

Pitts, Frederick Harry; Dinerstein, Ana C.

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## Postcapitalism, basic income and the end of work: A critique and alternative

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## **Bath Papers in International Development and Wellbeing**

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### **Postcapitalism, Basic Income and the End of Work: A Critique and Alternative**

**Frederick Harry Pitts**

School of Economics, Finance & Management, University of  
Bristol

**Ana C. Dinerstein**

Department of Social & Policy Sciences, University of Bath

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## **Postcapitalism, Basic Income and the End of Work: A Critique and Alternative**

**Frederick Harry Pitts and Ana C. Dinerstein**

### **Abstract:**

This paper critiques popular academic understandings of development towards a post-capitalist, post-work society based around the automation of production and the provision of a basic income to those displaced by its effects. By focusing on work and its escape as the central issue at stake in the transition to a postcapitalist society, these accounts miss how, at one end, capitalist work is preconditioned by a historically-specific set of antagonistic social relations of constrained social reproduction, and, at the other, by the specific social forms assumed by the results of that work in commodity exchange and the constituted form of the nation-state. Retaining money, commodities and the rule of value under the auspices of a national state postcapitalist and post-work vistas represent abstract 'bad utopias' that break insufficiently with the present, and in some ways make it worse, replacing a wage over which workers can lawfully struggle with a state-administered monetary payment that creates a direct relationship of power between citizen and state. This is highlighted in the potential adoption of basic income as part of authoritarian nationalist policy platforms including that of Narendra Modi in India. Suggesting that struggles over the contradictory forms assumed by social reproduction in capitalist society are themselves labour struggles and not external to them, we pose a 'concrete utopian' alternative that creates the capacity to reshape the relationship between individuals, society and the rule of money, value and the state rather than reinforce it. To illustrate this we examine the Unemployed Workers Organisations instituted in Argentina. This poses one potential means of devolving monetary and non-monetary resources and power rather than centralising them in the hands of an all-powerful 'postcapitalist' state that would carry all the scars of the society it sets out to surpass. Such a 'concrete utopia' would create space for, and not liquidate or falsely resolve, class struggle in, against and beyond capitalist development.

## 1 Introduction

Today, the post-work society has become a hot topic of debate. The post-work prospectus has taken hold in the unlikeliest of quarters such as Labour Party policy seminars (Pitts and Dinerstein 2017) and the World Economic Forum in Davos (see Yamamori 2016) in a historical context of the crisis of the relationship between employment and broader social reproduction. We expose and critique the nascent 'post-work' political imaginary and its claim that a postcapitalist society rises from the ruins of work. 'Postcapitalism', in the work of, say, Paul Mason (2015), indicates a transitional period out of the present and into the future. But this, we argue, will not come through the suite of options for escaping work alone- principally, automation and the basic income. This is because *work* as such is not the central social relationship that defines capitalism, and is therefore not the key thing to do away with. Work, in these approaches, is reified as something apart from the social relations of subsistence and social reproduction in which it is imbricated. This then allows the proposal of a basic income, which relies on money as a neutral unit of exchange and account rather than something that itself carries these antagonistic relations of production and consumption.

To redress this, we focus here on how work itself is undergirded at one end in a set of antagonistic social relations of separation from and dispossession of the means of production and the reproduction of labour-power, and, at the other end, in the form its results assume as value-bearing commodities exchanged in the market by means of money. We thus combine two radically revisionist schools of contemporary Marxism. First is the social reproduction approach. Zechner and Hansen (2015) define social reproduction as 'a broad term for the domain where lives are sustained and reproduced.' This suggests that capitalism is characterised as much by what supports a society of work than work itself.

We complement this social reproduction understanding of the social relations that characterize capitalist society with Marxian value-form theory in order to comprehend the 'social forms' that render capitalism an historically specific social formation (see Heinrich 2012, Pitts 2017). This suggests capitalism's specificity pertains not to work but to the forms taken by its results: abstract labour, value, money.

Combined, these approaches suggest that the escape from 'work' is no escape route from capitalism. The attainment of both is not nearly so easy as those who propose it would have us believe. That we must work presupposes relations of distribution that relate less to labour than life itself: it is capitalist work. Our point is that the relations of social reproduction do not fade away with the diminution of 'paid work' and the supplement of a UBI. Rather what we understand by 'work' and its commodification and monetarisation needs to be re-evaluated.

We suggest that the postcapitalist prospectus fails on three fronts. The first is that the post-work literature is productivist insofar as it sees 'work' as the central relation of capitalist society and not as the antagonistic relations of property, ownership and subsistence that logically and historically precede a society in which most people are compelled to sell their labour to live, nor the specific kind of results assumed by the products of that labour in the market. In so doing it remains locked within a capitalist understanding of what is productive and what is not, despite professions otherwise. The second is that the vista of automated worklessness supported by a basic income rests on a continuation of the money wage in all but name and the presence of a strong state that becomes the wage-payer of both first and last resort, with attendant consequences on the capacity of people or workers to resist and contest the conditions or pay to which they are subject. We will use the current uptake of the basic income among authoritarian populists as an example of where this might travel politically, with specific reference to the potential adoption of the measure by the Modi government in India. The third, associated with the second, is that nowhere in the popular imaginary of post-work or post-capitalist society does class struggles feature, when it is only by means of this that a post-

capitalist society can be accessed at all. We suggest the politics of social reproduction as an alternative prospectus for radical change within and beyond capitalist society that overcomes the one-sided focus on the escape from work as the harbinger of postcapitalism and engages with the present struggles for *alternative forms of* social reproduction. We take one specific example of this—the Unemployed Workers Organisations established in post-crisis Argentina—as a model for how the relationship with work, subsistence and money can be reconstituted in such a way as to work through the contradictions of labour, money, state and social reproduction without wishing them away.

We conclude by suggesting that the potential solution to the three *impasses* identified in the literature on post-work and post-capitalist society is to work within contradictions and expand them. Most notably this relates to class struggle recoded not only as struggles within workplaces, but without in the sphere of social reproduction. An understanding of social reproduction as the central terrain on which capitalism establishes itself shifts our focus to how class actors resist within it. This alternative prospectus has a major contribution to make to ongoing attempts to fashion critical and radical responses to the crisis of work and the wage. From this perspective, technology and automation cannot be reified as neutral forces the unfolding of which will deliver us a workless world supported by the intervention of the state as the new wage payer. Rather, even on the terms of the postcapitalist prospectus itself, class struggles would be necessary to accomplish the kind of economy-wide automation on which their vistas of the future hinge. But in that literature, post-work society is seen as the accomplishment of a kind of ‘end of history’ that closes contradictions and liquidates struggles for better/alternative/non capitalist forms of social reproduction? For the absence of this factor, their utopia is an abstract one. By centering struggle and social reproduction, the possibility awaits that *concrete* utopias can be delineated situated within practice and policy. The postcapitalist prospectus has stimulated a renewal of bold left programmes for governing the future, expressed in the recent electoral pitches of socialists in the UK and France. We end, therefore, by briefly considering the kind of politics that could translate our alternative perspective in such a policy platform today.

## 2 The post-work prospectus

There is little new in the post-work prospectus (PWP). Current debates mirror those that followed the last deep capitalist crisis in the 1970s. The origins of the PWP rest in a few formerly obscure pages from Marx’s *Grundrisse* – the ‘Fragment on Machines’ (1973, pp. 704-706; see Pitts 2017a). Early PWP advocates Antonio Negri (1991) and André Gorz (1989) were central in its dissemination. Today, its scenario of postcapitalist worklessness finds itself popularised via new adherents. Bestsellers like Paul Mason’s (2015) *Postcapitalism* and Srnicek and Williams’s (2015), *Inventing the Future* riff on its theme. Popping up in the pages of broadsheet newspapers, its ideas now inform public debate (Harris 2016, Jones 2016).

The new PWP emerged via a post-crisis discourse on capitalist development and growth. It assays the strategic opportunities opened up by the current phase of capitalist restructuring. It sees potentials within the present for the revitalization of progressive left politics. The empirical and theoretical contributions to the PWP are rich and varied, but it is possible to isolate several shared emphases and central propositions. First, the development of information technology is ‘accelerating’. Allied with crisis tendencies in the current phase of capital accumulation, this terminates in a post-capitalist future. Second, dynamics of automation and new cooperative commons potentiate a post-work society of abundance and leisure. Third, progressive left politics must surpass limited, reactive and parochial ‘folk politics’, reconfiguring itself around a populist-hegemonic post-work agenda demanding reduced working hours, full automation and a universal basic income (UBI) (Srnicek and Williams 2015).

A crude technological determinism underpins these accounts of automation and informationalization (see Spencer 2016; Dyer-Witheford 2015). Information technology appears the harbinger of a new social structure. Informationalized, dematerialized new technologies are cast as autonomous processes with sociological effects (Castells, 1996; Lash & Urry, 1994; Giddens, 2002). As Doogan suggests (2009: 55) these technological developments cannot be understood without reference to broader material dynamics. These centre on the neoliberal restructuring of labour markets and the labour process. In this context, how is it possible to build a post-work utopia on the back of the technological revolution underpinning automation- let alone a post-capitalist one? To this question, the PWP proffers an answer as unsatisfactory as any other leg of its appeals: the basic income. In the following, we will take apart this complex of ideas based on three areas that suggest post-capitalism does not attend the PWP: the productivism of the PWP, the continuing role of the state and money as forms of capitalist social relations in proposals for a basic income, and the absence of class struggle/s.

### 3 Post-work productivism

The post-work prospectus professes anti-productivism. As abovementioned, state-led automation will simultaneously increase productivity and facilitate the freeing of labour from production, and create the fiscal resources to support the transition via UBI. Yet, despite this professed anti-productivism, the assault on the society of work actually suffers from its reverse, a denied productivism that, like traditional Marxists through time, sees work at the centre of everything. A critical Marxism (see Pitts 2017b), on the other hand, recognizes that, where productive activity has taken place in all social formations through time, what renders capitalism distinct are the specific social relations that support it, and the social forms its results assume. In this section we will suggest that only by addressing this totality can alternative forms of social reproduction be found in, against, despite, and beyond capital.

Where Marx wrote of the ‘misfortune’ of being a ‘productive worker’ (1976, p. 644), the contemporary critical imaginary of a world without work focuses on only one part of this formulation, seeking an escape from the status of ‘worker’ without a strategy for addressing the criteria of productiveness to which the worker’s status as such is subject. Work is open to question, but at the expense of questioning the wider circumstances that make it what it is in capitalist society: the rule of value whereby productive activity is structured by certain concrete social relations and produces certain abstract social forms in commodities exchanged by means of money.

Neo-Ricardian interpretations of value theory as relating to embodied labour do not explain the subordination of human practice to the power of money. Following Clarke;

‘the distinctiveness of Marx’s theory lay not so much in the idea of labour as the source of value and surplus value as in the idea of money as the most abstract form of capitalist property and so as the supreme social power through which social reproduction is subordinated to the power of capital.’ (Clarke 1988: 13-14)

With the later understanding of value, not only those ‘working’ and ‘producing’ but capitalist society is subsumed to the money-form. Short of such a reckoning, this means that, even while launching a radical attack on that productive activity itself, many approaches to the post-work question implicitly carry over elements of what makes it productive or not from what we have already: the assumption that there exist non-bullshit jobs against what David Graeber (2013) labels ‘bullshit’ ones, that there is a better or worse way to spend our time, or that, in the basic income, there should be a monetary reward meted out for work beyond measure. Approximating what Kathi Weeks (2011, p. 230) calls ‘productivist mandates’, these generate various resonances between the auspiciously radical post-work perspective and a number of other stabilising elements within the present system, reactionary ideas at its edge, or revolutionary short-circuits of the past: most notably Silicon Valley’s self-

optimising productivity fetish and the technological singularity sought by wealthy scions like Peter Thiel, but also, at a more subterranean level, fascist coalitions of the productive seeking the liquidation of the unproductive.

This paper explores how the critique of work constructs new standards of productiveness in conformity with those to which we are subject already. The post-work standard-bearers of a new Marxism set up their view of an imminent post-work world based on a division between the productive and unproductive that suggests anything but the radical alternative to capitalism they seem to think it does.

Despite different politics, our present-day post-work dreamers desire much the same flat-white future as the so-called 'productivity ninjas' that spring from the Silicon Valley subculture of pop-optimism and personal optimisation. The post-work dreamers presuppose a world of technological singularity as the basis for our imminent lives of increased leisure. Equally as drunk on the promise of high technology are those web partisans who positively revel in hard work, skewered so effectively in the work of Melissa Gregg: hyped on tech, numbed by mindfulness and eager to find the optimum path to peak performance (Gregg 2015a, 2015b, 2016). Superficially, the Silicon Valley paragons of self-help productivity mantras could not be more different than the anti-productivist prophets of an automated post-work society supported by the basic income. Where the former claim to find a better way to put our life to work for profit, the latter propose the escape from work altogether so as to embrace life in and for itself. But they both do so through a focus on the more efficient use of our time: one for work, and one for life. And in so doing, they rest on the same idea: that some things are a more productive use of our time than others. In both, this results in a rejection of work that is messy and menial. When the latter is not ignored completely, both Silicon Valley productivity fetishists and post-work dreamers assume its delegation to others, automation by robots or liquidation altogether. And the consequences could be far removed from the capitalist and postcapitalist utopias on offer.

Both mistakenly see labour and direct productive effort as the characteristic, crucial element of capitalism. The difference is that one does so positively, and the other negatively. The post-work dreamers see the escape from work as the escape from capitalism. Silicon Valley self-help gurus see hard work as the secret of capitalism. But both ignore the extent to which capitalism is defined not in the specific productive activity that takes place within it, but, at one end, the social relations that make a society in which there is no way to live except for the selling of labour power possible in the first place, and, at the other end, the specific social forms assumed by the results of productive activity in capitalist society- which is to say, commodities, exchanged for money in the market. The post-work postcapitalist perspective misses that there is a whole lot else to undo in order to escape capitalism than just work alone- which perhaps explains the absence of any consideration of how to transcend the money form –not as means of exchange but as a *form* of power that governs society, in utopian visions that lean heavily on the provision of a universal basic income to the newly liberated masses. And the mindful productivity fetishists miss that, no matter how well you plan your time, the productivity you seek is ultimately arbitrated elsewhere, where the action really happens: in society as a whole, in the market. Until something sells, your 'productivity' is neither here nor there, the risk run that your time was spent in vain.

This belief that productive work is everything leads both perspectives to valorise certain types of activity and seek an escape from others. By seeing productive work as the centre of everything, the work connected with social reproduction that makes productive labour possible in the first place- are elided, either as something to value or something to escape. We do not mean only domestic work, but the work that sustains life in capitalist society. There are two weaknesses in the post-work worldview whereby the restructuring of paid work is prioritised at the expense of the forms of work that make it possible in the first place, and the existence of abstract labour as the substance of value



is ignored. The aim is to spend our time more productively, and there is usually a connotation that this more productive use of our time will be spent writing, painting, and so on and so forth, and not looking after one another, and sharing the distribution of cleaning, cooking, and caring more equitably. Indeed, the tedious nature of many aspects of this work is cast by the postcapitalist utopians as something to be reduced to a minimum and outsourced to our new robot slaves. Meanwhile, the self-optimising professionals of Silicon Valley also see such socially reproductive activities as something to be dispatched with as swiftly and efficiently as possible, as a potential block to the work where all the magic happens- productive labour, the only other things we need spend time on being mindfulness and meditation. What this usually implies is the presence of others- commodified or uncommodified providers of socially reproductive labour- to step in and take up the slack for the productive lifestyles of those among the silicon saved. For instance, at Google, unlimited free lunch is dished up by hands the owners of which remain unseen, the rest of their bodies obscured by the hot cafeteria metal. Both post-work paragons and productivity ninjas similarly elide the classed, gendered and racialized dimensions of the distribution of the work that supports their chosen scenarios. In both cases, the question remains: who does the work that makes possible the more productive use of our own time? With no solution offered in the post-work scenarios to definitively restructure the antagonistic social relations of production that support this unequal share in the burden of labour, the provision of a basic income is seen as a means of smoothing over the sticky and spiky contradictions of capitalist society, struggle over constitutive inequalities of property and ownership outsourced to the simple implementation of state policy.

In forgetting the bloodied bedding on which the sweet dreamers of a workless world (or a world of wageless work) sleep, both the post-work and productivity-fetishist perspectives on a more productive future tell a story almost always solely about the person telling it. As Angela McRobbie notes, both mainstream and radical postoperaist accounts of the creative economy tend to talk about a specific kind of male experience in seeking the liberation from useless labour (2016, pp. 94-5, 100, 157). This functions a little like the attraction of studying the Gramscian theory of hegemony for aspirant cadres of governments and NGOs, which Kees van der Pijl ascribes to its empowering narrative of a revolutionary 'war of position' fought by humble bourgeois clerks (van der Pijl 2005). Indeed, Gramsci hangs heavy over schemes for how to achieve a post-work society- most notably in Srnicek and Williams's interesting suggestion of a Mont Pelerin Society of the left (Srnicek and Williams 2015). This exposes the weakness of contemporary appropriations of Gramsci by non-Marxist Gramscians, in so far as it rests in turn on an analysis of neoliberalism as an elite project reshaping common sense, rather than an imperative driven by the abstract economic compulsions of capitalist reproduction. Empoweringly, the conditions of the former can be replicated, the latter not. In short, there is a tale told in the theory in which its advocates can place and present themselves as a means to pave their way through the world. There is little wonder the uptake for post-work thinking has been so strong among journalists and academics, as well as creatives and artists, since for these groups the alternatives require little adaptation to a working lifestyle in which their productive contribution can be enacted in all places at all times. It is their liberation from the forms and relations of productive activity that is posed here, even whilst with one side of their mouths they myopically propose their maintenance in favour of the narrower escape from work alone. They can continue their work without the fear or favour of, at one end, the socially reproductive circumstances that make it possible, and, at the other, the specific commodified forms assumed by the results of it. Similarly, the Silicon Valley start-up upstarts stand for a more efficient way of excelling at something they love, whereas to optimise one's time to be better at work is for most a means of self-exploitation in a job they hate, but for whom a lack of other skills or options makes it the only possible link to the means of living. In this it only retreads what traditional Marxism did for years, celebrating the productive power of a vanguard class of workers as the means by which a new world is unlocked. The fetishization of productiveness in the self-help books finds its reflective flipside in the disavowed productivism of the new anti-work literature, in which, falling over themselves to attest to their anti-productivist credentials, proponents give a reading of capitalism that emphasises only work and its escape as the central task confronting the class, under the auspices of being more

productive and better with it.

Far from negating the role of work in capitalist society altogether, what this does is reproduce the capitalist division between productive and unproductive labour along different lines. These lines become dangerous points of separation when tied to revolutionary programmes for a new kind of society forged in a context of human and economic crisis their proponents seek to posit the resolution of. Dreams of a basic income-funded future rhetorically idealise activities like programming or uploading an Airbnb listing only by uncritically seeing them as liberated in the present, rather than subject to the same 'bullshit' as any other job. Indeed, like right and left totalitarianisms through time, it encourages the pursuit of idealised activities characterised as more productive than others- at the risk of liquidating those activities considered unproductive and with them their actors. Aiming at the mediation of class antagonisms at a higher level rather than their abolition, it celebrates the productive workers engaged in these activities in much the same way that totalitarianisms of the right and left have modelled their visions of society around an idealised productive worker at once sourced from capitalism but erected into an absurd caricature. And, with devastating effect, this reduces what is 'unproductive' to ruin- whether along racial or class lines. This echoes in the present-day disdain for finance industries that issues from personalising critiques of capitalism on both the right and left. Unproductive work becomes synonymous with unearned wealth. The new populisms pose themselves as alliances of the productive. Draining the swamp, they propose to prosecute, persecute and eventually purge the unproductive. As leftist critics of capitalism line up behind the prospectus of a powerful state providing a basic income to a national citizenry in search of the optimum use of time against the unproductive, the inefficient and the 'bullshit', what could possibly go wrong?

What makes the search for the productive so dangerous, in both its Silicon Valley and post-work appearances, is that value in capitalist society relates not to the concrete expenditure of labour in the workplace at all. Rather, it relates to the exchange of its result as a commodity by means of money. This means that the search for a more productive use of time is inherently unstable and insatiable, searching for something false somewhere it cannot be found. It can locate productivity only in revolt against value, an abstraction that cannot be fought through work alone and only through the abolition of commodity society itself. Unable to offer an alternative, it seeks to satiate its search for the concrete and the productive through a succession of new abstractions that, when enacted, only serve to extend the same social process of valorisation with which they conceptually struggle. As we will go on to discuss, these abstractions entail an abstract utopia, and not a concrete, praxis oriented one. Moreover, a certain understanding of the nation state and our relationship to it is implied in many of these abstractly workless utopias funded by the basic income.

#### **4 Problematising the basic income: wage, money and the state**

According to advocates of the PWP the *problem* with capitalism is that it makes us dependent upon 'work'. This takes work as the basis of capitalism as an exploitative system. The implementation of the UBI appears progressive for it frees us from this exploitation. It makes everyone semi-autonomous from work. But this is a very narrow understanding of capitalism that sees it synonymous with labour and not, as we have stated above, with value and a certain historically-specific set of antagonistic social relations.

With the waning of work, we are told, technological unemployment renders the wage insufficient to secure workers' subsistence. Their labour-power- the pure potential to labour- must be reproduced through other means. This is also, as we have noted, the reproduction of life under capitalism. This is where the UBI steps in. It provides a state-sponsored supplement to ensure the reproduction of labour within capitalism.

Such visions are based on a fundamental misconception of the nature and determination of the 'wage'. The basic income, Mason contends, pays people 'just to exist'. But this is 'only a transitional measure for the first stage of the postcapitalist project'. The 'socialisation' of the wage through 'collectively provided services', or its abolition, follow (2015, p. 284-6). Payment to exist, coupled with automation, allows networked, autonomous experimentation in place of labour. As such, Mason suggests that the basic income would be a transitional step towards the abolition of the wage. But even this may retain the separation of people from independent, non-commodified means of living (see Bonefeld 2014). The social conditions undergirding the wage would continue, with or without the wage itself. The social conditions for the sale of labour-power would remain, with or without a buyer. This is because the wage is not a reward for expended labour but a payment to keep workers in the condition that they can and must labour (Criticuffs 2015). In this way, the wage subordinates human life to the command of money. We acquire what we need only as commodities bearing a price. Money is value-in-motion. In spite of its insubstantiality, it dominates and expands across the whole social and existential condition (Lilley and Papadopoulos, 2014). With the UBI, the state directly superintends the rule of money. So while UBI may apparently free us from (un)employment, it makes us more dependent on money and, more dangerously the state. These are forms of capitalist social relations, not neutral entities to be appropriated at will. Their persistence means no 'postcapitalism' need attend UBI's post-work idyll. As Clarke highlights 'the apparent neutrality [of the state] is not an essential feature of the state, it is rather a feature of the fetishized form in which the rule of capital is effected through the state. It is therefore something that should emerge at the end of the analysis and not something that should be inscribed in the analysis from the beginning' (Clarke 1991: 185).

This brings us to the problematic treatment of the state amongst advocates of the PWP. An automated economy requires a capitalist state supporting and maintaining our capacity to consume. And UBI increases the dependence of people on the state for their subsistence. We think that the PWP has not reflected on the nature of the capitalist state. It misconceives it as an arena for power struggles over resources. This managerial view of the state focuses on income distribution. The distribution of money by the state will only mean a different form of wealth sharing for social reproduction. The PWP misses the character of the state, like money, as a form assumed by capitalist social relations. It purports to free people from the burden of work sponsored by a better distribution of financial resources as a means by which 'post'-capitalism society can be accessed. But it continues humanity's subordination to the social forms of capitalist domination, namely money and the state.

The problem with equating the end of 'work' with the end of capitalism becomes particularly evident if we consider the state politics inherent in current proposals for the UBI. Consensus is forming around UBI from all sides of the political spectrum. Its implementation seems increasingly necessary to combat a generalised 'crisis of social reproduction' sparked by endemic unemployment and the retreat of the welfare state (Caffentzis 2002; Bakker & Gill 2003; Leonard & Fraser 2016; Gill 2016). But its merits are contested (Dinerstein, Pitts & Taylor 2016; Pitts & Dinerstein 2017; Pitts 2016; Pitts, Lombardozi and Warner 2017a, 2017b). The continuity it guarantees against the underlying constraints on living and working today appeals as much to those who wish to see the system preserved as does it to those seeking to do away with it. It is increasingly recognized even by the free-market right that a UBI may be necessary to contain the contradictions of a society where work is performed by robots and workers are surplus to requirements. From the *Financial Times* to the foothills of Davos it recommends itself as a safety cord for capitalism (Wolf, 2014, Yamamori 2016). Emboldened by the double-edged feasibility granted by mainstream liberal opinion, UBI is now the big demand of a contemporary left inspired by postcapitalist vistas (Mason 2015, Srnicek and Williams 2015) moving in an increasingly populist and statist direction (Pitts 2017a). In the UK, Labour Party Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell recently announced a UBI working group, headed up by leading advocate Guy Standing (2017, Cowburn 2017). The French Socialist candidate for president election, Benoit Hamon, ran on a platform in which UBI did much of the heavy lifting (Bell 2017). But

where else might its purchase travel politically? As the proposal is mobilised around politically, what kind of state (or nation state) does the basic income imply?

Against leftist aims, one possible destination of the UBI is in the policy agendas of the constituent parties of the contemporary 'nationalist international' of authoritarian populists (Ash 2016, Mishra 2016). Despite analyses emphasising their appeal to localised grievances, transnational commonalities include ascendant strongman leadership, pro-Putinism, isolationism, anti-cosmopolitanism and persecution of ethnic and religious groups. Common intellectual networks, international alliances, funding streams, news sites and hacking networks constitute a material infrastructure. And the UBI is increasingly on their agenda. It has already been adopted by the unpindownable Five Star Movement in Italy 'as a substitute for all existing social safety provisions linked to work and unemployment' whereby '[b]eneficiaries must declare immediate availability for work, attend training courses, participate in job interviews, and perform activities that are useful to the community in their municipality of residence' (Caruso 2017, p. 592). And, in the most interesting and telling turn yet, it was announced recently that the government of authoritarian nationalist Narendra Modi in India is considering its implementation (The *Economist* 2017a). This demonstrates its potential appeal to the international nexus of authoritarian national populism.

The Indian UBI proposals follow hot on the heels of the so-called 'note ban', or 'demonetization' whereby, on November 8<sup>th</sup>, the day of Donald Trump's election, the Indian government imposed a sudden and enforced devaluation of all paper money (Maiorano 2016). The auspicious aim of the measure was to root out corruption in the cash-driven informal sector. Some see the UBI as a means by which the accumulated scrap cash generated by demonetization can be recirculated. A possible tool to combat poverty, the proposals for UBI in India differ in scope from those in, say, France or the UK. But there are still implications for how we understand the UBI in an age of authoritarianism ascendant.

Following a pilot run in India by the Guy Standing (Davalá *et al* 2015), the idea was floated in the annual economic survey accompanying the government's budget declaration. Although small- no more than the average month's wage over the whole year- it would make a substantial impact, reducing absolute poverty some 20 per cent. It would be partly funded by a bonfire of existing welfare payments. The cuts to welfare would specifically target stratified systems for subsidised water, food and agricultural resources. As the *Economist* notes (2017b), this runs the risk of 'telling an illiterate farmer that a food-in-kind scheme he has used for decades is being scrapped to finance a programme that will put him on par with [...] a tycoon who lives in a 27 storey house'. Class is here elided for the abstract 'people'.

Adopting the 'authoritarian playbook' from which the nationalist International draws, Modi set a strongman, strong-arm prototype for President Trump (Robinson 2016). Indeed, commentators draw parallels between Modi's 'note ban' and Trump's 'Muslim ban' (Chakraborty 2017) The former was an exclusionary measure not so much targeted at but specifically impacting upon Dalits, Muslims and other ethnic groups subject to high levels of poverty and joblessness, who tend to subsist more closely from the cash-led economy. Indeed, the UBI measure itself contains a potential overlap with Modi's undeclared state of emergency, pro-Hindu migrant policy and vows to disenfranchise Muslims (Robinson 2016, Sharma 2016, Das 2016). For the sums to add up, only 75 per cent of the country could receive the payment. Payment via compulsory biometric identification cards would strengthen the government's hand in deciding who does and who does not get paid. This potential exclusionary effect thus teams with the capacity of the government to wield the wand of who gets what. And this, perhaps not coincidentally, relates to an outcome of the recent 'note ban'. Demonetization impacted forcefully upon poor farmers who relied on savings to subsist, by rendering those savings both useless and worthless. In this way, it replaced an individualised currency with a digital state-directed money ripe for adaptation in the UBI, in the process encouraging the spending of saved cash as a

means to raise effective demand.

Less a policy than a political weapon, it mobilises, on the guarantee of imminent riches, the masses as a national citizenry whilst allowing the eventual exclusion of those who fall foul of birth between other borders or beliefs. Its dark power consisting in the totalitarian relationship it establishes between the state and the capacity to subsist, what's not to like for the nationalist International? The UBI, paid on basis of membership of a nationally-defined people, is the perfect policy to cohere such a people in a class society where one cannot in practice exist, and excludes those who cannot or will not conform. UBI in One Country has the potential to be not revolutionary, as the left imagine, but deeply reactionary. With the best of intentions in a world gone bad, leftist conceptualisations of the UBI sometimes give succour to its possible implementation in the arsenal of authoritarianism, comingling with the right in a wider turn to populism, nationalism and *souverainisme*, or 'sovereignism' (Coates 2016, Henri-Levy 2016).

According to Laclau (1979; 2002), populism is about articulating difference on lines of equivalence- so that the grievance is shared by many. On an irretrievably nation basis at a time of the breakdown of liberal international institutions, UBI cannot but construct this equivalence along national lines. Hardt and Negri (2001, p. 403) for instance, write that a UBI could be paid on the basis of 'citizenship', through one's being a 'member of society'. This is as much out of necessity as choice, unless the UBI is organised worldwide, or Europe-wide, for instance. Yet the idea cannot be extricated from its context in concrete national conditions. In a time of national retrenchment, the UBI cannot but imply an exclusionary approach, its 'universality' recoded as the universality of a national people. The argument for the universality of the UBI masks, as Bonefeld suggests

'the global character of exploitative relations...The specific character of the state's integration requires an analysis of the peculiarities of a particular state and its national economy so as to understand the interrelation of the international movements of capital and the national formulation of policies' (Bonefeld 1993: 61).

The UBI sums this up: contrary to its universality, an exclusionary measure which grants citizens a guaranteed income but not necessarily those who are not subjects of a given state. In this way, the UBI resonates with a politics reconstituting itself around open and closed as much as left and right, as the latter undergo a convergence (The Economist 2016). Rolled out worldwide, this protectionism could well aid and abet the development of the UBI. The prospect of the widespread return of capital controls would help furnish the resources to enact national UBIs (Warner 2016). Where it doesn't take hold, such as in the EU, so-called 'helicopter money' could provide the hard cash with which to do it (McFarland 2016).

## 5 Liquidating class struggle by decree?

These subtle resonances between the past, the present and the future suggest that UBI is one part of a wider politics that the left must do its best to resist. The left advocates UBI out of the best intentions, but remains within a spellbound mode of thinking that, by not understanding capitalism, does not understand how it is confronted (Bonefeld 2016). Most painfully, it has the potential to fulfil the programme of right populisms and totalitarianisms through time by liquidating class conflict in production. As British Labour MP Jon Cruddas notes, in this way the UBI potentiates the self-destruction of the left and of the labour movement (BBC 2016, see also Cruddas & Kibasi 2016, Sodha 2017). Crucially the UBI *retains* the current rule of property, of power, whereas, as Sonia Sodha points out, 'if Karl Marx were alive, he'd be shouting about the ownership of the means of production' (BBC 2016). Under UBI, nothing changes hands. But, we are told, the results are shared among those to whom it is due.

Take, for instance, the link between demonetization and UBI in the Indian case. The combined effect of demonetization and UBI would, on the one hand, replace an individualized money supply through which people access the things they need by means of the wage with one granted at state convenience. On the other, for those not currently in receipt of a wage, it creates a permanent dependence on the umbilical cord of the state. This last would be no bad thing were it not for who controls it. And it limits the bases for class mobilisation. Although there are specificities to the situation in India that change some of these calculations, applied more widely the UBI breaks here with some vital preconditions of class struggle. Under the real illusion of legal equivalence circumscribed by the impersonal power of the state, buyer and seller of labour power meet in the market as equal parties. The class struggle then moves through, and is contained within, the practices and processes assumed by these legal real appearances. Class struggle is a struggle *over the form of* these legal as well as economic and political forms that mediate class struggle, which are, in turn, modified, or even destroyed, as in the case of Modi in India or Trump in the USA. Wage bargaining sees struggles ensue for a higher price of labour power, engaged in by associations of its sellers. This is driven by the collective struggle to live and enjoy life. Once the provision of money comes not from the wage but from the state, this web of relations by which workers win a better balance between their subsistence and the work they do collapses. From the impersonal power of liberal legal structures, we have the personalised power of state fiat determining who gets what. The weighty democratic, administrative and brute-force heft that this arrangement implies will no longer be concealed behind contractual niceties, but waged openly and directly. Class conflict destroyed, only state power remains.

In this way, it harkens back to forms of fascism, which, where it has reared its ugly head, has always sought to destroy the working-class movement where capitalism could not, by promising the resolution of class struggle on a higher plane of national or racial identity. In a world where borders are strengthening and not weakening, and strongmen rule supreme, what other basis will there be for a UBI than the nation and its 'people'? The UBI may yet conceal capitalist society's contradictions in the dark cellar of autarky. This way, withdrawing from the world and excluding the outsider, utopia may be the last thing UBI leads to. These tendencies are always there within conceptualisations of the UBI, right and left.

Liquidating class struggles for a nationally-constituted citizenry, abstract utopias reliant on the UBI treat the class struggle as a closed case but largely retain the current rule of property ownership, including, crucially, that of the means of production, for which no postcapitalist or post-work vista gives a convincing vision for redress. The basic income, as a key principle of the proposed post-work society, breaks here with some vital preconditions of worker organisation. Under the formal appearance of legal equivalence circumscribed by the impersonal power of the state, buyer and seller of labour power meet in the market as equal parties. The class struggle then moves through, and is contained within, the practices and processes assumed by these legal appearances. Wage bargaining sees struggles ensue for a higher price of labour power, engaged in by associations of its sellers. This is driven by the collective struggle to live and enjoy life- more money, more freedom, more time. Once the provision of money comes not from the wage but from the beneficence of the state, this web of relations by which workers win a better balance between their subsistence and the work they do collapses. From the impersonal power of liberal legal structures, we have the personalised power of state fiat determining who gets what. The weighty democratic, administrative and brute-force heft that this arrangement implies will no longer be concealed behind contractual niceties, but waged openly and directly. Class conflict destroyed, only state power remains. In this way it harkens back to forms of fascism, which, where it has reared its ugly head, has always sought to destroy the working-class movement where capitalism could not, by promising the resolution of class struggle on a higher plane of national or racial identity. Only here, the abstraction is free money and free time.

In his analysis of the Keynesian state, Holloway argues that the latter constituted a specific 'mode of domination' (Holloway 1996: 8) for the Keynesian state contained the power of labour via the 'monetization' of class conflict: 'In the face of rigidity and revolt, money was the great lubricant. Wage-bargaining became the focus of both managerial change and worker discontent' (Holloway 1996: 23). The crisis of Keynesianism was, in this sense, 'a crisis of a form of containment of labour' (Holloway, 1996: 27). The basic income could become, then, another form of domination of the power of labour, only that this time, rather than relying on class conflict, aims at obliterating it.

The basic income effectively abolishes any means by which workers can struggle for a better deal, liquidating class struggle and purporting to resolve its contradictions at the imaginary level of a nation state paying free money to a nationally-defined people. In so doing, the vista of an abolition of work afforded by the basic income serves up the fruits of struggle prematurely, without struggles having taken place. It temporarily defers the contradictions of class antagonism without resolution through the antagonism itself. This is ironic even on the terms of the postcapitalist argument itself, insofar as class struggle would be necessary to drive up wages to the extent that employers would be motivated to worth low-paid workers in bad jobs with machines in the first place. Yet none of the popular imaginaries of an automated future entertain this notion, outsourcing capitalist development to technology as a neutral force as opposed to one imbricated and resulting from wider social relations.

By endowing the relationship between work and technology with a set of eschatological and Promethean associations, the postwork hypothesis steals work from its antagonistic context in capitalist social relations that both pre-exist and continue to underpin the compulsion to labour in the first place, through money. This is nowhere more transparent in the appeal to a benevolent state as the effective payer of the wage *qua* basic income. This purports to change the social relations under which we get paid for the better, but runs the risk of doing so for the worst precisely because the class struggle contained and concealed in the formal legal relationship between the buyer and seller of labour is elided.

In a world where we must work to eat, we live as labour-power, the reproduction of which is also the reproduction of ourselves as humans. The wage is the umbilical cord with life itself. The abolition of bullshit jobs proposes to do away with the wage and replace it with a basic income, paid for a new kind of work freed from the labour relationship. This is not all bad. But In proposing to do away with bullshit jobs with a basic income, the postwork prospectus implies the persistence of the kind of tasks for which people are presently paid but under a different set of work relationships.

The basic income, in many ways, is just another wage- but one paid by the state. What about if you want better pay for the non-bullshit work you share in common? Addressing these demands to a state now invested directly in the reproduction of your capacity to labour- in however 'liberated' a way- is much harder than fighting for their recognition in the workplace. Whilst the workplace comes with its own everyday forms of domination, individual employers have no monopoly on the means of violence such as the state wields in last resort- and sometimes first. In this world, placing the power of deciding who will be paid and for what in the hands of a state however benevolent jumps the gun, pre-empting the overhaul of the wider social relations and social forms of capitalist society. These forms cannot be escaped through labour alone. The objectifications to which humans are subject have a habit of coming back to haunt us, and our attempt at freeing ourselves from them create new objectifications that control us anew. This is not to say that the postcapitalist school should stop trying to envision an alternative. But too often its promises merely repeat the worst of this world rather than the best of the next. The new boss may be just the same as the old.

## **6 Social reproduction struggles as 'labour' struggles**

What we would like to propose instead is the politics of social reproduction as an alternative to the

prevailing post-work, post-capitalist consensus. As noted, scholars have suggested that capitalism is undergoing a severe and protracted crisis of social reproduction. Employment increasingly fails to support subsistence. But PWP advocates confuse this situation with an unfolding end of work. A social reproduction standpoint redresses this. The PWP, by seeing in the crisis of social reproduction the end of work, misses the connection between production and what precedes it, logically and historically. As Nancy Fraser (2014, p. 57) writes, while Marx 'looked behind the sphere of exchange, into the 'hidden abode' of production, in order to discover capitalism's secrets', it is also necessary to 'seek production's conditions of possibility behind that sphere'. Namely: why do we have to work, and what keeps us working? The fashionable postcapitalists want to do away with work, without posing the question why it exists in the form it does.

In asking this, the social reproduction perspective takes inspiration from Marxist-feminist inquiries into the 'conditions of possibility of labour-power' and the 'manner in which labour power is biologically, socially and generationally reproduced' (Ferguson and McNally, 2015). Marx writes that 'the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist' (1976, p. 723). This relationship begins 'not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living' (Denning 2010, p. 80). As Dalla Costa (1995) contends, this relates to an ongoing process of 'primitive accumulation'. Workers are dispossessed continually of the common means of meeting their needs. New enclosures spring up daily. This is reproduced constantly to keep workers in a situation whereby they must sell their labour-power to live. The social reproduction perspective sees these conditions as key to capitalist society. As Ferguson and McNally (2015) contend, the very definition of the latter is workers' separation 'from the means of their subsistence (or social reproduction)'. Workplace exploitation, then, as Bhattacharya (2015) asserts, is not the singular moment of domination. The violent denial of the human need to subsist here precedes the compulsion to labour. There is no escaping work without addressing how to meet the former. The PWP offers no alternative infrastructure to do so independent of commodification. The UBI, a possible solution, only reinforces the rule of money with which the wage is intimately connected, simply substituting the buyer of labour power with the state.

What the social reproduction approach suggests, by foregrounding the constitutive social relations that undergird work to begin with, is that struggles for social reproduction as also instances of class struggle. Struggle addressed to state solutions and state recognition are themselves struggles for the means to live and subsist. As Anna Curcio points out in an interview with Kathi Weeks (Weeks and Curcio 2015), the same struggles, 'brought together by the same possibility of survival', are also struggles for the 'survival and the autonomous reproduction of the human being and a struggle for the survival and the reproduction of capital'. In fights to protect the welfare system, for instance, this dual identity is clear. Our survival hinges on the survival- and the prosperity- of capital, for now. This creates tensions, struggles, conflicts. They centre on consumption, the commons, commodification: outside production, in the sphere of realisation. The survival of society hinges on the ability of people to subsist and reproduce the means of both living and labouring. Thus, it is a political choice to identify which kind of society we want to emerge from this crisis. And, at present, all the visions for how this pans out are implicated within the eventual implementation of the basic income, and liquidated therein. In the next section, we suggest an alternative that does not liquidate social reproduction as class struggle.

## **7 From concrete to abstract utopia: Illustrating an alternative**

Less concerned with the popular than the populist category of the 'people', the left continues to plot abstract utopian schemes around monetary payments based on the membership of this elusive figure, class nowhere to be seen. But, if anything, the space to create *concrete utopias* is required (Dinerstein 2014; 2016). A necessary first step is to address class, property and social reproduction in cold, hard, critical and dispassionate ways- whilst still allowing struggle to thrive. This is about



harnessing the legal and political weaponry at hand to expand space for alternatives through and not in spite of the present state of things. It is imperative to locate where this potential lies. Where concrete utopias are called for in practice, today the anti-austerity left and critics of capitalism embrace abstract utopias like the automated worklessness of advanced robotics and the UBI (Dinerstein, Pitts & Taylor 2016).

In this section we will look at the example of the Argentinian Unemployed Workers Organisations (UWOs) as an illustration of how each of the impasses outlined above can be overcome and concrete rather than abstract utopias envisioned. In this example discussed by one of us elsewhere, the concern with the productive sphere is overcome with reference to new forms of social reproduction, the direct dependence on the benevolence of the state is mediated through new collective institutions, and the concept of continuing class struggle and societal contradiction is kept intact. The possibilities for an excess beyond the present is, as we shall see, not exhausted as in abstract utopia, but becomes a structuring principle of concrete utopias that remedy many of the flaws of the post-work prospectus. Instead of talking about the risk of co-optation, we prefer to explore how these concrete utopias are translated by the state, the law and into policy. This means that while they are at risk of being integrated into the modus operandi and logics imposed by the powers that they confront, and therefore suffer de-radicalisation, this translation is a process of struggle that allows room for radical change and excess.

UWOs are one of a number of Latin American social movements that seek autonomy and dignity in escaping social exclusion and unemployment. The work of one of the present authors (Dinerstein 2010, 2013, 2014, 2017) has been central in charting the story of how the UWOs came to pass. Unemployment in Argentina had risen from 6% in 1991 to 18% in 1995. 'Organisationally incoherent' roadblock protests called for 'job creation, public workers, essential services [and] participation in the management of employment programmes' (Dinerstein 2010, p. 358). These 'Piqueteros' had a strategy of 'leveraging state resources through a combination of protest and social projects in the community and not only challenged the common view of the unemployed as excluded and redundant but also influenced the institutional framework within which social demands could be made'. They did so through the creation of new UWOs which, through resistance and struggles, were successful in drawing down state benefits that would have been paid individually and paid them collectively for community projects that were decided collectively to address the needs of social reproduction.

One in particular is worthy of specific scrutiny: the *Union Trabajadores Desocupados* (UTD), or Unemployed Workers Union. The UTD was formed following the privatization of the local state oil company- only 5600 of 51000 workers remained. In the municipality of General Mosconi, 34.6% of the population was unemployed by 2001. The UTD was led by ex-oil workers, who assessed projects for support according to 'local need', 'dignity' and 'genuine work' in 'solidarity'. Projects addressed 'long-term sustainability' in 'housing, education and environmental protection', and also everyday issues like 'recycling, refurbishing public buildings and houses, community farms, soup kitchen...retirement homes, health care visits to the ill and disabled, production of regional crafts, carpentry...maintaining and repairing hospital emergency rooms and schools.' In this way, the UTD became the 'quasi-city council' of General Mosconi.

They did this through state funding, but not in a direct way reliant on the benevolence of the state. Rather resources were captured in an active and open relationship of conflict and negotiation that created space for things to exceed the capacity of the state to control and govern how the money was spent. The UWOs fought for 'the re-appropriation of social programmes for collective purposes', and they did this by switching between two modes of activity: mobilisation, which used the roadblocks to demand resources; and policy, which moved state resources through the neighbourhood to implement the resources in social projects. It is only by means of and through the

seeming contradiction between these two registers of mobilisation and social policy that state resources can be leveraged at all. The UWOs worked within contradiction rather than seeking to escape in a final, closed settlement that established an abstract utopia. Their concrete utopia, insofar as it was achieved at all, was subject to and thrived from these contradictions, 'using resistance as a conduit for community development and community development as a conduit for resistance' (Dinerstein 2010, p. 361). The post-work prospectuses based on the basic income, by seeking the absolution from work by means of the state, foreclose contradiction in a final abstract utopia of automated worklessness with no room for further struggle within the interstices of those contradictions.

Rather than a welfare policy granted from up on high to which individual recipients must address themselves, the UWOs instituted what Dinerstein (2010) describes as 'welfare policy from below'. Benefits of £30 per head per month were paid every 6 months from the state, and then distributed by the UTD among the 'unemployed workers' who were 'willing to undertake community work'. By 2005 the UTD managed as many programmes as the municipality and more than the provincial governments- housing co-ops, garment factory, training centres, a university. It also served as a job agency and trade union, using its leverage to get unemployed workers jobs, backed up by 'access blockades' outside and, once enough UTDs employed, 'line stoppages' within (Dinerstein 2010, pp. 360-1).

As such welfare was locked into a convincing reconstitution of a community of work and workers. UTD, for example, identified 'work as a true human attribute that must be used for the production of useful goods and services' (Dinerstein 2010, p. 361). The key issue here was 'dignity'. Their search for dignified work permitted neither Prometheism nor neurosis around what is conceptualised correctly as an everyday point of meaning and antagonism. By working within the contradictions that confront the everyday practice of work and the abstract determination of labour in capitalist society, the UWOs 'challenged the individualistic logic of workfare and state policy and reconceptualised 'work' in capitalist society' (2017) in a far more concrete and practical way than the postwork prospectus seems capable of, whilst also embedding this in an attempt to overhaul the socially reproductive social relations of subsistence that compel us to work in the first place. For Zechner and Hansen (2015), 'struggles around social reproduction allow for a renegotiation of the around what is considered work, or what is valued as such'. We can see in the piqueteros' struggle over social reproduction a similar renegotiation, situating the separation from the means of subsistence and the compulsion to sell one's labour power in historical context. Theoretically, this destabilises it. Practically, it allows the concrete search for contemporary on-the-ground alternatives.

The UWOs are suggestive of the possibilities of 'translating' radical political and social practice into institutionalised solutions struck with the state. Translation is defined by Dinerstein as 'the processes, mechanisms and dynamics through which the state incorporates the cooperation and solidarity ethos of the SSE practiced by social movements through policy' (2017). However, with this the risk is run of the 'depoliticisation' of these movements by the new legal structures put in place to superintend the state programmes on which their claims are made. UWOs had to become NGOs, registered and assessed by the state, or else, as did the UTD, retain autonomy by using the registration of a friendly NGO, so as to 'access funding [whilst] continuing to design its own strategies and implement its own community ventures' (Dinerstein 2010, p. 360). But it was working within this antagonistic and contradictory relationship with the state that allowed their social gains to be achieved. The basic income, on the other hand, concentrates power absolutely in the hands of the state as a benefactor rather than a boss, with the more subservient and compliant relationship this implies. The UWOs permit acceptance that the embeddedness of social actors 'in, against and beyond' the state will always be contested, and it is this from which we proceed as a starting point, rather than approaching it as a limit, so that 'institutionalisation' is not simply that- but rather 'contested institutionalisation' all the way up and down (Dinerstein 2010, p. 357). Social movements, in posing

alternatives, '*navigate the tension between resistance and integration*' (Dinerstein 2010, pp. 357-8). And it is this tension that is productive:

'embedding autonomy appears to be achievable by recreating social relations at community level, and by *engaging with* the institutions of society...Autonomous collective action by civil society actors remains alive through the steady, continuing and often painful struggles underpinned by the tension between affirmation of autonomy and recuperation of autonomy by the state.' (Dinerstein 2010, p. 364)

The Piqueteros wielded power by managing and using this tension, rather than avoiding it. This is because there was an excess facilitated that such totalising solutions as the basic income and 'fully automated luxury communism', by implying the presence of a strong and all-powerful state, do not. Dinerstein identifies 4 dimensions or 'zones' in the movement's struggle- not necessarily stages but contained dialectically within one another: The creative zone, the conflict zone, the translation zone and the beyond zone. No matter what the compromises of translation, what matters is what is left in the last of these, wherein lies an untranslatable excess- 'the impossibility to completely translate movement-led SSE practice into policy' (2017).

Dinerstein concludes that '[t]he collective use of individual social/unemployment benefits for community development purposes, financed by state programmes, but devised, implemented and supervised by NGOs, as in the UWO's case, might not be unimaginable in the UK environment' (2010, pp. 364-5). As an alternative using a social reproduction approach to recode the issues the postwork prospectus currently confronts in the public consciousness, this path may well be one policymakers should consider taking that circumvents wishful thinking and moves within contradictions and struggles rather than shutting them down in the search for abstract, and not concrete, utopias, which reaffirm the violence of abstraction and the power of money over humanity.

## **8 Conclusion: Criss-crossed by contradiction**

Covering everything that reproduces both life and capitalist society, social reproduction is inevitably crisscrossed by contradiction. Contradictorily, the reproduction of each- life and capital- is the reproduction of the other. Capitalist society depends upon the commodification of the labour-power we sell to live. As Ferguson and McNally note (2015), the reproduction of labour-power is simultaneously 'our quest to satisfy human needs, to *live*'. What this dualness indicates is that 'the very acts where the working class strives to attend to its own needs can be the ground for class struggle' (Bhattacharya 2015). Social reproduction is a sphere of conflict as long as labour power implies this twin intent. The capitalist desires its reproduction to exploit, the worker its reproduction to eat. Wage demands, strikes for pay or better hours, exercise regimes, diets. In seeking a better standard of life, all express this antagonistic settlement's contradictory contours.

The struggles highlight how social reproduction is crisscrossed by contradictions, wherein lies room for resistance and rupture, and for the creation of 'alternative forms of social reproduction', or concrete utopias (Dinerstein 2016). Any analysis of work and economic life must tune in to these contradictions and their possibilities. When we reproduce labour-power, we also reproduce life itself. The wage pays for labour-power, and it is through the wage that we live. There is no other way. But in living, we build strength to find alternatives. As Ferguson and McNally note, 'labour-power has a contradictory relationship with capital'. This is because its reproduction- that also of life- is 'essential to, but also a drag on, accumulation'. Its needs are not always those capital permits- and they are satisfied only in a false, unfulfilled way.

In rearguard actions to protect the welfare system, for instance, the contradictory unity of the situation is clear. Capitalism is undergoing a generalised crisis of social reproduction that has reached the global north since 2008, but which is far from new in the global South. Cutbacks in the welfare state couple with the delinking of subsistence from the wage, endemic unemployment and the

physical and social exhaustion of the commodification of labour-power. In unemployment and extreme precarity, satisfying human needs becomes an overwhelming task. The crisis worsens this state of precarity. The welfare state withdraws. This compels us to answer questions about how we satisfy these needs. As Dinerstein (2002: 14) puts it, the 'contradiction between the needs of the workers and the needs of capital that lives at the core of the problem of social reproduction cannot be more vivid. This is not a political, economic or social issue but it is about the reproduction of human 'life'.

In fighting for the welfare system we both ensure our reproduction as humans well as workers, and in turn the reproduction of capitalist society. The two sides, in their contradictory unity, are the same. Our survival hinges on the survival of capital, for now, from which we seek strength to fight on for an alternative to it. The social reproduction standpoint suggests that capital and state sustain us. But it endows the situation with a thoroughly contradictory status. There is a total absence of any Durkheimian functionalism. The post work thesis, on the other hand, posits precisely such a functional vision of society. Namely, it eliminates conflict and contradiction and seeks to 'solve the problem of work'.

To intervene in the politics of work, one must first intervene in the politics of the social relations that support it. Struggles over social reproduction are 'labour' struggles. Concurrently, 'labour' struggles are mainly struggles over social reproduction. We struggle to live, not to work. This takes place in, against, despite and beyond capital. This struggle is one, as Walter Benjamin puts it, for 'crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist' (1999). In struggling to avail ourselves of what we need to eat, to drink, to share together, we gesture from this world to others. That is, we produce surplus of possibilities that, as we have shown, postwork advocates are presently missing.

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