

The anti-surplus state: Putting surplus populations to work

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ABSTRACT

Surplus populations are back on the political agenda. With the rise of automation technologies and the advent of the hyperflexible “gig economy,” millions of individuals across the postindustrialized world will likely become supernumerary or consigned to low-quality jobs in the service sector. Neoliberalism signaled the abdication of the state’s responsibility for ensuring full employment and providing high-quality employment. Criminology has largely forgotten the central role played by employment and high-quality work in preventing the spread of social pathologies. Against the logic of neoliberalism, what is needed is a state capable of counteracting the formation of surplus populations, or an anti-surplus state. A second New Deal would enact infrastructure investments and re-embed superfluous populations into meaningful employment relations. Following Bourdieu’s criticism of a scientific “flight into purity,” criminologists should adopt the lessons learned by Sweden’s interwar social democrats and advocate policies capable of preventing the augmentation of social superfluity.

KEYWORDS

surplus populations; post-Keynesianism; political economy; economic liberalism; planned economies

Introduction

A surplus population is never inherently superfluous: a surplus exists only insofar as the state fails to include and involve in productive enterprises those bodies which are deemed superfluous. Converting the negative charge of a surplus into a positive charge of necessity is one of the central political tasks of our times: the task of a properly *anti-surplus state*. “The outstanding faults of the economic society in which we live,” Keynes wrote in the concluding chapter to his *General Theory*, “are its failure to provide for full employment and its arbitrary and inequitable distribution of wealth and incomes” (Keynes [1936] 2013: 372). But how does one go about appropriating the surplus and bringing it back into the fold of the necessary? Addressing the apparent necessity of superfluity was one of the key political aims of the Keynesian-Fordist state, from Scandinavian social democracy to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal “alphabet agencies.” These were attempts combat the horrors of unemployment, undignified scrambling over scarce resources, and attendant social pathologies. Work is food, shelter, and dignity; its absence means the opposite. “Our greatest primary task is to put people to work,” President Roosevelt said in his inaugural address in 1933. “It can be accomplished in part by direct recruiting by the Government itself, treating the task as we would treat the emergency of a war...accomplishing greatly needed projects to stimulate and reorganize the use of our natural resources.” Roosevelt’s first war, then, was a war on unemployment, to be solved by an aggressively expansionary state.

Can such a war be waged anew? It may have to be. Every week now, it seems, there are fresh reports of the coming age of the robot economy, the mechanization, automation, and overtaking of human jobs by artificial intelligence (AI) and semi-intelligent machines (e.g. Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). “Automation is killing the middle-skill job, a new OECD report says” – “47% of jobs will disappear in the next 25 years, says Oxford University report” – “1 million jobs will disappear by 2026. How to prepare for automation.” – “Robots ‘could take 4m UK private sector jobs within 10 years.’” How many jobs will disappear (and how many others will be created) in the wake of these new digital technologies must necessarily remain shrouded in mystery: there is simply no getting around the fact that technological development is inherently chaotic and unpredictable. Anyone proclaiming that 25/50/75/etc. percent of all jobs will be gone by 2020/2030/2040/etc. is either lying or ignorant. One recent estimate from McKinsey & Company maintains that “by 2030, 75 million to 375 million workers (3 to 14 percent of the global workforce) will need to switch occupational categories” (Manyika et al. 2017). Whatever the concrete figures, it seems certain that postindustrialized societies are heading for a new wave of automation that will cause widespread unemployment unless counter-cyclical measures are taken: in other words, the construction and mobilization of an *anti-surplus state*, capable of injecting billions into economies and engaging in demand management through direct spending.

The costs of not doing so are high. “The paradox is that automation and artificial intelligence now provide us with abundant means to achieve the Marxian dream of freedom beyond the realm of necessity,” writes David Harvey (2014: 208), “at the same time as the laws of capital’s political economy put this freedom further and further out of reach.” The neoliberal state was envisioned to be no more than a bureaucratic or symbolic state, a manager, a mere paper-pusher, a mediating interface between worker-users and employer-platforms.¹ The anti-surplus state, on the other hand, must necessarily not be an interface but a platform, the central locus of reallocated social energy and expenditure: a builder of roads, rails, bridges, schools, colleges, hospitals, water pipes and sewage lines, affordable housing, power plants, even factories, office buildings. The coming of automation makes this anti-surplus state both possible and necessary: *possible*, because, as Harvey points out, the promise of novel technologies is to liberate us from material scarcity; *necessary*, because this same tendency, given unbridled market forces, is likely to engender insurmountable waves of superfluity, which, if left unchecked, threaten to throw millions into poverty and (consequently) infect the social body with so many pathologies as to make life itself bleak and despairing. If (high-quality) work is the plinth of social harmony, what we need, then, is a state that is willing, ready, and able to make millions of jobs, directly and of its own accord.

But social science has forgotten or ignored this idea, misattributing the causes of conflicts and social pathologies where their real, underlying cause is the absence of work.

¹ Far from establishing a *Minimalstaat* (“minimal state”), *Schlanker Staat* (“slim state”) or “night-watchman state,” as Anglo-American neoliberals and German Ordoliberals advocated in the postwar era, the neoliberal state has usually entailed the expansion, not contraction, of public spending; thus, US government expenditures (measured as a percentage of GDP) stood at 34 percent in 1970 and more than 37 percent by 2015. Wacquant (2009) attributes this tendency to neoliberalism’s need for the “right-hand” of the state, with expansionary military, policing, and carceral spending. important in this regard are various US-led wars in the Middle East and Asia, including Iraq and Afghanistan, costing an estimated \$5.6 trillion since 2001 (Lubold 2017). The peculiar disconnect between neoliberal anti-statism and actual neoliberal expansionism can perhaps be attributed to the vague bounds imposed on state activities in the works of neoliberal intellectuals such as Milton Friedman; in Plant’s (2010) dissection of neoliberal state theory, his exegetical finding that the neoliberal “scope” of the welfare state is to remain “limited” (Plant 2010: 250) only foregrounds the fact that the quantitative extent of the neoliberal state was essentially glossed over by the leading lights of the “neoliberal thought collective” (see also Mirowski 2009).

Instead of a criminology advocating macroeconomic employment policies, we have a criminology obsessed with “self-control” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) and “the life-course” (Sampson and Laub 2003) – as if both were not epiphenomenal to a basic materialist insight: work is life. William Beveridge’s (1942) “five giant evils” of “squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease” all flow from the fourth term, idleness, or (less anachronistically), unemployment. This, too, is the lesson taught by the heterodox economist Erik Reinert (2007), who, in a neo-mercantilist critique of theories of economic development, demolishes the myths of the “palliative economics” of the neoliberal establishment, which in the past several decades has given preferential emphasis on the eradication of diseases (such as Bill and Melinda Gates’s anti-malaria campaigns), promoting entrepreneurship (as with now-disgraced Muhammad Yunus’s Grameen Bank microcredit schemes), and similar superficial or skin-deep measures, as an apparent formula for raising the standard of living in poor countries; instead of “getting the diseases right” or “getting the entrepreneurship right,” Reinert (2007) prescribes a policy of near-full employment through industrialization, now forgotten by the bearers of economic orthodoxy, pithily encapsulated with the formula, “Getting the economic activities right.”

Surplus populations appear with the force of naturalized necessity against the backdrop of a failure to get the economic activities right, which means creating jobs. Under the (later abandoned) Morgenthau Plan, Reinert notes, Germany was to become a deindustrialized, agrarian nation after the Second World War, a plan that would have had ruinous consequences: “In a deindustrialized Germany, there were suddenly 25 million superfluous people” (Reinert 2007). Then as now, superfluity was a political construct, a function of policies redirecting flows of social and economic energy – or, rather, failing to do so. Only because the *deindustrializing* Morgenthau Plan was abandoned, which would have, in Winston Churchill’s words, turned Germany into a “country primarily agricultural and pastoral in its character,”² and replaced with the *reindustrializing* Marshall Plan, did Germany precisely *not* become the site of immense surplus populations.

The willful ignorance of basic materialist doctrine explains the systematic misreading of numerous conflicts and social problems around the world. To take the example of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the horror of Gaza is in part the horror of unemployment, with its nearly 50 percent unemployment rate in 2017. Here is one Gazan woman’s testimony to the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem (2017):

I applied several times for teaching positions, six times to UNRWA and six to public schools. Every time, I passed the entrance exam successfully and the interview, but there were many candidates and the experienced teachers were those hired. Every time I was rejected it threw me and I felt anxious and nervous all the time. I was desperate and couldn’t sleep for worrying over not being able to provide for myself and for my family. In 2015 I married... Unfortunately, my husband is also unemployed. He hasn’t been able to find work since we got married. Four months ago, our daughter... was born and we live with my husband’s family. We can’t pay our share of the household expenses and cover our baby’s costs. My husband and I considered starting our own business but couldn’t get a grant or a loan, and because of the tough economic and political situation we gave up on the idea.

Western spectators cannot really imagine, at a visceral level, what this condition means any longer. We must return to the dirt and despondency of the 1930s Depression Era to gain even the smallest of glimpses of such abject poverty, and here our optics must necessarily be caked with the dust and grime of history, presenting so many impenetrable mysteries to the present-day observer. Think of the United States in the throes of the Great Depression, where occurrences such as the following one described by the *New York Times* were routine: “More

² The complete text of the Morgenthau Plan is available online: <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Documents/Morg.htm>.

than 3,500 young women took mental tests yesterday for twenty-seven anticipated vacancies as policewomen with salaries of \$2,000 a year” (New York Times 1938). Even the hypercompetitive neoliberal economy confronting present-day millennials cannot compete with such long odds and economic despair.

The failure of “globalization,” now steadily being replaced with “populism” was its abdication of the political project of appropriating superfluity, the task of converting *surplus populations* into (*economically*) *necessary populations*.³

Here’s an emblematic statement of neoliberalism and its attendant political impotence: “Here’s the truth. No politician can re-open this factory or bring back the shipyard jobs...or make your union strong again. No politician can make it the way it was. Because we now live in a world without economic borders. Push a button in New York and a billion dollars moves to Tokyo.”⁴ This statement, made by a fictional presidential candidate modeled on Bill Clinton (and played by John Travolta) in the late-1990s movie, *Primary Colors* (1998), is perhaps one of the most poignant summaries of ineffectual politics under globalization, which has been the failure of the state to positively appropriate and manage surplus populations within a social state. Instead, failing to spend and employ, the state has been led to discipline, criminalize, and penalize (Wacquant 2008; 2009).

And if this has been the foundational political-economic doctrine of Washington elites for several decades now, is it any wonder that Trump could win the 2016 US presidential elections? How different Trump’s promise that “you will never be ignored again” (Tackett and Tankersley 2017) is from the president of *Primary Colors*, who simply throws up his hands and says there’s nothing to be done about the disappearance of blue-collar jobs, nothing that can be done to protect regular American workers from the vicissitudes of global market forces. Following Trump’s promise to spend \$1 trillion on infrastructure projects—a policy taken straight out of FDR’s playbook, echoing Bernie Sanders’ earlier, identical proposal (Sanders 2016: 122-123)—a Georgetown University study has suggested that such a proposal, were it ever to be realized (which remains doubtful, given Trump’s thinly veiled pro-market inclinations and \$1.5 trillion tax cut), would create 11 million jobs over a decade, with more than half of these new jobs going to high school dropouts or high school-only graduates (Carnevale and Smith 2017).⁵ This has been the aim, too, of the Millions of Jobs group, a coalition of progressive organizations and labor unions in the US, including the

³ Both the concept of “globalization” and “populism” are deeply problematic, as the (post-Columbus) world was always already global, and populism means little more than the pursuit of that which has become popular, that is to say, that which can achieve a democratic majority. In one of the central works on populism to appear in recent years, Müller (2016) claims that populists who take power embark on a threefold political program: they (i) occupy the state, (ii) engage in mass clientelism and corruption, and (iii) suppress civil society (Müller 2016: 102). The problem with this conceptual approach, however, is that *all* political operators—certainly the successful ones, i.e. those figures capable of making their mark on the polity—in modern democracies could be accused of doing the same: “occupying the state” means little more than ensuring that political allies are placed in the right places; “mass clientelism” is merely a derogatory rebranding of the “tit-for-tat” exchanges and dealmaking of political elites from Washington through London to Auckland; to “suppress civil society” could also be viewed as circumscribing the legitimate definition of which agents constitute a civil society, legally speaking, through such measures as registering approved tax-deductible charities or subsidizing NGOs through government funds, a practice that most modern states constantly engage in; as Bourdieu (2014: 31-36) notes, “civil society” could be viewed as an extension of the state by another name.

⁴ This quotation is taken from an (unofficial) movie script, available online at: http://www.script-orama.com/movie_scripts/p/primary-colors-script-transcript-clinton.html.

⁵ There are legitimate concerns that Trump’s infrastructure push in combination with tax breaks for the rich would result in runaway inflation, raised interest rates, and reduced economic growth in the long run. But the solution is simple: don’t give tax breaks to the rich while embarking on massive infrastructure investment programs. The spending-inflation dilemma exposes the Janus-faced nature of Trumpism: sooner or later, its exponents must choose between protecting the everyman and benefiting the wealthy. At such a juncture, however, all available evidence suggests that the former will be sacrificed in favor of the latter.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Their central aim is, self-evidently, to push lawmakers to “invest in creating millions of new jobs,”⁶ which in 2017 resulted in a non-binding resolution in Congress calling on lawmakers to “enact a bold jobs and infrastructure package that benefits all Americans, not just billionaires,” a task urgently required by “crumbling roads, bridges, and schools, unsafe drinking water facilities, and outdated energy systems.”⁷

The fact is that there are plenty of tasks that still need to be dealt with by expansive welfare states: in the US, the American Society of Civil Engineers has estimated that there is a whopping \$2 trillion investment gap over a ten-year period for the nation’s crumbling infrastructure (ASCE 2016). Others estimate that there is an \$15 trillion shortfall in infrastructure investments worldwide (Infrastructure Outlook 2018). If we take the limited view of judging neoliberalism on its own terms—an “immanent critique”—by asking how well neoliberalism serves the interests of capital, it seems clear that neoliberalism is dysfunctional.

How dissimilar this is to the grandiose designs of certain mid-twentieth-century Keynesians. Big State Keynesianism once had a positive vision: “Neither dictatorship nor regimentation, but a balanced national economy as a basis for a higher form of individualism, with service as its ideal, is the purpose of the National Recovery program of the Roosevelt Administration,” in the words of one 1930s newspaper account (New York Times 1933). This meant, and would still mean, pumping billions into the economy, allowing the state to redirect flows of bodies, power, natural resources, reengineering the “process of social metabolism,” to speak with Marx, to safeguard life and improve life-chances. But the Keynesian state was not so much a big state—all modern states, even highly neoliberal ones, such as the United States and United Kingdom, occupy a significant percentage of social resources, as measured by the proportion of public spending in terms of Gross Domestic Product—as an *anti-surplus state*, a state whose primary purpose was to counteract the formation of surplus populations.

After post-Fordism

This has also been the view taken by the Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson, who saw farther than most, presaging the crisis of the mid-2010s even as he wrote under the thick ideological pallor of neoliberalism. In *When Work Disappears*, Wilson (1996) proposed a plan at once simple and ingenious: instead of individualizing and moralizing entanglements with “social disorganization” theory and culturalist analyses of a “new underclass” (see e.g. Wacquant and Wilson 1989; Wacquant 2008), or Murray-and-Hernstein-style sociobiological misanthropism (see Fischer et al. 1996), Wilson proposed providing millions of jobs to low-skilled dwellers of the urban ghettos – indeed, to the whole of the US public who found their lives disrupted and dislocated by the steady decline of employment opportunities. The problems of the ghetto were not about the breakdown of the “black family structure,” as Daniel Moynihan’s much-touted 1965 report had claimed, or cognitive deficiency, as the racist vision of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) imputed, but simply the decline of employment levels and deterioration of (previously) high-quality jobs. With “ghetto joblessness” at an all-time high, and the private sector failing to employ those deemed unworthy by corporate America, Wilson suggested a “policy of public-sector employment of last resort.”

The long shadow cast by neoliberalism forced Wilson to hedge his proposal in all sorts of ways, but after several hundred pages, his plan was alluringly straightforward: “[M]any

⁶ These, and other principles, are available on the Millions of Jobs website: <http://www.millionsofjobs.org/principles/>.

⁷ For a full-text version of this resolution, see the website of the United States Congress: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-concurrent-resolution/63/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22infrastructure+principles%22%5D%7D&r=8>.

workers, especially those who are not in the official labor force, will not be able to find jobs unless the government becomes an employer of last resort.” Infrastructure spending would be a central plank in this reform agenda, this attempt to engineer a capitalism with a human face. Spending one billion dollars on road maintenance, Wilson pointed out, would directly employ 25,000 people directly as well as indirectly create another 15,000 jobs. A good social democrat, Wilson modeled his proposal on Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA), which, Wilson cited approvingly, resulted in the construction of more than 650,000 miles of roads, more than 120,000 bridges, and 8,000 schools. A “WPA-style jobs program” would be expensive, Wilson wrote, but empirical research suggested that 12 billion dollars of state spending would result in one million jobs – and importantly, these would be low-wage, unskilled jobs, aimed precisely at those left behind by neoliberalism, including include far more than just “inner-city” dwellers: it would target “broad segments of the U.S. population” and would bring security and safety to all those devastated by rampant neoliberalism.

Why don’t social scientists, including criminologists, talk about the need for a more proactive social state in the twenty-first century? Why was Wilson’s (1996) proposal largely met with deafening silence? Most of the objects of social-scientific study—social pathologies in all their forms, including crime, poverty, homelessness, and—would likely be seriously reduced in the wake of a reconstructed New Deal, or what the British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has termed a “People’s Quantitative Easing,” including intensive investments in “infrastructural development, job-creation and high-technology industries” (Seymour 2016: 8). But social scientists are strangely timid, afraid to get their hands dirty with the perceived impurity of political advocacy. Such timidity is largely misguided, a point long ago recognized by Pierre Bourdieu, who rebuked the academic community for its “flight into purity” (Bourdieu 2008: 380-381; see also Shammass 2018). The social-scientific aversion against commitment would have been “criminal,” Bourdieu (2008) claims, if, say, a biologist were to fail to disclose the devastating effects of a noxious virus on human populations. But criminologists are not subject to such demands, Bourdieu observes. By and large, society does not make such ethical demands on social science, even though a policy involving the retrenchment of the welfare state “has effects that can already be foreseen thanks to the resources of social science” (Bourdieu 2008: 380), and despite the fact that such policies are in part advanced by intellectuals and academics instrumental in expediting ideological transformation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999). On Bourdieu’s account, the dichotomy between scholarship and commitment, which Alvin Gouldner termed the “myth of a value-free sociology” (1975: 1-26), is dangerous if not outright devastating: “As I see it, the scholar has no choice today: if [they are] convinced that there is a correlation between neoliberal policies and crime rates...how can [they] avoid saying so?” (Bourdieu 2008: 381).

This was well understood by Sweden’s early social democrats as well as those criminal justice and psychiatric experts who sympathized with the interwar social-democratic program. Olof Kinberg, a Swedish medical doctor, expounded on the classical vision of crime contained in social democracy: “No offender is an isolated phenomenon who like a meteor suddenly strikes from who-knows-where. On the contrary, he has a history and has thousands of connections with other people, with social conditions and various institutions. He is, in fact, not solely...a particular, individual, spiritual nature, but is also the symptom of a certain cultural condition in the society in which he lives” (Kinberg 1934). Offenders bore the stamp of a social order and were products of their environment. In this respect, imprisonment was the most facile of actions that a state could take, because it was society, not the offender, who was in need of treatment. Similarly, Karl Schlyter, Sweden’s leading social-democratic spokesperson on criminal justice affairs in the 1930s (and later minister of justice), who published and spoke extensively on the need to “empty the prisons” (Schlyter 1935), took the view that it would be far better to prevent the formation of a punishable surplus population

than to expend energy on devising rehabilitative schemes or reforming carceral conditions. Instead, the point was to facilitate, “through social reforms,” a “change [in] the environment that creates the clientele of the prison” (Dagens Nyheter 1934).

As Per Albin Hansson, Sweden’s social-democratic prime minister through large parts of the 1930s and 1940s, noted, the primary objective of Swedish social democracy was to combat unemployment and thereby “transform society” (Hansson 1932: 4). Writing in the early 1930s, Hansson viewed this as an urgently required task: “The whole world is being shaken by a terrible crisis. Everywhere one sees the distress and misery of the masses. The ranks of the unemployed are counted by the millions – in America... 11 million, in Germany, 5 million, in England 2-3 million, in Sweden, 200,000!” In this way, “unemployment makes itself felt in almost all areas” (Hansson 1932: 14) One of these areas was crime and attendant pleas for greater punishment. Social democracy entailed being “deeply aware of the fact that the greatest safeguard of good order is to organize society so that everyone may find security and well-being there,” Hansson (1932: 24) wrote. “Where injustice prevails, where people suffer from shortcomings, where a constant concern for what tomorrow may bring weighs on the minds of the people, where society neglects its duty of care, dissatisfaction grows, preparing the fertile ground of desperate acts.”

How poorly understood these lessons are today – how little uptake such ideas seem to have in a criminology bent on “explaining” offenders by reference to hormonal imbalances, broken brains, genetic defects, or (according to the dominant paradigm of self-control theory) the imperfect ability to abstain from pleasure-seeking behavior. Even in Sweden—the veritable homeland of such ideas—the Stockholm Prize in Criminology seems more interested in rewarding those scholars most interested in preventing the formation of micro-level “criminal opportunities” or who take an agent-centric “life-course” view, perspectives almost entirely incognizant of explanatory elements such as shifting legislative environments, zero-tolerance police strategies, and the macroeconomic effects of welfare states (or their absence).⁸

But even many political economists of punishment have been wary of thinking through what it means to live in a market society. For all the talk of adopting a “political economy” perspective on punishment (see e.g. Melossi, Sozzo, and García 2017), few if any scholars—with the admirable exception of Loïc Wacquant (and his one-time mentor and advisor, the aforementioned William Julius Wilson)—have directly advocated ramping up state spending on infrastructure, job creation, and similar state programs, whose express aim is to counteract the formation of those phenomena studied by criminologists, including urban disorders and violent crime. In *Punishing the Poor*, Wacquant notes that under President Bill Clinton, the US government cut federal spending on job creation and training from \$18 billion in 1980 to \$6.7 billion in 1993 (Wacquant 2009: 153). There is more wisdom contained in this statistical nugget than in most contemporary criminological analysis of the probable future of punishment, especially given the analytical role attributed to it under Wacquant’s Bourdieusian model of an “ambidextrous state” (see e.g. Bourdieu 2000a: 1-10), involving the neoliberal reallocation of resources from the social, assistive, and caring left-hand of the state to the disciplinary, punitive, and militaristic right-hand of the state. Indicatively, one recent volume putatively centered on the relationship between political economy and punishment fails to discuss job creation as a powerful remedy against criminalization and penalization (see Melossi, Sozzo, and García 2017) – and this despite significant evidence that property crime is strongly linked to unemployment levels (Raphael and Winter-Ebmer 2001).

⁸ For a list of past prize winners, and its relatively unequivocal slant favoring particular certain theoretical paradigms, see the Stockholm Prize in Criminology website: <https://www.su.se/english/about/prizes-awards/the-stockholm-prize-in-criminology/prize-winners>.

One of the reasons for this aversion to materialism in penology is the very low esteem in which the work of Rusche and Kirchheimer (1939) is held—the most famous Marxian attempt to analyze punishment—and more broadly, the theoretical approach it is said to represent. Hailing from the Frankfurt School, Rusche and Kirchheimer applied the doctrinal positions of “critical theory” to the sociology of punishment. Famously, they argued that there was a *direct* link between economic modes of production and concrete punishment practices. Foucault was appreciative of their work, noting that “Rusche and Kirchheimer’s great work, *Punishment and Social Structure*, provides a number of essential reference points” (Foucault 2015: p. 245 n21) for the development of a political economy of punishment (see also Box 1987). But it is probably fair to say that scholars working today find this kind of approach excessively reductionist. However, this is only because the materialist doctrine is taken too literally, too unequivocally: most would recognize that there are layers of mediation exercised by such entities as the penal or carceral field (see e.g. Goodman, Page, and Phelps 2017), or that we should expect to see a direct correlation *at all times* between unemployment and incarceration rates. In part, this is because joblessness is being supplanted with a deteriorating quality of jobs, so that millions of Americans (for instance) are struck from the unemployment records maintained by the Bureau of Labor Statistics while being caught up in cycles of underemployment, low-quality employment, and the exigencies of “flexible capitalism” (Sennett 2006) – what we might call the “Uberization” of the economy (Fleming 2017), or, more generally, “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2016). Taken too literally and reduced to a narrow band of statistical indicators, the political economy approach to punishment must surely seem absurd if not outright false. But there are no good reasons why such a narrow approach should be taken today.

The trouble with work

We have forgotten the lesson taught by Frances Perkins, President Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor (the first woman to occupy such a high position in the US federal government), who spoke of big-state spending as promoting a “higher form of individualism.” It is a myth that aggressive Keynesianism necessarily entails a brutal sort of collectivism, as Hayek and many of the neoliberal Mont Pèlerin Society’s members insisted in the 1940s and later. In a letter to Richard Nixon, Milton Friedman wrote, “As we are all painfully aware, the academic community in general, and the private organizations devoted to supporting or participating in research on current public issues, in particular, are dominated by a collectivist philosophy and a hostility toward private enterprise and individual initiative” (Friedman 1971). This orthodox assumption, that collectivism is necessarily opposed to “individual initiative,” is one of the central neoliberal clichés that should be dismantled. Instead, it is neoliberalism that involves rampant collectivism, with its figure of the “indebted man” (Lazzarato 2011) weighed down by student loans and housing mortgages (on a bubble-prone housing market), amidst the exceedingly competitive crush of millennial life (Berardi 2009). Instead, the anti-surplus state is the foundation of a true individualism, a point long ago recognized by Oscar Wilde (1891): “With the abolition of private property... we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism.” A flourishing individualism is only possible when the foundational needs of material life have been met; or, as Mack the Knife in Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* phrases it: “But till you feed us, right and wrong can wait!” More pithily: first bread, then morals. Decent, stable work that is adequately remunerated constitutes the necessary condition for a thriving human subject.

Instead of a job-creating state, or an anti-surplus state, neoliberal statecraft involves the proliferation of an ideology of workfare, or “work activation,” with an attendant trope of “job training” (Wacquant 2010). But job training schemes are largely ineffectual, pushing the burden of responsibility onto the individual worker for their state of joblessness. Job training injects individual responsibility into the core of the welfare state. This individualizing move

finds its perhaps most comically absurd expression in various fictitious job training schemes aimed at the unemployed. These fictional schemes have been described as “Potemkin companies,” in honor of Catherine the Great’s famed general. Thus, in France, “more than 100 Potemkin companies...are operating today...and there are thousands more across Europe. In Seine-St.-Denis, outside Paris, a pet business called Animal Kingdom sells products like dog food and frogs. ArtLim, a company in Limoges, peddles fine porcelain. Prestige Cosmetique in Orleans deals in perfumes. All these companies’ wares are imaginary” (Alderman 2015). The fiction of operating a false firm is meant to equip the unemployed with the requisite skills and discipline to function in the real labor market. One could go further in this criticism by noting that these fictitious firms only serve to highlight the fiction that is the “real” economy, too: in *Empty Labor*, Roland Paulsen (2015) estimates that office workers routinely waste around two hours of labor-time per day on “empty” tasks, like surfing the Internet. David Graeber (2015) goes even farther, arguing that it is not so much the vacuous pockets within the working day that require our attention but the widespread proliferation of “bullshit jobs,” whole swathes of occupations that are, in some sense, meaningless or superfluous to human need. “A world without teachers or dock-workers would soon be in trouble,” Graeber writes. “But it’s not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs or legal consultants to similarly vanish” (Jeffries 2015). While this is tantalizingly put, more rigorously we might say that there are no objective standards for determining which jobs are “valid” and which are “pointless.” The fictitious absurdity of Potemkin companies highlights the narrow moralism of the supporters of workfare and proponents of “labor activation” policies, who equate unemployment with shirking or laziness.

This point was recognized by some nineteenth-century radicals, including the French socialist Paul Lafargue. Above all, a worker produces not goods, services, or even surplus-value, but superfluity, on Lafargue’s (1904) account: through their labor, all employees also produce the conditions for their own and others’ unemployment. Lafargue’s quasi-Keynesianism *avant la lettre* is largely consistent with the observable facts: wherever market economies have reached a sufficiently advanced stage, one of the primary political problems becomes the problem of creating enough jobs, with even advanced, interventionist states often failing to do so, and a resultant overhanging threat to the social order posed by even slight increases in joblessness. In his visionary work of heterodox Marxism, *The Right to be Lazy*, Lafargue (1904) predicted what might happen when automation technologies reached a sufficient state of maturity: the labor market, Lafargue believed, will, “when all social forces are brought to it...be so overfilled that it will be well nigh a matter of compulsion to forbid work: it will be almost impossible for this swarm of hitherto unproductive human beings to find employment, for they are more numerous than the locusts” (Lafargue 1904: 36). Lafargue implicitly attacked Marx (he was Marx’s son-in-law, having married Marx’s second daughter, Laura) and what he came to see as the Marxian fetishization of work – a piece of bourgeois ideology, so Lafargue believed, unthinkingly adopted by communist theoreticians, beginning with Marx’s conviction that human beings are distinguished by their capacity for work: we humans are working animals, and therefore we cease to be animals at all, Marx claims in *Capital*; or, as Erich Fromm would put it later, “Labor is the self-expression of man, an expression of his individual physical and mental powers” (Fromm 2013: 34). With the ideology of producerism, labor becomes an unhealthy fetish. Lafargue’s ironic appraisal of work was that, given a sufficiently advanced technological state, market economies would generate a superabundance of goods, with attendant unemployment and social misery, so that there would be no-one available to consume them – certainly not at levels commensurate with a modest, sensible way of life. (Lafargue’s writings are full of scorn for the profligate bourgeoisie and their excessively indulgent habits.) As a result, advanced capitalism produced

surplus populations, swarming “locusts,” Lafargue says, as Marx, too recognized, of course, particularly in Volume Three of *Capital*.

At the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, a similar insight led Keynes to propose capping trade surpluses, with an international “bancor” currency and an International Clearing Union (ICU) set up to oversee the system (see Varoufakis 2016). The theoretical groundwork for this plan had been laid down in Keynes’s interwar *General Theory*, where Keynes noted that advantages accruing to exporting countries necessarily represented a deficit to importers: “The fact that the advantage which our own country gains from a favourable balance is liable to involve an equal disadvantage to some other country...means...that an immoderate policy may lead to a senseless international competition for a favourable balance which injures all alike” (Keynes [1936] 2013: 338-339). Keynes’s plan, premised on the view that trade was a “mechanism for exporting unemployment between developed nations” (Kriesler and Nevile 2016: 34), ultimately failed because of the great power dynamics in play at Bretton Woods (see e.g. Steil 2013), but it would have incentivized countries running export surpluses to rebalance them.

Lafargue’s central idea was that the problem of work must have practical consequences for a reform of market society: something must be done to counteract the fact that with increasing automation, “the productivity of the workers defies all consumption, all squandering” (Lafargue 1904: 31). And this something is the defilement of the fetish of work, even its outright prohibition, with the criminalization of work itself. To work must be made something akin to sin, Lafargue suggests. Under conditions of extreme productivity, in order to “exhaust the mountains of products, which grow higher and stronger than the pyramids of Egypt,” (Lafargue 1904: 30-31), work must be strictly policed, quarantined, and encircled by quotas. All of this is no doubt far removed from both Marxian producerism and the neoliberal cult of workfare. But perhaps Lafargue’s insight is not so far-fetched given our current political and economic predicaments, with steeply increasing labor productivity, the imperative to sharply reduce levels of consumption in the face of ecological crisis, and the ever-present political challenge of job creation. Lafargue’s idea, easily dismissed as a piece of rarefied utopian socialism of the kind so famously lambasted by his father-in-law and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (see e.g. Marx and Engels 2008: 77-81), punctures one of the central axioms of Western thought, namely that to work is both necessary and desirable. Lafargue’s challenge to us is to rethink whether labor policies should ultimately be the end-all and be-all of a progressive dismantling of the logic of neoliberalism.

Lafargue’s almost existentialist—certainly humanistic—interrogation of the centrality of work finds its counterpart in the Italian philosopher Franco Berardi’s (2009) twenty-first century syncretization of Marxism and humanism. Writing on the effects of competitive neoliberalism on human well-being, Berardi notes that “what is really experienced is the production of scarcity and need, compensated by a fast, guilty and neurotic consumption because we can’t waste time; we need to get back to work” (2009: 82). To Berardi, the narrow category of wealth, understood as the accrual of economic capital, is at the heart of our contemporary predicament. Today, wealth is “no longer the ability to enjoy things, bodies and signs in time, but the accelerating and expansive production of their loss, transformed in exchange value and anxiety” (2009: 82). Far from veering off into excessive idealism or naïve voluntarism, Berardi fuses Marxian concerns over workers’ rights with a humanistic critique of the work-and-wealth-centric worldview: “Perhaps the answer is that it is necessary to slow down, finally giving up economistic fanaticism and collectively rethink the true meaning of the word ‘wealth.’ Wealth does not mean a person who owns a lot but refers to someone who has enough time to enjoy what nature and human collaboration place...within everyone’s reach” (Berardi 2009: 169). Similarly, in an academic world straining under the burden of Research Assessment Exercises and the symbolic violence of (perceived) prestige in “top-

tier” publications—what Sayer (2015) calls “the insult of the REF [Research Excellence Framework]”—some researchers have called for a return to “slow scholarship” (Hartman and Darab 2012), over against those “*fast-thinkers* who offer cultural ‘fast food’” or “predigested and prethought culture,” in Bourdieu’s (1998: 29) memorable phrase.

But this critique of hypercompetitive economism is also redoubled by mounting ecological and environmental troubles: the Earth cannot sustain such an economic structure any longer, recognized long ago by the “deep ecology” of the philosopher Arne Næss (1973). The difficulty for an anti-surplus state, then, lies in striking a balance between the need for a social state (to counteract the predictable spread of social pathologies) and an ecological state (which does not devastate our terrestrial biosphere). Among the promising candidates for resolving this conundrum, if not outright contradiction, is some form of guaranteed income. As Wacquant writes, “Public policies aimed at combating advanced marginality will have to reach beyond the narrow perimeter of wage employment and move towards the institutionalization of a right to subsistence outside of the tutelage of the market via some variant of ‘basic income’” (2008: 7). Both social policies (to alleviate social suffering) and ecologically sound policies (to prevent ecological devastation) are needed now: to do the one without the other would do combat human suffering in the long run.

Conclusion

One of the central problems of our age is that the values promoting the apparent necessity and desirability of work, which served our forebears quite well, have become increasingly dated: there is a *hysteresis* effect, to speak with Bourdieu (2000b: 160-161), by which the Western civilizational habitus, which among other things is a habitus of capitalism, lags behind technological, ecological, political, and economic transformations. We no longer “need” to work at current levels. Keynes believed we would all be working 15-hour work weeks by the end of the twentieth century: “For three hours a day is quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us!” (Keynes [1930] 2010: 328). And yet the dispositions that valorize work have been so firmly inculcated in Occidental subjects that most seem unable to even entertain the idea that *not* working could be virtuous. The notion that work is a vice to be cudged and beaten out of us seems wholly alien. But “work must be forbidden, not imposed,” Lafargue (1904: 37) says. As the cure against Marx’s famous triad of the overaccumulation of capital, overproduction of commodities, and overabundance of labor, Lafargue offers us, albeit in a slightly satirical vein (in the form of a sort of Defoe of late nineteenth-century European socialism), a way out of our predicament. Thus, even while the anti-surplus state should create jobs, it should also do all that is in its power to, paradoxically, circumscribe and contain jobs: to reduce working hours to the bare minimum (a four-hour working day, for instance) and to pursue policies in line with the scarce resource that work is now steadily becoming.

To combat the formation and solidification of vast surplus populations, what is needed across the (so-called) postindustrialized world⁹ is a second New Deal, a new age of social democracy for the twenty-first century. While the 2008 financial crisis breathed new life into the idea that “we are all Keynesians now”—a phrase first coined by Milton Friedman and repeated by Richard Nixon, demonstrating the reluctant admission by neoliberals that even in times of crisis, Keynes’s basic counter-cyclical insights were unavoidable—we are nevertheless not nearly Keynesian enough. To some critics, the idea that the state itself should take up direct responsibility for employment smacks too much of twentieth-century command

⁹ There have never been more industrial proletarians in the world than today, as the Norwegian writer Kjartan Fløgstad has pointed out (Haagensen 2007), certainly far more than in Marx’s times. These proletarians just happen to not be (for the most part) located in the West. But the West is still enormously reliant on the fruits of industrial production. Postindustrialism is a wildly misleading misnomer.

economies. But what other options are available? The specter of surplus populations makes command economists of us all. In the US, one-third of all workers are now considered “contingent” (freelancers, “self-employed,” and the like), one survey suggests, giving rise to a highly insecure “gig economy” wherein ontological insecurity abounds. Late-modern neoliberalism has given birth to what one perceptive commentator has called the “50 Cent economy,” named after the US hip-hop artist whose guiding maxim is “get rich or die trying.” Even in the absence of unemployment, the qualitative deterioration of employment calls for a new tack in steering social life. Criminologists should be at the forefront of such debates, for their objects of study are shaped by the presence or absence of work, the deterioration or revalorization of employment, indeed the whole “ensemble of...social relations” that Marx (1998: 570) rightly saw as formative of our collective species-being.

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