

The Biopolitics of Laziness: Marx, Lafargue, and the Laboring Body

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Energy, efficiency, speed, acceleration: these are the keywords that define the *Zeitgeist* of industrial modernity in the West. The modern culture of dynamism, movement, and doing that emerged with the first industrial revolution and came to full fruition in the nineteenth century, the century Eric Hobsbawm calls “the age of capital,” was fueled by scientific advances and new technologies. At the core of this culture of productivity lay the human body and the life energy of the worker. As the biopolitical object at the center of every capitalist economy, the energy of the worker’s body needed to be maintained and reproduced through the time of nonwork. This is the part of the worker’s day that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, with Fordism, would come to be called ‘leisure time.’ In the nineteenth century, the time of reproduction, drastically curtailed, could only allow for the subsistence, or mere survival, of the worker. In this scenario the demand to shorten the working day became crucial, as the many workers’ struggles around this issue in every Western industrial country testify.

What is at stake in nonwork, therefore, is the desire to reclaim the time of life away from labor. This is a time that capitalism invariably desires to fully recapture, in order to insure its own functioning and the maximization of profit. The dialectic of work and nonwork traverses both the nineteenth and twentieth century as one of the major concerns for economists, social reformers, governments, and workers. In terms of the

sacred quality that the Protestant work ethic attributes to work, nonwork is labelled as “laziness,” with a moralizing language that signals disapproval of an unwillingness to produce. The work ethic decries all ‘waste of time’ and energies as affronts to the bourgeois asceticism necessary for the accumulation of value. Laziness appears as the source of all evils to Victorian social reformers such as Thomas R. Malthus, Jeremy Bentham, and Henry Mayhew, and is a suspicious category also for both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The discourse against laziness reinstates the Enlightenment figure of *homo faber*, whose scientific knowledge and domination of nature is the source of wealth and progress. Against the image of laziness as a moral flaw, a sort of capitalist original sin that must be eradicated at all costs, both Marx and Paul Lafargue, albeit from different perspectives, offer a much more complex view of the same phenomenon, a view that highlights the ambivalent status of nonwork in modernity. In Marx’s and Lafargue’s thought, competing meanings of nonwork emerge and intersect to give laziness an almost translucent quality: from the presumed idleness of the *Lumpenproletariat* critiqued by Marx, to the extension of the time of leisure demanded by Lafargue; from the supposedly “idle time” of women’s unwaged work in the home, to the enforced idleness of “the reserve army of the unemployed” discussed by both Marx and Engels.

While both at work and at rest, the body stands as the crucial means through which liberal and capitalist biopolitics is articulated; conversely, in the case of what we might call a biopolitics of laziness, the same body is the contested site on which to stage an adversarial biopolitics of the refusal of work. It is especially important today to study the different valences which Marx and Lafargue attribute to work and laziness, because the economic and cultural scenarios they outline for the nineteenth century resonate with two more recent historical moments: the mid-to late twentieth century, and the present moment, in which we appear to be witnessing a new stage of the breakdown of the distinction between work and leisure, at the time of the full subsumption of life into capital. Since the publication of Paul Lafargue’s pamphlet *The Right to Be Lazy* (1880,

1883), nonwork has been embraced by anarchists and other dissident Marxists, as well as by artists among the Surrealists and the Situationists, as a counterproduction of life, and the key means for social protest, autonomy, and revolutionary politics against the demands of capital. These forces found their fullest expression in the diverse rebellious practices of the 1960's, suspended between hedonism and politics, at a moment when hedonism came to be championed as a means of embodied politics, centered on what Antonio Negri and his fellow Autonomist Marxists call "exodus": the "collective migration out from the regime of the factory" celebrated by Paolo Virno (Virno, 8)¹

Can we think, through Marx and Lafargue, of a biopolitics of laziness? Is biopolitics always a tool of liberal governmentality at the service of capital, centered on the disciplining of the body of the population, so that the modern subject, through medical, social, political and legal *dispositifs*, is trained to perform appropriately as a productive member of society? What would a biopolitics of the lazy body look like? Marx's and Lafargue's view of work and nonwork can help us formulate an answer to these questions; such an answer would complicate the almost always *a priori* positivity with which the adversarial quality of nonwork is viewed by contemporary Autonomist theorists, in the first instance Negri himself, but also by other critics, such as Nick Srnicek and Aaron Bastani, for whom nonwork appears immanently emancipatory. While Lafargue regards laziness as profoundly liberatory, Marx shows us the pitfalls of this claim by making visible, in particular circumstances, the negativity of nonwork, its darker and more coercive side. In this essay I turn to the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics, as well as to the work of feminist critics and historians, to reconstruct the complexity and contradictions that define nonwork in Marx and Lafargue. After focusing on Marx's early theorization of work in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and in sections of *Capital* Volume I, I then turn to the question of surplus population and its management in liberal and capitalist biopolitics. An analysis of Lafargue's satirical intervention in the pamphlet *The Right To Be Lazy* will conclude my discussion. Marx's and

Lafargue's concepts of work and leisure indicate the different directions that the discourses and practices of nonwork will take in the twentieth and the twenty-first century: the analysis of their respective positions is therefore extremely important for understanding and historicizing the present.

1. Marx and Work

At the core of Marx's theory of capital accumulation lies the worker's body abstracted into labor power, the potential of the individual to create value not for themselves but for capital. This view of the worker as labor power, which Marx elaborates and critiques in *Capital*, is preceded by a different and perhaps more utopian vision of work in his early writings. While under capitalism work means misery and drudgery for the worker, outside of political economy it stands as the praxis through which human beings find and affirm their humanity. This is Marx's position in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, a position that Louis Althusser critiques as an example of Feuerbachian humanism, and of essentialism. The idea of work as human self-realization, as an activity, that is, through which the human being externalizes and creates its consciousness, possesses an immediate and deep Hegelian resonance, and stands in opposition to any theological interpretation of the human. Far from being essentialist or humanist, Marx considers work as an interactive praxis that connects the human subject and nature, as well as the individual and other human beings. Furthermore, consciousness is created through work as a transformative activity that changes not only the object of work, but the worker itself. As "a free, conscious activity" (Marx 1988, 76), work defines the human, but this meaning is always produced materially, historically, and socially. Recent readings of early Marx, including work by John Bellamy Foster, Judith Butler, and Jason W. Moore, centered on environmentalist and posthuman perspectives, demonstrate how Marx, in theorizing nature, does not repeat the anthropocentric view of the Enlightenment: nature for Marx is not inert matter upon which man operates and which he transforms with his work. Rather, in their accounts, nature in Marx is the site of an

interchange with the human. Nature and the human being are enmeshed in a relationship of co-dependence or co-shaping. One's humanity and life are obtained through this transformative interaction with nature as an agent in its own right.² This co-construction of the human via nature, therefore, sanctions the end of human exceptionalism: the human is now the site where physical nature and consciousness converge, so that nature becomes "man's inorganic body." Under conditions of freedom, when the human being produces for itself rather than creating value for another, nature becomes "the inorganic body of the human": human consciousness is made by the very awareness of being part, through a sensuous and creative relationship, of nature. In Judith Butler's terms: "We know that the laborer works on nature, and that he or she requires nature for the purposes of subsistence. We also know, I presume, that the body is sensuous, and its work on natural objects implies a sensuous engagement with those objects." But Butler continues, if nature is "the 'inorganic body' of the human, another kind of relationship is posited, in which the human body is no longer exactly discrete [...]. If there is an inorganic body of the human, then the human body extends to all of nature, or, conversely, all of nature comprises the human" (Butler 4-5). While this sensuous interchange between man and nature produces human consciousness by affirming that the human shares in nature, at the same time humans affirm their species-being (*Gattungswesen*) by creating freely not just for their own individual subsistence, as animals do, but for the good of their species; that is, they create socially, and aesthetically, for the common good.

The sensuous interdependence of man and nature inscribed in work produces use value, what Fredric Jameson, in his analysis of *Capital* Vol. I, calls "the qualitative": "Use value is therefore quality, it is the life of the body, of existential and phenomenological experience, of the consumption of physical products, but also the very texture of physical work and physical time." (Jameson 19). Under capitalism, the qualitative element of the body and of work is erased and transformed into quantifiable exchange value. Paradoxically, under these conditions, that is, in the process of capitalist production, the worker's body is absent and hyperpresent at the

same time. The qualitative, as Jameson explains, is an integral part of the corporeal sensuousness of the worker, and therefore antagonistic to the demands of capitalism. As such, the disorderly sensuousness of the body must be trained and redirected, channeled and transformed into the quantification of time and human energy necessary for production. In that process, as Marx describes it in the *Manuscripts*, the worker becomes four times alienated: separated from his own body, from his tools, from his products, and, finally, from the other workers also. The creativity that comes from his interaction with nature, along with his physical energy, are abstracted into labor power, itself a commodity sold, bought, and cheaply reproduced through the wages he receives.

Capitalism therefore begins with an act of alienation (for the worker) and separation (of people into classes, genders, and races), and an act of theft, that of primitive accumulation.³ In Marx's formulation, "Value is created through the alienation or the undermining of the original source of all wealth: the soil and the worker" (Marx 1977, 638). The advent of capitalism in the early modern era brings a transformation of precapitalist forms of work and of exploitation, such as feudal, peasant work, into the much stricter commodity-producing, wage-labor form. Deprived of their own means of sustenance through land enclosures, workers are now 'free' to sell their labor power, while their sensuous and creative relation to nature is reduced to the level of survival. The metabolic connection between the human and the land is disrupted. Marx is clear about how the increased productivity of the capitalist system is achieved by the systematic exploitation of the worker's labor to the point of exhaustion: "The instrument of labour appears as a means of enslaving, exploiting and impoverishing the worker; the social combination of labour processes appears as an organized suppression of his individual vitality, freedom and autonomy [...]. In modern agriculture, as in modern industry, the increase of the productivity and the mobility of labour is purchased at the cost of laying waste and debilitating labour-power itself" (Marx 1977, 638).

Marx's critique of capitalist labor focuses on the oppression of the workers and less on their strategies of resistance. Proponents of the radical

notion of the revolutionary potential on non-work have from the start discerned historical evidence that such resistance occurred. At the time of the enclosures of common lands in fifteenth century Europe, for example, a part of the population avoided the future of waged labor in an act of exodus, to become part of a "wandering mob," a throng that managed to create new forms of commoning.⁴ The lives of this wandering potential labor force, which refused to submit to the discipline of the wage, were, historians have argued, organized according to social-material relations close to those Marx describes in the *Manuscripts* and in *The German Ideology*: an enmeshed relation of human and nature, human and other humans. In such formations might be discerned a radical counter-biopolitics, upon which "a radical understanding of a form of self-instituted collective emancipation, in which cooperation and interaction among people, and between the human and the environment is crucial" (Papadopoulos 137; Dyer-Whitford 2006). The singularities that compose this fugitive mob can in no way be reduced to the universality of the new subject of modern humanism. This non-humanist plebian formation lacks the qualities that define the modern individual: altogether absent is the rationality, privacy, and productivity of modern *homo oeconomicus*. "The exit from the feudal labor regime into a creative relation with matter, gives rise to new shared common worlds" (Papadopoulos 137; Dyer-Witford 2006), which the modern humanist idea of "man mastering nature" had destroyed (Merchant 1990). Wage labor was the device that made capitalist social organization possible, not only by imposing control upon human productive capacities, but also by ruthlessly curbing the proliferating liberties of the eco-commons (Papadopoulos 139). These early, post-feudal formations of alternate commoning communities anticipate the successive waves of alternative socialities of later periods, from the various utopian communities of the early twentieth century to the social experimentations of the 1960s and 1970s; likewise, they anticipate the key contemporary posthumanist concept of natureculture.⁵

The flight of the early modern fugitive plebs is in fact repeated in any workers' struggle, rebellion, and refusal of work. As such, for capitalism,

this threatening nomadism continually needs to be recaptured and contained, and the body of the worker both “fixed” in the workplace, and allowed specific, limited means to reproduce itself. As Marx himself wryly summed up this effort, “[...] the process [of production] takes good care to prevent the workers from running away” (Marx 1977, 729). Far from being a means to “freedom,” the wage represents the key form of what Jackson and Carter have termed “dressage,” a preparation for the discipline of capitalist social relations and for the rigors of what soon became industrial work. The heralded freedom and mobility of the worker was in reality integrated into a stable labor market that demanded efficiency and a perfectly standardized personal performance.

In the image of disembodied labor power, the corporeality of the worker becomes invisible: this may be the most crucial of the many invisibilities created by capitalism. It is not only alienated, it is abstracted. This same abstraction, experienced as alienation, is at the core of work under capital; as the critic Susan Buck-Morss affirms, this informs nineteenth-century culture at large. Buck-Morss theorizes nineteenth-century culture as the product of an industrialized society; she reads it as an anaesthetic culture of the spectacle, whose phantasmagoric “unity of surface [...] hide[s] the alienation, the loneliness, and the sensual impoverishment of modern existence” (Buck-Morss 26). In her analysis, the key examples of this phantasmagoria are Richard Wagner’s operas as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total works of art, that lull the audience into an anaesthetic passivity through a full manipulation of all of the senses. The nineteenth-century factory, instead, is for her the obverse of Wagner’s stage; it reveals the truth about the modern body, and makes visible its fragmented and alienated condition. Marx performs the same act of *dénouement* in a number of sections of *Capital* Vol. 1, particularly in Chapter 25, “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation,” as well as the sections “The Working Day,” “The Factory,” and “Machinery and Large-Scale Industry.” In these set-pieces, the actual physical condition of factory work and of the body itself take center stage, described with vivid incisiveness. This is even the case when the accounts are mediated, as they

mostly are, by the reports of journalists, factory inspectors, and other British state officials.

The length of the working day remained generally unregulated during the nineteenth century, and quickly became the key terrain of conflict between the worker and capital. "The working day is indeterminate," Marx could write in 1844 (Marx 1977, 341). The 1850 Factory Act, which Marx mentions in the section "The Working Day," Chapter 10 of *Capital*, limited labor to ten hours per day, at a time when women and children, the most exploited of laborers, worked for twelve, fourteen or even sixteen hours. It was only the exhausted body of the worker that posed a limit to overwork. Marx also points out that the hardships of industrial labor, moreover, shorten the life of the worker (Marx 358). He elaborates upon the process of this slow death first in terms of nervous as well as physical depletion, and then in terms of the deprivation of freedom: "Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity. Even the lightening of labor becomes an instrument of torture, since the machine does not free the worker from the work, but rather deprives the work itself of all content" (Marx 1977, 548).⁶ Machines in the factory multiply, rather than reduce, labor, and make the worker their appendage. Marx describes this as the process whereby "[...] dead labor dominates and sucks up living labor" (348). Searching for an image of the machine for which the body of the worker is merely instrumental, he then presents capital as a predatory beast, dangerous for the human body: it is "the werewolf" (367), or a parasite. In the same vein, Marx describes how the prolongation of the working day into the night "only quenches the vampire's thirst for the living blood of capital" (376). To illustrate "the voracious appetite of capital for surplus labor" (349) he introduces a large repertoire of exploited workers, weavers, bakers, women working in "domestic industry" outside the factory, such as Mary Ann Walkley, a lace maker who dies for lack of sleep, food, light, and air. This is the most "Victorian" part of *Capital* Vol. I, where Marx seems keen to reenact the voyeurism with which social

reformers and the bourgeois, as well as novelists such as Dickens, approach the slum and its denizens. Yet, the sentimentality that Fredric Jameson sees in these pages—he speaks of “the demagogic appeal to sheer feeling, rather than rigorous demonstration” (70), is in fact dispelled by Marx’s matter-of-fact descriptive style, rigorously sustained by statistics and precise numbers and cast in terms of journalistic reportage of the time. The description of the working conditions of the Staffordshire potters, for example, related through the words of a physician, is highly clinical: “They are as a rule stunted in growth, ill-shaped and frequently ill. They become prematurely old, and they are certainly short-lived [...]. But among all diseases, they are especially prone to chest disease. One form would appear peculiar to them, and it is known as the potter’s asthma, or potter consumption” (Marx 1977, 355). Here poverty and exploitation are not presented through their affective outcomes, as a Victorian novel might do, but in very materialist and indeed biopolitical terms. Any sentiment is defeated by a direct medical description of the consequences of overwork. If Marx participates at all in Victorian sentimentality, it’s because this is the only literary and emotional register that allows him to represent what Jameson says is unrepresentable: the suffering and the actual conditions of the worker’s body.

This exhausted and consumed working body is at the center of what we might more properly call a necropolitical rather than a biopolitical project.⁷ The worker’s body is always already human capital, a surplus always available: “What experience generally shows to the capitalist, is a constant excess of the population, i.e., an excess in relation to the capitalist’s need for valorization at a given moment, although the throng of people is made up of generations of stunted, short-lived, and rapidly replaced human beings, plucked, so to speak, before they are ripe” (Marx 1977, 380). The replaceability of labor power makes for the capitalist’s indifference toward the life and working conditions of living labor. “Capitalism” affirms Marx, “therefore takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so. Its answer to the outcry about the physical and mental degradation, the premature

death, the torture of overwork is this: "Should that pain trouble us, since it increases our pleasure (profit)?" (Marx 1977, 381). In other words, it is the biopolitical project of the liberal state and of bourgeois society that are expected to demand, still on behalf of capitalism, that conditions of work for the worker become more humane.

2. Biopolitics and "the Reserve Army of the Unemployed"

When the consumed body of the worker cannot function anymore and must be continually replaced by "fresher" and equally inefficient labor, the life of the working class becomes a biopolitical problem for the liberal state. Biopolitics works to maximize life through the control and management of the population in order, as Michel Foucault writes, "to incite, reinforce, optimize and organize the forces under it; [biopower is] a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them" (Foucault 136). In this sense both Foucauldian biopower and capitalism function in a similar manner; both are generative forces that produce subjects, bodies, and populations to their own advantage, in the case of capital the extraction of surplus value (Federici 2020, 78). Any form of life incompatible with the capitalist organization of work, as discussed in the previous section of this essay, needs to be contained and disciplined, as happened in the case of the premodern non-humanist plebs, and later in the cases of rebellious, dissenting workers—for instance the 1848 and 1871 Communards in France.

Economic growth and the accumulation of value is a demographic problem: human life is necessary to maintain and increase productivity. Against Malthus's concerns with the problems of scarcity brought by overpopulation, in reality, in the capitalist system, a surplus of working bodies becomes necessary.⁸ This surplus of population benefits capital in yet another way: the population gets divided into a readily available pool of labor, 'securely' absorbed into industrial production, and into another group, the unemployed. Capital simultaneously creates the conditions for employment and their destruction (Paltrinieri 247). That is, capital assures

the constant availability of labor power, of bodies that will work at any cost and under any conditions, by simultaneously creating an excess of wageless, workless people. Even more, this division of the pool of workers into employed and unemployed, reflects both a biopolitical and a necropolitical agenda, in a dialectic characterized by Cathryn Braun: “The problem is that optimizing the forces of life coincides with reproducing social relations of exploitation and subjugation, as well as norms and standards of functionality, usefulness, productivity, fitness. The counterpart of enhancing life is the devaluation of those who do not meet those standards or are deemed not to meet them. Optimizing life means the construction or devaluation of ‘deficient’ life” (Braun 160). This separation of the working population into the employed and the unemployed populations is also inevitably a prime means of dividing and conquering, with the effect of weakening the power of resistance of those who are granted work (Jonna and Bellamy Foster 591). The subclass of would-be-workers composes “the reserve army of the unemployed,” of which Marx speaks in Chapter XXV, “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation” of *Capital* Vol. I, Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, and both in *The Communist Manifesto*. The condition of workers is always precarious: any technological advance or contraction of the market can increase the “reserve army of the unemployed,” “that monstrosity of a suffering population of workers held in reserve for the changing exploitative needs of capital.” Or again: “Capitalism reproduces its supply of labor by perpetuating over generations, a class of ‘needy individuals [...]’ And life-long neediness is a concerted attack on the body, and on the bodily capacities of those in need” (Marx 1977, 618, 719, 784). This reserve army offers numerous advantages to capital, as it continually replenishes the pool of available labor power. For the worker, however, it means precarious poverty, need, and further exploitation. At the core of modern industry, therefore, as an expression of the law of capitalist accumulation, lies a floating population of the unemployed, a constant reminder to the factory workers of the danger of falling into the reserve army of the wageless when their work is taken away by new

machines, for example, when they are fired for their protests, or when the demand for their production falls. What we could term a biopolitical "programmed obsolescence of the worker" creates a ready and willing population, always at the beck and call of capital, always replaceable. This is particularly true in the case of the most vulnerable sections of the working population, women and children, nomads and migrants.⁹

Marx divides this redundant population into three types: floating, latent, and stagnant.¹⁰ The last of these, the "stagnant population," remains for Marx the least recuperable and employable. This is the pauperized *Lumpenproletariat*—"vagabonds, criminals, orphans, pauper children, disabled victims of industry, and the elderly"—in other words, the members of a group he terms the paupers. "Pauperism," writes Marx, "is the hospital of the active labor army and the dead weight of the industrial reserve army" (Marx 1977, 797). The members of this *Lumpenproletariat*, past all possibilities of employment, turn into what Engels terms "'jobbers,' peddlers forced to hawk whatever they could, huckstering and peddling on every street corner, eking out a precarious existence by selling" (Engels 433). Precarity, however, is the condition of the entire working class, which from the beginning, consisted of both waged workers and of the permanent army of the unwaged. Industrial labor, continually at risk of becoming part of the reserve army of the wageless, is precarious. For this reason we could, with Fredric Jameson, say that *Capital* is not a book about work, but a book about unemployment (Jameson, 2).

The condition of existence of the unemployed is a condition of mere subsistence and survival, if not of actual starvation. Marx offers a detailed description of workers' poverty in *Capital* Vol. 1 through the many reports of journalists, doctors, and social reformers. The poverty of the proletariat is illustrated for example by the jarring image of the destitute family of a jobless iron worker, as reported by a journalist of *The Morning Star* "who visited the chief centres of distress at the end of 1866 and the beginning of 1867": "We found her [the iron worker's wife] ill from want of food [...]. Two wretched children were tending her, themselves looking as much in need of nursing as their mother. Nineteen weeks of enforced idleness had

brought them to this pass, she moaned as if all her faith in a future that should atone for it were dead” (Marx 1977, 825). The striking quality of this passage is not the Victorian pathos with which the poor are described, but the fact that here “idleness” is presented neither as an individual moral flaw to be condemned nor as a form of refusal, and therefore of agency on the side of the worker. Rather, the “enforced idleness” of the iron worker, with all its dire consequences for his family, is depicted as a structural effect of capital. The state of induced precarity of the reserve army of the unemployed allows the capitalist to cut the wages and dismiss the spent body of the worker, or the bodies made redundant by new machines.

The necessity to preserve human life and its forces by improving the population’s biological and social conditions, became more pressing political issues in Western Europe around the mid-nineteenth century. This biopolitical impulse began to emerge in part as a response to the dire conditions of the working poor, and, more immediately, to the threat that social unrest posed to both the liberal state and the capitalist system in France and England. From the 1834 rebellion of the silk weavers in Lyon, demanding better wages, to Chartism and the beginning of unionism and socialism in England, and even more, to the fear of communism inspired by the Paris Commune of 1848, and especially that of 1871, fear of worker revolts unsettled bourgeois hegemony across Europe. The states responded to these threats with a complex program of social engineering. This was accompanied by an ideological apparatus that created nothing less than a new social unity, the working-class family, and new social figures, the *ouvrier* as honest citizen, and the working-class housewife (Secombe 1974, Pinchbeck 1930, Tomasello 2018). This social reconfiguration in turn implied a temporal organization of the masses’ work and leisure, which anticipated that of Fordism, so that the limited reductions of the working day were balanced by a relatively extended time for reproduction, now to be carried out by women in the home. This modern social-familial arrangement, with its own new spatial and temporal organization, was still very much a disciplinary technology; as such, for example, it put in place a new gendered division of labor that

reaffirmed patriarchal power, one that Silvia Federici calls "the patriarchy of the wage" (Federici 2021, 87). The potentially rebellious male worker was socially integrated by becoming a juridical figure with social rights—for instance, and principally, the right to work that Lafargue attacks. Through the institution of the "Family Wage," of which Marx, as the secretary of the First International, approved (Federici 2021, 87), the *ouvrier's* better economic condition potentially allowed his wife to cease working outside the home, and thus acquire the key bourgeois quality, respectability. Through this social arrangement, therefore, the working class could be interpellated into bourgeois values, and into the existing social order. Men get "fixed" into the factory, and women, who had previously worked in the factory as well, are now confined to the domestic space and pushed into wagelessness (Steinfeld 2001).

The question of patriarchal relations within the working class is never confronted by Marx: for instance, he does not mention the opposition of male workers to women in the workplace, or their resentment against a system that gave unmarried women control over their earnings (Lown 107; Rowbotham 80). As Silvia Federici makes clear, Marx mostly looks at female industrial workers as victims, agreeing that women were certainly even more exploited than men, and worse paid, but he does not mention the sense of pride and independence that working in the public sphere gave women (Federici 2021, 80-81). Female employment came to be understood as undermining the stability of the family, an understanding that in fact concealed the state's fear of the inability of the working class to provide a steady flow of workers. In 1867 the English Children's Employment Commission denounced a crisis of domesticity. English social reformers worried about what appeared to be women's growing disaffection with family and reproduction (Federici 2021, 96). Once domestic labor in the "respectable" working-class home was invented, women, and even more, mothers, were removed from the factory, with a move that increased men's wages by making domestic labor and the work of care, "free." In this perspective, as their labor came to be viewed as nonwork, we can consider women as part of the "reserve army of the unwaged," this time unpaid but

not unproductive. Marx's exclusionary view of work as necessarily industrial and waged contributes to a naturalization of domestic labor as a form of female "idleness." Through the modern reaffirmation of the sexual division of labor, women's work in the home is portrayed as a "labor of love," incapable of producing value. In fact, women produce and reproduce the most important commodity for capitalism: labor power in the body of the worker. Unwaged women's labor of reproduction and care shows how much capitalism relies on unpaid work, from primitive accumulation to the theft of surplus value, to slave labor, to that of women in the home. Even though women's work is represented as nonwork, its wagelessness is another form of discipline, which implies a submission to the male breadwinner and, indirectly, to the social and economic order of capital. If the wage, as a cipher of exploitation, hides all the unpaid work that goes into profit, women's work is doubly exploited and shares in the precarity of all labor under capitalism.

3. The Biopolitics of Laziness: Lafargue and the Body at Rest

What I called, at the beginning of this essay, the dialectic of work and laziness, relies on a specific organization of time and of the body that is disrupted by nonwork. To theorize, or at least to dream of, a biopolitics of laziness is to posit an embodied subject who refuses to be labor power. Marx's antipathy to laziness allows him to focus exclusively on the drained and maimed body of the worker in the factory, and outside the factory, upon the starved reserve army of the unemployed. In both cases, the life force of the body, fully bent toward productivity, has been trained into self-sacrifice and self-denial in the name of "the dignity of work," or simply for its own survival. What is left out of Marx's analysis is exactly the issue on which Lafargue focuses his critique of work: the image of an anti-modern body at rest, with time at its disposal for enjoying life and for experiencing pleasure—a word that does not appear prominently in Marx's critical repertoire.

It seems surprising that a man so close to Marx intellectually and personally—Lafargue married Marx's daughter Laura—and a Marxist

socialist himself, could take up such a strong position against work (White 2014, 24). *The Right to Be Lazy* (*Le droit à la paresse*, literally "the right to laziness") was written by Lafargue between 1879 and 1880 while in prison for organizing students' protests in France. Born in Cuba from mixed ancestry, "black, African, Jewish, and Caribbean Indian" (Hemmens 79) of which he was very proud, Lafargue moved to France with his family to study medicine. After abandoning his medical studies, and because of his political activism for workers' and women's struggles, he went into exile in London. Here he worked at the "manual craft" of photography and etching. The pamphlet *The Right to Be Lazy* was written following an intense period of workers' revolts in France in the aftermath of the Paris Commune of 1871. Lafargue's thought and political activism, influenced by both Fourier and Marx, also brought him to Spain, where he contributed to the founding of the Spanish Workers' Party, and back to France, where, between 1871 and 1890 he was one of the founders of the French Workers' party.

In *The Right to Be Lazy: A Refutation of the Right to Work of 1848*, Lafargue directly attacks work: "Our epoch has been called the century of work. In fact, it's the century of pain, misery, and corruption" (29). Lafargue proceeds to debunk the axioms of the society of work: productivity as a means to progress, and the dignity and humanity that labor confers upon the workers. The "religious dogma" of work is in fact disastrous for the individual, since work debases him and damages his body. Work is shown to be a means of class control, the factory a prison (15), and the (aptly named) workhouse a place of terror. Terror turns into the ideological coercion exercised by the work ethic, through which the bourgeois teaches the working class self-denial and abstinence in the name of increased productivity, wealth, and social prosperity. Lafargue is particularly critical of progress, "the eldest son of work" (18), and he makes it clear that it only advances the bourgeoisie. The "love of work" through which the work ethic transforms the worker into a good citizen *and* into labor power, is inversely proportional to the sense of pride and independence of the worker. For this reason, Lafargue blames the working

class and their gullibility: “Shame on the French proletarians! [...]. The class that is freeing itself and will free humanity from servile work, has let itself be perverted by the dogma of work” (28). Work appears thus as an aberration and a delusion which, instead of representing the source of male pride, emasculates the worker and makes him the accomplice of capitalism exactly when he exerts his patriarchal power selling “his wife’s and children’s labor to the employer” (28). In order to reach the self-awareness necessary to give up work, the worker must perform a necessary act of ideological deprogramming: “To arrive to the realization of its strength, the proletariat must trample underfoot the prejudices of Christian ethics, economic ethics, and free-thought ethics. It must return to its natural instincts, it must proclaim the Right 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 work three hours a day, reserving the rest of the day and night for leisure and festivals” (29). This drastic reduction of the working day will allow the worker to use time for enjoying life and for conviviality, and for creating new forms of commonality.

Like Marx, Lafargue zeroes in on the way labor suffocates and perverts one’s “animal instincts” through “the organic degradation of the body” (21). However, unlike Marx, who believed in the emancipatory potential of capitalist modernity and progress, Lafargue finds a more feasible social and economic model in premodern nonwork. He focuses on Medieval times almost from a Bakhtinian, or at least Rabelaisian, perspective: far from living a life of scarcity, toil, and pain, the premodern subject enjoyed longer periods of nonwork: “ninety rest days, fifty-two Sundays, thirty-eight holidays during which he [the worker] was strictly forbidden to work” (32). “They had the leisure to taste the joys of earth, to make love and to frolic, to banquet joyously in honor of the jovial god of idleness [...]. Rabelais, Quevedo, Cervantes, and the unknown authors of the romances make our mouths water with their pictures of those monumental feasts [...]. O, where are the sublime Gargantuan stomachs of those days? Where are the sublime brains encircling all human thought?

We have indeed grown puny and degenerate. Embalmed beef, potatoes doctored with wine and Prussian schnaps, judiciously combined with compulsory labor have weakened our bodies and narrowed our minds" (32-33). The image of Cockaigne is used by Lafargue to reclaim the body at rest and at pleasure, enjoying its own materiality and the materiality of the world. The three-hour-long working day envisioned by Lafargue provides the worker with the time to reproduce his body, but not only for work or merely for improving himself and his condition, as envisioned by Marx when he points to the need for sleep, air, sunlight, and extended meal time, "the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body" (Marx 1977, 375). Instead, the time regained from work, according to Lafargue, should be time for enjoying the pleasures of the body and its expenditures, at the historical moment when expenditure was already channeled into consumerism and commodity fetishism by capital.

If capital thinks of the worker's body exclusively as labor power, to be formed through a disciplinary process out of which the "honest worker" can emerge (Ross 6), what body does a biopolitics, or an anti-biopolitics, of laziness imagine? This would be a rebellious body at leisure, in touch with its own sensuousness, its needs and desires—what the body had always been when trying to resist the demands of work. It is this sensuousness, rather than just its overworked and exhausted condition, that makes the body a limit to the demands of capital. As Federici affirms: "This accumulated structure of needs and desires that for thousands of years has been the precondition of our social reproduction, has been a powerful limit to the exploitation of labor, which is why capital, from its earliest phases of development has struggled to domesticate our body, making it a signifier for all that is material, corporeal, finite, and opposed to reason" (Federici 2021, 77). Far from invoking a romantic nostalgia for a prelapsarian time, Federici, as well as Lafargue and Marx in the *Manuscripts*, provides a deeply materialist figuration of the body, as produced historically through a metabolic exchange with nature, and through a social and biopolitical encounter with other humans; as shaped through violence and domination, but also through a less visible history of

laziness and nonwork. The yet to be written history of laziness gestures toward “a new anthropological paradigm” (Federici 2021, 176), still in the process of coming into being.

The body Lafargue places at the center of his discussion of laziness must be pursued and made actual. This uncaptured body, steeped in the time of nonwork, cannot be renounced, and as such it needs political action more than wishful thinking or mere utopian hope. On the other hand, the joyous positivity of laziness, potentially cognate, for example, with the Spinozism and Deleuzianism of Negri and other post-autonomists, always already co-exists with the negativity of Marx’s “nineteen months of enforced idleness.” It is Marx, therefore, who can first of all help us to fully understand the present condition of the body at work at the moment of what we could call the resurgent Victorianism of the modalities of neoliberal work. Today, at the time of the full subsumption of life into capital, when the distinction between life and work is becoming more and more blurred, a simply emancipatory view of the body at rest, at leisure, is no longer possible. (At the moment, for instance, when “working from home” is being presented yet again as a new model of freedom for workers, we would do well to remember that it uses the same employment model as “piecework,” which in nineteenth-century Europe ruthlessly exploited the female members of the “worker’s family” who supposedly could afford to stay at home). Today, the body as well as “the soul,” in Franco Berardi’s phrase and in his book of that title, are put to work through new techniques of discipline that are designed to be perceived by the worker-subject as modes of rest and of pleasure—for instance fitness, the beauty industry, bodybuilding, and work itself—as a form of self-realization. Cristina Morini and Andrea Fumagalli, in an essay entitled “Life Put to Work,” explain how the contemporary consumption of “services” actually follows the older logic of capitalist productivity: “The sexualization of bodies, which is so evident today, appears as cold, putatively technical, and neutral. Nevertheless, those bodies at work fully belong to the realm of deactivation of affects and desires or, to better specify, to the channeling of both human drives towards the market. *The*

hegemony of the productive function, actually lacking any reasonable legitimacy, continues to establish the rhythm of an undisputed productivity that extracts added value from everything, including the already mentioned knowledge, working experience and existential *savoir faire*" (Morini and Fumagalli 237, italics added). Through these new disciplinary techniques, the body, with its physical, affective, and erotic power, is ever more completely being put to work, so that any and every activity, even the most private and personal, can be exploited. The accumulation of value and its capture for capital, continues. Furthermore, let us not forget that the current conditions of induced precarity make work "flexible" and insecure for a new reserve army of the potentially unemployed, today's precariat. In the contemporary global scenario, in the face of the constant drive to economic growth and more productivity, Morini's and Fumagalli's claim that "the hegemony of the productive function is actually lacking any reasonable legitimacy" appears to echo Lafargue's words in *The Right to be Lazy*. Lafargue's whole argument is already based on an interrogation of the legitimacy of "the productive function." His doubts about the rationality of overproduction, and capital's even more doubtful demand to reinvest value for more accumulation, might be considered by the hardheaded realist an absurd and illegitimate logic of utopianism. The surplus production, this logic implies, should be equally distributed among the workers, who can now rest and enjoy all the surplus they have produced. Instead, Lafargue points out, capital demands more work, and creates poverty either by destroying the excess of production, or by starting colonial wars to find new markets. As a counterproposal, Lafargue makes the following demand: "Why not distribute it uniformly over the twelve months and force any workingman to content himself with six or five hours throughout the year, instead of getting indigestion from twelve hours over six months?" (44).

Today, as new calls for a shortening of the working week emerge, even from within capital, Lafargue's reasoning is bound to have a new resonance for the materialist critic. There exists, it is clear, a biopolitics of work and a biopolitics of laziness: each is centered on a different vision of

the body. The first is alienated and at the service of the accumulation of value, and more invisibly disciplined through contemporary techniques of self-optimization; the second is perhaps utopian and appears only at the interstices of both the Fordist and post-Fordist management of work and leisure. One of the historical points of emergence of the Lafarguean body is the joyous, communal, natureculture corporeality of the 1960s and 1970s. Even though this experience cannot be duplicated under present conditions, it needs to be remembered and used strategically as a mode of resistance. While Marx reminds us of capital's perverse appropriation and reversal of the adversarial power of laziness (Boltanski and Chiappello 1999) and turns it into a structural feature of coercion for the worker, Lafargue invites us to reflect anew upon the absurdity of endless accumulation, particularly at a time of environmental and economic apocalypse. Rather, he calls upon us to think of laziness as a form of the refusal of work, or more radically, as the refusal to work, as a step toward affirming a new paradigm of the human.

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Notes

¹ "The workday may be an accepted unit of measure, but it is no longer a true one. The movements of the 1960s point out this untruth in order to stake up and abolish the status quo. They signaled their opposition, their utter disagreement, with objective tendencies. They vindicated the right to nonwork. They enacted a collective migration out from the régime of the factory. They recognized the parasitical character of working for a boss." Paolo Virno, "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment" (1996). See also the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Labor of Dyonisus: Critique of the State-Form* (1994), and that of Nick Srnicek in *#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* (2014), and Aroon Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2019).

² Butler describes the "interchange" between human and nature as follows: "Nature is organic, as it were, in itself, but considered from the human perspective, it starts to become inorganic once it starts to sustain

the human, at which point it is the human life that is sustained and animated by nature" (13).

³ As Silvia Federici explains, primitive accumulation is the first act through which capitalist accumulation begins, but it continues through history, with new forms of enclosures (*Re-Enchanting the World*, 2019).

⁴ "Thus, just before the historical moment of the emergence of the modern left and of humanism we could say that the first *radical left non-humanist moment* is the moment of making justice and achieving freedom through a flight to the self-organised world of the commons, the worldly commons, the ecological commons, an ecological world which of course existed long before the flight from the feudal order. It is this form of escaping into a non-humanist nature-cultural and socio-material regime that needed to be recaptured, and was in fact recaptured into a new order of organization that became formed into capitalist social relations. The key function of wage labor is not first and foremost to oppress and control people's productive capacities, but to manage worker's surplus of non-humanist freedom" (Dimitri Papadopoulos, "Insurgent Posthumanism," 2010). The passage from the feudal world to early modernity and the formations of commons has been studied by scholars such as Yann Moulier-Boutang, Silvia Federici, A.L. Beier, and Peter Linebaugh among others.

⁵ This concept is developed in the work of Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (2007) and *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016); Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Existence* (2016), among other scholars.

⁶ In another passage of the same section, "Machinery and Large Scale Industry," Marx uses a military image to describe the factory and its effects on the worker's body: "Every sense organ is injured by the artificially high temperatures, by the dust-laden atmosphere, the deafening noise, not to mention the danger to life and limb among machines which are so closely crowded together, a danger which, with the regularity of the seasons, produces its list of those killed or wounded in the industrial battle" (Marx 1977, 552).

⁷ The concept of necropolitics is elaborated by Achille Mbembe in the article by the same name. Mbembe affirms that alongside biopower, the power to control the biological life of the population, and therefore its demographic development through specific techniques of optimization, the modern state develops a necropolitical power, the right to kill, or let die a part of the population over another, the sovereign right of allowing some to live, and killing others, as happens in wars, or in the war against terror. The state is thus involved in the work of death rather than in the work of life.

⁸ “In capitalism, overpopulation is not just a supplementary mass of human beings, but above all, can be exploited by capital” (Luca Paltrinieri 2017, 246).

⁹ “The industrial reserve army, during the periods of stagnation and average prosperity, weighs down the active army of workers; during the periods of over-production and feverish activity it puts a curb on their pretensions. The relative surplus population is therefore the background against which the law of the demand and supply of labour does its work. It confines the field of action of this law to the limits absolutely convenient to capital’s drive to exploit and dominate the workers” (Marx 1977, 792).

¹⁰ Harry Cleaver exhaustively comments on the three types of unemployed population in “Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I (1867),” (2019); so does Fredric Jameson in *Representing Capital. A Reading of Volume I* (2011).

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