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The Concealed Theological Remnants of the Violence of Work in America

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the violence of work in America, a system which wages war on American bodies forcing them to work when they are sick, robbing them of sleep, adequate nutrition, and time with their families and friends. Drawing from Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt, I expose the ways in which work has become an insidious byproduct of a theological and political falsity meant to control, suppress, and create creatures who will follow rules and regulations almost always to their own detriment. Using Foucault, I show how the American work place, having internalized the Protestant Work Ethic, has become a space where the Arendtian *homo faber* thrives at the expense of its physical and spiritual well-being. Further, I posit that because the Foucauldian subject is always in creation via discursive means, *homo faber* is both the creator and prisoner of the system which enslaves them. In this paradigm, the Foucauldian subject persists and resists by way of the Arendtian relational activity of Action, exercising what little power it can against the tyranny of work.

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Americans must often choose between care of the self and their jobs. The myth of work-life balance is a carrot dangling before the American bound to the cultural treadmill of ceaseless work. In this paper, I will explore the violence of work¹ in America which

¹ As a point of clarification, the definition of “work” employed herein is the activity

wages war on American bodies, forcing them to work when they are sick, robbing them of sleep and adequate nutrition, and of time with their families and friends. This inescapable intrusion of work on the American is even reflected in their speech. Stephen Kalberg, Associate Professor of Sociology at Boston University, explains in his introduction to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, "Expressions that reflect the centrality of work in our lives are pervasive: we arrange 'working lunches,' we 'work out' daily, we 'work' on our love, our relationships, our personalities, and our tans. We praise the work ethic of our peers and 'hard workers' are generally assumed to be people of good character."² Indeed, it is often joked about that when Americans meet one another for the first time, the first question they ask is "What do you do?" meaning not, what does one do to feed their soul or spirit, not what does one do to enjoy one's time, but what one does for work.

By looking to Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt, I will expose the ways in which work has become an insidious byproduct of a theological and political history meant to control, to suppress, and to create creatures who will follow rules and regulations almost always to the detriment of their own well-being. The conversation I hope to ignite is not why do Americans dislike their jobs, this is but a cultural symptom of a much greater dis-ease, but rather, I endeavor to examine the deep roots of a system that not only makes work of paramount importance in the life of the average American, it perpetuates an abandonment of leisure, of family, and of identity outside that of vocation, and it does this in exchange for the illusion of agency in an open-market economy. To

a person engages in to earn monetary compensation. Further, the definition relied upon in this paper hinges on productivity as a primary measure of success. It is this productivity which in turn confines this activity to a more rigorous and less playful definition of "work."

² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: With Other Writings On the Rise of the West*, 4th ed., trans. Stephen Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

have work in America is to be counted on as fortunate – unemployment rates are counted and announced with great excitement when they are low, and with great distress when they are high. But how fortunate can Americans be when they feel tethered to a capitalist system which itself acts as a thief, robbing them of said necessities and pleasures during working hours and of their hard-earned dollars afterward in exchange for material goods which prove inadequate at fulfilling the spiritual lacuna left by unsatisfying work.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), Americans work more hours per week than workers in the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, France, and Sweden.³ A recent article in the Wall Street Journal states that worker satisfaction is at a ten-year high with 49.6% of Americans reporting that they are “satisfied” with their jobs. Citing a survey by The Conference Board, the newspaper reports that “nearly half of employees surveyed are unsatisfied, and internal policies help explain why. Among the 23 components of job satisfaction the Conference Board asked about, the 1,565 respondents were least content with their company’s promotion policy, followed by bonus plan, performance-review process, educational and job training programs, and recognition for their work.”⁴ We work more hours but we are not recognized for it, we give up time with our families but opportunities for advancement are slim. We live in a culture where mere “satisfaction” is the best we can do to describe how we feel about our work, and we live in a culture where a meager 49.6% of its workers can say that they feel acquiescent towards their jobs. What of the other 50.4%? Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, American social activist Emma

³ Country Profiles, in the ILOSTAT Database, accessed October 25, 2016, http://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/home/statisticaldata/ContryProfileId?_afLoop=460044076937073#!%40%40%3F_afLoop%3D460044076937073%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D9a972hjct_307

⁴ Lauren Weber, “Job Satisfaction Hits a 10-Year High—but It’s Still Below 50%,” Wall Street Journal, July 19, 2016, accessed October 25, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/job-satisfaction-hits-a-10-year-highbut-its-still-below-50-1468940401>.

Goldman commented on what she called the “destruction of social relationship”: “So long as every institution of today, economic, political, social, and moral, conspires to misdirect human energy into wrong channels; so long as most people are out of place doing the things they hate to do, living a life they loathe to live, crime will be inevitable.”⁵ But how have we as Americans come to be so “misdirected,” manipulated, and deceived into feeling lucky to have jobs, while being so oppressed by them? Further, how does this misdirection Goldman writes of bring about the destruction of social relationship and relationality? To begin I propose we look to Max Weber and his proposal for the theological underpinning of this phenomena.

The Protestant Work Ethic

Published in 1907 Max Weber’s seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* sought to do more than simply describe the economic character of capitalism (that had already been done by Marx). According to Weber, outlining the features of a capitalist society as one that engages in a free market of goods was simply insufficient as it did not describe the undergirding spiritual precepts and values that organize the life of the capitalist. “Weber insists that this definition of modern capitalism is incomplete; modern capitalism involves also the organization of economic activity in terms of an “economic ethic.” This ethos legitimates and provides the motivation for the rigorous organization of work, the methodical approach to labor, and the systematic pursuit of profit typical of modern capitalism.”⁶ Anathema to Marxian theory about the role of religion in the life of the capitalist, Weber posited that soteriological beliefs drove one’s fervor to work and that work, profit, and

⁵ Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (publication place unknown: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 14.

⁶ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 9.

salvation were inextricably linked in the mind of the modern capitalist. The Puritans defined by Weber as the ascetic Protestant of England and North America, believed that if one was to be a good Christian worthy of God's salvation, one needed to work, idleness was antithetical to God's command. The "spiritual" nature of this ethos was paramount to the Puritans who "placed systematic work and striving for profit in the middle of their lives. Little else appeared to matter greatly to them, not even family, friendship, leisure, or hobbies."⁷ Frivolity of any sort including socializing and even sleep all counted against the precious minutes in the day that one could use towards securing one's salvation.

One might wonder however, how this fervor for work could be reconciled with the Calvinist notion of predestination. While Calvin proposed that it was presumptuous for humans to impact God's decisions, it was the duty of the faithful to simply live with certainty of his salvation through God's grace. Weber cites in response to this the inability of Protestant Christians to sit comfortably with the uncertainty of their salvation. If salvation came by grace and not works believers were forced to live precariously balanced between hopeful eagerness of having been chosen by God to spend eternal life in heaven, and under the fatalistic ax of anxious despair that no matter what they would do, they were doomed. This simply would not stand, the doubt was too powerful, the stakes too high. Claimed that this lack of self-assurance was due to insufficient faith, Weber explains that, "*Work without rest in a vocational calling* was recommended as the best possible means to *acquire* the self-confidence that one belonged among the elect. Work, and work alone, banishes religious doubt and gives certainty of one's status among the saved."⁸ Work became the antidote to soteriological uncertainty and doubt.

⁷ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, vii.

⁸ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 111. Emphasis in the original.

The draw to work above all other forms of keeping oneself occupied can be traced back to the ascetic lifestyle of the Christian monk. In his article “From Vigilance to Busyness: A Neo-Weberian Approach to Clock Time,” sociologist Benjamin H. Snyder explains that the daily routine of the Benedictine “consisted of a system of eight “divine offices” – discrete spans of time with precise sequences of prayer to be carried out each day... All other activities – chores, meditation, reading, sleeping, and eating – were to be arranged with regularity in the “time remaining” around these offices. The system was called the *horarium*”⁹ and its purpose first and foremost was to prevent the weakness of the body and psyche from distracting the individual from the one thing that could put them on the road to salvation – work. Base desires, idleness, and sloth would be overrun by methodical routine, lest the soul give way to sinful pleasures. This rigid and rational ordering of time would reorient one away from leisure and towards God’s will. Translated by the Puritans, the result of being a good and hard worker ever glorifying God through systematic and virtuous methodical work, would be clues and signs of God’s pleasure and approval in the form of wealth and profit. Weber explains that Puritans “viewed the acquisition of wealth, when it was the *fruit* of work in a vocational calling, as God’s blessing. Even more important for this investigation, the religious value set on tireless, continuous, and systematic work in a vocational calling was defined as absolutely the highest of all ascetic means for believers to testify to their elect status.”¹⁰ The harder you worked, the more wealth you acquired. Salvation by way of work and wealth justified the enduring of pain, sleeplessness, and hunger.

America was inducted into this Protestant ethic early on and Weber makes this point by citing the quintessential American

⁹ Benjamin H. Snyder, “From Vigilance to Busyness: A Neo-Weberian Approach to Clock Time,” *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 3 (September 2013): 253.

¹⁰ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 151-152. Emphasis in the original.

capitalist, Benjamin Franklin, whose pithy aphorisms made their way into the American vernacular. Simply search the internet for the words “productivity” and “motivational quotes” and you will encounter over 670,000 sites most of which will feature one of several popular Franklin quotes. On one page titled “15 Wake Up Early Quotes To Get You Inspired,” two of the 15 quotes come from Franklin (one comes from his contemporary Thomas Jefferson), among them the infamous “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.”¹¹ Looking to Franklin as a perfect example of this ethos, we can see this “spirit” of capitalism internalized and synthesized. Now apart from its soteriological roots the Protestant Work Ethic was free to imbue the American with a right and proper way to engage with work. “Free of all presuppositions,” explains Weber, Franklin’s writing “contains the spirit of concern to us in near classical purity, and simultaneously offers the advantage of being detached from *all* direct connections to religious belief.”¹² Weber quotes Franklin at length, but given the limitations of this paper I will simply include a few sentences which exemplify the primary lesson to be learned by all Americans—laziness, spontaneity, and frivolity will only lead to ruin, work is the mark of a good and savvy individual:

Remember that *time is money*. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle on half of that day, though he spend but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent or rather thrown away five shillings besides... The most trifling actions that affect a man’s *credit* are to be regarded. The sound of your hammer at five in the morning, or at nine at night, heard

¹¹ Kosio Angelov, “15 Wake up Early Quotes to Get You Inspired,” High Performance Lifestyle, accessed October 27, 2016, <http://blog.highperformancelifestyle.net/inspirational-wake-up-quotes/>.

¹² M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 70. Emphasis in the original.

by a creditor makes him easy six months longer; but if he sees you at a billiard-table or hears your voice at a tavern, when you should be at work, he sends for his money the next day.¹³

This ethos regarding work can be seen in the lives of modern-day Americans, with the tensions between work and family being examined extensively by sociologists. As reported by Suzanne Bianchi and Melissa Milkie in their article “Work and Family Research in the First Decade of the 21st Century,” over 800 articles had been written between 1999 and mid-2009 on the issues of work and family.¹⁴ Among the commonly examined themes found in this literature are the nature of work-family conflict and the correlations between work, family, stress, and health. Bianchi and Milkie report that work-family conflict “demonstrated the strong link to strain, depression, somatic symptoms, and burnout” in parents.¹⁵ The impact of work on family life is elucidated in Milkie’s 2004 article, “The Time Squeeze: Parental Statuses and Feelings about Time with Children.” In it she states that work impacted the number of hours parents spent with children but also in the quality of the time spent. While this may strike some as an obvious claim to make, Milkie explains that the psychological effects of this are great, stating, “The more hours of paid work, the more likely parents are to feel time strain with children. The intriguing aspect of work hours is that they are not explained away in models controlling for the amount of time parents report spending with their children, nor do activities such as eating together as a family or the number of focused one-on-one hours.

¹³ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 70. Emphasis in the original

¹⁴ Suzanne M. Bianchi and Melissa A. Milkie, “Work and Family Research in the First Decade of the 21st Century,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3 (June 2010): 706.

¹⁵ Suzanne M. Bianchi and Melissa A. Milkie, “Work and Family Research in the First Decade of the 21st Century,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3 (June 2010): 716.

Something other than a simple loss of parent-child hours or activities related to longer work hours must influence parents' time strain."¹⁶ She cites a study by K.J. Daly which states that perhaps this effect is caused by the inability of parents "to spontaneously respond to children's needs, as the demands from employment are not easily escaped."¹⁷ But if this in some small way begins to explain how the American has come to be tied to the Protestant Work Ethic and how it currently impacts our relationships and families, we must ask the question of how it is that America itself maintains workers in such a state.

The Body as Object

Over and above its soteriological roots, what is the psychological hold that work has on the American individual? What keeps someone playing this game of self-sacrifice once they've begun? To maintain the masses constantly focused on work which places such strain on one's well-being, there must be something much bigger and more systematized at play. Michel Foucault proposed an answer by way of his book *Discipline and Punish* in 1975: the creation of the docile body. The insidious nature of the control of the body and suppression of the spirit has roots, Foucault claims, not only in religion, but in the creation of the prison system. Bodies which can be easily monitored and examined become a political tool by which a system exerts control over the individual. And so filling one's time with work begins as an individual endeavor toward salvific ends, but in the Foucauldian paradigm becomes itself the very tool used to enslave the populace into being a homogenous organism of efficiency, productivity, and conformity. Anything which deviates from the prescribed power-relation is considered delinquent and

¹⁶ Melissa A. Milkie and Marybeth J. Mattingly, "The Time Squeeze: Parental Statuses and Feelings About Time with Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 3 (August 2004): 757. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ M. Milkie and M. Mattingly, "The Time Squeeze," 757.

must be corrected, this delinquency from work will be addressed in America by way of 19th century vagrancy laws, but first we turn to 17th and 18th century Europe.

Foucault shuttles one back to 1757 and the public quartering and execution of Damiens as he opens *Discipline and Punish*. The details are gory no doubt and are intended to be so, they function to alarm the modern-day reader. Harvard theologian Mark Jordan describes his experience of the shocking details: “I am meant to find them revolting, barbaric, and (above all) old-fashioned. I am expected to feel relief when I pass from such gruesome testimonies to something tidier, like a list of aseptic penal prescriptions. In *Discipline and Punish*, the description of the tortured body is half of a pair. The other half consists of excerpts from rules, published in 1838, for a Parisian house of young prisoners.”¹⁸ The reason that Foucault places these two halves of the story together is purposeful because in a not so subtle way he wants us to understand that these two halves are far more similar than we would like to imagine. The destruction of Damien’s body is an external and visible representation of the same kind of destruction later found in the regimented structure of time imposed upon the body, it is a destruction meant to attack the soul.

The rules mentioned by Jordan are those of Leon Faucher who created a time-table which structured the prisoner’s day down to the minute much like that of the Benedictine monks to which Weber referred. This time-table is indicative of the greater restructuring of punishment from public spectacle to orderly and cloistered discipline. Foucault explains, “The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property.”¹⁹ The individual as such

¹⁸ Mark D. Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 41-42.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York:

becomes a vehicle, an object, upon which physical or psychological force can be enacted. Again, we turn to Jordan who explains that “The body is a network of tense relations, a field for perpetual battle. This micro-physics is a series of battlefield reports from a war that is not officially taking place.”²⁰ And so it is that this battle for control of the body begins with torture and execution, moves forward to organization and separation and in this isolation, the body becomes one which is “manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds.”²¹ Foucault lays out the battleground for the creation of the docile body as one which requires enclosure of the body, partitioning within the enclosure, the creation of said partitions as “functional sites,” the implementation of rank or hierarchy within the enclosure, and the control of activity by way of “temporal imperatives.”

To derive as much as possible out of the body, first it must be quartered off. Foucault calls this “enclosure” and describes it as “a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself.”²² Examples of this are prisons, yes, but Foucault extends this idea of enclosure to the military barracks, to schools, and to factories. I propose that we extend this definition to the modern-day workplace, for just as Foucault describes the guardian of the factory as monitoring the ins and outs of the individual through a gate delineating said enclosure from the outside world, we can imagine today’s reception desk where workers are identified and signed in and out. The receptionist/guard lets no one in to the workplace without clearance. Foucault explains the purpose of the enclosure by saying, “Its aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to

Vintage Books, 1995), 11.

²⁰ Mark D. Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 45.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 136.

²² M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 141.

supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. It was a procedure therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering and using. Discipline organizes an analytical space.”²³ Lest we be fooled, today’s reception area and employee identification cards are meant to control the body of the individual, to know its location, and to keep certain bodies in and others out. We may believe and yes, we have been conditioned to believe that the receptionist is a warm and pleasant body there to offer guests tea or water, but she is a guard, a gatekeeper. She is the rook keeping the pawns in place. But she too unknowingly Foucault might say, is a body much like the bodies she polices, she is part of a system of control that is so embedded into our collective psyches that we don’t think twice when she offers us herbal tea.

The body now enclosed, the enclosure must be made functional. This Foucault explains, facilitates analysis and observation of the body. The architecture of the enclosure must be manipulated to create a system by which individuals can be easily scrutinized. He states:

In factories that appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, the principle of individualizing partitioning became more complicated. It was a question of distributing individuals in a space in which one might isolate them and map them; but also of articulating this distribution on a production machinery that had its own requirements... By walking up and down the central aisle of the workshop, it was possible to carry out a supervision that was both general and individual; to observe the worker’s presence and application, and the quality of his work; to compare workers with one another, to classify them according to skill and speed; to follow the successive stages of the production process. All these serializations formed a permanent grid: confusion was eliminated...²⁴

²³ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 143.

Foucault's description of the functional workplace overlaid onto today's world evokes an image of cubicles lined up in orderly rows creating a grid of easily placed bodies. A place for everyone and everyone in their place, and in much the same way, the cubicle becomes the prison cell of the business class. A 2014 Wall Street Journal article titled, "A Brief History of the Dreaded Office Cubicle" states that at the time of its conception in the mid-1960's U.S. offices were "largely open, of the type we now see on "Mad Men": row after orthogonal row of serried desks, where accountants or typists clacked away from 9 to 5, often surrounded by a corridor of closed-door offices for managers and executives."²⁵ This landscape meant however that office workers were bombarded by visual and aural noise, and so in 1968 Robert Propst introduced the cubicle and by "1998... around 40 million Americans were working in what he estimated were 42 different versions"²⁶ of his original design. The article continues describing the frustration on behalf of the U.S. business class towards this functional enclosure stating that by the 1980s the "flimsy walls of the cubicle began to symbolize... transience, precariousness and the disposability of the American worker."²⁷ In a backlash against the cubicle, companies today are offering workers proposed freedom from the restrictions of this grey-felt walled existence via the same kinds of open-floor plans once used pre-cubicle. But the article remains clear that "the real problem isn't the furniture; it is how the furniture represents the arbitrariness of power in the workplace."²⁸ While Foucault's description is reminiscent of the cubicle existence we've become so

²⁴ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 144-145.

²⁵ Nikil Saval, "A Brief History of the Dreaded Office Cubicle," *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 2014, accessed October 29, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304885404579549800874319342>.

²⁶ N. Saval, "A Brief History of the Dreaded Office Cubicle."

²⁷ N. Saval, "A Brief History of the Dreaded Office Cubicle"

²⁸ N. Saval, "A Brief History of the Dreaded Office Cubicle"

accustomed to, Mark Jordan explains that “It is modern control over the spatially indexed information about bodies. It is imposed not by ritual horror but by geometric cognition... (the enclosure) requires a whole system of lines in order to capture everyone, each one, within a little square.”²⁹ Cubicle or no cubicle the “punitive mechanism” designed to control the body of the American is the enclosure, monitoring, and analysis of said body.

The bodies, now placed into functional gridded systems, need an incentive to stay, a reward system defined by Foucault as “rank.”³⁰ In this system bodies are conditioned to desire a higher status, in this hierarchized structure individuals would no longer think of themselves as interchangeable, rather, they would have a goal to strive for, something which if achieved would set them apart from the others. Giving the example of the classroom, Foucault explains, “In the eighteenth century, ‘rank’ begins to define the great form of distribution of individuals in the educational order: rows or ranks of pupils in the class... rank attributed to each pupil at the end of each task and each examination; the rank he obtains from week to week, month to month, year to year; a succession of subjects taught and questions treated, according to an order of increasing difficulty.”³¹ Required assignments rewarded certain kinds of behavior. We see similarities to the soteriological roots of the Protestant Work Ethic – work hard and you will be given an affirming sign from God, in the case of the Puritans, in the case of the American worker here, by the boss. It is an organization of the body without a doubt, a control over behavior that moves one from the cubicle to the prized corner office. The reward can be architectural, a private office, a bigger office, an assigned parking spot closer to the entrance; it can be psychological, an email from the boss letting you know you did a great job at the

²⁹ Mark D. Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 48.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 146-147.

³¹ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 147.

presentation today; it can be monetary, a company credit card, a Christmas bonus. Rank ameliorates the feeling of one being a small fish in an endless ocean of fish, for a moment the small fish assigned a new higher rank is a big fish in the small pond that is the office.

Finally, within enclosures, functional spaces, and rank, there is the control of activity by way of the time-table. Here we see the return of the regulation of time. Returning to Benjamin H. Snyder's piece "From Vigilance to Busyness" published in 2013, we learn that "by some estimates, a third to nearly half of the U.S. population regularly experiences time in the form of intensely scheduled days that leave them feeling rushed and overworked."³² The regulating of time however is not so simple, it is not just about regulating when people come in and out and when they take lunch and for how long, it is now also about the efficiency of movement, the controlling of the body to make it as productive as possible within the time it is inside the enclosure. Foucault calls this the "correlation of the body and the gesture."³³ The work day is structured and segmented as before, but it is also viewed as good or bad based on an expectation of productivity, think of the worker struggling to meet quotas or deadlines. Here things begin to get messy because now workers are more attuned to the pressures of time and the unsustainable demands of the workplace begin to encroach on home life, leisure time, quality time with children, sleep, and nutrition. The American worker is now a good employee or a bad employee, gains or loses rank based on whether they can live up to the ever-growing demands of productivity within non-idle time.

Working against this system, taking a break from it, seeking solace or respite now becomes the calling card of the lazy and the delinquent. In America during the industrial era "dislocated and

³² Benjamin H. Snyder, "From Vigilance to Busyness: A Neo-Weberian Approach to Clock Time," *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 3 (September 2013): 243.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 152.

itinerant men in search of work were labeled a “tramp menace,” and their presence in cities and on thoroughfares ignited a host of legal, economic, and moral condemnations.”³⁴ The reasons for displacement and lack of work mattered not, the body of the itinerant (often that of the migrant worker) or unemployed male was a body that was defying enclosure, regulation, observation, and manipulation. These men were viewed as shirking the imperative to be good, hard-working, upstanding Americans, antithetical to the ethos proposed by Franklin. “Alarmist descriptions of the “tramp menace,” which took shape in the 1870s as part of this discussion, defined faulty and deficient workers as social and economic outliers. The authorities responded to this perceived threat with vagrancy laws, which were designed to punish those types of workers but also, by contrast, defined the qualities expected of an ideal worker – punctual, sober, productive, and from the employer’s perspective, cheap.”³⁵ Chief Justice Harry Olson of the Chicago Municipal Court “advocated that “persons found guilty of vagrancy shall serve a term on the ‘rock pile.’” With the goal of “cleaning the scum of the earth from Chicago,” Olson proposed to confront the “crooks and loafers” with two options: “work at honest labor” or “get out of Chicago.”³⁶ Emerging from its early roots of American independence, we begin to see in a very short span of time the ever-increasing level of allegiance required from the American worker to the Protestant Work Ethic.

Most recently the issue of Americans missing work became a source of international attention. During the 2016 American presidential election Hilary Clinton attended a public event while

³⁴ Joel E. Black, “A Crime to Live Without Work: Free Labor and Marginal Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1870 to 1920,” *Michigan Historical Review* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 63.

³⁵ Joel E. Black, “A Crime to Live Without Work: Free Labor and Marginal Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1870 to 1920,” *Michigan Historical Review* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 65.

³⁶ J. E. Black, “A Crime to Live Without Work”: 88.

suffering from pneumonia. The BBC News reported that “the Democratic presidential hopeful was doing what millions of Americans do every day – ignoring her symptoms and attempting to “power through” a day’s work.”³⁷ An expert in social work is quoted as saying, “At the very core of being American is the idea of being a hard worker.” The article further explains that “nearly a quarter of US adults have been fired or threatened with the sack for taking time off to recover from illness or to care for a sick loved one.”³⁸ According to the United States Department of Labor there are currently “no federal legal requirements for paid sick leave.”³⁹ In 2009 The Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) published *Contagion Nation: A Comparison of Paid Sick Leave in 22 Countries*. The study found that “the United States is the only 1 of 22 rich countries that fails to guarantee workers some form of paid sick leave.”⁴⁰ Further, the report found that the U.S. is “the only country that does not provide paid sick leave for a worker undergoing a 50-day cancer treatment.”⁴¹ But this issue is not relegated to hours of sick leave, the pressure of the American worker to be dedicated to work is also seen in American’s relationship to vacation days. GfK, a market research organization, in conjunction with Project Time Off, conducted a survey of over 5,000 American workers and found that 55% failed to take advantage of vacation days they had earned in 2015 indicating that Americans had left “a total of 658 million vacation days unused.”⁴²

³⁷ Brian Wheeler, “Why Americans Don’t Take Sick Days,” BBC News, September 14, 2016, accessed October 24, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37353742>.

³⁸ B. Wheeler, “Why Americans Don’t Take Sick Days”

³⁹ United States Department of Labor, “Work Hours: Sick Leave,” accessed October 29, 2016. <http://www.dol.gov/general/topic/workhours/sickleave>.

⁴⁰ United States Lags World in Paid Sick Days for Workers and Families (Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2012), accessed October 29, 2016, <http://cepr.net/documents/publications/psd-summary.pdf>.

⁴¹ United States Lags World in Paid Sick Days for Workers and Families (Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2012).

⁴² Project Time Off, “The State of American Vacation: How Vacation Became a Casualty of our Work Culture,” accessed October 29, 2016,

The Protestant Work Ethic internalized by Americans feeds off Foucault's formula of enclosure, function, rank, and time-table and vice versa. A self-perpetuating cycle keeping Americans bound in a violent act which voids them of the opportunity to care for their most basic needs. Conditioned to believe that the more they work the stronger their character, the better they are as people and as citizens, they are bodies ready for enclosure – they sit at computers, in cubicles, wear i.d. tags, clock in and out and are observed and monitored as part of the function of their employment. They are rewarded for their ceaseless hours of committed service with rank, time off (which they apparently never take out of paralyzing fear of being perceived as delinquent or lazy), and they are dominated by the time-table of the workday and the unremitting demands of quotas, deadlines, meetings, and conferences that eat away at their bodies, families, and spirits.

Work vs. Action

What of the 49.6% of Americans mentioned in that Wall Street Journal article who felt “satisfied” by their work? The argument here is much more nuanced than at first glance. To untangle this, we must define what it is exactly is meant when we use the word “work.” To do this, I propose we look to 20th century political theorist, Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition* Arendt outlines three proposed understandings of human activity: Labor, Work, and Action. Piecing them apart she states:

Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body... Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an “artificial” world of things, distinctly

different from all natural surroundings... Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.⁴³

Without getting hung up on the gendered language used in the text, this Arendtian paradigm proposes that the three levels of activity can be used to define how individuals relate to the land, to material, and to one another. It is a paradigm which also proposes a certain level of freedom inherent within each activity. Labor characteristically bound to the biological necessities of human beings, such as hunger, is an activity in which there is no freedom. The human grows food to eat, eats the food, then needs to grow some more. It is a cycle in which there is no end, it is a slave existence, explains Arendt. Work is the concern of *homo faber*, a creature which seeks to dominate nature and all that is natural and is also not equal to a free existence as it roots itself in the manufacturing and fabrication of the material world “whose sum total constitutes the human artifice.”⁴⁴ Arendt explains:

Material is already a product of human hands which have removed it from its natural location, either killing a life process, as in the case of the tree which must be destroyed in order to provide wood, or interrupting one of nature’s slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone, or marble torn out of the womb of the earth. This element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature.⁴⁵

⁴³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pbk. ed., Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 7.

⁴⁴ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 136.

⁴⁵ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 139.

We begin here to see that the violence of work I have outlined encased in a system which seeks to organize and manipulate the body is also a violence perpetuated by those very bodies upon the earth. Work is violent Arendt reminds us, and whether it is something that is enforced and acted upon us, or a product of our bodies acting upon the earth or one another, it is violence nonetheless. Plainly stated, while the place of work in the life of the American may have theological and soteriological roots, it was not created as a tool by God as the Puritans may have believed. Instead it was created as a tool by humans to shape the world and all those within it. *Homo faber* therefore is a creator in a theological sense because far beyond the material manufacturing and fabrication of buildings, cars, and clothing, *homo faber* created a system which alters nature and all that is natural within it. Further, it creates a system which controls the body, manipulates it, and robs it of its freedom. Foucault picks up on this violence against nature in a statement which I believe eloquently describes *homo faber's* creation of the American worker:

Historians of ideas usually attribute the dream of a perfect society to the philosophers and jurists of the eighteenth century; but there was also a military dream of society; its fundamental reference was not to the state of nature, but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the primal social contract, but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights, but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to the general will but to automatic docility.⁴⁶

As described in Snyder's piece "From Vigilance to Busyness," time is manipulated and standardized by individuals conditioned to make their schedules the same as one another's, this is exemplified

⁴⁶ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 169.

by the tracking of workers' identical schedules (i.e. the 9 to 5 workday). Time is then coordinated and synchronized to connect into a seamless flow of activity, this exemplified by the factory worker whose cog needs to be produced in a certain amount of time in order to move onto the next stage of development at a set interval. Another example being the coordinating of schedules in the home where mom drops off Suzy at school and dad picks up Suzy after soccer practice. Lastly regularity is the action by which individuals move through space and time in predictable movements with little variation. In this way *homo faber* took natural daylight and imposed upon it the construct of seconds, minutes, and hours, it then took the natural body and set it to manufacture and produce all the "human artifice" of the world within the confines of standardized, coordinated, and regulated time.

Moving now to Arendt's view of Action, she places this activity at the highest point of her ontological scale and attributes to it the highest degree of freedom because it is an end unto itself. She describes action as outside of necessity or predictability, it is what happens between humans. Action is rooted in imagination, in play, in the capacity to create something completely new without the desire for the material. She states, "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amount to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle."⁴⁷ What makes action different than work or labor is the possibility of freedom found *within* this activity. "Action to be free must be free from "motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other."⁴⁸ Action is the event brought about by the agent inviting the other to be in relationship, it is when the agent

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pbk. ed., Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 178.

⁴⁸ Dana Richard Villa, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 100.

seeks nothing in return, seeks to produce nothing at all but to satisfy fellowship. Action is the ephemeral transcendence of human relationality brought to life.

Considering this, I propose that the 49.6% cited earlier are agents attempting to imbue the activity of action within the activity of work, those who perceive *action* as a possibility within the workplace. They are the communications associate who makes homemade pickles using their grandmother's trusty pickle recipe and gives them out as Christmas gifts to co-workers. They are the administrative assistant who found so much joy in throwing birthday parties and baby showers for her friends, that she decorates the offices of those in the company who are celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. They are the marketing director who coordinates lunch-hour knitting group meet ups, or who plays "lunch roulette" picking co-workers she doesn't know well and inviting them to eat with her in the lunchroom. Action within Work is an effort to break free from the tyranny of regimentation and its reification. It is an act of fraternity and care.

Action, the avenue for connection and relation when commodified becomes Work. To illustrate this let us consider the advent of the internet. Individuals took the personal computer and made it a venue through which humans could speak to one other facilitating the integral question Arendt posits is at the heart of action: "Who are you?" An unprecedented invention connecting individuals to one another by way of zeros and ones. The perversion of this invention was in its use for the purposes of making a profit. This is the American way of taking a beginning, a new and unique idea and converting it into dollars, and further taking the people involved and making them into bodies and objects. Taking the example of the ephemeral internet, we now have the material result of its commodification by way of the Googleplex, a 3.5 million square foot⁴⁹ super structure in Mountain View, California. Populated by

over 16,000 employees, the Googleplex houses 30 cafes, a volleyball court, bowling alley and 7 fitness centers.⁵⁰ Visitors are not allowed in, but instead are encouraged to visit the Googleplex gift shop where they can purchase Google branded t-shirts, mugs, and other assorted merchandise. Where once there was an idea, now there is a revenue of \$74.98 billion dollars and total assets worth upwards of \$147 billion dollars as of 2015.⁵¹ Where the human sees the ability to be in relationship with another human across the miles by way of the personal computer, *homo faber* takes that idea and twists it into a way to enclose the body and to make it produce.

Conclusion

To conclude I would like to echo back to the very beginning of this paper, to Stephen Kalberg's astute observation of how work is reflected in the language of Americans for this is a much more serious issue than we might like to think. In 2012 Jeremy Schulz published "Talk of Work" an article which contrasts how Americans and Europeans (specifically French and Norwegians) talk about work. He states, "The hard work commentaries of the French and Norwegian respondents feature script repertoires that focus exclusively on the stimulating and enriching character of their work activities. By contrast, the commentaries of the American respondents incorporate overachievement scripts addressing both the extrinsic rewards of work and the personality traits that make hard work a natural expression of personality... But they also invoke personality traits such as drive and the innate aversion to leisure."⁵²

⁴⁹ "Googleplex," Wikipedia, accessed October 30, 2016, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Googleplex>.

⁵⁰ Julie Balise, "Office Space: Google's Campus Feels as Big as the Internet Itself," SF Gate, January 5, 2015, accessed October 29, 2016, <http://www.sfgate.com/business/article/Office-Space-Google-s-campus-feels-as-big-as-5992389.php>.

⁵¹ "Alphabet, Inc." Wikipedia, accessed October 30, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphabet_Inc.

⁵² Jeremy Schulz, "Talk of work: transatlantic divergences in justifications for

This “hard work talk” reifies the subject’s convincing script which justifies the perpetual nature of sacrifice of well-being in exchange for the acclaim of being a good citizen. Schulz continues explaining, “While the European repertoire turns a blind eye to the motivational possibilities of career success and drive, the American repertoire is alive to them... both Western European professional men and their American counterparts approach their engagement with hard work in profoundly different ways. This transatlantic divergence in justificatory talk bespeaks a transatlantic divergence in work ethics.”⁵³

In our speech we reflect and reify our connection to the power which exerts itself upon our bodies and we can see through the work of sociologists that this manipulation has been internalized to such an extent that we have become pieces of the system itself. Foucault reminds us that techniques of power centered on the body employ a type of discipline which is “applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being.”⁵⁴ The deep roots of connection between the Foucauldian paradigm of control of the body by way of enclosure, partitioning, and rank and that of the theological undergirding of the Protestant Work Ethic weave together to create a system of complex and convoluted ties between theology and economics. Theologian Marion Grau writes in her book *Divine Economy*, “it can seem as if theology and economics have long since traded places in the cultural discourse of power, with economics having taken on the proclamation of the terms and conditions of salvation and damnation in contemporary society.”⁵⁵ Certainly this is the case in the history of America as we have seen and it continues to dominate the work ethic of contemporary

hard work among French, Norwegian, and American professionals,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (November 2012), 603.

⁵³ J. Schulz, “Talk of work”: 629.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), 242.

⁵⁵ Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy: Refinancing Redemption* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 13.

Americans, our salvation is tied to our work and our economics. Theology is used as a bolster to reinforce the techniques of power within the capitalist system, and vice versa. By way of this paper I hope to have uncovered the ways the theological and the political are intertwined into the very fabric of our lives, our homes, our bodies, our families, and our relationships therein. Perhaps there is no easy cure to what ails us other than to notice and question how it is that we have come so far down this road. Critical Theorist Judith Butler reminds us in her book *Precarious Life* that “the foreclosure of critique empties the public domain of debate and democratic contestation itself, so that debate becomes the exchange of views among the like-minded, and criticism which ought to be central to any democracy, becomes a fugitive and suspect activity.”⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), xx.

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