Victorian *Vita Activa*: Work Ethics and Prowork Politics

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

English

August, 7, 2020

Nashville, TN

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the funding and support of the Vanderbilt English department. Thank you for recognizing the value of my ideas and contributions and for providing the necessary resources for me to accomplish this massive undertaking. Thank you, Vanderbilt University, for letting me roam the grounds of your beautiful campus. As a first-generation college student, finding myself at Vanderbilt was at times surreal, but I am truly grateful to have had the privilege of working at such a swanky joint.

I am extremely thankful for my dissertation committee, who I genuinely believe must be the best dissertation committee there ever was. As co-chairs, Jay Clayton and Rachel Teukolsky were tirelessly engaged and supportive, and I learned more from them than I can possibly articulate here. Jay Clayton gave me the confidence to keep writing when things got tough, and he models the kind of innovative scholarship I hope to someday produce. Rachel Teukolsky showed me that you can be a passionate, brilliant scholar and a detail-oriented, reliable professional at the same time. Thanks to Rachel, also, for never failing to ask: "But what about gender?" There was nothing "outside" about my outside reader, James Epstein. He shaped me as a scholar from the first time I heard him give a talk on E.P. Thompson at the Robert Penn Warren Center, and he taught me everything I know about nineteenth-century labor history. I still have trouble believing how lucky I am to have landed such a remarkable mentor. Scott Juengel is one of the best thinkers and teachers I know. He has that remarkable knack for repeating your own ideas back to you in a way that adds complexity and makes you see things that were not there before. Many thanks to you all, for everything.

I am grateful also for the support and intellectual companionship of the Vanderbilt English faculty and my fellow graduate students. I was continually awed by how brilliant you all

are, and it pushed me to be better. Special thanks go to Deann Armstrong and Kirsten Mendoza, for being wonderful humans and excellent role models. And to Kylie Korsnack, for being a dear friend, for sharing my love of the speculative and the fantastic, and for inspiring me to be a better teacher. And a very special thanks to The Don Quizotes: Lauren Mitchell, Stephanie Straub, and Martin Brown. Thanks to Lauren, especially, for your tireless emotional support and commiseration and for protecting me in that horrible haunted house. Had I died of fright in there, this dissertation would never have been completed.

Many thanks to my family for being so proud and supportive, even if you don't know *exactly* what it is that I do for a living. And to Veronica and Maren, for getting me out of the house to play tennis, bocce ball, soccer, volleyball, volleyball tennis, tag…etc., and for being smart and funny. And, finally, I am deeply grateful to my partner, Eric, for his love and companionship. He pushes me to nuance without equivocating and reminds me to keep the literary in my literary scholarship. His influence can be felt throughout this dissertation, and it is no doubt better for it.

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Introduction: Victorians and the Active Life

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the Victorians were obsessed with work. "Except for 'God,'" wrote Walter Houghton in 1957, "the most popular word in the Victorian vocabulary must have been 'work'" (242). The frequency with which the Victorians wrote about work has been generally misinterpreted as unreflective acclamation. Yet, not all Victorian authors blindly extolled the virtues of work. Rather, many were engaged in a vivid and contentious debate about the meaning of work and its role in individual and collective life. For the authors under study in this dissertation, work was important. It was the key to both individual well-being and collective advancement. But work was not valued regardless of its context and character. In the Victorian era, the centrality of work—the recognition of its importance—made it a subject not of endless praise but rather of constant scrutiny.

The Victorian discourse of work was responding directly to the socioeconomic upheaval caused by industrialization and was thus grounded in colossal but nevertheless concrete questions concerning the organization of labor and relations of production. But "work" was a capacious term for the Victorians that exceeded the bounds of economic activity. "Work" could mean paid employment, but it could also refer to a wide range of other engagements and activities. Even when it was economic activity under discussion, defining work was intimately intertwined with ethical and political concerns. Work's semantic ambiguity thus signaled the underlying presence of passionate debates. "As reason had been to the Enlightenment," Alan Mintz has noted, "work was to the Victorians: an overarching term that sanctioned a multitude of diverse, often antagonist positions" (1). Behind work's multitude of definitions lay a multitude of arguments about what work *should* be.

Given that "work" expresses such diverse, sometimes contradictory, meanings in Victorian literature, what exactly was being discussed? How do we understand how all these disparate conceptions of "work" comprise one conversation? This dissertation proposes that a term drawn from Hannah Arendt may provide some conceptual coherence to this multivalent discourse. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt offers a powerful meditation on what she terms *vita activa*, the active life, "human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something" (22). Arendt's study of *vita activa* is meant to counter an imbalance within the Western philosophical tradition in which *vita contemplativa*, the contemplative life, is privileged over its active counterpart. In neglecting to give the same philosophical attention to *vita activa*, she argues, we have been acting blindly. Arendt thus proposes a "very simple" proposition: that we stop to "think what we are doing" (5). This dissertation reads Victorian authors as philosophers and theorists of *vita activa*, recasting the Victorian obsession with work as a sustained attempt to think what they were doing.

The injunction to contemplate the active life feels perhaps paradoxical. Is this not simply a call for more contemplation? Importantly, for both Arendt and the Victorian authors under study here, examination of the active life was meant, in turn, to actively alter that life. In *Past and Present* (1843), Thomas Carlyle announces the ascendancy of what will come to be known as his famous—or infamous—"gospel of work":

> The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it. 'Know thyself:' long enough has that poor 'self' of thine tormented thee; thou wilt never get to 'know' it, I believe! Think it not thy business, this of knowing thyself; thou art an unknowable individual: know what thou canst work at; and work at it, like a Hercules! (189)

At the heart of this new gospel's injunction to "know thy work and do it" lies a critique of the philosophical privileging of *vita contemplativa*. According to Carlyle, to seek self-knowledge through endless internal gazing is futile. It is only through active engagement with the world that we can come to know anything about ourselves, as humans or as individuals. If contemplation without action is useless, however, so is action without contemplation. Before one can do one's work, one must *know* it. Carlyle is not proposing an end to self-knowledge but rather a new form of self-knowledge that foregrounds the role of social contribution in identity formation.

This pursuit of self-knowledge represented, in part, an individual endeavor to determine the nature of one's personal contribution, but it was also viewed as a collective undertaking. The Victorian "work ethic" has often been understood to operate at the level of individual morality: to be productive rather than idle was a personal moral responsibility. The Victorian discourse of work did certainly encompass this idea of productivity as a marker of individual virtue and character. The larger concern, however, was with establishing a collective ethics rather than a standard of individual morality. Further, this ethics did not simply promote productivity over idleness. Rather, the Victorian authors under study in this dissertation were concerned with establishing ethical work practices that would determine the collective nature of *vita activa*. The emphasis was not on combating idleness but rather on redirecting misguided and misspent productivity.

The principle concern addressed by the Victorian discourse of work, in my reading, is that the character of *vita activa* had become solely determined by the imperatives of capitalist growth and *laissez-faire* economics. Decisions about *what* work was getting done and *how* it was getting done were being dictated by market mechanisms that did not take into consideration the human consequences of those decisions. Further, the ideological reduction of "work" to the

individualized scramble to "make a living" had alienated workers from the inherently social nature of their contributions. The Victorian authors under study here worked to formulate an alternative set of criteria that could guide a collective decision-making process informed not by markets but by ethics. In line with Marx, who defined capitalism as an "outrageous squandering of labour-power and of the social means of production," the Victorian discourse of work offered a sustained critique of capitalist production as wasteful of human potential and incapable of meeting human needs (*CV.I*, 667). This is not to say that this critique was always anti-capitalist. Many Victorian writers saw themselves as critics but not necessarily opponents of the capitalist mode of production. Nevertheless, the Victorian insistence that "work" have meaning beyond its definition as paid employment, as well as the accompanying demand that ethical considerations must play a role in determining what work gets done, by whom, and under what conditions, suggests radical alternatives to capitalist articulations of value.

The Victorian critique of industrial capitalism has been seen to suffer from a romanticized or idealized detachment from the realities of the era's labor conditions. Rob Breton, for instance, has argued that the gospel of work represented "a mythical moral economy to withdraw into and thus bypass the real properties of society" (7). By contrast, in my reading, many of the Victorian authors who take up the subject of work are seen to practice a form of applied ethics. The ethical debates I will trace throughout my chapters respond to the authors' observations of real working conditions or their own lived experience of work. I contend further that not only were Victorian discussions of work ethics relevant to critical issues facing workers in their own time, these discussions also offer valuable contributions to labor debates ongoing in the era of late capitalism.

Against theorists who emphasize a definitive break between industrial and postindustrial capitalism, my project foregrounds continuity. I do not discount the ways in which work has changed, especially with the largescale entrance of women into the workforce and the rapid expansion of digital technologies, but I do argue that primary concerns taken up in the Victorian discourse of work—such as alienation, powerlessness, and the squandering of human capacities—are endemic to capitalism in all its manifestations. Following my conviction that the Victorian theorization of *vita activa* could serve to denaturalize reified conceptions of work in contemporary discourse and thus act as a vital resource, I contend that the Victorian authors under study offer new insight into four pressing twenty-first century concerns: the largescale casualization of the labor force; the reshaping of a global workforce in response to the climate crisis; the systemic invisibility and devaluing of care work; and the specter of a "jobless future" caused by increasingly advanced automation.

This dissertation, therefore, has two interrelated goals. Firstly, I hope to offer the most comprehensive picture sketched thus far of the Victorian discourse of work by considering how its disparate threads come together into a shared project: to better understand "human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something." Secondly, I hope to suggest that the urgency with which the Victorians approached this project should not be dismissed as hopeless idealism or risible anachronism. Rather, this dissertation proposes, it may be time to get obsessed with work again, to stop and "think what we are doing."

Vita Activa: Labor, Work, and Action

For Arendt, giving *vita activa* adequate philosophical attention meant defining and analyzing its component parts. In *The Human Condition*, she proposes a tripartite structure into

which all human activity might be divided: labor, work, and action. Labor is the continual, cyclical process by which humans meet biological necessities, providing for both individual and species survival. While labor functions alongside nature and is subject to its rhythms and processes, work involves the creation of an artificial ("man-made") world that functions as a mediator between humanity and the natural environment. Unlike the products of labor, which are meant for immediate consumption, the artifacts and structures created by work are designed for durability and permanence. Labor might produce a loaf of bread; work a table or a synagogue. Action, for Arendt, represents the sociopolitical realm. While labor and work are tied to the material world, action is the intangible activity through which humans build social relationships and political systems. Action is the realm of human plurality in which humans both develop themselves as social beings and as unique individuals. For Arendt, labor and work are essential and meaningful activities, but they allow for only limited forms of sociality and are definitively apolitical realms.

In the Victorian theorization of *vita activa*, a single term comes to represent all three realms of activity. "Work" encompassed the daily labor necessary for survival, the work required to construct a durable material world, and the creation and maintenance of intangible sociopolitical structures. To "work" was to act in the world in any of these capacities. This is not to say that Victorians authors did not sometimes make distinctions between "labor" and "work" (though these distinctions never fall neatly along Arendt's lines) or that political action was always defined as "work" (though it frequently was) but rather that "work" was consistently used to denote all three manifestations of *vita activa*. This conceptual collapse did, in one sense, lead to a cultural privileging of the principles of stability and permanence Arendt associates with work. "Work" was often conceived as the process of creating order out of chaos, both natural and

sociopolitical. The dangerous consequences of envisioning a sociopolitical order based on the principles of permanence and durability will be discussed in my chapter on Carlyle, particularly as these consequences relate to imperialist narratives of progress.

Beyond this, however, the Victorian understanding of "work" as *vita activa*—"human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something"—denaturalizes the reified definition of work as paid economic activity. This disrupts what I find to be the problematic element of Arendt's conception of *vita activa*: her insistence that labor and work are apolitical. For Arendt, there must be a separate realm of action in which human beings can both express their unique individuality and develop meaningful social relationships. For the Victorians, the daily meeting of necessity as well as the construction of a durable human environment—labor and work—were imbued with the potential for what Arendt calls action. Baking bread and building a table were thus conceived as political acts, in the sense that they were philosophically privileged as an active engagement with the world that forged meaningful bonds between the individual and the collective. This did not mean that baking and woodworking transcended their character as paid employment in a capitalist economy but rather that within the Victorian discourse of work, they were not reducible to this identity.

In Victorian discourse, work was the process by which one acted on and in the world. Work formed the link between individuals and their natural and social environments. As I discuss further below, work is often immediately associated with the demand for productivity, but the overidentification of work with productivity can be misleading. This dissertation argues that the Victorian discourse of work is more interested in *impact* than *output*. The authors under study here were interested in outcomes, but they considered the outcomes work could "produce" more holistically than the language of productivity would allow. Because work was the process

through which one shaped and was shaped by one's environment, these authors frequently

conceived of work not as production but as *involvement*. Rather, work was just as often

conceived as a process of interaction in which the worker was altered along with the

environment they worked upon. Further, this understanding of work as engagement and

involvement implicated workers in the outcomes of their own activity, mobilizing a language of

responsibility notably absent from rationalized conceptions of productivity.

The Work Ethic *versus* Work Ethics

The Victorian "work ethic" has been interpreted as an absolutist doctrine that advocates

productivity over idleness. One of the most oft-cited aphorisms in support of this interpretation

comes from the son of the famous educator Thomas Arnold, who attributes to his father the

uncompromising position: "'*Work*.' Not, work at this or that—but, Work" (*vi*). This injunction,

which suggests that all work is beneficial, regardless of its quality or outcomes, has been

assumed to represent a monolithic moralism that defined the Victorian middle-class ethos. The

association of work with moral rectitude is seen to condone the avarice of the middle class,

especially owners of capital and employers of labor, by recasting their self-serving pursuit of

wealth as laudable productivity, while at the same time functioning to discount the suffering of

the working classes by recasting poverty as a collection of individual moral failings rather than a

structural social condition.[1]

The contention of this dissertation is that the meaning often derived from Thomas

Arnold's injunction—that all work is beneficial regardless of context or value—is not generally

representative of the Victorian discourse of work. There was no doubt a moralist strain of this

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[1] For a representative articulation of this position, see Altick, 165-79.

discourse that negatively conceived work as a defense mechanism for the prevention of sin and vice; thus, in this worldview, any work was better than no work. A more sophisticated cousin to this position is found in authors like Arnold, Carlyle, and Samuel Smiles, who see developing the *habit* of work as of the foremost importance. The work one did was less important than the act of working itself, because the character formation required by the serious application of one's energies formed the necessary foundation for a productive and meaningful life.[2] This is a more accurate understanding of Arnold's position. It is not that Arnold believed all work was of equal value. Rather, he sought to inculcate the habit of work in his students, with the understanding that they would go on to make meaningful social contributions.[3]

Reductive readings of the Victorian discourse of work often begin with the assumption that there is a singular "work ethic" that represents a hegemonic attitude towards work. In this dissertation, I follow Claire White and Marcus Waithe in their selection of "work ethics" as a key term for their recent edited collection on nineteenth-century authorship and creative labor. The pluralized work ethics signals both a fundamental reality—there has never been a singular "work ethic" to speak of—and challenges the notion of dogmatism associated with a monolithic work ethic. Whereas "work ethic" tends to signal "a stance evacuated of judgement, value, or teleology," "work ethics" should be understood as a branch of moral philosophy in which the nature of work is scrutinized and its "values, benefits, and responsibilities" evaluated (White and Waithe 5-6). This project approaches the authors under study as moral philosophers who respond to the social upheaval of the industrial revolution and the rise of modern capitalism by attempting to retheorize the human relationship to work.

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[2] Another version of this position found in *Past and Present* points directly to Carlyle's ambivalent relationship to capitalism: "Idleness is worst, Idleness alone is without hope: work earnestly at anything, you will by degree learn to work at almost all things. There is endless hope in work, were it even work at making money" (141).
[3] See Houghton, 242-7.

My project joins a small but strong body of literary and historical criticism that has taken up the Victorian discourse of work as its subject. Of the dozen or so authors that make up this body, several have engaged explicitly with the subject of work ethics. A prevailing and understandable tendency among these authors is to acknowledge the diversity of this ethical discourse before concentrating on a single concept or author. While the introduction to Timothy Travers's *Samuel Smiles and the Victorian Work Ethic* (1987) provides one of the most comprehensive meditations to date on the diversity of Victorian work ethics (despite his use of the singular "work ethic"), his study is focused on its title author and the self-help ethic he popularized. Rob Breton's *Gospels and Grit* (2005) traces what he terms a "radical conservative" work ethic through the writings of Carlyle, Joseph Conrad, and George Orwell. Two monographs—Alan Mintz's *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (1978) and Ruth Danon's *Work in the English Novel: The Myth of Vocation* (1985)—focus specifically on the Victorian conception of vocation as the dominant work ethic of the middle class. The essays that comprise Claire White and Marcus Waithe's edited collection, *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830-1910* (2018), coalesce around the subject of "authorial work ethics." With a similar emphasis on creative production and its relationship to the broader discourse of work, art historian Tim Barringer's *Men at Work* (2005) offers a masterful reading of the entanglement of aesthetics, work ethics, and masculinity in the Victorian era.

My project is indebted to these earlier, focused studies and seeks to employ their insights in presenting a more comprehensive view of Victorian work ethics than has yet been produced. Each of my chapters is centered on a predominant branch of Victorian work ethics: the Protestant work ethic, as conceptualized by Max Weber; Carlyle's gospel of work; the self-help ethic; and utopian socialist work ethics. Each chapter discusses the central figures associated with these

ethics—Weber, Carlyle, Samuel Smiles, and William Morris—while also considering how these ethics as originally conceived were challenged or expanded by other authors.[4] In attempting such a capacious study, I hope to do justice to the diversity of this ethical discourse, while at the same time illuminating the shared concerns that imbued the Victorian discussions of work with urgency and intensity. In this attempt, I build from the work of the above authors as I engage with their respective concentrations throughout the dissertation.

As my chapters coalesce around four major formulations of Victorian work ethics, they also place these Victorian ethics in conversation with four separate issues facing twenty-first century workers. The presentist orientation of my project places it in direct conversation with three of the most recent studies to engage with the Victorian discourse of work: Carolyn Lesjak's *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* (2006), Jennifer Ruth's *Novel Professions* (2006), and Joshua Gooch's *The Victorian Novel, Service Work, and the Nineteenth-Century Economy* (2015). I would like to say a few words on how each of these studies help me to articulate the stakes of my own, but I first want to address how my project departs from these previous studies with its attention to multiple genres.

Both Mintz's and Danon's earlier studies on vocation, as well as all three of the studies listed directly above consider the Victorian discourse of work as it is shaped by and expressed in the novels of the era's "major authors." Danon is explicit in her preference for the study of novels over the nonfiction prose of figures like Carlyle and John Ruskin. While the writing of these essayists remains largely hypothetical and divorced from lived experience, she argues, fiction "depends upon observation and experience far more than upon theoretical presuppositions" (4). The more recent scholars, however, do not reproduce Danon's sharp

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[4] Weber is here, of course, the odd man out. While not a Victorian author, Weber's analysis of the Protestant work ethic is centered largely on its development in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain.

division between theory and fiction. Rather, they are interested in how novels engage directly in

the theorization of work, though they do so by means of fictional representation. These scholars

do often understand the novel, however, to fill a gap in nonfictional discourses of work. For

example, Ruth argues that novelists like Trollope and Dickens "attempted to 'theorize' the

professional, trying to do what nonfiction failed to do" (4). By "nonfiction," Ruth refers

specifically to the discourse of political economy, which she argues could not "make sense" of

the growing predominance of this new figure "whose stock-in-trade consisted of intangible

services" (4). Similarly, Gooch argues that the novel "plays a critical role in reimagining work-

relations and worker-subjectivity" in a growing service economy that challenged the conceptual

vocabulary of political economists (3). Understanding the novel as a vital theoretical resource

requires departing from a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that reads the novelist as complicit in the

proliferation of hegemonic ideologies.[5] As Ruth argues, when we stop scanning texts for the

"hypocritical gestures" we've been trained to expose, "we make possible a very different critical

relationship" (27).

Scanning for hypocritical gestures is particularly easy when one is examining a

predominantly middle-class discourse of work, and I am indebted to scholars like Ruth and

Gooch for their articulation of the Victorian novel's role as a theoretical resource. My project,

however, moves more freely across the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction and, in doing so, I

believe avoids some of the limitations imposed by studies dedicated to the novel.[6] The

conversations that form the Victorian discourse of work continually speak across genres, and the

structure of my project enables me to move freely with the discourse. The thematic organization

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[5] The most oft-cited example of this hermeneutics in relationship to the Victorian discourse of work is Mary Poovey's influential chapter on *David Copperfield* in *Uneven Developments*.

[6] Lesjak attempts to sidestep this obstacle by expanding the term "labor novel" to include both fiction and nonfiction works, which is, I believe, more confusing than helpful.

of the project allows me to draw connections between the journalism of Henry Mayhew and the novels of George Gissing, and to move, in my chapter on the self-help ethic, between biography, autobiography, and semi-autobiographical fiction. My move away from a dedicated study of the novel also allows me to consider a wider range of voices, like those of the casualized trade workers interviewed by Henry Mayhew. Analyzing the novels of Dickens, Eliot, and Trollope has proved essential to understanding how philosophies of work intersected with the lived experience of working in nineteenth-century Britain, but I hope that my project (modestly) points to the importance of considering literatures of self-representation in crafting a more expansive view of the Victorian discourse of work.

My project highlights continuities between the concerns of nineteenth-century authors and twenty-first century workers, but I do not wish to collapse the two time periods into one another. Though the centuries are joined by similar concerns, the way of conceptualizing and addressing these concerns was radically different. My project understands the Victorian discourse of work as a valuable resource because of its radical difference: Victorian conceptions of work have the potential to disrupt and reconfigure contemporary discussions of work. Both Lesjak and Ruth precede me in their understanding of how the balance between alterity and continuity structures the relationship between the Victorian discourse of work and contemporary concerns. For Lesjak, the continuity resides in the divide between labor and pleasure (closely akin to the divide between work and non-work) that structures life in both the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. While the Victorian realist novel often functioned to enforce this divide, she argues, the virtually ubiquitous presence of what she terms the "problematic of labor" in these novels makes them a valuable resource. As the relationship between labor and pleasure was "actively negotiated" in the nineteenth-century novel, these texts illuminate the impossibility of

strictly enforcing a divide between them and offer glimpses of "alternative visions of a public sphere not rent by such divisions" (16, 19). I follow Lesjak in her understanding that the centrality of the problematic of labor in the Victorian imaginary makes the texts from this period unique resources for the critical analysis of our own relationship to work. Lesjak's central problematic—the structural divide between work and pleasure enforced by the capitalist system of production—is closely related to the central questions of my project, and I also argue that Victorian texts contain alternative visions for a radical restructuring of the human relationship to work.

While the throughlines of my project address questions of this scale, the individual chapters are structured by a presentist methodology more akin to Jennifer Ruth's in *Novel Professions*. Rather than approaching capitalism at a structural level, Ruth's study addresses a more focused problematic: the contemporary proletarianization of the professional. Ruth argues for the value of reasserting "professional" as an identity position in a late-capitalist economy that undermines the intellectual, creative, and practical autonomy that once accompanied employment in a profession. (Ruth's anchoring example here is, unsurprisingly, the assault on faculty autonomy within academia.) Novels produced during the historical moment of emergence for many modern professions—the second half of the nineteenth century—act as a valuable resource for rearticulating what it means to be a professional in the twenty-first century, at a moment when this identity has been largely evacuated of meaning.

The third key term of my project—"prowork politics"—brings together these two levels of critical engagement: one that addresses the broadest foundational structures of capitalism and one that focuses on more immediate and localized concerns. My project argues that a return to the Victorian discourse of work offers a necessary vocabulary for reconceptualizing work as a

collective ethical practice as against the privatization and alienation that are constitutive of work in a capitalist society. As I discuss further below, I position what I am calling the prowork politics of Victorian authors against two intertwined contemporary discourses of labor: a Marxist "refusal of work" or "antiwork" politics and a technophilic "postwork" politics that transects disciplinary and ideological boundaries. These discourses argue for the abandonment of what is often referred to as a "work-centered society," in which work is a central daily activity that also functions as a primary source of individual and social identity. In contrast, I argue for the necessity of radically reconceptualizing rather than abandoning work as a foundational sociopolitical practice. Although Victorian prowork politics were not always anti-capitalist, they offer, I argue, theoretical and philosophical foundations for reconfiguring a human relationship to work beyond capitalism, a relationship that both addresses collective needs and encourages individual development. As this anti-capitalist argument threads my four chapters together, individual chapters consider how a prowork politics—a politics that foregrounds work's potential as an ethical practice—might address some of the specific challenges facing twenty-first century workers.

My project is interested in the radical potential of Victorian work ethics and the politics these ethics support, but it is not blind to the ways in which these work ethics were employed to sanction the worst abuses of industrial capitalism and European imperialism. Not only were Victorian work ethics used to justify the unchecked avarice of the industrialists, whose material productivity was portrayed as morally superior to the idleness of the aristocracy, but also to sanction exploitative working conditions for the poor, who were seen as being rescued from their own propensity to idleness and vice. In addition to sanctioning exploitation at home, work ethics were tied to the rationalization of imperialism: images of the "idle savage" who lacked the

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necessary industriousness to husband his own resources underlay the "civilizing" mission of empire. Further, the "Promethean" conception of work as the triumphant mastery of nature promoted the unprecedented exploitation of natural resources that defines the age of the Anthropocene. In arguing for the contemporary viability of a prowork politics, my project directly addresses the ethical abuses associated with Victorian work ethics, with the understanding that any revival of these politics must come to terms with the exploitative potential they contain.

Prowork *versus* Antiwork Politics

"Our epoch has been called the century of work," wrote Paul Lafargue in 1883, but "[i]t is in fact the century of pain, misery and corruption." As the rest of Lafargue's essay clarifies, it is not that labeling the nineteenth century as "the century of work" is a misnomer. Rather, it is because it can *rightly* be called the century of work that it has also been the century of misery. Lafargue's "The Right to be Lazy" might be considered the inaugural text of the Marxist antiwork or "refusal of work" tradition. Lafargue, who was both a disciple and son-in-law of Marx, departed from mainstream Marxist analysis to attack the "dogma of work" rather than the material conditions of production. The problem is not that the working class is being exploited against its will, argues Lafargue, but rather that it is aiding in its own exploitation. The proletariat, "despising its historic mission, has let itself be perverted by the dogma of work." According to Lafargue, the proletariat has so deeply internalized the idea that its role is to endlessly produce but never to consume that it has extinguished its own revolutionary imagination. Lafargue's rhetoric reads like an attack on the working class, but his target is not workers themselves but rather the collective consciousness represented by his fellow French

socialist Louis Blanc's "right to work" politics. Lafargue's scorn is reserved for the idea that demanding full employment is a revolutionary tactic. To define work as a right is far from radical; it simply reproduces capitalist ideology. The proletariat should demand not work but leisure and the right to consume what they produce. Lafargue thus announces his revolutionary demand to be the three-hour workday, in which "work will become a mere condiment to the pleasure of idleness."

The idea that a truly revolutionary anti-capitalist politics must directly oppose the "dogma of work" forms the foundation of an influential Marxist tradition that has seen a recent revival. This tradition is defined by both its central concrete demand—a radical reduction in working hours—as well as its ideological positioning against what it defines as the "productivist ethics" of "traditional" Marxist politics. The best-known manifestation of this Marxist politics began with the Italian workers' movements spawned by the social upheavals of 1968 and was expanded into what came to be known as autonomist Marxism, represented by writers like Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and Franco "Bifo" Berardi. As Negri outlines in his famous 1977 essay "Domination and Sabotage," "refusal of work" politics is first manifested as a series of antiwork tactics like sabotage, strikes, and the demand for shorter working hours, but its eye is always on implementing the transition from capitalism to communism. Because "the exploitation of labor is the foundation of the whole capitalist society," the refusal of work "does not negate *one* nexus of capitalist society, *one* aspect of capitalism's process of production and reproduction. Rather, in all its radicality, *it negates the whole of capitalist society*" (270, italics in original). Previous socialist traditions, Negri contends, have not only failed to embrace refusal of work politics as the one true revolutionary path but have been openly hostile to its radicality. The

refusal of work "has been continually and violently outlawed, suppressed and mystified by the traditions and ideologies of socialism" (269).

A few years earlier, in an essay titled "The Mirror of Production," Jean Baudrillard had labelled this prowork bias the "secret vice of Marxist political and economic strategy" (118). Driven by the "unbridled romanticism of production," Marxism had simply repurposed the "metaphysical overdetermination of man as producer" central to the discourse of political economy (113). Thus, the revolution, as imagined by traditional Marxism, created only a mirror image, rather than a radical reconfiguration, of the capitalist system of production. This revolutionary voice declared: "we are going to subvert the capitalist mode of production in the name of an authentic and radical productivity" (10). For both Baudrillard and Negri, Marxism's idealization of productivity had rendered it insufficiently radical. If capitalism was to be truly transcended, its ideological and functional core had to be dismantled. This meant that the idea of "an authentic and radical productivity" must be abandoned in favor of a critique of productivity itself. As the lynchpin of capitalism, work lacked revolutionary potential.

This critique of traditional Marxism, as Baudrillard suggests, is as much about combatting an ideological bias as it is reimagining the process of revolution. The failure of the Marxist revolutionary imagination is attributed to its "metaphysical overdetermination of man as producer." The perceived productivist bias within Marxism is seen to have its root in the humanist leanings of Marx himself, particularly in his conception of alienation. The "humanist Marx" is often seen to come out most clearly in his early writings, and it is this "immature" Marx whom Louis Althusser attempted to purge in his proposal of the "epistemological break." In his well-known formulation of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx contended that in estranging man from "his own active function, from his vital activity,"

capitalism divorced man from his "species-being" (328). For early Marx, *vita activa*—

humanity's active engagement with its natural and social environment—determined the unique

character of its species life. The alienated labor of capitalism—in which the individual can no

longer determine the nature of their own active engagement—creates a rift between the

individual and the free exercise of their uniquely human capacities. At the same time, because

capitalism transforms the expression of their species-life into an individualized scramble for

survival, the individual is also alienated from others. Communism is thus conceived as the

transcendence of alienation, the reunification of humanity with its species-being.

For antiwork Marxists, the conception of alienation and its accompanying belief in an

authentic relationship between humanity and productive activity lies at the heart of socialism's

failed revolutionary imagination. Rather than abandon the concept of alienation, the "refusal of

work" tradition reconceptualizes alienation not as a negative condition of capitalism to be

overcome in the transition to communism but as a *radical movement towards communism*. As

summarized by Berardi in *The Soul at Work* (2009), alienation in the autonomist tradition is

considered "not as the loss of human authenticity, but as estrangement from capitalistic interest,

and therefore as a necessary condition for the construction—in a space estranged from and

hostile to labor relations—of an ultimately human relationship" (23). Whereas Marx saw "labor

relations" as an essential part of the human condition and sought, therefore, to humanize them,

the refusal of work tradition is predicated on the idea that what is "ultimately human" can only

occur outside the realm of production. Alienation represents the revolutionary realization that

"work" does not represent an ontological constant that must be radically recuperated but an

historically determined condition of oppression that must be radically disavowed.

While the Marxist "refusal of work" tradition positions itself as the most radical possible conception of anti-capitalist politics, antiwork positions and tactics have proven easily adaptable to a more mainstream discourse. In a moment, I will discuss the emergence of an influential "postwork" discourse and its relationship to radical antiwork politics, but I want to first briefly consider the mainstreaming of the refusal of work tradition in a recent work by the British sociologist David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work* (2015). Frayne is a member of a "progressive" think tank called *Autonomy*, whose goal is to advocate for foundational antiwork policies, like shorter working hours and Universal Basic Income (UBI). Whereas the definition of "work" is frequently more nebulous in the Marxist tradition, Frayne is clear that the refusal he calls for is of paid employment. For Frayne, combatting our "work-centered society" means reducing the amount of time we spend doing things for money. Frayne quickly constructs a dichotomy in which "work" comes to stand in for forced activity and "non-work" for freedom. Thus, less work means more freedom. Shorter working hours, he argues, "would open up more space for political engagement, for cultural creation and appreciation, and for the development of a range of voluntary and self-defined activities outside work" (36-7). That less work translates into more time (and apparently desire and opportunity) to be active in meaningful ways is a staple contention of antiwork and postwork politics. Frayne is more insistent than most, however, that a reduction in paid employment would result in the emergence of a new, informal economy built on "a flourishing infrastructure of informal social networks and autonomously organized production" (112). The necessity of building this informal economy, he argues, lies in the hopelessness of radically altering the existing one. "[S]o long as economic rationality continues to dictate the goals and methods of production," Frayne argues, "existing attempts to humanise working conditions are highly

limited in what they can hope to achieve" (46). If people experience work under capitalism as oppressive and meaningless, the only viable strategy is to limit the hours they are forced to spend doing it.

What Frayne's progressive antiwork politics share with their explicitly Marxist counterpart is the insistence that the formal realm of production be ceded to capitalism. If productivity is to occur, it must be organic rather than structured, spontaneous rather than planned, motivated by individual rather than collective initiative. These antiwork politics share what I would call a fetishization of autonomy, the idea that freedom is equivalent to existing outside of established structures. The contention of this dissertation is that antiwork politics, in abandoning work, abandons the necessary project of constructing an ethical and equitable system of production that could act as an alternative to the capitalist model.

While antiwork politics often associates itself with the radical denaturalization of "work," its call for shorter working hours arguably reinforces the capitalist divide between work and non-work and its accompanying individualization of work. By contrast, the Victorian authors under study in this dissertation conceptualize work as a necessary and meaningful realm of interaction between the individual and their external world. In doing so, they raise essential questions that the refusal of work leaves unanswered: What does it mean to work ethically? How might we construct an economy in which meeting shared needs and goals is done both efficiently and equitably? How do we move away from a system of production based on profit to one based on real demand? How do we build a society in which self-initiative and self-development are structurally channeled into collective survival and advancement?

This dissertation reads the Victorian authors under study as fellow travelers in the tradition of humanist Marxism. Their politics is prowork, not in the sense that they blindly

celebrate the "dogma of work," but in the sense that they understand work as an essential human activity that, in an uncorrupted state, can be a source of both individual happiness and collective well-being. It is not until my final chapter that I will take up Victorian authors who explicitly theorize a transition away from capitalism, but I see the powerful critique of alienation that runs through the entire project as foundational to the radical reconceptualization of work necessary to the formation of a viable and ethical anti-capitalist politics.

In the twenty-first century, radical antiwork politics has been given new life through a marriage with the mainstream technophilic discourse of "postwork," which asserts that the advancement of digital technologies will continue to render human labor obsolete. Whereas in previous eras, only certain sectors of the economy were affected, postwork authors argue, digital technologies will lead to a systemic displacement of workers in all sectors. While previous technologies displaced mostly manual and unskilled workers, the new technologies will render even the most educated workers obsolete. The only way to combat the devasting effects of this unprecedented displacement is to radically reconfigure the work-centered society. Jeremy Rifkin's *The End of Work* (1995), arguably the inaugural text of the contemporary postwork tradition, expresses its signature blend of catastrophism and optimism: "The end of work could spell a death sentence for civilization as we have come to know it. The end of work could also signal the beginning of a great social transformation, a rebirth of the human spirit" (293). If we do nothing, the spread of technological unemployment will mean increased poverty and social unrest. But as long as policies are instituted to protect displaced workers, the massive reduction in human employment signals an era of unprecedented freedom. "After all," writes Rifkin, "work should be what machines do. Work is only about producing utility values. People, on the other

hand, should be free to generate intrinsic values, and to reinvigorate a sense of shared community" (*xli*).

The discourse of postwork has proven politically mobile. In the past decade, "postwork" thinkers have emerged both from the radical left and the mainstream liberal tradition. The discourse has been largely driven by economists but has crossed disciplines, encompassing sociologists and social theorists. The texts vary widely, from Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2018), an enthusiastic political manifesto that sketches a technophilic communist utopia, to the Oxford economist Daniel Susskind's *A World Without Work* (2020), a measured compilation of policy suggestions to help us transition into the "jobless future." Despite their differences in intended outcome—the Marxist strain of this tradition envisions a transition out of capitalism, the liberal strain a more humane species of capitalism—postwork writers share a surprising number of core assumptions. I will take up the postwork tradition more fully in my final chapter, but to conclude the body of this introduction, I would like to briefly consider one aspect of postwork politics to which I see Victorian prowork politics responding.

A core contention at the heart of postwork politics was articulated by John Maynard Keynes in a famous 1930 essay, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," in which he argued that the "economic problem" would likely be solved within a hundred years. Due to the rapid rate of productivity increases, Keynes argued, the collective struggle for survival would soon come to end. We would then be unique in the biological world as a species whose existence was no longer defined by the imperatives of necessity. For current postwork theorists, writing about a hundred years after Keynes, we have reached this horizon, in which the "economic problem" no longer needs to be our central species concern. We no longer must be a species defined by work, not only because there is less work to do thanks to automation, but also because

we no longer have to worry ourselves with necessity. We can therefore begin to concern ourselves with how we will use the freedom our technological advancements have made possible. As Susskind argues, we have spent a lot of time thinking about *labor* policies, but now it is time to start developing "*leisure policies*" to determine how we will spend our new surfeit of free time "wisely and well" (226, italics in original). For Bastani, living in a "post-scarcity" world means the opportunity to "live your best life" (186). Now that we have collectively tackled the realm of necessity, we are ready to start embracing our lives of leisure. Of course, we are being held back by our indoctrination into the work ethic. The only reason we have not accepted that work, to return to the words of Rifkin, is "what machines do" is because work is the opiate of the populace, "it intoxicates and disorientates, distracting us from looking for meaning elsewhere" (Susskind 225).

The problem with declaring the "economic problem" solved is that it rather obviously is not. Automation certainly has and will continue to replace human labor, but we are nowhere close to being "postwork." Hundreds of millions of human beings still lack access to safe drinking water, and even in a rich country like the United States, the infrastructures that have made things like safe drinking water available are crumbling and in immediate need of largescale repair or replacement. In the United States, public schools and universities are chronically understaffed, and many rural areas still lack access to basic health care. Around the world, poor areas devastated by wars and natural disasters sit forgotten and unlivable. And it is impossible to say in the age of the Anthropocene that we can disregard the collective struggle for survival. If anything, this struggle has only added a dimension. A massive amount of scientific, manual, and political labor will be required to meet the climate crisis.

Postwork and antiwork theorists have proposed policies that may be beneficial for workers, like shorter worker hours and stronger social safety nets that are not tied to work requirements. But the political call for "less work" arguably ignores the greatest challenges we face as a species. Instead, this dissertation proposes that perhaps the Victorians were right: it is not that we are working too much but rather that we might be working at the wrong things. In allowing the capitalist labor market to dictate what work gets done, human needs are simply not being met. Baudrillard scoffed at the idea that there might exist "an authentic and radical realm of productivity," but this is arguably exactly what is needed to connect human workers with human needs. The human species has not transcended the need to be productive, so the only solution is radical productivity.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter One, "Men Without a Calling: Mayhew, Gissing, and the Victorian Gig Economy," reassess Max Weber's famous formulation of the Protestant work ethic in light of a Victorian labor crisis. Weber argued that the religious conception of the "calling" served the needs of industrial capitalism by offering ideological support for the rationalized division of labor. Weber's reading is based on the predominant narrative of industrialization, in which pre-capitalist forms of labor are homogenized into a hegemonic system of wage labor and time discipline. This chapter foregrounds a counternarrative of industrialization, one in which workers are forced *out* of wage labor, rather than in. During his investigations for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849-50, Henry Mayhew uncovered an alarming employment trend in the London trades. Work that had traditionally been performed in workshops for established wages was being transformed into casual piecework performed in the homes of workers and the garrets of "small

masters." As Mayhew discovers, this systemic casualization had devastating effects for trade workers, leading to dramatic reductions in the value of labor, as well as brutal working conditions. The workers interviewed by Mayhew understood casualization to function in service of urban capitalists and provided detailed analysis of the ways in which casualization operated as a mechanism of labor exploitation. In these worker narratives, work in a calling comes to represent a measure of security and autonomy that functions *against* the interest of capital.

I return to Mayhew's study of the systemic casualization of the London trades at a parallel historical moment. The past decade has seen the rise of what has been popularly called the "gig economy," a widespread proliferation of task-based employment. The gig economy has been heralded by its advocates as a revolutionary break with industrial models of employment; in this narrative, workers have been empowered to break free of the oppressive wage system and become "microentrepreneurs." In my reading, casualization is shown to be wholly consistent with industrial logics. Despite their opposing optics, the mass concentration of labor enacted by the factory system and casualization's dispersal of labor served the same function: to intensify production while driving down the cost of labor. While nineteenth-century London trade workers may ostensibly have little in common with Lyft drivers or adjunct English professors, this chapter reveals surprising continuities between the nineteenth- and twenty-first century gig economies. I turn to George Gissing's novel *New Grub Street* (1891) to examine how connections were already being drawn in the Victorian era between casualized manual laborers and intellectual gig workers. In a brief closing section, I argue that combatting the effects of systemic casualization in the twenty-first century relies on understanding casualization's mobility as a mechanism of labor exploitation, its ability to move through all sectors of the economy and transcend class barriers.

My second chapter, "Work as Worldbuilding: Carlyle and the Politics of *Homo Faber*,"

examines the Victorian era's most influential formulation of work ethics, Thomas Carlyle's

"gospel of work." Whereas Arendt argues that the social connections created by work are limited

by its ties to material production, Carlyle conceptualizes work as a comprehensive act of

worldbuilding that involves the simultaneous fabrication of the material and social worlds. For

Arendt, *homo faber*—man as fabricator, man as worker—is inherently apolitical. Carlyle, by

contrast, imagines a sociopolitical realm shaped by the principles and motivations of *homo faber*.

Carlyle's elevation of *homo faber*, I argue, represents both the most radical and the most

authoritarian elements of the gospel of work.

In *Past and Present*, Carlyle formulates a radically democratic conception of work as a

collective act of worldbuilding: with our daily labor, we literally create the world around us, both

its material and social substance. Carlyle's vision of work as a collective responsibility offers a

radical alternative to the individualizing discourse of liberalism (and neoliberalism). His

reverence for "all the past and forgotten work" that made our current lives possible is an implicit

reminder that it is the work we do now which makes the future livable for those who come after.

Carlyle develops a powerful account of the human condition in which the daily contributions of

workers—so often trivialized and depoliticized—become the substance of species history. At the

same time, Carlyle rejects the radical potential of his own vision by binding collective action to

the imposition of rigid hierarchies. Carlyle's vitriolic support of imperialism and slavery, in his

"Occasional Discourse[s]" and elsewhere, reflect his refusal to acknowledge the contributions of

nonwhite workers *as* work; colonized laborers and slaves are expelled from the species act of

worldbuilding, in Carlyle's formulation, by being denied the status of *homo faber*. Additionally,

his writing reflects a profound ambivalence about the status of the white working classes:

sometimes they are the noble creators of history; sometimes they, like the colonial worker, are refused human agency.

Arendt recognized that *homo faber* must necessarily engage in acts of exploitation and mastery. To fabricate a human world requires a mastery of the natural one, a transformation of environment into resources. Because Arendt saw *homo faber* as apolitical, however, she does not extend this critique to the sociopolitical realm. My reading of Carlyle makes explicit the connection between the destructive mastery of nature and the violent history of imperialism. I argue, however, that we cannot respond to this destructive and violent history by denying our species identity as *homo faber*. Given that we must transform our natural environment to survive, we cannot stop being fabricators, makers, builders, workers. Our only option is to confront *homo faber*'s history of mastery and to use the lessons learned there to radically reconfigure our conception of work, not only as an ecologically-sustainable practice, but also as an anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-sexist practice.

"Working Heroines: Affective Labor in the Self-Help Narratives of Seacole and Alcott" explores two texts by working women that adopt the masculine rhetoric of self-help popularized by Samuel Smiles in the Victorian best-seller *Self-Help*: Mary Seacole's 1857 memoir *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* and Louisa May Alcott's 1873 semiautobiographical novel *Work: A Story of Experience.* Seacole and Alcott make unlikely companions. Seacole was a Jamaican woman of color and a successful hotelier who moved boldly among continents in search of new experiences and economic opportunities; Alcott was the educated but poor daughter of New England transcendentalists. Both, however, were working women in the nineteenth century who took on, as one of their many jobs, war nursing. In their respective narratives, both Seacole and Alcott's fictional proxy, Christie, trace their paths through a series

of employments to the heroic culmination of war nursing. In *Self-Help*, Smiles assured any man that he can be a hero in his own right, no matter how mundane his pursuits, if he works diligently and remains free of vice, but this democratization of heroism did not extend to women. Both Seacole and Alcott appropriate this language of heroism to describe not only their service as war nurses but all the work they performed to arrive there.

In their appropriation of the self-help ethic and narrative form, Seacole and Alcott complicate dominant images of Victorian nursing while also highlighting key tensions within the self-help tradition. As scholars have long noted, the emergence of professional nursing in the Victorian era was reliant on purging the employment of its associations with working-class labor, especially domestic service. Idealized images of nurses, especially Florence Nightingale, presented nursing as saintly self-abnegation and as an extension of (unpaid) domestic duty, helping to define nursing as one of the only respectable employment for middle- and upper-class white women. Neither Seacole nor Alcott rely on these idealized images of nursing, instead connecting their service as nurses to their working experience in less reputable employments, like hotelier and domestic servant. The image of female heroism they represent does not necessitate self-denial; like the working heroes of the Smilesian tradition, Seacole and Alcott's protagonist Christie take pleasure in their work and demand recognition for their social contributions. With this demand for recognition, I argue, Seacole and Alcott expose a fundamental tension at the heart of the self-help tradition between the satisfaction of useful work performed for its own sake and the desire for public appreciation.

In the closing section of this chapter, I consider how these Victorian working women, by insisting on the public visibility of what Michael Hardt has termed "affective labor," accessed rhetorical resources that may need to be rescued and revived. Despite the growing demand for

their services, domestic care workers in the twenty-first century suffer from invisibility and lack of respect and continue to be undervalued and underpaid. In contrast to the largely white, middle-class occupation of nursing, domestic care work is considered a working-class occupation and is frequently performed by women of color. As these workers fight for visibility and respect, they seek language to help the public understand their labor as skilled and socially valuable work. Seacole and Alcott had access to a rich discourse of work ethics that allowed them to claim value for their work based on its ethical contributions, its often simple and mundane betterment of people's lives. This ethical discourse, I suggest, may serve as a powerful resource for contemporary care workers and their advocates as they attempt to articulate the importance of their affective labor and correct for its systemic undervaluing.

While the first three chapters of my dissertation point towards the radical potential of reconceptualizing work, the final chapter, "Working in Utopia: Radical Ethics in Morris and Wilde," directly engages with two competing utopian socialist visions: William Morris's 1890 novel, *News from Nowhere,* and Oscar Wilde's 1891 response, the essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." While Morris's utopian vision represents a radical extension of the prowork politics of predecessors like Ruskin and Carlyle, Wilde engages in a Victorian version of what would come to be known in the mid-twentieth century as "antiwork" or "refusal of work" politics. Wilde, for good reason, has rarely been taken seriously as a socialist thinker, but I argue that his critique of leftist traditions that celebrate labor as a fundamentally human activity represents an early articulation of what becomes a significant and enduring critique of Marxism, that Marxism was blinded by the same "dogma of work" that drove exploitation under capitalism.

In Wilde's utopian socialist vision, work is understood to be inherently oppressive. All necessary and useful work is performed by machines, and human beings, freed from the burden of animal labor, can now engage in the truly human pursuits of contemplation and artistic and intellectual production. Wilde's vision may read "utopian" in the most derisive sense of the term, but his vision of a world without labor has taken on new resonance in the twenty-first century with the emergence of a "postwork" tradition of thought. Postwork writers—who range from avowed communists to Oxford economists—argue that with the rapid advance of digital technologies, we are approaching a world without work, in which a vast majority of the necessary business of existence will be automated. This presents an opportunity, postwork writers argue, to radically restructure the "work-centered society" to open up new opportunities for human freedom and flourishing beyond the confines of organized employment.

I return to Wilde in this "postwork" moment to consider how his postwork vision highlights both what is most powerful and what is most troubling about the growing legitimacy of this tradition. Wilde offers a trenchant critique of socialism's glorification of masculine labor, particularly its aestheticization of the male laboring body, and reminds us that any attempt to formulate a radical prowork politics in the twenty-first century must contend with its history of sexism. Wilde's vision also reveals, however, that postwork politics suffer from a neglect of what Marx termed "the realm of necessity." In their belief that technological advances will somehow provide for necessity and species survival, postwork thinkers overlook the massive amount of coordinated human effort—the unquantifiable amount of work—that universally meeting even the most basic of human needs would require.

The chapter thus turns to Morris, who I believe offers a more sustainable and ethical vision of a postcapitalist future, in which useful work is not eliminated but is prized as the most

valuable human activity. Morris's radical refusal to define the realm of necessity as inherently

oppressive allows him to place the meeting of collective needs at the center of social

organization without eliminating individual desires and pleasures. Morris's prowork model, I

argue, offers an urgently needed starting point for discussing how we might radically reconfigure

the practice of work to reflect our collective ethical commitments, rather than the demands of

market mechanisms and capitalist profits.

My brief conclusion, "Prowork Politics in the Twenty-First Century," considers how a

prowork politics is already operational in two current political movements: support for the Green

New Deal and calls to Defund the Police. I argue that identifying these critical movements as

"prowork" provides a new lens for articulating what is at stake that may possibly help to expand

their political reach. Beyond the rhetorical value of defining these political projects as

"prowork," I suggest that keeping their prowork character in mind may help to formulate

sustainable policies that reflect the ethical commitments at the heart of these movements.

Chapter One: Men Without a Calling: Mayhew, Gissing, and the Victorian Gig Economy

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in 1905, has proven to be the most enduring articulation of the role of work ethics in capitalist societies. In Weber's well-known analysis, the emergence of Protestantism acts as an ideological buttress that supports the ascendency of industrial capitalism. Overturning previous conceptions of spirituality as necessarily divorced from worldly concerns, the Protestant tradition married religious devotion to action in the secular world. Success in an earthly "calling" acted as proof of one's election, while also contributing to the glory of God by productively employing his gifts. To be idle, by contrast, was to waste these divine gifts. In Weber's reading, this Protestant ethic sanctioned the acquisitiveness necessary for the growth of capitalism; the accumulation of material wealth ceased to be associated with immorality and became instead a marker of piety and grace. As importantly, the Protestant emphasis on a defined calling supported the capitalist division of labor. The pursuit of a calling required methodical, focused application. Undisciplined and sporadic activity represented both a waste of divine productive capacity and a constant temptation to backslide into idleness. Weber cites the seventeenth-century Protestant minister, Richard Baxter: "Outside of a well-marked calling, the accomplishments of a man are only casual and irregular, and he spends more time in idleness than at work…[He] remains in constant confusion, and his business knows neither time nor place" (qtd. on 109). Thus, Weber concludes that in the Protestant tradition, "[i]t is not work itself, but rational work in a calling that is demanded by God" (109).

For Weber, this demand for "rational work in a calling" forms the perfect ideological companion to the rationalized division of labor necessary to the growth of industrial capitalism. The methodical application required to pursue a calling manifests as the secular gospel that "time

is money," the recognition of economic potential in the mastering of time. The Protestant work ethic, then, supports a regime of industrial time-discipline that replaces earlier task-oriented work rhythms. Once the economic practices sanctioned by the Protestant ethic have grown into an inescapable "mighty cosmos" that determines, "with overwhelming coercion, the style of life *not only* of those directly involved in business but of every individual who is born into this mechanism," capitalism no longer requires the spiritual dimension of the calling: "The Puritans *wanted* to be men of the calling—we, on the other hand, *must* be" (120-1, italics in original). Though capitalism has outgrown the need for moral sanction, however, the system does not fully purge the ethic: "the idea of the 'duty in a calling' haunts our lives like the ghost of once-held religious beliefs" (121). Within the mighty cosmos of capitalism, work in a calling is no longer a choice, yet we cling to the ghost of its ethical significance.

The outsized influence of Weber's conception of a singular "work ethic" that serves as capitalism's companionate ideology has led to a generalized equation of work ethics with disciplinary mechanisms. Imbuing work with ethical properties is understood as a form of false consciousness tied to long-dead religious beliefs that renders us ripe for exploitation. Linking Weber to Foucauldian discourse, Kathi Weeks has recently argued that the "willingness to live for and through work renders subjects supremely functional for capitalist purposes" (12). Having internalized the idea that work should be at the center of our lives, we have become "docile subjects" who willingly contribute to our own exploitation (53). Or, as Bertrand Russell expressed it decades earlier, "the morality of work is the morality of slaves" (9). In the Weberian model of the work ethic, the idea that work has moral and ethical value that exceeds its material productivity can only be read as conducive to capitalism's disciplinary regime.

This chapter disrupts the Weberian association of work ethics with the capitalist rationalization of labor by rereading one of Weber's key terms in the context of a Victorian labor crisis. In my reading, the conception of a "calling" is mobilized in opposition to, rather than in support of, capitalist mechanisms of exploitation. The narrative of industrial capitalism on which Weber's analysis relies is a familiar one. In this history of capitalism, the pre-capitalist task-oriented conception of time was replaced by the industrial abstraction of time as a regime of wage labor was systematically imposed. Irregular and decentralized forms of labor were eradicated by a massive wave of rationalization that left the deadening uniformity of Dickens's Coketown in its wake. This chapter highlights a counternarrative, in which industrial capitalism imposes, rather than eradicates, decentralized task-based labor.

In the nineteenth century, the industrial manufacture of inexpensive, ready-made consumer goods in other parts of England began to put pressure on traditional London trades like tailoring and boot-making to produce more cheaply and more quickly. Given that production could not be centralized and mechanized as it was in Manchester and Leeds, urban owners of capital turned to another strategy: systemic casualization. Through this process of casualization, trade work that had traditionally been performed in workshops for established day wages was replaced by an irregular piece-work system performed in workers' homes and the garrets of "small masters." This movement from the workshop to domestic systems of production gave rise to a labor practice most commonly called "sweating," which mimicked factory labor by dividing the work usually performed by one skilled worker into a series of smaller tasks that could be delegated to an "unskilled" workforce, often women and children.

Henry Mayhew has become practically synonymous with the London "street-folk" who populate his magnum opus, *London Labour and the London Poor*. Yet, *London Labour*

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represents only a limited selection of the original 82 letters Mayhew published for the *Morning Chronicle* during his stint as their "Special Correspondent for the Metropolis" from October 1849 to December 1850. In 1971, Eileen Yeo and E.P. Thompson published *The Unknown Mayhew*, a collection *Morning Chronicle* letters omitted from *London Labour*, along with excerpts from a self-published 1851 series called *Low Wages, Their Causes, Consequences and Remedies*. In their revelation of this "unknown Mayhew," Thompson and Yeo hoped to correct for the popular misunderstanding of Mayhew as "no more than a gifted journalist, with an undisciplined zest for collecting facts about the poor and picturesque characters among the poor" (Yeo 56). Yeo hoped to show Mayhew as a serious social investigator conducting an empirical study of poverty, while Thompson was more interested in highlighting a politically radical Mayhew whose strident opposition to unregulated capitalism put him at odds with respectable London.[7] The publication of *The Unknown Mayhew* and the debates to which it gave rise did successfully complicate and nuance understandings of Mayhew. My return to Yeo and Thompson's archive, however, has more to do with disrupting dominant narratives about Victorian labor than it does dominant narratives about Mayhew.

Mayhew's *Morning Chronicle* reportage offers what is arguably the most extensive nineteenth-century study of the systemic casualization of the London consumer trades. Mayhew's study reveals workers in crisis. As casualization swept through London, traditional trade protections deteriorated, and wages rapidly declined. The loss of a secure income drove workers into desperate competition with one another, further depressing the value of their own labor. In the dominant narrative of industrialization, the oppressive regime of time-discipline represented by wage labor destroys the natural work rhythms and relative worker autonomy

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[7] See Yeo's and Thompson's respective introductions to *The Unknown Mayhew*.

associated with decentralized, preindustrial forms of production. For trade workers in mid-nineteenth century London, the experience of industrialization was quite different. These workers were not being forced *into* a system of wage labor but rather forced *out* of one. In the narrative told by these workers, wage labor represents not only a steady income but also a relatively high measure of autonomy. Being forced out of "day work" into piecework meant a loss of control and dignity, a deterioration in working conditions and quality of life.

Under these circumstances, the privileging of work in a calling—the methodical pursuit of a defined occupation—signals not the complicity of workers in their own exploitation but rather a concrete demand for better working conditions. While grounded in a detailed analysis of how casualization functions as a mechanism of exploitation, Mayhew's study of casualization is framed in ethical terms. Casual labor is presented as immoral, but not in the way that Weber imagines. There was a largely middle-class Victorian discourse in which the casual laborer was painted as morally suspect and associated with indolence, intemperance, and criminality. This suspicion of the casual laborer was especially pronounced in London, an untamable metropolis understood to offer "the possibility of scraping together a living by innumerable devious methods" (Stedman Jones 12). By contrast, Mayhew reads casual labor not as a reflection of working-class immorality but as a potential source of unethical behavior. Importantly, for Mayhew, the abandonment of ethics begins not with worker, but with the employer. In turning to the exploitative practices of casualization, the owners of capital create unethical labor conditions that, in turn, pressure workers to behave in ways that they themselves define as unethical.

The irony that underlies Mayhew's deft analysis of the casualization of labor is that he was himself rather casually employed. His time at the *Morning Chronicle* was a relatively steady gig in the life of a writer-by-trade who turned out pot boilers and didactic children's literature to

make ends meet. Removed from his editorship at *Punch* after only a year, Mayhew found

himself living beyond his means. Two years before he began writing the series that would

become his most enduring work, Mayhew was facing the Court of Bankruptcy and narrowly

escaped debtor's prison. Mayhew was, in short, a man without a calling. Yet, Mayhew's

understanding of his status as casual laborer is obscured by his own reified sense of class

division and his persistence, as much as he sympathizes with the working classes, to see them as

subjects of study. They are the observed; he is the observer.

It is in George Gissing's 1891 novel *New Grub Street* that we get a powerful image of the

writer as casual laborer. This chapter turns to Gissing's portrayal of literary labor to highlight the

way in which casualization migrated across class boundaries and affected intellectual/creative as

well as manual laborers. *New Grub Street* has long been appreciated for its detailed portrait of

late-Victorian literary life, but I join a handful of scholars who read the novel as a meditation,

more broadly, on working life and the struggle to make a living. Throughout *New Grub Street*,

Gissing draws connections between intellectual/creative production and manual trade work.

Whereas for earlier figures like Carlyle and Ford Madox Brown, connections between "brain

work" and manual craftsmanship relied on idealized images of the artisan, Gissing's parallel is

based on the realities of producing for a capitalist marketplace.[8] Like Mayhew's sweated tailors,

Gissing's struggling writer, Henry Reardon, finds himself driven by the casualness of his labor

into degrading working conditions where he must make choices he defines as unethical. As in

Mayhew's reportage, a steady wage comes to represent, for Gissing's precarious literary

laborers, not an oppressive regime of time-discipline but the opportunity to regain some

semblance of autonomy and dignity.

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[8] On Carlyle, see Waithe; on Brown, see Barringer, 76-81.

My reading of *New Grub Street* also serves as a bridge that links my discussion of casual

labor in the Victorian era to what in the twenty-first century has been termed the "gig economy."

The recent systemic shift from waged and salaried work to casual forms of employment has been

heralded by its advocates as a revolution in the world of work. Workers are "evolving beyond the

constraints of traditional work models" and "demanding the freedom of flexible work

environments" (Shadpour). While certain high-demand workers have no doubt found more

freedom and flexibility through gig work, many workers have found themselves disempowered

rather than liberated by this employment trend. Systemic casualization in the twenty-first century

has shown itself to function much the same way as it did in Victorian London: it allows

employers to reduce labor costs by dismantling worker protections and leveraging the

vulnerability this creates. Despite the oppressive realities of the gig economy, two centuries of

defining wage labor as the primary vehicle of capitalist exploitation makes defending "traditional

work models" feel ethically dubious. In the final section of this chapter, I briefly consider this

ethical conundrum through my reading of the "calling," suggesting that it may provide a

language of worker advocacy that recognizes the importance of reliable employment while

acknowledging that the demand for a steady wage may be intrinsically connected to more radical

demands for autonomy and dignity.

Mayhew and the Dual Sector Trades

In the first letter of his *Morning Chronicle* series, Mayhew assures his readership that his

study of the London poor will address only those "whose incomings are insufficient for the

satisfaction of their wants—a want being […] contradistinguished from a mere desire by a

positive physical pain, instead of a mental uneasiness, accompanying it" (120). Yet, as Mayhew

set out to study only the very poor, those suffering from physical want, he found that he was led up the economic ladder. In a November 1849 letter, Mayhew announced his intention to profile the destitute "slop-workers" of the tailoring trade, but he stopped short, and in a December letter declared that in order to understand the slop trade, "we must first inquire into the nature and characteristics of that art of which it is an inferior variety" (217).

This rather simple recognition—that to understand the poorly-paid, deregulated portion of a trade involved analyzing its relationship to the more reputable parts of the trade—sent Mayhew on an investigation that would result in what is arguably the most comprehensive nineteenth-century account of casualization as an economic phenomenon. As he began his investigations, Mayhew learned that many of the major London trades were comprised of a two-part structure. One part, commonly called the *honorable* sector, consisted of workers employed in workshops for an established hourly wage. The other part, the *dishonorable* sector, existed outside the bounds of industry standards and union-supported customs. Workers in the dishonorable sector were generally engaged in piecework rather than waged work and were irregularly, rather than continually, employed. While this two-part structure had long existed, the dishonorable trade had been traditionally understood to have a designated role: the production of inferior goods. In the tailoring trade, for instance, the dishonorable sector had supplied the "slop-shops," shops or warehouses that sold inexpensive, ready-made clothing, and provided the notoriously underpaid labor used to fulfill government contracts for the production of military, civil service, and prison uniforms (150, 255). By the time Mayhew began his investigations in 1849, however, the deregulated sectors of the trades had exceeded their bounds and were swallowing up their honorable counterparts. For example, Mayhew estimated that during the time of his investigation, only 3,000 of the 21,000 tailors in London remained employed in the

honorable sector (218). The Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley, after reading Mayhew's report

in the *Morning Chronicle*, expressed his alarm at what seemed the inevitable fate of all the

honorable tailors in London: "Like Ulysses's companions in the cave of Polyphemous, the only

question among them is, to scramble as far back as to have *a chance of being eaten at last"* (*lxi*,

italics in original).

John Seed has argued that Mayhew got lost in the subjective idiosyncrasies of the

workers he interviewed and failed to understand how each individual story was connected to "the

epic narrative of capital" (63). But, as Kingsley's quote suggests, an epic narrative is exactly

what Mayhew uncovered in his study of the London trades, and he well understood that this

narrative was all about capital. Given the scope of his study, Mayhew was able to trace some

narrative elements largely invisible to the workers themselves, particularly when it came to

articulating parallels between trades, but much of Mayhew's understanding of how casualization

functioned as a mechanism of labor exploitation came directly from the subjects of his inquiry.

Rather than obscure the overarching narrative, Mayhew's careful attention to the subjective

experience of the workers he interviews serves to illuminate the larger economic forces at work.

Many workers interviewed by Mayhew understood that the widespread shift from waged

work to piecework was the direct result of employers attempting to lower labor costs. One coat

maker interviewed by Mayhew could remember the exact year—1834—that his shop moved

from "day work" to "piece work." Before that time, he says, "each man employed received 6d.

per hour for every hour that he was upon the establishment; it mattered not whether the master

found him in work or not, he was paid all the same" (223). Once the system of compensation

moved to piecework, workers were kept on the premises for days "without receiving a penny"

(223). As the coat maker recognizes, it was this change in the method of compensation, even

before work was exported out of the workshops, that began the degradation of the honorable trade. The effect of the piecework system, he explains, is "that the workman has to work now a day and a half for a day's wages, […] and the consequence is, fewer hands are employed, and the surplus workmen offer their labour at a lower price" (223). As soon as work "is given out to be done," the pressure to perform more work for less compensation becomes even more severe (223). Once the journeyman begins to take work home, he often falls prey to the temptation of the sweating system, employing "hands to do it for him at a lower price than he himself receives" (223). These "hands," as the coat maker explains, are generally women and children. Finding that he can get work done "as low as he pleases" using this effective method, the sweater continually underbids his fellow workers. The masters, their appetite for profit whetted by the cheapness of sweated labor, then impose these lower prices on the workers employed in the shop (223).

In Mayhew's investigations, versions of the coat maker's narrative are echoed by workers across the London consumer trades. The move from wages to piecework meant irregular income and bouts of unemployment, which increased competition among the workers and encouraged them to underbid one another, leading to the introduction of the sweating system, which in turn further depressed the value of labor. Sweating and other systems of compound labor will be discussed in the next section, but it is important to note that the piecework system itself afforded opportunities for exploitation that the wage system had foreclosed.

While lowering hourly wages was highly visible and easily contested, there were many ways to quietly manipulate the prices paid for individual articles. Prices were determined by the amount of estimated time it would take to create the article, and employers could simply tell a worker—who knew better but needed the work—that, for instance, a Wellington surtout that

took twenty-six hours to make would only take eighteen. Owners also manipulated prices through an indiscriminate system of fines. At a meeting of journeyman tailors attended by Mayhew, the workers reported being fined for every *hour* that the garment was returned late. Given that workers were operating with increasingly tight turnarounds, these late fines were a constant source of anxiety. Fines were also imposed for arbitrary reasons, as in one case in which a female worker was docked 1s. for being "saucy" (246). When the husband, employed by the same establishment, went to protest, he was also fined a shilling, for the reason, the supervisor was reported to say, that now "one cannot laugh at the other" (246). Employers of pieceworkers were also notorious for not factoring in the cost of supplies. For instance, tailors were often expected to provide their own "trimmings," but this expenditure was not considered in their compensation. Equally as significant were the accumulative costs of keeping one's home lighted and warmed for the long hours of work. One young tailor, just months out of his six-year apprenticeship, could not make more than 12s. a week working eighteen hours a day, "and out of that sum trimmings cost him 2s., light 6d., and coals 1s. 6d., so that he only had 8s. for his support" (245). That a skilled tailor emerging from the apprenticeship system could come away with only eight shillings a week—when those in the honorable trade could expect six shillings a day—suggests just how effective the piecework system could be at depressing the value of labor.

It was the effectiveness of casualization in circumventing industry standards and stripping workers of the protections afforded by the honorable trade that made the largescale shift to piecework a crisis for the affected workers. Karel Williams has argued that Mayhew's study exaggerates the effects of casualization because Mayhew overidentifies with the position of the honorable tradesman. In Mayhew's *Morning Chronicle* letters, writes Williams, "[t]he opinions of the aristocratic artisans in the honourable sectors of the trades are not being critically

recorded but uncritically assimilated as the investigation's own conclusions" (249). It is because of the "presiding artisan consciousness" informing Mayhew's study that "the threat from the dishonourable trade" emerges as "*the* crisis" (251, 254). Williams cleverly observes that fellow historians who study the *Morning Chronicle* letters "are so busy congratulating Mayhew on escaping bourgeois respectability that they fail to notice that these texts completely endorse proletarian respectability" (249-50). The terms "honourable" and "dishonourable" clearly intersect with the language of respectability, and honorable trade workers affected by casualization do mourn the loss of the markers that defined for them a respectable working-class life.

For some, the steady decline in quality of living meant giving up a favorite meal. "I should like a piece of roast beef with the potatoes done under it," lamented one weaver, "but I shall never taste that again" (130). Several others instead narrated their alienation from intellectual and cultural engagement. One boot-maker reports: "In the years '45, '46 and '47, I was in much better condition than I am now. Then I was able to take my periodicals in. I used to have near a shilling's worth of them every week, sir" (289). While one cabinet-maker proudly informs Mayhew that he will still find "more cabinet-makers than any other trade members of mechanics' institutes, and literary institutions, and attenders at lectures," another who had been in the trade for forty-five years related to Mayhew the way in which poverty had turned him from intellectual pursuits (443). Lamenting that after so many years in the trade he had begun to see a steady and seemingly irreversible decline in his wages, he reflected on the past: "I felt myself a gentleman, and we all held up our heads like gentlemen. I was very fond at that time of reading all that Charles Lamb wrote, and all that Leigh Hunt wrote. As to reading now, why if

we have a quarter of cheese or butter, I get hold of the paper it's brought in, and read it every word. I can't afford a taste for reading if it's to be paid for" (453).

Mayhew is deeply sympathetic to these accounts. His alarm at the spread of casualization did reflect his sense that to be forced into the dishonorable trade meant general degradation. The honorable tailors, Mayhew writes, "are really intelligent artisans, while the slop-workers are generally almost brutified with their incessant toil, wretched pay, miserable food, and filthy homes" (236). Although Mayhew emphasized the dramatic disparity between the honorable and dishonorable sectors of the trade, however, he did not attribute this disparity to the workers themselves. In the *Morning Chronicle* letters, workers do not end up in the casual sector because they are lazy, profligate, or otherwise unfit for steady employment. Rather, differences in working and living conditions were attributed to economic forces beyond the workers' control. Mayhew understood that as the largescale migration to piecework systematically depressed the value of labor, it also systematically intensified labor. Workers had to work longer and faster to reach a subsistence wage, and this inevitably led to dehumanizing working conditions.

Further, Mayhew's understanding of the brutal (and brutalizing) effects of casualized labor came predominantly from pieceworkers themselves. His conclusion that casualization was "*the* crisis" facing the London trades at midcentury was a reflection not only of artisan consciousness but of the lived experience of workers subject to casualization's effects. Casualization did not only affect secure wage workers threatened by its spread; it had devastating consequences for those already in the most vulnerable positions. As more and more workers flooded the casual sector, it depreciated the value of *everyone's* labor. A female waistcoat maker who had been employed by the same slop warehouse for twenty-six years succinctly captures the inexorability of the downward pressure exerted on pieceworkers' incomes: "Prices have come

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down very much indeed since I first worked for the warehouse—*very much* […] Every week they have reduced something within these last few years. Work's falling very much. The work has not riz, no! never since I worked at it. It's lower'd but it's not riz" (148). Mayhew's letters reflect as much sympathy with those who had always been subject to the exploitation of casualized labor as the privileged artisans who feared its spread. As Mayhew confesses to his readership at the beginning of a letter on slop-workers and needlewomen, "I could not have believed that there were human beings toiling so long and gaining so little, and starving so silently and heroically, round about our very homes" (137).

The dual-sector structure of the London trades reflects a history of hierarchy, in which workers excluded from the protections afforded by the honorable trade, like women and immigrants, were exposed to a highly deregulated and exploitative labor market. What the casualization crisis highlighted so starkly was that the maintenance of this divide ultimately benefited only employers. Though the term "honorable" had been used as an exclusionary mechanism, the spread of casualization highlighted the importance of the values this term embodied. To be honorably employed meant to have a measure of control over one's pay and working conditions, to produce quality goods of which one could be proud, and to live a relatively comfortable life—to feed one's family roast beef and to take in periodicals. The "dishonourable" trade was thus dishonorable, in part, because it deprived workers of autonomy, dignity, and comfort. The dishonor thus fell not on the worker but on the employer who created the exploitative working conditions.

In the face of widespread casualization, the honorable sector came to define ethical work practices, against which the practices of the dishonorable sector were judged unethical. Mayhew was not anti-capitalist, but he did gain from the workers he interviewed a strong sense of just

how unethical the single-minded drive for profit could be. The discourse of work ethics that surrounded the casualization crisis was concerned with both the decisions of the capitalists and the decisions that casualization forced the workers themselves to make.

Workers in the dual-sector trades interviewed by Mayhew were almost unanimous in their agreement that systems of "compound labour" were the worst evil to emerge from the largescale shift to piecework. What tailors called "sweating," boot and shoemakers called "chamber-mastering," carpenters called the "subcontract" or "subletting" system, and cabinetmakers called "garret mastering." Under these systems of production, tradesmen defined as "skilled" workers (workers who had often previously worked in honorable shops for day wages) employed a small group of workers defined as "unskilled." These underlings could be paid virtually nothing, so the sweater could greatly increase the speed of his production while still underbidding the solitary tradesmen. When the sweater employed his own family, he received additional labor for free. The next section takes up the complex ethics of turning "sweater" or becoming a "small master." Sometimes viewed as a traitor by their fellow workers, sometimes as victims, these figures themselves often expressed concern over their own complicity in what they felt to be a necessary but unethical means of survival.

Compound Labor, or the Factory Dispersed

Despite casualization's opposing optics, its dispersal of workers was driven by the same motivations as the concentration of workers in the factory towns: to reduce the cost of labor and intensify production. Casualization's intimate relationship to industrialization is most apparent in the emergence of systems of compound labor, in which work was subdivided along the industrial model. It was Mayhew's account of the horrific labor conditions that accompanied these systems

of compound labor that prompted Charles Kingsley to equate casualization with the predicament of being trapped in a cave with a hungry cyclops. In once such report, Mayhew is guided to a "dirty-looking house" where a sweater in the tailoring trade is lodged, and he finds "in a small back room, about eight feet square […] no fewer than seven workmen, with their coats and shoes off, seated cross-legged on the floor, busy stitching the different parts of different garments" (139). Though one of these workers is identified as the "master," he is "scarcely distinguishable from the rest" (140). As one worker explains, the same crowded room where they work is also where they all eat and sleep, two or three to a bed. He goes on to tell Mayhew that they often work "from seven in the morning till eleven at night," Sundays included, and earn only an average wage of eight shillings a week, out of which they must "deduct expenses of lodging, trimming, washing, and light, which comes to 5s. 9d." (141). With so little money left over, he laments, "we cannot get a coat to our backs" (141). The slop-worker ends his account with an expression of desperation: "I'd sooner be transported than this work. Why, then, at least, I'd have regular hours for work and for sleep; but now I am worked harder and worse-fed than a cab-horse" (141).

Not only were systems of compound labor seen to dehumanize the worker by forcing him to work brutally long hours in crowded and unsanitary conditions, but the quality of production was also seen to suffer. In Mayhew's account of the sweater's garret, the product becomes indistinguishable, "different parts of different garments" broken up into fragments and scattered across the floor. The concrete labor of producing use values becomes abstracted by the same process as factory labor. As workers attested to Mayhew, the increased alienation created by the subdivision of labor led to a necessary decline in quality of work. . Whereas an honorable tradesman working for day wages had some control over his pace of production and could afford

to consider the quality of his work, pieceworkers confessed to feeling driven by necessity to think only of the quantity they were able to produce. This complaint was especially prominent among carpenters, who were opposed to piecework because it "induces a man to 'scamp' his work; that is, to devote less time and labour to the skillful execution of it then he would were he paid by the day" (409). Piecework in the carpentering trade gave rise to a system of compound labor called "sub-letting," which further distanced the worker from the object of his production. Mayhew notes that the system of subletting often employed multiple levels of subdivision. A general contractor sublet the work to various piece-working journeymen, who themselves sub-let the work "to others even lower than themselves" (410). Through this process, Mayhew concludes, "men gradually become mere machines, and lose all the moral and intellectual characteristics which distinguish the skilled artisan" (410). Workers also continually expressed concern about the effects of casualized production on the "fleeced" public, who were paying the same amount for a decidedly inferior product. This was particularly concerning in the building trade, in which the question of safety was involved. As one foreman working in the subletting system tells Mayhew: "Work is scamped in such a way that the houses are not safe to live in. Our name for them in the trade is 'bird cases', and really nine-tenths of houses built nowadays are very little stronger" (425).

As with the factory system, this subdivision and "deskilling" of manufacturing encouraged a more extensive use of child labor. Often, this involved a tradesman employing his own children. One garret-master engaged in the making of children's shoes confessed to working his daughters fifteen hours a day. He assures Mayhew that prices had been driven so low, the entire family working such hours was necessary for their survival, though he regrets that his daughters "seem to have no spirit and no animation in them; in fact, such very hard work takes

the youth out of them" (319). There was also an external labor market for children. The use of

child labor in the boot and shoe trades had grown to such an extent that Mayhew discovered "a

market in Bethnal-green, where children stand twice a week to be hired as binders and sowers"

(321). One such worker, a "sharp little fellow not yet 13," explains that he is engaged in one task,

"stitching the sole to the upper," and after being employed at that same task for a year, he can

now sow a dozen pairs of lady's slippers a day (321). Some boys, he tells Mayhew, can "sew

faster than men," completing up to three dozen pairs a day (322). The boy says he has never been

badly treated by any of the seven garret-masters for whom he has worked, though he "sometimes

work[s] from six in the morning until ten at night" (322). His only complaint is his lack of

education: "I can neither read nor write—I wish I could. Do you know of any school, sir, where I

could learn on a Sunday?" (322).

Workers interviewed by Mayhew were divided on the question of who or what bore

responsibility for the unethical labor practices that accompanied systems of compound labor.

Critics have argued that, despite this diversity of opinion, Mayhew himself picks a villain: the

"small master." Williams argues that Mayhew's uncritical assimilation of the artisanal

consciousness leads him to "scapegoa[t]" the "small working masters," who are "abused as the

cause of every evil" (250). Donna Loftus has recently echoed this critique of Mayhew, arguing

that he "resorted to fear-mongering, castigating the small master as a new social evil that needed

to be eradicated" (507). Mayhew's interviews with workers in all positions—not just the

privileged honorable tradesmen—are full of condemnation for the expanding systems of

compound labor, and Mayhew does adopt this position as his own. But he does not simply vilify

the small master.

Of all the trades affected by casualization, Mayhew found that the labor of cabinetmakers had seen the most drastic decline in value, estimating that prices in the trade had fallen 300 percent in just a few years (460). He attributes this to the rapid rise in the number of "garret-masters." The problem with garret-masters, however, is not that they are villainous but that they are always battling destitution:

> The capital of the garret master being generally sufficient to find him in materials
> for the manufacture of only one article at a time, and his savings being but barely
> enough for his subsistence while he is engaged in putting those materials together,
> he is compelled, the moment the work is completed, to part with it for whatever
> he can get. He cannot afford to keep it even for a day, for to do so is generally to
> remain a day unfed. (461)

Mayhew's objection to small masters stemmed from his understanding that they were often just as vulnerable as the workers they employed. Because the garret-master was exposed directly to the market, he had to sell in order to live, and this encouraged a system reliant on his self-exploitation as well as on his exploitation of more vulnerable workers. As Mayhew observed of the sweater in the tailoring trade, the "master" is "scarcely distinguishable" from his employees.

Mayhew's evidence also suggested to him that the increase in small masters was driven less by greed than by desperation. The following narrative of a "fancy cabinet-maker" who took up as a "small master" is representative. The cabinet-maker tells Mayhew that when he began work in the trade forty years earlier, he could bring home on a Saturday night, "a new dress for my wife, for I was just married then, and something new for the children when they came, and a good joint for Sunday" (463). When the "slaughter-houses," large warehouses that employ pieceworkers, began to proliferate in his trade, he turned to outwork. As the slaughterhouses

overtook the honorable trade, the increased competition drove down prices, and now, he says, "I have to work harder than ever. Sometimes I don't know how to lie down of a night to rest best, from tiredness" (463). Employing his wife and daughter was done out of necessity: "The slaughtermen give less and less. My wife and family help me, or I couldn't live" (463). Even after employing his wife and remaining unmarried daughter to line the work-boxes he constructs, he struggles to turn any kind of profit. "Many a times," he tells Mayhew, "I've had to pawn goods that I couldn't sell on a Saturday night to rise a Sunday's dinner" (464). His wife produces the "duplicates" to prove it.

For Mayhew, systems of compound labor become a predominant factor in the degradation of the London trades, but *they are not the originary cause*. Rather, they are an effect of casualization—the breakdown in traditional employment relationships driven by the urban capitalist's desire for greater profit. Mayhew did not ignore the presence of unscrupulous sweaters and garret-masters hoping to turn their own profit by exploiting more vulnerable workers, but his evidence suggested to him that the profit motive of large capitalists—not small masters—bore the greatest responsibility for the labor crisis. Mayhew's own understanding is reflected in the testimony of a cabinetmaker, who assures Mayhew that the "principle reason" skilled workers become small masters is "because there an't enough work at the regular shops to employ them all. The slaughterers have cut down their prices so low that there ain't no work to be had at the better houses, so men must go on making up for the 'butchers' (slaughterers) or starve" (472). If any of these small masters could get into "regular journeywork," he tells Mayhew, "there an't one man as wouldn't prefer it—it would pay them a good deal better" (471).

Mayhew's study of casualization analyzes a specific labor crisis that occurred in mid nineteenth-century London among manual trade workers. Yet, his analysis reflects a broader understanding of how casualization functions as a mechanism of labor exploitation. In doing so, it offers an important corrective to the dominant narrative of industrialization. In this narrative, the spread of wage labor represents the imposition of an oppressive system of time-discipline that deprived workers of autonomy and alienated them from their labor. In Mayhew's account, it is casualization—being jettisoned from waged employment—that produces these effects. In the next section, I begin to consider the portability of Mayhew's analysis of casualization by turning to George Gissing's study of literary labor.

Gissing and the Writer Without a Calling

In his introduction to *New Grub Street*, Bernard Bergonzi notes that while it has long been appreciated as "the most explicit fictional study of literary life ever written in English," the novel is equally as exceptional for being a novel about *work* (9). *New Grub Street*'s attention to work has likely been overlooked, Bergonzi argues, because "the 'work' involved—the writing of novels—is, in the eyes of most people, the furthest possible extreme from mere 'labour,' and might even be considered so delightful and rewarding an activity as scarcely to deserve the name of work at all" (9). *New Grub Street* is certainly about work, not just the writing of novels but all kinds of literary labor, and it is particularly interested in the connection between writing for a living and other forms of employment. In this section, I examine Gissing's extended reflection on what it means to treat writing as a "trade." Though a surface reading of the novel might suggest that the comparison is meant only as a meditation on the commercialization—and therefore degradation—of artistic integrity, the novel's extended comparison of writing and

manual trade work is significantly more complex. Rather than use this comparison to oppose the subordination of creative inspiration to market demand, Gissing foregrounds the shared realities of manual and intellectual workers. For Gissing, the idea of writing as a trade was not itself degrading. Rather, Gissing imagines writing as a kind of dual-sector trade, in which there are honorable and dishonorable labor practices.

Gissing's emphasis on writing as work is due in large part, no doubt, to his pronounced tendency towards self-reflection. Virginia Woolf classified Gissing as "one of those imperfect novelists through whose books one sees the life of the author faintly covered by the lives of fictitious people." Gissing certainly was a writer preoccupied with what it meant to write for a living, and, like most other subjects, it was a subject about which he was deeply conflicted. In one of his many essays on Dickens, Gissing reflects on the formative experience of reading John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens*. "[T]he pages which invigorated me," he writes, "were those where one sees Dickens at work, alone at his writing-table, absorbed in the task of the story-teller, […] writ[ing] with gusto, ever and again bursting into laughter at his own thoughts" (13). Though he writes with pleasure and emotion, Dickens does not wait for a stroke of divine genius: "A man of method, too, with no belief in the theory of casual inspiration; fine artist as he is, he goes to work regularly, punctually" (13). This, says Gissing, is what inspired him, "not to imitate Dickens as a novelist, but to follow afar off his example as a worker" (13).

Though inspired by the image of Dickens as a man with a calling who puts aside Romantic notions of artistic inspiration and produces methodically, Gissing was appalled by the same kind of regularity in Anthony Trollope. In his semi-fictional autobiography, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), Gissing reflects on the mild scandal caused by the revelation of Trollope's writing methods in his own posthumously-published autobiography. In *An*

Autobiography (1883), Trollope proudly lays claim to what many Victorian readers seem to have found unsettling, if not abominable: a rigidly systematic approach to creative production. Trollope explains that he developed a "system of taskwork," which he strongly recommends to young writers as a guard against idleness. At the beginning of each week, Trollope would decide on a certain number of pages to be completed by its end. Because page is an "ambiguous term," he explains, he counted each word he wrote to make sure that every page was 250 words (78). Anticipating the objections to his method, Trollope quickly dismisses the doctrine of artistic inspiration: "To me, it would not be more absurd if the shoemaker were to wait for inspiration, or the tallow-chandler for the divine moment of melting" (79). He strongly advises young writers to "avoid enthusiastic rushes with their pens, and to seat themselves at their desks day by day as though they were lawyers' clerks" (80).

In *Henry Ryecroft*, Gissing muses that if the "public" turned against Trollope because of this posthumous confession, then the public must not be as stupid as he thought: "A man with a watch before his eyes, penning exactly so many words every quarter of an hour—one imagines that this picture might haunt disagreeably the thoughts even of Mudie's steadiest subscriber" (180). This image of a writer "with a watch before his eyes" is clearly one that haunted Gissing, never mind the fact that it is an image he invented himself. At least by Trollope's own account, he did not pen so many words per quarter hour. This is rather Gissing's hyperbolic rendering of writing as a "system of taskwork." *New Grub Street* suggests that it is not Trollope's comparison between writing and shoemaking that Gissing found so troubling, but rather the suggestion that a respectable tradesman might engage in piecework. Gissing may have thought Trollope a "big, blustering, genial brute," but he respected his ability to hold his own in the literary marketplace (*Ryecroft*, 181). Trollope, of course, already had a steady income from his postal work when he

began writing. His system of taskwork was designed to prevent idleness. In *New Grub Street*, Gissing, who envied but never achieved the respectable, middle-class security of a writer like Trollope, imagines writing not as a voluntary system of taskwork but as a system of piecework forced by poverty.

In *New Grub Street*, the connection between manual trades and literary production is first introduced by the professional periodical writer, Jasper Milvain: "Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skillful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets" (38). *New Grub Street* has been read as an indictment of literary commercialization, and Milvain's injunction that the writer "nowadays" must "thin[k] first and foremost of the markets," suggests a narrative of lost integrity.[9] To produce for the market is to sacrifice one's principles, to be concerned with popularity rather than quality. The reading of Milvain as lacking integrity is supported by his unapologetic commitment to making money: "I shall never write for writing's sake, only to make money. All my plans and efforts shall have money in view—*all*" (150, italics in original). Yet, Jasper Milvain is not the novel's villain, and his injunction to treat writing as a trade does not signal an utter abandonment of integrity. In fact, despite Milvain's assertion that he will write only for money, he consistently takes pride in his work. His clever essays on modern topics may not be works of literary genius, but he works diligently and produces writing of good quality. "Honest journey-work!" he declares to his sisters, "There are few men in London capable of such a feat" (214).

As Milvain makes clear, to approach writing as a trade is as much about *how* one produces as *what* one produces. In language that clearly echoes Trollope, Milvain asserts that

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[9] See Poole, 105-40 and Buckley.

writers must abandon the "ancient prejudice […] that one mustn't write save at the dictation of the Holy Spirit" (43). One must settle on an appealing topic, Milvain says, "then go to work methodically, so many pages a day. There's no question of the divine afflatus; that belongs to another sphere of life" (43). To think of the markets is therefore not simply about producing things that will sell but is also about constancy of production. In the absence of a guaranteed wage, one must create economic security through the reliability of one's output. As Sue McPherson has pointed out, Milvain's single-minded pursuit to secure an income may feel ethically dubious, but he is motivated by a full awareness of the "economics of casual employment" (497). Unreliable production leads to unreliable income, and unless one has already accumulated wealth, this means destitution. Milvain's injunction to abandon the idea of writing as a divine calling reads like a statement of principle, but the novel makes clear that it is an absolute necessity for the working writer.

Milvain's friend, the novelist Henry Reardon, is less willing to adopt the image of writing as a trade. Feeling confident after the modest success of his first novel, Reardon decides to marry and have a child, but he soon finds repeating this success more difficult than he had imagined, and he struggles to support his new family. He finds himself feeling envious of the clerks who pass his window, who "have just to work *at* something, and when the evening comes, they have earned their wages, and are free to rest and enjoy themselves. What an insane thing it is to make literature one's only means of support! When the most trivial accident may at any time prove fatal to one's power of work for weeks or months. No, that is unpardonable sin! To make a trade of an art!" (81). For Reardon, Trollope's advice to young writers, to sit themselves down daily at their desks "as though they were lawyers' clerks" is an impossibility. The creative faculty is too fickle and thus not conducive to steady application.

Despite his objection to the method, however, Reardon continues his attempt to produce methodically. Rather than imagine himself as a clerk clocking in to earn a steady wage, however, his impending poverty drives him to conceptualize writing as manual piecework. Gissing's account of Reardon's attempt to write himself out of poverty evolves Gissing's instinctive abhorrence for Trollope's taskwork method into a dystopian image of self-exploitation. Reardon attempts to establish a quantitative system in which he "tick[s] off his stipulated quantum of manuscript each four-and-twenty-hours," but the pressure to produce soon takes a toll on his mental and physical health: "At times he was on the border-land of imbecility; his mind looked into a cloudy chaos, a shapeless whirl of nothings" (153). He is driven by exhaustion to take a brief rest, but when he begins anew, he finds himself even less able to produce: "A day or two of anguish such as there is no describing to the inexperienced, and again he was dismissing slip after slip, a sigh of thankfulness at the completion of each one. It was a fraction of the whole, a fraction, a fraction" (154). In the absence of meaning, the only way for Reardon to ensure that he is producing is to think in fractions—the physical presence of ink-covered pieces of paper are the only markers of his accomplishment. Each fraction, each micro-task, becomes a talisman to ward off his impending poverty.

Reardon ultimately completes the three-volume novel, but, unsurprisingly, the labor conditions are reflected in the product. The despair Reardon faced in producing the novel is only compounded by his having to face it as a finished product: "He was in passionate revolt against the base necessities which compelled him to put forth work in no way representing his healthy powers, his artistic criterion. Not he had written the book, but his accursed poverty" (239). Reardon has become so alienated from his own writing that he can no longer even identify himself as the author. Aside from the shame it produces, the product's inferior quality is

reflected in the compensation: Reardon receives only 75 pounds, while his previous two novels had brought him 100, and then, of course, there are debts to pay. Thus, the pressure to continue producing is barely alleviated, and the cycle of self-exploitation and inferior production continues. Reardon eventually gives up his employment as a writer and retreats into the safety of a steady wage, becoming one of the clerks who used to pass by his window. Yet, being a "decent wage-earner" is not enough to keep his middle-class family in comfort (293). His wife leaves him, and unable to recover his health, he dies soon after.

Gissing respected, and hoped to emulate, Dickens's ability to merge the joy of artistic production with the necessity of methodical application. Dickens represents for Gissing what is perhaps an ideal image of work in the calling: Dickens is able to succeed in a capitalist marketplace without succumbing to capitalist imperatives. While Gissing may have shared some of Reardon's antipathy for too easily equating writing with other forms of labor, he also does not romanticize writing as a process of divine inspiration. He understands it as work, both in the sense of paid employment and as *vita activa*, as one's active engagement with the world. Reardon fails as a novelist because the conditions of the former—the reality of his impending poverty—alienate him the latter, from his writing as a process of meaningful engagement. As with Mayhew's "small masters," Reardon finds himself producing solely for subsistence, and once this occurs, he is robbed of any control he may have had over his own production. Far from the discipline of the factory floor, Reardon mimics industrial rationalization by subdividing his own labor into meaningless units. Once again, it is wage labor—represented by the image of the clerk—that comes to stand in for more humane and ethical working conditions, in contrast to the hyper-exploitative conditions created by casualized labor.

The Gig Economy, Then and Now

In the twenty-first century, the gig economy has been lauded as a more ethical species of capitalism. Its proponents envision a world of autonomous microentrepreneurs freed from the oppression of the nine-to-five grind. For some, self-employment in the gig economy has no doubt meant more freedom and exciting opportunity. For those with marketable skills, a move to gig work can provide desirable flexibility. Yet, as Mayhew's study reminds us, casualization is not about creating more freedom for the worker. It is designed to create more freedom for the employer: freedom to ignore established regulations, freedom to create an "on-demand" workforce that can be continually adjusted, freedom from any obligation to employees. The ability of the liberatory rhetoric of the gig economy to gain traction was, and continues to be, based on the image of steady employment as part of an oppressive regime of industrial time-discipline. Receiving a steady wage is rhetorically equated with uniformity, rationalization, and a loss of worker autonomy. Worker advocacy in the twenty-first century may involve a reappraisal of these associations.

Mayhew's study reminds us that the gig economy would more accurately be understood not as a countercultural movement that emerged in response to industrial capitalism but as industrialization's fellow traveler. Like industrialization, the purpose of casualization is to lower labor costs and intensify production, to get the most out of the available workforce with the least amount of capital expenditure. While the labor crisis under study in *The Unknown Mayhew* was centered on a particular set of trades in a specific location, the systemic casualization facing twenty-first century workers has permeated every sector of the economy, including higher education. Gissing's understanding of how the hyper-exploitative conditions created by casual employment could migrate across class boundaries serves as a poignant reminder of

casualization's versatility. Though it is essential to remain aware of the unique challenges facing the diverse body of gig workers, from Uber drivers to professional house cleaners to adjunct professors, Gissing's ability to connect the struggling writer to the manual pieceworker reminds us that despite the real differences in forms of labor, shared experiences of exploitation can transcend class differences.

Writing at the dawn of the twentieth century, Max Weber argued that capitalism forces us into a calling. A century later, it seems as though capitalism is just as likely to force us *out* of one. While the response to this crisis should not be a return to the status quo, in which only a privileged set of workers have access to security and benefits, the Victorian discourse of work reminds us that the call for a steady wage signals larger demands that challenge capitalist imperatives: the demand for ethical working conditions that allow one to labor and live with dignity; the demand to control the quality of one's work and to have recourse against unfair labor practices; the demand to eat roast beef and to take in periodicals.

The Politics of *Homo Faber*: Work as Worldbuilding in Carlyle

For Hannah Arendt, work is unpolitical. In the tripartite structure of *vita activa*, work is the realm of fabrication, in which we construct a man-made material environment distinct from the natural world. Though material, this fabricated world forms the foundation for a meaningful human existence not wholly determined by the struggle for survival. Through work, we build a barrier that protects us from complete subordination to our natural environment. Work also creates the conditions necessary for the conception of a species identity and the existence of human history. The durable world constructed by work "becomes a home for mortal men whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions" (173). Though work itself is unpolitical, it is necessary to the existence of politics, both because it creates the requisite material stability for complex social arrangements, and also because work constructs the record of what Arendt calls action. For Arendt, action is the only properly political human activity because "it goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter" (7). In the absence of this mediation, individuals connect directly to one another, confronting each other as distinctive thinking and speaking beings. It is only in the realm of action, argues Arendt, that human beings "reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (179). Because action's only product—"the 'web' of human relations" it creates—is intangible and impermanent, work is necessary to create a record of actions (183). These records can never capture the full significance of action, however, whose nature as an "appearance" is inherently fleeting.

Despite the apparent fact that the work of worldbuilding is a collective endeavor, Arendt has a surprisingly limited vision of work's sociopolitical potential. In her conception, the act of workmanship is solitary by nature. As "the builder of the world and producer of things," *homo*

faber (man as fabricator) "can find his proper relationship to other people only by exchanging his products with theirs" (160). The social potential of work is limited only to the marketplace, in which individuals are represented by their products. *Homo faber* is also limited politically by the ideals he embodies. Though the guiding principles of *homo faber*—"permanence, stability, and durability"—form a necessary foundation for political life, they are not themselves worthy political principles (126). Because fabrication is ultimately concentrated on ends, everything for *homo faber* becomes instrumentalized, which leads to a "degradation of all things into means, their loss of intrinsic and independent value" (156). A political realm informed by the ideals of *homo faber* would lead to a "generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men" (157). The danger of work's reliance on instrumentalization can be seen in *homo faber*'s destructive relationship to nature. *Homo faber* has "always been a destroyer of nature," because he can construct his artificial world only by irreversibly altering the natural one (139).

For Thomas Carlyle, work is the only human action. While in Arendt's model of *vita activa*, work is concerned only with the creation of the material world, Carlyle understands the construction of the material world to be practically synonymous with the construction of that intangible "'web' of human relations" Arendt associates with the realm of action. Carlyle defines the work of worldbuilding as the simultaneous creation of material and sociopolitical conditions. Though Arendt herself defined work as unpolitical, I argue in this chapter that her articulation of the principles of *homo faber* helps us to better understand the political centrality of work in the Victorian era. At the same time, my reading of Carlyle is meant to challenge Arendt's depoliticization of work. Arendt's understanding of work as a largely solitary endeavor is problematic. Even if we understand work solely as the construction of a material world, the

complex social coordination this undertaking requires clearly exceeds the narrow social potential afforded by Arendt. Further, Arendt's reading of work threatens to support capitalism's structural depoliticization of work, in which one's daily productive activity is defined as the individualized scramble "to make a living." In his attempt to counter the individualization of work promoted by *laissez-faire* capitalism, Carlyle constructs an alternative vision of work as collective public action.

In Carlyle's writings, the ideals of *homo faber*—permanence, stability, and durability— shape a worldview in which "work" encompasses all aspects of human engagement and endeavor. This conceptual collapse of all human activity into work has dangerous consequences, but they are not the same as Arendt imagines. For Arendt, the danger of granting *homo faber* a political voice is his reliance on instrumental logic. But, for Carlyle, work is not reducible to its ends. Because work is not simply the creation of tangible products but is always actively constructing the sociopolitical realm, it is never wholly instrumentalized. Rather, in Carlyle, politicizing the ideals of permanence and stability leads to a fetishization of social order. Just as creating the material world is viewed as the triumph of man-made order over natural chaos, Carlyle sees the work of politics as the suppression of social chaos—represented both by the "nomadic" labor conditions of capitalism and the rise of democracy.

Though Arendt's *homo faber* conducts himself as "lord and master of the whole earth," this mastership, "unlike political forms of domination, is primarily a mastery of things and material and not of people" (161). Because Arendt depoliticizes work, she misses an essential historical connection between the mastery of things and the mastery of people. Carlyle's conception of work as a collective responsibility contains radical potential, but this potential is foreclosed in his own writing because Carlyle cannot imagine interdependence without

hierarchy. This chapter reads Carlyle's conception of the "permanent contract" as his vision of a sociopolitical order based on the principles of *homo faber*. As I will show, Carlyle proposes the permanent contract as a solution to labor unrest both "at home" and in the colonies. In doing so, I insist on a continuity between his notorious "Occasional Discourse[s]" and the most influential works of his oeuvre. At the same time, I read Carlyle's mobilization of the principles of *homo faber* to support slavery as participating in the construction of a racialized myth unique to imperialist ideology. To participate in the work of worldbuilding, one must be recognized as a worker. In Carlyle's imperial mythology, the work of nonwhite colonial subjects is not recognized as work and is thus denied its historical character.

Carlyle's writing exemplifies the connection between the mastery of nature and political dominance. The destruction that Arendt identifies as inherent to the worldbuilding mission of *homo faber* has been a destruction of cultures, indigenous economies, and human lives, as well as the natural environment. Yet, with the increasing severity of the climate crisis, we arguably cannot afford to abandon *homo faber*'s project of worldbuilding. As has been widely argued, our response to anthropogenic climate change cannot be simple retraction. We cannot just do less of what we have always done. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that a viable response to climate change requires a radical redefinition of work that recasts the daily productive activity of individuals as part of a world-historical narrative. Carlyle, I argue, offers a language of radical connectivity that may help us to reconceptualize the significance of work. At the same time, Carlyle's writing serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of climate justice, the linking of any collective response to the climate crisis with the imperatives of social justice.

Work as Worldbuilding

"Older than all preached Gospels was this unpreached, inarticulate, but ineradicable, forever-enduring Gospel: Work, and therein have well-being" (PP 193). This is Thomas Carlyle's "gospel of work," undoubtedly the most influential articulation of work ethics in the Victorian era. George Eliot wrote of Carlyle in 1855 that "there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived" (344). The popularity of *vita activa* as a subject of philosophical reflection in the Victorian era is due, in no small part, to Carlyle's outsized influence. The emphasis on the ethical significance of work we find in authors from Eliot herself to Ruskin to Samuel Smiles to the American Transcendentalists was largely inspired by Carlyle. Yet, despite the enormous impact of Carlyle's gospel in the Victorian era, it is difficult to imagine a contemporary reader being inspired by his rapturous odes to the transcendent power of work. The grandiosity of the claims Carlyle makes about work feels hopelessly anachronistic. In this chapter, I hope to push past this initial feeling of alienation to consider what it might mean to read Carlyle's transcendent conception of work as a timely contribution to contemporary discourse.

In *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle reflects on the relationship not only between these two temporal states but on their relationship to the future, which he represents with an allusion to Norse cosmology:

> [T]he Present holds in it both the whole Past and the whole Future;—as the Life-Tree Igradasil, wide-waving, many-toned, has its roots down deep in the Death-kingdoms, among the oldest dead dust of men, and with its boughs reaches always beyond the stars; and in all times and places is one and the same Life-tree! (37)

Carlyle's understanding of the sacredness of work is rooted in this image of an immense tree that embodies past, present, and future. For Carlyle, what we accomplish in the present is only possible because of what has been accomplished in the past, and what we accomplish now determines what can be accomplished in the future. Because our actions in the present are organically connected to the past and future of our species, what we choose to do with our *vita activa*, our active lives, has world-historical significance. The work of the past is always with us, just as our work will always be with those who come after.

When Carlyle again evokes Igradasil, it is to call attention to all the work—the immense outpouring of human energy and intelligence—that forms the invisible roots that give life to the flourishing branches of the present. Carlyle asks his readers to participate in an extended thought experiment, in which we reflect on all the past work that has made our current life possible. "For example," he asks, "who taught thee to *speak*?" (125, italics in original). From the moment the first human beings approached one another "as uncomfortable dummies, anxious no longer to be dumb" to "the writing of this present copyright Book," there has been "a pretty spell of work, which *somebody* has done!" (126, italics in original): "Thinkest thou there were no poets till Dan Chaucer? No heart burning with a thought, which it could not hold, and had no word for; and needed to shape and coin a word for,—what thou callest a metaphor, a trope, or the like? For every word we have, there was such a man and poet" (126).

Though Carlyle develops a rather different conception of history in his "Heroes and Hero-Worship" lectures, here the role of the exceptional individual is subordinated to the anonymous labors of innumerable somebodies. In Arendt's conception of *vita activa*, work constructs a durable material world, and speech is part of the intangible and fleeting exchanges that constitute action. Here, Carlyle draws attention to the inextricability of what Arendt

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conceptualizes as the disparate realms of work and action. It is only the durability of work, the ability of work to transcend individual lives, that creates the language that allows for speech. While, for Arendt, speech is something that happens in the present, for Carlyle, every word we speak is the product of the work that came before us and is thus rooted firmly in the past.

For Carlyle, the worldbuilding capacity of work exceeded the construction of a material world, but the importance of material production is not ignored in favor of cultural transmission. Rather, worldbuilding occurs simultaneously at material and intangible levels. As the material world is built, so is the sociopolitical one: "Literature:—and look at St. Paul's Cathedral, and the Masonries and Worships and Quasi-Worships that are there; not to speak of Westminster Hall and its wigs! Men had not a hammer to begin with, not a syllabled articulation: they had it all to make;—and they have made it" (126). In Carlyle's reading, the building of St. Paul's Cathedral is of one piece with the expression of the religion that finds voice there. The medieval carpenters who constructed Westminster's hammerbeam roof are players in the development of constitutional monarchy. Hammers and syllables work in tandem to construct the world in which we live. Though work constitutes history, it is not a dead record but a living, active force in our present:

> It is all work and forgotten work, this peopled, clothed, articulate-speaking, high-towered, wide-acred World […] The quantity of done and forgotten work that lies silent under my feet in this world, and escorts and attends me, and supports me and keeps me alive, wheresoever I walk or stand, whatsoever I think or do, gives rise to reflections! (128-9)

Though much of the work that came before us had been forgotten and lies silent, it nevertheless continues to actively accompany and support us.

In these "reflections," Carlyle develops a radical conception of human interconnectivity that transcends time. These reflections also develop a powerful conception of work that defies its individualization. It is also a radically democratic conception of work that transcends class boundaries. But the radical potential in Carlyle's conception of worldbuilding does not remain open in his own writing. The principles of *homo faber*—permanence, durability, and stability— inform both Carlyle at his most radical and Carlyle at his most authoritarian. In the above passages, the permanence of work serves as an organic and powerful connector; in other parts of Carlyle's work, this same emphasis on permanence leads him to conceive of work as a means of imposing a hierarchical social order. For *homo faber*, disorder is the "eternal enemy": "attack him swiftly," Carlyle proclaims, "subdue him; make Order of him, the subject not of Chaos, but of Intelligence, Divinity, and Thee!" (194). This conception of work as the imposition of order on chaos forms, as Arendt sees, a language of mastery. Though, for Carlyle, this mastery is not only of the natural world but of the social world as well.

The Permanent Contract

It is in *Past and Present* that Carlyle first introduces the "principle of Permanent Contract." This "principle" encompasses a universal truth: "Permanence, persistence is the first condition of all fruitfulness in the ways of men" (266). Just as the flourishing orchard requires time and patience to develop, and acorns need decades to grow into a pleasant wood, the human heart "roots itself" and "draws nourishment" by staying in place (270). Permanence is the foundational principle of humanity; it is what distinguishes "the Species Man from the Genus Ape" (266). But the "principle" of the permanent contract also manifests as a concrete labor policy recommendation. Mobilizing both the "lifelong" marriage contract and the multi-year

military contract as examples, Carlyle argues that the current system of temporary contracts and "free" labor might be replaced by a more permanent model of employment relations. Complaining first of the rising popularity of month-long contracts for servants, Carlyle hints that such an "apelike" and "nomadic" system will not last for long. He then turns to the subject of factory labor. Would it be possible, he asks, in some near future, for the "Master-Worker" to "grant his Workers permanent *interest* in his enterprise and theirs? So that it becomes, in practical result, what in essential fact and justice it ever is, a joint enterprise" (271).

Read alone, this passage would sound much like nineteenth century calls to more justly allocate profits by granting workers a financial "interest" in the company for which they work, i.e. a share of the profits their labor produces. But this is not what Carlyle means by permanent interest, which becomes immediately clear in the following passage. What Carlyle suggests is not a move towards equality but rather benevolent despotism. Referring again to the military, Carlyle argues that "freedom of debate" is not allowed aboard a navy ship. Yet, the freedom found there is a much greater freedom, "not nomad's or ape's Freedom, but man's Freedom" (271). The goal is to "reconcile Despotism" with this true Freedom, which Carlyle insists is no mystery: "Do you not already know the way? It is to make your Despotism *just*" (271).

What Carlyle means by "man's Freedom" and just despotism is developed is his reading of *Ivanhoe.* Carlyle argues that other critics have been mistaken in pitying Cedric's thrall, Gurth. Carlyle finds in him a vision of "true liberty" to counter the "Liberty to die by starvation" afforded by *laissez-faire* capitalism. "Gurth's brass collar did not gall him," Carlyle argues, because "Cedric *deserved* to be his master" (204, italics in original). Rather than being set adrift in a capitalist society, connected only through the "cash-nexus," Gurth "had the inexpressible satisfaction of feeling himself related indissolubly, though in a rude brass-collar way, to his

fellow-mortals" (204). Carlyle's metaphor of Igradasil suggests an organic connection between human beings established through innumerable, often spontaneous, actions, but his sense of rootedness here becomes distinctly hierarchical. Human beings can only be connected to one another through formal and indissoluble bonds.

Further, while Carlyle's conception of the "done and forgotten work" of worldbuilding suggests a radically dispersed and democratic form of agency, in which every worker is a "small Poet," the worker here is deprived of agency. He cannot find his own work but must be guided and compelled to action. What we see in medieval society, at least in Scott's account, is a more just society, argues Carlyle, in which the "true liberty" of man consisted "in his finding out, or being forced to find out the right path, and to walk thereon. To learn, or to be taught, what work he actually was able for; and then by permission, persuasion, or even compulsion, to set about doing the same!" (204). Carlyle's proposal of the permanent contract is designed not only to create social bonds but to impose a (preferably benevolent) despotism in which the ignorant are led by the wise. Carlyle's argument about who is worthy to do this leading varies throughout this work, particularly in his shifting understanding of the role of the aristocracy, but, in *Past and Present*, he does give a concrete example. It is the employer, whether it be the homeowner taking on a domestic servant or the owner a factory, who has earned the right and responsibility to guide the worker down his correct path. This can only be properly accomplished if he has the right to compel, the power of mastery.

Were there any doubt that the permanent contract suggested something very like permanent servitude, Carlyle employs the same concept in his defense of Caribbean slavery in his "Occasional Discourse[s]."[10] In the "Occasional Discourse[s]," Carlyle paints a viciously

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[10] I use the title "Occasional Discourse[s" to refer to the original article, "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question," published in *Fraser's Magazine for Town in Country* in 1849, as well as the extended pamphlet version

satirical portrait of post-emancipation Jamaica as a land of idleness. Former slaves refuse to

work on the sugar plantations, content instead to live off the land immediately available to them.

Because they can achieve basic subsistence, which Carlyle envisions as being "up to the ears in

pumpkins," with very little labor, the former slaves have no reason to return to the plantations.

The only answer, argues Carlyle, is to compel them to return. In light of this need to

"emancipate" the former slaves from their own idleness and get them back to work, Carlyle

proposes a reinstatement of slavery by another name, permanent servitude, which he

acknowledges to be practically synonymous: "if 'slave' mean essentially 'servant hired for life,'

or by a contract of long continuance, and not easily dissoluble—I ask, whether in all human

things, the 'contract of long continuance' is not precisely the contract to be desired, were the

right terms once found for it?" (7).

Some contemporary readers responded to the overt racism and authoritarianism of the

original "Occasional Discourse" by attempting to rescue the "gospel of work" from its creator's

unsavory application of it. In an 1850 review, first published in *The Inquirer*, then reprinted in

both the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* and the *Antigua Herald and Gazette*, the author laments what

they see as the degeneration of a brilliant mind. "We wish there were doubt as to the authorship,"

the reviewer writes, "for, coming from Mr. Carlyle, it is as melancholy an example of the

aberration of a fine mind as has ever been exhibited […] His sour meditations have altogether

unsettled his judgement, and obscured his moral perceptions. Prophecy has degenerated into

raving, eloquence into mere driveling" (11). Carlyle's moral and intellectual degradation is seen

in his savage expression of white supremacy and the blatant misapplication of his own noble

theory: "The Gospel of *work*, as a universal duty, we believe, with Mr. Carlyle, to be a true and

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of 1853, in which Carlyle's intensified vitriol is signified in a change of the "Negro" of the original title to the n-word.

heaven-sent Gospel. The dogma, that some men have a right Divine to compel others to work by any means that will serve the purpose, is no part of that Gospel" (11). As Marcus Wood has noted, modern critics have echoed this desire to separate the "Occasional Discourse[s]" from Carlyle's earlier work, dismissing these racist tracts as "an aberration, at best a grumpy footnote, which should not be allowed to contaminate an otherwise majestic oeuvre" (348).

Yet, Carlyle's mobilization of the gospel of work to defend colonial slavery is clearly not an aberration. The language of the "Occasional Discourse[s]" directly echoes the language of *Past and Present*. Carlyle's proslavery position is simply a novel application of "the eternal law of nature" that every man has the "right" to be "permitted, encouraged, and, if need be, compelled, to do what work the Maker of him has intended" (OD 5). At least one of Carlyle's contemporary readers immediately recognized this connection. In his 1850 rebuttal to the first "Occasional Discourse," John Stuart Mill unequivocally condemns chattel slavery, but the substance of his critique of Carlyle lies not in a catalogue of slavery's abuses or an ethical demand for racial equality.[11] In fact, the core paragraphs of Mill's rebuttal are not about slavery *per se*. Rather, they take on what Mill, addressing his Victorian audience, refers to as that "pet theory of your contributor [Carlyle] about work," which "we all know well enough" (3). Mill understood that at least some readers would be appalled by Carlyle's overt racism and strategically used the opportunity to stress, rather than distance, the connection between Carlyle's proslavery position and his popular gospel of work.

Mill's critique of the "gospel of work" is not especially substantive, but he was correct in his observation that underneath Carlyle's racialized image of black idleness lay a deep

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[11] As David Theo Goldberg has argued, Mill refutes Carlyle's scientific racism only to replace it with the "polite racism" of liberalism (204). Mill's work consistently draws racialized distinctions between European and non-European peoples, and he, like Carlyle, believed in the possibility of benevolent despotism. See *On Liberty*, 12-13.

connection to the fundamental principles of his gospel of work. Carlyle's proslavery position

represents an extension of his authoritarian application of the principles of *homo faber*. The

construction of a durable, "permanent" social order was essential for Carlyle in both the

metropole and the colonies. This is not to say that Carlyle did not privilege white workers in the

metropole over black workers in the colonies. According to Carlyle, there is "more thought and

heart in one starving Lancashire weaver" than there is in "a whole gang of Quashees" (PP 268).

Yet, the racial superiority of white workers did not make them qualified for autonomy, and his

proposal of the "permanent contract" to solve the English "labor problem" equates, by his own

admission, to something closely akin to slavery.[12]

While the application of the principle of permanence in the "Occasional Discourse[s]"

signals a continuity with the more "respectable" works of Carlyle's oeuvre, it also represents a

unique deployment of these principles in service of imperialist myth-making. Carlyle's

meditation on "done and forgotten work" in *Past and Present* signals the radical potential to

understand *all* workers as powerful actors in the development of a species-history. In the

"Occasional Discourse[s]," however, he mobilizes this conception of "done and forgotten work"

as an exclusionary mechanism to sever black workers from the collective project of

worldbuilding.

Carlyle's inflammatory rhetoric in the "Occasional Discourse[s]" is reliant on racist

images of black idleness, but Carlyle reveals his understanding that what is at stake in the post-

emancipation labor debate is not so much the amount that former slaves are working as the *type

of work* they are performing. In the opening images of the black West Indian worker, the only

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[12] In the 1853 "Occasional Discourse," Carlyle reinforces this equivalency in an extended comparison of "Distressed Needlewomen" and "Demerara N******." "How to abolish the abuses of slavery, and save the precious thing in it," he argues, "will, by straight methods or by circuitous, need to be done (not in the West Indian regions alone)" (369).

"work" being performed is the voracious eating of pumpkins, but Carlyle's later attacks shift to focus on these black workers' identity as subsistence farmers. The problem becomes not that the former slaves are eating pumpkins, but that they are growing them. The question becomes one of a "right of property," of who "has a right to raise pumpkins and other produce" in the West Indies (674). Though Carlyle continually satirizes the liberal conception of human rights, he approaches the question of who has the "right" to cultivate the land of the West Indies without irony. For Carlyle, this right to cultivation belongs to the "Saxon British" because they have performed the necessary worldbuilding work that has made the growing of pumpkins in the West Indies possible. Before the arrival of British, Carlyle argues, the islands "had produced mere jungle, savagery, poison-reptiles, and swamp-malaria" (674). Had "Quashee and the like of him been the only artists in the game," it would have always remained this way: "Never by art of his could one pumpkin have grown there […] These plentiful pumpkins, I say therefore, are not his" (674).

The "Occasional Discourse[s]" may read like a diatribe against idleness, but the real concern, for Carlyle, is the potential for worker autonomy. Carlyle was not the only figure concerned about the possibility of emancipated slaves in the West Indies working their own farmland. Henry Taylor, who worked for the Colonial Office and was a friend of Carlyle's, identified the presence of independent farming plots as one the most significant obstacles facing the post-emancipation West Indies (Holt 43). Particularly in Jamaica, planters had encouraged slaves to cultivate plots of land to supplement their own subsistence. While these lands could not, of course, be legally owned by the slaves, they had by custom come to think of these plots as their private property. While these plots were a boon to planters during the era of slavery, lowering their labor costs by supplementing worker subsistence, this benign cost-saving device

was now a threat to their entire economic model. Able to meet their own needs, former slaves need not return to the plantations. These provision grounds had always been an integral part of the Jamaican economy. Much of the island, not only the enslaved population, was reliant on the food production of these small farms (Holt 67). These provision grounds not only helped sustain life on the island by producing food items to be sold in local markets but also luxury goods like ginger, allspice, and coffee, not only for local markets but also for export (Ledgister 109). During the era of slavery, these provision grounds thus functioned not only as a support to the plantation economy but as an independent shadow economy operating alongside and in opposition to the logic of monoculture. It was the strength of this shadow economy that made it such a threat to British interests in post-emancipation Jamaica. Working their own provision grounds represented an alternative for black workers that was not labor on the plantation.

For Carlyle, the importance of permanence to human happiness and progress translates into an insistence on a rigidly hierarchical social order, in which those fated to serve are required to do so faithfully and with full confidence in their betters. David Levy, in trying to understand how Carlyle's overtly hierarchal social vision could appeal to British workers, has argued that white workers were seduced by Carlyle's appeal to white supremacy. In Carlyle's vision of the world, "[a]ll *Christian white* people can be masters," even those relegated to serve (46, italics in original). Though I cannot agree with Levy's insistence that the free market offered real freedom for workers in opposition to the servitude offered by Carlyle, his assessment that Carlyle mobilized a narrative of white mastery is accurate. Though white workers were denied autonomy and agency in Carlyle's hierarchical social order, the racialized myth of imperialism granted them a position within a heroic narrative of worldbuilding. White *male* workers, at least, could see themselves embodied in the mighty John Bull, a "terrible worker; irresistible against

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marshes, mountains, impediments, disorder, incivilisation; everywhere vanquishing disorder, leaving it behind him as method and order" (PP 156).

In Carlyle's narrative of empire, the mastery of the natural world that Arendt sees as inherent in the worldbuilding project of *homo faber* becomes indistinguishable from the mastery of nonwhite peoples. In the "Occasional Discourse[s]," black West Indian workers are denied status *as workers*, despite the obvious fact that Carlyle's argument is reliant on the claim that their labor is necessary to the functioning of the plantation economy, because Carlyle ejects them from the realm of human history. They become part of the material John Bull—the ideal embodiment of *homo faber*—will use to fabricate a civilization. Though Carlyle often presents the white working class as a disordered body, as part of the social chaos that must be mastered, they are always actors, though often misguided ones, in the worldbuilding project that Carlyle defines as human history. These white workers are thus offered a unique form of what W.E.B. Du Bois called in the American context a "psychological wage." Though not offered mastery in any real sense, they are encouraged to embrace a racialized narrative that aligns their interest with white elites rather than their fellow workers in their colonies.

In my reading, Carlyle's work offers us two opposing but interrelated articulations of *homo faber*'s political potential. In the first, the conception of work as a collective worldbuilding project translates into a democratic vision of organic participation, in which every worker contributes through their daily action to a living world that "attends and supports" everyone who comes after. This is a version of species history built on a radical vision of interconnectivity that encourages both a thoughtful attention to the past and an active responsibility to the future. In the second, the conception of work as worldbuilding translates into a project of mastery, in which the perceived "disorder" of nature and non-European civilizations is subject to the forceful

imposition of "order." In this exclusionary and hegemonic narrative of progress, power translates to agency, and those with power determine the future of the species.

Homo Faber and the Climate Crisis

It has become clear, particularly in the past decade, that the response to anthropogenic climate change must be a collective one. While individual lifestyle choices play an important role, they do not constitute an adequate response to a global crisis. Installing energy-efficient windows in your home is a responsible personal choice, but it is no substitute for enforceable regulations that would require all new construction to meet passive housing standards. Biking to work reduces your individual carbon footprint, but it is no substitute for government investment in sustainable public transportation. Further, the popular bumper-stickered injunction to "think globally, act locally," while still valuable advice in certain matters, is now well-understood to ignore the intrinsic realities of global connectivity.

As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, this understanding has required a complex reconceptualization of human agency. The climate crisis requires us to conceptualize ourselves as a species, as "constitutively one," a form of human identity that conflicts with previous understandings of both political subjectivity and anthropological difference (2). Since these contradictory conceptions of the human cannot be reconciled, we must learn "to think the human on multiple scales and registers" (14). Chakrabarty concludes that at the broadest of scales, our identity as a species, we cannot speak of agency in the ways to which we are accustomed. Any active response to climate change must be filtered through our political and anthropological differences; "there is no corresponding 'humanity' that in its oneness can act as a political agent"

(14). The only agency we have as a species is "nonontological"; our oneness can only be expressed as a "geophysical force" (13).

Chakrabarty is right that we must learn "to think the human" in complex and contradictory ways, but I would like to suggest, in contrast to Chakrabarty, that there is a way to think the human as possessing a collective political agency. This is a collectivity that does not require cohesion, a oneness that does not require a collapsing of difference. We are bound together by our identity as *homo faber*, a species that, by definition, transforms the natural materials it encounters into an enduring, artificial environment. What I hope to suggest with my reading of Carlyle is that the way we conceive of the relationship between our collective species identity as *homo faber* and our individual identity as workers has significant consequences, both for our ability to address the climate crisis and for our ability to address core injustices and systemic inequalities. How we work as individuals is connected to how we work as a species, whether we acknowledge it or not, and the choices we make, as humans, about what kinds of work individuals are encouraged or discouraged to perform has always been a political decision.

In *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014), Naomi Klein argues that action has been stalled because the kind of action necessary to address climate change runs counter to the most powerful ideological force of the modern world: *laissez-faire* capitalism. As Klein's title suggests, capitalism and the climate are now fundamentally at odds: "What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity's use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of those rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature" (21). One of the most obviously necessary steps to address climate change involves a contraction, a limitation in consumption that is antithetical to capitalism's ideology of unlimited growth. But, as Klein argues, addressing climate change

cannot involve *only* contraction. Addressing climate change involves massive social reorganization and collective effort at an unprecedented scale. It is the required scale of economic planning and management which seems even more politically impossible than curbing consumerism. Mass action on this scale is redolent of Soviet planned economies and thus falls "entirely outside the boundaries of our reigning ideology" (21). Addressing climate change is thus not foremost about developing new technologies or drafting smart policies but about tackling political obstruction to collective action at its ideological root. If we can accomplish this, Klein argues, we may not only save the world as we know it, but create a more equitable, just world in the process. Mobilizing the resources necessary to address climate change could simultaneously provide the means to rebuild local economies, invest in public infrastructure, recapture essential public services like energy and water from the private sector, and radically restructure an unsustainable, unhealthy system of agriculture.

Carlyle may seem an unlikely source for thinking about our response to climate change, but the kind of collective action Klein discusses here requires a mass mobilization of workers, and this requires radically rethinking work itself. Just as we can no longer allow the free market to dictate what energy sources we use, we also cannot rely on the free market to allocate what kinds of workers we produce. Work must no longer be an individual endeavor to "make a living" but a collective effort to build a sustainable human existence. We must remember that the work we perform accrues; it forms a foundation for those who come after. We need the energy and ambition of *homo faber*; we must look to build a future, a world that will endure. The question that remains is: How do you fabricate a world without destroying it in the process? Historically, the work of worldbuilding has been informed by the desire for mastery, what Amitav Ghosh calls "the aspiration to dominance" (146). It is only in confronting this aspiration to dominance,

inherited from the ideologies of empire, that we can begin to build a world on radically different

terms.

Working Heroines: Affective Labor in the Self-Help Narratives of Seacole and Alcott

In an 1866 preface to *Self-Help*, Samuel Smiles reflects on an unintended consequence of the title choice he had made seven years earlier. After expressing his gratitude and surprise at the immense success of *Self-Help*, Smiles shares one notable concern about its reception. The title, he says, "which it is now too late to alter, has proved unfortunate, as it has led some, who have judged it merely by the title, to suppose that it consists of a eulogy of selfishness: the very opposite of what it really is,—or at least what the author intended it to be" (3). Unfortunately for Smiles, the tendency to associate the self-help ethic he popularized with a doctrine of self-interested individualism has persisted. *Self-Help* was by far the most influential work to emerge from a mid-century tradition of self-help and "success" literature that has been equated with the promotion of *laissez-faire* economics and bourgeois values. For Eric Hobsbawm, Smiles was one of many of the period's journalists who "hymned the virtues of capitalism" and embodied a "rigid, self-righteous, [and] unintellectual" bourgeois respectability (186-7). The self-help ethic's emphasis on personal responsibility has been understood to furnish the bourgeoisie with a romanticized image of itself, while also allowing middle-class writers to recast the poverty of the working classes as a moral failing. As Raymond Williams has argued, "the new bourgeois ethic of self-making and self-help" promoted by the popular fiction of the 1840s had one predominant message for the working class: "you must not blame your poverty on others" (4). It is the hopelessly hypocritical nature of this self-help tradition that Dickens so effectively satirizes in the character of Josiah Bounderby.

These associations with the self-help tradition are not unjustified and no doubt characterize some of the literature that influenced Smiles, as well as the literature that was, in turn, influenced by him. But Smiles is right to suggest that labelling *Self-Help* a "eulogy of

selfishness" would signal either ignorance or a willful misreading. As I have shown in the previous two chapters, the Victorian discourse of work was deeply concerned with the way in which work acted as a mediator between individual and collective identities. The self-help tradition is no exception. Though grounded in the ideals of self-reliance and personal responsibility, the self-help ethic did not simply promote bourgeois individualism. The self-help literature under study in this chapter does not voice a monolithic doctrine but rather reflects an abiding concern with the relationship between the pursuit of individual success and recognition and the performance of social duty.

My study begins with Smiles, whose *Self-Help* was one of the most popular books of the Victorian era. It outsold all the major novels of the period and was translated into several different languages, including Japanese, Croatian, and Arabic. The immense popularity of *Self-Help* has signaled to scholars that this book captures something essential about the Victorian worldview. As Peter Sinnema has put it, *Self-Help* has helped to define our understanding of "who the Victorians were" and "what 'Victorianism' itself might mean" (*vii*). In my reading, Smiles does represent something quintessentially Victorian: a sustained attention to philosophies of work and the theorization of *vita activa*. Like Carlyle, Smiles understands work to be the foundation of human progress, but, beyond his predecessor, Smiles effectively visualizes a role for individual agency and worker autonomy in the process of collective advancement. In articulating the role of the individual worker in collective narratives of progress, Smiles redefines heroism as exhibiting perseverance in prosaic daily endeavors, rather than as bravery in the face of extraordinary circumstances. Though Smiles moves heroism into the realm of the prosaic, he does not rob it of romance. Rather, his work navigates a tension between the romance of exceptional outcomes and the importance of patient daily application.

Smiles was the most influential figure of the Victorian self-help tradition, but he was not its only voice. Though Smiles democratized heroism in important ways, he still considered it almost exclusively as a white, male attribute. A vast majority of the mini-biographies that comprise *Self-Help* are of Northern European men, and Smiles voiced support for both the maintenance of separate spheres and European imperialism. The main body of this chapter reads two lesser-known self-help narratives, both written by working women, that challenge the gender and racial hierarchies present in Smiles's dominant articulation of the self-help ethic: Mary Grant Seacole's memoir, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) and Louisa May Alcott's semiautobiographical novel, *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873). Though these texts have been passingly associated with the self-help ethic, neither is generally read as a self-help narrative. In placing these works within the self-help tradition, I argue that they not only engage with the ethics of self-help but also employ its narrative form.

Seacole and Alcott are not exactly an intuitive pairing. Seacole was a Jamaican-born British woman of color who, upon finding herself widowed, became a transnational entrepreneur and war hero. Alcott was the daughter of a well-educated, politically radical, and chronically impecunious New England family, who eventually achieved literary fame writing novels for young women. Both, however, were working women in the Victorian era who sought recognition and respect for women's labor. In particular, I argue, both *Wonderful Adventures* and *Work* offer extended meditations on the social importance of what the Marxist theorist Michael Hardt has termed *affective labor*, labor whose end products are emotional in nature, such as feelings of safety and well-being or a sense of community. Both Seacole and Alcott insist that affective labor has a place in the public realm, as well as in the domestic. In doing so, both also refuse to divorce the ethical value of affective labor from its status as paid employment.

Both *Wonderful Adventures* and *Work* develop an image of affective labor as female heroism in their respective accounts of war nursing. Rather than merge this heroism with the romanticized language of bravery and self-sacrifice associated with war, Seacole and Alcott emphasize the kind of prosaic heroism conceptualized by Smiles. In fact, they present war nursing as one of a series of occupations taken up by their female protagonists and suggest a continuity between their heroic public service and other forms of affective labor. In foregrounding their identities as independent workers functioning in the economic sphere, both Seacole and Alcott complicate the Victorian image of nursing as an extension of domestic duty and insist on its status as valuable public labor. In addition, their narratives complicate the ascendant image of nursing as a respectable profession for middle-class women by associating their nursing duties with less reputable forms of female employment. Before I turn to my respective readings of Seacole and Alcott, I will briefly consider how, together, they participate in an important revisioning of Victorian care work.

Victorian literature is, for good reason, not frequently associated with giving voice to female workers. Yet, as I argue throughout this dissertation, the Victorian theorization of *vita activa* provided ways of conceptualizing work that are absent in contemporary discourse. In the final section of this chapter, I suggest that Seacole and Alcott had access to rhetorical resources that have been lost to contemporary care workers, who continue to struggle with the invisibility and undervaluing of their affective labor. In her landmark *Uneven Developments* (1988), Mary Poovey convincingly argued that in the Victorian era, the ideological enforcement of separate spheres created a dichotomy in which the domestic realm represented virtue and morality and the economic realm competition and self-interest. The domestic realm functioned as a kind of haven for morality that allowed male workers in the economic realm to abandon virtue and altruism.

This dichotomy undoubtedly played an important role in how the Victorians conceptualized

participation in the capitalist economy, yet, as I have shown, the Victorian discourse of work was

far from abandoning questions about the role of virtue and altruism in the economic realm.

Because work was intrinsically tied to questions of ethics in the Victorian era, Seacole and Alcott

had an available language with which to make claims for the social value of their affective labor.

Viewing contemporary affective labor through a Victorian lens, I argue, may provide a language

for worker advocacy that can help to conceptualize domestic care work as valuable public

service.

Self-Help, Heroism, and Human Progress

Asa Briggs has argued that Smiles was essentially a popularizer of Carlyle's "gospel of

work," and he saw their difference as primarily one of style: "Where Carlyle thundered, Smiles

warned and pleaded. What Carlyle prophesied, Smiles turned into homilies" (117). There are

certainly grounds for Briggs's reading. Smiles adopts Carlyle's conception of work as the source

of both individual meaning and collective progress. In language that clearly echoes Carlyle,

Smiles lays out a vision of work as the foundation of human progress:

> Patient and persevering labourers in all ranks and conditions of life, cultivators of
>
> the soil and explorers of the mine, inventors and discoverers, manufacturers,
>
> mechanics and artisans, poets, philosophers, and politicians, all have contributed
>
> towards the grand result, one generation building upon another's labours […] This
>
> constant succession of noble workers—artisans of civilization—has served to
>
> create order out of chaos. (20)

As outlined in the previous chapter, I read this vision of work as collective species action to contain radical potential, in opposition to discourses that privatize and individualize work. In Carlyle, however, this radically democratic conception of work is degraded by the authoritarian and hierarchical elements that shape his larger social vision.

Arguably, what made *Self-Help* such an immensely popular text was its ability to purge the gospel of work, not of its hierarchical, but of its authoritarian and elitist elements. What *Self-Help* offers is a repeated, detailed visualization of what Carlyle struggled to even conceptualize: the role of daily individual endeavor in the collective advancement of the species. The break between Smiles and Carlyle is exemplified in their respective conceptions of heroism. Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841) is frequently cited as a forerunner of *Self-Help* because of their similar didactic employment of biography to provide inspirational models of behavior for their readership. Both include a series of short biographies of influential figures who have made what the authors, respectively, understand to be significant contributions to society. Carlyle's conception of heroism, however, is centered on the oversized historical influence of the "leaders of men" who have shaped the eras in which they lived: "Universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the history of the Great Men who have worked here." This image of the history of the world as the history of Great Men—like Luther, Cromwell, and Napoleon—is clearly at odds with Carlyle's vision, discussed in the previous chapter, of history as the quiet, gradual accumulation of "done and forgotten work." The figures in *On Heroes* are still "workers," but they are only the most exceptional, figures worthy not only of emulation, but of worship.

Smiles conception of heroism offers a mediation between the two poles of Carlyle's vision of human progress. As Timothy Travers has aptly described it, Smiles "conceived of an

atomistic society, advancing as a stream of water would advance, each molecule playing its working part" (136). Smiles's atomistic view of society allowed him to think individual and social development together, to think collective advancement as the sum of daily lives. In light of this view, Smiles offered a more democratic vision of heroism that merged the significance of exceptional outcomes with the importance of prosaic daily endeavor. Smiles's biographies include men of both well- and lesser-known accomplishments, and his accounts of their lives stress not their innate talent or genius but rather their industriousness and perseverance. In accounts of figures that made significant contributions to the development of manufacturing in England, such as Richard Arkwright, Joseph Jacquard, and Josiah Wedgewood, Smiles catalogues the numerous obstacles these "artisans of civilizations" faced and overcame:

> Men such as these are fairly entitled to take rank as the Industrial Heroes of the civilized world. Their patient self-reliance amidst trial and difficulties, their courage and perseverance in the pursuit of worthy objects, are no less heroic of their kind than the bravery and devotion of the solider and the sailor. (89)

In *Self-Help*, Smiles rewrites heroism not as an exceptional quality called for in the face of exceptional circumstances but rather as a daily practice of patient, useful work. Further, while Smiles highlights key figures whose untiring labors produced the most notable ends, he also stresses that the most significant advancements are always the product of collective effort. While James Watt emerges as the most prominent figure in the history of the steam engine, Smiles presents the development of this "king of machines" as being "effected step by step—one man transmitting the results of his labours, at the time apparently useless, to his successors, who took it up and carried it forward" (39). Of the "heroic industry" that constructed this era-defining invention, we find the invaluable contributions of "Savary, the military engineer; Newcomen, the

Dartmouth blacksmith; Cawley, the glazier; Potter, the engine boy; [and] Smeaton, the civil engineer" (39).

In equating heroism with perseverance and steady self-reliance in *Self-Help*, Smiles does not limit it to the aggressively masculine realm of military service, but it remains a masculine concept nonetheless. None of the figures profiled in *Self-Help* are women, and in the next book of the self-help series, *Character* (1871), Smiles strongly emphasizes the social importance of separate spheres. In a chapter called "Home Power," Smiles offers the familiar Victorian image of the home as the "woman's domain—her kingdom, where she exercises entire control" (30). "Good" women, and especially mothers, are essential to forming the character of men who act in the public realm, which in turn shapes the character of the nation. The home, writes Smiles, is "the most influential school of civilization," and the woman's role is as a moral educator (27). Women do begin to make an appearance outside of the private domestic realm in the final book of the self-help series, *Duty*, which was published in 1880, over twenty years after *Self-Help*. Even then, however, women's social contributions are linked directly to a particular conception of heroism Smiles calls "Heroism in Well-Doing."

While all heroism, for Smiles, must be linked to "well-doing," in the sense that one's work should always benefit others, this particular manifestation of "Christian" heroism is linked directly to "suffering and self-sacrifice" (251). Unlike the more expansive conception of heroism in *Self-Help*, which links the performance of social duty with the self-fulfilling exercise of one's volition and talents, this heroism is marked by self-abnegation. The chapter centers on medical workers, both male and female, who risk their own health, and often their lives, to care for the sick and wounded. The beloved "Lady of the Lamp" features prominently, and Smiles reproduces the familiar saintly image of Florence Nightingale being "worshipped" by the

"common soldiers" to whom she gives comfort. Smiles finds Nightingale's devotion to "so trying and disagreeable an occupation" especially admirable because of her privileged origins:

> She was an accomplished young lady, possessing abundant means. She was happy at home, a general favourite, and the center of an admiring circle. She was blessed with everything that might have made social and domestic life precious. But she abjured all such considerations, and preferred to tread the one path that leads to suffering and sorrow. (241)

To further underline Nightingale's privileged origins, Smiles reminds his late-Victorian readership that before Nightingale recast nursing as an occupation requiring "intelligence" and "fitness," nurses "used to be taken from the same class as domestic servants" (241).

Unlike the "Industrial Heroes" profiled in *Self-Help*, the female heroine of *Duty* is doomed to a life of suffering. Driven from the happiness and contentment of the domestic sphere by a sense of self-abnegating duty, she can find purpose in the public realm—but certainly not pleasure. Smiles employs Nightingale's class position to underline the nature of this sacrifice. It is not as though, like someone drawn from the class of domestic servants, she would have had to work for a living anyway. Even though Smiles glancingly acknowledges nursing as a skilled profession, he quickly subsumes this image of nursing to replace it with the image of nursing as saintly martyrdom. As a distinctly feminine employment, it must be purged of its associations with paid labor. Nightingale's own account of her private life prior to her entrance into the public realm certainly does not accord with Smiles's biographical sketch. In *Cassandra* (1860), Nightingale famously excoriates the deadening uselessness and monotony of the lives of upper-class women and makes an impassioned plea for meaningful female employment. Public employment, in *Cassandra*, is presented not as self-sacrifice that leads to suffering but rather as

the only *escape* from the enforced idleness and vapidity of upper-class domestic and social life. Yet, the narratives accord on one key point: employment in service of the public good is the purview of spotlessly respectable and well-educated middle- and upper-class women.

Both Seacole and Alcott refuse a narrative of female heroism that is reliant on suffering and self-sacrifice. Rather, the images of heroism they narrativize reflect the more expansive view of heroism developed in *Self-Help*. This heroism is still closely connected to the performance of duty and the public good, but it is does not require the elimination of individual desires. Rather, the performance of heroic public service is seen as a path to individual growth and the pleasurable exercise of one's talents. Seacole and Alcott thus cast the affective labor of caregiving as heroic public service without idealizing it as martyrdom. In doing so, they claim a heroism for themselves marked by assertiveness, autonomy, and perseverance rather than saintly self-abnegation. In separating the performance of affective labor from an idealized narrative of feminine self-sacrifice, these authors also insist on the status of this labor *as* labor, as unromantic but fulfilling daily work deserving of both respect and proper compensation.

The formal conventions of the self-help narrative allow both Seacole and Alcott to foreground their identities as self-reliant female workers. The paradigmatic *Self-Help* has been faulted for its lack of formal coherence. It is often represented as something like a disorganized grab bag of character sketches mixed with a few generous handfuls of quotable aphorisms. Yet, as Peter Sinnema has noted, it is in the sketches themselves that one finds the text's formal coherence. Each short narrative follows a similar trajectory: "early years and influences," followed by confrontation with adversity, followed by "perseverance in the face of these seemingly insurmountable obstacles," and ending with success, "honorific and/or financial" (*xvii*). In each case, "temporary failures animate our undeterred heroes, spurring them on to

renewed activity" (*xvii*). *Wonderful Adventures* and *Work* extend this formal cohesion to the full length of their autobiographical (or semi-autobiographical) book-length narratives. The structure informs both the overall trajectory of the narratives and as well as its episodic nature. Each obstacle faced provides its own smaller narrative of overcoming within the larger framework. Critics have noted the importance of formal repetition in *Self-Help*. As a didactic text, it relies on repetition to prove the universality of its moral lessons and practical advice. Neither *Wonderful Adventures* nor *Work* are as didactic as *Self-Help*, but they similarly employ formal repetition to reinforce the intended messages of their texts. In the autobiographical context, this formal repetition functions as a means of self-fashioning: it allows the subject to prove consistency of character in the face of adversity. At the same time, for Seacole and Alcott, each new challenge faced proves that not only they—but also the communities they represent—are fully capable of self-help.

Rewriting the Victorian Nurse

The development of professional nursing is often seen to have roots in Victorian Britain, and Florence Nightingale remains one of the most famous progenitors of "modern" nursing. Nightingale's role in professionalizing nursing is most associated with her insistence on occupational training and rationalized management, but scholars have noted that the impact Nightingale had on the public perception of nursing was just as significant as her more tangible reforms. Mary Poovey has noted that just as general practitioners at midcentury "had to sever their historical associations with tradesmen […] so the nurse's historical link with domestic servants had to be effaced before respectable women could contemplate this work" (173). Nursing had to be freed "from the taint of its lower-class origins" and dissociated from the kind

of unscrupulous working-class caregivers caricatured in Dickens's drunken Sairey Gamp (173).

As an affluent young woman of impeccable social origins, Nightingale was an ideal figure to purge nursing of its lower-class associations and imbue it with respectability.

Although Nightingale insisted that nursing was a profession and that nurses must therefore receive wages, she was also complicit in the construction of an idealized image of nursing that obscured its identity as paid work. Nightingale embodied what Catherine Judd has called "saintly maternalism" (135). Popular images of Nightingale both emphasized her essentially domestic nature, as in Martineau's well-known description of Nightingale as a "housewifely woman," and also suggested an otherworldly purity and divine transcendence of the material, as in Longfellow's comparison of Nightingale to the virgin martyr, St. Philomena. In Longfellow's ode, the "lady with the lamp" is literally disembodied, appearing as a passing shadow on the wall that the "speechless sufferer turns to kiss." As Judd has argued, Nightingale did not ascribe to these idealized images of herself, but she accepted them because the public recognition helped to advance her cause (135). Nightingale's association with a self-effacing domesticity helped to portray nursing as an extension of domestic duty, rather than as an intrusion into the public sphere, while the images of virgin saintliness helped to purify nursing of its associations with both menial wage labor and the threat of sexual impropriety.

As a Jamaican-born woman of color, Mary Seacole did not have access to the idealized image of nursing associated with middle- and upper-class white women; Alcott's fictional proxy, Christie, as a former domestic servant, actress, and seamstress, is barred from the same idealized image by her dubious class identity. Both performed professions that at least obliquely associated them with sexual impropriety. Though, in the case of Seacole, Nightingale herself not-so-obliquely suggested in a letter to her brother-in-law that the hotelier was running a house of ill-

repute in the Crimea (Salih, *xxxi-xxxii*). Seacole and Alcott, while they have complicated relationships to their own racial and class identities, nevertheless represent images of nineteenth-century nursing that refuse to dissociate it from these identities. In doing so, they make a claim for the value of affective labor without taking recourse to an idealized image of white, middle-class respectability.

The Crimean Heroine

Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands is an exceptionally complicated text. Part-memoir, part-travel narrative, it was also written explicitly as what Jessica Howell has aptly termed "a kind of retrospective résumé" (108). *Wonderful Adventures* was written by Seacole as part of a larger fundraising effort to rescue her from financial ruin after her supplies company, Seacole and Day, was bankrupted by the end of the Crimean War. Seacole was denied the opportunity to enter the war effort as a nurse in service of the British government, so she instead gained access to the Crimean front as a hotelier and sutler. Despite entering the war effort as a private businesswoman, she soon gained a national reputation, thanks in large part to the reportage of W.H. Russell, for her tireless efforts to provide medical care, emotional support, and welcome "creature comforts" to homesick British soldiers. Due to her reputation as a passionate public servant, when Seacole was forced to abandon her hotel and a large portion of her stock at the end of the war, leaving her in financial distress, a group of influential men, including Russell and the Dukes of Wellington and Newcastle, organized the Seacole Fund to provide her with pecuniary aid. In support of this effort, *Wonderful Adventures* offers to the British public an entertaining account of how Seacole became, in her own words, "a Crimean *heroine*!" (71, italics in original).

Wonderful Adventures does not begin in the Crimea. Seacole does not land in Constantinople until halfway through the narrative. Seacole's memoir is thus not simply an account of her actions as a Crimean heroine but rather the tale of how she becomes one. The first half of the narrative is dedicated to establishing two things about Seacole: that she is a skilled medical practitioner and that she is a competent businesswoman. She deftly weaves accounts of her business ventures—like opening a hotel for goldminers travelling through Panama—with accounts of her medical experience—like battling a cholera epidemic in Cruces, where the hotel was located. Because *Wonderful Adventures* was written to buttress Seacole's reputation as an altruistic public servant, critics have understandably emphasized the way in which the narrative constructs this aspect of Seacole's identity. Catherine Judd has argued, for instance, that Seacole must downplay her role as an economic actor to effectively portray herself as heroic. She thus relies on her efforts as a war nurse to enact a "purification from the economic taint inherent in her role as entrepreneur" (115). Several critics have noted that Seacole, to the same purpose, mobilizes the image of nursing as extension of the private domestic realm in her repeated use of maternal imagery, including her self-fashioning as "Mother Seacole," a surrogate mother who cares for her British "sons" in the absence of their biological families. "By accentuating her feminine, maternal function," Sarah Salih argues, "Seacole effectively diverts attention from other aspects of her identity that do not conform to mid-nineteenth-century ideals of femininity," such as her global mobility and participation in the realm of "masculine enterprise" (*xxx*).

By contrast, I read in Seacole's memoir a refusal to extricate nursing from her role as a sutler and hotelier. Instead, she presents these employments as part of the same project: to provide care for British soldiers. Seacole does employ domestic language to describe her role in the Crimea, but she uses this language to describe her provision of goods as well as her nursing,

thus complicating any neat division between feminine altruism and "masculine enterprise." "Mother Seacole" does not denote Seacole as nurse but rather Seacole as caregiver, a nebulous identity that encompasses a wide range of affective labor. Seacole's role as caregiver—for which *Wonderful Adventures* serves as a "retrospective résumé"—intersects with three employment categories we now generally consider distinct: medical care, hospitality, and domestic service. In fashioning this capacious view of caregiving that weaves in and out of public service and private enterprise, feminine altruism and masculine assertiveness, Seacole complicate visions of Victorian nursing as either saintly self-abnegation or rapidly rationalizing profession.

Seacole herself does make glancing attempts to establish a hierarchy between her role as war nurse and her role as hotelier and sutler, but her narrative soundly deconstructs this distinction. While docked in Balaclava to purchase supplies before heading to the front, Seacole assures her readership that even though she was there for business, she devoted much of her time to caring for wounded soldiers on the "sick wharf." "I did not forget the main object of my journey," she writes, "to which I would have devoted myself exclusively had I been allowed" (87). This passage serves to remind readers that Seacole's offer of nursing services to the British government was rejected and that she turned to private enterprise solely as a means of getting herself to the front. While her narrative consistently emphasizes that duty, rather than profit, was her goal in the Crimea, the claim that nursing was her "main object" does not hold. The narrative suggests that she is equally proud of her ability to provide "creature comforts" to soldiers of all ranks (119). In one anecdote, she is particularly proud to provide the humble handkerchief. After asking an officer for a handkerchief to wrap up a roast fowl, he reports that he had so long been without one that he that he had torn his last shirt into shreds for the purpose (121). "Shortly after," Seacole reports, "a hundred-dozen of these useful articles came to my store, and I sold

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them to all the officers and men very speedily" (121). This contribution, she reminds her

readership, cannot be underestimated: "Tell me, reader, can you fancy what the want of so

simple a thing as a pocket-handkerchief is? To put a case—have you ever gone out for the day

without one; sat in a draught and caught a sneezing cold in the head?" (120-1). Seacole's

narrative is full of these forms of appeals, in which she asks her readership to actively imagine

the use value of the goods she provides. While material, these goods are an essential part of the

affective labor of caregiving.

In a further complication of the dichotomy between service and enterprise, Seacole is

equally proud of the luxuries she provides for those who can afford them—like lobsters and roast

fowl—and the homely comforts she provides for free, like her famous rice pudding, "baked in

large shallow pans, for the men and the sick" (123). In a narrativized moment of reflection,

Seacole asserts that she cannot "charge myself with doing less for the men who had only thanks

to give me, than for the officers whose gratitude gave me the necessaries of life" (117). This is a

rare moment in which Seacole acknowledges the disparity between the services she can provide

for the officers and those she can give to the mass of common soldiers. While this passage

ostensibly makes a claim for her dedicated service to those who could not pay, it also reminds

the reader of the reality of her situation: getting paid is not optional for her. She is an unmarried

woman working independently in the public, economic sphere, and she is reliant on the fact that

the "generosity" of officers expresses itself in the form of cash payment. At the same time, this

acknowledgement of exchange values does not negate the affective component of Seacole's

labor. "Mother Seacole" does not fade away when money enters the equation. As Nicole Fluhr

has observed, Seacole's adoption of the maternal persona does not mean a wholesale adoption of

British middle-class values. Rather, Seacole makes the transgressive assumption that "the ideal

of a self-reliant working woman is in no way at odds with the model of British mothers for whom she proposes to substitute" (106).

In turning to a self-help narrative model, Seacole is able to construct her "retrospective résumé" while also engaging in a broader ethical discourse that affords reflection on her own complex identity as a colonial woman of color. Critics, particularly those in the postcolonial tradition, have found Seacole notably silent concerning her identity as a colonial subject and the structural racism of British imperialism. Sandra Pouchet Paquet has most recently voiced the opinion that *Wonderful Adventures* "reflects an enthusiastic acceptance of colonialism in the aftermath of slavery" and "is not concerned with the degradation suffered by black Jamaicans under British rule" (864). While Seacole's "success story" may be personally significant, "[t]here is nothing in her narrative to suggest that her work in the Crimea alters the status of women, or black West Indians more generally" (868). In his foundational reading of Seacole in *Maps of Englishness* (1996), Simon Gikandi argues that *Wonderful Adventures* should be read as a marginalized subject's "ultimate attempt to claim her Englishness" (127). As a subject at the margins, Seacole must actively construct her English identity through her narrative. In doing so, Seacole must "writ[e] around" her Jamaican Creole identity and "unconditionally espous[e] the imperial cause" (142). Borrowing a phrase from Raymond Williams, Gikandi argues that Seacole's adoption of "the new bourgeois ethic of self-making and self-help" is an important part of her narrative self-fashioning. With every obstacle she encounters, she proves her mastery of this ethic and its "attendant moral codes" (132). Unlike the middle-class white protagonists of novels like *Jane Eyre* and *North and South*, however, Seacole must transcend the personal nature of the self-help narrative and "elevate her subjectivity to another level, to transform her individual self-making into a collective romance" (133). This "collective romance" is inherently

imperial in nature. As Seacole overcomes the challenges presented by the inhospitable terrains and peoples of Panama and the Crimea, she comes to represent "the forces of civilization […] against barbarism" (133).

Gikandi is correct that Seacole consistently positions herself as a bearer of civilization in uncivilized worlds, but he fails to understand this as an inherent part of the Victorian self-help ethic. Gikandi, following Williams, misreads the self-help ethic as a primarily individualistic doctrine not properly belonging to the realm of collective national romance. But at least for Smiles—the ethic's most influential author—the merging of individual narratives with the epic romance of progress was always a fundamental part of the self-help doctrine. Unfortunately, for Smiles, as for Carlyle, there was little room for protagonists in this narrative who were not white European males. Despite the immense global popularity of *Self-Help*, it is a book written by a British author for a British audience. He notes that the "industrial greatness of the [British] empire" is a product of the exceptional industriousness of the English, for whom "the spirit of active industry has been the vital principle of the nation" (37). Smiles later speculates, in a familiar expression of nineteenth-century racial theorizing, that the "northern nations" may owe their superior capacity for industry to their harsh climate and unfriendly soil, which has necessitated "a perennial struggle with difficulties such as the natives of sunnier climes know nothing of" (283). Furthermore, while the imperialist ideology in *Self-Help* was euphemistically racialized, Smiles was explicit about its biologically racial character in an 1852 article published in the *Eliza Cook Journal*: "White people have distinguished themselves in all climates. They are intelligent, enterprising, hardy, and industrious. It seems to be their destiny to occupy the world and subdue it" (qtd. in Travers, 96).

Wonderful Adventures is undoubtedly supportive of the British imperial project, but it offers a significant challenge to the stark racialization of nineteenth-century narratives of progress. In doing so, it significantly revises the collective romance at the heart of the Victorian self-help ethic. Critics like Pouchet Paquet and Gikandi have emphasized Seacole's desire to align herself with white Britishness. Seacole does begin her narrative by identifying with her father, a solider "of an old Scotch family," and proudly laying claim to her "good Scotch blood" (11). She even concedes that her Scotch heritage may be the source of the "energy and activity which are not always found in the Creole race" (11). While she acknowledges familiarity with the "lazy Creole" stereotype, she assures her readership that "I am sure I do not know what it is to be indolent" (11). In these passages, Seacole gives credence to the racialized pseudoscience that underpinned Smiles's conception of self-help. Yet, in the following paragraph, she immediately offers an alternative story about the source of her work ethic that foregrounds the industry of native Jamaicans, specifically Jamaican women. While she may have inherited a desire for adventure from her British father, it is from her black Jamaican mother that she learns to work. We learn that her mother both kept a boarding house and "was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress" (11-2). She confesses that without the influence of her mother, she "might very likely have grown up idle and useless"; it is from observing the industry of her mother that Seacole develops a "yearning for medical knowledge" and "the ambition to become a doctress" (12). Seacole not only sites her mother as the primary model of energy and self-reliance essential to the formation of her character, but she also makes clear that her mother was not an anomaly. Seacole's mother is one of many working Jamaican women, some of whom are "skilled doctresses," some of whom run hotels and boarding houses, and some of whom, like Seacole and her mother, do both.

If we read *Wonderful Adventures* as a self-help narrative, the essential narrative moment in which Seacole addresses her early influences strongly suggests that her narrative is just as much about foregrounding her identity as a working woman of color as it is about laying claim to Britishness. Another key moment in Seacole's self-help narrative also foregrounds her racial identity. In keeping with the self-help tradition, Seacole faces many obstacles that only serve to solidify her resolve to pursue her chosen path. After documenting the horrors that awaited her in what she found to be the rugged and lawless region of Panama, she quickly attests that "I have never known what it is to despair, or even to despond […], and it was not long before I began to find out the bright side of Cruces life" (29). These narrative turns, in which adversity gives rise to optimism and resolve, are a recurring part of the self-help form. Often, however, a central conflict emerges, one that dwarfs all the others, a moment in which the protagonist is most in danger of giving up. This moment in Seacole's narrative is literally pivotal; it turns the narrative from her early formative adventures towards her service in the Crimea. The primary adversary in this pivotal moment is not the uncivilized terrain and peoples of a foreign land but rather British racism. Seacole employs the conventions of the self-help narrative to prove that she possesses qualities lauded by her British audience—industry, self-reliance, perseverance, and a desire to be socially useful—but she does so by positioning the prejudices of that same audience as the primary obstacle she must overcome.

When Seacole is driven by patriotism and her admitted love of adventure to join the war effort, she attempts "long and unwearied application" at the War Office to enlist as a hospital nurse (72). Even though she had extensive experience treating the diseases most prevalent in the Crimea and had testimonials outlining this experience, Seacole's repeated offers were ignored. She is then redirected to the Medical Department, where her steady application also goes

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unrewarded. Seacole's response to this rejection is multilayered and rhetorically complex. She ostensibly absolves the white British men who turn her away, while at the same time clearly calling attention to their ignorance: "Now, I am not for a single instant going to blame the authorities who would not listen to the offer of a motherly yellow woman to go to the Crimea and nurse her 'sons' there […] In *my* country, where people know *our* use, it would have been different; but here it was natural enough" (72, my italics). Here, Seacole's personal narrative foregrounds her identity both as a Jamaican and as a working woman of color, particularly as a working woman of color who embodies a long tradition of medical care work, a proud tradition of skilled affective labor. The British authorities are shown to be ignorant of this important West Indian tradition and blinded to Seacole's obvious qualifications by her identity as a racialized colonial subject.

While Seacole remains cheerful in the face of this rejection by male British bureaucrats, facing rejection at the hands of her fellow nurses is a more troubling experience. After being turned down by the War and Medical Departments, she appeals to Elizabeth Herbert, a protegee of Nightingale who remained in England to recruit nurses for the war effort. Seacole is optimistic, "[f]eeling that I was one of the women they most wanted, experienced and fond of the work" (73). Contrary to Seacole's hopeful expectations, Herbert would not even grant Seacole an audience, instead sending a note informing her that "the full complement of nurses had been secured" (73). When Seacole persists and secures an interview with "one of Miss Nightingale's companions," she receives the same reply. "I read in her face the fact," writes Seacole, "that had there been a vacancy, I should not have been chosen to fill it" (73).

It is with this rejection by her fellow nurses that Seacole begins to feel real despair:

The disappointment seemed a cruel one. I was so conscious of the unselfishness

of the motives which induced me to leave England—so certain of the service I

could render among the sick soldiery, and yet I found it so difficult to convince

others of these facts. Doubts and suspicions arose in my heart for the first and last

time, thank Heaven. Was it possible that American prejudices against color had

some root here? Did these ladies shrink from accepting my aid because my blood

flowed beneath a somewhat duskier skin than theirs? (73)

In a rhetorical move that models Seacole's response to the War and Medical Departments above, she marries accusation with absolution. Though Seacole immediately dismisses the idea that British racism is preventing her from performing her social duty, those interrogative sentences remain hanging in the air. It is difficult to believe that few readers—then or now—could dismiss these accusations as quickly as Seacole ostensibly does. Seacole has already made clear that she is fully qualified for this position and has the proper documentation to prove it. She has, in fact, left the audience with no other option but to understand that she is being rejected because she is a colonial subject and woman of color. It is not only that her skills are in question, the above passage clearly suggest, but also her motives. What is most painful for Seacole is that her racial identity seems to make her morally suspect. This is the central moment in which Mother Seacole, the Crimean heroine, is almost erased from history—the moment when Seacole is almost prevented from joining the war effort. This is the narrative moment of greatest conflict in which she must use all her stores of self-reliance and perseverance.

Seacole overcomes this challenge, of course, both emotionally and practically, but only because of her exceptional self-help ethic. And even though Seacole moves on, she returns to this pivotal moment later in the narrative. At the end of a chapter that features multiple

testimonials attesting to the value of her service in the Crimea, Seacole asks her readers to physically turn back to the pages to reread this moment of conflict, to remind themselves "how hard the right woman had to struggle to convey herself to the right place" (118). Seacole may have dispelled the specter of racism in the moment, but she challenges her audience, after she has indisputably proven the social value of her work, to go back and confront those hanging interrogatives.

Written two years before the global phenomenon that would establish "self-help" as the most popular manifestation of Victorian work ethics, *Wonderful Adventures* emerges from the same mid-century ideological milieu. Although *Wonderful Adventures* was written with uniquely self-interested motives in mind, Seacole's efforts to claim the value of her own affective labor in the Crimea—to claim her right to public gratitude and monetary compensation in equal parts— call attention to the tradition of West Indian working women from which she emerges. Against critics who see Seacole's narrative as attempting to unequivocally align with white Britishness by "writ[ing] around" her racialized colonial identity, my reading has suggested that Seacole employs the self-help narrative to foreground her identity as a working woman of color. In line with the Smilesian tradition, Seacole's narrative is not a celebratory account of financial success. It is, in fact, a story of financial ruin, of the occasional necessity of financial ruin in the pursuit of one's social duty. It celebrates determination, self-reliance, and a commitment to useful work. While the ethics of Seacole's narrative align with Smiles's own, in placing herself as the protagonist of a self-help narrative, she challenges the gendered and racialized narrative of progress at the heart of the dominant self-help tradition he represents.

From Success to Experience

Like Mary Grant Seacole, Louisa May Alcott inherited her work ethic from her mother. Alcott dedicated *Work* "TO MY MOTHER, *whose life has been a long labor of love*." While "labor of love" generally denotes work performed outside of the economic realm, Abigail May Alcott's labors of love were often performed out of financial necessity. Louisa May Alcott's father, the transcendentalist philosopher and reformer Bronson Alcott, was notoriously inept at making a living. It was Abigail who, with aid from Alcott and her sisters, kept the family afloat working as a seamstress and in other varied occupations. Alcott respected her father's ideals, but her frustration with him was also often evident. "Transcendental Wild Oats," published the same year as *Work*, offered a satirical account of the Alcott family's time living in a transcendental intentional community called Fruitlands. The portrayal of her father as the character Abel Lamb is not flattering; he is earnest and principled but also naïve and ineffectual. He and his fellow founder, Charles Lane, are shown to be conveniently blind to the amount of practical labor required to keep the agrarian community running. Her patiently overworked mother, "Sister Hope," manages both the household and the farm while the men philosophize.

Unlike *Wonderful Adventures*, which is reliant on its connection to the real events of Seacole's life, *Work* is a semiautobiographical novel loosely modelled on Alcott's own working life. Alcott herself filled most of the working roles undertaken by the novel's protagonist Christie, including domestic servant, seamstress, governess, and Civil War nurse. Rather than a faithful account of Alcott's own experiences, the novel offers an extended philosophical reflection on the meaning of work that is, rather uniquely, grounded in the lived experience of daily employment. As Christie prepares to leave home and embark on an independent life as a single working woman, the narrator offers a brief synopsis of the self-help narrative to come. We

are informed that Christie is one of a large class of women who "are driven by necessity, temperament, or principle out into the world to find support, happiness, and homes for themselves," and that—spoiler alert—she will ultimately succeed:

> Many turn back discouraged; more accept shadow for substance […]; the weakest lose their purpose and themselves; but the strongest struggle on, and, after danger and defeat, earn at last the best success this world can give us, the possession of a brave and cheerful spirit, rich in self-knowledge, self-control, and self-help. (12)

Despite the narrator's confident pronouncement that Christie will ultimately reach this "happy end," the coming narrative is deeply conflicted about the definition of a successful life and the means of achieving it.

Critics have noted that *Work* is a novel of "conflicting feelings" and "unresolved contradictions" (Kasson, *xii*). This is often attributed in large part to the fractured nature of the book's composition. The first half of the book was written in 1861, but it was not completed until over a decade later. In the interim, the novel underwent a significant title change. When Alcott began her semiautobiographical account of a woman's working life in 1861, it was called *Success*. Jean Fagan Yellin has argued that the title change signals what was essentially, for Alcott, a concession. Alcott abandoned *Success* as a title because "she had difficulty dramatizing the successful life of a woman who applied the theories proposed by nineteenth-century social critics" (528). The "hollowness of the heroine's claims of success" at the end of the novel suggests, for Fagan Yellin, that Alcott ultimately failed to articulate a place for her antebellum social theories in the industrializing postbellum United States (539). While Fagan Yellin is correct that Alcott's novel does not fully register the dramatic changes that occurred in the interim between the novel's initial undertaking and its completion, reading Alcott's title change

as an admission of failure would be to overlook the core philosophical debate signaled by this meaningful rebranding. That *Success* becomes *Work: A Story of Experience* signals Alcott's engagement with a key tension at the heart of the self-help discourse between the romantic allure of exceptional outcomes and the quiet satisfaction of performing useful daily labor. Throughout the novel, Christie has moments of genuine contentment with the latter, and Alcott is undoubtedly committed to asserting the intrinsic value of all socially-useful work. But Alcott's protagonist also suffers from recurring bouts of dissatisfaction that propel her from employment to employment. Christie longs for a both a higher sense of self-fulfillment as well as social recognition. In foregrounding this internal struggle in her protagonist, Alcott unearths a key conflict that bubbles beneath the surface, but ultimately remains subterranean, in Smiles's self-help oeuvre.

Like Seacole, Alcott rewrites the masculine self-help narrative to reflect her experience as a working woman and to foreground the social value of affective labor. As in *Wonderful Adventures*, Alcott's representation of war nursing is not reliant on images of saintly self-denial or rationalized professionalism. Though a young Christie embarking on her life of independence muses that she might one day become "a Florence Nightingale" (8), her narrative willfully abandons Nightingale's purposeful construction of nursing as a respectable middle-class profession, instead positioning this public service as an extension of her earlier paid work as a domestic servant and companion. While, as Poovey notes, Victorian proponents of professionalized nursing were trying to extricate nursing from its associations with the likes of Dickens's Sairey Gamp, Alcott was embracing this very relation. Alcott opens her *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a series of four sketches adapted from the letters she wrote home during her short stint nursing soldiers in a Union hospital, with an epigraph from this thoroughly

disreputable caregiver, and Alcott later compares herself and another nurse to "the immortal Sairy [sic] and Betsey." *Hospital Sketches* has been praised for its unsentimental representation of war nursing. As Emily Waples has noted, *Hospital Sketches* "revis[es] sentimental depictions of women's wartime contributions by drawing attention to the exacting and enervating *work* of nursing" (98, italics in original).

Hospital Sketches captures Alcott's experience of war nursing through a combination of realist attention to detail and comedic tone. The reference to Sairey Gamp is not out of place in a text that feels stylistically Dickensian. Alcott's representation of war nursing in *Work* takes a decidedly different stylistic approach, but it maintains its attention to war nursing as exhausting, embodied work. In contrast to her comedic sketches, Alcott's self-help narrative is earnest and didactic, and war nursing takes on a romantic dimension as public service in the righteous war to end slavery. Whereas *Hospital Sketches* covers the actual course of Alcott's own service—six weeks before she was taken seriously ill and had to return home—*Work* gives Christie a much longer tenure and has her working, like Mary Seacole, on the front lines. Unlike Alcott herself, Christie is married by the time she enters the war effort and her husband, David, is a captain in the Union army.

Alcott began her self-help narrative prior to the Civil War, but she arguably needed this epic conflict to finish the conversations her antebellum writing had begun. Critics have often read discontinuity between the first and second parts of the novel, but when viewed as a philosophical meditation on the meaning of work, the text reads as remarkably seamless. The Civil War acts as an event in the novel that allows Alcott to directly address the tension identified above—between the romance of "success" and the satisfaction of "experience"— through a meditation on the meaning of heroism. While much of Alcott's direct discussion of

heroism is channeled through the masculine figure of her husband, this discussion clearly

becomes a vehicle for Christie to address her own need for recognition and respect. Though

Alcott, like Seacole, admits to being swept up in the romance of war, she ultimately settles on the

superiority of a Smilesian pragmatic heroism defined by steady perseverance and patient

collective action. At the same time, Alcott refuses to give up on the idea of success and

ultimately demands for her pragmatic heroine—once an actress—a stage and a following.

After working as a domestic servant, an actress, a governess, a companion, and a

seamstress, Christie finds herself friendless, broke, and alone, facing an existential crisis. Saved

from a suicide attempt at the last moment by a "fallen woman" she had earlier befriended (and

lost her job defending), the self-reliant Christie enters a period in which she must allow herself to

be cared for, but she does not remain idle. With the aid of the radical preacher Mr. Power,

Christie finds a position as housekeeper and companion in the abidingly peaceful home of an

elderly Quaker woman and her son, who runs a greenhouse. Christie's time with the Sterlings

and the romance she develops with David Sterling have been read by critics as an idealization of

the domestic realm discordant with the novel's representation of female autonomy and self-

reliance. This section of the novel *is* brimming with scenes of tranquil domestic bliss, Yet, even

as Christie settles into "a happy, quiet, useful life, utterly unlike any of the brilliant futures she

had planned for herself," Alcott indicates that Christie's future is far from decided (189).

When Christie begins to have romantic feelings for the prosaic and quietly industrious

David, she finds herself frustrated by his lack of ambition. Christie often thinks she finds

something more complex hiding within the "busy, cheerful man apparently contented with the

humdrum duties of an obscure, laborious life," but she chides herself for her penchant for

romance: "Gods are gone, heroes are hard to find, and one should be contented with good men,

even if they do wear old clothes, lead prosaic lives, and have no accomplishments but gardening, playing the flute, and keeping their temper" (190-1). Yet, she cannot shake the feeling that her beloved David is meant for more, and she confesses her discontent to Mr. Power. When she tells Mr. Power that she knows David to be *good* but wishes him to also be *great*, Mr. Power reminds Christie that not only is being good the more difficult path, it is also "the only success that satisfies, the only honor that outlives death" (195). While this conversation is ostensibly about her masculine counterpart, Christie's reply is telling: "I'm afraid I shall always have a hankering for the worldly honors that are so valued by most people" (195). As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the this "hankering" is for herself, as much as for her lover.

Mr. Power quickly diagnoses Christie as a "hero-worshipper," and Alcott reinforces the reference to Carlyle by having Mr. Power gift Christie a copy of "Heroes and Hero-Worship." When he asks Christie if she has found the hero in David yet, she replies that she is still looking. It is the outbreak of the war which seems to offer a conventional resolution to Christie's discontent. Upon seeing David in uniform for the first time, Christie declares: "Yes, Mr. Power, I've found my hero at last! Here he is, my knight without reproach or fear, going out to take his part in the grandest battle ever fought!" (283). Yet, Christie is not content with allowing David to a sole place in the spotlight. Christie asserts that she, too, wants to embrace this "splendid chance to do and suffer" and to "earn a little of the glory or the martyrdom that will come in the end" (291). With this conviction, Christie enlists as a war nurse.

The image of war as a series of grand battles and knightly campaigns is quickly replaced with the image of war as a "long, hard task" (295), and Christie's vision of glory and suffering is quickly replaced with one of practical daily work. Rather than a state of exception, Christie's time as a war nurse is presented as a direct extension of the humble working-class labor

documented in the first half of her narrative. Christie quickly rises to a position of responsibility

because of her practical experience. As her supervisor tells her:

> You are a treasure, my dear, for you can turn your hand to anything and do well
> whatever you undertake. So many come with plenty of good-will, but not a
> particle of practical ability […] The boys don't want to be cried over, or have
> their brows 'everlastingly swabbed,' as old Watkins calls it: they want to be well-
> fed and nursed, and cheered up with creature comforts. Your nice beef-tea and
> cheery ways are worth oceans of tears and cart-loads of tracts. (296)

As with "Mother Seacole," this cheerful provision of "creature comforts" is discussed in

specifically maternal terms, as one solider declares that Christie "takes care of me as ef she was

my own mother," but as with Seacole, it is Christie's *employment* experience that makes her

qualified for public service. Christie's diverse experience as a paid service worker and caregiver

prepares her for the demands of war nursing. Like Seacole, Alcott presents war nursing as a

deeply embodied form of affective labor that refuses to separate menial tasks, like the brewing of

beef tea and the "scrabbling" of eggs, from the provision of complex affects: comfort, peace,

feelings of belonging and companionship, and pleasure.

While *Work* does not have the same practical impetus for asserting the value of affective

labor as does *Wonderful Adventures*, Alcott makes clear that the achievement of respect and

recognition are an essential part of Christie's war experience. While she early on makes a

distinction between the masculine honor of battle and "the only honors left the women, hard

work, responsibility, and the gratitude of many men," the subsequent narrative complicates this

distinction (297). Christie does not lay claim to the narrative of self-abnegation and sacrifice

Smiles associates with feminine heroism. Rather, she is honest about the fact that she enjoys the

praise her talents have earned her. "I never discovered what an accomplished woman I was until I came here," she says, "I'm getting vain with so much praise, but I like it immensely" (298). While Christie may have entered the war effort with an ideal of service as suffering, she finds it instead a pleasurable exercise of her talents and an opportunity for recognition and distinction.

The war does ultimately bring personal suffering to Christie through the death of her husband, and Alcott employs this tragic event as a platform for meditating further on the social value of affective labor and its invisibility. David does not die in the heat of battle but rather on a mission of caregiving. When a small group of fugitive women and children escaping from slavery arrive at David's camp, he assumes a distinctly feminized role as caretaker that mirrors his wife's own efforts. As a soldier relates to Christie, David "fed and warmed 'em, comforted their poor scared souls," and nursed the children "as if they were his own" (311). These acts of care are David's last, as he is killed, alone in the woods, helping these women and children get onto the boat that will take them to safety. His deathbed words to Christie affirm the novel's celebration of work as the source of spiritual comfort and moral growth: "Do not mourn, dear heart, but work: and, by and by, you will be comforted" (315). Christie does mourn, but this mourning takes on a unique character that connects it to the novel's running debate about the role success and recognition play in imbuing daily work with meaning. Christie's greatest sorrow in the wake of her husband's death is the lack of public recognition his sacrifice has received. She cannot bear to think of him "in his grave unknown, unrewarded, and forgotten by all but a faithful few" when those men "who have merely saved a banner, led a charge, or lost an arm, get all the glory" (318). Mr. Power is again her council in this moment of what appears as moral weakness, assuring her that "to do bravely the daily duties of an upright life was more heroic in

God's sight, than to achieve in an enthusiastic moment a single deed that won the world's applause" (319).

This is ultimately the message of *Work*. For Alcott, as for Smiles, the conception of heroism as daily useful work trumps the romance of glorious self-sacrifice and the lure of public renown. Yet, Alcott does not let go of the idea of success and, in fact, demands for her female protagonist both the moral satisfaction of performing socially-useful work and the pleasure of public recognition for this service. After the death of her husband, Christie gradually internalizes Power's lesson and settles in to run the greenhouse and raise her and David's daughter (conceived during a wartime rendezvous). She reflects that after twenty years of seeking her fortune, she has found it at last: "I only asked to be a useful, happy woman, and my wish is granted" (329). This humble conclusion does not actually conclude the narrative, however, but instead gives rise to a reflection about "a late event which seemed to have opened a new field of labor for her is she chose to enter it" (328).

Attending "one of the many meetings of working-women, which had made some stir of late," Christie is saddened by the ineffectiveness of the middle- and upper-class reformers who lead these meetings. She applauds their earnest intentions but sees that they have failed to reach their working-class audience. Motivated by the "expectant, despondent" faces of the working women who desperately longed to hear something that could help them, Christie spontaneously rises to speak. Mobilizing the "self-possession, power of voice, and ease of gesture" she learned while working as an actress, Christie delivers a motivational speech inspired by her own experiences as a working woman. The working-class women "felt that a genuine woman stood down there among them like a sister, ready with head, heart, and hand to help them help themselves" (333). In short, at the end of her own self-help narrative, Christie becomes a

purveyor of the doctrine and proves herself, after years of service in humbler occupations, to be a skilled orator with a future as a public figure. This new manifestation of affective labor—born of her previous working experience—opens up an elevated realm of action that connects her to her working past but also opens up a new path to leadership and perhaps even "greatness." Her work as an "interpreter between the two classes" merges with what she sees as the greatest challenge of her age (334). While she reflects that she will likely only be laying the foundation for a "happy success I may never see," she is proud to be one of the "pioneers" and hopes to be remembered as the "brave beginners" of the abolition movement were (334).

While throughout her narrative, Christie asserts the dignity and value of humble labor, she ends her narrative with an idealistic vision of taking her place in the annals of human history. Rather than understand this as an abandonment of Alcott's commitment to the moral value of useful work, however, I see this as a running tension within the self-help tradition. The self-help tradition must assert that all socially-useful work has value, while at the same time driving this daily work with the inspirational possibility of individual achievement and social recognition. *Work* is indeed a novel of "conflicted feelings," but these conflicted feelings reflect a larger—perhaps irresolvable conflict—at the heart of the self-help doctrine itself.

George Eliot famously concludes *Middlemarch* with a reflection on the inability of even intelligent and passionate women to find a meaningful role in the public sphere of Victorian England. Resigning the ambitious Dorothea Brooke to a quiet, useful life in the shadow of her husband, Eliot suggests that Dorothea's fate was inevitable. The great historical deeds of women like Theresa and Antigone are now impossible, because the "medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone" (896). Women like Dorothea will still create a meaningful impact, but only through "unhistoric acts" that will be carried out privately, until these silent heroines

come to rest in "unvisited tombs" (896). Alcott was an admirer of Eliot, but the end of *Work* might be considered a rebuttal to the resignation that permeates *Middlemarch*'s conclusion. Both Seacole and Alcott, in their own ways, attempted to create mediums in which female heroism and female ambition might take shape.

Affective Labor and Domestic Care Work

In his 1999 essay "Affective Labor," Michael Hardt coined the titular term to describe a form of labor increasingly dominate in postindustrial economies. As distinct from previous conceptions of emotional labor, affective labor is not simply work that requires emotional investment from the worker; it is work that *produces* emotional responses, like "feeling[s] of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness and community" (96). For Hardt, the "dominant position" of affective labor in post-Fordist economies imbues it with an immense amount of power. As one of the "strongest links in the chain of postmodernization, its potential for subversion and autonomous constitution is all the greater" (90). Critics have noted a prevailing tendency in autonomist Marxist theory to compress widely divergent forms of labor into master categories, thus eliding essential differences in the lived experience of workers.[13] Hardt's claims for the subversive potential of affective labor fall into this pattern. While some labor whose products are affective—such as that of the entertainment and communication industries—have achieved a dominant position in the late-capitalist economy, traditionally feminine forms of care work remain widely undervalued, both monetarily and in the social imagination.

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[13] This is particularly important to note, because autonomist Marxism was meant to be a corrective for the conceptual rigidity and determinism of traditional Marxism. For an excellent overview of critical responses to conceptions of immaterial and affective labor, see Gill and Pratt.

Formed in 2007, the National Domestic Workers Alliance has worked to organize

domestic workers and make their labor visible. Domestic workers continue to be poorly paid,

have little legal or practical protections, and are not covered by the Occupational Health and

Safety Act. Even the laws that exist are difficult to enforce, says Ai-jen Poo, the executive

director of the NDWA, because domestic work is often so isolated: "[Y]ou have millions of

workplaces that are hidden…You could go into any neighborhood and apartment building and

not know which homes are [also] workplaces" (qtd. in Thomhave).

Workers interviewed in a 2018 report by a subsidiary group of the NDWA called We

Dream in Black, which focuses specifically on organizing black female domestic workers,

repeatedly attested to the invisibility of their own affective labor. These workers associate the

invisibility of their labor with the lack of respect they feel their work receives. Most of the

women interviewed in the report are home health aides, a profession continually cited as one of

the fastest growing in the United States. Despite the high demand for this profession, the women

interviewed overwhelmingly expressed the sense that the public does not understand what they

do. As Diane Heller, a home health aide from Atlanta, expressed it: "I don't really think people

understand what goes into domestic work […] It makes me feel like a low person on the totem

pole: not respected, looked down on. If people really got a chance to hear and talk to people that

do our kind of work, they would be more compassionate. We need to educate the public"

(Atlanta, 17).

The report itself, which is centered around first-hand accounts written by the workers

themselves, reflects Heller's assessment that narrativizing the experience of individual care

workers is a key component of meaningfully increasing visibility. What the report reveals is that

the duties of "non-medical care givers" who care for the elderly, the chronically ill, and the

severely disabled are incredibly diverse. These workers care for the physical well-being of the clients, such as bathing and feeding, they administer medications, they cook and clean, they run errands, and they provide companionship. While one of the stated goals of the We Dream in Black Report is to redefine domestic care workers as professionals deserving of better pay and greater respect, many of the interviews clearly indicate that professionalism does not equate to rationalizing or homogenizing the duties that care workers perform. Rather, these women stress that providing personalized, holistic care for individuals who need it, regardless of what that care entails, is worthy of respect. The demanding physicality of their work, as well as the "menial" tasks, are wedded to the affective labor that defines their profession. As care worker Ihesha Johnson expresses it, "What I do is professionally love people […] there is no amount of money you can place on love. It is too high of a cost. Nobody could afford it. So, when you meet somebody willing to give that love, people need to know how valuable that is" (Atlanta, 21). Sonia Myers, a home nursing assistant from Durham, echoes Johnson's emphasis on the affective component of care work: "Love. Love is my basic skill. And trust" (Durham, 33).

Hardt it right to say that there is subversive potential within certain forms of affective labor, but, at least in the case of care work, that potential will not develop on its own. At the center of my critique of postwork theory is the argument that we cannot be "postwork" until we figure out how to meet the needs of our communities. By all accounts, we need more care workers, but the social devaluing of this labor and the lack of structural financial investment in providing these services acts as a barrier to meeting the real demand for care workers. Properly valuing this work, however, requires an active reevaluation of what it means to be a health care professional. Domestic care workers, who might do laundry and watch Wheel of Fortune with a

client, as well as administer medications, are subject to a classed and racialized hierarchy that defines their work as unskilled.

Though the Victorian era has long been identified as the period in which the ideology of separate spheres becomes hegemonic, the accounts of Victorian female workers often operated in open defiance of the dichotomy between the domestic realm and public, economic spheres of activity. A discourse of work already invested in questions of ethics offered a fertile ground for some female workers, like Seacole and Alcott, to argue for the power of values traditionally associated with the domestic realm to influence public and economic life, perhaps even to shape history. As domestic care workers continue to fight for visibility, they will mobilize a discourse of work that is inherently ethical, because arguing for the value of the services they provide is an ethical argument about how much we collectively decide to invest in the care of our most vulnerable communities. These arguments will require challenging, in new ways, the dichotomy between the domestic and the public. In the self-help narratives of Seacole and Alcott, we find demands for respect and recognition that collapse distinctions between domestic and professional work that may provide a philosophical and rhetorical foundation for a language of care worker advocacy.

Working in Utopia: Radical Ethics in Morris and Wilde

In *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2019), Aaron Bastani imagines a world in which we work very little, yet everyone lives in luxury. In Bastani's technophilic communist future, asteroid mining has solved the problem of mineral scarcity on Earth and fine Burgundies are made cheaply in a laboratory. This enthusiastic manifesto, which has spawned a series of utopian-themed memes (the most popular of which being Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism), may have more than one jump-the-shark moment, but it is only the most quotable manifestation of a rigorous, academic Marxist tradition. This tradition began with the "refusal of work" politics that emerged from Italian workers' movements in the 1970s and was taken up and expanded by autonomist Marxists like Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Franco Berardi, and Paulo Virno. In the past decade, this "refusal of work" or "antiwork" politics has found new life in a merger with utopian discourse. While the act of refusal at the heart of this Marxist tradition has always been understood as a constitutive demand rather than a passive rejection, "postwork" thinkers like Bastani develop this demand into concrete policy proposals and elaborate visions of a post-capitalist future. Contemporary postwork discourse is varied and complex, extending far beyond the Marxist tradition. There are also important variations among Marxist postwork thinkers, but they share a common goal: to conceptualize—and facilitate a movement towards—a world in which work is not fully eliminated but rather radically decentered. These thinkers position themselves against the "productivist ethics" of both capitalism and previous Marxist traditions, arguing that we should demand less work and more time to develop our individual and social identities in what Marx famously called the "realm of freedom."

Anyone who has read Oscar Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) will not be surprised to hear that Bastani selects a passage from this essay as epigraph to the final section

of *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, in which he most explicitly lays out the book's utopian vision. If you were to change the final term of Bastani's politics—for he is clear that Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC) is a *politics*, not a singular text—to socialism, FALS might be the perfect acronym for Wilde's utopian vision. Beyond glancing acknowledgements like Bastani's epigraph, however, the relationship between Wilde's Victorian postwork politics and their contemporary counterpart has not been explored. This chapter will begin by placing "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" in conversation with antiwork and postwork Marxist politics. In doing so, I hope to add dimension to recent arguments that have attempted to understand this text as a serious articulation of Socialist politics, rather than a casual foray into a fashionable topic by a writer whose true commitments lay elsewhere. I will read "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" as a trenchant and (and, dare I say, productive) critique of the work ethics and prowork politics that have been the subject of this dissertation thus far.

As does the contemporary Marxist postwork tradition, Wilde's politics offer not only a critique of labor conditions under capitalism but also a rebuttal of fellow Socialists who attempted to realize, rather than refuse, work's ethical potential. Wilde found much to admire in William Morris, from his textile designs to his translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, but the "Soul of Man Under Socialism" represents a powerful rejection of Morris's politics, particularly Morris's argument that with the elimination of capitalism, all work could be made pleasurable. In several different essays and his utopian novel, *News from Nowhere* (1890), Morris argues for the necessity of pleasurable and rewarding work to both individual happiness and the formation of an ethical society. Morris thus develops a post-capitalist vision that represents an evolution of Victorian prowork politics. He maintains the core belief in work as the most fundamental and meaningful of human endeavors while insisting, in contrast to his intellectual predecessors, that

work under capitalism would always be warped and tainted, unable to realize its radical ethical potential. In response, Wilde argues that socially necessary work will always be oppressive and, therefore, the only path to human freedom is full automation.

Ruskin, Morris, and Wilde

As a figure popularly synonymous with "*l'art pour l'art*" Aestheticism and the Decadence movement, Wilde has been historically associated with pleasure and consumption rather than work. Recent scholarship has sought, however, to create a more nuanced picture of Wilde that considers the lasting effects of his tutelage under John Ruskin at Oxford and his continued associations with Morris. As Marcus Waithe points out, when Ruskin's influence is acknowledged by scholars, it is generally assumed that it represents an early phase in Wilde's thinking that was then supplanted by Paterian aesthetics. Yet, Wilde read *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* at the same time he was attending lectures by Ruskin, and as Waithe and others have argued, Wilde did not approach these two mentors as antithetical. Though Aestheticism came to be understood as a rejection of the ethical and political commitments shared by Ruskin and Morris, that position had yet to be solidified during Wilde's formative years. Rather than abandon Ruskinian ethics in favor of Paterian aesthetics, then, Wilde can be seen to embody intimate connections between the two thinkers throughout his career.[14]

This reevaluation of Wilde's relationship to Ruskinian craftmanship ethics and its accompanying labor politics have prompted a careful examination of the relationship between the respective utopian visions of Wilde and Morris. In *Working Fictions* (2006), Carolyn Lesjak concludes that the two are "fellow travelers" in the British socialist tradition. Despite their

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[14] See Waithe and Riquelme.

"stylistic differences," Lesjak argues, Wilde and Morris "each focus on ways of overcoming the increasing separation of labor from any notion of pleasure" (182). Like Morris, Wilde's critique of labor is aimed at the alienation created by the capitalist means of production. Wilde's utopian vision in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" is thus akin to *News from Nowhere* in its attempt to show how Socialism will end this alienation and reconnect humanity to the "joy of living labor" (200). Marcus Waithe has suggested that Wilde's utopian vision realizes a potential that remains latent in Morris's post-capitalist imaginary. Rather than break with Morrisian socialism, Waithe argues, "Wilde perceives, and exploits, a radical potential in his aesthetic and socialist thought that Morris himself could not endorse without abandoning the Ruskinian ethics to which he was committed" (95). Whereas Lesjak reads Morris and Wilde as sharing a political project, Waithe argues that Wilde's politics might be understood as a radical evolution of Morris's own. In the latter reading, Wilde's ability to be shaped by yet ultimately move beyond Ruskinian ethics gives him an imaginative advantage over the more stalwart Morris.

Appreciating the sincerity of Wilde's post-capitalist vision in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" requires an understanding of the ways in which he was shaped by the labor politics of Ruskin and Morris. Yet, this chapter will insist that Wilde's socialist politics do not form an easy companionship with Morris's, nor do they represent a radical realization of logics latent in Morris's thinking. Rather, Morris and Wilde represent competing philosophies of work and, by extension, competing visions of a post-capitalist future. For Morris, overcoming the alienation of labor and reuniting humanity with its natural enjoyment of useful, productive activity was the goal of Socialist revolution. For Wilde, alienation from labor is a natural state. The goal of Socialism is therefore not to reunite humanity with its natural love of labor but to reduce the burden of that labor by making necessary production as efficient as possible and leaving

humanity almost entirely free to pursue either creative endeavors or what Wilde terms "cultivated leisure."

The next section will take up this essential philosophical and political divergence in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" and Morris's utopian writing, but I first want to briefly consider an early lecture that simultaneously highlights both the significance and the limitations of Ruskin's influence on Wilde. Beginning with its title, Wilde's 1882 lecture "Art and the Handicraftsman" sounds at moments like it could have been written by Ruskin or Morris. The lecture, written for an American audience, is a call to emulation. Wilde encourages this audience to follow the lead of the British Arts and Crafts movement in embracing a marriage of fine art and handicraft. For, he reminds them, "by separating the one from the other, you do ruin to both; you rob the one of all spiritual motive and imaginative joy, you isolate the other from all real technical perfection" (172). Quoting heavily from Ruskin, the lecture discusses architecture and home design as forms of art in which beauty and utility can be seamlessly blended. Confronting the misconception that beauty and utility form a natural dichotomy, Wilde insists that "there is no opposition to beauty except ugliness" and that "utility will always be on the side of the beautiful thing […] because beautiful decoration is always an expression of the use you put to a thing and the value placed on it" (162). Wilde here embraces a central argument for Morris, that the creation of beauty and the production of use value are inseparable. It is a position that Wilde will reverse in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," in which he emphatically reinscribes the division between art and useful work.

If one were to ignore the rest of "Art and the Handicraftsman," this reversal would support readings that Wilde's career represents an abandonment of Ruskinian ethics in favor of "*l'art pour l'art*" Aestheticism. But Wilde's account of the (in)famous Ferry Hinksey road

project signals that a significant reinterpretation of Ruskin's ethics is already underway in this early lecture, and it is the culmination of this ethical reworking that we see in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." In 1874, Wilde was one of the Oxford undergraduates approached by Ruskin to participate in the building of a road between the villages of Upper and Lower Hinksey. For Ruskin, this scheme was motivated by a desire to redirect what he saw as a wasted resource, the youthful energy of Oxford undergraduates expended in pointless sports contests. Ruskin agreed that young men did need physical exertion to counterbalance their intellectual labors, but he thought that redirecting these energies to socially useful work would benefit both the students themselves and the surrounding community. Wilde describes being deeply moved by Ruskin's call to action and the motivating camaraderie of working side-by-side with Ruskin and his fellow students "in the mist and rain and mud of an Oxford winter" (180). Yet, Wilde is blunt in his assessment of the utter failure of this project. After two months, Ruskin leaves for Venice, and the road, "like a bad lecture," Wilde writes, "ended abruptly—in the middle of a swamp" (180).

Wilde did not come away from the Ferry Hinksey project with a belief in the nobility of manual labor. He rather presents Ruskin's scheme as nobly conceived but ultimately misguided. But neither is Wilde dismissive of the road-building project. Rather, he takes from it a crucial lesson: "I felt that if there was enough spirit amongst the young men to go out to such work as road-making for the sake of a noble ideal of life, I could from them create an artistic movement that might change, as it has changed, the face of England" (180). From Ruskin, Wilde learned the power of ethical motivation. He recognized that noble ideals could form the foundation for largescale social transformation by motivating and guiding individuals, like himself and his fellow Oxford undergraduates, in search of purpose and meaning. For Wilde, however, this social transformation must be born in the realm of art, not labor. Wilde advocates for a blending

of creative and manual work but only in the limited sense of the marriage of artistic design and skilled handicraft. From his understanding that artistic production—rather than road-building—was the key to social transformation, Wilde attempts to build an alternative "noble ideal of life." In the "Soul of Man Under Socialism," Wilde will develop this ethical paradigm into a coherent post-capitalist vision.

Just as Wilde's treatment of the Ferry Hinksey project signals the way in which he will shape a divergent politics out of Ruskinian ethics, Morris's imaginative restaging of this same event in *News from Nowhere* offers a poignant microcosm of how Morris evolves these same ethics in shaping his own political vision. Morris's utopian novel employs a familiar device of the genre: he places an outsider—in this case, a political radical from the nineteenth century who awakes to find himself magically transported into the future—in his alternative world to function as a proxy for the reader. During his tour of the future communist society, Morris's outsider, William Guest, comes across a group of men repairing a road. These healthy, attractive young men, "looking much like a boating party at Oxford," are having such a good time in this act of communal labor that Guest's young guide, Dick, is envious: "They are in luck to-day," he says, "it's right down good sport trying to see how much pick-work one can get into an hour […] It is not a mere matter of strength getting on quickly with such work" (83). Not only are these young men enjoying male camaraderie, they are also being admired by a group of female spectators who picnic along the side of the road.

In this utopian reimagining of the Ferry Hinksey project, Morris extends Ruskin's suggestion that competitive sports might be replaced with useful labor by creating a world in which useful labor has become competitive sport. If sports are about the pleasure of physical exertion, the satisfaction of developing skill and technique, the building of communal identity

through teamwork, and the thrill of being admired for one's talent, then why, asks Morris, can't these same motivations be applied to manual labor? What really separates wielding a pickaxe from wielding an oar, besides social perception and the respective conditions under which these activities are generally performed? In a society in which socially useful labor is valued as it should be, Morris suggests, Ruskin's failed experiment forms the imaginative foundation for a radical collapse between the realms of work and leisure. It is exactly this radical erasure of the boundary between work and leisure that Wilde will position himself against in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." In doing so, he offers a powerful critique of Morris's work ethics and their implications, including Morris's obvious fetishization of manliness, and develops an unmistakably Wildean antiwork politics.

Wilde's Utopian Demand

"The Soul of Man Under Socialism" offers one of the most impassioned rebuttals even written to the argument that private property and economic competition are essential for the flourishing of individuality and diversity. Inverting the assumptions of liberalism (and neoliberalism), Wilde argues that it is only with the abolition of private property and the public ownership of production that "we shall have true beautiful, healthy Individualism" (128, 133). Under Socialism, all the human energy currently wasted on the joyless accumulation of personal wealth and the endless, miserable labor required to create these massive personal fortunes will be redirected to the actual enjoyment of life. Released from the single-minded pursuit of wealth and social advantage (for the rich) or survival (for the poor), man will finally be able to "freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him" (133).

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Wilde was certainly not the first to make the argument that capitalism was a wildly inefficient system of production, the termination of which would result in a general liberation of human energy and capacities, but Wilde transforms this observation into what Kathi Weeks has termed a "utopian demand." Somewhere between a manifesto and a literary utopia, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," does not quietly unfold a detailed vision of a socialist future but rather voices a central demand around which any such future must be built: "The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful" (140). Though he does not name names, Wilde clearly articulates this position as a counter to the work ethics of Ruskin and Morris: "I cannot help saying that a great deal of nonsense is being written and talked nowadays about the dignity of manual labour. There is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading" (140). In a direct rebuttal to Morris's utopian vision of pleasurable labor, Wilde argues that "many forms of labour are quite pleasureless activities" and will remain so under any conditions: "Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine" (140).

In Wilde's vision of Socialism, there is a necessary marriage between the bureaucratic machinery of the State and technologies of production. The State becomes, instead of an institution of political governance, "the manufacturer and distributor of necessary commodities," and the goal of this economic State should be to utilize technology to eliminate human labor as much as possible (140). Like Marx, Wilde contends that once the unprecedented productivity gains of the industrial revolution are shared equally, rather than channeled into private wealth, technology will become a means of human liberation. Beyond Marx, however, Wilde evolves this promise of human liberation into a technophilic utopian vision: "*All* unintellectual labour, *all* monotonous, dull labour, *all* labour that deals with dreadful things, and involves unpleasant

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conditions, must be done by machinery" (140, my italics). Wilde imagines machines not only to work in coal mines but to provide sanitation services and to "run messages on wet days" (140). While machinery is doing all the necessary labor, "Humanity will be amusing itself, or enjoying cultivated leisure—which, and not labour, is the aim of man—or making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things, or simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight" (141).

The argument that the most tedious and monotonous work would ideally be done by machine is not a radical antiwork position. Even in Morris's prowork utopia, technology is employed to aid in the completion of monotonous tasks. But Wilde's argument in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" exceeds this familiar position. Wilde's argument here is broadly philosophical and has to do with his conviction that humanity "is made for something better than disturbing dirt." Wilde and Morris share a post-Darwinian humanist belief that the goal of Socialism should be to provide the ideal social conditions for the flourishing of human nature. "It will be a beautiful thing—the true personality of man," writes Wilde, "It will grow naturally and simply, flower-like, or as a tree grows" (134). For Wilde, however, the natural growth of humanity does not require soil but rather demands a sustained mediation between humans and their natural environment. The flourishing of humanity requires not only the abolition of the worst kinds of labor, however these might be defined, but a complete decoupling of humanity and necessity. What cannot be done by machinery must still be performed by "the State," a body obviously made up of individuals but rhetorically transformed into an inorganic entity. For Wilde, the natural flourishing of human nature—expressed through leisure, contemplation, and creative production—requires that the meeting of necessity be defined as unnatural.

Wilde's claim that all necessary work is dehumanizing and should therefore be performed by machines or the mechanism of the State is radical, though it does not differ very dramatically

from Marx's well-known assertion in *Capital V. 3* that the "true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself," can develop only beyond the "realm of necessity" (959).[15] Wilde's refusal of work, however, extends even beyond a refusal of *necessary* labor to a refusal of *useful* labor. Wilde's radical Individualism demands that true human flourishing occur not only beyond the realm of necessity but also beyond the realm of the social. For productive activity to be truly human, it can fulfill neither a material need *nor* another's desire: "An individual who has to make things for the use of others, and with reference to their wants and wishes, does not work with interest, and consequently cannot put into his work what is best in him" (141). For Wilde, the only form of truly human production is Art, and Art can only be produced for the pleasure of the individual artist. Art "is the most intense mode of Individualism the world has ever known" (142). For Wilde, the consumption of art is social—the contemplation of beautiful things being one of the primary activities humans will engage in once they are freed from labor—but its production must be radically individualistic. Here, Paterian aestheticism meets not Ruskinian ethics but Emersonian self-reliance.

In the parlance of contemporary postwork Marxism, Wilde demands full automation. The next section will place Wilde in conversation with this contemporary tradition to elucidate the political and ethical stakes at the heart of his utopian demand. In contrast to readers who have dismissed "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" as flippant or considered Wilde's foray into Socialism a momentary blip on the radar of an amoral aesthete, I will consider the essay in its larger context as part of a radical antiwork tradition and as a powerful articulation of postwork politics well ahead of its time. What I hope to make clear is that an antiwork politics is still a

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[15] The important difference here between Marx and Wilde is that Marx's "realm of necessity" is arguably rather limited, pertaining to the production of necessary material goods, and his "realm of freedom" is defined more by a release of new productive capacities than opportunities for cultivated leisure.

labor politics, one formulated specifically to counter what is frequently referred to as the "productivist ethics" shared by capitalism and most socialist traditions. In calling for a life of cultivated leisure in which everyone becomes an artist, Wilde is not abandoning work ethics but rather formulating his own. The next section will also consider the resonance of Wilde's essay now—when it is being argued that advanced digital technologies are close to making full automation not only possible, but perhaps inevitable. These technologies have already, as Wilde envisioned, eliminated the need for humans to run messages on rainy days (though arguably the same technologies are steadily increasing the number of humans running around delivering every other possible thing on rainy days). While the next section will read Wilde and his fellow postwork visionaries as offering a substantive critical response to the prowork politics outlined in this dissertation, it will also consider how Wilde's essay illuminates possible consequences of separating social necessity and individual freedom that the postwork tradition has yet to adequately address.

Wilde and the Postwork Marxists

If Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* is *The Communist Manifesto* of the Marxist postwork tradition, Kathi Weeks's *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (2011) and Nick Srnicek and Alex William's *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (2015) together form its *Das Kapital.* The latter two texts create the theoretical foundation for a twenty-first century postwork politics, though this foundation itself has deep roots in decades of theoretical and political work in the autonomist Marxist tradition. Additionally, as I discuss in my introduction, this Marxist postwork politics is also in dialogue with a mainstream postwork discourse, represented by NYT

bestsellers like Martin Ford's *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (2015) and contributions from reputable economists like Daniel Susskind's *A World Without Work* (2020). This section will center on the focused but influential work of Weeks and Srineck and Williams because their projects most closely align with Wilde's own. I will turn to Weeks for a discussion of anitwork ethics before turning to Srineck and Williams to explore the implications of the demand for full automation.

     The Problem with Work offers the most thorough discussion to date of the relationship between work ethics and postwork politics. A hallmark of the Marxist postwork tradition is its assertion that "traditional" forms of socialism fail to break with the "productivist ethics" that drive capitalist production, but Weeks is unique in her recognition of the complexity of the work ethics her politics oppose. Weeks helpfully establishes her "postwork ethics" against two divergent philosophies of work that she terms *socialist modernization* and *socialist humanism*. When Marxists position themselves against "traditional" socialism, they are generally referring to what Weeks defines as socialist modernization. Socialist modernization, most associated with the Soviet regime, is centered on "an affirmation of the heroic, world-building capacities of disciplined, proletarian labor" (84). While this ethics upsets the class relations of capitalism, it maintains capitalism's dehumanizing labor conditions and obsession with economic growth. The worker is symbolically valued as part of a mass workforce, but individual happiness and opportunity are sacrificed to an idealization of asceticism and social duty. More importantly to a discussion of Wilde and Morris, Weeks establishes her postwork ethics against socialist humanism, the primary goal of which is the transcendence of capitalist alienation. In this socialist tradition, unalienated labor is established as the utopian ideal and "imagined as the primary means of individual self-realization and self-fulfillment" (86). While socialist humanism

offers a more substantive critique of work under capitalism, Weeks argues, it is hindered by a

nostalgic romanticism of craft production and its preference for the meeting of local, immediate

demand.

The most significant problem with humanist work ethics, however, it that they affirm,

rather than deny, what the postwork Marxist tradition sees as "the fundamental ideological

foundation of contemporary capitalism": the "glorification of work as a prototypically human

endeavor, as the key to both social belonging and individual achievement" (Weeks 109). Though

socialist humanism seeks to radically reshape the human relationship to work, it does not

critically examine the idea that work should be at the center of human life. It is therefore

politically limited because it offers neither a comprehensive critique of capitalist exploitation nor

a sufficiently revolutionary alternative for the future. By contrast, postwork ethics is defined by

an active refusal to value work over other forms of human activity. In Weeks's concise

formulation, the central demand of postwork politics is *less* work rather than *better* work. It

demands a society in which increases in productive capacity, driven by technological advances,

translate into a radical reduction in the amount of time humans spend working. This creation of

more "nonwork time" would then open onto a horizon of endless opportunities, as Bastani puts

it, to "live your best life" (Bastani 186). What Weeks articulates so clearly in *The Problem with

Work* is that the achievement of this postwork vision requires an ethical reconfiguration powerful

enough to penetrate what she sees as a deeply-entrenched false consciousness constructed by the

humanist "metaphysics of labor" and the mythical ontology of "man the producer" (123-4). To

succeed, postwork politics must convince human beings that work need not be the defining

characteristic of their species life.

It is this understanding of the need to develop a penetrating postwork ethics that Wilde shares with Weeks. "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" critiques both the celebration of human labor power at the heart of socialist modernization and socialist humanism's promise of unalienated labor. It demands that the "glorification of work" be replaced by a glorification of creativity, contemplation, and leisure. It is Wilde's commitment to the establishment of a postwork ethics, I would like to suggest, that exposes a central ambiguity running through contemporary postwork Marxism. Postwork Marxism arguably struggles to define what it means by work. At times, it uses "work" and "waged labor" interchangeably, suggesting that what needs to be eliminated is simply paid employment, the connection between individual production and individual survival. But if all postwork Marxists were concerned with was the elimination of waged labor, there would be no need for the ideological critique of other socialist traditions. At other times, it seems to be suggested—though not explicitly articulated—that "work" correlates to Marx's "realm of necessity." As I discuss further below, postwork discourse is intimately connected to visons of "post-scarcity," the idea that a struggle for resources no longer needs to define the human condition. In other moments, postwork writers seem to suggest that "work" is defined as an activity that is always to some degree coerced, as opposed to "nonwork," which is always freely chosen, though what constitutes coercion remains unclear. What postwork Marxists are sure of is that "work" is limiting and oppressive and "nonwork" embodies a realm of infinite possibility.

Though "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" manifests some key ambiguities of its own, Wilde does not suffer from this same hesitancy to define what he opposes. Wilde's demand for full automation is driven by a desire to free the individual from material and social obligations, and he is also clear about what the realm outside of these obligations would look like. In short,

he is clear about what humanity is being freed from and what it has gained the freedom to do. This is embodied in his central utopian demand: "The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful." In Wilde's postwork vision, the "work" that is being eliminated is all work performed to meet social needs or wants. Nonwork time is the realm of true Individualism and Art, in which the unique creative capacities of every individual naturally and beautifully unfold in the absence of external pressure. This is Wilde's radical antiwork ethics. Contemporary postwork Marxism would no doubt balk at the extremity of Wilde's rejection of social obligation, as well as his romantic idealization of Art. Yet, there is a persistent return in postwork Marxism to the promise of the opportunity, so succinctly summarized by Bastani, to "live your best life." It is a politics that relies on the rhetorical elevation of individual freedom. While this discourse often assumes that individual freedom will be channeled back into forms of social life, like political engagement and community involvement, these engagements must be purged of their association with obligation. Further, Bastani's insistence on "luxury" as a key term reflects a broader refusal of what postwork theorists see as the asceticism of other Marxist traditions. While these contemporary Marxists may not be aesthetes, there is certainly a running suggestion that a reduction in work time translates into "opportunities for pleasure and creativity" (Weeks 103). The postwork Marxists echo Wilde's insistence that cultivated leisure is intrinsically more valuable than "disturbing dirt."

Just as Wilde's use of Art (with a capital A) and Individualism (with a capital I) may give the contemporary reader pause, so does his use of "the State" (with a capital S). But once again, the ostensible anachronism of Wilde's Victorian postwork politics points towards an unresolved ambiguity in its contemporary counterpart. Wilde is insistent that his version of socialism is anti-authoritarian. Though "the State" is rhetorically constructed as a monolithic, mechanistic entity,

Wilde does tell us that the State, which will assume all responsibility for useful production, will be "a voluntary association" (139). But this is the only explicit reference to the continuing presence of human labor in Wilde's postwork vision. Though he suggests that the State is made up of humans, when a human functions within this entity, they are subsumed into its machinery and cease to be an individual. This transformation is further reinforced by Wilde's assertation that useful production is equivalent to slavery. The Greeks understanding that "civilization requires slaves" was correct, Wilde maintains: "Unless there are slaves to do the ugly, horrible, uninteresting work, culture and contemplation become almost impossible" (141). We cannot rely on human slavery as ancient Greece did, however, because it is clearly immoral. Therefore, it is on "mechanical slavery" that "the future of the world depends" (141). In equating all necessary labor to slavery, Wilde makes his ethical commitment to full automation clear. Wilde here interestingly avoids the common nineteenth-century problem of using slavery as a rhetorical proxy for all forms of unfreedom without reference to its concrete historical manifestations. As Arendt outlines in *The Human Condition*, ancient Greek society justified the need for slavery on just the grounds Wilde suggests: to labor was to be "enslaved by necessity," and the only way to free oneself from this enslavement was to dominate others and place them between yourself and this realm of necessity. Ancient slavery was not a "device for cheap labor" as it would become later, "but rather the attempt to exclude labor from the condition of man's life" (83-4). The purpose of mechanical slavery, for Wilde, is to permanently banish labor, the realm of unfreedom, from the human condition.

Wilde acknowledges that his vision of full automation is utopian, and this confession prompts one of the most oft-quoted defenses of the utopian literary tradition: "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing it, for it leaves out the one country

in which Humanity is always landing" (141). An increasing number of twenty-first century writers are suggesting that if we have not yet landed on Wilde's Utopia, we can at least see the shore on the horizon. Within contemporary Marxist postwork discourse, the demand for full automation is still classified as a utopian demand, but it is also considered to be grounded—like "scientific" Marxism—in a rational analysis of economic conditions. Postwork writers across the political spectrum argue that research overwhelmingly indicates that current economic trends in automation will not only continue but accelerate. While the effects of automation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were largely limited to specific sectors like manufacturing and agriculture, studies suggest that the digital technologies that define the twenty-first century will significantly impact every sector of the economy. The increasing sophistication of these technologies means that not only are low-wage service jobs in danger of being virtually eliminated but also that professions requiring high-level cognitive and creative labor are in danger.[16]

Postwork Marxists argue that this increasingly widespread vulnerability should be mobilized into an anti-capitalist politics. Srnicek and Williams argue, echoing Wilde, that full automation is the only path to a post-capitalist future that affords both abundance and freedom. A fully-automated economy "would aim to liberate humanity from the drudgery of work while *simultaneously* producing increasing amounts of wealth" (109, italics in original). Rather than fear the effects of automation, then, we should develop policies to encourage and accelerate the widespread replacement of human labor. The demand for a shorter working week should be coupled with the demand for Universal Basic Income (UBI), while investment in developing technologies that eliminate human labor should be increased. Positioning themselves against

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[16] For the best articulation to date of the likely effects of digital technologies on the human workforce, see Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee's *The Second Machine Age*.

traditional leftist demands for full employment, Srnicek and Williams argue that these myopic, work-centric politics must be replaced with "the future-oriented demand for full *un*employment" (123, my italics). Srnicek and Williams acknowledge that labor will never be entirely eliminated, but they challenge the idea that some forms of labor are innately human and cannot, or should not, be replaced by technology. For instance, while care work is often considered to be immune to automation because it requires uniquely human emotional capacities, they point out that advancements in assistive technologies may allow us to automate "some of the highly personal and embarrassing care work that might be better suited to impersonal robots" (114). Like Wilde, Srnicek and Williams present a radical conception of what it might mean to be free from undesirable labor. Full automation has the capacity not only to free us from repetitive, technical work—work we think of as being somehow unhuman to begin with—but also the work that feels closest to our species life. Full automation may free us not simply from boredom and exhaustion but from things significantly more complex, like the embarrassment of forced intimacy or the shame of dependence.

The ethical imperative at the heart of postwork Marxism—to free humanity from necessity and obligation—is reliant, as Srnicek and Williams indicate, on the presence of a post-scarcity economy. Postwork Marxists argue that we no longer need to be defined as a species by the struggle for existence; we already possess the technological capacity to not only meet all our basic needs but also to live in relative luxury. Bastani, predictably, presents the most colorful iteration of this argument. *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* argues that due to key technological advancements—including the digitization of almost everything, the production of better high-yield crop varieties and synthetic meats, the proliferation of renewable energy sources, and, yes, the ability to mine asteroids for minerals scarce on Earth—are leading to

conditions not only of post-scarcity but of "extreme supply." Bastani insists that, under FALC, we could all live like today's billionaires (if we want to) (189). What Bastani terms his "luxury populism" is certainly the extreme end of the post-scarcity argument, but it is an essential component of all postwork politics. The presence of a post-scarcity economy is necessary to both the practical viability of Marxist postwork politics as well as its antiwork ethics. We can break free of the productivist ethics that keep us tied to a life of work only because we no longer need to be so productive. Once we unleash the technological capacities currently being squandered by capitalist competition, there will be very little necessary labor that needs to be performed. The conception of post-scarcity is essential to the argument that we no longer need to define work as a fundamental part of our species identity.

Wilde's conception of the State exposes a significant blind spot in this reliance on post-scarcity. Postwork Marxists do not suggest that full automation is a literal possibility—that *all* work will eventually be automated—but they do argue that moving towards this horizon offers a concrete path forward for leftist politics. In this path forward, however, there is little suggestion of how the massive reorganization of labor that would be required to redirect present productive capacities towards the meeting of human necessity would be accomplished. Even if we do have the technological capacity for everyone to live in relative comfort, how will we accomplish the complete reconfiguration of our global economic infrastructure that mobilizing this capacity will require? This, arguably, is going to take a lot of work. Wilde's shadowy State—a mechanistic entity comprised of humans but not Individuals—looming behind his vision of artistic freedom and contemplation is indicative of a larger tendency for misdirection within postwork politics. In its insistence that we all do less work, this politics has little to say about the human work that needs to be done to secure the future of abundance it promises. In contrast to Wilde, Srnicek and

Williams argue that once we all stop working so much, we might redirect some of this free time into the "self-conscious production of socially useful goods" (183). But this remains an afterthought—one optional activity among many—in a postwork world in which the "imperatives of survival" have been replaced by "desire, abundance and freedom" (177).

Wilde's equation of necessary production with slavery also points to an ethical complication at the core of postwork politics. If the work required to meet material needs is defined as the realm of unfreedom, it creates a hierarchy in which essential work is devalued in favor of elective pursuits. "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" suggests that in combatting what it sees as the hegemony of the work ethic, postwork ethics imposes a counterhegemony that defines all work—however work might be defined—as unfreedom and denies its potential as a source of meaning and identity. Though contemporary postwork Marxists would not rhetorically employ slavery in the same way as Wilde, they nevertheless channel the same Greek philosophical tradition that associates human potential with intellectual and creative activity that can truly flourish only when freed from the restraints of daily necessity and species life. Beyond demanding freedom from necessity and the imperatives of survival, the postwork critique of work ethics suggests that work signifies unfreedom because it is the product of social obligation, rather than individual choice. Again, Wilde's position here—that all useful production is oppressive—represents the radical extension of a logic that underlies the postwork tradition to which he belongs.

If Wilde insists on a radical division between Marx's "realm of freedom" and "realm of necessity," William Morris's utopian demand is the complete collapse of this distinction. In his essays and *News from Nowhere*, Morris develops a work ethics whose primary tenet is that useful production is a necessary precondition for human happiness. Work is the realm of human

flourishing *because* it is the realm of social obligation. The next section will consider how Morris's insistence that useful work be allowed to become a source of pleasure and satisfaction suggests a model of anti-capitalist politics that foregrounds, rather the elides, necessity and survival. In doing so, I argue, it proves a more viable and ethical resource for the shaping of radical politics in the present. I will also consider, however, the way in which Wilde provides a necessary critique of Morris that must be taken seriously if the latter is to become a resource for the twenty-first century.

A Utopian Prowork Politics

This dissertation has highlighted the critical capacities and radical potential of Victorian work ethics, but the work ethics under study so far have remained—to varying degrees— anchored in the capitalist system of production. William Morris might be said to compile all the radical potential we have discussed thus far and craft from this material a vision of life beyond capitalism. If Morris's predecessors suggested that ethical work practices could form the foundation of social and political transformation, Morris attempts to imagine the radically new sociopolitical structures that might emerge from a realization of work's ethical potential.

Like Wilde, Morris was influenced by evolutionary discourse and constructs his ideal society as one that would place the least constraint on the natural development of human capacities. For Wilde, this meant freeing humanity from "enslavement to necessity." By contrast, Morris imagines the ethical meeting of necessity as the most human of actions. While in the postwork Marxist tradition, the realm of necessity is associated with asceticism, Morris argues that necessity and pleasure are intimately related. In "Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil," a lecture

originally given in 1884 that constructs a philosophical foundation for *News from Nowhere*,

Morris proposes that necessary labor is imbued with erotic potential:

> Let us grant, first, that the race of man must either labour or perish. Nature does
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> not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by some sort or degree. Let us
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> see, then, if she does not give us some compensation for this compulsion to
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> labour, since certainly in other matters she takes cares to make the acts necessary
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> to the continuance of life in the individual and the race not only endurable, but
>
> even pleasurable. (287)

Morris's mildly mischievous allusion to "other matters" playfully points to what he will develop

in the essay as a serious philosophical proposition. Morris does not suggest that work and sex are

the same activity but rather that following the logic of nature, pleasure and survival may not be

dichotomous. Assuming a natural potential for the integration of pleasure and labor, Morris sets

to work imaging the conditions in which this merger might be achieved. To carry the analogy a

bit further, Morris's work ethics is based on the understanding that work, like sex, is not

pleasurable under all circumstances. Capitalism produces conditions in which virtually no work

can be pleasurable. "Useful Work versus Useless Toil" outlines the necessary preconditions for

releasing pleasurable work from its captivity under capitalism.

Morris outlines three primary socioeconomic conditions necessary for labor to become

pleasurable: "hope of rest," "hope of product," and "hope of pleasure in the work itself" (288).

Much of the scholarship on Morris has focused on the last of these conditions, but the focus of

this section will be primarily on "hope of product." It is important, however, to first say

something about "hope of rest" and how it relates to the postwork politics. Morris shares with

Wilde (and Marx) the understanding that capitalism is a grossly inefficient system of production

and that, therefore, its supersession would lead to less working hours. Less work, as well as better work, is a precondition for Morris's post-capitalist vision. Morris acknowledges that all labor—no matter how attractive—requires an expenditure of energy and thus necessitates rest. For Morris, however, simply reducing the hours of labor is an inadequate solution: "As long as the work is repulsive it would still be a burden that must be taken up daily, and even so would mar our life, even though the hours of labour were short" (295). The postwork solution to the continuing repulsiveness of labor is full automation. For Morris, the solution is transforming work itself to eradicate its repulsive elements.

For Wilde and the postwork Marxists, radical politics must break with the productivist ethics of capitalism. The ontological conception of "man the producer"—both Arendt's *homo laborans* and *homo faber*—must be discarded, and the collective desire to be productive must no longer dictate the form of our sociopolitical structures. Morris, by contrast, emphasizes the need to oppose capitalism's structural *lack* of real productivity. Demanding the right to be productive is thus the most radical anti-capitalist position one can take. Morris conceptualizes this utopian demand—the inverse of Wilde's in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"—as "hope of product." Morris defines productivity as creating something useful, though his definition of utility is expansive, encompassing not just practical use but also enjoyment and satisfaction. The most hopeless aspect of capitalism, for Morris, is that workers across classes are forced into constant activity that has no social value. The middle classes squander their acquired skills and talents in the pursuit of money and social position, while a whole class of workers is forced into unproductive activity in the service of this "private war for wealth," such as soldiers, domestic servants, clerks, and those engaged in the burgeoning realm of advertising, what Morris calls "the puffery of wares" (291). The working class, the only class engaged in material productivity,

is forced to waste their labor producing "articles of folly and luxury" for the rich and "miserable makeshifts" for the poor (291-2). They are busy producing either goods whose sole purpose is to signify social position in the private war for wealth or goods that are made intentionally inferior (and, at times, actually adulterated) so as to be cheap enough for consumption by the poor. Think, Morris asks his audience, "of the product of England, the workshop of the world, and will you not be bewildered, as I am, at the thought of the mass of things which no sane man could desire, but which our useless toil makes—and sells?" (292).

For Morris, the end of capitalism must mean an end to useless toil—that labor which produces goods for the false demand created by the profit and wage systems. While Wilde's vision calls for freedom *from* the needs and desires of others, Morris demands the freedom *to* consider these needs and desires. The most common misreading of Morris is that his politics represent a nostalgic return to pre-industrial handicraft, but Morris's celebration of handicraft is only the most prominent manifestation of the larger principle outlined here. The merging of art and utility embodied for Morris in skilled craftsmanship signifies a commitment not only to a particular form of production but to the principle of producing goods that meet the unfettered desire of consumers no longer shaped by the imperatives of capitalism. Ruth Kinna has argued that Morris is limited by his prioritization of artistic production, which leads him to equate "all non-artistic tasks" with "forced labor" (509). Yet, Morris is clear that labor does not need to possess an artistic element to be made pleasurable.

The third demand that structures Morris's post-capitalist vision—the promise of "pleasure in the work itself"—is intimately related to the hope of product, because meeting social needs can itself become a source of pleasure. Morris is clear that "all labour, even the commonest, must be made attractive" if a sustainable human happiness is to be achieved (299).

In cases in which the labor itself may have no other appeal, its usefulness alone can imbue it with pleasure: "This element of obvious usefulness is all the more to be counted on in sweetening tasks otherwise irksome, since social morality, the responsibility of man towards the life of man, will, in the new order of things, take the place of theological morality, or the responsibility of man to some abstract idea" (299). This new ethics, which places useful work at the center of social life, is the foundation of Morris's post-capitalist vision. For Morris, the meeting of natural and social obligations does not require individual self-denial. Rather, meeting the needs and desires of others is necessary to the full development of individual capacities and happiness.

Morris is clear, however, that usefulness could not make work pleasant under *any and all* conditions. For useful work to serve as an organizing social principle, the capitalist division of labor must be disrupted. This means that the daily work required to meet collective needs must be conceived as a collective responsibility so that no one spends all day every day at the same employment. This is especially true of the most arduous tasks, which must be shared widely so that the hours taken to complete them are short. This does not mean that every person must do every task but simply that the meeting of material needs must not fall to one class alone. Morris would agree with Wilde that it is impossible to "sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours on a day when the east wind is blowing" with any dignity, much less pleasure ("Soul" 140). While Wilde concludes from this that the sweeping itself is an inhuman activity and must be performed by machines, Morris suggests that it is the eight hours a day which is the problem. To sweep a slushy crossing three hours a week, east wind and all, if it were accompanied with the gratitude of one's community, might not be so bad.

It is also important to note that usefulness is by no means the only pleasure that work affords. It is simply the only one, aside from the pleasure of earned rest, that is essential. In *News*

from Nowhere, Morris proposes a range of available pleasures in the realm of work. There is, of course, the pleasure of creating beautiful objects that accompanies craft work. But there is also, as Morris suggests in the road-building scene and elsewhere, the pleasure of physical exertion and the exercise of manual skill, which can be made even more attractive when accompanied by a pleasurable sociality. There is also the innate pleasure of what Wilde dismisses as "disturbing dirt," a direct and sensuous interaction with one's natural environment. And, as R. Jayne Hildebrand has beautifully elucidated, Morris's utopian vision embraces the pleasurable potential of habit. Challenging the conventional wisdom that repetition is oppressive, Morris highlights the pleasure of the activity so intimately familiar as to become instinctive, which Hildebrand likens to the performance of a skilled musician. The pleasure of habitual activity is what makes room, in Morris's otherwise pastoral utopia, for the existence of something like mass production and mechanized labor. Underlying all these forms of pleasurable work is the insistence on variation, the ability of each individual to pursue multiple employments that allow for the exercise of the full range of human capacities. Any work, if comprising one's sole life employment, becomes oppressive.

At the core of Morris's post-capitalist vision, however, lies an ethics of work structured around "the responsibility of man to the life of man." For Morris, this means connecting every individual to the realm of necessity—to the daily demands of species survival—as well as the lives of others, their individual needs and desires. This is Morris's prowork ethics, which Wilde keenly comprehends and develops his antiwork ethics against. There is much in Morris's utopian vision to warrant Wilde's ethical counter, especially the notable absence of Art, which Wilde sees as the ideal expression of human capacity. Critics of the utopian literary tradition generally maintain that utopian visions are incapable of a self-reflective attention to loss. According to

these critics, utopian visions have little to say about what their own conditions of perfection disallow, or at least make practically impossible. But Morris makes clear that in his post-capitalist vision, the realm of artistic representation has been sacrificed to the aestheticization of production and daily life. In Morris's future, art infuses everything, but it no longer exists in an independent form. Old Hammond, one of Guest's utopian guides, informs him that art "has no name among us now, because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces" (160). Art has become synonymous with "work-pleasure" (160). This transformation of art into work-pleasure is most clearly seen in the production of beautiful objects for daily use, like clothing and architecture, but it also extends to Morris's aestheticized representations of domestic and manual labor.

It is not only the aestheticization of labor that renders art anachronistic, however, but the larger ethical paradigm at the core of Morris's vision. The realm of representation in general—whether it be art, literature, history, or abstract mathematics—has become dramatically devalued in favor of direct interaction with one's natural and social environment. In his travels, Guest encounters an elderly curmudgeon with a love for the literature of previous ages who laments that their society no longer produces "such splendid works of imagination and intellect" (174). His granddaughter offers a quick and vehement rebuttal: "Books, books! Always books, grandfather! When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much?" (175). She points out the window at a moonlight garden and lays her hands on the shoulders of the young lovers, Dick and Clara, declaring that "these are our books" (175). In other scenes, Guest expresses surprise at the amount of attention these citizens of the future give to the mundane details of daily life, as in their "quite exaggerated interest in the weather" (224). When Dick articulates a deeply emotional

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response to the coming autumn, Guest comments on what he clearly feels is an overinvestment in such a "commonplace matter" as the changing seasons. Dick is surprised and perturbed by Guest's comment. Is it not natural, he asks, to "sympathize with the year and its gains and losses? […] I am a part of it all, and feel the pain as well as the pleasure in my own person" (224-5). For Morris, the end of capitalism signals a seamless merger of the individual with their social and natural environment. While there is still room for dissonance and rupture (we see examples of this in the novel), the daily lived experience of most individuals does not require mediation. Morris suggests that in the absence of structural antagonism, the realm of representation is no longer needed to function as a mediator between humanity and its lived experience. Yet, Morris arguably does experience the loss of Art *as* a loss. Foregrounding its absence in his utopian vision, I would argue, is Morris's way of confronting and defending the troubling implications of his ethical commitments.

As we saw in "Art and the Handicraftsman," Wilde was initially sympathetic to Ruskin and Morris's ethics of craftsmanship and the merger of art and utility it represented. Seeing the radical extension of this integration of artistic production and necessary labor in *News from Nowhere* and hearing Morris's confession that Art might be altogether abandoned in favor of "work-pleasure" may likely have prompted the extremity of Wilde's opposing position. What we get in Wilde's utopian rejoinder is an impassioned defense of the realm of representation and the mediation between the individual and their environment that Art performs. Though a rapt attention to collective thriving, to the natural environment, and to the needs and desires of others offers what this dissertation argues is a promising ethical reconfiguration, the need to defend the realm of representation as a space not just of individual expression but of critical analysis remains crucial.

"The Soul of Man Under Socialism" also offers a valuable critique of what critics have noted since *News from Nowhere*'s initial publication is Morris's essentialist representation of gendered spheres of labor and his association of productivity with masculinity. As Ruth Livesey has argued, "the masculine laboring body" became for Morris the primary site for a "rebirth of the arts after the demise of capitalism" (603). While the work-pleasure Morris describes extends beyond masculinized manual labor, a celebration of the masculine laboring body and productive homosociality—as in Morris's rewriting of the Ferry Hinksey scene—forms an essential part of his utopian vision and his prowork politics. Wilde's insistence that manual labor cannot be made pleasurable must be read, in part, as a rejection of this overt privileging of manliness as an aesthetic and ethical ideal. Wilde's alternative—the structural devaluing and eventual elimination of manual labor—may be neither desirable nor realizable, but his antiwork vision nevertheless offers a powerful critique of Morris's exaggerated aestheticization of masculine physical strength. In my reading, locating beauty and pleasure in useful work represents a strong foundation for an ethical anti-capitalist politics, but the vision of what this useful work—and the working bodies that perform it—would look like requires a dramatic break with the gender paradigms Morris found so compatible with his own utopian vision.

The Future of Necessity

In *Utopia, Limited*: *Romanticism and Adjustment* (2015), Anahid Nersessian argues that that Romantic conceptions of limitation and adjustment offer an essential corrective to a utopian tradition defined by excess and uninhibited gratification. Defining "true utopianism" as "the absolute freedom of the individual from any and all constraints," Nersessian argues that utopian demands are too irresponsible to serve as the foundation of a viable politics, particularly in the

age of the Anthropocene (24). In particular, she maintains, "conventional utopias" like *News from Nowhere* are spaces in which "nobody works, or where nobody has to work in order to live" (173-4). These utopian visions represent a "fantasy of autonomous growth" in which human needs are met and exceeded without the trouble of human exertion. "[W]hat is unthinkable in conventional utopia," she writes, "is an ethically responsive and socially restrained relationship to necessity" (175). In Nersessian's reading, utopias are concerned only with consumption and pleasure and therefore cannot serve as ethical models for a sustainable human future.

Nersessian's reading is representative of a common misunderstanding about what the utopian represents. The utopian has never been defined wholly by excess and unrestrained liberty. In fact, the utopian tradition has always struggled with the question of freedom. Precisely because utopian writers must formulate an alternate system of ethics that structures life in their imagined societies, the utopian requires a certain level of uniformity. This is not to say that utopias are always totalitarian, as some critics have suggested, but rather that utopian visions are constitutionally reliant on restraint, and, further, that the nature of this restraint is generally ethical. This is especially true when it comes to reimaging work. Not only has the utopian tradition not ignored work, work has been one of its central preoccupations, beginning at least with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which contains a detailed section on "work-habits." And it is difficult to imagine a careful reading of *News from Nowhere* that would conclude that in Morris's utopia, "nobody works." It is a novel preoccupied with reimagining the human relationship to work in a way that foregrounds exactly what Nersessian claims the utopian tradition cannot imagine: "an ethically responsive and socially restrained relationship to necessity."

If there is a strain of utopian thinking that embodies a "fantasy of autonomous growth," it is the radical postwork tradition, but this tradition is arguably anomalous in the lack of attention it affords to the question of necessity. It is this lack of attention to necessity, as I have argued, that prevents this utopian tradition from formulating an ethical alternative to capitalism. Given that capitalism has failed so spectacularly to provide for either individual or species needs, however, a radical alternative is required. Limitation, while important, is only one part of a much larger project that must think not only *less* but *different*. We cannot simply limit consumption; we must rethink how we consume. In the same respect, we cannot simply limit productivity; we must rethink how we produce. Reformulating the role of work in both our individual lives and our collective life as a species is essential to addressing the largest challenges we currently face, and this will require some utopian thinking.

Conclusion: Prowork Politics in the Twenty-First Century

What might a radical prowork politics look like in the twenty-first century? Throughout this dissertation, I have suggested some ways in which the Victorian discourse of work offers unique insight into twenty-first century concerns. At its close, I would like to take a moment to consider more explicitly the stakes of reviving the Victorian preoccupation with work ethics. What might it look like to formulate a politics that realizes the demand articulated by the authors under discussion here: that work be shaped by collective ethical considerations rather than market mechanisms and profit motive? What if we developed a politics that took seriously the idea that work was the primary means through which individuals impacted their communities, for good or for ill? What if a radical politics reflected the belief that work is the predominant way in which individuals influence the trajectory of our species?

I would like to argue that such a prowork politics is already at work in the twenty-first century, though it has yet to identify itself as such. In this brief closing section, I will consider how two contemporary political projects—the Green New Deal and calls to defund the police—reflect the priorities and concerns of what I am calling prowork politics. In bringing forward the prowork aspect of these essential political projects, I hope to provide a new lens through which to examine what is at stake in these politics, as well as to highlight the potential importance of histories and philosophies of work in formulating a sustainable and equitable radical politics.

The Green New Deal as Prowork Politics

In her 2017 memoir *What Happened*, Hillary Clinton reflects on what was to many—herself included—a surprising defeat to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. An entire chapter is dedicated to a single moment, a single sentence uttered at a Democratic Town

Hall in Ohio. Clinton was discussing her policy to renew ailing economies in regions that had

been historically overdependent on coal production. Clinton briefly alluded to her plan to bring

green energy jobs to previously coal-dependent economies before turning to Representative Tim

Ryan, who was in the audience, and triumphantly posing the following rhetorical question:

"Because we're going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business, right,

Tim?" She immediately followed this statement with an assurance that she would not forget

"those people" who "labored in those mines for generations." But "those people" likely never

heard Clinton's nod to their valuable contributions. Instead, many voters in Coal Country likely

only ever heard that single soundbite, which conservative media played on repeat: "[W]e're

going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business."

Clinton was already struggling with her image as a Wall Street lackey out of touch with

the working classes, but this moment solidified her branding as a callous elite. The resonance of

this gaffe was, in part, due to the opportunistic seizure and deployment of the soundbite by

conservative media. But, as Clinton herself acknowledges, the gaffe was able to produce such a

significant backlash because the Democratic party had long been struggling to effectively

communicate with voters in economically depressed, predominantly white areas. Yet, though

Clinton writes in *What Happened* that she feels "absolutely sick" about her unfortunate choice of

wording, her analysis of the incident focuses more on the ways in which it was "infuriating."

(265). In doing so, she falls back on an easy narrative: that "God-fearing, flag-waving, blue-

collar white America" votes against its own economic interests out of prejudice, fear, and

resentment (265, 274-7).

Clinton's frustration is understandable. At the time of the gaffe, she had already

developed and announced a $30 billion plan to restructure and revive the economies of regions

historically reliant on the coal industry. Trump's competing declaration that he would renew coal production in the United States was, as Clinton points out, both disingenuous and impossible. Support for Trump among white working-class voters in these regions was no doubt driven by his ability to exploit the worst feelings among them and to fuel the irrational fear that there was an alliance forming against them between liberal elites and racialized Others.

Yet, to dismiss Clinton's gaffe, as she does, as a single unfortunate comment caught up in a storm of factors beyond her control is to ignore a larger problem with the rhetoric surrounding the promotion of "green jobs" and "diversified economies," both in her campaign and within the Democratic party more generally. Firstly, while Clinton is frustrated by the inability of Coal Country voters to see themselves as part of a larger, diverse working class with shared interests, her classification of these regions as populated by resentful, "God-fearing, flag-waving" white men is reductionist and serves to reinforce the conservative notion that the interest of "blue-collar" workers stands apart from other working-class interests. Secondly, Clinton notes that coal mining has become an outsized symbol of nostalgia for a time in which "men were men and jobs were jobs" (277). There is a nostalgic pull that keeps these regions emotionally tied to the revival of the coal industry, but this nostalgia is grounded as much in a radical history as a conservative one. Through the frequently bloody struggle of generations of workers (and their families), coal mining went from being one of the least desirable jobs one could imagine—extremely dangerous and poorly-paid—to a solid middle-class occupation. In a time when support for unions has declined across the country, the coal industry stands a powerful symbol of what an organized working-class consciousness can accomplish.

Clinton's flippant reference to putting coal miners out of work, while certainly taken out of context, did reflect a larger belief that regions historically reliant on coal production need to

be saved from themselves. The underlying narrative goes something like this: for their own good, we must drag these suffering, backward regions into the twenty-first century, even if they resent us and refuse to cooperate. In this narrative, these regions become a problem to be solved, areas in need of complete transformation. The new green economy, it is suggested, will look nothing like the old days, when "jobs were jobs." These regions must let go of their nostalgia for the blue-collar, union job that one kept for life and get with the postindustrial program of flexibility and entrepreneurship.

The Green New Deal, legislation introduced to the House of Representatives in 2019 by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, offers an important correction to at least a decade of Democratic party rhetoric suggesting that "blue-collar" workers and organized labor have little to no role to play in addressing the climate crisis. Rather than frame previously coal-dependent regions as a problem to be solved against their will, the Green New Deal instead positions these communities as a resource. With its revival of the idea of "public works," the Green New Deal attempts to mobilize feelings of national solidarity that fueled the popularity of the original New Deal programs in the 1930s. Workers are assigned a starring role in the necessary transformation of industries and infrastructure that addressing climate change with any seriousness will require. Beyond that, the legislation requires that the green jobs created be "good," which, if left unpacked, would be problematic. But the legislation goes on to specify that these jobs be "high-quality union jobs that pay prevailing wages, hires local workers, offers training and advancement opportunities, and guarantees wage and benefit parity for workers affected by the transition" (4.G) and that they provide "a family-sustaining wage, adequate family and medical leave, paid vacations, and retirement security" (4.H). In short, it revives what is for many the

golden standard of a "good job," with the insistence that these good jobs be made available to everyone.

The Green New Deal has been labeled socialist propaganda by conservative politicians and dismissed as an unrealizable dream by many establishment Democrats. Yet, it is a mistake to assume that this legislation is dead on arrival among the "God-fearing, flag-waving" set. As recent articles by *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* have shown, there is interest, and even support, in previously coal-dependent regions for the Green New Deal.[17] As Terry Steele, a West Virginian coal miner, told *The Guardian*'s Michael Sainato, nostalgia for the "good old days" is more about the loss of economic security than conservative values. What people in his region want, he explains, is "not having to work three jobs to make what you used to be able to make with one." If the Green New Deal can really provide this, he suggests, it will find support.

There is, of course, opposition to the "socialist" politics of the Green New Deal in these regions as well as deep-seated skepticism about the realities of climate change. The fact that the legislation was introduced by a woman of color who has been consistently demonized by President Trump as "un-American" connects the legislation to the mobilization of racism and sexism on which the Trump administration has so heavily relied. But the unique thing about the Green New Deal is that it is radically anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-classist legislation that, I would argue, has a solid chance of gaining support among socially conservative voters. And this is too valuable an opportunity to let pass.

The Green New Deal has the potential to garner widespread support if Democratic policy makers can unify behind its prowork politics. The message of the original New Deal was a broadly popular one: we are a nation of workers, there is work to be done, and it is incumbent on

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[17] See Griswold and Sainato.

the government to connect the workers with the work. Behind this simple messaging was, of course, a complex web of bureaucracy and political machinations. But the New Deal programs did get work done, work of astonishing scope and variety. In tapping into this labor history and its mobilization of a collective work ethic, the Green New Deal frames climate change action in a language that does not alienate those who are most skeptical about the need to address the climate crisis. If these prowork politics were simply rhetorical cover, they would not be worth fighting for, but there is a core truth at the heart of the Green New Deal that the Democratic party would do well to remember: addressing climate change involves massive alterations of our material infrastructure, and this will involve a lot of "blue-collar" work. The creation of green jobs should not be conceived as a project to "save" depressed regions. Rather, it would be much better understood as a project of realizing underutilized human potential.

Defunding the Police as Prowork Politics

The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020 sparked a series of protests that are ongoing as I write. These protests share similarities with several recent protests responding to the systemic racialized violence of the United States police system, but in their scope, intensity, and duration, these demonstrations feel more like the organized movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These protests represent a broad range of positions and concerns, but a central demand has come to the fore: Defund the Police. Calls to defund the police have been equated with calls for total anarchy and have been met with a counterdemand, from President Trump and other conservative politicians, to restore "law and order." More moderate opposition, as from Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, has

acknowledged the systemic racism of policing but has resisted calls to defund, instead insisting that police forces receive *more* funding for training and community outreach.

Opposition to defunding has relied largely on the conception of defunding as a negative action, as a retraction of resources that would leave a vacuum in its place. Yet, the call to defund the police represents much more than a simple removal of funding. It means, rather, a radical reallocation of public funding away from militarized policing and incarceration towards education, job placement, affordable housing, and health services. As long-time racial justice and prison abolition advocate Angela Davis explained in a recent interview, defunding is "not primarily a negative strategy. It's not primarily about dismantling, getting rid of, but it's about reenvisioning." Defunding the police and prison abolition initiate a process of "rethinking the kind of future we want." An essential part of this reenvisioning, I want to insist, involves the kind of radical reimagining of work that this dissertation calls for.

Because defunding the police, like the Green New Deal, involves the deliberate creation of a workforce in response not to the demands of the market or to the interests of those in power but rather to collective ethical imperatives. Defunding means less police, but it also means more teachers, social workers, city planners, and health care professionals. As advocates of defunding often point out, police are currently required to fill vacuums left by the absence of funding for other community services. There are schools in the United States who have police patrolling the halls but not a single nurse or counsellor. Police are the default responders to 911 calls they are in no way qualified to handle, like those involving mental health crises and substance abuse. Some cities have already begun responding to misalignments in the local workforce by creating alternative emergency response programs that, when appropriate, send health care professionals and crisis management specialists, rather than armed police. A radical movement away from

incarceration and violence towards collective responsibility and care will involve a massive proliferation of such programs. Advocates have already begun to imagine the possible scope of this workforce realignment. In a recent article, Philip V. McHarris and Thenjiwe McHarris ask us to imagine a world in which, when someone calls 911 to complain about a homeless person sleeping in their neighborhood, this individual is not arrested for vagrancy. Instead, an emergency social worker is deployed to get them into housing.

The language of "defunding" signals an important reality: in a capitalist society, even the most radical outcomes are reliant on the movement of money. But for the radical potential of defunding to be realized, it will be essential to remain mindful of the fact that we are not talking about an abstract movement of "resources." We are talking about actively changing the kind of daily work that gets done in our communities. We are talking about radically reconfiguring the workforce to reflect our values and priorities. This will require not only a movement of funds but also a movement of workers. This will require getting qualified workers where they are most needed, properly compensating the work we collectively determine is essential, and, in the long term, educating and training more of the workers our communities most need. It will require a persistent insistence that, against all historical precedent, the shape of the workforce be intentionally and democratically determined.

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