



Life beyond Work

Craig Willse

review of

Kathi Weeks (2011) *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. (PB, pp. 304, £14.99, ISBN 978-0822351122)

In *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks issues a clarion call for the abandonment of moralistic pro-work politics. Rather than better work or better wages, Weeks asks us to imagine a life beyond work and the wage. Part polemic, part philosophical rumination, part political program, *The Problem with Work* revives neglected strands of Marxist analysis, including demands for less work or no work, demands for wages for housework, and demands for a basic income. In turn, it offers a feminist counter-tradition to a politics that would shift control of the means of production but leave in place an ethics of productivity. While the text does not take up what critical race and ethnic studies might also contribute to a renewed Marxism, we must think through those questions alongside those posed by Weeks.

Framing the political terrain of work, the introduction establishes anticapitalist attachments to work and its worthiness. For Weeks, in work we experience naked forms of domination and control. Despite this, the fact of work is not only unquestioned, but overvalued; work has achieved the status of moral good. Chapter 1 turns to Max Weber's classic *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to excavate the origins of this overvaluation of work. Weeks positions our contemporary version of Calvinism as 'productivist norms' (45), and here we see the radical stakes of the project. Rather than simply rescue work from capitalist

control, or from routinization and boredom, Weeks's repoliticization of work calls into question the worthiness of productivity. Why must our lives be productive?

To push this question forward, Weeks centres a feminist analysis of social reproduction over and above a classic Marxist analysis that accepts the wage relation's buying and selling of labour power as capital's lynchpin. Drawing from Mimi Abramovitz's vital formulation, Weeks argues that the family ethic remains essential 'for the role it plays in reproducing a stable and able workforce with little in the way of public funding' (64). For Weeks, though, feminist analysis of the family ethic and its concomitant gendered division of labour must not only call for freedom from family and equal opportunity for participation in wage labour markets. Rather, we must question the accepted status of work while attending to the contemporary operations of 'professionalization' across gendered and classed labour categories. From here, the work ethic's total permutation as professionalization imperatives may expose it to challenge:

Where attitudes are productive, an insubordination to the work ethic; a scepticism about the virtues of self-discipline for the sake of capital accumulation; an unwillingness to cultivate, simply on principle, a good "professional" attitude about work; and a refusal to subordinate all of life to work carry a new kind of subversive potential. (77)

With this denaturalizing of the work ethic in place, chapters 2, 3 and 4 visit Marxist and feminist anti-work trajectories. Weeks draws on Marxist autonomous traditions that insist not on better work, but less or no work. Weeks shows how autonomous Marxism departs from two apparently conflicted but actually connected strands. For the first, a modernization model, socialism perfects the capitalist mode of production. For the second, a humanist model, socialism offers freedom for individual self-expression and creativity but neither challenges work or productivity. In contrast, the autonomous refusal to work names work itself – 'not private property, the market, the factory, or the alienation of our creative capacities' (97) – as our central concern.

Weeks then turns to the writings and campaigns of wages for housework. Here Weeks finds feminist antiwork politics that recognize the general condition of social reproduction and challenge the family ethic. Weeks notes that some liberal versions of wages for housework may actually accommodate rather than explode the twinned family and work ethics – securing women to domestic labour, and valorising through the wage domestic work of familial housekeeping, child-rearing, and sex. But Weeks unearths antiproduktivist possibilities as well:

... [F]eminists in the wages for housework movement rejected not only the capitalist but also the socialist remedies defended by other feminists at that time.

Wages for housework extended the autonomous Marxist critique of socialist production – a vision they saw as nothing more than the substitution of state control for private control over the same structure of production – into the field of reproduction. Socialism was understood as a program intended to rationalize production in the social factory, to perfect rather than transform the work society. (125)

Thus, in problematizing the received categories of Marxist analysis, feminist iterations of autonomism offer a more radically transformative vision.

Across its chapters, *The Problem with Work* cleanly distills its argument, guiding the reader along such that its cogent analysis is useful beyond the text. During my reading, two cases came immediately to mind: same-sex marriage debates and the ‘crisis’ of the university. Regarding the former, we can see the core conservativeness of the mainstream LGBT marriage push, as it has sought to advance this conjoined family ethic and work ethic (Kandaswamy, 2008). Advocates and mainstream media portray LGBT families as loving, hard-working citizens who simply deserve the just returns of their contributions to society. Thus, same-sex marriage campaigns promote the economic and social productivity of heteronormalized gay families rather than claim an inherent validity to any and all sexual practices and groupings. As many critics have pointed out, same sex marriage abandons poor and un- and under-employed queer people with no property or health benefits to share (Willse and Spade, 2005). Weeks’s framework highlights how a queer formulation of a less or no work ethic might differently produce cross socio-economic solidarities.

Weeks also helps us think through questions of academic labour. In the university we readily find an abundance of liberals, including Marxists, celebrating working too much. I recently read a very moving and helpful account of one tenure-track faculty member’s efforts to balance life and work demands (Nagpal, 2013); that the formula arrived at limited working hours to fifty a week points not to the author’s co-optation, but to the absurd conditions of professionalized academic labour. The university’s speed-up has been passed down to graduate students facing full-time employment requirements that might have been reserved for tenure or promotion in earlier eras. Even the least precarious, tenured and tenure-track faculty, face mounting workloads, including more students in classes, more classes, more advisees, more assessment and reporting duties, and higher publishing demands. Greater instability accompanies the speed-up, as tenure track lines at some universities become de facto extended visiting appointments; the supposed security of tenure-track lines has been exposed as especially fragile for women of colour (Evans, 2007).

The last point brings us to the most obvious limitation of Weeks's analysis – the failure to engage critical race scholarship on labour and neoliberalism. *The Problem with Work* most compels when Weeks takes up feminist lineages as generative, rather than corrective, as in the analysis of wages for housework and the argument about social reproduction. Black, critical ethnic, and Native studies might play a similarly useful role here (e.g., Harris, 1993; Robinson, 2000; Ferguson, 2003; Hong, 2006; Simon, 2011, to name a few). What does it mean for decades of scholarship insisting on the social and material generativity of racial formations to be put aside? Obviously, a review of any monograph can always point out omissions, but here we might note a few places the analysis falls short in its refusal to take seriously that social reproduction within racial capitalism is always a racial project.

Weeks briefly considers hired domestic help (172-74) in relation to a feminist demand for shorter hours. Weeks rightfully rejects this as a private solution to a social organization of time, work, and production. The question of hired domestic help cannot be thought through, however, without situating it in historical trajectories of slavery, antiblack racism, and racialized migration regimes. Foundational work in Black feminist theory has engaged with domestic labour, and women of color feminism has shown that the public/private divide (the basis for Weeks's rejection of this option) does not operate for white and Black women in the same ways; if white women have struggled to get out of the home and into the workforce, a Black struggle in the white supremacist US has been for access to private, domestic/family space. The paradigm-shifting writings of the Combahee River Collective and *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* brought this argument forward decades ago (see, e.g., Smith, 1983). Further, the private sphere of white female domestication has been produced out of the labour of women of colour, for whom others' homes have often been the only available sites for (highly exploitative, under-the-table) waged labour. Patricia Hill Collins, whom Weeks cites elsewhere, recognized the category of domestic worker as so central to African American female life that Collins theorized the social position of Black women in sociology as an extrapolation of this role, giving us the concept of "outsider within" (Collins, 1986). The questions of family time and family ethic carry not only different but perhaps incommensurate histories from the vantages of white, Black, Native and migrant women of colour, what Grace Hong has identified as the "ruptures of American capital" (Hong, 2006). Contemporary organizing work, such as Domestic Workers United and their Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights, might provide instructive and generative examples here. What might Weeks's demand for shorter hours look like starting from the position of racialized waged domestic work and abstracting up from there?

Critical race and ethnic studies would also help fill out and complicate Weeks's brief engagement with sex worker organizing, which Weeks criticizes for valorising work. While that might be true at an immediate rhetorical level, here a more sustained engagement with actually existing social movements might be helpful. Experiences of sex work are of course highly stratified by race, class, and gender identity. People of colour and trans people are more likely to engage in street-based sex work, and hence are more vulnerable to police harassment, violence, and arrest. Sex work in the US cannot be understood separate from our racialized-gendered prison regime (Davis, 2003; Stanley and Smith, 2011; Woods, 2013). When I think of the most compelling cases of sex worker organizing, these are efforts led by women and trans people of colour who are fighting simultaneously against police brutality, imprisonment, and denial of healthcare and health resources (such as Women with a Vision in New Orleans, or HIPS in Washington, DC). The recognition of sex work *as* work offers a platform for depathologization such that these other demands can be made, demands that might be broadly construed as workplace safety given our capitalist context, and might be thought of as life entitlements in others. While *The Problem With Work* does not claim to be a social movement history, sex worker and prison abolition movements have generated discursive reflections on the relationships of work, gender, and sexuality that certainly could be engaged with here.

Thinking about how to overcome these limits, we might consider the final chapters of the text. Weeks closes the monograph with a defence of utopic thinking. Weeks compellingly insists on a vision of demands not bound to the practical, while also not conceding that territory. For Weeks, a demand is a worldview-making practice; it calls attention to received and accepted ideas about our world – for example, that we must work. Demands help reframe our current circumstances, and when we mobilize effectively around them, we begin to envision and build a world in which bizarre, utopic demands would make perfect sense. In the epilogue, titled “A Life Beyond Work,” Weeks hypothesizes a basic income demand predicated not on the work we do, but on the fact of our living: ‘what if basic income were to be seen as income not for the common production of value, but for the common reproduction of life?’ (230). While Michel Foucault makes just a few brief appearances, in this proposal of utopic demands, *The Problem With Work* offers fruitful contact points between Marxist political economy and a Foucaultian biopower framework. Here Weeks extends and radicalizes the focus on social reproduction beyond a narrow articulation and towards a broad category of life itself.

A conversation with Black studies might expand the possibilities of this demand further. In ‘Whither the Slave in Civil Society? Gramsci’s Black Marx,’ Frank

Wilderson begins with a simple and profound observation: the Black slave, foundational to the emergence of a world capitalist system, is constituted outside of capital because the slave, unlike the worker, is not produced through the wage relation. The slave is not an interpellated worker; the slave has no labour power from which to be alienated and in turn unalienated. Rather, the enslaved person is a thing, meant to be accumulated and die. From there Wilderson argues that the revolutionary subject of Marxist analysis, extended by Gramsci and hailed in various civil society counter-movements, precludes the slave and her Black heirs as well. If the worker is the revolutionary subject, the slave can never be the subject of revolution, of history, only its object.

Wilderson illustrates pointedly the stakes of articulating Marxism through Black studies. While Weeks shifts us from work, that shift must account for the lives cut out by a work model in the first place. Reading Wilderson and Weeks together suggests a way forward. Wilderson writes,

Thus, the black subject position in America is an antagonism, a demand that can not be satisfied through a transfer of ownership/organisation of existing rubrics; whereas the Gramscian subject, the worker, represents a demand that can indeed be satisfied by way of a successful War of Position, which brings about the end of exploitation. The worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices; the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity itself. (Wilderson, 2003: 231)

As I suggested with the case of sex work above, what would it mean to begin with this formulation and abstract up? In moving to social reproduction, Weeks enters a terrain that Wilderson marks as that of slavery and anti-blackness: productivity, or life itself outside the relationality of wage and ideology. In shifting from capitalism/anti-capitalism to biopower, Weeks argues that we achieve neither innocence nor outsidership. Accounting for racialized cuts within a landscape of social reproduction – for example, waged white work – might further radicalize Weeks's insights (i.e. Roediger, 1999).

A final challenge to Weeks is offered by analysis of the ways in which capitalism has been drawn into subjectless valuation (Clough et al, 2007). Life itself, before or beyond its disciplinary organization into labouring classes, has already been made productive for capital; this is why Kaushik Sunder Rajan, for example, speaks of biocapital (Rajan, 2006). From this view, capital may be happy for us to refuse work, as our biological matter already generates value, as stem cell lines, as affective states. But Wilderson's provocation complicates this and for me unlocks another potential in *The Problem With Work*, starting from the position of the constitutiveness of antiblack racism.

The Problem With Work is a rigorous and challenging read. I enjoyed the effort of thinking through it and with it, and even in moments against it. It is one of those rare texts that immediately propose lives beyond itself, and I look forward to continue engaging its arguments and provocations.

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the author

Craig Willse is assistant professor of cultural studies at George Mason University.
e-mail: cwillse@gmu.edu