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„The Right to be Lazy: Refusal of Work as a Political Strategy in the 21st Century“

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Bc. Eliška Kubicová

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# 1 Introduction

Work is a topic that has been at the center of public debate in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic, by showing what is possible in terms of flexible working arrangements and by highlighting which types of jobs are truly indispensable for the functioning of society, has provided many new impulses for thinking about work and its place in society. As a result, many people all over the world are demanding more from their jobs and their employers, as well as reevaluating their relationship with work more generally.

Work-life balance has been one key aspect of the debate. The option of remote working, home office, and flexible working time is now a must-have for many. Discussions about introducing a four-day working week and reducing overall working hours, already quite active in the years leading up to the pandemic, are more lively and more visible than ever (Kropp and McRae 2022, 233; Schor 2022). In a phenomenon referred to as the Great Resignation, record numbers of people have left their jobs in the past two years, leaving employers in many industries across Europe and the US struggling to find employees (Matthes 2022; Winck and Hoff 2022). The so-called "quiet quitting" is another phenomenon that demonstrates a change of attitude towards work: the term describes a situation where employees *"show up to work with the purpose of doing no more than what's required to stay employed"* (Samuel 2022).

Does this mean that a fundamental change in how we view work and its place in our lives and societies is underway? Are we perhaps heading towards a future without work? And if so, what does it mean for democratic politics?

From Paul Lafargue's 1883 pamphlet *The Right To Be Lazy* to the much discussed 2015 book *Inventing the Future. Postcapitalism and a World without Work* by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, the idea of eliminating work altogether – as opposed to merely improving working conditions or overcoming the alienated nature of work under capitalism – has long been popular among certain strands of the left. Perhaps the most theoretically engaging version of this line of thinking is the one developed by the operaist movement in the 1960s and 1970s in Italy, for whom refusal of work is a central part of the political strategy of the working class. The argument can be summed up as follows. Firstly, since capitalism rests on the antagonistic relationship between work and capital, refusing to work is the only action that can truly challenge it (Tronti 2019, 273). In other words: the exploitation of labor by capital is the essence of capitalism; therefore, it is only by challenging this process that the working class

can hope to free itself. Anything else is bound to fail and even ultimately strengthen the rule of capital, due to its almost unlimited capacity to adapt to new realities. Secondly, refusal of work has positive content: it is a measure of self-valorization, it can free up the invention of the working class, leading to a process of reinventing society entirely (Negri 2005, 272). Refusal of work is an outward manifestation of a newly gained confidence of the working class, which has become conscious of its power and refuses to play by the capital's rules, working instead to create a society where labor is not exploited but serves the reproduction of the working class, taking place on its own terms. Refusal of work, therefore, is dialectical in nature: it is destructive and constructive at the same time (ibid, 270).

There is one key difference with the current situation, however. For the operaists, refusal of work – despite often taking the form of individual activity, such as absenteeism – was always conceived as a form of collective action by the working class. In our post-Fordist and (post-) neoliberal era of precarious jobs, unclear class structure, and social atomization, refusal to work (or the demand to work less) seems only conceivable as an individual solution, even a form of escapism, with no political meaning attached to it. What is more, much of the debate on reducing working hours is driven by the argument that it makes workers more productive or prevents burnout (Chainey 2019; Schor 2022). This is a phenomenon described by operaist thinkers: capitalism uses any challenges against its power productively, to strengthen itself (Pieper 2013, 116). Meanwhile, many progressive writers have subscribed to some form of technicist utopia and see the reduction of working hours as a purely technical problem, assuming that automatization and/or digitalization will automatically lead to more leisure time for everyone – despite the very clear evidence to the contrary.[1] Is there any chance, then, of reclaiming the demand for shorter working hours as a tool of political struggle against capital?

It is in this context that I ask the following question: How can refusal of work, as conceptualized by operaism in the 1960s and 1970s, be used as a political strategy aimed at overcoming capitalism in the 21st century?

As discussed above, refusal of work as a working-class strategy envisaged by operaism has two aspects which are equally important, and which cannot be separated from each other. Firstly, it attacks the capitalist system at its weakest point (or to be more precise, at the only

[1] Average working hours have not been reduced in the past hundred years, despite the fact that productivity has risen substantially (see for example Autor and Salomons 2017).

point where it can be effectively fought). Secondly, it is a manifestation of working-class self-valorization, i.e., the beginning of a transformation towards a new social order, one that is not based on exploitation. A 21st century version of the strategy, therefore, must address both of these aspects, and possibly include new ones, reflecting the changes in the nature of capital and society that have since transpired.

In recent years, two distinct, if related, lines of thinking have developed from the original operaist conception of refusal of work. The first one comes from post-operaism[2]. The central theme for these authors is the search for a revolutionary subject in the post-Fordist era of immaterial labor and social atomization. With so many divisions within the working class, with some groups (seemingly) profiting from the capitalist system or at least being spared direct exploitation, how to build the unity that is necessary for a successful revolution? A key concept the authors work with in this context is that of the "social factory" or the "socialized worker" – terms which help show how capitalism and the relations it brings with it have spilled out of the factory and colonized other spaces and other parts of human life, including the sphere of reproduction, which was traditionally seen as belonging to the realm of private life, family, kinship, and intimate relationships. This means that no one is living outside capitalist relations – and that in turn means everyone is potentially a member of the revolutionary subject. In this context, refusal of work is seen as something that can bring together various groups which will together form the new "proletariat" (Pizzolato 2017, 460).

The second strand is represented by feminist theorists who see refusal of work as a starting point from which to rethink our society's relationship to work in general. Kathi Weeks builds on the post-operaist arguments according to which the differentiation between various types or modes of labor has essentially become meaningless. In the era of immaterial labor, where even things such as our emotions, creativity, or personality traits can be sold to capital as labor-power, the separation between work and private life is all but impossible for many. In a similar vein, the advent of the "social factory" means that the differentiation between directly productive labor, indirectly productive labor, and reproductive labor has become untenable. For these reasons, Weeks suggests abandoning the "ideology" of work and decoupling work

[2] As capitalism moved from the Fordist model of industrial labor to post-Fordism and immaterial labor, operaism lost its key point of reference, the "mass worker". This is why, from the 1980s on, it is generally referred to as post-operaism. However, Negri (2018) rejects the "post" label, arguing that the core ideas remain unchanged, the theory has merely been adapted as its principles were applied to a new reality.

from payment, making a case for a basic income (Weeks 2011). In a slightly different approach, which nevertheless builds on a similar analysis of the current situation, Silvia Federici's writings on the commons allow to formulate a strategy of (re)creating spaces of social life outside capitalist relations as a form of prefigurative practice (Mudu 2019).

For reasons of scope, I focus on no more than two theorists for each of the lines of thinking I am exploring in this thesis, choosing ones whom I consider to best exemplify the arguments I am following. Other writers within the broader post-operaist tradition, notably Maurizio Lazzarato, have written on the concept of refusal of work (Lazzarato 2014); however, his argumentation is different to the one I choose to follow here. Similarly, other feminist authors have written on topics related to work. In particular, social reproduction and reproductive labor have been much discussed in recent years. I choose to focus on Weeks and Federici because of the continuity with operaism, which both cite as a significant influence on their thinking.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, I reconstruct the concept of refusal of work as it was originally formulated by the operaists in the 1960s and 1970s, specifically, in Mario Tronti's *Workers and capital* (2019) and Antonio Negri's *Domination and Sabotage: On the Marxist Method of Social Transformation* (Negri 2005). I will then explore each of the two abovementioned lines of argument in depth. Chapter two is devoted to post-operaism and its conception of the refusal of work as a working-class strategy, with Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2001) being the key reference. In chapter three I explore feminist approaches. Specifically, I refer to *The Problem with Work* by Kathi Weeks (2011) as well as Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) and *Revolution at Point Zero* (2012). Again, the key aim of the chapter will be to explore the authors' approach to work and its refusal, and the role that refusal of work can play in a working-class liberation strategy. In chapter four I revisit the key findings of the previous three chapters, comparing the three lines of thinking and analyzing all relevant aspects of the concept of refusal of work that they present. Bringing all this together, I then attempt to outline a political strategy for the 21st century based on the concept of refusal of work.

# 2 The origin of the strategy of refusal in operaism

## 2.1 Historical context

Operaism was born in Italy in the 1960s, in a specific historical context, with many different factors coming together to influence and shape the nascent movement. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, leftist intellectuals worldwide were coming to terms with the events of 1956, the bloody suppression of the uprising in Hungary and the de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union (Pizzolato 2017, 453). This meant above all questioning the state-centric model of socialism hitherto advocated by the established socialist and communist parties and looking for alternative approaches. The trade unions have become a target of criticism as well: many on the left now saw them as out of touch with the reality on the factory floor at best, or even as *"sympathetic to a Fordist "plan" to defuse the class struggle by offering welfare benefits to workers"* (Pizzolato 2011, 5). One significant voice against the established "Old Left" and for a direct workers' struggle at the point of production was the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, founded in 1949 by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort (ibid, 12). The operaists were another group espousing similar ideas and principles.

Two more aspects, specific to the situation in Italy, played a significant role in the emergence of operaism. The first one is the character of the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano; the Italian communist party) and the political situation in the country more generally. Given that the PCI had been part of the government in the years directly after the second world war and even helped draft the Constitution (Hilwig 2008, 249), it was in essence a part of the establishment – or at least could be perceived as such by the more radical left currents. The representatives of the "Old Left" in turn distrusted the radicals, especially the student movement of the late 1960s (ibid). Moreover, the PCI had adopted a strategy which involved focusing strictly on the political arena, i.e., *"seizing control of the political levers in Rome"* (Pizzolato 2011, 14), rather than engaging in struggles in the factory. This was due to the influence of a specific reading of Gramsci: Gramsci's theory of the relative autonomy of the political, along with related concepts such as the "war of position", had led the mainstream of the PCI down the path of reformism, even a "historic compromise" with the Christian Democrats (Lotringer 2005, 3). In the eyes of the operaists, this "reformist turn" amounted to a betrayal of the working class.

The second aspect crucial for the understanding of the situation in Italy is the demographic change within the industrial working class, caused by mass migration from the South to the

industrial North (Lotringer 2005, 2). These newcomers were largely unskilled workers, unattached to the established working-class organizations, while at the same time having an intuitive understanding of the class struggle (Pizzolato 2011, 15). The "Old Left" – the PCI and the trade unions – was unable to recognize this trend, much less reflect it in its strategy and tactics. For the operaists, on the other hand, the study of the "class composition", i.e., a sociological study of the working class, was a central part of socialist strategy. This research ultimately gave rise to the concept of the "mass worker", which became a central point of reference in operaist theory (see below).

The student movement of the late 1960s played a significant role in the development of operaism as well. As in the case of France, the Italian students attempted to forge an alliance with the workers' movement, though with limited success (Hilwig 2008). One of the key obstacles to a successful collaboration was the resistance of the existing working-class institutions (the PCI and the trade unions). The PCI was in many ways part of the "establishment" and was therefore wary of the anti-establishment drive of the student movement. In general, the institutions of the "Old Left" did not want to have their position as spokespersons for the labor movement challenged (ibid, 249). This led the students to bypass the existing institutions and reach out to workers directly, an initiative that found a certain amount of success particularly among the southern immigrants, who were unattached to the "traditional" working-class organizations (Pizzolato 2011, 24). This alliance between the students and the more radical currents within the working class gave rise to organizations such as *Lotta continua* and *Potere operaio*, who became the standard bearers of the operaist movement (ibid, 21).

The late 1960s and early 1970s were the high point of working-class struggle in Italy. This development was due to the combined influence of the radical student movement, which *"challenged the unions to return to their broader mission"* (Hilwig 2008, 255) and the demographic changes within the working class, with the arrival of new immigrants from the South, who brought with them a new militancy and a skepticism of the established labor movement organizations (ibid). While these radicals infused the Italian labor movement with new energy, the official trade unions remained in control and it was they who led the series of successful strikes known as the *Autunno Caldo* (Hot Autumn) of 1969, a key turning point (ibid).

These intense struggles bore their fruit above all in the passing in 1971 of the *Statuto dei lavoratori*, a major labor reform guaranteeing a significant level of protection to workers (Pizzolato 2017, 451). The *Statuto "represented a major victory for the labour movement but it was eventually instrumental in stifling strident militancy on the shop floor"* (ibid). The radical autonomous groups such as *Lotta continua* and *Potere operaio* remained active even after the passing of the *Statuto*, pushing for ever more concessions, but their influence was slowly diminishing. One of the effects of the *Statuto* was the strengthening of the official trade unions and their integration into the establishment; workers were encouraged to voice their grievances through "official" channels, rather than open struggles directly in the factories (ibid).

After 1973, several factors converged to render operaism and the movement it had spawned increasingly irrelevant. The intensity of the industrial conflict coupled with the economic crisis moved many of the big manufacturing companies first to use restructuring programs to "tame" the workers' movement by breaking up the most militant groups (Pizzolato 2017, 452). Later, production was given up altogether in many locations: the process of deindustrialization began, with outsourcing and relocation of production outside of "core" countries and regions (Pizzolato 2011, 30). The autonomist movement responded by expanding the struggle outside the factory and the narrowly defined working class of the previous years, a move centered around the concept of the "social factory"[3] (Pizzolato 2017, 453). However, by the late 1970s it was clear that these ideas did not resonate with the workers, most of whom were satisfied with what the "official" working-class institutions had achieved. Ironically, the autonomist movement had become something akin to a Leninist vanguard party, disconnected from the mass of the working class – something they themselves criticized in the organizations of the "Old Left" (ibid, 462).

## 2.2 Key terms and ideas

### *2.2.1 The working-class point of view*

Operaism departed from the then mainstream interpretations of Marxism in several key points, three of which are especially relevant here. The first is the idea – or methodological principle – of adopting the "working-class point of view". This has two aspects, a theoretical and a

[3] This move is generally seen as marking the shift from operaism to post-operaism. I deal with this in more detail in the following chapters.

political (or strategic) one, which are connected and both equally central to the overall conception.

On the theoretical level, adopting the working-class point of view means above all recognizing that it is the working class and its continuous struggle against capital that is the main motive force behind the development of capitalism. The core idea was expressed by Negri as follows:

> *"There is only one way that I can read the history of capital – as the history of a continuity of operations of reordering that capital and its state have set in motion in order to counter a continuous rupture, a permanent provocation toward separation that the real movement of the proletariat brings about." (Negri 2005, 238)*

Similarly, Tronti describes the political history of capital as *"the* history of the capitalist class's successive attempts to emancipate itself from the working class, *through the medium of the various forms of capital's political domination over the working class,"* (Tronti 2019, 246).

In other words: the history of capitalism is the history of capital's reactions to working-class struggle. This goes directly against earlier Marxist theories which assumed that any capitalist development can be traced back to forces found within capital itself. Human history may well be the history of class struggles, to paraphrase *The Communist Manifesto*, but it has been the bourgeoisie who had the upper hand in the development of capitalism. In contrast, the operaists build on Marx's labor theory of value to show that, just like labor-power is the only possible source of new value, the working class is the only possible source of new impulses for the development of capital: *"labour can reduce everything to itself and thus render everything alive, because the class movement that expresses it has a univocal antagonistic direction,"* (Tronti 2019, 226).

The strategic or political implication of this thesis is obvious: it accords agency to the working class, even attributes power over capital to it, since it maintains that it is capital that depends on labor, not the other way round. The theoretical implication is to reveal two central contradictions within capitalism. Firstly, capital needs the working class, not only as a source of labor-power, but it needs it *as a class enemy: "The working-class struggle had thus imposed capital's own interests upon it; that is, capital had imposed its own interest on itself via the mediation of the working-class struggle,"* (ibid, 208). In other words, capital needs an

antagonistic class to "save it from itself" by imposing demands on it; this class thus also has the power to destroy capitalism.[4]

Secondly, the working class needs to destroy capitalism, but it is itself part of capital, since it provides the labor-power which fuels the production process. It needs to destroy "society", since in late capitalism, capital and society have become one and the same, but it is itself part of "society". I will expand on this in the following section. The relevant point here is that it is the working-class point of view that provides a way out of this apparent conundrum. From a capitalist point of view, the class struggle is an – unwelcome but inevitable – part or consequence of the production process (ibid, 203). For this reason, it is possible to make it appear as something that is contingent and in principle possible to eliminate. Indeed, this is the ideological move undertaken by capital when it substitutes its own interest for the "general interest" of society. If we adopt a working-class point of view, however, things present themselves the other way round: the production process is but a moment of the class struggle; the class struggle precedes capitalist production both logically and historically (ibid). This not only shows that the class struggle is inevitable under capitalism and that there is no such thing as a "general interest"; it also reveals the production process to be the key terrain on which to attack the capitalist system.

In terms of working-class strategy, the fact that capitalist development is a series of reactions to working-class struggle, and, more importantly, that capitalism in fact needs the working class to perform this function, raises the question of what can be done that would truly challenge the system. Negri uses the term "destructuring" to describe such a process, as opposed to "restructuring", which essentially amounts to reforming the system in order to preserve it (see Negri 2005). For Negri, the solution lies in what he calls self-valorization of the working class, which is the ultimate form of working-class unilateralism: through it, the working class carves out a space for itself outside of capitalist relations and eventually imposes its own values on the whole of society. For Tronti, the working-class point of view is useful above all as a lens which allows us to see the reality of the capitalist relations in a different light, not only in order to build a strategy upon this finding, but also because knowledge itself

[4] This, according to Tronti, is the meaning of Marx's famous dictum that the bourgeoisie produces its own gravediggers.

is a terrain of struggle, along with production: *"big industry and its science are not the prize for whoever wins the class struggle. They are the battlefield itself,"* (Tronti 2019, xviii).

### 2.2.2 Socialization

The second key concept that operaism puts forward is that of "socialization" (of capital and labor). Put simply, socialization describes a process wherein capitalist relations "colonize" ever more areas and aspects of human society, eventually reaching a point where all of society is nothing more than a moment of the production process, i.e., society becomes a *"means for the ends for capitalist production"* (Pizzolato 2017, 456) Closely connected to it is the concept of the "social factory", which became especially influential in the later years of operaism and in the shift towards post-operaism. For Tronti, the term "factory" itself does not refer to a physical space or even a type of organization of production but describes a specific social relation. The concept of the "social factory" refers to a phenomenon wherein this social relation leaves the confines of the production process in the usual (narrow) sense and becomes the organizing principle of society in general: *"[capitalist development] tends to subordinate every political interaction to the social relation, every social relation to the production relation, every production relation to the relation of the factory,"* (Tronti 2019, 29).

The process of socialization concerns both labor and capital but has different implications for each. For the working class, socialization essentially entails a transformation of a group of individuals into a class. Workers are hired as individuals, but in the production process they are organized by capital so as to cooperate with each other; this way, capital can exploit not only the surplus-value produced by workers-as-individuals, but also the surplus-value that is generated by their cooperation, i.e., by the social relation. *"In the passage from individual labour-power to social labour-power, from the worker to the social worker, labour transfers into capital, becomes a social productive power for capital,"* (ibid, 133). This move represents a qualitative leap in the development of capitalist relations since it allows capital to harness the power of "the social" itself. On the other hand, it places the capitalist system in danger of being overthrown, since capitalist production henceforth requires that the working class be continually reproduced, not just as a sum of individual workers, but also *as a class,* i.e., in antagonism to capital: *"the individual reproduction of the single worker is no longer sufficient: a social reproduction of the collective worker becomes necessary,"* (ibid, 54). Capital continues to try to bring this process under its control in order to minimize the danger (the

integration of working-class organizations into the capital-run state is part of this strategy), but it can never be fully eliminated (ibid, 219).

For capital, the process of socialization entails the extension of the social relations of production into other areas of society, eventually encompassing all and reducing society or "the social" itself to a part of the production process*: "at the highest level of capitalist development, […] the whole of society becomes an articulation of production, the whole society lives in function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive dominion over the whole society,"* (ibid, 26). In other words, there is nothing outside capitalist relations anymore, even things such as intimate human relationships ultimately serve capitalist production.[5] This in turn has two consequences, both of which are highly relevant for a working-class strategy. Firstly, *"the specific traits of the factory are lost amid the generic traits of society,"* (ibid, 27). That means capitalist relations appear to be part of the natural order of society; it is no longer possible to identify them as belonging to a specific economic system, which makes it that much more difficult to resist them. Secondly, capital becomes identified with society; its interest with the "general interest": *"In the social relation of production, society's mouthpiece is no longer the working class, but capital directly. The general* social *interest is left entirely in the hands of capital. Nothing is left to the workers other than their* partial *class interest,"* (ibid, 56). For this reason, capitalist relations cannot be resisted by appealing to the "general interest", as – according to Tronti – reformism does: any such attempt only results in strengthening capital.

The process of socialization, therefore, concerns capital and labor both. It cannot be otherwise, since they are antagonistic classes, which means they can only be conceived together, and therefore develop and evolve together as well. However, while in the case of capital socialization results in the universalization of its particular interest, which eventually becomes the interest of society as a whole, in the case of labor it serves to strengthen the class character of the working class, i.e., the particular nature of its interest. In terms of political strategy, this latter moment is key: it is precisely because the universal (society, general interest) has been "occupied" by capital that the unilateral pursuit of working-class self-interest offers the only possible way to overthrow the system.

[5] This became a key point in the theoretical work of Silvia Federici and other Marxist feminist authors. I deal with it in more detail in chapter three.

### 2.2.3 The mass worker

The third and final innovation brought into the wider Marxist tradition by operaism is the concept of the "mass worker". While this idea played a central role when operaism first emerged in the 1960s, it is arguably the one concept which did not age particularly well – it was gradually abandoned in the 1970s and replaced by the "socialized worker" (Pizzolato 2017, 456). The origin of the concept goes back to the "Workers Inquiries" which the early operaists conducted in factories: these were essentially sociological studies aimed at understanding the demographic makeup of the working class as well as observing the *"actual political subjectivity as it emerged within the factory,"* (ibid, 455). The "mass worker" was *"young, unskilled, often an immigrant southerner, and working on the assembly line"* (ibid, 454). This worker was the fitting political subject for operaism, because he was central to capitalist production while being instinctively opposed to the capitalist system, but unattached to the institutions of the "Old Left".

On the theoretical level, what makes the emergence of the "mass worker" possible is a certain level of development of capitalism. According to Tronti, as capitalism evolves, the labor performed by the worker becomes increasingly less like a craft or a profession (the kind of labor typical of precapitalist production) and more abstract, i.e., more "generic": there is no longer any necessary connection between the worker and the "content" of their labor, the labor can – at least in theory – be performed by anyone (Tronti 2019, 58). At the same time, this development brings with it (or at least makes possible) the emergence of a certain kind of political subjectivity: *"The single worker must become* indifferent *to their own labour so that the working class can come to* hate *it. Within the class, only the 'alienated' worker is truly revolutionary,"* (ibid, 59). In other words: late capitalism, as understood in Tronti's time, brings with it the "mass worker", which is nothing but the ultimate form of alienation.

The concept of the "mass worker" has important implications for political strategy. Firstly, the emergence of this phenomenon is a consequence of changes within the capitalist system. Specifically, Tronti links it to Taylorism, the kind of scientific labor organization which seeks to maximize efficiency by analyzing and subsequently redesigning the work process down to the smallest detail, including workers' psychology.

> *"While a man retains individuality, he is more or less proof against class feeling. He is self-conscious… But when his individuality is scientifically measured off in aliquot parts and each part is threatened with substitution by identical parts of other men, then*

*this sense of superiority is gone. […] [The workers] are then ripe to recognize their solidarity, and to agree not to compete," (John Commons: Labor and Administration. Quoted in Tronti 2019, 315)*

Just as capitalism is able to use pressure from the working class to strengthen itself, the working class can use pressure from capital – its attempts at intensifying exploitation or increasing level of control – for its own ends. The success of such an endeavor, however, is by no means guaranteed: it requires political organization that is fit for this purpose (ibid).

Secondly, the "massification" of the working class – the process through which the working class becomes more numerous, including an ever-bigger proportion of the population, while simultaneously becoming internally more homogenous – means that there is a risk of it losing its specifically working-class character, becoming dissolved in the wider and vaguer political subject of "the people" (ibid, 323). This is a problem, since it is its specifically working-class character, i.e., its role in the production process, that gives it its political power (ibid, 324). The key question Tronti asks in his 1970 postscript is therefore: How to broaden the concept of the working class enough to include everyone fighting capitalism, but not so much as to make the term useless? (ibid, 325).

## 2.3 Refusal of work as a strategy

How and why does refusal of work function as a political strategy? This question should be answered in the following section. I first explore the relationship between capital and labor, as conceptualized by Tronti, building on his reading of Marx, before moving to Negri's concept of working-class (or proletarian) self-valorization. Finally, I discuss the wider political implications, focusing in particular on the relationship between the working class and "society" or "people" as well as on the role of organization, i.e., the question of the working-class party.

### *2.3.1 Capital versus labor*

The entire "strategy of refusal", as formulated by operaism, is built on one central premise: the production process is the best terrain on which to lead the attack on capitalism, because this is where the working class has a key strategic advantage. To explain why this is so, Tronti offers his reading of Marx and the latter's analysis of the production process under capitalism.

On the very basic level, capitalist production is a process in which capital (in the form of means of production) and labor (in the form of labor-power purchased by capital) come together to generate new value. The creation of value in this way is possible because labor-power is a

unique kind of commodity: its being consumed (i.e., used by the capitalist who purchased it) does not lead to its annihilation, as is the case with any other commodity, but instead creates more value. In Tronti's words: *"[…] labour-power is the sole commodity that through the process of its consumption, produces a valorisation greater than its own value – it produces surplus-value, produces capital, "* (Tronti 2019, 155)

Another key characteristic of the commodity labor-power is that it is always necessarily attached to a person (ibid, 214); there is no other way for capital to obtain it than hiring a worker. What follows from this is a paradox or a contradiction within capitalism. On the individual level, workers need capital: they need to sell their labor-power in order to secure their survival, since they have nothing else to sell (ibid, 136). On the systemic level, however, it is capital that needs workers, since they are the ones who provide labor-power, and labor-power is the only thing capable of producing value. As Tronti puts it: *"In the act of production, the relation of force between the two classes is favourable to the working-class side. Let's ask why that is. Well, we have seen already: for labour-power to pass into the capitalist relation of production is* a need of capital's,*"* (ibid, 218, emphasis added). Capital and labor, then, are mutually dependent on each other, with labor having the stronger position overall since capital's need for labor (or labor-power) is greater.

Another aspect of their relationship that is key for the formulation of a political strategy is the fact that labor is at the same time *opposed to* capital while being itself *part of* capital. This, too, follows from the two key characteristics of labor-power. Labor is part of capital since labor-power is what produces capital: *"Labour-power is not […] just potential labour but also potential capital. The use of labour-power is not only labour, but also surplus-labour; not only the production of value, but also the production of surplus-value. The use of labour-power, therefore, is not only labour, but also capital,"* (ibid, 155). In other words: when labor-power is being put to use by the capitalist who purchased it, it creates more value than what they paid for it, i.e., it generates surplus-value, which is capital. On the other hand, since labor-power is "living labor", always necessarily connected to a person (ibid, 178), an individual worker, it will always be qualitatively distinct from capital and, inasmuch as the existence of classes (and with it the class struggle) predates the production process (ibid, 172), opposed to it. Tronti puts it as follows: *"Upon the act of purchase and sale on the market, labour-power distinguishes itself with two fundamental characteristics: 1) that of being already in substance counterposed to capital; and 2) that of being still formally autonomous of it,"* (ibid, 218).

This double character of labor in its relation to capital has important implications for political strategy. If labor were only separated from and opposed to capital, fighting the capitalist system by withdrawing labor would be easy in theory while being impossible in practice, owing to the mutual dependence of labor and capital. This, however, is not the case: labor is also *part of* capital. It follows that *"[to] fight against capital, the working class must fight against itself* qua *capital,"* (ibid, 273). What this – rather abstract – principle involves in practice is *refusal of work*: since labor-power is at the same time a form of capital (when it is being sold and then used) and an aspect of a living human being, it is possible to annihilate the former aspect while preserving the latter one. Indeed, it is precisely by reclaiming the autonomy of living labor that workers can destroy labor-as-capital.[6]

The socialization of capital and labor adds another dimension to their relationship with each other: it is relevant not only for the production process in the usual narrow sense, but concerns all of society, including the political sphere. As discussed in the previous section, what happens at the highest stage of socialization, i.e., the highest stage of development of capitalism, is that it is not only the labor of individual workers that is being exploited but social labor as well. In other words, it is the class character itself of the working class which is being exploited by capital. *"But the substance of the relation is given from the outset by the antithetical counterposition between labour-in-potential and capital-in-itself – the simple figures of labour and capital, of worker and capitalist.* The content of the capitalist relation is, in each moment, the class relation,*"* (ibid, 218, emphasis added). What this means above all is that the class struggle can never be eliminated, at least not by capital, despite the fact that it presents a potentially mortal danger for capitalism. Capital can – and does – attempt to "domesticate" the class struggle, by e.g., exercising control over the working class via trade unions coopted and integrated into its political system, but it can never totally erase the class struggle. In Tronti's words:

> *"[…] the process of general socialization cannot go so far as to liquidate the workers as a specific class; it cannot, it must not, dilute, dissolve, dismember the working class amid the whole of society; it can and must increasingly socialise the class relation, such as it is, and ever renew the workers as an antagonistic class within it," (ibid, 219).*

[6] This is the argument behind the concept of proletarian self-valorization, which I deal with in more detail in what follows.

The strategic implication of this is analogous to the one described above in relation to production in the narrow sense. Just as the working class can (and must) disrupt capitalist production by fighting against itself *as capital,* which is to say, refuse to perform the work which capitalism demands from it, it can (and must) destroy the capitalist society by attacking itself as a class *for capital*. This is the essence of Tronti's "strategy of refusal". Put simply: what the working class must refuse is playing the part in the development of capitalism assigned to it by capital. This role is something akin to an internal balancing or course-correcting mechanism whose ultimate purpose is to stabilize the system: whenever capitalism risks developing in a direction which would put its functioning or long-term sustainability at risk, the working class – via trade unions and/or reformist political parties – presents it demands, forcing the system to reform just enough to avoid collapse.

> *"Through the trade-union struggle, working-class demands can do nothing more than reflect capital's own needs. And yet capital cannot pose this necessity directly, all by itself – not even if it wanted to, not even when it reaches its highest point of class consciousness. Rather, at this point, it acquires precisely the opposite consciousness: it must find ways to have its own needs put forward by its enemies, it must articulate its own movement via the organised movement of the workers," (ibid, 259).*

The truly radical action available to the working class, therefore – the only action that can lead to victory over capitalism – is the refusal to participate in this process. That means a refusal to put forward any specific demands, demanding pure power instead, and a dismantling of the entire system. This refusal can take the form of simple passivity, but in order to be successful, it needs to be organized. I discuss the question of organization in the final part of this section.

The "strategy of refusal" as formulated by Tronti, built on the need for the working class to "fight against itself qua capital", is theoretically sound but still somewhat vague, especially in regard to the question of refusal of work. He recognizes the strike as a key tool in the working-class arsenal but does not expand on the point (see for example Tronti 2019, 221). Moreover, it seems that the strike, being by definition a relatively short-term measure, is not enough: stopping work for a certain period of time does not amount to destroying capitalism by withdrawing the one element on which it stands, i.e., labor-power, which is the meaning of refusal of work. A more concrete formulation of refusal of work as a strategy was offered by Negri and is centered around the concept of working-class (or proletarian) self-valorization.

### 2.3.2 Self-valorization as a measure and a method

The starting point is the concept of destructuring (of capitalism), as opposed to both destabilization and restructuring. Put simply, *destabilization* is an act of attacking the political system; it does not have a clear direction or a positive content. From the point of view of capital, this moment can be used to *restructure* the system, i.e., to change it in order to stabilize it for the long-term. Only an act of *destructuring* can truly challenge the system: it not only attacks the regime, but has a clear *direction,* a positive content, and as such cannot be "captured" by capital for its own ends. Indeed, a mere act of destabilization can in fact be beneficial for capital: *"Capital has often accepted that the workers' struggle is the motive force of development – and has even accepted that proletarian self-valorization should dictate the rationale for development: what it needs to eliminate is not the reality, but the antagonistic direction [senso] of the workers' movement,"* (Negri 2005, 232) Because of this, the proletariat needs to aim to prevent the restructuring of the capitalist regime; to not only destabilize the system, but *destructure* it.

The solution to this problem, according to Negri, is proletarian self-valorization. On the theoretical level, self-valorization amounts to *separation*: the working class frees itself from its integration into the capitalist system (ibid, 236). This is the same move described by Tronti, the one where the working class refuses to play the part assigned to it and instead rediscovers, reinvents, and reclaims its own inner nature. *"[…]* separation *in this case means* the rupture of the capital relation*. Separation also means that, having reached the point of maximum socialization, the working class breaks the* laws of the social mediation *of capital,"* (ibid, 239-240). What this amounts to on a less abstract level is simply an imposition of working-class values and interests, in short, a dictatorship of the proletariat (ibid, 260). The working class does not demand concessions from capital, it simply takes what it wants. It does not play by capital's rules, it makes its own rules and imposes these on capital. A key part of this process is the freeing of labor from capitalist relations, reinventing it as a tool of human reproduction rather than capitalist production: *"The determinate objective of the process is to increase the use value of labor, against its capitalist subsumption, against its commodification, against its reduction to a use value of capital,"* (ibid, 261).

Moving to a still less abstract level, the practical measure that corresponds to proletarian self-valorization is refusal of work. To be more precise, refusal of work is at the same time the *content* and the *measure* of self-valorization (ibid, 270). As *content*, it is both a goal in itself

and a tactic. This is an important point – as discussed above, the key characteristic of destructuring is that it must have both a negative (destructive) and a positive (constructive) element. It cannot be a pure attack on the system, it needs to be the imposition of another system, one which is incommensurable with the existing one. *"The objective, the aim of the process of self-valorization, is the complete liberation of living labor within production and reproduction; it is the total utilization of wealth in the service of collective freedom,"* (ibid). Refusal of work, then, amounts to an imposition of a different kind of "work" entirely. At the same time, it plays a tactical role: since capitalism is defined by the production process and the production process relies on work, its refusal *"negates the whole of capitalist society,"* (ibid).

Since self-valorization is nothing less than the working-class revolution itself, refusal of work is also useful as a way to *measure* it: that way it is possible to know how far along in the process of societal transformation we currently are. In this context, it has two aspects, a negative one and a positive one. The negative measure is simply *"the progressive reduction of individual and overall labor-time, that is, the quantity of proletarian life that is sold to capital,"* (ibid, 272). The positive measure of refusal of work is its mirror opposite, namely the amount of time that is being used for *"socially useful labor dedicated to the free reproduction of proletarian society,"* (ibid). The key point here is that using refusal of work in this way wrestles control over productivity out of capital's hands: it is no longer capital who defines what constitutes socially useful labor, it is the working class, based on its own internal needs. In simple terms, what this move essentially amounts to is a redefinition of the term "work".

Conceptualizing refusal of work as both the content and the measure of self-valorization has two key consequences for working-class strategy. Firstly, the distinction between productive labor and indirectly productive labor[7] – used by capital to divide the working class – collapses, allowing for a greater degree of unity within and inclusion into the working class (ibid, 273). Secondly, it means that the often-discussed dilemma between the reformist policy of small improvements in the present and the revolutionary policy of a radical improvement at some unpredictable time in the future proves itself to be meaningless. There is no need to choose between them: the re-appropriation of free time and the improved quality of life of the working class that goes with it *is* the proletarian revolution.

[7] One might also add reproductive labor to the list, though Negri does not mention it – presumably, it is being counted as part of indirectly productive labor.

### 2.3.3 Class as a condition of politics

The working-class character of the struggle is an essential part of the strategy: in pursuing its own goals, the working class is the only subject that can successfully overthrow capitalism. There are two key reasons for this. First, due to the process of socialization, capitalism has now taken over all of society; human society – including its political institutions – has become a mere function of the production process (Tronti 2019, 26). What this also implies is that the interest of the collective capitalist has become identified with the "general interest" of society (ibid). For this reason, any attempt to push through political change by appealing to the "general interest" can only strengthen capital. It follows from this that change can only be achieved through a politics that is unilateral, built around a partial interest, and antagonistic in relation to the system (society) as a whole; in other words, a class-based politics. Negri makes this point when he criticizes reformism: *"Eurocommunism is innovative in relation to Marxism, not because it denies the empirical conditions of the process of* self-valorization, *but because it denies the* worker and proletarian character, *the* radically antagonistic potential, *and the* political relevance *of that self-valorization,"* (Negri 2005, 254). The point here is that any politics that is not proletarian in character, that is to say, not antagonistic, can only serve capital.

Tronti stresses that capital is well aware of this fact, which is why the history of capitalism is the history of capital attempting to quell class struggle, or canalize it in ways that are beneficial to it, since antagonism, which is the essence of class struggle, is the only thing that can put the system in danger (Tronti 2019, 219). Indeed, trying to dissolve the working class into "the people", thereby stripping its politics of its antagonistic character, is a key part of capital's political strategy:

> *"[…] the real generalisation of the working-class condition can reassert the image of its formal extinction. This is the basis on which specifically working-class power is immediately absorbed into the generic concept of popular sovereignty: the political mediation here serves to allow the explosive content of the working class's productive force to function peacefully within the fine forms of the modern capitalist relations of production. So, at this level, when the working class refuses politically to become the people, it in fact opens up the most direct path to the socialist revolution." (Tronti 2019, 57)*

Antagonism is one part of the reason why a challenge to capitalism only has a chance to succeed if it is a class-based one. The second part is connected to the specific relationship between

capital and labor as discussed above: because of the way the production process functions, and because the production process is the central pillar on which the entirety of the capitalist society stands, those who provide labor-power (i.e., the working class) are in a position of power. In other words, it is not the case that *any* class has the potential to overthrow capitalism by pursuing its own interests and adopting an antagonistic position in relation to capitalism, only the working class can do that: *"[…] working-class political power is intimately connected to the productive power or wage-labor,"* (ibid, 241). At the same time, however, due to the process of socialization of labor and the emergence of the "socialized worker", it becomes increasingly difficult to define who exactly is and is not part of the working class. On the one hand, if we postulate that all of society is a function of the production process, it follows that all of us, regardless of what we do, contribute labor-power for capital, which would mean that all of us are working class. This may be seen as positive: according to Negri, the key advantage of refusal of work as a political strategy is that it allows to overcome internal divisions between productive and indirectly productive labor (see above). On the other hand, the working class must not be equated with "the people", for the reasons discussed.

Negri does not explicitly deal with the relationship between the working class and "the people". Tronti addresses the issue but remains somewhat vague: *"Of course, the working class is not 'the people'. But the working class comes from the people,"* (Tronti 2019, 253). The key difference between the two subjects seems to be in the content or goal of their struggles: *"The people have only their own rights to defend, while the working class must demand power,"* (ibid, 62). He briefly mentions the issue of "working-class hegemony", suggesting that the working class should lead other classes in a sort of alliance, vaguely reminiscent of the Gramscian "historic bloc" – a concept he explicitly rejects, however (ibid, 96). In the postscript, Tronti asks the question how to delineate the working class sociologically, i.e., which societal groups should count as part of it. However, from the point of view of strategy, the differentiation between the working class and the people can remain purely conceptual: what matters is the mode of struggle, the demands and goals, the subject in whose name those demands are made; the question of which individuals are part of this subject can remain open. It is even conceivable that the working class and the people are the same empirically, i.e., that they are composed of the same individuals. Of course, this would mean that "the working class", just like "the people", is nothing but a discursive construction, something which Tronti would almost certainly disagree with.

### 2.3.4 The role of political organization

The final key element of the strategy of refusal is the working-class party, i.e., the political organization of the working class. As discussed above, working-class struggle can be used by capital as a motor of its own development and therefore turned against the working class. In order to avoid this, two things are necessary. Firstly, a *tactical* approach is needed: the working class has to act in ways that disrupt the system and prevent its stabilization. *"The working class is still forced to make use of the contradictions which pitch capitalist reformism into crisis; it has to aggravate the elements that put brakes on capitalist development. […] Now is the time for the working class to both strategically support the general development of capital and tactically oppose particular modes of that development,"* (Tronti 2019, 68). Finding the right modes of struggle, however, is no easy matter; that is why a specialized actor – the party – is needed. While the revolutionary strategy is intuitively understood by the working class at large, the tactics (where to strike, when, and how) can only be formulated by the party (ibid, 93). This includes moments where the tactics appear to go against the strategy, and *"the party must impose on the class what the class itself is,"* (ibid, 264). For all his rejection of "traditional" working-class institutions, Tronti apparently remains attached to the Leninist vanguard party model.

Secondly, for Tronti, correct working-class organization is a goal in itself, since it prevents capital from harnessing the energy of the class struggle for its own purposes: *"Capitalist power seeks to use the workers' antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor for its own development. The working-class party must take this real working-class mediation of capital's interests and organize it in an antagonistic form,"* (ibid, 242). This antagonism consists in the refusal to become part of the system, play the role assigned to the working class by capital. Furthermore, in order for the strategy of refusal to function, it has to go beyond an intuitive, spontaneous refusal; it has to be organized as a collective action. *"From the workers' point of view, an action is a mass action or no action at all,"* (ibid, 86). Individual action, or even action by a vague "movement", then, does not count as political action and certainly does not have the power to threaten the system. Tronti goes even further: what is necessary is for the working class to anticipate the development of capital and organize itself on a level higher than the current organization of capital (ibid, 169). This is the biggest challenge of all, since so far in history working class level of socialization followed that of capital: working-class socialization is only a consequence of its being organized by capital (ibid, 207). That is why, for Tronti, the

task of political organization is the only real political problem: once it has been achieved, everything else will be *"child's play"* (ibid, 270).

Negri's approach to the question of the party is significantly more nuanced: he realizes that there is a necessary contradiction between the proletariat, which *"can exist only as a movement, as an antagonistic project"* (Negri 2005, 275), and the party, which inevitably tends towards institutionalization and reformism. Additionally, the party always tends to prioritize abstract goals and programmatic purity above the real-life needs of the class it supposedly represents: *"In the classical party, the needs and desires of the proletariat are subordinated in a sadistic manner to the supposed, but always mystified, unity and generality of the program,"* (ibid). If we adopt refusal of work as a strategy, however, the party does not seem to be necessary: it is a process of *"direct appropriation of wealth and power"* (ibid, 276), which can be performed by anyone, anytime – at least in theory.

And yet the party does have a role to play: *"[T]he party is a function of proletarian force, conceived as a guarantor of the process of self-valorization. The party is the army that defends the frontiers of proletarian independence. […] The party is a function of the command that the proletariat exercises against its enemies,"* (ibid). In other words, the party is a tool that the working class creates to perform a specific task; it can never turn against the class it came from, not even temporarily. Self-governance of the masses remains the ultimate goal of revolutionary politics (ibid, 277). The party, however, is also a contradiction, because political struggle itself is contradictory: the tactical aim of the working class is to seize power from capital (or the capitalist state); but its ultimate goal must be to dissolve power (ibid, 279). For Negri, too, the tension and possible contradiction between strategy tactics is an inevitable part of the problem of the party – but abandoning the idea of the party cannot be a solution if the working class is to have a chance of success.

## 2.4 What is relevant for today?

The argument for the refusal of work as a political strategy, as put forth by the original operaism, can thus be summed up as follows, in four key steps. First, the production process is the terrain on which to strike the attack. This is on the one hand because production is the main pillar on which capitalism – and with it the entirety of society since capitalism and society have become indistinguishable – rests. On the other hand, it is because the production process is where the working class has a strategic advantage over capital, given that it is the sole supplier

of labor-power, the commodity which fuels the entire process. Second, the method to use in the struggle is proletarian self-valorization, which is to say, refusal of work. This allows the working class to liberate itself from capitalism into which it is integrated by "fighting against itself qua capital", which essentially means rejecting the kind of work demanded from it by capital, embracing instead the "living labor" aimed at human reproduction. Third, the struggle needs to be class-based, unilateral, and antagonistic: since capital has successfully turned its particular interest into "general interest" of society, only the pursuit of a particular self-interest of a class can challenge it. Fourth, the action needs to go beyond an intuitive, spontaneous refusal; a certain level and type of political organization is necessary. How do these four elements relate to our current situation?

### *2.4.1 The centrality of production*

Is the production process still the best terrain on which to attack capitalism? The idea has clearly lost traction on the left in the years since the operaists wrote. The focus on the factory worker and the belief in the primacy of the economy, which the operaists share with more mainstream or "orthodox" varieties of Marxism, mark them as part of a type of leftist politics which seems to belong to the past. Since the 1980s, the focus has been on the political sphere, on new social movements, on reinventing the revolutionary subject – or abandoning the idea of revolution altogether. The idea behind this turn was that the economism inherent in classic Marxism was too reductionist and, therefore, any politics built on it could not adequately grasp current political reality. In the words of Chantal Mouffe, whose book (written with Ernesto Laclau) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2014) was one of the key theoretical underpinnings of this transformation of leftist politics:

> *"What motivated us was the incapacity of left politics, both in its Marxist and social-democratic versions, to take account of a series of movements that had emerged in the wake of the 1968 revolts and that corresponded to resistances against a variety of forms of domination which could not be formulated in class terms. The second wave of feminism, the gay movement, the anti-racist struggles and issues around the environment had profoundly transformed the political panorama, but the traditional left parties were not receptive to those demands whose political character they were unable to acknowledge. It was in view of remedying those shortcomings that we decided to enquire about the reasons for such a situation.*

*We soon realized that the obstacles to be overcome came from the essentialist perspective dominant in left thinking. According to this perspective, that we called 'class essentialism', political identities were the expression of the position of the social agents in the relations of production and their interests were defined by this position. It was no surprise that such a perspective was unable to understand demands that were not based on 'class'." (Mouffe 2019, 10-11)*

The argument that production is of key importance to capitalist society and should therefore be regarded as an essential political terrain is not easily rejected, however. The nature of work may have changed – only a very small part of the workforce in the developed world now has jobs of the type known in the Fordist era – but capitalism still needs to grow, and it still needs labor-power to achieve that growth, making the basic premise of the argument still valid. The problem here appears to lie in the mismatch between political goals: while the Old Left is mainly concerned with ending capitalism, typically with the implied assumption that the dismantling of other forms of oppression will follow, the New Left refuses to see any one demand as more important than others, the primary goal being liberation from oppression for all. From this latter perspective, prioritizing production indeed makes little sense. For the operaists, however, the argument never was that all forms of oppression will be removed by destroying capitalism. In fact, other forms of oppression are never mentioned in their writings. This could be seen as proof that at the end of the day, they were nothing but straight white men looking out only for themselves. A more generous interpretation would be that they simply did not consider these other issues to be their task to solve. Their goal was to put forth a strategy for overcoming capitalism – nothing more, nothing less. In the same way, refusal of work does not purport to give a solution to all the political problems of today; it only offers a way out of capitalism.

### *2.4.2 The meaning of self-valorization*

The core of the argument lies in the method of struggle: self-valorization of the working class in the form of refusal of work. This line of thinking constitutes a major break with the Marxist tradition, which has always tended to venerate work. The classic approach has been to see work as something that belongs to the workers and, on these grounds, demand a fair compensation of work (Tronti 2019, 244). The operaists reject this view: to them, *"it really is the capitalist who creates work,"* (ibid). What this means is that work – understood here as productive labor

– can never truly belong to the workers: *"the productivity of labor always belongs to capital,"* (ibid, 162). The goal, therefore, must be to get rid of it.

*"The objective, the aim of the process of self-valorization, is the complete liberation of living labor within production and reproduction; it is the total utilization of wealth in the service of collective freedom,"* (Negri 2005, 270). Refusal of work, therefore, does not mean that the goal is complete idleness for everybody. "Liberation of labor" essentially amounts to a transformation of "work": instead of productive and/or reproductive labor for capital,[8] it needs to become reproductive labor for ourselves. This transformation cannot only happen on the level of discourse or work conditions however, it must have a material basis. This is a crucial point: we are already witnessing an attempt by capital to use the criticism of the alienation of labor for its own purposes. As described by Boltanski and Chiapello in their book The New Spirit of Capitalism (2018), contemporary management discourse with its focus on engagement, fulfillment, meaning, personal development, etc., taps into the same human needs as the call for "liberation of labor", only to introduce more sophisticated forms of alienation and exploitation. "Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life," as the popular adage goes: a perfect illustration of capitalist appropriation of "refusal of work". Just because work does not "feel like work" does not mean it is not productive labor for capital, i.e., exploitation.

The other two potential pitfalls to be avoided were already foreseen by Negri in his initial formulation of the refusal of work strategy: technological utopia and quietism (Negri 2005, 271). These, too, are forms of "refusal of work" which do not truly challenge the material basis of the existing economic-political system. The former is the belief that we will be liberated from the need to work by technological advancement alone, not taking into account the fact that under capitalism, technology will always belong to capital, with all the consequences it entails, namely, that technology will always serve the need for further growth, which can only be fueled by labor. The latter is an individual solution to a collective problem: a retreat, an escape, which might be possible for an individual or a small community but does nothing to threaten the system at large. *"[Refusal of work] is neither a (utopian) flight of fancy, nor a*

[8] Due to the process of socialization, even reproductive labor serves capital in our current circumstances. See above.

*(quietist) retreat into isolated consciousness: it faces foursquare that collective relationship which alone permits us to introduce a logic of (collective) class separation,"* (ibid).

At the same time, refusal of work is both the content and the measure of self-valorization, both the means and the end. It is something that can be done in the here and now to advance the revolutionary goal in a concrete way. Crucially, however, it can only fulfill this purpose if the abovementioned mistakes are avoided. How to ensure, then, that refusal of work threatens the very material basis of power? The answer lies in the nature of the subject which carries out the strategy.

### *2.4.3 Class struggle in the 21st century*

The question of the revolutionary subject was very clear to the operaist writers: it could only be the working class. This follows directly from their analysis, according to which the production process is the central feature of the capitalist system – both the engine that powers it and the basis on which everything else is built – which in turn makes it the privileged terrain on which to lead the attack. From today's perspective, however, this is a major complication, given that the working class seems to have disappeared, or at least been transformed beyond recognition. The key question for us, then, is: who – or what – is the working class today? To answer this question, other questions need to be asked first: What is it that makes a person a worker? And what makes a class a class?

Who is a worker? The concept of socialization, which originates with Tronti himself and is later expanded upon by Negri, complicates the question somewhat. If the whole of society is nothing but a moment of the production process, it seems to follow that everything that happens in society contributes to the creation of capital in one way or another. This would mean that everyone performs productive labor for capital, which in turn would mean that everyone is a worker. Even if we reject this – admittedly quite bold – interpretation of the concept of socialization, contemporary capitalism with its prevalence of immaterial and/or informal labor makes it difficult to draw a clear line.

Building upon Marx, Tronti differentiates between a *proletarian* (a person who sells their labor-power because they have nothing else to sell) (Tronti 2019, 153) and a *worker* (a person who participates in the production process by expending their labor-power (ibid, 155). Of course, this distinction is purely conceptual since a proletarian always becomes a worker once the contract is made and the actual production starts. However, the concept of the proletarian seems to be more useful in delineating today's working class. Provided the definition of labor-

power is expanded to account for the fact that what is being sold to capital under contemporary capitalism is not only the work of people's bodies and intellects, but often also parts of their identity, their relationships, their very *person*, we can say that everyone who sells their labor-power as their only means of survival is a worker.

A sum of workers is not yet a class, however. The key component of class is antagonism. According to Tronti, the working class and the capitalist class cannot be thought separately, only together and in opposition to each other. *"It is often asked what a social class really is. The answer is: these* two *classes,"* (Tronti 2019, 245). Their interests are directly opposed, but at the same time, each of them is the condition of the existence of the other. The relation that exists between them is the essence of capitalism itself.

There are two issues with the concept of class in today's politics. Firstly, as discussed above, class-based politics has been declared obsolete and abandoned by the left, based on the reasoning that it was too reductionist and therefore unfit for contemporary political struggles. Secondly, with the advent of neoliberalism in the 1990s, even the very idea of antagonism was abandoned, with politics reduced to a mere technical problem to be solved by experts. This is a phenomenon described in detail (and criticized) by Chantal Mouffe in multiple texts (see for example Mouffe 2011, 2013). A similar argument had been made by the operaists: when capital succeeds in turning its particular interest into the "general interest", thus making it appear as if there were no alternative, only the pursuit of a particular interest can break this political deadlock and bring about real change.

### *2.4.4 Organization as a political problem*

The final element of the strategy is political organization. This is a highly important point, since organization is what makes the difference between an individual action and a collective one, between a vague, instinctive, spontaneous movement and political struggle. It is also the most problematic point from today's perspective, given that mass political parties are a thing of the past, having been replaced – quite possibly forever, though there is no way to be certain – by leaderless movements on the one hand and small, highly professionalized political parties on the other (for a discussion of this topic, see for example Manin 1997).

If it is to have a chance of success, political action needs to be both well thought out (tactical) and mass in character. *"From the workers' point of view, an action is a mass action or it is not an action at all. A vanguard that does not bring the movement along with it is no different from a rearguard,"* (Tronti 2019, 86). To bridge this gap and guarantee the unity between those two

requirements is the task of the party.[9] This is a crucial task – but already the operaists knew that it was an impossible one. There has always been a contradiction inherent to the concept of the working-class party. The party is needed because determining the proper tactics for political struggle is no easy matter and requires a specialized actor. At the same time, a working-class party is only a working-class party if it remains organically connected to the class of which it is the instrument. Due to the complexity of politics, however, those two requirements are often contradictory. Tactics may necessitate moves that appear to go against the interests and/or overall strategy of the working class. The very specialization which is required of the party is what distances it from the class at large.

The other problem with the working-class party in contemporary context is the fact that the working class has all but disappeared as a political actor. This is partially due to the confusion as to who even counts as "worker" in today's economic system, as discussed above. A far more important issue, however, is the fact that a person's being (or not) a worker is no longer the main determining factor behind their political allegiance. What this comes back to is the central point of contention between the old Marxist left and the New Left: can a person's interest really be inferred from their position in the system, without considering what they themselves think? Even classic Marxism accounts for this to a certain degree, with the concept of false consciousness; but the issue appears far more complicated in contemporary capitalism. Clearly, in our context, the first major task would be to make workers realize they have a shared interest, i.e., that they are a class. Only then can we start thinking about what a proper organizational form for a 21st century working-class party would be.

[9] The term "party" is used here in a broad sense, referring to any organization that allows a social group to pursue its political goals. The name of the organization or its organizational form are irrelevant to the theoretical argument. For example, Tronti himself discusses in his postscript that in some countries, notably the US, it has been the trade unions that played the role of the working-class party, instead of any of the political parties.

# 3 Exodus: refusal of work in post-operaism

## 3.1 Historical context

The term *post-operaism* is generally associated with Negri's later writings, most importantly *Empire*, co-written with Michael Hardt and first published in 2000. According to Negri himself, the term post-operaism is not justified: in his view, these are the same theories that had been formulated by operaism three decades earlier, only adjusted to reflect a changed social reality (Negri 2018).

Indeed, the world looked very different at the turn of the millennium than it had done in the mid-1970s, the point by which the original operaist movement lost its momentum. The cold war was over; the bipolar world had changed – almost overnight – into a unipolar one. The postwar consensus between capital and labor was over too, having been replaced by neoliberalism, which brought with it growing inequalities, both within countries and between them. Globalization was at its peak, as was the world anti-globalization movement. The nature of work had changed significantly. In order to understand the shift between operaism and post-operaism, it is therefore necessary to understand the nature of these changes.

The postwar decades had been characterized by a sort of mutual understanding or a "social contract" between capital and labor, motivated on the one hand by the need for stability in order to rebuild the economy and, on the other, by fear of radical resistance from the working class in the context of the cold war and the threat of Soviet communism. As a result, a set of fiscal and social policies was implemented which had the effect that, in the period 1950-1980, inequality in the USA and Western Europe was significantly lower than in the preceding decades (Piketty 2021, 487). However, this "social democratic" model, consisting of *"a mixture of policies including nationalization, public education, health and pensions reforms, and progressive taxation of the highest incomes and largest fortunes,"* (ibid, 486), got into a crisis at the end of the 1970s. With the advent of neoliberalism and the arrival to power of its proponents, many of the policies that made up the social democratic or welfare model were unmade again.

The most immediate (certainly the most easily measured) effect of neoliberal reforms has been the rise of inequality. While income from capital investment has been rising, income from work has been stagnating or even declining in real terms (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018, li), thus widening the gap between the rich and the poor (or, to be more precise, between those who

own capital and those who do not). Especially the middle classes have seen a real decline in their living standards, or, at least, are faced with the prospect that children will have a worse quality of life than their parents did (ibid, liv). The share of total societal wealth held by the top one percent has increased, the share held by the bottom 50 percent has decreased (Piketty 2021, 524). The effect has been less pronounced in Europe, where the welfare state has proven more resilient than in the US, but it is present here as well (ibid).

Despite the very real and tangible ways in which the development of capitalism in the final two decades of the millennium made life objectively worse for most, it was clear that around the time when post-operaism was taking form there was much less resistance to it than in the preceding period: intellectual critique and working-class militancy had both waned and nearly disappeared. This is the starting point of Boltanski and Chiapello's now classic *The new spirit of capitalism*, published for the first time in 1999, one year before *Empire* and reflecting many of the same transformations. Many authors have since attempted to explain this development. One particularly compelling explanation is linked to the changing nature of the working classes resulting from the deindustrialization process. The "traditional" labor movement, both in its organizational forms and its underlying political theory, had been based on the industrial working class with the male factory worker as its ideal-typical representative. However, by 2000, such workers made up a relatively small part of the overall workforce and could no longer be considered "typical" in any sense. Traditional leftist theories had, for the most part, become obsolete – and new ones had not yet been written. Moreover, in the post-cold war climate, where victorious neoliberalism was generally accepted as having no alternative, speaking about social class was itself considered illegitimate (Budgen 2000, 154).

Another factor explaining the apparent disappearance of the working class (or, at the very least, of its class consciousness and resistance to capitalism) is the changing nature of work and its organization. By studying management discourse, Boltanski and Chiapello show how contemporary capitalism has shifted: hierarchical management has been set aside in favor of network-based management (and managers replaced by "leaders" whose job is to "inspire" and "mobilize" rather than direct and control (Budgen 2000, 153)). Workers, at least those in "middle class" positions such as highly skilled labor or middle management, whose support for the system is crucial for its functioning, are promised autonomy, even personal fulfilment in their work (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018, 15). Thus, the challenges raised against "bourgeois society" by the student movement of the 1960s have, in a perverted fashion, been incorporated

into capitalism (Budgen 2000, 154). These changes which combined to make work look and feel less like work (at least for some), coupled with the trend towards forced flexibilization and precarization of work and compounded by the overall neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility meant that the working class could no longer even recognize itself as such, much less organize itself to mount any kind of sustained resistance.

Finally, another phenomenon that shaped the period 1980-2000 and had a profound influence on post-operaism is that of globalization. The term itself is a contested one, with debates going on for decades over what it exactly is (see for example Appelbaum and Robinson 2005), and it is not within the scope of this text to engage in that debate. However, it cannot be denied that the processes usually referred to by the term "globalization" have changed the world in a profound way. Firstly, the world became much more interconnected during those few decades, especially economically, with the neoliberal era ushering in a period of liberalization of international trade which put an end to a period of relatively protectionist policies, most notably in countries of the so-called Global South. Secondly, the nature of international politics changed, with the relative power of the nation state diminishing (with the possible exception of the sole remaining superpower, the United States) and the power of non-state global actors (international organizations, big NGOs, multinational corporations, etc.) growing in a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "global governance" (see for example Brand 2012).

Far from being a simple coincidence, these two phenomena are closely connected. If countries of the Global South implemented neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s, it was, for the most part, not out of their own free will but because it was required of them as part of the Structural Adjustment programs which were a condition of receiving loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This package of reforms known as the "Washington consensus" was centered on the principles of market economy, openness to the world and macroeconomic discipline (Serra, Spiegel, and Stiglitz 2008, 3) and already at the time of its implementation there was reason to believe it would not improve the economic situation of developing countries (ibid, 4). The fact that a small group of international organizations was able to force sovereign states to radically change their economic and fiscal policies, a group of international organizations, moreover, which were formally independent and yet quite evidently beholden to the interests of and guided by principles advocated by the United States, signaled a profound change in the nature of power in the global arena.

## 3.2 Key terms and ideas

### *3.2.1 Empire*

As part of its attempt to explain this new reality, post-operaism develops several new concepts, three of which are relevant to the question of refusal of work. The first of these is Empire, the central concept of the book of the same name. Put simply, Empire is a new, specifically postmodern form of power, one that has been slowly emerging throughout the 20th century, finally taking over in its last two decades.

To begin with, it is necessary to differentiate Empire from imperialism. While both are a form of power exercised in the global arena, they are radically different in form. Imperialism is an expression of modern sovereignty and modern capitalism: it arises from the need for a space outside the capitalist realm into which it can expand; it exercises its power by creating and maintaining rigid boundaries. The "outside", whose role is to be exploited and/or used as a dumping ground for the negative externalities of capitalist production, needs to be constructed as radically different than the "inside", otherwise it cannot play this role (Hardt and Negri 2001, 234).[10] In contrast, in Empire there is nothing outside capitalism anymore. Accordingly, sovereignty no longer depends on boundaries but *"is realized at the margins, where borders are flexible and identities are hybrid and fluid,"* (ibid, 39).

Another key feature of Empire is that with formal subsumption (i.e., the integration of territories and populations into the domain of capitalist production) accomplished and real subsumption (i.e., the intensification of the exploitation of labor by capital) advancing, society itself is *"ever more completely fashioned by capital"* (ibid, 255). What this means for political theory is that the distinction between society, politics, or culture on the one hand and economics on the other is no longer tenable.[11] A disciplinary society – which is the first step towards Empire – *"is [...] a factory-society. Disciplinarity is at once a form of production and a form of government such that disciplinary production and disciplinary society tend to coincide completely,"* (ibid, 243). The next step towards the *"indistinguishability of economic and*

[10] An analogical construct was employed to justify the colonization and enslavement of non-European populations: the inhumane treatment of these people was permissible because they were constructed as radically "other", not fully human.

[11] Of course, to Marxist theorists, the separation between the political sphere and the economy always was a charade, an ideological trick designed to mask relations of exploitation. But Hardt and Negri's argument goes further: the point is not that politics and economy (i.e., the base and the superstructure) are intrinsically connected; in Empire, they are one and the same.

*cultural phenomena"* (ibid, 275) was made by the so-called new social movements of the 1960s, whose refusal of the kind of work typical of the disciplinary regime ultimately led to the era of immaterial labor (I discuss this point in more detail in what follows). It is for this reason that the sphere of production is just as important for understanding Empire as the sphere of sovereignty (or power).

While the power of the modern state was transcendental, localized, and hierarchical, the power of Empire is immanent, deterritorialized, and network-based. In modern sovereignty, the legitimacy of power rests on a source that is transcendental, i.e., comes from outside the political system (or indeed society) itself. The Enlightenment removed God as a source of legitimacy of power and replaced him by Reason, but the transcendental nature of the legitimizing instance was preserved (ibid, 95). Conversely, a key characteristic of Empire is that *nothing is outside it*; it follows logically that legitimation of its power, too, comes from within: *"the legitimation of the imperial machine is born at least in part of the communications industries [...] This is a form of legitimation that rests on nothing outside itself and is reproposed ceaselessly by developing its own languages of self-validation," (ibid, 33).* The all-encompassing nature of Empire is thus absolute: not only does it cover all of Earth's territory and dominate every sphere of human activity, not even its legitimizing discourse can make a reference to the outside.

In the modern state, power was executed over a specific territory and emanated from a specific, more or less central, location. There was a clear border between inside and outside and the seat of power was easily identifiable. Empire, as we have seen, has no outside, it has absorbed and integrated everything within itself – because of this, there are no rigid borders, no binaries: *"the space of imperial sovereignty [...] appears as a continuous, uniform space. [...] In this smooth space of Empire, there is no* place *of power – it is both everywhere and nowhere,"* (ibid, 190). In Empire, power has no single, identifiable locus of control – but it functions as if there was one (ibid, 323).

Finally, the power of Empire – power in the postmodern world – is biopower: *"what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself,"* (ibid, 24). In a *disciplinary society*, power is exercised by a set of social institutions which *"[structure] the parameters and limits of thought and practice, sanctioning and prescribing normal and/or deviant behaviors,"* (ibid, 23). This corresponds to modern form of power, in which the mechanism of rule is external to the persons over whom it is exercised. In a *society of control* – associated

with the postmodern era – power becomes more immanent: *"mechanisms of command"* are *"distributed throughout the brains and bodies of citizens"* (ibid). While power still flows through institutions, these are no longer tangible, spatially bound institutions: they are specific logics, sets of rules which exercise their power by shaping the production of subjectivities. Discipline, then, is not something enforced from the outside, it is something that has been internalized, it is *"something like an inner compulsion indistinguishable from our will, immanent to and inseparable from our subjectivity itself,"* (ibid, 329). In Empire, therefore, power itself – and not just its legitimation – becomes completely immanent in character.

### *3.2.2 Multitude*

The counterweight to Empire is the Multitude. Just as Empire is a postmodern form of power or sovereignty, the Multitude is a postmodern form of what was in the modern era called the popular masses, the proletariat, and various other names. At its core, the Multitude is *living labor*. Just as original operaism insisted that it is the proletariat who pushes forward the development of capitalism, because capitalism only develops in response to class struggle, post-operaism posits that the development of sovereignty, from its modern form into the postmodern one, was driven by the Multitude and its struggle against sovereign power (ibid, 51).

To fully understand the concept of the Multitude, it is necessary to differentiate it from other concepts which may seem similar or related. The first of these is *the people:*

> *"The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while positing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it," (ibid, 103).*

The analogy with the relation between Empire and imperialism is obvious: while *the people* rests on a clear differentiation between a (homogeneous) inside and a radically different outside, the Multitude is fluid, heterogenous, inclusive, even all-encompassing. Historically, *the people* was a product of the nation-state: the nation is what transforms the Multitude into a people (ibid). This is a case of sovereignty developing in reaction to the pressure from the Multitude: the demand for power from the Multitude was channeled through the discursive

construction of "the nation", creating "the people" as the carrier of sovereignty, i.e., the legitimizing instance of state power.

The key political implication of this difference is that *the people* is a unitary entity, a political subject with a single will and capable of political action. The issue for political strategy in a postmodern world is how to turn the Multitude into a political subject capable of political action without reducing it to *the people*, thus depriving it of the features which define it and give it the ability to stand against the power of Empire.

Secondly, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between the Multitude, the proletariat, and the poor. The proletariat was the central reference point for leftist politics throughout the 19th and most of the 20th century but had seemingly vanished by the 1990s. To Hardt and Negri, the proletariat has not disappeared, it has merely been transformed in its composition. They define *proletariat* as *"a broad category that includes all those whose labor is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction,"* (ibid, 52). Given the above discussed characteristics of Empire (it encompasses everything and everyone on the planet; the sphere of politics/power/sovereignty is indistinguishable from the economic sphere), this means that nearly everyone alive is now part of the proletariat; we have reached the final, highest phase of the process of socialization.[12] In this sense, the Multitude could be seen as a continuation of the proletariat, a logical next step in its development: from the "professional worker" of the 19th century via the "mass worker" of the mid-20th century to the "social worker" of the post-Fordist age (ibid, 409).

At the same time, the Multitude is more than just a phase: it is the underlying logic and source of power that has driven struggles against oppression and exploitation all throughout human history. As such, Hardt and Negri relate it to the figure of "the poor": *"The poor is destitute, excluded, repressed, exploited – and yet living. It is the common denominator of life, the foundation of the multitude,"* (ibid, 156). While the figure of the proletarian, as conceptualized by mainstream Marxism, is defined by factory discipline, thus reinforcing the fact that the

[12] One could argue that even the capitalists are subjected to the laws of capitalism, that they have little choice but to behave in ways required by the logic of capital. Indeed, one of the central theses of operaist thought is that as capitalism develops, power increasingly serves the interests of "the capital" in the abstract rather than the capitalists as a group of people, to the point where even members of the capitalist class can get crushed by it. The key difference lies in the exploitation of labor: a capitalist might be subjected to "*capitalist norms of production and reproduction*" as Hardt and Negri put it, but they do not perform any labor and they certainly do not have their labor exploited.

proletarian has essentially been created and shaped by capitalism, the figure of the poor is characterized by freedom (ibid, 158). While the proletarian can only exist in capitalism, the poor has their own identity, above and beyond any specific political or economic system. This freedom, this sort of inner life force, is the key characteristic of the Multitude.

As mentioned above, the defining characteristic of the Multitude is its vitality, its creative power. Indeed, *"the multitude is the real productive force of our social world,"* while Empire is a parasitic, vampire-like entity (ibid, 62). This power residing in the Multitude is referred to as *virtuality,* it is *"a power of self-valorization that exceeds itself"* (ibid, 358). Living labor is "virtual" because it is something that cannot be measured or contained. It can be exploited, but it cannot be extinguished – not least because that would go against the interests of Empire (*"a parasite that saps the strength of its host [...] can endanger its own existence,"* (ibid, 361)). Virtuality is also completely positive, since it is a force of destruction and constitution at the same time, *"a resistance that becomes love and community"* (ibid). As we will see, this feature especially plays a central role in the political strategy of refusal.

### 3.2.3 Immaterial labor

The final concept that needs to be discussed is *immaterial labor*. Perhaps the most famous of post-operaist concepts, it has been widely reflected and built upon in political and social theory in the years since it was first formulated.

At its base, immaterial labor is labor that *"produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication,"* (ibid, 289). What is significant is that in today's world, *"providing services and manipulating information are at the heart of economic production,"* (ibid, 280). Just as the process of modernization involved the industrialization of labor (that is, even sectors that had nothing to do with industrial production in the narrow sense now operated based on the logic of industrial labor), the process of postmodernization involves the informatization of labor (ibid). Immaterial labor is thus the defining characteristic of Empire: *"Empire takes form when [...] immaterial labor and cooperation, become the dominant productive force. The superstructure is put to work,"* (ibid, 385, emphasis added). Immaterial labor, in other words, consists in manipulating what was previously considered part of the superstructure. This is the reason why, in Empire, the structure and the superstructure, labor and non-labor, production and reproduction, can no longer be distinguished from each other.

There are two main types or *faces* of immaterial labor. One consists of the manipulation of symbols and information in ways that mimic the functioning of computers (ibid, 291). Just like industrialization forced human workers to work more like machines, informatization forces workers to function more like computers. A key consequence of this is that human labor becomes more abstract than ever before: the tasks performed are generic, homogeneous, and very far removed from the actual object of labor, i.e., the intended product (ibid, 292). The other face of immaterial labor is *affective labor*, which involves the *"creation and manipulation of affect,"* (ibid, 293). Another concept that has been widely reflected in literature, most notably in feminist theory, affective labor is the opposite of, and a complement to, the depersonalized, abstract computerized labor. This labor is concrete and corporeal (which is where it contrasts with the abstract nature of computerized labor), but the effects it produces are immaterial: affects, feelings, social networks, relationships.

Immaterial labor has two key characteristics. Firstly, cooperation is an inherent part of it, it is *"completely immanent to the laboring activity itself"* (ibid, 294), rather than something that can be "added on" to a labor that is, in principle, capable of functioning without it and will only cooperate when organized to do so by the capitalist. The implication of this is that what is exploited in postmodern capitalism is the social relation itself, i.e., the human capacity to communicate and cooperate with each other, rather than just the sum of individual labor-powers. Secondly, immaterial production is decentralized to the point where *the network* is the central locus of production, rather than any specific, physical location or center (ibid, 295). One consequence of this has been the weakening of the bargaining power of the working class, since it has given capital more freedom of movement than it ever had before (ibid, 296). In contrast, the infrastructure required to make network production work, i.e., communication infrastructure, is controlled by capital and governed in a very centralized manner (ibid, 297).

## 3.3 Exodus as a strategy

How does the strategy of refusal work in the context of Empire? To answer this question, I first explore the nature of the relationship between Empire and the Multitude in order to assess the overall logic of power in the contemporary world. In a second step, I analyze specific key aspects of the postmodern form of power, as expressed in Empire, and how these can be counteracted. I then present the strategy of refusal (or exodus) in detail, relating it to the two previous points. Finally, I discuss the question of a political subject for the 21st century.

### *3.3.1 Empire versus the Multitude*

As discussed in the previous section, what characterizes the Multitude is "virtuality" – a specific kind of creative power. The Multitude is the carrier of "living labor" as known from Marxist theory in general and from original operaism in particular; as such, it is the only possible source of new value. All through the existence of capitalism, living labor has always been exploited by capital. What is different about the current situation, however, is the nature of what is being exploited.

Immaterial labor, i.e., labor which produces immaterial goods, has of course always existed. But the fact that it is now the dominant form of labor, the most crucial productive force, has important political implications. Put simply, the prototype of waged labor in today's world is work without a finished product: work that consists of activities such as communication, coordination, facilitating and overseeing cooperation between people (Virno 1996, 192). These types of activities, however, cannot be carried out unless certain preconditions are met. For example, the job of "facilitating cooperation" (what contemporary managers are expected to do (Budgen 2000, 153)) can only be performed if the people involved have a capacity to communicate, network, and cooperate with each other. This capacity – sometimes referred to as *general intellect* in post-operaist theory – cannot be manufactured by the manager or the capitalist class; it is an inherent characteristic of human society at a certain stage of its development. What is productive, then, is the entire social body of the Multitude (Hardt and Negri 2001, 403).

The fact that the entirety of the Multitude is the key productive force in today's world in turn implies that no aspect of our lives can be thought of as being outside capitalist relations. *"The powers of production are in fact today entirely biopolitical; in other words, they run throughout and institute directly not only production but also the entire realm of reproduction,"* (ibid, 364). This means that even those aspects of human existence that were previously thought to be free from capitalism are today productive. Just as the political power of Empire has no bounds and encompasses the entire planet, so that nothing is "outside" its scope, there is nothing "outside" capitalist relations.

In contrast to the creative power of the Multitude, the Empire is a purely reactive, even parasitic entity: *"Empire itself is not a positive reality. […] Each imperial action is a rebound of the resistance of the multitude that poses a new obstacle for the multitude to overcome,"* (ibid, 361). Just as, in Marxist theory, capital is "dead labor" which cannot produce any value itself,

only capture the value generated by the working class (i.e., living labor), Empire can capture some of the power inherent to the Multitude and use it both to extract value and strengthen its own rule. Indeed, a key strength of Empire (or of capital, of which Empire is the current expression) is its ability to adapt in response to a changing reality and to struggles of the Multitude against it. In fact, this is what pushes development forward, both on the terrain of production and on the terrain of sovereignty: *"The deterritorializing desire of the multitude is the motor that drives the entire process of capitalist development, and capital must constantly attempt to contain it,"* (ibid, 124). The question for political strategy, then, is how to mount a struggle to which capital will not be able to respond, which will truly put the existence of Empire in danger, rather than merely force it to reform.

The key to the logic of power in a postmodern world lies in a central paradox: the creative power of the Multitude is what sustains Empire; at the same time, it is what can bring Empire down – a potential source of resistance. From the point of view of Empire, then, the creative power of the Multitude must be controlled and exploited, but it must not be extinguished. Since power in its postmodern form consists in the production of subjectivities, the paradox is mirrored on this terrain as well: in order for the power of Empire to function, it is necessary *"that the political subject be fleeting and passive, while the producing and consuming agent is present and active,"* (ibid, 320).

Crucially, then, the Multitude already has all the tools necessary to defeat Empire. *"The deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary its destruction,"* (ibid, 61). What this means is that the Multitude can exist without Empire, but Empire cannot exist without the Multitude. It also means that the power which keeps Empire running is the same power that has the potential to destroy it. More importantly still, the very nature of this power will keep pushing it to fight against Empire: the essence of the Multitude is an unbound vitality, a "will to freedom", that will always necessarily struggle against any sort of oppression or outside rule. From the point of view of Empire, there is no permanent solution: to extinguish the power of the Multitude would be to deprive capitalism of the engine that drives it forward; to keep it alive is to put itself in constant danger of being overthrown.

An example illustrating this paradox is the mobility of the Multitude. *"Mobility and mass worker nomadism always express a refusal and a search for liberation,"* (ibid, 212). Mobility, nomadism, exodus – whatever the term used, and regardless of the specific motivations and

circumstances involved in each individual case, movement is one of the primary expressions of the inner nature of the Multitude, of its "will to freedom". *"Desertion and exodus are a powerful form of class struggle"* (ibid, 231), which is precisely what makes them dangerous to capital: it is an attempt to escape from its clutches. This is why Empire is forced into the paradoxical position of having to try and stop these movements, despite, on the one hand, the fact that it depends on them (*"Is it possible to imagine U.S. agriculture and service industries without Mexican migrant labor […]?"* (ibid, 397)) and, on the other, the fact that it is ultimately unable to do so: the only thing it can realistically do is criminalize the individuals undertaking these journeys (ibid, 398).

### *3.3.2 A postmodern form of power*

We have seen that the power of Empire is ultimately drawn from the vitality or creative power of the Multitude. But how exactly does the power of Empire function? As discussed in the previous section, Empire is a specifically postmodern form of power; it has certain characteristics which set it apart from previous forms of power. These, of course, need to be taken into account when formulating a strategy to counter it.

The first characteristic of postmodern power is its *immanence*: where modern and pre-modern power based its legitimacy on a source that was transcendental, i.e., located outside its realm, postmodern power has no "outside" and can therefore not have a transcendental legitimizing instance. What this means in less abstract terms is that, since "power" (or "politics", which in this context is essentially the same) does not have any "outside", it cannot be thought of as a separate sphere of human activity or experience. Modern political philosophy believed that the human subject has an essence outside of and/or prior to society; in postmodern society, this no longer holds. *"In Empire, no subjectivity is outside, and all places have been subsumed in a general non-place,"* (ibid, 353). Power is woven directly into the fabric of society, into our very lives. Consequently, any resistance to the power of Empire must come from within as well.

Closely linked to the immanent nature of power is the second characteristic of Empire: the political sphere can no longer be separated from the economic sphere. Just as power infuses society to the point where it is impossible to clearly separate them, relations of production permeate the sphere of politics, so that the two cannot be differentiated; in any case, the relative autonomy of the political is over: *"Today a notion of politics as an independent sphere of the determination of consensus and a sphere of mediation among conflicting social forces has very*

*little room to exist. Consensus is determined more significantly by economic factors,"* (ibid, 307). It follows logically that strategies of resistance need to reflect this: it would make no sense to lead the struggle on the terrain of the political when this terrain has effectively ceased to exist, or at least no longer is the place where power is located. In the postmodern world, then, resistance needs to be led on the terrain of production. The key advantage of the Multitude in this context lies in the fact that another type of distinction has also ceased to be meaningful: that between productive and reproductive labor. *"This wide landscape of biopolitical production allows us finally to recognize the full generality of the concept of proletariat,"* (ibid, 402). This means that, at least in theory, a much wider coalition can be mustered in support of the anti-capitalist struggle.

The third key feature of postmodern power is its network-like and deterritorialized character: power is diffuse; it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Postmodern power consists of the production of subjectivity and is "distributed" via communication networks. While there appear to be certain "hubs" or nodal points in the network (mostly corresponding to key financial centers), it is impossible to locate a "seat" of power; power is not tied to a specific geographical location. This has weakened the position of those struggling against the power of capital, since capital has more freedom of movement than ever before: *"Capital can withdraw from negotiation with a given local population by moving its site to another point in the global network,"* (ibid, 297). Therefore, a new approach is needed. In this context, too, the Multitude needs to use the features of the power of Empire to its advantage. Since power is everywhere, it can be attacked from anywhere. *"To achieve significance, every struggle must attack at the heart of Empire, at its strength. That fact, however, does not give priority to any geographical regions […]. On the contrary, the construction of Empire […] means that the virtual center of Empire can be attacked from any point,"* (ibid, 58-59). The key political task, then, lies in establishing a synergy between the various struggles.

The fourth characteristic of postmodern power is that it is *biopower*. As discussed above, power in today's world takes the form of production of subjectivity and is woven directly into our communities and our lives, rather than being a separate sphere or a force pressing on us from the outside. To put it somewhat poetically: just as, in the original operaist theory, the task for the working class was to fight against *itself qua capital*, the task today is to fight against the Empire within us. The key to a successful strategy lies in the paradoxical nature of the relationship between Empire and the Multitude: Empire requires its subjects to be both active

(as producers and consumers) and passive (as political subjects). *"On the terrain of the production and regulation of subjectivity, and in the disjunction between the political subject and the economic subject, it seems we can identify a real field of struggle,"* (ibid, 321). What is required is to transform ourselves in such a way as to repress the passive aspect and strengthen the active one: an *anthropological exodus* (ibid, 215).

A political strategy for the 21st century must properly account for the specificities of the nature of postmodern power and make use of its weaknesses. As we have seen, the key characteristic of power in today's world is its *immanence* and its nature as *biopower*: power is not a separate sphere; power is everywhere around us and even within us. The differentiations between politics and economics, between productive and reproductive labor, between power and the human subject, no longer make sense. Power has no specific seat or "place", it is diffuse, being "distributed" through a network.

### *3.3.3 The constituent power of Exodus*

There are two key advantages for the Multitude. The first one derives from the non-localized nature of power: since power is everywhere and nowhere, it can be attacked from anywhere; there is no longer any privileged place from which the attack is more likely to succeed, or which needs to be attacked first. This realization brings with it a powerful drive towards equality and solidarity among the Multitude: gone is the old socialist idea that the industrial working class in the developed countries needs to lead the struggle; today, anyone anywhere can challenge the power of Empire with the same chances of success as anyone else. The second advantage lies in the fact that it is the Multitude who holds the world's vitality or creative power, while Empire only uses it and reacts to it. This means that the Multitude already has all that is required to build a world in which it can live freely: the only thing to do is to free itself from the shackles of capital.

The strategy suggested by Hardt and Negri is that of *exodus* or desertion. Other words used in this context include nomadism, defection, refusal, or sabotage – all of these are essentially synonyms describing the ultimate form of political struggle. *"Whereas in the disciplinary era* sabotage *was the fundamental notion of resistance, in the era of imperial control it may be* desertion*,"* (ibid, 213). *Refusal* is the common denominator of these concepts. Exodus or desertion is the form taken by refusal in the context of Empire and postmodern power. The previous era – the one in which operaism was born – was characterized by a separation between the political and the economic sphere, with the latter dominating the former. Accordingly,

refusal took the form of *sabotage,* that is, blocking the process of production. In a postmodern world, power is everywhere; the only possible resistance, then, is *"the evacuation of the places of power,"* (ibid).

Words such as "exodus" or "refusal" may suggest an inherent negativity that would be difficult – if not impossible – to base a political strategy on; however, that would be to misunderstand their meaning in the context of post-operaism. The political strategy of Exodus is rooted in the so-called virtuality, i.e., the creative power residing in the Multitude. *"These virtual, constituent powers […] are completely positive since their 'being-against' is a 'being-for', in other words, a resistance that becomes love and community,"* (ibid, 361). What it entails, then, is not just a retreat from the Empire, but also, simultaneously, the construction of a counter-Empire, a *"struggling within and constructing against Empire",* (ibid, 218). As such, it is an expression of strength, not of weakness: *"Defection stands at the opposite pole to the desperate notion of 'You have nothing to lose but your chains.' It is postulated, rather, on the basis of a latent wealth, on an abundance of possibilities,"* (Virno 1996, 198).

This strategy has two main features which make it work. Firstly, it counteracts the key strength of capital (or Empire), namely its ability to adapt in response to resistance and struggle, ultimately using the creative power of the Multitude against it. It does so by simply refusing to play by Empire's rules: *"The 'exit' modifies the conditions within which the conflict takes place, rather than presupposes it as an irremovable horizon,"* (ibid). In Kathi Weeks' interpretation, this corresponds to the shift from a dialectical logic to a logic of antagonism. Put simply, *negating* capitalism is not enough, since capital itself functions according to a dialectical logic, thus being able to neutralize any such opposition by treating it as a mere antithesis which can be recuperated within a new synthesis (Weeks 2015, 129). What is needed instead is a logic of antagonism: the construction of an alternative model that is *"different rather than merely reactive,"* (ibid, 130). Secondly, the strategy of Exodus avoids the pitfalls of the two-stage transition to communism,[13] embraced in its various forms by most versions of Marxism. Exodus has both a destructive and a constructive moment which can be distinguished analytically but not in practice: "communism" is not an abstract utopia but a *process* (ibid, 128). I will discuss this point in more detail in the final part of this chapter.

[13] "Communism" is the declared end goal of the strategy, but Hardt and Negri do not clearly define what is exactly meant by it – quite deliberately so, for reasons that are explored in what follows.

Having defined the main contours of the strategy of Exodus, one needs to ask what it entails specifically, in our day-to-day practice. In this context, the main strength of the theory may also be its main weakness. Since "communism" is not a utopia, it is impossible to say anything definite in advance about what it will look like, or even how exactly it will come about. Hardt and Negri only give a few pointers. Firstly, *"the refusal of work and authority [...] is the beginning of liberatory politics,"* (Hardt and Negri 2001, 204). In other words: refusing our current subjectivity as "producers", created and forced upon us by capital, is a necessary first step. The creation of an alternative subjectivity happens simultaneously, in ways that cannot be foreseen but can only grow out of practice (ibid, 205). Secondly, transforming the Multitude into a political subject capable of collective action, including but not limited to making relatively specific political demands, is a key precondition for the functioning of the strategy. Let us explore this point in more detail.

### *3.3.4 Forming a political subject*

The Multitude as a political subject was born gradually over the course of the 20th century, formed in and by a succession of various workers' and liberation struggles (ibid, 394). Each of these struggles was driven by the Multitude's inherent vitality or "will to freedom" and in turn it shaped both the Multitude itself and the power of Empire, which, as we have seen, did not come into being at once but developed progressively in response to a series of challenges. Indeed, if we accept the thesis that liberation (or communism, to use the term used by Hardt and Negri) is a *process*, rather than a utopia or even a political goal, this is the only possible way for a political subject to come into being: a process in which new subjectivities are born out of revolutionary practice.

The Multitude properly becomes a political subject by defining its own *telos* (ibid, 395). In other words, once its actions are no longer merely reactive and spontaneous, but start being directed at defining and pursuing its own purpose. *Telos* is not to be understood as a utopia or a political goal in a narrow sense: *"The teleology of the multitude is theurgical; it consists in the possibility of directing technologies and production towards its own joy and its own increase of power,"* (ibid, 396). As discussed above, the Multitude already has all that is needed, i.e., the living labor, the creative power, the productive force, the vitality. All that is needed is to set these free from the control of Empire.

Once it has formed into a political subject, the Multitude can start to *act politically,* that is, *"confront directly and with an adequate consciousness the central repressive operations of*

*Empire,"* (ibid, 399). This, of course, is still rather abstract – necessarily so, since it is impossible to foresee the new subjectivities that will be born out of the struggle. It is nevertheless possible to identify the first three political demands that will need to be made by the Multitude, once formed into a political subject. The first one is that of *global citizenship*: this is a recognition both of the Multitude's inherent drive to move freely and of the fact that in contemporary capitalism, migration is always inevitably a lived reality (ibid, 400). The second one is that of *social wage*: this is a reflection of the fact that in a world where productive and reproductive labor can no longer be differentiated, and where the entire social body of the Multitude is productive for capital, it makes no sense to measure an individual's labor; therefore, every single member of the Multitude is entitled to a wage (ibid, 403). The third one is that of the right to reappropriation: primarily of means of production, but in the postmodern context, these *"are increasingly integrated into the minds and bodies of the multitude,"* (ibid, 406). What it amounts to, then, is essentially *"the multitude's right to self-control and autonomous self-production,"* (ibid, 407).

## 3.4 What is relevant for today?

The political strategy of Exodus is designed to reflect the specific nature of power in the postmodern world, using the strength residing in the oppressed and exploited multitude as its basis. In today's world, there is no "politics" as a separate sphere of human activity: power permeates the entirety of society, as well as the minds and bodies of individuals. Power takes the form of biopower; it works by producing human subjectivities, with the result that it is indistinguishable from one's own will. It is distributed via communication networks, making it impossible to pin to a specific location. Despite these undeniable strengths, Empire – the carrier of power in our world – also has a key weakness: it is not productive. Productivity, in the sense of creative power, belongs to the Multitude. This is the crux of the strategy of Exodus: the aim is to free this productivity from being exploited by capital, instead turning it towards the Multitude's own goals. Exodus in this context refers to a move which is destructive and constructive at the same time: a retreat with the aim to carve out a space in which to build an alternative world, an exit allowing to redraw the rules of the game. This "two-in-one" move is the only thing that can create new human subjectivities, which is the only way to take power: the Exodus rejects our self-understanding as "producers" or "members of capitalist society" and replaces it with another one, one that is not merely a negation, but a true alternative. What are the key strengths, challenges, and open questions of this political strategy?

### 3.4.1 Do words matter?

Firstly, there is the question of the role played by language, communication, and ideas in political struggle. The influence of Foucauldian thought is obvious in *Empire*, and yet, in an apparent contradiction, a certain attachment to Marxism (and materialism more generally) is present as well. This raises additional questions about the base and the superstructure, as well as about the importance of specific words or concepts in political work.

*"Postmodernization and the passage to Empire involve a real convergence of the realms that used to be designated as base and superstructure,"* (ibid, 385). In an era of immaterial labor, language and communication are the key productive forces. In an era of absolute immanence, it is impossible to distinguish different spheres of human activity or experience. The difference between structure and superstructure, between productive and reproductive labor has collapsed, certainly in practice, but it could be argued that they have ceased to make sense conceptually as well. With this move, then, much of Marxist theory is abandoned. One important point remains, however: it is still production that determines the character of society. Industrial production creates a disciplinary society; immaterial or informational production creates a society of control.

In a postmodern society, power is exercised by the *production of subjectivities*. This is a concept that appears to blur the distinction between materialism and idealism. While *subjectivity* in itself belongs to the world of ideas, the fact that it is the vehicle of power means that it undeniably has a tangible, material impact on the world. Meanwhile, *production* has traditionally been understood in a material sense, though of course, in the era of immaterial labor, its outcomes are not necessarily – not even typically – physical objects. To complicate matters still further, even production of immaterial goods is not necessarily itself immaterial or free from material constraints. As argued by the Frankfurt School or critical social theory more generally, knowledge production cannot be thought independently of the material conditions within which it is happening (Calhoun 1995, 19). This point has become more relevant than ever now that the "knowledge worker" is the paradigmatic worker of the age. What this means for a (potential) political strategy is that similar to how base and superstructure have become indistinguishable, the distinction between materialism and idealism has ceased to be meaningful. The struggle therefore needs to be led both on the terrain of ideas and language and with more tangible, physical means.

Indeed, Hardt and Negri argue explicitly that *"destroying [corruption and exploitation] in words is as urgent as doing so in deeds,"* (Hardt and Negri 2001, 404). This, however, does not imply that it amounts to an ideological battle: words and ideas are relevant only insofar as they are part of the production process. "Fighting with words" can be effective when it happens on the terrain of production, precisely *because* it can hinder or block production. In contrast, from a purely idealistic standpoint, the idea is that winning the battle on the ideological field (i.e., the superstructure) will have consequences on the material field as well (i.e., the base).

The most obvious difference between operaism and post-operaism is that they are using different terminologies. The "working class" becomes the "Multitude", "capital" becomes "Empire", "refusal" or "sabotage" becomes "Exodus". Given that, as discussed above, words matter just as much as deeds, we need to ask why this shift occurred and whether it accomplishes its goal. There are two key aspects of the problem – a theoretical and a practical one. From a theoretical perspective, what matters is a concept's ability to reflect reality in a way that is both adequate and theoretically fruitful. Changing terminology, therefore, is meant to reflect the fact that social reality has changed to the point where the original terms are no longer adequate and therefore cannot be used to build a working theory. From a practical perspective, one needs to also consider the terms' effectiveness as direct tools of political struggle: is this word something that can be used as a rallying cry, a basis for a shared identity? For example, is "Exodus" a good name for a political strategy, implying, as it does, a certain passivity? Is "Multitude" – a very abstract term which will not mean much to anyone not familiar with post-operaist theory – really a better way to build a sense of shared identity than "working class", a term which admittedly may be somewhat tainted ideologically, but has the undeniable advantage of being fairly self-explanatory? Or were the terms intended as purely theoretical tools, requiring a subsequent "translation" into political practice? If so, what might such translation look like? Valid arguments can be made for both continuity and innovation; I will not attempt to settle the argument here.

### *3.4.2 What is collective action?*

Just as it was the case for the original operaist strategy of refusal, the strategy of Exodus can only hope to succeed if it is a collective political action. However, given the nature of the Multitude as the revolutionary subject, what it means to act collectively is even more difficult to define than was the case with the working class in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Multitude is the revolutionary subject, the only possible agent of change in the context of Empire. It has two key defining characteristics. Firstly, it is the possessor of living labor (variously also termed productivity, creative force, or virtuality), and, therefore, the engine that drives the whole capitalist system forward. Secondly, it is inclusive and non-homogenous – in contrast to more "traditional" political subjects such as "the people" or "the working class", all of which are characterized by a homogeneity on the inside and a radical differentiation from the outside, which make it possible to conceptualize them as a unitary actor with a single will and a capacity for political action.[14] Crucially, these characteristics of the Multitude do not interfere with its capacity for collective political action – quite the contrary: they are what makes political action possible in the face of the power of Empire. To put it simply: to counter a postmodern form of power, a postmodern political subject is needed.

But how can an entity that is by definition non-unitary be said to have agency? What makes the Multitude a political subject? According to Hardt and Negri, the Multitude becomes a political subject when it defines its own *telos,* when it decides to put its productivity and creative power not in the service of capital, but of its own joy and wellbeing (Hardt and Negri 2001, 396).

Here, again, it is important to remember that power in a postmodern society takes the form of *production of subjectivities*. This is clearly a process that has both an individual aspect (subjectivity) and a collective one (in a postmodern world, production of any kind is always necessarily social in character). Just like the concept of *production of subjectivities* blurs the line between the world of ideas and the material world, making it both possible and necessary for a political strategy to take both of them into account, it blurs the line between individual and collective action. Changing one's own self-understanding or self-identification may just be an individual action with no political meaning – but if many individuals in many different places do it at the same time, guided by the same motivation and reasoning, political consequences are inevitable. This is what Paolo Virno refers to as *"acting-in-concert"* (Virno 1996, 194) – a type of collective action that does not require "sameness", only a capacity for cooperation, i.e., for participation in the general intellect. The assumption is that the kind of

[14] This does not necessarily mean that their will is easy to identify, let alone pursue, in practice. See the final part of the previous chapter for a discussion of this topic.

communication and cooperation available to human beings in a postmodern society makes it possible to act collectively without giving up our individuality.

The final problem with the collective action of the Multitude is that action can be "captured" by capital and used for its own purposes. How can this be avoided? This is where the strength of the strategy of Exodus lies: as discussed above, Exodus means an exit in order to build something new; a redrawing of the rules of the game. An action cannot be "absorbed" by capitalism if it lies outside what according to the logic of capital constitutes the horizon of possibility. The term "Exodus" may imply passivity to some, but the idea behind the strategy of Exodus is everything but passive: it is not enough to be against capitalism, it is essential to also be *for* something – even though the desired alternative will always necessarily be only vaguely defined. As long as we are not capable of imagining, not even in very rough contours, a world other than a capitalist one, capitalism will always win – no matter how strong the resistance. The self-interest of the Multitude is the place to start when looking for alternative worlds.

### *3.4.3 The means is the end*

The key issue with the strategy of Exodus is that it is very abstract and does not offer much in terms of concrete steps to be taken or even a very precise vision of what the outcome should be. There are only a few concrete political demands in *Empire*, such as global citizenship or a "social wage". Seen from the right perspective, however, these shortcomings are in fact strengths.

Refusal of work, as conceptualized by original operaism, amounts to both the *content* and the *measure* of self-valorization (or liberation) of the working class. It is the goal and the method at the same time; it also offers a relatively simple way to measure the degree of working-class liberation – without implying that it is necessarily a linear process. The strategy of Exodus is based on the same principle: Exodus is the process of carving out a space within which alternative practices and relationships can be pursued (Weeks 2015, 122). When a "liberated" space is created or extended, the positive effects can be felt immediately, and, in general, the more such spaces there are, the easier it becomes to create even more, though this in no way implies that it is an automatic process that cannot be stopped or even reverted. According to Kathi Weeks, this amounts to a true revolution in leftist political thought: there is no means-to-an-end instrumental rationality, no two-step strategy, no quasi-religious belief in the inevitability of liberation (ibid).

The strategy of Exodus, therefore, solves or sidesteps many of the issues that have plagued "traditional" leftist thought. Firstly, it offers a solution to the question of utopianism. The key problem with utopias is that they are both harmful and necessary: any progressive political program that does not offer a sufficiently coherent and compelling vision of the future will struggle to be persuasive or even credible; at the same time, a utopia that is *too* specific may inadvertently cause more harm than good, as the experience of the "communist" regimes of the 20th century demonstrates. By suggesting that *"the negative and positive moments of refusal can be distinguished analytically, but not isolated from one another practically,"* (ibid, 129), i.e., that the method and the outcome are one, the strategy of Exodus offers a whole new approach to the problem. There is such a thing as a utopia, but it is not located in the distant future: the utopia is always already being realized, and it keeps evolving as the liberation process advances.

A second and somewhat related issue which the strategy of Exodus avoids is the problem of the tension between tactics and strategy. Because it collapses the distinction between the means and the end, it does not have to wrestle with the age-old question whether the end justifies the means. Because the method and the outcome are the same, there can be no question of "tactical" moves that serve the long-term strategy and goals of the Multitude but go against its immediate or short-term interests. For traditional leftist theory, including Tronti and the original operaism, the need for tactics was the main reason why a political party is of crucial importance: while the workers' intuitive understanding of their interests and long-term goals is generally correct, it does not necessarily translate into knowing what specific steps need to be taken to achieve those goals.[15] Once the idea of "tactics" is rejected, then, the question of political organization is greatly simplified. While it is still true that, as discussed above, only a collective action can be a political action, there is no need for the kind of military-like discipline required for a Leninist-style party.

Finally, the strategy of Exodus is much more egalitarian in character than other leftist strategies. There is no privileged place, time, or actor; anyone anywhere can start and lead the liberatory process at any time. This does not mean that all such attempts are objectively equally likely to succeed, it means simply that their chances of success are determined solely by factors that are historically contingent. The egalitarian or democratic character of the strategy is of

[15] See previous chapter for a more detailed discussion of this topic.

course a value in itself, but it also significantly raises the likelihood of success: the more different perspectives and experiences can be drawn upon, and the more different parts or aspects of the system can be attacked, the higher the chance that at least some of the struggles will succeed.[16]

[16] Capitalism is of course realizing the value of multiple perspectives too – which is why "diversity" has been the order of the day for quite some time now.

# 4 Feminist encounters with work and refusal

## 4.1 Historical context

Feminism's critical encounter with the concept of work goes back to the Marxist feminism of the 1960s and 1970s and is perhaps the single most important achievement of that theoretical tradition. The relationship between Marxism and feminism has always been fraught with difficulties. Their "unhappy marriage", as it is famously called in Heidi Hartmann's essay (Hartmann 1984), can be explained by their different priorities, both in terms of analysis and of practical politics. Marxists and Marxism-inspired movements have for the most part advocated for women's rights, but class has always been the privileged analytical tool as well as the main political rallying point. Feminism, at least in some of its versions, readily acknowledges the importance of class but is nevertheless primarily interested in describing and subsequently challenging oppression based on gender (Pugh 2000, 323). Marxist feminism attempts to reconcile these differences by applying concepts and analytical tools derived from Marxism to explain the oppression of women; work plays a central role in this analysis.

Marxist feminism's concept of work was developed for the most part over the course of the so-called Domestic Labor Debate which was going on in the late 1960s and early 1970s, mostly in Italy, the United States, and the United Kingdom. In all these countries, this was a very specific context, characterized on the one hand by a rise of progressive social movements of different kinds, usually collectively referred to as the New Left and, on the other hand, by the onset of the economic crisis of the 1970s, which ultimately lead to the end of the Keynesian consensus of the postwar decades and the rise of neoliberalism. The political expression of the debate can be found in the Wages for Housework movement, which was first initiated in Italy but later spread to other countries. Its declared goal was to have housework recognized as work and adequately remunerated.

Housework was analyzed using the concept of reproduction which goes back to Marx and Engels, though it was never fully developed in their writings (see for example Himmelweit 1991). The key argument of the debate and of the movement can be summed up as follows: the unpaid work done by women in their households serves the purpose of reproducing labor-power (hence the term reproductive labor), both in terms of the day-to-day replenishment of workers' ability to perform their jobs and in terms of birthing and bringing up the next generation of workers; it therefore fulfills an important function within the capitalist system

and should be recognized as such. The argument operates on two levels. Firstly, it seeks to challenge the view, widely accepted at the time, that housework is not "work" but a part of a woman's "nature". Secondly, it highlights the fact that the family, at the time thought to be a haven from capitalist relations, in fact serves a function within the capitalist system. The similarity with the operaist concept of social factory, which I discuss in more detail in the next section, is certainly not a coincidence given that two of the leading figures of the Wages for Housework movement, Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, both had ties to Italian autonomists.

Just like operaism lost its momentum in the late 1970s and was reinvented at the turn of the millennium, this time in application to new concepts and new realities such as post-Fordism or globalization, Marxist (or socialist) feminism was pushed into the background by other, less radical and more academic forms of feminist thought in the 1980s but has been making a limited comeback in the last two decades. The context has changed significantly since the 1970s. On the one hand, feminism has to a certain degree been coopted by the establishment, in the form of liberal feminism and the diversity discourse. On the other hand, phenomena such as globalization or precarization of work have created new challenges for women worldwide. Contemporary Marxist feminism seeks to address the shortcomings of mainstream feminism as well as to reflect the new realities of the 21st century, especially globalization (Hennessy and Ingraham 1997, 2).

The concept of reproductive labor, initially developed by Marxist feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, found application in feminist economics as well as in critical globalization studies. While the former seeks to highlight the importance of unpaid domestic labor to the economy, with many economists attempting to calculate its contribution to GDP, the latter uses the term in analyses of the international division of labor, showing how reproductive labor, just like productive labor, is being outsourced to less developed parts of the world where it can be done in more exploitative (hence cheaper) ways. In Western Europe and North America, women's participation in the labor market increased dramatically between 1960 and 2000 (see for example Toossi and Morisi 2017), which was in part made possible by shifting reproductive labor – previously done by unpaid full-time housewives – onto women of the Global South, either in their countries or as migrant workers in countries of the Global North.

The key achievement of the domestic labor debate and the Marxist feminism of the 1970s has been to expand the content of the concept of "work" (Weeks 2011, 24). Building on these

efforts and in a certain sense continuing the debate on what counts as "work", feminist theorists and sociologists have developed additional concepts, the most well-known of which is perhaps *affective labor* coined and first described in Arlie Hochschild's *The Managed Heart* (1983). Other concepts include *care work* and *emotional labor*, both of which have been very present in the wider public debate in recent years.

For the Wages for Housework movement, recognizing housework as work is the *"first step towards refusing it,"* (Federici 2012, 19). In keeping with this tradition, some contemporary feminists have discussed what it would mean to refuse to work – referring not just to work in the narrow sense, i.e., waged work, but *any* work. As we will see in the following sections, refusal of work is especially tricky where reproductive labor is concerned. Indeed, dedicating our creative powers to the "free reproduction of the working class", as opposed to capitalist production, is the declared goal of refusal of work as formulated by the operaists. Silvia Federici and Kathi Weeks have both sought to formulate a strategy of refusal of work which includes reproduction in its conception of "work"; similar attempts have also been made by ecofeminism.

## 4.2 Key terms and ideas

### *4.2.1 Social reproduction and reproductive labor*

In the context of Marxist thought, reproduction means *"the ability of whole social systems to keep going, "reproducing" themselves, by means of the processes that define and determine them, laying the foundations for their own continuation,"* (Himmelweit 1991, 197). The concept of reproduction was first developed by Marx himself. Since labor-power and its unique ability to generate new value is what fuels the capitalist system, securing an abundance of it is a chief concern for capital. In Volume 1 of Capital, Marx describes the two aspects of this process. Reproduction of labor-power requires, on the one hand, the basic physical or biological reproduction of workers: food and rest, but also the creation of the next generation of workers. On the other hand, it means reproducing the working class as working class, i.e., reproducing the class relation (Marx 1992, 711-724).

For the Marxist feminists who further developed the concept, the key issue with Marx's formulation is that it naturalizes it: *"The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital. But* the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation*,"* (Marx 1992, 718,

emphasis added). In relation to reproduction, Marx apparently fails to apply his own method of historic materialism to deconstruct the phenomenon, treating it instead as an ahistorical, natural, *instinctive* occurrence. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels attempts to address this inadequacy by analyzing how the social organization of reproduction changed throughout history; however, in the eyes of the feminist theorists of the 1960s and 1970s, he does not go far enough in recognizing the role of reproduction in the capitalist system.

Reproduction in the context of Marxist feminism is conceptualized as labor; labor which, historically, has mostly been done by women for free and treated as invisible (or not properly counting as "labor") by political theorists and the society at large – despite being crucial to the functioning of capitalism (or, indeed, *any* socioeconomic system). Reproduction has three main components, which I will now explore in more detail.

Firstly, it is the day-to-day replenishing of workers' ability to perform their jobs: *"Housework is much more than house cleaning. It is servicing the wage earners physically, emotionally, sexually, getting them ready for work day after day,"* (Federici 2012, 31). Cooking, cleaning, and running a household more generally are all key parts of this job, but emotional labor is no less important: "absorbing" workers' negative feelings generated by their jobs and taking care of their overall emotional well-being is an important function of the family, which is why it has often been considered a "haven" free from capitalist relations (ibid, 35). Secondly, it is intergenerational reproduction, i.e., childbirth and childrearing. Crucially, this includes socialization: *"[Housework] is taking care of our children—the future workers—assisting them from birth through their school years, ensuring that they too perform in the ways expected of them under capitalism,"* (Federici 2012, 31, emphasis added). As mentioned above, already Marx stressed that reproduction involves the reproduction of the working class not as people, but as workers: individuals with a specific self-understanding and patterns of behavior. The family plays an important role in instilling the required values and behaviors. Thirdly, reproduction involves reproduction of the class relation. This is the only component which cannot be conceptualized as labor: the class relation is both a condition and a byproduct of capitalist production. As explained by Marx, *"[t]he capitalist process of production [...] produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer,"* (Marx 1992, 724). There is certainly an overlap between this process and the socialization

aspect: just like the family or the school, the workplace teaches and enforces certain behavioral norms. Marx however is more interested in the structural aspect: what makes worker a worker is the separation between labor-power and means of production; in other words, the fact that they are selling their labor-power to the capitalist. This relation is realized in and perpetuated by participation in the production process.

During the first debate about reproductive labor in the 1960s and 1970s, the male breadwinner and full-time housewife model was still the norm in Western societies.[17] Capital's counteroffensive in the form of neoliberalism and globalization brought with it major changes to the organization not just of production, but of reproduction as well. In the developed world, the declining value of labor-power meant that at the turn of the millennium only very few families could comfortably live on a single income (Fraser 1994, 592). Given that the need for reproduction did not decline, an alternative solution was needed to replace the full-time housewives of the previous decades: reproductive labor has increasingly been converted into waged work organized through the market and/or outsourced to women from marginalized groups and in less developed countries (Federici 2012, 50).[18] Meanwhile, in many parts of the Global South, reproduction has become all but impossible. In Silvia Federici's words: *"It is a measure of the degree to which the reproduction of the workforce has been underdeveloped that worldwide, millions are facing untold hardships and the prospect of death and incarceration in order to migrate,"* (ibid, 103).

The key point of contention in the debate about reproduction and reproductive labor has been the nature of its relation to production and to capital. While some authors argued that reproductive labor, while essential to capitalism, cannot be considered productive because it does not create surplus value (Seccombe 1974, 10), others claimed that it directly contributes to the accumulation of capital by producing the key ingredient of capitalist production, namely labor-power, and should therefore be considered productive (Dalla Costa and James 1975, 33). This latter view is clearly influenced by the operaist concept of the social factory – a connection which Silvia Federici explicitly mentions in the introduction to *Revolution at Point Zero*

[17] This so-called "family wage" model was the basis of government policies in the postwar decades, despite the fact that there was always a substantial number of families for whom it was not the lived reality (Fraser 1994, 591).

[18] Following a line of thought known from operaism, Silvia Federici explains this development as capital's reaction to the challenges of the women's struggles of the 1960s and 1970s: their demands for access to waged work, motivated mainly by the financial independence it would provide them, were used for capital's own advantage.

(Federici 2012, 7). Post-operaism, as we have seen, takes the argument one step further, arguing that at the current stage of development, there is nothing outside capitalist relations anymore, making the distinction between reproduction and production impossible, even meaningless. From the perspective of feminist theory and its version of the strategy of refusal, however, the distinction is crucial, for two reasons. Firstly, as pointed out by Federici, just like it is impossible to separate labor-power from the person of the worker to whom it belongs, it is impossible to say if reproductive work serves the person or capital: it is always both (ibid, 99). This means that refusal of reproductive work needs to take a different form than the refusal of productive work. Secondly, reproductive labor is a gendered phenomenon. As argued by Kathi Weeks, this means that refusing work (whether productive or reproductive) will have different consequences for men and for women; any political strategy based on refusal of work needs to account for that (Weeks 2011, 162).

### *4.2.2 Commons*

The term "commons" refers to a resource to which all members of society have access. In its modern usage, it was popularized by Garrett Hardin in a 1968 article *The Tragedy of the Commons,* in which he argued that an unlimited access to a shared resource will lead to its overuse, possibly to the point of destroying it altogether. The post-2000 period saw a renewed interest in the concept, this time mostly framed in positive terms, as a potential alternative to private property and a solution to the problems created by the shortcomings of capitalism. According to Silvia Federici, there are two main explanations for this development. Firstly, the failure of the Soviet model of socialism meant that there was a need for other alternatives to capitalism. Secondly, the neoliberal push to privatize more and more previously shared resources and introduce the market logic into new areas of life has heightened the awareness of the dangers that are connected with this development (Federici 2012, 139). In contemporary theory, the concept of commons is often used alongside the concept of primitive accumulation, to which it provides a kind of negative backdrop: primitive accumulation is conceptualized as the process of privatizing what had previously been accessible to all (i.e., commons); the term *commoning*, meanwhile, describes the opposite process. This connection is made, among others, by David Harvey (Harvey 2005), but also Federici herself, as we will see later.

Silvia Federici engages with commons on two levels: in *Caliban and the witch*, she offers an account of the original commons, as they were understood and practiced in medieval Europe;

in her essay *Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation* (republished in Federici 2012), she reclaims the concept for contemporary feminist politics.

In medieval Europe, commons were *"meadows, forests, lakes, wild pastures"* (Federici 2004, 17) that could be freely used by anyone; for the many landless or near-landless peasants, the commons were crucial to reproduction (ibid, 73). The commons also had an important social function: "*[b]eside encouraging collective decision-making and work cooperation, the commons were the material foundation upon which peasant solidarity and sociality could thrive,"* (ibid). The idea that any shared or communal resource will necessarily be overused to the point of depletion, treated as a matter of course by late 20th century economists, does not appear to have any basis in fact: medieval peasants were apparently perfectly capable of collectively managing their shared resources in a way that prevented this from happening. Additionally, access to the commons was especially crucial for women, since it allowed them to gain a certain amount of social standing and power. Once all land was privatized and the commons ceased to exist, women were confined to the home and tied to reproductive labor (ibid, 77).

In contemporary context, the question that poses itself is: how can commons become the foundation of a non-capitalist economy (Federici 2012, 141)? Using the phenomenon of urban gardens as a paradigmatic example of 21st century commons, Federici sketches out a political strategy and an alternative economic system based around commons. *"The gardens are far more than a source of food security. They are centers of sociality, knowledge production, cultural and intergenerational exchange,"* (ibid). Just like the medieval version, the contemporary incarnation of the common is not only about sharing resources; it also fulfills an important social function in fostering and providing space for a more community-based way of life.

## 4.3 Refusal of work as a feminist strategy

### *4.3.1 Recognizing work as the first step towards refusing it*

One of the manifestoes of the Wages for Housework movement, written by Silvia Federici in 1975, is entitled *Wages against Housework*. As the title suggests, the real or final goal of the movement was not in fact to receive payment for domestic work, it was to be freed from this work; the demand for wage was only a means to this end.

*"It should be clear […] that when we struggle for a wage we do not struggle to enter capitalist relations, because we have never been out of them. We struggle to break capital's plan for women […]. Wages for housework, then, is a revolutionary demand not because by itself it destroys capital, but because it forces capital to restructure social relations in terms more favorable to us and consequently more favorable to the unity of the class. In fact, to demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do this work. It means precisely the opposite. To say that we want wages for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and its more insidious character as femininity," (Federici 2012, 19, emphasis added).*

Wages for Housework was not simply another political movement struggling for better working conditions, it was a *revolutionary perspective*. It demanded nothing less than a complete restructuring of the way social reproduction is managed and the first step towards this goal was to make invisible work visible, in other words, to redefine what counts as work in our society.

The first concern was demanding the recognition of domestic or household labor as *work* rather than an expression of "love" or "women's nature" as it was seen at the time (ibid, 16). The Wages for Housework movement was not especially interested in exploring how the status quo came to be, the goal was to simply point out the reality and demand change. The question of the historical development of the gender division of labor was thoroughly explored by Silvia Federici later in *Caliban and the witch*. She dates the beginning of the phenomenon to the 16$^{th}$ and 17$^{th}$ centuries and claims that it was one of the key conditions that made possible the development of capitalism, along with primitive accumulation in the form of enclosures of previously public lands or resources and land expropriation, both from the peasant population in Europe and by way of colonization. The process by which the gender division of labor was instituted had two key components. Firstly, the suppression of certain forms of traditional medical knowledge led to women being deprived of control over the reproductive function of their bodies. Secondly, they were denied access to waged work, which had become the only means of subsistence for the newly landless former peasants, making women economically dependent on their husbands. Compounding this development was a discourse which defined women as "non-workers": *"[m]arriage was now seen as a woman's true career,"* (Federici

2004, 105). The devaluation of women's labor to the point of invisibility is therefore inextricably tied to the beginnings of capitalism.

In the first phase of the domestic labor debate, the focus was on typical household tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. This labor might have been classified as "not work" by the dominant discourse at the time but arguing that it was in fact work was not that difficult, given that these are relatively concrete tasks or result-oriented activities which may conceivably be done by other actors or organized in other ways. As the debate moved forward, however, it became clear that social reproduction encompasses even more than previously thought. The core idea shared by this version of Marxist feminism with operaism and post-operaism is that work, as it is usually understood, tells only a part of the story: there are many other ways in which we, knowingly or otherwise, contribute to the accumulation of capital and the continuing working of capitalism. Emotional labor was one of the first additions to the list: in *Wages against Housework,* Silvia Federici famously claims that *"[…] capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking,"* (Federici 2012, 19). Directly inspired by the concept of the social factory, these authors went even further, arguing that the housewife's very *being* is "money for capital".

What makes the destiny of the housewife particularly problematic is that she becomes identified with her work, precisely because she is unwaged. The wage is a social contract; as a waged worker, one is separate from one's work. One may change jobs; one may hate one's job (as many indeed do). The housewife, being unwaged, does not have this luxury: her work is part of her personality, a natural inclination (ibid, 16). This line of argument is particularly interesting since it prefigures later debates on the character of work in post-Fordism: as we have seen, capitalism at the current stage of development demands and productively uses not just the work of our hands and brains, but also our affects, our personalities, our relationships. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to tell where the worker ends and the person begins.

The domestic labor debate appears to anticipate later developments in the world of work in other ways too. In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale,* first published in 1986, Maria Mies foretells a trend she refers to as *housewifization*: the growing atomization, flexibility, and precariousness of work; in other words, developments by which waged work increasingly comes to resemble domestic work, particularly in its most problematic aspects. In addition to the identification of the person with their work, as discussed above, the housewife faces three key problems. The first is her isolation in the home, which makes it impossible to

solidarize and organize with others in the same position; this is a problem shared by those working in today's so-called gig economy. The second is the blurred or outright missing distinction between worktime and non-work time. A woman's work is never done, as the saying goes; similarly, in many of today's ultraflexible jobs, workers are never truly off work, they are expected to always be available in case they are needed on short notice. The third is the devaluation and invisibility of her work, which makes it hard to muster the social power required to mount a struggle. This, too, is a challenge faced by those in today's "unskilled" jobs.[19]

What are the key takeaways from the feminist debate about work? Defining what is and is not "work" is crucial, because it is the necessary first step towards refusing work. At the same time, in the post-Fordist world, this has become extremely difficult, in many cases even impossible. When we focus on social reproduction, the question of "what exactly is work" is even more important – and even more difficult. Thinking about activities such as childrearing, elder care, or offering emotional support to loved ones, we certainly would not want to live in a world where they have been eliminated. Yet they undeniably play a role in keeping capitalism alive. The question, then, is the following: What is it in the current organization of social reproduction that makes these activities into "work" or "productive"? How can we organize reproduction – and life in general – so that reproductive activities are not "work"? I explore two attempts at answering this question in the following sections.

### *4.3.2 Kathi Weeks: Utopian demands*

The strategy proposed by Kathi Weeks in *The Problem with Work* builds on many of the elements from both the Wages for Housework movement and the operaist version of refusal of work. The key difference in her approach is that it is significantly less materialist. For operaists and the early Marxist feminists, the problem was above all in the structure of capitalism and the material or physical power of capital. Weeks focuses instead on the ideological aspect, arguing with Max Weber that financial pressure alone would not be enough to make people work: *"Material need […] is not the only, or even necessarily the most effective, inducement to work. The moral justification for hard work for long hours thus serves to accomplish what neither raising nor lowering wages alone can do,"* (Weeks 2011, 44). The most immediate

[19] Interestingly, the Covid-19 pandemic showed that many of these "invisible" jobs are in fact precisely those that are most crucial to keep society running. This sparked a debate at the time but from today's standpoint does not seem to have had any lasting effects on the state of affairs.

reason behind the fact that we all work so much, then, is what Weeks analyzes under the name of *work ethic*: an ideology according to which work is a moral obligation and a goal in itself. Refusal of work in this context amounts to a refusal of the *ideology* of work.

The specific strategy proposed by Weeks is that of the *utopian demand.* This is, in essence, a discursive strategy which brings together the utopian with the realistic, and the revolutionary with the reformist, in order to combine the strengths of both. The power of utopia lies in its power to denaturalize seemingly natural phenomena and open up political imagination; the power of the demand lies in its specificity and achievability within the limits of the current socioeconomic system. Their connection avoids the dilemma, faced by the Left since the beginning, of whether the focus should be on improving the immediate situation of the oppressed, knowing that this ultimately stabilizes the system, or on struggling to radically reform or even topple the system. A utopian demand can both have an immediate effect within the current system and be a catalyst for a more radical change: *"While remaining grounded in concrete possibilities, the demand has to be enough of a game changer to be able to provide an expansive perspective,"* (ibid, 220).

What are the demands that could have such an effect? Weeks formulates two, both of them rooted in the wider tradition of refusal of work. The first one is for basic income. Seen by Weeks as a successor to the demand for wages for housework, it works on two different levels. Firstly, it reflects the fact that in post-Fordist economy, the connection between work and income appears highly arbitrary and thus difficult to defend: *"[…] both the labor of production and the labor of reproduction are difficult to limit to an identifiable set of workers,"* (ibid, 142), which is why *"[…] the demand for basic income's proposal to break the link between work and income highlights the arbitrariness of which practices are waged and which are not,"* (ibid, 143). Secondly, drawing the consequences from this, it demands to sever the link between work and the right to consumption.

The second demand is for shorter working hours for the same pay. This demand builds on the operaist tradition of refusal of work; the core motivation behind it is simply to refuse the centrality of work in our lives, thus gaining more freedom. What makes this demand a *utopian* demand is its open-ended character. It is not a question of demanding more time for family or leisure, as the argument goes in the more common (and less radical) versions of it; the goal is not just to choose from preexisting options, it is to gain the space necessary for inventing new ones: *"The demand for shorter hours should not only speak in the name of existing*

*commitments but also spark the imagination and pursuit of new ones,"* (ibid, 170). This is a crucial point: to demand shorter working hours is to seek freedom from work in order to reinvent our relationships, communities, our very selves. And these transformed subjects and communities may very well go on to demand even more.[20]

What exactly is the mechanism of the political strategy based around utopian demands? The demands work on two different levels. Firstly, their content can have a direct impact on the political landscape by entering the public debate; it is even conceivable that they are fulfilled, changing the lived day-to-day reality for all of us. Their second function, however, is even more important: the act of demanding has a performative aspect; it is a way of constituting a political subject. *"The utopian demand does not so much express the interests or desires of an already existing subject as it serves as one of the many mechanisms of its formation,"* (ibid, 222). It is impossible to predict what kind of political subject will form around the utopian demand. On this level, too, the strength of the strategy lies in its open-endedness: *"If prescriptions of alternatives close down possibilities, so too does the naming of agents,"* (ibid, 223). The point of a utopian demand, then, is not to formulate a political program, or to present an alternative vision of the future; it is simply to provide a rallying point around which a political subject might constitute itself. In this aspect, it is not unlike the strategy proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, which centers on finding a term or a concept (an "empty signifier") around which a wide coalition can form.

### *4.3.3 Silvia Federici: The politics of the commons*

There are many different modern forms of *commons*. Digital commons is a term that has been around since the early days of the internet, mostly associated with open source software and the movement against commercialization of knowledge (Federici 2012, 141). The most important form of commons, according to Silvia Federici, are the urban gardens which have been appearing across North America since the 1980s (ibid). They have been an important source of food security for marginalized communities, but they are also spaces where people come together to form and strengthen community relations (ibid). As such, they are a paradigmatic example of contemporary commons.

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[20] Defenders of the status quo seem to be very aware of this, which is why they regard this version of the demand for shorter hours as particularly dangerous: *"[…] the possibility of more time for consumption may be less threatening than the prospect of idle time, not only because of what we might do with more nonwork time, but of* what we might become*,"* (Weeks 2011, 170, emphasis added).

The central question in regards to commons is the following: Is it possible to build a non-capitalist economy on their basis and if so, how? This is crucial because the history of capitalism plainly shows that the system is perfectly capable of coexisting with pockets of precapitalist or non-capitalist relations or ways of life; in many cases, these in fact help it thrive.[21] How can an urban garden be a springboard to an anti-capitalist revolution rather than just a haven into which one can escape for a time? Urban gardens have two characteristics which are relevant here. Firstly, they are not just a place to grow food, they are also community centers. Secondly, they produce food for own consumption rather than for the market.

*"The gardens are far more than a source of food security. They are centers of sociality, knowledge production, cultural and intergenerational exchange,"* (ibid). It is well established that, since its inception, capitalism has been characterized by a push towards atomization of society – especially, as Federici points out, when it comes to the organization of reproduction (ibid, 146). If we are hoping to overcome capitalism, re-learning how to build and maintain relations of community and of solidarity is essential. What is meant more specifically is *"[c]ommunity as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and responsibility: to each other, the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals,"* (ibid, 145).

The other key aspect of the urban garden is subsistence production. This is crucial because, just like the communal aspect of the commons teaches us community relations, dedicating our time and energy to reproductive activities helps us refocus our attention away from the productive work demanded by capitalism and on reproduction as that which truly matters to humanity. In this sense, commons such as urban gardens offer a space for experimenting with alternative ways of organizing social reproduction: *"[…] by pooling our resources, by reclaiming land and waters, and turning them into a common, we could begin to de-link our reproduction from the commodity flows that through the world market are responsible for the dispossession of so many people in other parts of the world,"* (ibid, 144).

The clear advantage of a political strategy based on commons is that, just like the operaist strategy of refusal, it unites the means with the end. The creation of commons is a *method*, because participating in them makes lasting changes to the subjectivities and community relations of those involved. It is a *measure,* because the existence of commons directly and

[21] This has been argued by many different authors over the past century, perhaps most notably by Marxist theory of international relations in its various forms including the theory of uneven and combined development or Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory.

immediately affects people's lives, meaning that, the more commons there are, the further along the way towards non-capitalist relations we are. It is also a *goal,* insofar as the character of the commons prefigures a potential future non-capitalist society. *"[T]he "commoning" of the material means of reproduction is the primary mechanism by which a collective interest and mutual bonds are created,"* (ibid, 144).

There are two main issues with this approach, however. Firstly, there seems to be an almost nostalgic element to Federici's concept of the commons: they embody a way of returning to the highly localized community relations of precapitalist times. As noted by Kathi Weeks in her critique of what she calls the humanist tradition within Marxism, returning to a precapitalist way of life was never an option (or, indeed, desirable), as Marx himself was all too aware (Weeks 2015, 117). Secondly, there is nothing in the concept of the commons itself that would guarantee the spread of the phenomenon on the scale needed for a complete overhaul of the current socioeconomic system. While certainly useful as part of an overall strategy, it cannot stand on its own.

### *4.3.4 Life against work*

Two attempts at developing a feminist approach to the refusal of work have been made. Kathi Weeks formulates two demands, the demand for basic income and the demand for shorter working hours and explains how these can form the core of an overall feminist anti-capitalist strategy: they can foster political imagination, destabilize the current hegemonic narrative surrounding work, and provide a rallying point for the constitution of a new political subject. Silvia Federici explores the concept of commons and explains how these can constitute a first step towards an alternative future by allowing us to create new kinds of relationships and focus our attention and efforts on reproduction. Neither one of the feminist authors aspires to formulate a comprehensive strategy to overcome capitalism; they merely develop elements which could be part of such a strategy or point towards it. What are the central elements of a (hypothetical) feminist strategy of refusal?

Firstly, refusal in itself is not enough; what is needed is refusal in the name of something else. This *something else* needs to be specific enough that it can successfully serve as a motivator for political action but not so specific that it would limit the agency of the political subject, or indeed inhibit the formation of the subject itself. In her concluding remarks, Kathi Weeks suggests "life" as a possible counterpoint to "work" (Weeks 2011, 230). Life in this context is to be understood in a biopolitical sense: a life which is and will continue to be the object of

political struggle. It is however also a "full life": a life which offers the opportunity for happiness and meaning, whatever these may mean to a specific person (ibid, 232). Whether we want to use this term or prefer Silvia Federici's commons and community, the core idea is of a concept uniting a focus on social reproduction with the freedom necessary to reinvent ourselves and our relationships. By focusing on the alternative to work, we can overcome the issues related to the inherent negativity of the word *refusal.*

The second key element of a feminist strategy of refusal is the complete reorganization of social reproduction within our society. Reproduction is of course necessary in any society, regardless of the specifics of the socioeconomic system. What is more, it is also a key reference point for refusal of work in all of its variants: reproduction is generally seen as an alternative, or a counterpoint, to productive work. It is however not without issues of its own. The first of these is the fact that reproductive labor, while not inherently problematic, has become exploited and alienated under capitalism. *"[C]ooperation at the point of production, separation and atomization at the point of reproduction,"* (Federici 2012, 146) is the principle that has been guiding the organization of reproduction under capitalism, in stark contrast to the precapitalist world, where collective and community-based ways of organizing reproduction were the norm (ibid). The most immediate consequence of this has been the fact that these activities are perceived as work rather than simply an aspect of life: *"We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create our sexuality, which we have never known,"* (ibid, 20). The other problem with reproduction is that it is (or at least always has been in known history) a gendered concept – which means that any changes to the organization of either production or reproduction will have different consequences for men and for women (Weeks 2011, 162ff). This is certainly a major blind spot in the operaist version of refusal of work: the "free reproduction of the working class" is the declared goal of the liberatory struggle – but unless a radical change in the organization of reproductive labor (and of the accompanying ideology) happens, it will continue to be women who are primarily responsible for it, making it highly questionable whether they have in fact been "liberated".

The third and final element is the focus on opening up new possibilities, on carving out spaces in which to create alternatives, without trying to anticipate what these will look like. This is crucial for two main reasons. Firstly, transforming subjectivities is the only way to bring about lasting change; at the same time, subjectivities can only be transformed during and by participation in a process of social and/or political change. The process of formulating

alternatives is therefore central to the success of the entire project. Secondly, as discussed above, being too specific when defining the goals or describing the political subject to carry them out strongly limits agency and may also hinder the process of constituting a political subject. As with naming the proposed alternative to "work", there are different ways of resolving this issue. The commons are one option – the creation of pockets or enclaves of alternative, cooperative ways of life, in which we would experiment with and learn new ways of being with each other and with ourselves. The other possible approach is even more open-ended: it consists in challenging the view that work is supposed to be the center of our lives and demanding more work-free time, without presuming to specify what this time should be filled with.

From a feminist perspective, the key challenge for a strategy of refusal of work is putting reproduction at the center of society, but without reproducing or preserving the issues connected with it under capitalism. Focus on reproduction is the proper "antidote" to a productivist society, but that does not mean reproduction can go unchanged and uncritiqued. Insofar as reproductive activities have been turned into "work" under capitalism, this work, too, needs to be rejected rather than embraced. Just as in the original domestic labor debate, the point is not to exalt the virtues of the housewife; it is to free her from her work. The solution, then, lies in the radical reorganization of social reproduction on the one hand and the demand for more "non-work" on the other – with a very flexible understanding of what exactly "non-work" might mean or look like in practice.

## 4.4 What is relevant for today?

### *4.4.1 What counts as work?*

Refining and broadening our understanding of what is "work" is certainly one of the prime achievements of Marxist feminism, as proven by the fact that many of the related concepts have now become commonplace in mainstream debates. What makes it especially relevant to my project is that the critical intellectual engagement with the concept of work was, at least in its initial phase, motivated not by glorification of this labor, but by refusal. Identifying "work" was the first step towards refusing it.

The chief concern of the early domestic labor debate and the Wages for Housework movement was to denaturalize domestic or reproductive work, which at the time was widely seen not as "work" but as part of "women's nature". This is a project that has become much more pressing

in the present context, since it affects an increasing number of people. Indeed, the identification of the person with their work, which Silvia Federici considers to be one of the key obstacles to the liberation of the housewife (Federici 2012, 16), has been replicated in many waged jobs under post-Fordism, a phenomenon which Kathi Weeks describes under the label of professionalism: *"A professional invests his or her person in the job but does not 'take it personally' when dealing with difficult co-workers, clients, patients, students, passengers, or customers. As an ideal of worker subjectivity, this requires not just the performance of a role, but a deeper commitment of the self,"* (Weeks 2011, 75). What is more, professionalism expands into the sphere of consumption, an area which has nothing to do with the work itself: a professional is generally expected to dress, live, and spend their leisure time a certain way (ibid, 74); outward signs of status and/or class are in a certain sense a part of the job.[22] Flexible working time and the option to work from home, while usually greeted as something positive (in job advertisements, these are typically listed under "benefits"), can, depending on the context, be another way in which separating the professional from the personal becomes more difficult.

Separating work from non-work is especially important when it comes to the sphere of reproduction, because in all the versions of the refusal of work strategy, a society centered around reproduction is posited as the antithesis of, and desired alternative to, a society centered around production. At the same time, separating work from non-work in reproduction is particularly problematic. In Silvia Federici's words:

> *"To the extent that labor power can only exist in the living individual, its reproduction must be simultaneously a production and valorization of desired human qualities and capacities, and an accommodation to the externally imposed standards of the labor market. As impossible as it is, then, to draw a line between the living individual and its labor power, it is equally impossible to draw a line between the two corresponding aspects of reproductive work," (Federici 2012, 99).*

In other words: since a person is always – at least potentially – a carrier of labor-power, and, conversely, labor-power cannot exist except carried by a person, reproduction always serves

[22] It could of course be argued that this has always been the case. Whether or not this is a new phenomenon is a sociological debate which is outside the scope of this thesis, especially as it does not have any impact on the core of my argument.

both the people and capital. This insight goes a long way towards answering the central question that poses itself in regards to reproduction and refusal of work, namely, what is it that makes reproductive activities "work" rather than "the free reproduction of the working class"? On the structural level, then, the answer is relatively straightforward: in a world without labor-power, reproductive activities would only serve the people. Labor-power is not a "real" thing, it is an abstraction that is unique to the capitalist mode of production, therefore, in a non-capitalist society, the problem does not pose itself in this way. On the level of lived experience, however, the issue is significantly more complicated. The problems traditionally linked to the role of the housewife are caused primarily by the way reproduction is understood and organized in society: the fact that reproductive work is gendered; the fact that it is devalued and made invisible as a result of being seen as a "natural calling" rather than proper work; the fact that it is atomized, destined to be performed in the isolation of the home. While capitalism has certainly been actively shaping the organization of reproduction to its advantage, there is no guarantee that these problems would not persist in a non-capitalist society.[23]

The task of identifying what is and is not "work", particularly in the sphere of reproduction, is further complicated by the fact that there is a purely subjective component to it. As an example, while some people may find genuine joy and fulfillment in caring for children and be outraged at the idea that it should be considered "work", others will regard it as a tedium and something they would only do either out of a sense of duty, or because they are adequately paid for it. This is just a reflection of personal characteristics and preferences, which might, to a certain degree, be influenced by how this work is regarded by society (is it considered valuable, respectable, something to take pride in?), but is quite independent of whether there is capital making profit from this work or not. Feminist theory of work reminds us that these are all aspects to be taken into account when thinking about a possible post-work society.

### *4.4.2 If not work, what?*

The question of "what is work" has a complementary, reverse question: "what is non-work"? This is an important question to address, not just for the sake of the intellectual integrity of the theory, but also because if a political strategy is to have a chance of success, it needs to provide

[23] Insofar as the state socialist regimes of the 20th century can give an insight into this, there is indeed no reason to be overly optimistic. While many experimented with alternative organizations of reproduction, notably the Soviet Union during the first post-revolution years, none achieved a lasting change. Most merely succeeded in forcing women to do double duty as both housewives *and* workers (for a discussion of this topic, see for example Goldman 1993).

a clear enough alternative to the status quo. Refusing work is not enough, we need to refuse in favor of something else.

The proposed alternative must fulfill certain criteria in order to work in this manner. The two key requirements, as formulated by Marxist feminism, both contain a certain tension. Firstly, the concept proposed needs to be realistic enough to be widely seen as a viable alternative, but at the same time, it must be utopian enough to spark political imagination and denaturalize, question, and critique, the current socioeconomic order. Kathi Weeks develops this idea in depth, exploring various understandings of what "realistic" means, with the clear aim to reclaim utopia as a tool of political struggle. Secondly, it must be specific enough to have a mobilizing effect, but open-ended enough not to put a constraint on the process of the constitution of a political subject or limit its agency, once constituted. This point is analogous to the operaist principle according to which the utopia is always already being realized: the right political program needs to be capable of both making concrete changes in the here and now and inspiring a desire and a determination to demand even more radical change.

Which concepts may successfully play this role? How are we to picture "non-work"? As discussed in the previous section, Kathi Weeks' suggestion is to use *life* as the counterpoint to work. It certainly has the advantage of being both specific and vague at the same time: specific, because it is something we are all familiar with, not a foreign or abstract sounding concept; vague, because it gives individuals a significant measure of freedom in deciding what it means to them personally:

> *"[…] rather than burdening life with a fixed content – that is, with too many assumptions about what might count as a life beyond work – the possibility of the provocation to get a life lies in its capacity to pose a political project that it does not stipulate and to open a postwork speculative horizon that it cannot fix in advance," (Weeks 2011, 233)*

Interestingly, the idea of life as a counterweight to work has found its way into mainstream with the concept of work-life-balance, which has been figuring very prominently in the current debate about work. For an anti-capitalist political strategy, however, the concept must be significantly more radical than that: demanding a "balance" is not enough; what we must demand is a society where "life" is a clear priority, regarded as that which we should devote most of our time and energy to. Similar arguments have been made by ecofeminists as well as

indigenous and indigenous-inspired movements with, for example, the concept of *buen vivir* – a good, full life in harmony with ourselves, with others, and with nature as the true goal which societies should aspire to (see for example Cubillo-Guevara et al. 2018). Silvia Federici's work on the commons ultimately points in the same direction: prioritizing reproduction over production, along with reorganizing it to make it more cooperative, as well as not harmful to people in other parts of the world (Federici 2012, 145), can also be read as a plea to prioritize life above all.

### *4.4.3 Beware of false universalism*

Just as nearly all versions of Marxism, the operaist theory – both in its original form and as post-operaism – has universalistic aspirations: the goal is nothing more and nothing less than changing the entire world, ideally all at once; though it in no way ignores the fact that it is going to be a long and difficult process, full of struggles and setbacks. As we have seen in this chapter, feminist authors are much more modest in their goals: they do not propose a comprehensive strategy to change the entire socioeconomic system; they merely formulate elements of such a strategy or give initial impulses that may be developed into something more. The final, but perhaps the most important, contribution of feminist theory in this context is that it reminds us to account for differences of gender, race, or class, which the operaists fail to do. Indeed, in a world divided by so many intersecting lines of oppression, there can be no one-size-fits-all political strategy; ignoring this fact can – and often does – lead to a re-entrenchment of these divisions and exclusion of entire groups of people. In the following, I give a few examples of such cases.

Marxist feminism of the 1960s and 1970s was often criticized in later years for its failure to account for racial differences. Perhaps the most eloquent argument was formulated by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, who in her 1992 article shows that the division of reproductive labor has always been determined not just by gender, but also by race, with upper- and middle-class white women outsourcing it (or the most tedious and physically demanding parts of it) to women of color (Glenn 1992). This pattern has been reproduced in the international division of labor that developed with the advent of globalization:

> *"[…] in the aftermath of structural adjustment and economic reconversion, a restructuring of reproductive work has taken place internationally, whereby much of the reproduction of the metropolitan workforce is now performed by immigrant women*

*coming from the Global South, especially providing care to children and the elderly and for the sexual reproduction of male workers," (Federici 2012, 108).*

Plausibly a direct consequence of Western women's refusal of reproductive work, this "international division of reproductive labor" (Parrenas 2005) has the effect of strengthening the gender and racial oppression that are both the result and condition of it. By shifting "their" reproductive labor onto women from the Global South and/or racial minorities, white women have an active interest in their continuing oppression (because it makes their labor cheap). At the same time, outsourcing reproductive labor in this way, rather than fighting for its fairer division within the family, has the effect of confirming it as "women's work" (Glenn 1992).

The second example concerns the topic of worktime. As argued by Kathi Weeks, worktime is a gendered concept – a direct consequence of the fact that women are primarily responsible for reproductive labor, regardless of whether or not they work outside of the home as well. As is well known, the 40-hour work week was introduced at a time when a full-time housewife was considered the norm (though it was not necessarily the reality for all); the famous "eight hours for what we will" did therefore not include contributing to reproduction (Weeks 2011, 162). In the current context, this means that shorter hours of waged work do not necessarily lead to a reduction of overall working time (and a corresponding increase in leisure time) for women (ibid). Moreover, it is their responsibility for reproductive labor which causes women to work in flexible, precarious, and part-time jobs in much greater numbers than men; the issues connected with these types of jobs are well known. Therefore, as argued by Weeks, *"[…] any account of working time must include an account of socially necessary unwaged labor, and any movement for reduced working time must include a challenge to its present organization and distribution,"* (ibid).

Related to this last point is the third and final example: that of the class divide. Class in this context is not to be understood in the Marxist sense, but rather as a sociological category. In the context of contemporary capitalism, flexibility and shorter working hours can be a privilege or a curse, depending on what kind of education one has and what kind of work one does. A professional or an employee in a high-skilled, well-paid job may choose to reduce their working hours to give themselves more leisure time, knowing that they will still earn enough for a comfortable lifestyle. To a worker in a minimum-wage job, meanwhile, a reduction in working hours likely means they will need to get a second job, thus having the exactly opposite effect on their quality of life. Similarly, flexibility is often hailed as a great benefit in white-collar

jobs, allowing for a better overall work-life balance; meanwhile, in blue-collar jobs it tends to have the opposite effect, since the worker never knows in advance when (or if at all) they will have work-free time.

As these examples show, refusal of work can easily have very different effects on individuals depending on their race, gender, class, or any number of other characteristics. What is needed, therefore, is an intersectional approach: when formulating a political strategy, we must account for existing lines of oppression, lest we risk preserving or even deepening them. Put simply, refusal of work must result in less work for *all*, not just for *some* at the expense of others.

# 5 Refusal of work as a political strategy for the 21st century

## 5.1 Clarifying the terms

### *5.1.1 Work, labor, and labor-power*

> *"Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power," (Marx 1992, 283)*

Drawing mostly upon Tronti's reading of Marx, as discussed in detail in the first chapter, I propose the following conceptions of labor, labor-power, and work. As described in the famous passage from Marx quoted above, *labor* is the uniquely human ability to transform the world around us in order to fulfill our needs, also transforming ourselves in the process. Unlike other living beings, humans have a mediated relationship to nature: through labor, they develop as *"reflective, self-conscious beings,"* (Sayers 2007, 434). Labor is also necessarily a social process: *"[i]t involves and sustains relations with others,"* (ibid). It can take different forms depending on the level of development of production, with the relationship between the laboring activity and the need which is being fulfilled by it becoming increasingly indirect. *Labor-power* refers to a human being's ability to perform labor. Unlike labor, it can easily be measured and quantified (typically in units of time). Whereas labor is always concrete (when we say a person is performing labor, we always have a specific activity in mind), labor-power is an abstraction: saying that a person possesses labor-power says nothing about the activity that they perform.

*Work* is a more difficult concept to grasp. In day-to-day speech, it is usually used synonymously with labor to describe an activity wherein we consciously change the world for some purpose defined in advance: we "work" on our hobby projects as much as we "work" for our employers. For the purposes of my argumentation in this chapter, I propose a much narrower concept of

work. Following Tronti's remark that *"it really is the capitalist who creates work,"* (Tronti 2019, 244), I define *work* as the activity we engage in when we expend our labor-power, having sold it to someone else. The defining feature of work, then, is not its content, nor the nature of the activity itself, but the structural conditions in which it is happening. The case of reproductive labor is particularly instructive in this regard: childrearing, for example, is "love" when done by the family for free, but "work" when done by someone who is paid for it. Similarly, any labor can be "work" if done not directly for the purpose itself, but for someone else in exchange for money. This is also the meaning of the operaists' call for refusal of work as the instrument of the liberation of living labor: it is a demand for labor to serve its purpose directly, not mediated through capital, which appropriates a share of it and distorts it so that it better serves its ends.

### *5.1.2 Political subject and collective action*

*"From the workers' point of view, an action is a mass action or no action at all,"* (Tronti 2019, 86). In an era of extreme individualism, this core principle of early operaism is more relevant than ever. Any political strategy requires collective action, and any collective action requires a political subject. This however raises two questions: What exactly is a political subject? And what exactly does it mean to act collectively? Political subject is the condition of political agency: in order to act politically, an appropriate agent is needed. In most common conceptualizations, a political subject is a collective but nevertheless unitary entity. Whether this unity is achieved by an internal homogeneity and a strong differentiation to the outside, as is the case with "traditional" political subjects such as "people" or "class",[24] or by some other means, remains open; a political subject, however, requires something akin to a "general will": something ensuring that it is more than just a sum of individual wills or actions. For various reasons, some of which have been explored in the previous chapters, the traditional conception of political subject, as well as the specific understanding of collective (or political) action that is connected with it, is not applicable in the contemporary context. In this chapter, therefore, I work with specific conceptions of political subject and of collective action.

The postmodern world is a world of multiple, overlapping, fluid, and ever-changing identities and subjectivities; the political subject of the 21st century must reflect this fact. As argued by Kathi Weeks, the constitution of a political subject is a contingent, dynamic, and open-ended

[24] See the final part of Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of this topic.

process. It is not the task of a political theorist to find out in advance what a political subject might look like – a political subject can only constitute itself through political practice. In fact, trying to anticipate the result will only hinder the process: postmodern society is too complex and changes too fast for anyone to be able to grasp it in all its complexities and account for every possible constellation of identities; any attempt at doing so will necessarily be severely reductionist and, therefore, not sufficiently dynamic and inclusive. A postmodern political subject does not require a shared identity or common interests; the only thing it needs is a sense of shared purpose. According to Hardt and Negri, the Multitude properly becomes a political subject by defining its own *telos* (Hardt and Negri 2001, 395). This shared purpose can be a relatively modest demand, such as one for shorter working hours, or it can be an all-encompassing ambition to dismantle the entire socioeconomic system; the political subject can be a short-lived, ad hoc coalition, or it can be a social movement lasting for decades.

A postmodern political subject, inclusive and heterogenous as it is, cannot be expected to perform the type of collective action which we typically picture, requiring a hierarchical organization and strict discipline. As explained by Paolo Virno, the form that collective action takes in our context is "acting-in-concert" and is predicated on the so-called general or public intellect (Virno 1996, 201). The core idea is that at the current stage of development of society, our capabilities for communication and collaboration have reached such a high level that there is no need for more "primitive" organizational forms because individuals can coordinate their actions more directly, without the need for mediating tools or shared characteristics: again, all that is needed is a shared purpose.

## 5.2 Requirements for a 21st century political strategy

### *5.2.1 Acting collectively*

The key precondition for any political action is bringing together a crucial mass of people to act collectively. No individual person can single-handedly change society; this has always been the case but has perhaps become even more pronounced in the postmodern era, where we are connected with each other in more complex ways than ever before. In fact, individual or small-scale changes can often have the effect of strengthening the status quo rather than challenging it, since they can act as a release valve. The basic parameters of a 21st century political subject and the nature of its collective action were explored in the previous section. In practice, then, a political strategy needs to spark and foster the constitution of a political subject.

As discussed briefly at the end of the chapter on operaism, the question of the nature of the political subject and its constitution is one of the key points of contention between the Old Left and the New Left. While traditionally interpreted Marxism maintains that political affiliation is, in principle, determined by one's objective position within the system, newer approaches insist that the political subject is always contingent. A contemporary political strategy based on refusal of work has the challenging task of bringing these two approaches together: by insisting that there is a privileged terrain on which to lead the attack, namely the production process, it retains a materialist (and objectivistic) core; at the same time, if it is to adequately reflect the nature of postmodern society, it needs to acknowledge the fact that the constitution of a political subject can only be a discursive process.

### *5.2.2 Targeting production*

Capitalism has proven to be highly resilient. Generations of political theorists and activists have prophesized its imminent end – so far, they were all proven wrong. Many have also attempted to explain why this is the case. The operaists' argument in this context is especially compelling: according to their theory, capitalism is so resilient because it can not only fight back resistance but harness the energy of the struggles to reinvent itself and move forward, strengthened. It follows, then, that in order to truly put it in danger, it is necessary to mount a challenge which cannot be appropriated in this manner because it targets the core logic of the system.

Various leftist traditions have argued over what the central, defining feature of capitalism is. Many (perhaps most) have seen it in the accumulation of capital. For the operaists, however, the core of capitalism lies in the production process. To accumulate capital, it is necessary to generate new capital – new value – and the only thing capable of generating new value is labor-power expended in the process of production. Capitalism as a system is therefore fully dependent on a continuous supply of labor-power. And if the production process is disrupted, the entire system will come down with it.

Part of the challenge is that once we move from the abstract, theoretical level, production (as well as its key elements, the means of production and labor-power), are not necessarily easy to recognize. Production has changed enormously in the past few decades; however, according to the central assumption of post-operaist theory, its core operating logic remains the same. The task, therefore, is to understand the 21$^{st}$ century production process and identify its crucial elements – as a first step towards disrupting it.

### 5.2.3 Uniting the means with the end

The question of strategy is also one which has caused deep division within the Left since the beginning. The Leninist approach, embraced by much of the Old Left, sees politics as something akin to a game of chess, requiring well thought-out tactical play and the willingness to sacrifice short-term advantage or well-being for the promise of victory in the long-term. The problem with this strategy is that, even if we accept that it was adequate in its original context – which is debatable – it is certainly not appropriate for a postmodern world because it is predicated on a preexisting political subject with objective (or at least already fully-formed) interests. Meanwhile, the problem with the reformist approach is that one can easily become too focused on details and lose sight of the overall goal – or even be coopted by forces of the status quo.

What is needed, then, is a strategy which combines the strengths of both approaches, bringing together the various factions as well as avoiding the weaknesses of their respective programs. A strategy which does not require any specialized actor but can be carried out by anyone – because it can *both* work towards an ambitious goal in the more distant future *and* improve lives immediately in a concrete way. Correspondingly, such a strategy would be aligned with people's intuitive understanding of their interests, needs, and wishes while also opening up their political imagination, inspiring and enabling them to question the status quo on a more fundamental level and subsequently formulate even more ambitious demands. The reform versus revolution argument is thus finally superseded.

### 5.2.4 Open-endedness

The obvious challenge for a political strategy aimed at overcoming the existing socioeconomic system is providing an adequate response to the question, what is the alternative to the status quo (and why is it better). One the one hand, this vision of an alternative model of society needs to be specific and coherent enough to be credible and provide a relatively clear path forward: a very vague conception of a better future will at best spark a generalized sense of anger and unhappiness with the current state of affairs but will not be able to effectively guide political action. On the other hand, giving too detailed an answer also has its perils: as pointed out by Kathi Weeks, insofar as a utopian image of a possible better future can serve to inspire the constitution of a political subject, being too specific denies this subject agency and even potentially hinders the process of its formation (Weeks 2011, 223).

Finding the right balance between being too vague and being too specific when formulating an alternative vision of society (or perhaps developing one that is vague and specific at the same time) is important for another reason: it resolves many of the issues connected with revolutionary politics. A detailed utopia as a political goal can easily lead to a tunnel vision in political leaders, blinding them to the needs in the here and now as well as the consequences of their actions. Suggesting a direction in which to move but refusing to be too specific about the desired outcome helps reduce this risk.

### *5.2.5 Intersectionality*

A liberatory political strategy must of course be universal in the sense that it must aim to make life better for everyone, not just a small group. However, this does not mean that the strategy itself is to be identical for everyone: the status quo is in important ways not the same for everyone and the strategy needs to reflect this fact if it is to avoid reproducing existing lines of oppression. The most obvious example in the context of refusal of work is responsibility for unpaid domestic and care labor, which is divided unequally, with gender and, to a lesser extent, race and class playing a major role in determining who carries the biggest share.

The task of the political strategy, then, is to set the direction and perhaps specify, in broad terms, how to move forward; the details need to be worked out by individuals or small groups, reflecting their specific situation and needs. As discussed in the previous section, it is not necessary for a postmodern subject to be homogenous, or even have any substantial shared interest: a common purpose is all that is needed. It does not even need to be organized in the way that "traditional" political parties or working-class organizations were: as long as everyone is working towards a common purpose, they are quite free to choose their own method of struggle. This diverse and decentralized character of the strategy is in fact one of its biggest strengths: attacking the system in multiple different ways from multiple different locations or directions raises the likelihood that at least some of these challenges will be successful.

## 5.3 Elements of a strategy of refusal

### *5.3.1 Constituting a political subject*

The question of political organization has been central to progressive politics from the very beginning. In the postmodern context, it becomes even more challenging: it is no longer simply a question of giving organizational form to an existing political subject; the first step is to *constitute* a political subject, a process which is by no means natural or guaranteed to succeed.

The constitution of a political subject as a discursive process has been conceptualized by many authors; in the following, I briefly sketch out the approaches that appear to be most compelling and fitting for my project.

The first name that comes to mind in this context is that of Ernesto Laclau: his approach – developed together with Chantal Mouffe – is probably the most famous theory of the constitution of a political subject. Central to the process, according to Laclau, is antagonism. Put simply, to constitute a political subject, we need a way to bring together different groups, entities, needs, subjectivities – but without stripping away their differences and particularities. This specific form of internal unity can be achieved by differentiating the nascent political subject from something else; this *something else*, however, cannot be of the same kind, because then it would be possible to unite the subject and its opposite on a higher level of abstraction. The meaning of antagonism – and, indeed, of politics itself – is precisely that such a unity must always remain impossible. What is needed to constitute a political subject, then, is something that represents the antagonism and allows the various elements that form a political subject to act together without needing to become the same. This function is fulfilled by the empty signifier: a demand without a content of its own, which has come to represent the impossible unity of the political subject. (See for example Laclau 2005, Laclau 2012, Laclau and Mouffe 2014).

A different, though in important ways similar, approach to the question of political subject (or political organization) comes from intersectional feminism. Authors within this tradition criticize traditional leftist politics for conceptualizing a political subject purely on the basis of commensurability: the idea that there needs to be something shared by all, a lowest common denominator. The problem with this approach is that it reproduces the logic of capital, as well as many existing lines of oppression (Bohrer 2019, 233). The alternative they propose is political organization based on solidarity: *"solidarity requires unity, not uniformity"* (ibid, 254). A straight white man will never know what it feels like to be a Black lesbian, and there might be little to no overlap between their life experiences, but this knowledge is not necessary for them to work together politically. All that is needed is a shared political project.

Hardt and Negri's approach to the question of political subject was discussed in detail in the chapter on post-operaism. They, too, stress that it is in no way necessary to create homogeneity within the political subject: indeed, this is the key difference between the Multitude – the postmodern political subject – and other types of political subjects. Defining a shared *telos* and

formulating the first few political demands is what transforms the Multitude into a political subject. The general intellect, i.e., the capacity for communication and cooperation achieved by the postmodern society, makes it possible for individuals to act collectively without losing their individuality.

Finally, as explored in the previous chapter, Kathi Weeks also tackles the question of the constitution of the political subject. Her approach is centered around the concept of the *utopian demand*: a demand which is specific and realistic but at the same time points towards a radically different future (Weeks 2011, 221). Unlike a political *program* or *manifesto*, formats which need to be coherent and comprehensive, which necessarily causes their corresponding political subject to be at least somewhat homogeneous and exclusive, a *demand* is limited in scope, which leaves the question of the political subject wide open: the process of the constitution of the political subject only begins with the formulation of the demand; it is impossible (and, indeed, not necessarily desirable) to know where it will lead.

What do all these different approaches have in common? First of all, they understand a political subject as something which is in a certain sense united, but which nevertheless preserves its components in their uniqueness rather than reduce them to a smallest common denominator or render them homogeneous. Secondly, they identify a discursive element which creates this specific type of unity – a demand, a project, a goal, a telos, an empty signifier. To formulate a political strategy, then, we first need to identify the *type* of discursive element that can create this unity. In a second step, we can attempt to suggest its *content* – a specific demand, project, purpose, etc.

Any discursive element capable of constituting a proper political subject must be in a certain sense revolutionary: a political project whose realization would mean nothing less than the end of the current system. This is the meaning of antagonism as conceptualized by Laclau and Mouffe. This is also why, in Kathi Weeks' interpretation, refusal of work is the only truly revolutionary program: it is not a mere negation but a proposal of a genuine alternative (Weeks 2015, 130). Additionally, the political project needs to have both a negative and a positive aspect: a negative one, because, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, unity of any kind requires a constitutive outside, something which we are rejecting, something which we are *not*; and a positive one, because otherwise it would again be a simple negation rather than an alternative.

A political *project* seems to me to be the appropriate form: it emphasizes the positive moment of *building* something new rather than *rejecting* the existing system or *demanding* amendments

to it. It also describes a collective, *collaborative* activity, which nevertheless does not require sameness. A project has a clearly defined goal but the steps leading to it are entirely up for debate and the plan can be adjusted anytime if the circumstances require. The content of this political strategy, then, is the political project of putting life – instead of work – at the center of society.

### *5.3.2 Making ourselves useless for capital*

Once we have a political subject, we need to specify the action this subject is supposed to take. As in any project, the first step is to analyze the current situation. Specifically, what are the key characteristics of postmodern power? This question is explored in detail in previous chapters. To highlight the two most important points: firstly, postmodern power is exercised by the production of subjectivities; it is experienced from within the individual rather than as an external force. Secondly, production is central to power – and in any case impossible to separate from other spheres of society.

As discussed above, the strategy of refusal of work needs to have two aspects, a positive and a negative one. These are impossible to disentangle in reality but it is helpful to conceptualize them separately. The negative moment is the *refusal of work* in the narrow sense: the literal act of not working or working as little as possible; what we might describe as the political project of making ourselves useless for capital. The word *project* in this context seeks to emphasize the fact that refusal of work is not an action; it is a set of tools, methods, tactics, and behaviors which can be deployed to contribute towards the goal of liberating our lives from exploitation by capital. Some examples are given in what follows, though it is by no means an exhaustive list – indeed, the key point here is that there should be no limit to creativity as long as everyone is working towards the same goal.

Broadly speaking, refusal of work can be effectuated on two levels. On the material level, work can be refused in relatively tangible and measurable ways – by reducing working hours, demanding flexible working times, or the currently widely discussed "quiet quitting", as well as related tactics known from earlier times: foot dragging, absenteeism, strikes. What all these methods have in common is that they effectively reduce the amount of labor-power that capital is able to extract from workers. As we have seen, production is central to the functioning of capitalism, and labor-power is the key component necessary for the running of production. The less labor-power we supply, the weaker capitalism will be.

On the discursive level, refusal of work amounts to a refusal of the central position of work in our lives and societies. In the individual context, this means to stop defining ourselves primarily through our work and deriving our sense of self-worth from it or seeing it as our duty or calling. In the societal context, it means to sever the link between work and the right to consumption – a central feature of the capitalist work ethic as described by Kathi Weeks (Weeks 2011, 49). The power of refusal of work lies in the fact that the material and the discursive aspect strengthen each other: the less time I spend at work, the more time I will have for other activities, which opens up the possibility of building my identity around something else than my job. Similarly, quiet quitting – doing only the necessary minimum at work and nothing more – does more than just reduce the measurable amount of labor-power I give to capital: by refusing to care about the result beyond a certain minimum point, I push back against capital's effort to swallow up my entire personality and reassert my right to have a life outside of my job. Just like the housewives of the 1970s sought to free themselves by *"[calling] work what is work"* (Federici 2012, 20), refusal of work today means, among other things, drawing a clear line between work and non-work.

The key advantage of refusal of work, then, is that it can function on a material and discursive level simultaneously, with the two aspects mutually reinforcing each other. Having more free time for relationships, hobbies, personal development, or anything else we might wish, makes it easier to define ourselves by things other than our job. Conversely, not identifying ourselves with our jobs makes it easier to devote less time and energy to work, because our career success is no longer seen as an indicator of our worth as a human being. Refusal of work could thus prove to be something of a virtuous circle, especially given another advantage: reducing the amount of work improves people's lives in an immediate, concrete, and tangible way. Thus, the tactic and the strategy are the same, as are the goal and the method; there is no need to "organize" politically in the traditional sense – there is no one tactic that is better than the others, so there is no need for a specialized actor to tell the workers what to do and when.

Ultimately, given the nature of postmodern power, the goal of any political strategy must be to get capital (or Empire) out of our heads – to effect change at the level of production of subjectivities. As discussed in the chapter on post-operaism, this is a process that has both a material and an immaterial component. The above described strategy exemplifies the twofold nature of this process: refusing to work in a literal, material sense helps create the conditions for a shift in self-understanding which amounts to a refusal of work on the discursive level –

and that is what a true liberation from work means. To free ourselves from the exploitation by capital, we must render ourselves useless. To free ourselves from the power of Empire, we must become uncontrollable and ungovernable.

### *5.3.3 Creating alternative spaces*

Let us focus now on the positive moment of refusal of work: if we are refusing work, what do we propose to replace it with? As many critics of the strategy of refusal of work have pointed out, a simple rejection of something does not yet amount to a political program, at least not a particularly compelling one.

The need for a positive moment stems above all from the fact that only with this second move we truly take a step away from capitalism.[25] As argued by Kathi Weeks, a simple rejection amounts to turning the system on its head – what is needed, however, is to scrap it altogether and build something new in its place. According to traditional reading of Marx, *"[c]ommunism is conceived as the absolute negation of capitalism [...]. As a reactive reversal, the utopian vision remains locked within the orbit of what it opposes [...]. Thus we find the utopian imagination fails just when it appears to be most successful, that it is unable to imagine true difference because it imagines the difference to be absolute,"* (Weeks 2015, 127). This lack of political imagination is the reason why most versions of Marxism remain attached to the same productivist values that are central to capitalism (ibid). The goal of anti-capitalist politics, therefore, cannot be to create a system that is the complete opposite of capitalism, much less to merely distribute the profits generated by capitalism more equitably or change the ownership of the means of production, since none of that threatens the core logic of the system. In fact, it does quite the contrary: it reproduces it. What is needed, then, is an alternative that is strictly incompatible with the key principles of capitalist production.

What are the alternatives that the approaches explored so far can offer? In the context of operaist theory, the answer has always been highly abstract: working-class self-valorization in the case of original operaism, liberation of living labor in post-operaism. Both of these terms of course amount to the same thing: our minds, bodies, relationships, affects and personalities should be used for our own ends, whatever these might be, not those of capital. For Silvia Federici, the alternative system can be glimpsed in the commons as spaces where alternative

[25] As mentioned above, the negative and the positive moments cannot be separated from each other in practice – a division into a first and second "step" is purely conceptual.

relations might develop – ones that are not shaped by capitalist relations of production – while to Kathi Weeks, it would be wrong to specify what the result should look like; we should only strive to create a space in which it can develop and perhaps point in a direction which seems promising. Both of these feminist approaches also essentially amount to shaking off the shackles of capitalism – either by explicitly using our energies towards reproduction rather than production, or by simply freeing up our capacities for whatever we might choose, with the implication that the answer to the question "what might we do instead of work" cannot be given in advance: the process of inventing possible answers can itself only fully develop once our creative capacities have been unleashed.

All these approaches thus seem to converge on one point: the true alternative to capitalism is a world without work; that is to say, a world in which our time, energy, creativity, our capacity for communication and to form relationships, are all used in ways which serve us – and only us. This is a crucial part of the argument which is perhaps most prone to being misunderstood: the alternative to work is not idleness or leisure; the alternative to work is liberated labor. For one, a society in which everyone was constantly idle could quite obviously not function (I deal with this point in more detail in the final part of this chapter). More importantly still, idleness and leisure are perfectly compatible with capitalism. Not only is leisure time crucial to restore workers' ability to perform their jobs; many leisure activities can be commercialized, thus helping to keep the system alive.[26] Idleness certainly does have some subversive potential, but it can in many ways also be exploited by capital, insofar as it often unleashes creative powers. In the words of the anthropologist James Suzman: *"The only obvious adaptive advantage of boredom is its ability to inspire the creativity, curiosity and restlessness that motivates us to explore, seek novel experiences and take risks. Psychologists also remind us that boredom is a more fertile mother of invention that necessity,"* (Suzman 2020, 110). All of these, of course, are characteristics highly useful to capitalism.

The problem with "nonwork" or "living labor" or even "reproduction" as the basis of an alternative society is that these are very abstract terms that cannot serve as political slogans. For this reason, Kathi Weeks suggests the demand for "life" as the centerpiece of the political struggle. "Life" in this context should be understood as a "good life" or "full life" in the sense known from indigenous and indigenous-inspired traditions: not simply being alive, but living

[26] This is likely the only reason why employers seem to be open to the idea of shortening working hours. The latter point especially has featured in the calculations of the capitalist class for decades (Weeks 2011, 49).

in harmony with oneself, with others, and with nature (see for example Cubillo-Guevara et al. 2018). At the same time, the meaning of "life" is something that cannot be determined once and for all – it is always in the process of being (re)invented. One key advantage of such an approach is that the concept is already very present in the public space: "work-life balance" is the key term driving the debate around work in recent years; the idea of "life" as the opposite of or alternative to "work" seems well established. At the same time, we must not forget that a successful political strategy needs to be able to effect change in the production of subjectivities and that it must not be a utopia for a far-distant future, but something that we can start putting into practice in the here and now. Even on this level, "life" can prove a good concept: we can create spaces and timeslots in which to "live" rather than "work" – including rethinking what exactly does it mean to "live". Finally, "life" can certainly not be confused with idleness or leisure: it is very well understood that labor is an essential part of life; indeed, to many, it may be something that makes life worth living.

## 5.4 Challenges and what to avoid

### *5.4.1 Avoiding cooptation*

As the operaists (and post-operaists) have shown, the reason capitalism has been so successful is that it can absorb almost any challenge, using it to strengthen itself. We can already see this happening with certain versions of the refusal of work rhetoric: reduction of working hours is often demanded either in the name of greater productivity or in the name of having more time for family – a highly problematic take on refusal of work given that, as Kathi Weeks points out, the heterosexual family model, which makes the privatization of reproduction possible, is just as important to the functioning of capitalism as the work ethic (Weeks 2011, 165).

What is needed, then, is a version of refusal of work that is immune to such a cooptation by capital. Kathi Weeks' solution is to demand less work not in the name of something specific, such as family or leisure, but as a goal in itself, with the implication that the aim is simply to remove work from the central position it occupies in our lives and societies. Eight hours for *what we will*, as the old slogan goes: the strength of it lies precisely in the fact that it does not specify what these hours should be used for (ibid, 167). Being specific in this case amounts to leaving a backdoor open through which capital can impose its will onto us: leisure, family, creative pursuits, personal development – all can be used "productively" under certain circumstances. The point, therefore, is not to replace work with something else that should be pursued instead, but to give the workers back control over their time and energy (ibid). Refusal

of work, then, is not about how we spend our time – it is about *who decides* how we spend our time, that is to say, it is about freedom and power. It is in this sense that the seemingly purely negative strategy of refusal (or exodus) proves to be the exact opposite. In the words of Paolo Virno, *"[d]efection stands at the opposite pole to the desperate notion of 'You have nothing to lose but your chains.' It is postulated, rather, on the basis of a latent wealth, on an abundance of possibilities,"* (Virno 1996, 198).

### *5.4.2 Reproducing oppression*

As discussed in the chapter on feminism as well as at the beginning of this chapter, one of the risks connected with a strategy of refusal of work is that, if not approached correctly, it could deepen existing inequalities and oppressions. Under the current economic system, working less is a welcome relief for some – and a way into poverty for others. If a renewed focus on reproductive labor is to be a key element of a post-capitalist society, we must grapple with the fact that its division is currently highly unequal, with gender and, to a lesser extent, race and class being strong predictors of who does the lion's share.

Similar to the previous point, the problem can be avoided by giving power back to the people. In this context, this means a bottom-up and highly decentralized nature of the struggle. Not only is the probability of success higher when the system is attacked from many different directions using many different tactics, as argued in the chapter on post-operaism, but it also ensures that the rights of oppressed groups are protected. For example, Silvia Federici argues that the first step towards liberation must be to reassert our control over reproduction – to seize the means of reproduction, so to speak – and that this must be done by women (Federici 2012, 147). This is crucial because women are the ones who have been primarily responsible for this work and therefore have the relevant experience and perspective, but also because being in charge (or at least in the lead) of the struggle on this terrain will ensure that their interests and needs will be taken into account. In contrast, a struggle for a renewed centrality of reproduction in society without a gender perspective may well lead to a deterioration of the situation of women.

### *5.4.3 Individual escapism*

The Oscar-winning film Nomadland (2020) explores the lives of a subculture of older Americans who have turned to a minimalist, nomadic lifestyle. The themes of exodus and refusal are central to the story: for most of the characters, the decision to become a nomad was mainly motivated by a refusal to play by the rules of modern capitalist society. Off-the-grid

living, another similar lifestyle which has sometimes found its way into mainstream media in recent years, can also be seen as a form of exodus. To Hardt and Negri, desertion and exodus are a form of class struggle (Hardt and Negri 2001, 213). But is this always necessarily the case? Even leaving aside the figure of the so-called digital nomad, who, far from having a subversive potential, actually embodies the ultra-flexible and ultra-individualist nature of 21st century capitalism, exodus – as illustrated by the abovementioned examples – often amounts to a mere individual escape rather than a political act.

This, of course, raises the question of what it means to act collectively or politically. I deal with this topic in detail at the beginning of this chapter; here I want to stress that this is an important point to be kept it mind, especially given that one of the effects (or, indeed, successes) of neoliberal capitalism has been to make us unlearn thinking, let alone acting, collectively. Coupled with the idea, also successfully imposed by neoliberalism, that there is no real alternative to the current system, it is easy to see why many would come to the conclusion that an individual escape is the best one can hope for. Another factor that adds to the confusion is the fact that the nature of collective action has changed dramatically since the heyday of the traditional labor movement, whose organizational forms apparently still hold sway over our idea of what collective political action can (or should) look like.

### *5.4.4 Precapitalist nostalgia*

It is perhaps not surprising that, in the absence of a sufficiently detailed vision of a postcapitalist future, many turn to the past for answers, taking the precapitalist world as a source of inspiration for the postcapitalist world. One obvious problem with this approach is that many of us have highly idealized notions of life in precapitalist societies. Just because a precapitalist society did not have the kind of problems that capitalism causes, it does not necessarily follow that it was better. Marx himself famously believed that capitalism was an improvement on the preceding system, due mainly to a higher level of socialization of workers, who were no longer so isolated and powerless as they had been under feudalism. Those who romanticize precapitalist societal relations and wish to model a future post-capitalist society upon them often tend to forget (or perhaps choose to ignore) that these societies, too, were imbued with power and rife with inequality and oppression.

The other problem with this approach is that a return to a previous stage of societal development is simply not possible. In his book about work, the anthropologist James Suzman discusses the findings – possibly quite surprising to a 21st century person – showing that people in hunter-

gatherer societies only worked about 15 hours per week on average (Suzman 2020). He also explains that, following the law of entropy, the amount of necessary work increases with the growing complexity of human society. What is possible for a small-scale society with hardly any division of labor and social hierarchy is certainly not an option for a highly complex 21st century society, in which we work not just to satisfy our basic needs for food and shelter, but also as a way to achieve social status and self-actualization. While precapitalist (or non-capitalist) societies may provide a useful backdrop for analyzing specific issues of capitalism, and even be a source of inspiration in certain specific aspects, we must not forget that turning back the clock is neither possible nor desirable. The postmodern is here to stay; we just need to find a way to make it work for us.

### *5.4.5 Technological utopia*

The final pitfall to be avoided lies on the opposite end of the spectrum than the precapitalist nostalgia: the technological utopia. Coming usually from tech enthusiasts, the central tenet of this belief is that technological advancement will eventually free us all from the necessity to work or at least reduce the need for human labor to a minimum. The chief issue with this approach is that it simply does not reflect reality: if we look at the history of capitalism so far, technology-driven increase in productivity of labor has never yet led to a reduction in working time (see for example Autor and Salomons 2017).

The idea that increased productivity would lead to a reduction in the amount of necessary labor seems logical – so why has this not been the case? Multiple possible explanations have been put forward. In the classic Marxist view, as explored in the first chapter, this is because human labor is the only possible source of surplus value, i.e., the only possible source of profit. Allowing humans to work less would hinder the accumulation of capital, and with it the functioning of the system as a whole. It follows, then, that as long as capital is in charge, it will always force us to work – even if this "work" is barely recognizable as such and so abstract (i.e., so far removed from the value it creates) that it seems completely useless. Meanwhile, in his famous theory of so-called *bullshit jobs*, David Graeber (2019) proposes a different kind of explanation. According to this approach, the reason why we continue to work so much – despite the fact that many of our jobs make no real difference in the world – has more to do with power than with the nature of the economic process: we are required to work to earn our living because that is how we stay in our proper place in the social hierarchy. Whatever the reason behind this

phenomenon, one thing is clear: refusal of work must be about demanding a sociopolitical change, not merely expecting a technological one.

## 5.5 Who will do the cleaning in a post-work society? Anticipating critique

Let us now address a few of the most common arguments against refusal of work. The most obvious objection to the idea of a post-work society is that eliminating work is simply not possible: even the most idealistic concept of a fully automated classless utopian society cannot deny that some tasks will always need to be performed by humans. Care work is a typical example of an activity that cannot be outsourced to machines, but even leaving out occupations with an affective component, many seemingly unskilled jobs are still miles away from being fully automated, yet are absolutely essential to the functioning of society.

To address this argument, I first want to clarify that – recalling the distinction between work and labor made at the beginning of this chapter – a society without work is not a society of idleness. Humans would still perform many of the same tasks they do now; the difference lies not in the activity itself, but in the conditions under which it is being performed: who controls it and who benefits from it. This of course raises the follow-up question of how, in a world where a person's material well-being is not conditional on work, can people be incentivized to perform some of the less pleasant yet socially necessary tasks. Here it is important to remember that a transition from a capitalist society to a post-work society is no mere surface-level or technological shift: it is a complete transformation which involves a profound change in values, relationships, thinking and behavioral patterns. It is perfectly plausible – though of course impossible to prove – that in such a society people would be primarily motivated by something other than individual gain, as well as have a different view of what constitutes an unpleasant task. In this particular context, a look at precapitalist/non-capitalist societies may be helpful in giving answers to the question.

Refusal of work as a strategy is based upon small-scale, decentralized action. The ultimate aim might be to overthrow the system, but in the here and now, it is about carving out spaces in which to start cultivating a different kind of subjectivity. This approach however raises a few potential objections. When exactly is creating a space to build an alternative lifestyle a political act rather than just an individual escape? Even if such a project succeeds in one or more locations or contexts, how does that foster political change on a world scale?

The question of what exactly constitutes collective political action has been addressed in detail at other places in this text. To sum up the key point: what makes an action a political action is a clear political goal. Demanding fewer working hours for all as a means of reshaping our society's relationship with work is a political act; reducing my own working hours in order to have more time for my hobbies is not (this is especially true given that being able to work less in the current context is an expression of privilege more than anything else). The main reason why the distinction may appear somewhat unclear is that, as discussed in the chapter on post-operaism, a crucial element of the strategy is that refusal of work is the means and the end at the same time: it aims to bring about a far-reaching sociopolitical change, but it also aims to change human lives in a tangible way from day one, which means there is an overlap between its effects and those of an individual refusal of work. The answer to the second objection stems from the same premise: in order to be part of collective political action on a world scale, the individual initiatives must be committed to working towards the same goal in coordination with others. The high level of development of communication which exists in the 21st century makes this possible on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, there is never any guarantee that the project will succeed: history is entirely contingent, as it always has been.

The final critique that might be aimed at the strategy of refusal of work is that it is both too vague and too passive. The first objection amounts to saying that the strategy does not propose any definite or specific "next steps" to be taken; it does not even make it very clear who should be taking these steps, i.e., who the political subject is. The second raises the question whether a "refusal" or an "exodus" may truly be the basis of something new, or an effective political slogan around which to rally a movement. Is not a mere rejection of the status quo a rather weak, even defeatist, political program?

Both of these have been addressed in other parts of the text; I will simply repeat the main points here. Firstly, the "vagueness" of the strategy is quite deliberate; in fact, it is a key element of it. Since the postmodern world is highly complex and dynamic, a strategy hoping to change it must be at least equally varied and flexible; this level of complexity can only be achieved by working in a decentralized manner. In other words: the more different kinds of tactics are employed in parallel, the higher the likelihood that some will succeed – or that a synergy effect will be created which will advance the whole movement towards its goal. Secondly, refusal in this context is to be understood not as a simple rejection, but as a demand to completely redraw the rules of the game. It is based, in Paolo Virno's words, on *"an abundance of possibilities"*

(Virno 1996, 198); i.e., it comes from the confidence that by being able to imagine another kind of world we can challenge the system not just in ways which it had foreseen and is prepared to accommodate, but in ways that truly threaten its base.

# 6 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the concept of refusal of work as it was formulated or reflected by three theoretical traditions: operaism, post-operaism, and Marxist feminism. For operaism, the Marxist current born in the factories of 1960s northern Italy, refusal of work is the right political strategy for the working class because it acts where workers are strongest and capital is weakest, namely, in the production process. Capitalism relies on having access to labor-power; withdrawing it will thus bring the whole system down. Another key advantage lies in the fact that refusal of work is the goal, the method, and the measure of success all at once: there is no need for tactics, and the positive effects of the change are felt immediately. The challenge lies in the question of political organization – refusal of work can only be a successful political strategy if it is a collective action.

Post-operaism seeks to apply the same core principles to the reality of the late 20$^{th}$ and 21$^{st}$ century. What changed in those few decades is both the nature of work and the nature of power: we now live in a postmodern world, where immaterial labor is the dominant productive force and where power is woven into society rather than external to it, acting from within the individual. Refusal of work in this context takes the form of *exodus* – understood not as a simple flight but as extricating ourselves from the fetters of the current system in order to build a different one. The question of political organization remains a key challenge of the project: the political subject of the 21$^{st}$ century is different in nature, but it is still indispensable for any political strategy.

Feminist authors ask very different kinds of questions in regards to refusal of work. Most importantly, they ask what does (and what should) count as "work", and how is this work distributed. This is a question never addressed by original operaism – though we can likely assume that for them, the house and care work done by women for free was never included in the "work" that was to be refused. In post-operaism, the distinction between productive and reproductive work is considered to have become essentially meaningless; the concept of work has become so abstract that it does not allow to ask questions about who is responsible for what kinds of work, why, and what the implications are. If we are to adopt refusal of work as a political strategy, these questions need to be addressed – otherwise the new society will reproduce the oppressions of the current one.

So how can refusal of work, as conceptualized by operaism in the 1960s and 1970s, be used as a political strategy aimed at overcoming capitalism in the 21st century? The operaist strategy is still sound in a few key points. Firstly, the production process is the heart of the capitalist system, and, as such, its weakest point. Secondly, it is not enough to reject the status quo, one needs to simultaneously build an alternative system, tapping into the strengths and resources of the working class (or Multitude). Thirdly, a successful political strategy is decentralized, democratic, low-threshold, and brings tangible benefits immediately, thus avoiding the many issues connected with "traditional" revolutionary politics. Fourthly, political organization is essential to success – without collective action, there can be no political strategy at all. Taking into account the nature of contemporary capitalism and postmodern society more generally (the post-operaists, of course, would argue that they are the same), we can formulate a 21st century version of the strategy of refusal: a project of making ourselves useless for capital by creating and expanding spaces – both physical and discursive – where other principles reign than those of capital.

The nature of work and its role in our lives and societies is a topic that has been much discussed in recent years. While some predict we will be mostly freed from the necessity to work by technological advancement, others have argued that, as much as the assumption appears logical at first glance, this has so far not been the case – and there is reason to believe that it never will be, unless a fundamental change in the very structure of society occurs. From an anthropological perspective, James Suzman argues that the reason why we keep working so much is connected to our human nature (which does not tolerate boredom very well) as well as the nature of society, which generates new needs as it becomes more complex.[27] David Graeber claims that work often has little to do with actual necessity and everything to do with power: employment is a way of keeping people subjugated, economically and politically. Kathi Weeks' argument points in a similar direction: the status quo is the result of an ideology, the *work ethic,* which teaches us that work is a moral calling as well as the means to earn the right to material well-being.

Once it becomes clear that reducing working time is a political question, it is not the technological development that should give hope, but rather the changing attitude towards work

[27] Here it is important to note that Suzman's definition of "work" is very different from mine. The compulsion to invent and create new things, which he claims is part of human nature, can be channeled in other ways than as productive work under capitalism.

among younger generations. The indignation of representatives of the status quo over the alleged "laziness" of Millennials and Gen Z has become a running joke in certain parts of the internet, but there have also been serious attempts at formulating principles which should shape the workplace of tomorrow. One such has been made by the German journalist Sara Weber in her book, characteristically (and somewhat provocatively) entitled *Die Welt geht unter, und ich muss trotzdem arbeiten* (2023).

As promising as these changes might seem from the perspective of a revolutionary strategy, the experience of the student movement of the 1960s and the developments that followed shows that there is nothing to guarantee that they will result in profound, lasting changes to the socioeconomic system. Indeed, it is far more likely that the system will find a way to accommodate them without threatening its core logic. The one crucial takeaway from operaist theory is that this danger is ever-present and the only way to counteract it is to lead the struggle against the central feature of the system, namely production. This means that if refusal of work is to be a revolutionary political strategy, it needs to be formulated and fought for not as a relatively minor reform of the current system but as a demand to design and establish another system entirely, one whose defining principles are incompatible with the status quo.

Another pitfall must be avoided at all costs: that of seeking individual solutions to collective problems. This issue has several different but related aspects. Firstly, in the past few decades, we seem to have mostly unlearned to think and act collectively: in neoliberal social theory, individuals are only ever expected to follow their own personal goals and protect their own personal interests. Secondly, class-based politics has been declared illegitimate and the status quo has been presented as the only possible alternative which serves the interests of us all. Consequently, if one is unhappy with certain aspects of the system, the only "solutions" available are individual, apolitical ones, such as finding a better job. Thirdly, different social groups have often been pitted against each other in an attempt to release some of the tension produced by the system and divert attention away from its core problems. A successful political strategy, then, must teach people to act collectively without erasing their differences and to seek power in the right places.

Finally, it is time to bring "materialist" and "idealist" politics together. In an era of immaterial labor, the distinction can be conceptual at best, and one could even argue that it has become completely untenable, given that even communication, relationships, affects, etc. are now productive while identities or subjectivities are vehicles of power. This is good news from the

perspective of progressive politics, because it means that the conflict between the so-called Old Left and New Left has been resolved (or rather has become meaningless). In practical terms, any political strategy needs to act both on the material level and on the discursive level; a requirement which is made easier by the fact that the two strands of the strategy can strengthen each other in a virtuous circle.

The term work-life balance, which seems to dominate much of the current debate about work, is one which certainly has potential as a political slogan at the center of the strategy of refusal of work. One advantage is that it is already well established in public debate and quite self-explanatory. In setting "work" directly against "life" it expresses the idea at the core of the strategy, namely that refusal of work is not an end in itself, nor a merely negative move, but rather an act of making more space for something else in what is essentially a zero-sum game. "Life" certainly provides a good counterweight or alternative to "work" because it is inherently positive while also being something of an empty signifier, i.e., a term that can be filled with many different meanings. The limitation of work-life balance, on the other hand, lies in the word "balance" which implies (or at least allows for the interpretation) that both are equally important. This makes it vulnerable to cooptation by capitalism, something we can already see happening. Perhaps, then, we should demand a life-work imbalance instead, as an expression of the fact that the first is – must be – infinitely more important.

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## Abstract Deutsch

Die Arbeitswelt ist im Wandel: seit Jahren wird über die Veränderungen in der Natur der Arbeit an sich, sowie in ihrem Stellenwert in der Gesellschaft, eine rege Diskussion geführt. Der Begriff "work-life balance" steht im Fokus einer besonders lebhaften Debatte, in der es um Arbeitszeitverkürzung, aber auch um die grundsätzliche Frage, ob Arbeit den Mittelpunkt unseres Lebens bilden soll, geht. Die Befreiung des Menschen von der Arbeit als Ziel antikapitalistischer Politik ist kein neuer Gedanke; allerdings gehörte er immer einer relativ unbedeutenden Strömung innerhalb der linken politischen Theorie an. Diese Masterarbeit zielt darauf ab, die Möglichkeit einer auf Arbeitsverweigerung basierten politischen Strategie für das 21. Jahrhundert zu untersuchen.

Arbeitsverweigerung als politische Strategie ist in den 1960er Jahren entstanden und ist mit der theoretischen Tradition des Operaismus verbunden. Das Konzept wurde später von Theoretiker:innen des Post-Operaismus weiterentwickelt, um der neuen Realität zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts besser zu entsprechen. Arbeitsverweigerung wurde auch von feministischen Autor:innen im Zuge ihrer kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit dem Arbeitsbegriff bearbeitet. Diese Masterarbeit analysiert die drei genannten theoretischen Zugänge, mit Fokus auf Arbeitsverweigerung als politische Strategie und anschließender Diskussion der Aspekte, die aus aktueller Sicht von besonderer Relevanz sind. Das letzte Kapitel führt die wichtigsten Punkte zusammen, um eine „Strategie der Verweigerung" für das 21. Jahrhundert zu skizzieren.

Die vorgelegte Strategie hat drei wesentliche Bestandteile. Erstens, Arbeitsverweigerung ist nicht als eine passive oder rein negative Taktik zu verstehen, sondern als ein Vorgang, der sowohl einen negativen als auch einen positiven Aspekt beinhaltet. Durch den Akt der Arbeitsverweigerung wird Raum für etwas anderes – eine Lebensweise, die auf alternativen Prinzipien beruht – geschaffen oder erweitert. Arbeitsverweigerung ist auch nicht als Rücktritt zu deuten, sondern als ein Versuch der Neufestlegung der Spielregel. Zweitens, die Strategie der Verweigerung muss sowohl auf dem diskursiven als auch auf dem materiellen Terrain agieren. Im 21. Jahrhundert sind die zwei Aspekte nicht voneinander zu trennen: auch immaterielle Phänomene, wie Kommunikation oder Affekte, sind produktiv geworden. Wird der Kampf an beiden Fronten geführt, können Synergieeffekte entstehen. Drittens, ein politisches Handeln muss notwendigerweise ein kollektives Handeln sein. Das Wesen der kollektiven Aktion und des politischen Subjekts, das sie ausführt, muss den Eigenschaften der Gesellschaft und der Macht im 21. Jahrhundert entsprechen: das Subjekt muss dezentralisiert, dynamisch, vielfältig und demokratisch sein.

## Abstract English

The changing nature of work and its place in society has been the subject of public debate for several years now. Centered around the term "work-life balance", one particularly salient discussion concerns the possible shortening of working time – coupled with the broader question whether work should really be the center of our lives. The idea that the goal of political struggle under capitalism should be to liberate ourselves from work is not new but it has always been a rather marginal current within the broader leftist political theory. This thesis seeks to explore the possibility of a political strategy based on refusal of work that would be fit for the 21st century.

Refusal of work as a political strategy goes back to the late 1960s and is connected with the theoretical tradition of operaism; the concept was further developed by post-operaist theorists at the turn of the millennium in order to better reflect the changed nature of work and of politics. Refusal of work was also reflected by Marxist feminist writers as part of their critical encounter with the concept of work. The thesis analyzes each of these three theoretical traditions in turn, focusing on the concept of refusal of work and the political strategy based upon it, as well as discussing which aspects of the strategy are of particular relevance in the contemporary setting. The final chapter builds upon those discussions, bringing together the key points to formulate an outline of a "strategy of refusal" for the 21st century.

The key components of the proposed strategy are the following. Firstly, refusal of work must not be understood as a passive or purely negative tactic. It is a move which has both a negative and a positive aspect: by refusing work, we are creating or expanding space for something else, a life based on an alternative set of principles. Refusal is also not a disengagement but rather a withdrawal in order to redraw the rules of the game. Secondly, the strategy of refusal must act both on the material and discursive level. In 21st century capitalism, the two moments have become inseparable, with intangible phenomena such as communication or affect becoming productive. Leading the struggle on both fronts has the potential to create synergies or a virtuous circle of change. Thirdly, in order for an action to be political, it must be collective. The nature of collective action and of the political subject which carries it out, however, must correspond to the nature of society and of power in the 21st century: it must be decentralized, dynamic, diverse, and democratic.