

Four

After Work

I

I said at the beginning of this book that the labor market had broken down along with all others. I meant that it doesn't work as we expect and need it to—that it no longer allocates opportunities and incomes in ways we can understand or justify, unless we happen to be bankers or gangsters, occupational profiles that have recently become indistinguishable.

The Great Recession made this breakdown seem sudden; but in the case of the labor market, it's been a slow-motion collapse since the 1950s, just as Daniel Bell, Hannah Arendt, Heather Ross, and Wassily Leontief predicted, and just as the sponsors of Nixon's Family Assistance Program—Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney—understood.

If I'm right about this breakdown—and of course I am, the evidence is by now overwhelming—the crisis we face is much more than economic. Because then productivity can no longer be the Measure of Man, or of men, or of anybody else. Because then our question becomes *not whether but how* to be our brother's keeper. Can we love each other for real, by foregoing the principle of productivity and applying the criterion of need—from each according to his or her capacities, to each according to his or her needs?

If Freud was right about love and work as the essential components of human nature, what is to be done about the decline, and now the practical disappearance, of socially necessary labor? Put it this way: Can we love our neighbors as ourselves in the absence of work that supplies a living wage?

So our questions are these. How can we provide incomes for: (1) People who work hard but *don't produce value* that has a marketable numerator, by which I mean a return on their investment of labor time, among them [a] fast-food workers, journalists, academics, filmmakers, and musicians, but also [b] people whose labor time has been historically undervalued or redlined due to race or gender. (2) People who *don't work* because they *can't*, for example elderly men and women, who constitute a growing proportion of every developed nation's population. (3) People who *don't work*—they don't produce value the labor market might recognize—because they've got better things to do?

So conceived, the breakdown of the labor market is not just an economic crisis; it's a moral opportunity to rethink our relation to work, and to think anew about what, and who, we can love. But for the moment, let me frame that opportunity as yet another question. Does this breakdown signify the failure or the success of capitalism?

II

Call it a failure. Eduardo Porter of the *New York Times*, not exactly a radical economist, did just that in a column of April 21, 2015, where he bracketed the question of corporate morality—is it fair to pay McDonald's employees \$8.00 an hour when the company's executives “earn” about three hundred times that?—and said this:

The job market—that most critical institution of capitalist societies, the principal vehicle to distribute the nation's wealth among its people—is not working properly. This raises a fundamental question: If the job market cannot keep hardworking people out of poverty and spread prosperity more broadly, how will it be done? Is public assistance our future?¹

In a word, yes. The job market can provide neither enough work nor enough income to the vast majority of those who actually want a job, and yet the surfeit of goods available in the market just keeps growing. So our choices are limited. Either we expand transfer payments—“public assistance,” “entitlements,” call it what you will—to allow families and individuals to make ends meet and to buy those goods, or we watch as American

society becomes an ugly oligarchy, the “rich and poor man fray” predicted by Herman Melville in 1876.

Either we detach income from work, or we kill ourselves, figuratively and literally. Either we guarantee everyone an income, regardless of their productivity, or we declare ourselves brain-dead.

But how did we get to this point of *moral* bankruptcy, where you can’t buy the right not to die unless you have two jobs or work on Wall Street—where you’re either on the dole or dead to the world? To answer that question, you have to switch sides with me and call the breakdown of the labor market not a failure but capitalism’s greatest success.

The signature feature of capitalism was the creation of a market in labor power—in other words, the invention of a working class, a social stratum unlike any before it, with no rights to the commons and no standing as citizens. Neither slaves nor serfs, these men and women owned only themselves, or rather their capacity to produce value through work. That was all they had to sell, and they made the most of it: they changed the world.

The creation of this new class took at least two hundred years in England, from the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century. The same social process was recapitulated in North America more quickly, between the 1740s and the 1870s. Karl Marx called it “primitive accumulation.” By this he meant the dispossession and displacement of a peasantry with once customary rights to the commons—land nobody owned and nobody fenced off, where anybody could hunt or forage—and the conversion of every natural artifact, particularly land and labor power, to a fungible commodity with a market price. (In North America, this dispossession and displacement goes by the name of “Indian removal”—exterminating the indigenous people, or isolating them on “reservations.”)

The key word here is the commons, the place where legal possession, the assertion and enforcement of individual property rights—“enclosure,” they called it—was inconceivable until the sixteenth century, because everybody knew that without access to the common land, you couldn’t stay alive unless you started stealing or started working in the sense we moderns know, as a wage laborer.

So conceived, capitalism arrived when and where the universalization of the “commodity form,” as Marx liked to call it, was completed, when even the essence of human nature, work itself, was on sale—when your worth to the world could be measured by how much it cost to feed, clothe, and house you. When labor power became a commodity, your value as a worker was the cost of the inputs—food, clothing, shelter—that allowed you to stay alive. But Marx himself, a ferocious critic of capitalism, always emphasized that wages, the index of this value, included “a historical and moral element” that exceeded the market’s impersonal calibrations.

So he rejected the notion of an “iron law of wages,” which predicted that as the value of labor power declined in accordance with population growth—more supply + less demand = lower price—workers would inevitably be driven to a subsistence level of existence, into what we would now call poverty. There were too many countervailing forces, Marx thought, like trade unions, social movements, and the common sense of human decency, which stood athwart the market’s laws of supply and demand.

Moreover, and more important, he agreed with David Ricardo in thinking that the introduction of labor-saving machinery would of course displace skilled workers, but that overall demand for labor would nonetheless increase, *because somebody had to build the machinery*.

Still, the labor theory of value Marx perfected held that the wage rate was a mathematical function of the market costs of labor power, give or take the marginal effects of that “historical and moral element.” And in formulating his so-called law of capital accumulation, he predicted the gradual extrication of human labor from the process of goods production—to the point where labor time became worthless because the machines would build themselves. In this at least his prophecies came true.

III

But what if Marx was both wrong and right? Wrong in the sense that the iron law of wages seems to be working, after all—just look at how many people with jobs can collect food stamps—but right in the sense that the “historical and moral element” in the determination of wages seems now to be making a comeback, at the very moment that labor time has become worthless? Isn’t that exactly what the movement for a \$15 minimum wage is about, this reassertion of a moral urge to reject the market’s equation between factors of production and human beings?

These sound like merely rhetorical questions, I know, but they’re not.

The development of capitalism has reached the point of what I have elsewhere called “primitive disaccumulation,” and what Jeremy Rifkin has called the “zero-marginal cost society.” He and I are describing pretty much the same thing, but our lexicons illuminate different pasts and determine different futures.²

By primitive disaccumulation, I mean that the commodity form regulates a diminishing proportion of socially necessary transactions, in a *reversal* of what Marx called primitive accumulation, so that the most basic requirement of postindustrial society—information—is fast becoming more or less free of charge. Think of what you don't pay for anymore because you've uploaded some kind of file-sharing software, Napster once upon a time, now BitTorrent, tomorrow who knows? My students use Russian web sites to download books still under copyright, including mine.

Today you can download almost anything without cost, so the new commons encroaches on every sector's business model, especially music and newspapers, but also movies. Soon even higher education, the last redoubt of debtors' prison, will be free, not because the politicians will restore Pell Grants and fund state universities, but because MOOCs and YouTube will give everyone online access to the most influential academics on the planet—from Michael Sandel and Martha Nussbaum to David Harvey.

Rifkin and I agree that as the market registers fewer transactions—as we produce and distribute more goods without the mediation of money—our assessments of future economic growth, GDP and so forth, must begin to look bleak. Leading economists such as Robert Gordon and Tyler Cowen have, accordingly, predicted the decline of innovation and the end of growth. After all, the Commerce Department can't measure what's off the books. But that's the thing about this new stage of economic development—it can't be measured by the old quantitative criteria, even though we're unquestionably producing more of what we need and want.

The creators and purveyors of information—journalists, educators, musicians, filmmakers, geeks in general—aren't working any fewer hours than they used to. In fact, we're all working harder. And we're actually more productive than ever. There's more information, more music, more movies, more images than ever, *and we ourselves produce it*, but without any rational expectation of remuneration.

We know that what we do is *worthless* as measured by the standards of the labor market, but we do it anyway.

How? When and why did “making a living” become impossible? Don't say we exported all the good, unionized jobs in manufacturing (goods production). That's not an answer, because in a postindustrial society like ours, almost all the jobs are “tertiary,” that is, devoted to the distribution or maintenance rather than the production of goods, and they have been since the 1950s, just as the intellectuals of that moment predicted. Repatriating those good old jobs is no different than reliving the good old days: it's just stupid.

And don't say “cheap labor” of the imported or exported kind—poor immigrants who flood the U.S. labor market or sweatshop workers elsewhere who work for nothing—because then you've already bought my argument. Now you agree with me, that the *perfection* of the labor market, the great success of capitalism, has made work useless, pointless, an unnecessary diversion from what is important. Labor-saving machinery is portable, as China's workforce will soon discover.

IV

My answers to the question of how labor time became worthless are variations on themes Marx himself developed. To begin with, the working class has been abolished, not in its own name, and not with a bang—“the revolution”—but with the whisper of cybernation. You can't have a working class in the absence of work, or rather work that has no value in the market, and thus creates no *monetary* claim on goods available through the market. And let's face it, work without income is morally repugnant because it carries the connotation of slavery; it's a great deal more repugnant, at any rate, than income without work.

So much for workers. The capitalist class we love to hate has meanwhile been abolished by other means. Primitive accumulation created a working class by driving peasants off the land and into the cities, where they would learn to work by the clock—or die trying. By the same token, it created capitalists, bourgeois individuals who would hire labor, invest in plant and equipment, save their profits, and advertise their abstemiousness as a virtue.

For three centuries they thrived, and then, at the end of the nineteenth century, they solved a fundamental crisis by sentencing themselves to social death.

The crisis consisted of working-class triumph in the Gilded Age. I know, that's not what you learned in your history classes, but that's what happened. Between 1873 and 1896, economic growth was spectacular, unprecedented, and yet its income benefits seemed to accrue mainly, or only, to workers. This was not a secret. By 1896, many leading economists (David Wells, Edward Atkinson, Charles Conant, Jeremiah Jenks) had said as much, and the Finance Committee of the U.S. Senate, chaired by Nelson W. Aldrich of Rhode Island, had convened hearings to verify and explain the anomaly.

The problem back then was the *exact inverse* of what we see today—*ours is not a new Gilded Age*. In our

time, labor productivity keeps rising, real wages keep falling, and so inequality deepens. In the late nineteenth century, real wages rose while productivity stagnated (again, even though economic growth was spectacular). The measurable result, back then, was a shift of income shares from capital to labor—a profit squeeze that turned capitalists into public servants, by their own accounting and all others. Do the math. Between the early 1880s and the late 1890s, non-farm real wages rose roughly 35 percent, due mainly to price deflation; meanwhile, productivity rose only about 6 percent. This is the opposite of what has happened in the United States since 1975.

What was a capitalist to do? Bribe a senator, charter a trust, hire a private army, fall back on sport and culture—you know, get all athletic, and build museums in your spare time. Capitalists tried practically everything in the 1880s and 1890s: pools, trusts, Pinkertons, lockouts, armed violence, also wilderness resorts and monumental repositories of the visual arts bought in Paris, Rome, Florence, Madrid, maybe London What finally worked was the corporation, a bureaucratic solution to a social-economic crisis. By means of this impregnable legal device, capital was finally able to subject labor to real, as against formal, control, and productivity surged, to the point where, by the 1920s, the output of goods increased without any measurable increase of inputs, whether of labor or capital.

Notice: the corporation succeeded by reducing socially necessary labor—what the scientific managers called “the human element”—to nothing. Or almost nothing. The increase of productivity in automobile manufacturing was 400 percent between 1919 and 1929; the net loss of jobs in manufacturing for the decade was 2 million.

But the corporation was built on the separation of ownership and control. In effect, capitalists sentenced themselves to social death by turning basic decisions about production and distribution over to salaried managers who do not own the company’s assets—just as their aristocratic predecessors had rented out the land to commoners, mere peasants, when faced with the social crisis of late feudalism, and thereby had sentenced themselves to a similarly slow social death.

These salaried managers act in the name of capitalism, but they are not themselves capitalists. They’re functionaries, servants, courtiers, who will do anything their invisible masters decree because they have no self-determined purpose except bigger bonuses.

Consider that for a moment—savor this miraculous fact.

The end of capitalism as we knew it is already upon us. The people who benefit from the way we organize production and distribution has shrunk to a tiny, cosseted minority, the 1 percent as we now say. We don’t need them, and they know it. That is why their courtiers and hirelings now seek to protect their privileges by any legislative means possible, from voter ID laws to fast-track trade treaties.

Or put it this way. The historic function of capitalists—and, more generally, class society—was to reorganize and compel social labor, to *force* men and women to be more productive than they would be, or could be, under the social relations specific to earlier modes of production, slavery or feudalism. The slaughter bench of primitive accumulation, enclosure, and industrialization is the proof of that compulsion.

By now, however, this compulsion is simply unnecessary. Our prosthetic doubles, the machines that can reproduce themselves, have made possibility rather than necessity the central fact of our lives.

That horizon of possibility first appeared in the 1920s, when the value of capital—past labor time congealed in the material form of plant and equipment—began to decline along with the value of labor, when capital-saving innovation allowed economic growth without saving or net investment for the first time in human history. In the two decades after 1920, *net additions to the capital stock were nil*. And yet economic growth was spectacular in the 1920s, and, at least between 1933 and 1937, even more spectacular (you read that right, the New Deal worked). It wasn’t on paper. It was real growth, of productivity, output, and per capita income.

At that moment, profits became worse than pointless, and with them, capitalists.

Because if their historic function was to compel social labor, to extract surplus value from the working class, and to convert that surplus—profits—into investments that would determine the future (creating jobs, infrastructure, etc.), after 1920 this function was moot. Capital-saving innovation let corporations finance the improvement of their productivity and output out of depreciation funds rather than profits: the *mere replacement and maintenance* of the existing capital stock, no net additions necessary, fueled growth.

At that point, the function of capitalists and their appointees became speculation in markets that could absorb the pointless profits generated by capital-saving innovation (the stock market back then, the housing bubble in our own time). They had become a fetter on the development of the forces of production. So they could be realistically depicted, by F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos among others, as an effete, debauched aristocracy—superfluous people.

V

Now, you can't have capitalism without a proletariat or a capitalist class—if the social classes that constitute it have dissipated or decayed to the point where we can't actually identify them. But that is our condition.

So we have to rethink the compulsion to work, the social and psychological territory magnified by the rise of capitalism. Why do we have to work? Well, of course, to buy the right not to die—to make enough money to get by, and, beyond that, to raise a family, to buy a home, to buy a gun or a car or a motorcycle, to attain some social standing, to have some choices and be able to demonstrate *to others* that you can make them. The principle of productivity on which capitalism once thrived is still formative. From each according to his or her production of real value, durable goods, to each according to the market value of his or her labor time: you get what you pay for, and you pay for what you get.

N. Gregory Mankiw, the remarkably naive Harvard economist who has advised George W. Bush and Mitt Romney, among others, precisely expressed that principle in a paper called “Defending the One Percent”—who could make that up?—which recently appeared in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Economic Perspectives*: “According to this view [his view], people should receive compensation congruent with their contribution.”³

Well, OK. But what, exactly, are the gangsters on Wall Street contributing, and now that I mention it, to *what* are they contributing? Also, how is their compensation congruent with their contribution? Aren't they the people who brought us financial disaster in 2008, destroying trillions of household savings in the process? We should reward them for their idiocy?

And the fundamental question remains: Why do we *want* to work? I have asked almost two hundred people this question, in conversation and in formal interviews, and the answer is pretty much the same. Let me emphasize that these weren't all academics or intellectuals, although individuals of this persuasion were most emphatic in claiming they couldn't live without meaningful work.

I spoke with bartenders, janitors, waitresses, nurses, fast-food workers, programmers, engineers, actors, lawyers, doctors, morticians—yes, more than one—editors, secretaries, manual laborers, cabdrivers, musicians, athletes, doormen, teachers, salesmen, bricklayers, managers, currency analysts, stock traders, dentists, hygienists, carpenters, plumbers, contractors, club owners, concierges, postal carriers, and prostitutes. (The list is incomplete.)

And what was their uniform answer? A reason to live, which typically translated as a reason to get out of bed and to do the right thing while awake. They wanted something to do, somewhere to go, a place—more than that, actually, an *emotional destination*—that would help them translate their inchoate, inarticulate desires into a coherent, regular, recognizable set of meanings, and that would, accordingly, give their humdrum, everyday lives some durable shape, some significance. The answer was never “just for the money,” not even when I asked the morticians and the prostitutes.

The job always appeared as a means to other ends, as it must be in a market society, but the ends were invariably an *escape* from a previous life or a *commitment* to a different life. Their regulative desire was to become somebody else, to find a future that wasn't already determined by their social origins or inscribed in their own bad decisions.

So Frédéric Lordon, a French economist and the author of *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (2014), sounds perfectly ridiculous when he declares: “Of all the factors at work in maintaining the relation of employment dependence, market alienation is no doubt the strongest. . . . And the stage of mass consumption must be reached for the full scope of the Spinozist statement ‘they can imagine hardly any species of joy without the accompanying idea of money as its cause’ to become clear.”⁴

Of course “they” can imagine such species of joy. No, *we* work, we engage in social labor, for the same reasons we try to love each other as ourselves—we think it will make a difference. At this historical juncture, though, the labor of love has finally become the only work available.

Listen to Mr. Conyers, a mortician from the Roy L. Gilmore Funeral Home in St. Albans, New York (it's a kind of suburb in Queens). I asked him how he could deal with dead bodies every day, and he said this:

What I do is important. I want the relatives to remember this person as she lived, what she looked like while she was alive. I don't want 'em staring and thinkin', “She looks good for a dead person.” I want 'em to see her as if she's gonna wake up, not gone forever. I learned this my first try, when Mr. Gilmore let me loose. It was a little girl, a beautiful child, run over by a car, what do I do? I put her in purple because her mother said it was her favorite color, and everybody said “Oh, my God, it's her!” I bring people back to life, you see what I mean?

He wasn't talking about the dead people.

Or listen to El, the presiding spirit of the Last Drummers, three guys who set up on the long reaches of the A Train, between 125th and 59th Street, on Manhattan's West Side. "Yeah," he says, "on the train it's definitely work, we hope for the money there, but, you know, we gonna do this anyway, that's the music, it's what we gotta do. We hear a new beat, we have to play it. Or we at a party, we know the drums come out at a certain point, everybody waitin' for it to happen. How did you say it, yeah, it's a 'calling.'"

Or Shari, the economist from the World Bank who now works for the United Nations. She gets paid a lot better than Mr. Conyers the mortician and El the drummer, but she speaks the same language: "I work because I have to; if I don't do this, what happens? Maybe nothing and that's not acceptable. I like to think that what I do is important. But I think that everybody needs this, this, what, this *purpose*. You have to have a goal, something worth doing, otherwise you don't get out of bed. Then what?"

Or Charlene the hooker, who patrols the neighborhood bound by 125th and Lexington at one end, 124th and 3rd Avenue at the other: "I don't do this because I like it; I got a daughter in school. But look, I'd rather suck your dick than wait on you in Applebee's, get paid shit for bein' polite to you, you see what I'm sayin'?"

Or Ephraim, the window installer, once upon a time an athlete, a pitcher drafted by the Chicago Cubs who never made it to the big leagues: "I tell my daughter, you gotta do what you love to do; the money don't matter when you get to be my age. I played ball, now I do this. I'm not proud of it. But I'm alive."

Or Mel the super, who's got six buildings on my block, one of them the halfway house next door, where morons and murderers go to pretend they're not. He's a man who's always at work: "I'm blessed because I don't ride that raggedy-ass subway to the Bronx anymore"—he used to be a mechanic for the MTA—"I walk out the door every morning and there I am, I'm at work on my own street, you see what I mean? I got somethin' to do, keep me busy all day, and that's a good thing. You know I'm a be here on this stoop till 8:00 o'clock, cause that's my job, gotta make sure these people don't do nothin' stupid."

But *why* do you work, I ask him, and everybody else. "Well, shit, I got rent to pay," he says. "And you know, I got something to do, something to get done. That's a good feeling, you know what I mean? What I do, you can't do without me, don't matter that you don't see it—c'mon, I do most of my work before you get up in the mornin'—what matters is that I'm fuckin' doin' it. To me, I mean, you see what I'm sayin'?"

Or Terry the former journalist, at the *Providence Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Times*, where he was a reporter, a manager, and an editor until he was downsized in 2013 (after having done a stint as a digital downsizer himself). "Work is not a trifle," he says, "not to the fast-food workers in my writing class [which he teaches for free]. What looks like drudgery to you doesn't feel that way to them. Or to the undocumented nanny who loves the kids she looks after but still wants to get out from under the family that basically enslaves her."

"Me, neither," he continues, "I became a journalist because I didn't want to be Dilbert, and because I thought I could serve the cause of social justice by writing, reporting."

I ask him if he thinks journalism is over now that information is free.

"No," he says emphatically, "some information is unique, and by that I mean it's uniquely valuable."

But to whom, I ask. Nobody's paying you to teach those fast-food workers how to tell their stories. If our labor time has become worthless—it can't be "monetized," in the parlance of our time—then how do we explain or justify working for a living?

VI

Hanna Rosin has recently predicted the "end of men" as a result of the Great Recession. The phrase is playful hyperbole, of course, but the empirical groundwork of her argument is the significant decline of labor-force participation by men since 2008. What happens when men become useless because they don't work? Are women taking over the world because jobs of the traditional, masculine kind—you know, in factories, in manufacturing—are disappearing? Does the world turn upside down when the absence of work makes men superfluous?

Ask the question another way. As men are laid off from old-fashioned, goods-producing jobs because they lost their race against the machine, and as traditionally women's work—social work, health care, education—becomes the norm in the labor market, does the market price of labor time regress to the mean determined by the long-standing wage gap between males and females?

Put it in the terms the pathbreaking sociologist Arlie Hochschild proposed many years ago: Why doesn't "emotional labor" pay a living wage? Or put it this way: Has most labor time become, practically speaking, worthless, because the market can register the cost of *socially necessary* labor time and compensate its performance accordingly, but can't let us reward *socially beneficial* labor time—what has long been

characterized, dismissed, or denigrated, as “women’s work”?

In a word, yes. Socially *beneficial* labor has always been undervalued, or rather, it has never had a market price commensurate with its reproductive worth, and I use the word “reproductive” advisedly. Absent the unpaid (women’s) housework of the new family created by primitive accumulation—cooking, cleaning, child rearing—wage labor would have been, and would still be, impossible. Labor markets, like all others, have subsisted since the seventeenth century on the *externalization* of such costs, environmental and otherwise. That is why markets need scrutiny, regulation, management, and containment, not obeisance.

In the late nineteenth century, when the family exported all its economic functions—when the household gave way to the factory, the school, the bakery, the hospital, the department store, the restaurant, as the site of consumable goods production—these once private or familial costs were taken up, or socialized, by public spending, mainly on education. An accounting of their value became possible.

But these economic functions remained undervalued by the labor market because it was still women producing the goods (goods in a material or marketable sense, yes, but more broadly goods in an ethical sense). And then, in the 1920s, the market value of labor power as such began to decline because the price of its inputs did, as capital-saving techniques reduced the costs of producing everything. Mechanization, automation, and instrumentation bent on the elimination of the “human element” from goods production actually worked.

As I’ve noted, the net loss of jobs in manufacturing was roughly 2 million between circa 1919 and 1929, and the income effects included a relative decline of consumer spending—which, in the absence of net investment, had already become the single most important source of economic growth. The Great Depression was the result, as I have elsewhere explained. In our own time, we’re witness to an acceleration of the same social-economic vectors—the Great Recession was the result.

So, by now, most of us do women’s work—if we can get it. The labor of love has superseded—outlasted—its rivals.

VII

For the past hundred years, this phenomenon, the end of work, has been imagined again and again. It’s almost always been framed as a lament or a warning, something like what William Empson and Raymond Williams, two famous literary critics, tracked in recording the pastoral response to modern industry and its attendant, the modern city.

In 1999, for example, Susan Faludi, a feminist writer, published a best seller called *Stuffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. It was illustrated throughout with black-and-white photos of working men, sailors, and soldiers from the 1940s and 1950s, as if time had stopped, or should have stopped, in the golden age of postwar, Cold War America. It retold the story Arthur Miller had given us in *Death of a Salesman*—the story of a superfluous working man—but it was now fortified with footnotes.

And there’s the rub. That story of superfluous men was already a commonplace—a familiar conceit—of journalistic and artistic enterprise when Miller made it new. As I have said before, most sentient beings in the 1950s had glimpsed the end of work, and perhaps the end of men, in “automation” and then, in the early 1960s, in “cybernation.” And, for that matter, when Faludi was writing her book in the mid-1990s, the depiction of a downsized Dad, the manly breadwinner, was a growth industry, as anybody who has seen *Toy Story* or *Terminator II* can attest.

In fact, it’s been almost a century since we started hearing this lament, this warning, about the end of men as a result of the end of work. By now we’re all familiar with what John Maynard Keynes wrote in 1930, in “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren”—dozens of writers, including Rosin, have recently cited the piece as introduction to their own studies of the endings impending in the crash of the labor market.

All of them wonder how he went so wrong, predicting increased leisure, less labor time, more pleasure. They all ask, what was he thinking?

But the great irony is not that that he predicted less socially necessary labor time—he turns out to have been right about that, regardless of what we’ve done with the time left over—but that he wrote in the throes of the Great Depression, when the sheer brutality of economic necessity was reasserting its social and psychological hold on working people. Keynes rightly worried that we’d let that brutality govern our thinking about the future. “But, chiefly,” he pleaded, “do not let us overestimate the importance of the economic problem, or sacrifice to its *supposed necessities* other matters of greater and more permanent significance.”

His more fundamental concern, though, was that we wouldn’t know what to do with the leisure time that came of labor-saving and capital-saving innovations. “Thus for the first time since his creation man will be

faced with his real, his permanent problem—how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.”

Keynes knew the deviants, miscreants, and malcontents would be the ones to address this problem. “The strenuous purposeful money-makers may carry all of us along with them into the lap of economic abundance. But it will be those people, who can keep alive, and cultivate into fuller perfection, the art of life itself, and do not sell themselves for the means of life, who will be able to enjoy the abundance when it comes.”

So he was a great deal more pessimistic, or less utopian, than his recent interlocutors have suggested. “Yet there is no country and no people, I think, who can look forward to the age of leisure and of abundance without a dread. For we have been trained too long to strive and not to enjoy.”

Still, Keynes was more optimistic, or more prescient, than his most significant predecessor in pondering these issues—that would be William James, the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century (you read that right, Husserl, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Bergson, Durkheim, Wahl, and Kojève were close readers and/or enthusiasts of James). In 1909, James delivered a lecture called “The Moral Equivalent of War,” where he addressed the end of work and its less-than-promising implications for the “masculine virtues.”

From time out of mind, James noted, boys had learned how to be men either as warriors or as workers. But now neither war nor work could school them in manliness. War would be too costly, and work of the strenuous, necessary kind would soon be unavailable; for it was already a world ruled by women: “a world of clerks and teachers, of co-education and zoophily, of ‘consumers’ leagues’ and ‘associated charities,’ of industrialism unlimited and feminism unabashed.”

A new “pleasure economy” driven by consumer demand had replaced the old “pain economy” determined by saving, striving, starvation, anything but enjoyment. What then? How to reinstate those “masculine virtues”? Why, full employment, of course!

Like our contemporaries on the Left who still worship at the shrine of work, James proposed to put all teenagers to work, to teach them something about the “military ideals of hardihood and discipline” hitherto bred in war—but instead of military conscription, they’d be drafted into “an army enlisted against Nature.” There the Devil would lay cross enough upon them: they’d be sent “to coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dish-washing, clothes-washing, and window washing, to road building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes.” There they would learn the lessons of necessary labor.

VIII

I say that Keynes was more optimistic than James because the economist, unlike the philosopher, wasn’t afraid of increased leisure time. James’s real worry in designing his moral equivalent of war was that personalities held together by the economic imperatives of work would regress to idleness or idiocy when exposed to the possibilities of a “pleasure economy”—what we now call a consumer culture. “The transition to a ‘pleasure-economy’ may be fatal to a being wielding no powers of defence against its disintegrative influences,” he wrote. “If we speak of the fear of emancipation from the fear-regime, we put the whole situation into a single phrase: fear regarding ourselves now taking the place of the ancient fear of the enemy.”

The philosopher was right in this regard. We still fear emancipation from the fear regime imposed by thousands of years of scarcity. *We still want to go to work*. The economist agreed. He was hopeful, but he was pretty sure we wouldn’t know what to do with the leisure time the twentieth century afforded us because we had been emotionally starved for so long. He was pretty sure we wouldn’t know how to enjoy each other—how to love each other as ourselves—instead.

Are we then consigned to what Freud named the “compulsion to work”? Are we simply unable to be our brother’s keeper because getting something for nothing is just intolerable, even when we know that working for a living gets us nowhere? And suppose that we could get over the disease we call the work ethic, how would we pay for the “entitlements” that would necessarily follow, as in a guaranteed annual income?

The last, practical question is the least interesting because it’s the one most easily solved. As I said in the preface, just abolish the cap on Social Security contributions and increase taxes on corporate income. All fiscal problems solved. And don’t say corporations will relocate overseas if we tax them at higher rates—they’ve already done that, at an accelerating pace since Ronald Reagan’s cuts. Also, don’t speak of diminished incentives, because then you sound like a moron. Sure, CEOs wanted higher profit rates. They got what they wanted, and they destroyed the world economy, circa 1987 to 2015: We should increase their incentives?

The real question, then, is what disables us. Why can’t we stop working, and, by the same token, and in the same measure, why can’t we choose to be our brother’s keeper?

Love and work, Freud taught us, are the essential elements of a healthy life. Why? Because they take us outside ourselves, bring us into the world, make us commit to social purposes. Love and work are sublimations, transpositions of instinctual drives we inherit from our animal past—they get us beyond the mere repression of our instincts; they move us toward the *social* labor that makes us human. They just *are* social labor.

But work can no longer serve this socializing purpose. So, as I've already said, we don't have much of a choice. And yet we can't make it.

IX

Why?

I have two answers. For women, entry into the labor force, and, in a larger sense, the discovery of meaningful work outside the home, has been the key to the kingdom of equality with men. The correlation of these social and intellectual moments is indisputable, as Linda Nicholson, among others, has insisted. Modern feminism was founded on just this, the notion that through work, women could enter the world as bearers of extrafamilial identities, as abstract individuals rather than mothers, daughters, sisters, or wives.

For modern women, then, work has personal and political meanings it can't have for men (most of them, anyway). Vivian Gornick's poignant memoirs offer vivid testimony. They illustrate, no, they insist, that her difficult choice as a feminist was always between love and work. But then, go ahead, read any novel from, say, 1720 to 1890, or watch any movie from 1930 to 1990, and you'll find that love is women's work. The great refusal of modern feminism, as Gornick has demonstrated, is that very equation.

My other answer to the question of why we can't recover from the disease of work is contaminated by the category of race.

Here the return of the repressed becomes unavoidable. According to the economists who have studied the welfare state, Americans can't imagine being their brother's keeper because they think getting something for nothing is the prerogative of people of color. Transfer payments and entitlements are bound for "those people," not the thrifty, hardworking, rule-bound types, those white folks who are honored by the designation of *middle class*, whether by social standing or expressed aspiration.

So, to put it in terms made familiar by our recent culture wars, gender and race overdetermine our inability to think past work. But there's also a class component to this intellectual impasse. It becomes clear in the recent and remarkable book by Robert and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much Is Enough?*, which engages the questions Keynes asked in 1930 in the most serious and yet entertaining fashion.

The authors, father and son, lay out a program for a guaranteed annual income that is, in my view, wholly unobjectionable. But they also object to *idleness*—watching TV, hanging around, whatever. They want us to be doing something important if or when we're done with work. We shouldn't be wasting the free time made available by mechanical improvement, they insist.⁵

To which I say, why not? If our time on the job is becoming worthless, why not waste the rest of it?

Fuck work and its attendant idiocies. But love remains. We don't have much of a choice there, either. It's all that's left.

Coda

I

Can love survive the end of work? I've been asking that question all along. I guess I've been asking whether love can *replace* work—whether socially *beneficial* labor, the love of our neighbors, can replace socially *necessary* labor as the criterion we use in calculating the distribution of income and the development of character.

Of course it can. It already has, to judge by the state of the labor market.

The most basic good in a postindustrial society like ours is information, and it is now free. In other words, the labor market can't assign a remunerative value to the socially necessary labor of producing and distributing information. It's socially beneficial—but it's more or less worthless. The work goes on, but the income you might have accrued from it doesn't. Ask a journalist or a freelance writer, or a musician whose band doesn't tour.

So the question is not how to put us all back to work for a minimum wage—fuck that—it's how to detach income from time spent on the job. But look, we've already done that, too.

Wall Street bankers don't do much of anything except peddle bad paper, but they get paid millions of dollars. Teachers, professors, novelists, journalists, carpenters, musicians, and janitors do everything we say we value—they educate, entertain, they build things, and they clean up after us—but they get paid almost nothing.

Meanwhile the so-called welfare state has also decoupled income from work, but not so that you'd notice unless you, like Paul Ryan and Jeb Bush, think “entitlements” are a danger to the moral fiber of the nation. Remember, 20 percent of all household income now arrives in the form of a transfer payment from government, and every Walmart “associate” is a ward of the state, someone collecting food stamps or using the emergency room for routine health care, because he or she can't make it on the wages alone.

So it's not as if we don't know how to do what needs to be done, which is detach income from work; it's that we refuse to face the fact that it's now simply necessary to *complete* what we've already begun—which is the transition to a postcapitalist society, where wage labor neither determines nor disfigures daily life.

How, then, do we face the fact? I don't doubt the moral and political significance of a movement for a higher minimum wage, \$15 an hour. But as I've said, forty hours a week at this pay grade just puts you at the poverty line (and you know you're not getting forty hours, because that would require real benefits from your employer). What is the point of a higher minimum wage, then, except to prove that you have a work ethic?

Excuse me, that's another rhetorical question. There's no good reason to increase wages by legislative fiat if the labor market is broken. But there's a good reason to *replace* that market. So what is to be done, for now, is intellectual work. Our question is, how to imagine a moral universe that isn't anchored to or limited by socially necessary labor—how we learn to accept income that can't be accounted for by reference to time on the job. To hell with full employment. How about full enjoyment? Fuck work.

II

Love and work—the two things we all want, according to Freud and every other student of human nature—have pretty much the same function in our lives. Like good teachers, they take us out of ourselves, into the world.

Love and work commit us to purposes that we didn't invent, and so they teach us to devise and evaluate our own. When we're in love, what we most want is that the person we love can become what he or she wants to be, partly because we know that this urgent desire includes us. When we're at work, what we most want is to get the assigned task completed, because we know that this is what our coworkers need—we know that this completion will free us from the commands of the past, and so let us experience the present, enter the future.

In love or at work, *commitment* is a condition, but also a boundary and a limit. It requires certain behaviors, and it precludes others. But commitment in either emotional venue doesn't necessarily mean a cancellation of your own purposes, although of course it can. The thing about love and work is that you typically feel

commitment as both the limitation *and* the liberation of your own volition—as the *realization* rather than the negation of your self, of your natural talents, past effort, and learned skills.

Think about it as a musical proposition. You can't play the blues without mastering the genre, which is pretty simple—without memorizing the chords and the changes and the lyrics. But you can't improvise, make it new, become yourself as a player or a singer, without that preparation, that commitment. "Piety is not only honorable," as G. L. S. Shackle put it in explaining the Keynesian revolution, "it is indispensable. Innovation is helpless without tradition."

Love forces us to acknowledge antecedents—the physical actuality and the moral capacity of other people. You can have sex with anyone without this doubled acknowledgment, but you can't love someone without it. Broaden that dictum and you find that poor old Immanuel Kant was right, after all, in rendering the Golden Rule as a philosophical principle. To love your neighbor as yourself, he must appear to you as an end in himself, not a means to your ends, whether they're sexual, economic, or political.

To love someone is to treat him or her as a person who must be different from you, and who must, by the same token, be your equal. Otherwise you could rightfully decide their purposes for them, which would mean treating their moral capacity as absent or insufficient. Everyone would then appear to you as a slave or a child in need of your tutelage. The obvious limits of this supervisory vantage, by the way, are arguments against the idea that parental love (or God's love for all his children) is the paradigm of love as such.

To love your neighbor, to be your brother's keeper, is, then, to care for yourself, *and vice versa*. That is what we have yet to learn.

"As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master." That's how Abraham Lincoln put it in an unpublished note to himself. Harry Frankfurt puts it differently, but no less usefully, in a book called *The Reasons of Love*: "There must be something else that a person loves—something that cannot reasonably, or even intelligibly, be identified as his 'self'—in order for there to be anything at all to which his self-love is actually devoted. . . . A person cannot love himself except insofar as he loves other things."¹

Work seems much different than love in such perspective. A TV series like *The Office* and movies like *Office Space* or *Horrible Bosses* exist and succeed precisely because the people in charge quite realistically violate this Kantian principle, the Golden Rule. But that is why the heroes of these fictions say, "No, I would prefer not to." They're Bartleby the Scrivener all over again because they don't stand up to anybody, they don't even leave the office, no, they subvert the system by hanging around or doing something stupid.

But what these fools, our fools, keep demonstrating is their moral capacity, however bumbling it may seem to their bosses, and to us the audience—at first, anyway. They insist that they must be acknowledged as agents in their own right, as moral personalities who can steer this business, and their own lives, as well as anyone in charge. They reject what Hegel, also Nietzsche, called "slave morality," the idea that self-mastery is an interior to which no exterior corresponds. (The fascination with manual labor on reality TV, as in *Dirty Jobs* or *Ice Truckers*, has the same political valence; it's a way of saying that every man, every woman, can decide for himself or herself, without guidance from the well-groomed and the well-educated.)

Finally, love and work similarly remind us that the material artifacts of this world, whether natural or man-made, can be indifferent, even resistant, to our efforts. Here the rules of love begin to look like the laws of science—you can't make the beloved do what he or she won't, or can't, not anymore than you can bend the earth to your will. And here again that knowledge is a form of *self-consciousness*, a way of learning the limits of what we can ask of others, of the world. It's a way of asking ourselves, given this situation, what can I do about it?

Still, what becomes of love when work disappears?

III

Love and work as we know them, as the choices we make that decide who we are as individuals—these are the essential ingredients of modern times. They date from the late eighteenth century, when the notion of individualism we take for granted, as an expression of unique qualities that sets each of us apart from all others, took hold because it could, because the idea that "all men are created equal" became first a revolutionary slogan and then a cultural commonplace.

So the real question is, what happens to us when work must be love?

This absurd question is what we must answer, because work is no longer our lot. Unlike every generation before us, we can do without it, and we'll have to. We don't need to work. But if we want to survive, we have to love each other, as ourselves—we have to be our brothers' keepers.

It's not merely a moral imperative, as Kant would have it; this is a practical, economic necessity. There's

not enough work to go around. We can produce more every year, every month, with less and less labor time. We lost our race with the machine, and we know the robots are coming to take our jobs and steal our emotions. That means the principle of productivity—from each according to his or her input, to each according to his or her output—is outmoded, even ridiculous, and not just because the more we produce, the more we destroy.

That principle of productivity has been more or less incongruent with reality for a hundred years; but then cultural revolutions typically take about a century. The relation between goods produced and income received has been totally unintelligible for that long, anyway, since the “human element” could be eliminated from the factories, and now from the banks and the stores and the warehouses, by electrification, automation, instrumentation, cybernation, computerization.

So, what is to be done?

The first thing we do is kill all the bankers. Just kidding; we need them to keep the books.

No, the first thing is, we think through what it means to detach income from work. Then we invent practical means of doing so. We don’t have to start from scratch just because for the last fifty years, liberals, conservatives, and all those in between have been addressing the wrong issue, “full employment.” Instead, we start with Nixon’s Family Assistance Program, and see where it leads us.

Eventually we’ll decide that, in the absence of jobs that pay a living wage, even at a minimum of \$15 an hour, we have to provide everyone with a guaranteed annual income, regardless of the work they do. Then we get to ask the real questions.

Like, why should I love God better than this day? What do I want to be when I grow up? Where’s the remote?