
Do We Really Have to Work More Creatively?

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*... did not Marx's own son-in-law write
a book called The Right to be Lazy?
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A Moribund Left

To say the Left is in crisis is not only a cliché, it is an unwarranted optimism. Crisis implies the necessity, and thereby also the possibility, of decisive action and change. I think it would be far truer to say the Left is in a state of paralysis. It has nowhere to go, no way to take. Since the fall of 'actually existing socialism', the possibility of an alternative to capitalism has all but disappeared from the public sphere, in which I include the university. As Fredric Jameson has remarked so incisively, 'people find it easier today to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'.¹ Hence the fundamentally reactive nature of the Left's current demands.

1. F. Jameson, in P. Anderson, 'The River of Time', *New Left Review*, no. 26, March/April 2004, p. 74. For an acute analysis of the critical fatalism of the last few decades, in the French context, see L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. G. Elliot, London and New York, Verso, 2005.

Being of the Left in the present climate means something like having a commitment — against a raft of corporate aggressors — to welfarism, to the environment, and to the sovereignty of poorer nations. In other words, it is something like a commitment to the amelioration of global capitalism. That's not a positive program.

In the absence of any cogent alternative to it, our criticisms of the current global polity will always have an element of bad faith about them. Take the question of contemporary trade unionism. The moment you accept the inevitability of capitalism — and you do so whenever you are incapable of imagining an alternative — you find yourself, as a leftist, in a highly ambivalent position. On the one hand, unions protect the rights of workers in a world of mass unemployment and insecurity. That is clearly a leftist position. On the other hand, that same protection seems to bar others from the workforce through the restrictions higher labour costs are said to place upon growth. Support for unionism, in other words, seems directly to contribute to the 'dualization of society',² that characteristic modern split between those full citizens who work and those 'non-citizens' who do not. Shouldn't the Left support the rights of the unemployed? Are we really meant just to dump them in the interests of those who have jobs to defend? There are of course other ways of thinking through the relation between trade unions and the unemployed (in fact, the clichés I have just rehearsed are quite dubious). My point is that these arguments are not being made public, explicit and clear. In this context it is very easy to split the Left for the contradictory entity that it seems to be. We appear to be for workers, but against giving them jobs. That's not a positive program, or even a leg to stand on. It is a state of paralysis.

A Neo-liberal Left?

It is in this light — the malaise of the contemporary Left — that we need to approach the nascent Creative Industries, a development that is nothing if not positive in its positing of future goals and directions. A policy initiative intimately related to the rise of New Labour in Britain, 'Creative Industries' is basically an attempt to draw artists away from their traditional role as both critics and

2. A phrase of André Gorz, cited in C. Lodziak and J. Tatman, *André Gorz, A Critical Introduction*, London and Chicago, Pluto Press, 1997, p. 70.

victims of capitalism and into the embrace of the economy — as its new leaders. Compare what artists currently rely on: an increasingly untenable welfare system and a demoralizing, unpredictable and unremunerative grants system. Art may well be about freedom, but in contemporary capitalist societies it involves ‘a condition of dependent beggary that is the very opposite of freedom’.³ I am quoting John Hartley, Dean of Creative Industries at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). This is in his introduction to *Creative Industries*, a new Blackwell collection of essays on the topic. Hartley himself quotes Richard Florida, Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University and author of the celebrated *The Rise of the Creative Class*. For Florida, new economic developments put artists in a position to turn their traditional situation on its head. ‘Creativity,’ Florida writes, ‘is now *the decisive* source of competitive advantage’.⁴ In effect, what people like Hartley and Florida are claiming is that the massive global rise of service and communication industries over the past two decades has led to a situation where creative communication (‘easy to replicate but hard to imitate’⁵) is at a premium. We have all this new media — now we need to fill it with words. Making the argument that creative content provision will become the economic focus of the future, institutions like QUT have managed to attract government funding back into the arts and humanities (to the tune, in QUT’s case, of fifteen million Beattie government dollars for its new Creative Industries Precinct). This is clearly a discourse that works!

Creative Industries is a discourse that affiliates itself, however paradoxically, with a number of the traditional concerns of the Left. According to Hartley, it has produced affiliations with many of its traditional cadres as well:

[M]any on the Left who have been trained in Frankfurt-style critique have turned up working directly in the creative industries, and in the policy, educational and government support agencies that serve them.⁶

For Hartley, such service represents ‘not an abandonment of

3. J. Hartley, ‘Creative Industries’, in J. Hartley (ed.), *Creative Industries*, Malden, Oxford and Carlton, Blackwell, 2005, p. 7.

4. Hartley, ‘Creative Industries’, p. 1.

5. C. Leadbeater and K. Oakley, in J. Hartley, ‘Preface’, in R. Wissler, B. Haseman, S. Wallace and M. Keane (eds), *Innovation in Australian Arts, Media and Design, Fresh Challenges for the Tertiary Sector*, Flaxton (QLD), PostPressed, 2004, p. xiii.

6. Hartley, ‘Creative Industries’, p. 13.

critique but its implementation'.⁷ In making this assertion, Hartley is relying upon the arguments of people like Charles Leadbeater. Leadbeater believes that there is real potential for economic democratization in the shift Creative Industries heralds, as the focus of production turns from resource-intensive areas towards the relatively costless world of signs. As Leadbeater puts it, 'an economy which becomes more knowledge intensive has the potential to become more inclusive and meritocratic'.⁸ Why? Because it means that '[e]veryone with an education can have a go'.⁹ So there is a utopian dimension to all of this too.

How should we evaluate this Creative Industries phenomenon? There is something compelling — I have to say as an artist — about the idea that we do not have to cut off our own legs in order to stand up for ourselves. What is more, there is a certain marxist flavour to the idea of a future where work becomes more and more a matter of autonomous creative activity. However, I am going to attack it, at just this point, and I will rely on the works of André Gorz to do so. For this is precisely what Gorz criticizes about traditional marxism: the fantasy of a future in which all will work in a fun and free way.¹⁰ What such visions lack, according to Gorz, is a recognition of the far more radical possibility that contemporary developments present us with: a future where we do not have to work at all. Creative Industries remains tied to what Marx noted was 'the absolutely necessary condition for capitalist production': the 'incessant reproduction, [the] perpetuation of the worker'.¹¹ The fantasy remains tied to the delusion that we still need to work.

Where Did All the Technology Go?

In what follows I am going to show why I think Creative Industries' embrace of capitalism, much as it might give a number of us something to do, is way too hasty. I think there is something very different that we could be doing with the energies that have supported the idea of the Left for some two hundred odd years of activism,

7. Hartley, 'Creative Industries', p. 13.

8. C. Leadbeater, 'Delia Smith, not Adam Smith', in J. Hartley (ed.), *Creative Industries*, p. 130.

9. Leadbeater, 'Delia Smith, not Adam Smith', p. 130.

10. A. Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, trans. G. Handyside and C. Turner, London, Verso, 1994, p. 57.

11. K. Marx in M. Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination, A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 347.

agitation and revolution. I propose the following program for the Left: we should devote our energies to proclaiming the right to be lazy.

In making this call I am borrowing the title of Paul Lafargue's classic marxist text. Lafargue wrote *The Right to be Lazy* in 1883 during a six-month gaol term in Saint Pélagie Prison.¹² Born in Santiago, Cuba, but educated in France, Lafargue married Marx's second daughter, Laura, and worked in close association with both his father-in-law and Engels. As for the text, it attacks those on the French Left ('only slaves would be capable of such baseness') who seek to proclaim a 'right to work'.¹³ Lafargue insists that the proletariat's demands become far more radical:

[I]t must proclaim the Rights of Laziness, a thousand times more noble and more sacred than the anaemic Rights of Man concocted by the metaphysical lawyers of the bourgeois revolution. It must accustom itself to working but three hours a day, reserving the rest of the day and the night for leisure and feasting.¹⁴

As you can perhaps tell, elements of Lafargue's text enter into the realm of magic realism, nowhere more so than when he proceeds to depict the joys to which this 'regime of idleness' will lead.¹⁵ Nonetheless, there is something quite compelling in what he says, and that is for the simple fact that:

Aristotle's dream is our reality. Our machines, with breath of fire, with limbs of unwearying steel, with fruitfulness, wonderful, inexhaustible, accomplish by themselves with docility their sacred labour.¹⁶

The reason is automation. Pointing to the obvious fact that capitalist accumulation has led to a vast array of labour-saving technology, Lafargue comes to the obvious conclusion: we should not have to work as much any more. We should be able to let the machines do it for us.

I will address the technological dimensions of the right to be lazy below, when I turn to unpacking the reasons why 500 years of

12. P. Lafargue, 'The Right to be Lazy' (1883), *Selected Marxist Writings by Paul Lafargue*, trans. C. Kerr, ed. R. Broadhead, Berkeley, Centre for Socialist History, 1984. An internet version of this same Charles Kerr translation can be accessed at <www.marxists.org/archive/lafargue/1883/lazy/index.htm>.

13. Lafargue, 'The Right to be Lazy', pp. 451, 437.

14. Lafargue, 'The Right to be Lazy', p. 451.

15. Lafargue, 'The Right to be Lazy', p. 475.

16. Lafargue, 'The Right to be Lazy', p. 484.

technological development have not done one bit — it is an extraordinary fact, the moment you think about it — to dent our need to work.

More Holidays!

For the moment I simply want to show how easy it is to mount a case for the right to be lazy. Recall what I said above about the difficulty of maintaining left-wing positions in the contemporary public sphere. Well forget all that, it isn't true: we just have to stop regarding free time as a problem.

In a discussion paper titled 'The Double Dividend, An Analysis of the Job Creation Potential of Purchasing Additional Holiday Leave',¹⁷ Richard Denniss proposes that the seven million (more or less) full-time employees in Australia sacrifice a projected 4 per cent wage rise in return for an extra two weeks annual leave. Denniss, a strategic adviser to the Australian Greens and previously Deputy Director of the Australia Institute, estimates that extending annual leave in this fashion would lead to an extra 146 000 full-time jobs. In June 2003, when the paper was released, unemployment was at 6.1 per cent; Denniss' proposal would have reduced it to 4.7 per cent. Obviously, such a shift would result in a significant reduction in public welfare costs. It would also, Denniss believes, lead to an increase in domestic tourism spending. With slightly less money, and much more time, workers would be more inclined to spend their holidays, and holiday money, at home. There would be health benefits — less stress! — and a consequent reduction in public health costs as well.¹⁸ A Newspoll survey conducted for Denniss discovered that 52 per cent of the workers interviewed (57 per cent of those aged between twenty-five and thirty-four) would willingly sacrifice the wage rise and take six weeks annual leave instead.

This is a simple, practical example of how the right to be lazy can be sold as a viable political program. It is attractive to the employed who work longer hours now than in the past (males now work an average of 43 hours a week, when in 1982 the average was 39).¹⁹ It is attractive to the unemployed because their future employment is predicated upon an increase in the laziness of those with work.

17. R. Denniss, 'The Double Dividend, An Analysis of the Job Creation Potential of Purchasing Additional Holiday Leave', The Australia Institute, 2003, <www.tai.org.au>, accessed 8 May 2005.

18. Denniss, 'The Double Dividend'.

19. Denniss, 'The Double Dividend'.

Where Did All the Unemployed Go?

Denniss' proposals would take us, going by the male figures, back to something more like a 41-hour week. The next step, in a left-wing program espousing the right to be lazy, would be to push for a 38-hour week. Then a 35-hour one. Then a 32-hour week. We could actually reduce, and redistribute, the working week quite substantially before getting to the point where such changes would reduce current productivity, for the simple reason that there are so many unemployed people in Australia at the moment.

But hold on, aren't we in a period of record low unemployment — 5.5 per cent at the time of writing this article,²⁰ a statistic that is proud testimony to the validity of the government's campaign for 'greater workplace flexibility'? The real rate is 'something close to 12%' according to Tony Nicholson, executive director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, which picks up some of the pieces.²¹ As Denniss explains elsewhere, the Australian Bureau of Statistics measures unemployment in three categories: employed, unemployed and not in the labour force.²² You will notice that there is no category for employed part-time. That is because most work was full time when the categories were instituted, in the 1960s. Part-time employment is, one should add, precisely the area of the labour market that has grown through the Howard government's 'flexibility' measures. Think of the spread of all those cafes and bars. At any rate, the thing to note about the way the statistics function is that if you work one hour a week, you are officially counted as employed. As for Nicholson's real rate of 'something close to 12%', he arrives at it by counting as employed anyone who works more than one day a week. So even 12 per cent is an underestimate of the real numbers. John Quiggan, Professor of Economics at the University of Queensland, offers an even grimmer picture. Claiming that unemployment constitutes the Howard government's 'worst policy failure', Quiggan focuses attention on the 300 000 men of working age on disability or sickness benefits, arguing (by comparing these figures with the

20 May 2005. Figures from *The Weekend Australian*, 7–8 May 2005, p. 19.

21. T. Nicholson, 'Rubbery Figures Hide the Real Jobless Tragedy', *The Age*, 17 December 2004, <www.theage.com.au/news/Opinion/Rubbery-figures-hide-the-real-jobless-tragedy/2004>, accessed 8 May 2005.

22. R. Denniss, 'Measuring Employment in the 21st Century, New Measures of Underemployment and Overwork', Discussion Paper no. 36, The Australia Institute, February 2001, <www.tai.org.au/>, accessed 8 May 2005.

much lower figures of prior decades, when our health portfolio was much worse) that some 200 000 of them are in a state of 'disguised unemployment'.²³ Again focusing on the male figures,²⁴ Quiggan suggests that the true picture of the unemployed and underemployed in contemporary Australia is about 20 per cent. This in turn leads him to conclude that, excepting the 'trough of the last recession,' unemployment in Australia is 'worse than at any time since World War II'.²⁵ We live in a society characterized by mass unemployment.

Of course, this is not simply an Australian problem. Once you start to see its broader dimensions, you begin to realize that we are part of a global trend, a trend that is making full-time employment increasingly hard to sustain as the platform for social identity and civil rights. To get a real picture of the facts, you need to adopt both a global and historical perspective. I mentioned above the curious fact that 500 years of technological development have done nothing at all to dent our need to work. What those years have done, however, is make that need more difficult to satisfy. The reality is that work is disappearing. The figures economist Jeremy Rifkin has amassed about work trends in the United States are arresting. In the 1950s, 33 per cent of all American workers were in manufacturing; by the 1960s that figure was 30 per cent; it was 20 per cent in the 1980s; and had dropped to 17 per cent by the time Rifkin was writing in 1995.²⁶ Many of those manufacturing workers were descendants of those who used to work the land. In 1850, agricultural workers constituted 60 per cent of the working population of the United States. By 1995, the figure had dropped to 2.7 per cent.²⁷ This drop in working populations has been accompanied — the reason for the decline — by a massive increase in individual productivity. In 1850, a farm worker produced enough to feed four people. Now, a single farm worker supplies enough to feed more than seventy-eight people. That should be great news. Coupled with the need to work, it is a disaster. As Rifkin states, there are more than nine million people living in poverty in rural America, 'all casualties of the great strides in farm

23. J. Quiggan, 'Economic Policy', in R. Manne (ed.), *The Howard Years*, Melbourne, Black Inc. Agenda, 2004, pp. 178–9.

24. As Quiggan comments, 'It is harder to assess the unemployment situation for women because of the more complex life choices they face, but it does not seem to be much better', 'Economic Policy', p. 179.

25. Quiggan, 'Economic Policy', p. 179.

26. J. Rifkin, *The End of Work*, New York, G. Putnam and Sons, 1995, p. 8.

27. Rifkin, *The End of Work*, p. 110.

technology that have made the United States the number-one food producer in the world'.²⁸

Austrian economist and erstwhile editor of *Les Temps Modernes*, André Gorz, sees it thus. Everywhere we look we see:

a reduction by automation of socially necessary work time. Which is why societies everywhere *are organising this reduction in ways which hide its reality*. But there can no longer be full-time waged work for all, and waged work cannot remain the centre of gravity or even the central activity in our lives. *Any politics which denies this, whatever its ideological pretensions, is a fraud.*²⁹

For Gorz, the massive extension of the service industries (which now employ, by Rifkin's figures for the year 2000,³⁰ some 77 per cent of the US workforce) is one such fraud. 'A way of disguising private activities and leisure activities themselves as work and jobs', the growth in these industries,

shows a striking parallel with the developments which took place during the last century when the introduction of intensive farming and the mechanisation of the textile industry led to millions of unemployed people going into domestic service: 'personal and domestic servants' represented 14% of the working population in Britain between 1851 and 1914.³¹

Gorz notes other ways of disguising the fact that we do not need to work so much any more: for example, raising the school leaving age, extending university attendance, and offering 'poorly paid, para-military "work experience" schemes'.³² In Australia we are doing all of these things.

Economics or Discipline?

My aim here is to show how the Left can offer a cogent alternative to the current status quo, a policy platform which needs to extend into an alternative to capitalism itself. I have begun by considering Denniss' arguments for the right to be lazy. There is a problem,

28. Rifkin, *The End of Work*, p. 113.

29. A. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise, On the Liberation from Work*, London, Pluto Press, 1985, p. 31.

30. J. Rifkin, 'When Markets give way to networks ... Everything is a service', in Hartley (ed.), *Creative Industries*, p. 367.

31. Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, p. 8, p. 226.

32. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 36.

however, with such a policy initiative, which we need to consider at the outset. The problem is its happy assumption that people will actually embrace a society whose workers have more free time. The reason this is not necessarily the case is that work is a means of achieving social discipline. Many are disturbed by the prospect of an Australia in which it would not have that function.

They hate freedom. Gorz, as usual, goes right to the heart of things. For him, there is a clear reason why people victimize the unemployed through all manner of 'quasi-racist' rhetoric, such as the idea that 'those who work hard achieve social success and those who do not succeed have only themselves to blame'.³³ The Howard government blames the victim in this fashion, and ignores the actual causes, like automation, because it cannot bear to relinquish the disciplinary structure of work itself. It is 'the social relations between employers and employees' that conservatives are really interested in, not the work itself.³⁴ The fact is that most of us, in our work, are subordinate to someone else. If our lives are 'entirely organised and centred around work', they will be fundamentally anchored by our submission to that power structure. Were 'work just one activity among others which were equally important or even more important', conformity would be far harder to engineer.³⁵ We would become used to organizing our days by ourselves. In other words, this refusal to think through the reality — and the utopian potential — of unemployment has nothing to do with economics. It is a question of discipline.

In a very real way discipline is the key to the entire Howard government, for all its supposed obsession with the economy to the exclusion of all else. According to Quiggan, the significance of the Howard government's contribution to the Australian economy is actually quite illusory.³⁶ Its contribution to creating and maintaining a climate of fear, on the other hand, is indisputable. Turn back to 1996. After the new government's first Cabinet meeting, Senator Herron announced, 'with the satisfaction of one disclosing a job well done', the Howard government's first decision: to run an audit through ATSIC, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission.³⁷ As Donald Horne commented:

33. Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, p. 219.

34. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 35.

35. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 35.

36. Quiggan, 'Economic Policy'.

37. D. Horne, *Looking for Leadership, Australia in the Howard Years*, Ringwood, Penguin, 2001, p. 210.

All those issues confronting Australia, and they picked *this* as number one? No opening signs of goodwill; instead an opening display of discipline.³⁸

A concern with discipline seems equally to mark this government's prize solution to the unemployment problem: the abolition of unfair dismissal legislation for small businesses. As Minister Abbott says, of his government's appalling record on unemployment: 'and greater improvements could be achieved if the current unfair dismissal laws were abolished'.³⁹ Quiggan suggests that such a move might, at most, raise employment by half a per cent; Denniss' proposal would raise employment by three times that amount.⁴⁰ It does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that their real aim in ditching unfair dismissal provisions is to spread the fear of authority through mandating its arbitrary (fair or unfair) exercise. Such a conclusion would be consonant with the thesis that this government's prime economic aim is not so much the management of scarcity as the enforcement of social discipline.

I would suggest that unemployment itself is being used to this end. Consider the following laconic comment of Julian Disney on the harshly punitive measures the Howard government introduced against the unemployed in the late 1990s: 'the changes neither addressed nor took adequate account of the pervading shortage of work opportunities for most of the people upon whom the obligations were imposed'.⁴¹ What Disney's formulation does not address is the possibility that the government took full account of the shortage of work opportunities, and used it to further a quite different aim: fear. This is a terrible time to be unemployed in Australia, on the receiving end of 'a stratification which repudiates equal rights and justifies itself through quasi-racist hatred and contempt'.⁴² I am suggesting that the creation of such an underclass is less an oversight of a government blinded by ideology and arrogance than an aim that government wishes to achieve. Why? Because people will be afraid of losing their jobs and will curb their behaviour accordingly. We are meant to live in fear.

It is not an economic question, but a question of discipline.

38. Horne, *Looking for Leadership*, p. 210.

39. Denniss, 'The Double Dividend'.

40. Quiggan, 'Economic Policy', p. 180.

41. J. Disney, 'Social Policy', in R. Manne (ed.), *The Howard Years*, p. 200.

42. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 36.

But What of the Right to be Lazy?

Does the successful appeal of fear and punishment invalidate the program I am advancing here: that the Left foment its still considerable forces around the right to be lazy? I do not believe it does, either in the short or long term. In fact, I think the articulation of a program like this offers us the resources finally to force this government to speak the truth. The Howard government has little interest in redressing unemployment, or in economic management, or in anything other than discipline itself. On the other hand, the right to be lazy constitutes a positive policy program that can actually offer people more freedom. We can increase workplace participation, and we do not have to rescind the unfair dismissal legislation to do so. The more this becomes known, the more people will start to realize that the policy bankruptcy of this government extends right into the economic sphere. Its primary interest is discipline.

The principle behind everything I have argued so far is that it is not enough for the Left simply to say that the status quo is untenable because of all its unfortunate consequences. You have to offer a real alternative:

The demand for change, in other words, does not arise out of the impossibility of tolerating the existing state of affairs, but out of the possibility of no longer having to tolerate it.⁴³

This principle needs to be applied on the broad scale, as much as in the short-term measures I have so far considered. The Left needs to show that there is an alternative to capitalism, and that is predicated upon the right to be lazy. The fact of the matter is that we can push Dennis' proposals far harder than he does. Gorz campaigns for a twenty-hour week: 1000 hours a year, which one might spread in various ways: 'two and a half days a week, or two weeks a month, or 5 months in a year'.⁴⁴ The Left needs to show how such a program might be possible.

There is a whole new realm of fear we need to combat here. After all, such a proposal would put us, as a society, well below current productivity levels. That is, it would have severely retarding effects on the 'healthy', as they say, 4 per cent growth rate the Australian

43. Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution', in *Socialism and Revolution*, trans. N. Denny, Doubleday-Anchor, New York, 1973, pp. 167-8.

44. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 53.

economy has 'enjoyed' these last ten years.⁴⁵ We are all familiar with 'runaway growth as a condition of economic health'.⁴⁶ And we are all familiar with the fact that environmental destruction is an economic necessity. How could things be otherwise? There is one way, and it is surprisingly simple: we have to dissociate work from its current role as the means of access to goods and services. This will involve some serious laziness.

Technology is Worthless

To understand how a move away from capitalism is possible we need to answer the question raised above in relation to Lafargue's pamphlet. Why, I asked, after 500 years of technological change, do we still need to work? The answer to this question will point the way forward to the sort of post-capitalist society Gorz proposes.

The contradiction of capitalism, to put Marx's *Capital* in a nutshell, is that a capitalist system requires continual technological changes to advance its immediate profits, yet it is incapable of registering the material value of those changes because of its ultimate reliance upon labour-time as the measure of value. The more capitalism develops its technological resources, the less it requires workers to service them. That should be a great thing. Yet such is the contradictory nature of capitalist society that the falling demand for work actually constitutes a problem. It means we cannot satisfy our need to work to produce the measure of value by which we access goods and services. The flip-side of this scenario is that, if we can shift the function of determining the access to goods and services away from work, we will be in a position finally to appreciate all the massive time-saving advances capitalism has brought us. We will be ready to be truly lazy. In fact we could start right now.

This is how Marx himself articulates the contradiction in the *Grundrisse*:

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour-time to a minimum, while it posits labour-time, on the other side, as the sole measure and source of wealth.⁴⁷

45. Quiggan, 'Economic Policy', p. 185.

46. Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, p. 362.

47. K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus, Middlesex, Penguin and New Left Review, 1973, p. 706. Postone cites this passage in *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, p. 34 and pivots much of his reinterpretation of Marx around it.

In practice, what this means is that technology is worthless. I will try to unpack what Marx is getting at in the above quote. I will ignore the first part of the contradiction (Capital 'presses to reduce labour-time to a minimum'), as we all know how desirable automation is for those who own the means of production. It is the reason the United States now produces its 1948 standard of living in less than half the time (that is, less than half the wage-hours) it took in 1948.⁴⁸ We tend to forget how short-lived the profits of automation in fact are, and how obligatory the new technology is once one's competitors have it.⁴⁹ These are further proofs of the bloated role of work in capitalism, but I will leave them aside and focus instead on the second part of the contradiction Marx identifies. Capital may well strive 'to reduce labour-time to a minimum', but what does it mean to say that it simultaneously 'posits labour-time ... as the sole measure and source of wealth'?

One of the main arguments of Marx's *Capital* is that work, in capitalist societies, is performed not merely for the sake of producing things, but also to mediate their distribution. Work acts as a means of distribution because it allows the worker to exchange his/her commodity, labour power, for other commodities, albeit through the intermediary form of money. As individual workers, our immediate aim is to produce the 'measure of wealth', which can then be swapped for specific objects — those goods and

48. By Rifkin's 1995 figures; Rifkin, *The End of Work*, p. 223.

49. As a capitalist you do indeed have a vested interest in automating production (driving to 'reduce labour-time to a minimum') as it will give you an immediate advantage over all other competitors. After all, you will be producing the same products with fewer labour costs. Mind, such technologically derived profits only last so long, given how imitable technology in fact is. The moment everyone catches up with the innovator the profit advantage swiftly disappears. That's because the ensuing competition will drive prices down till they meet the level of the new, technologically reduced, labour costs. Only a monopoly-style situation will stop this happening. Marx gives an example from the textile industry: 'The introduction of power looms in England ... probably reduced by one half the labour required to transform a given quantity of yarn into woven fabric': Marx in Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, p. 287. The end result, however, was that the products fell to half their price. Producers were effectively back where they started prior to the technology's introduction. It is the same with the computers that we have seen introduced everywhere over the last twenty years. Once everyone in a given industry possessed that technology they could no longer derive profit from it. Nor was there any choice not to implement the new technology. As Max Weber remarked, in relation to technological advances in the 19th-century textile industry: 'There was repeated what everywhere and always is the result of rationalization: those who would not follow suit had to go out of business': in Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, p. 17. You have to change, even if that change brings no real benefit. Postone puts it this way: 'The peculiarity of the dynamic — and this is crucial — is its treadmill effect'. It gets you nowhere. This, in Postone's apt phrase, is the 'dialectic of transformation and reconstitution' that drives the 'radical transformation of the technological and social conditions of the labour process' throughout the centuries of Capital's unfolding: Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, p. 283. We used to call it progress. Another way to put it is that technology is worthless, yet it forces change upon us.

services necessary for our well-being and social participation. That is why unemployment is such a problem. It is not because there are masses of pressing jobs to be done. It is because the unemployed cannot enter the field of exchange: they do not have any work to swap for other things. Work is our currency, our means of access to goods and services. What we produce — the material wealth itself — is largely irrelevant.

It is important, though by the same token difficult, to realize how historically unprecedented this scenario is. Whereas previous societies determined the distribution of goods and services through relations of 'personal or direct domination' and tradition (for example, feudal relations, kinship etc), capitalism does so in a starkly impersonal way, through the exchange of labour products. What is more, the way the value of one's labour power is calculated actually has no relation to its productivity. One's labour power is not remunerated for its productivity, but rather for the time spent performing it. This is so normal to us that it is hard to see just how strange it really is. Think of the figure I cited from Rifkin above: in 1850, an American farm worker produced enough to feed four people; now, a single farm worker supplies enough to feed more than seventy-eight people. Agricultural labour in the United States is now twenty times more productive than in 1850. That massive change in productivity does not enter in any way at all into the calculation of an agricultural worker's wage. That worker will still be remunerated for the time spent working, for example, by the hour. The actual productivity of our work is irrelevant to its function as the 'measure of wealth'.

I have just compared the way we distribute goods and services in exchange for work, our true currency, with the system that prevailed in the Middle Ages, where things were distributed according to relations of mastery and servitude. I make this comparison to underline a paradoxical fact. A feudal society would have been more capable of attributing a value to technology than we ourselves are. A feudal master, when faced with a labour-saving device or practice, might have decreed that the peasants now work less, or that they work less and pray more, or he might have even rejected the innovation altogether (as Mediaeval guilds tended to).⁵⁰ We, on the other hand, have no choice but to accept anything that increases the productivity of our labour. The market will not

50. Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, p. 16.

allow otherwise. Nor, and this is where the contradiction really cuts in, does the presence of such labour-saving devices make any difference to the way our work is valued when we come to exchange it for things. We are still remunerated for the time spent working, regardless of how much more productive our work now is. Remember what I am arguing here: technology is worthless. No matter how much we advance the productivity of human labour power, such advances are irrelevant to our calculations of its value.⁵¹ That is why — finally to respond to Lafargue's question — none of these advances in technology have altered our need to work. We, as individual workers, can only gain access to the social product by selling our labour-time. It does not matter how productive that labour is relative to prior epochs.

The contradiction between the need for a job, to access the social product, and capital's tendency to make jobs unnecessary, will be apparent. It is why workers have such a vested interest in Capital's expansion into ever-newer domains, including Tasmanian forests, for example. Workers need Capital to push into hitherto unexplored realms simply so that they can deploy their own labour-time and so have access to the social product:

[B]ecause labour is determined as a necessary means of individual reproduction in capitalist society, wage labourers remain dependent on capital's 'growth' even when the consequences of their labour, ecological and otherwise, are detrimental to themselves and to others.⁵²

The growing environmental concern has made this fact ever more apparent. The simple fact of treating labour-time as 'the measure of wealth' not only makes it impossible to enjoy the machines capitalism has brought us these last 500 years, it causes us to destroy the natural landscape as well.

51. There are various, more or less illusory, ways in which one might qualify this assertion. The most obvious follows along the lines described in footnote 50 above, and is conveniently glossed by Postone as follows: 'increased productivity leads to short-term increases in amount of value yielded per unit time, which induces the general adoption of the newer methods of producing; however, once these methods become generalised, the value yielded per unit time returns to its older level': Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, p. 290. As Postone argues, it is this very dialectic of change in material wealth (technology and its products) and stasis in the measure of wealth (labour-time as the measure of value), that renders capitalism so contradictory and self-defeating. Again, technology is effectively worthless.

52. Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, p. 313.

Agenda

I have just explained why capitalism is incapable of taking advantage of the technology it nonetheless puts in motion, to the point that unemployment is actually a problem. It should be a cause for celebration, and still could be. As any artist knows, the moment you have identified a contradiction, you are in the space of possibility. Capitalism's dysfunction in fact points to a way beyond it. It is obvious the moment you see it: *we have to dissociate work from its function as the 'measure of wealth'*. By the same token, *we need to find a way to start valorizing technology*. After all, the positive side of all the issues I have been addressing here is that capitalism has bestowed upon us an enormous amount of labour-saving technology. If we can find a way to value their productive power, rather than our own labour-time, we will be well on the way to celebrating unemployment for all the riches it may bring us. We will be ready to be seriously lazy.

It is worth adding that the alternative to capitalism I am advancing here, while fully consonant with Marx's vision, has nothing to do with 'actually existing socialism', which was entirely predicated upon a productivist ethos and associated one's work with one's right of access to the social product, like in any other capitalist society. Postone describes the old Eastern Bloc as 'the most rigid, vulnerable, and oppressive form of state-interventionist capitalism' on just these grounds.⁵³ That ethos is well summed up in one of the massive signs I saw atop a building in Moscow when I lived there in the early 1990s: 'If you don't work, you don't get to eat'. Founded upon the glorification of the worker as the true motor of human history, the Soviet Union, just like much 20th-century marxism, replaced

Marx's critique of the mode of production and distribution with a critique of the mode of distribution alone, and his theory of the self-abolition of the proletariat with a theory of the self-realization of the proletariat.⁵⁴

As this quote makes clear, the Postonian interpretation of Marx that I am drawing upon here is a decidedly heretical one. Postone rejects what he calls 'traditional Marxism' for its tendency to view labour as the transhistorical motor of human society and just inheritor of

53. Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, p. 14.

54. Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, p. 69.

the future. He argues, to the contrary, that labour's centrality to the social process is just what is wrong with capitalism. This striking realignment has led Guido Starosta to assert that:

Postone's work poses fundamental questions and controversial answers which should enter the research agenda of any attempt at a critical reconstruction of the critique of political economy for our times.⁵⁵

Postone's work should enter the research agenda of anyone working on the theoretical foundations of the right to be lazy. This is where we will find laziness extending into an alternative to capitalism itself.

But if the world beyond capitalism is to be achieved through laziness, through the 'self-abolition of the proletariat', how might that actually be brought about?

In broad terms, it will involve getting the technology to work for us. Gorz mentions a Japanese proposal, made in 1983, that robots start paying union dues. He suggests that it would be even better to get them to pay tax, per unit of output.⁵⁶ Such funds could then be diverted towards his main proposal: 'the guarantee of an income for life independent of a job'. The idea of a staggered reduction of income down to the 20-hour week is ultimately intended to effect this outcome: a situation where one's wage no longer has anything to do with one's job. In such a scenario there would no longer be any necessity to produce so as to obtain access to the social product. You would already have it. The goals of production could be determined by a different set of values altogether, including democratic ones. Of course, we still would need to do some work to produce social necessities: hence the twenty hours, which are not obligatory. They are, however, our right. As Gorz puts it, the guaranteed income for life 'will only bring freedom if it is accompanied by *the right to work for everyone*'.⁵⁷

Gorz is addressing the world of possibility. It is also possible to be more specific.

For example, there is the history of recent attempts to legislate a 35-hour week in France under the Jospin Government, beginning with the *loi de Robien* in 1996, which gave firms financial incentives

55. G. Starosta, 'Editorial Introduction: Rethinking Marx's Mature Social Theory', in *Historical Materialism*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2004, p. 44.

56. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 45.

57. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 40.

for work-sharing. This law was followed by the *loi Aubry* in 1998, which reduced the working week to thirty-five hours, effective from 1 January 2000, in time with the new Millennium. It was undermined by the Chirac Government in 2002, and then effectively dismantled in 2005. Press reports have since happily reported the thirty-five hour week 'a disaster', though opinion polls and various economic indicators seem to suggest otherwise.⁵⁸ Nor is this the end of the matter. The dramatic and contested character of the French experience in *legislated* work-time reduction needs to be compared with the rather more stable experience of surrounding countries like Germany and the Netherlands, which have achieved similar but more lasting results for large portions of their populations, by way of collective bargaining. Finland, Belgium, Denmark and Sweden offer examples of successful work-time reduction too. There is a lot to learn from the recent European experience.⁵⁹ This is something the Left in Australia can and should be doing right now.

But let me change channels. I will conclude on a topic that is of both immediate and long-term relevance to the politics I have been discussing here. It concerns one of the key ideological obstacles that the right to be lazy faces, which I touched upon above in relation to fear and discipline, around which people vote. Cultural Studies has a real role to play here, as do artists. Why? Because we are in the rare position of being able to teach people how *not* to work.

How Not to Work

The central ideological task for Cultural Studies is to work out how to deal with boredom.

The task is not, as the critics of socialism have often imagined, how to inspire people to work in the absence of the abstract compulsion to do so. For some work will always still be necessary. Gorz's treatment of this issue constitutes one of the most significant elements of his *oeuvre*. In a world where work is restricted to twenty hours a week (Gorz's calculation as to what is socially necessary to produce our actual needs, once shorn of the need to work so as to access them), people will flock to the task. Why? For

58. For example, P. Broughton, 'French 35-hour Week 'a disaster'', Telegraph.co.uk, 18 May 2005, <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/05/18/wfran18.xml>, accessed 3 October 2006. On positive opinion polls, and economic indicators, see A. Hayden, 'International Work-Time Trends: The Emerging Gap in Hours', *Just Labour*, no. 2, Spring 2003, pp. 28–30.

59. For a start, see Hayden, 'International Work-Time Trends'.

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the same reasons that 'retired people, the unemployed and sons and daughters of peasants seek waged work, however unrewarding'.⁶⁰ It offers them a way out of their constricted lives in the private sphere. Work allows access to an anonymous social space, where you meet people you wouldn't otherwise, and can 'feel useful in a general sense, rather than in the particular way subject to particular relationships'. As such, work allows one

to exist as a fully social individual protected from the pressures of particular groups by anonymous membership of society at large.⁶¹

This is why Gorz insists that the future society must not only guarantee everyone a wage for life independent of work, but that it must also guarantee everyone the right to work twenty hours a week. Gorz recognizes the value of *anomie*: the advantage of a space where you are alienated from your everyday concerns and allowed to exist as an abstract unit of the social whole. This is actually a space of freedom, as those who are currently denied work know so well. For these reasons, 'the demand for abstract work will grow apace with the reduction of obligatory work time'.⁶²

The real problem is elsewhere. How will we deal with the fact that the right to work has been so curtailed by the right to be lazy? How will people cope with the boredom?

Joseph Brodsky: 'When hit by boredom, let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom. The sooner you hit bottom, the faster you surface.'⁶³

But Where?

Fredric Jameson's article 'Politics of Utopia' in many ways spurred this one.⁶⁴ Its significance lies in the way Jameson tackles head-on the curious question of why the societies depicted in utopian texts like Sir Thomas More's seem such boring places to be. For Jameson this is their existential challenge. Utopias force us to realize that we would miss 'the miseries and the deformations' of our current world of danger and overproduction 'as much as the pleasures and

60. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 54.

61. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 54.

62. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 54.

63. J. Brodsky, cited in B. McIntyre, 'On Boredom', in *The Weekend Australian Review*, 23–24 April 2005, p. 2.

64. F. Jameson, 'Politics of Utopia', *New Left Review*, no. 25, January/February 2004, pp. 35–56.

fulfilments' it brings. Why? Because 'what we call our personality is made up of these very things': the pathological as much as the personable.⁶⁵ The possible absence of misery bores us. I have extended Jameson's argument elsewhere to claim that difference itself bores us; in fact, boredom is often the first sign of the apparition of difference.⁶⁶ Hence Brodsky's advice: we need to embrace both phenomena concurrently if we are ever to project a life beyond (that is, a variety of pleasures and pains beyond those of) capitalism.

An artist I met once heard me out as I was whingeing about the difficulty of our vocation. Poets have fared worse out of capitalism than probably any other species of artists. 'Yes,' he replied, 'but as an artist you're aware that there's always more than one economy'.

Another important Gorzian contribution: 'entrepreneurial pioneering ... is not something specific to capitalism'.⁶⁷ There are many examples of entrepreneurial activities that are not rewarded in pecuniary terms. In general, entrepreneurialism, 'like all other forms of creativity ... sets up its own criteria for success and then tries to gain recognition for them'.⁶⁸ The implication is that capitalism functions as a system of recognition, as much as a mode of enrichment, for people who discover opportunities in it. The implication is that the former role is in fact more compelling. Psychoanalysis tells us that the struggle for recognition (or rather, misrecognition) can occur in any symbolic domain — once you have passed through your boredom. Who says you need a capitalist economy to be entrepreneurial? There is an entrepreneurialism of influence too: teaching, art work, spreading rumours. In fact, there are as many entrepreneurialisms as there are economies.

But do we really need to work more creatively?

One of the defining capitalist fantasies is the idea that 'I could be an artist if I only I didn't have to ...' It gets people to work on time. But it is no basis for a society forced to confront the horror of free time.

But how?

This is where we need Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies has as

65. Jameson, 'Politics of Utopia', p. 52.

66. P. Magee, 'Strange Directions for Future Research', TEXT, *The Journal of the Association of Writing Programmes*, vol. 10, no. 2, October 2006.

67. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 61.

68. Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, p. 61.

its mission the study of what people do in their leisure time. There we have an archive of how, through popular culture — through Elvis clubs, chat rooms, body-building, watching *Australia's Funniest Home Videos*, or *Iron Chef*, having sex, cooking, reading academic journals, travelling, making home movies — people deal with the private sphere, whose role I am suggesting we expand. These investigations concern alternative modes of valuing the moments in one's day. They are vital to the task of finding a future in which *not* working is the main way of fulfilling your contribution to society.