



## Surplus Populations and the State: A Criminological View

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### Abstract

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

### Keywords

Surplus populations; post-Keynesianism; political economy; economic liberalism; planned economies.

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## Introduction

A surplus population is never inherently superfluous; a surplus exists only insofar as the state fails to include and involve in productive enterprises those bodies that are deemed superfluous. Converting the negative charge of a surplus into a positive charge of necessity is one of the central political tasks of our times: the task of a properly *anti-surplus state*. 'The outstanding faults of the economic society in which we live', Keynes (1936/2013: 372) wrote in the concluding chapter to his *General Theory*, 'are its failure to provide for full employment and its arbitrary and inequitable distribution of wealth and incomes'. But how does one go about appropriating the surplus and bringing it back into the fold of the necessary? Addressing the apparent necessity of superfluity was one of the key political aims of the Keynesian–Fordist state, from Scandinavian social democracy to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal 'alphabet agencies'. These were attempts to combat the horrors of unemployment, undignified scrambling over scarce resources and attendant social pathologies. Work is food, shelter and dignity; its absence means the opposite. 'Our greatest primary task is to put people to work', Roosevelt said in his inaugural address in 1933:

It can be accomplished in part by direct recruiting by the Government itself, treating the task as we would treat the emergency of a war ... accomplishing greatly needed projects to stimulate and reorganize the use of our natural resources. (Roosevelt 1933/2014: 63)

Roosevelt's first war, then, was a war on unemployment to be solved by an aggressively expansionary state.

Can such a war be waged anew? It may have to be. Every week now, it seems, there are fresh reports of the coming age of the robot economy, the mechanisation, automation and overtaking of human jobs by artificial intelligence and semi-intelligent machines (e.g., Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018), automation is killing the middle-skill job; that is, 47 per cent of jobs are set to disappear in the next 25 years, according to an Oxford University report, one million will vanish by 2026 (Frey and Osborne 2013), and robots 'could take 4 [million] United Kingdom private sector jobs within 10 years' (Booth 2017). How many jobs will disappear (and how many others will be created) in the wake of these new digital technologies, which must necessarily remain shrouded in mystery? There is simply no getting around the fact that technological development is inherently chaotic and unpredictable. Anyone proclaiming that 25, 50 or 75 per cent of all jobs will be gone by 2020, 2030 or 2040 is either lying or ignorant. One recent estimate from Manyika et al. (2017: 7) maintains that 'by 2030, 75 million to 375 million workers (3 to 14 per cent of the global workforce) will need to switch occupational categories'. Whatever the concrete figures, it seems certain that post-industrialised societies are heading for a new wave of automation that will cause widespread unemployment unless counter-cyclical measures are taken—in other words, the construction and mobilisation of an *anti-surplus state*, capable of injecting billions into economies and engaging in demand management through direct spending.

The costs of not doing so are high. As David Harvey (2014: 208) writes:

The paradox is that automation and artificial intelligence now provide us with abundant means to achieve the Marxian dream of freedom beyond the realm of necessity at the same time as the laws of capital's political economy put this freedom further and further out of reach.

The neoliberal state was envisioned to be no more than a bureaucratic or symbolic state, a manager, a mere paper-pusher, a mediating interface between worker-users and employer platforms.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, the anti-surplus state must necessarily not be an interface but a platform,

the central locus of reallocated social energy and expenditure—a builder of roads, rails, bridges, schools, universities, hospitals, water pipes and sewage lines, affordable housing, power plants, even factories and office buildings. The coming of automation makes this anti-surplus state both possible and necessary—*possible* because, as Harvey (2014) points out, the promise of novel technologies is to liberate us from material scarcity; *necessary* because this same tendency, given unbridled market forces, is likely to engender insurmountable waves of superfluity, which, if left unchecked, threaten to throw millions into poverty and (consequently) infect the social body with so many pathologies as to make life itself bleak and despairing. If (high-quality) work is the plinth of social harmony, what we need, then, is a state that is willing, ready and able to make millions of jobs, directly and of its own accord.

However, social science has forgotten or ignored this idea, misattributing the causes of conflicts and social pathologies where their real, underlying cause is the absence of work. Instead of a criminology advocating macroeconomic employment policies, we have a criminology obsessed with ‘self-control’ (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) and ‘the life-course’ (Sampson and Laub 2003)—as if both were not epiphenomenal to a basic materialist insight: work is life. William Beveridge’s (1942: 6) five ‘giant evils’ of ‘squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease’ all flow from the fourth term, idleness or (less anachronistically) unemployment. This, too, is the lesson taught by the heterodox economist Erik Reinert (2007), who, in a neo-mercantilist critique of theories of economic development, demolishes the myths of the ‘palliative economics’ of the neoliberal establishment, which in the past several decades has given preferential emphasis on the eradication of diseases (such as Bill and Melinda Gates’s anti-malaria campaigns), promoting entrepreneurship (as with now-disgraced Muhammad Yunus’s Grameen Bank microcredit schemes) and similar superficial or skin-deep measures, as an apparent formula for raising the standard of living in poor countries. Instead of policies intended to ‘get the diseases right’ or ‘get the entrepreneurship right’, Reinert (2007: 216) prescribes a politics of near-full employment through industrialisation, now forgotten by the bearers of economic orthodoxy, pithily encapsulated with the formula: in short, ‘get the economic activities right’.

Surplus populations appear with the force of naturalised necessity against the backdrop of a failure to get the economic activities right, which means creating jobs. Under the (later abandoned) Morgenthau Plan, Reinert notes, Germany was to become a deindustrialised, agrarian nation after World War II, a plan that would have had ruinous consequences: ‘In a deindustrialized Germany, there were suddenly 25 million superfluous people’ (Reinert 2007: 278). Then, as now, superfluity was a political construct, a function of policies redirecting flows of social and economic energy—or, rather, failing to do so. Only because the *deindustrializing* Morgenthau Plan was abandoned—which would have, in Winston Churchill’s words, turned Germany into a ‘country primarily agricultural and pastoral in its character’ (World Future Fund n.d.)<sup>2</sup>—and replaced with the *reindustrializing* Marshall Plan, did Germany precisely *not* become the site of immense surplus populations.

The willful ignorance of basic materialist doctrine explains the systematic misreading of numerous conflicts and social problems around the world. To take the example of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the horror of Gaza is in part the horror of unemployment, with its nearly 50 per cent unemployment rate in 2017. Here is one Gazan woman’s testimony to the Israeli human rights organisation B’Tselem (2017: para. 12):

I applied several times for teaching positions, six times to [the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees] and six to public schools. Every time, I passed the entrance exam successfully and the interview, but there were many candidates and the experienced teachers were those hired. Every time I was rejected it threw me and I felt anxious and nervous all the time. I was desperate and couldn’t sleep for worrying over not being able to provide for myself and for my family. In 2015 I married ... Unfortunately, my husband is also unemployed. He

hasn't been able to find work since we got married. Four months ago, our daughter ... was born and we live with my husband's family. We can't pay our share of the household expenses and cover our baby's costs. My husband and I considered starting our own business but couldn't get a grant or a loan, and because of the tough economic and political situation we gave up on the idea.

Western spectators cannot really imagine, at a visceral level, what this condition means any longer. We must return to the dirt and despondency of the 1930s Depression Era to gain even the smallest of glimpses of such abject poverty, and here our optics must necessarily be caked with the dust and grime of history, presenting so many impenetrable mysteries to the present-day observer. Think of the United States (US) in the throes of the Great Depression, where occurrences such as the following one described by the *New York Times* (1938: para. 1) were routine: 'more than 3,500 young women took mental tests yesterday for twenty-seven anticipated vacancies as policewomen with salaries of \$2,000 a year'. Even the hypercompetitive neoliberal economy confronting present-day millennials cannot compete with such long odds and economic despair.

The failure of 'globalisation', now steadily being replaced with 'populism', was its abdication of the political project of appropriating superfluity, the task of converting *surplus populations* into (*economically*) *necessary populations*.<sup>3</sup>

Here is an emblematic statement of neoliberalism and its attendant political impotence:

Here's the truth. No politician can re-open this factory or bring back the shipyard jobs ... or make your union strong again. No politician can make it the way it was. Because we now live in a world without economic borders. Push a button in New York and a billion dollars moves to Tokyo. (Script-O-Rama n.d.)<sup>4</sup>

This statement, made by a fictional presidential candidate modelled on Bill Clinton (and played by John Travolta) in the late 1990s movie *Primary Colors* (1998), is perhaps one of the most poignant summaries of ineffectual politics under globalisation, which has been the failure of the state to positively appropriate and manage surplus populations within a social state. Instead, failing to spend and employ, the state has been led to discipline, criminalise and penalise (Wacquant 2008, 2009).

If this has been the foundational political-economic doctrine of Washington elites for several decades now, is it any wonder that Trump could win the 2016 US presidential elections? How different is Trump's promise that 'you will never be ignored again' (Tackett and Tankersley 2017: para. 2) is from the president of *Primary Colors*, who simply throws up his hands and says there is nothing to be done about the disappearance of blue-collar jobs, nothing that can be done to protect regular American workers from the vicissitudes of global market forces. Following Trump's promise to spend USD\$1 trillion on infrastructure projects—a policy taken straight out of FDR's playbook, echoing Bernie Sanders's (2016: 122–123) earlier, identical proposal—a Georgetown University study has suggested that such a proposal, were it ever to be realised (and that remains doubtful, given Trump's thinly veiled pro-market inclinations and USD\$1.5 trillion tax cut), would create 11 million jobs over a decade, with more than half of these new jobs going to high school dropouts or high school-only graduates (Carnevale and Smith 2017).<sup>5</sup> This has been the aim, too, of the Millions of Jobs group, a coalition of progressive organisations and labour unions in the US, including the Service Employees International Union. Their central aim is, self-evidently, to push lawmakers to 'invest in creating millions of new jobs' (Millions of Jobs n.d.),<sup>6</sup> which in 2017 resulted in a non-binding resolution in US Congress (2017: iv) calling on lawmakers to 'enact a bold jobs and infrastructure package that benefits all Americans, not just billionaires', a task urgently required by 'crumbling roads, bridges, and schools, unsafe drinking water facilities, and outdated energy systems'.<sup>7</sup>

The fact is that there are plenty of tasks that still need to be dealt with by expansive welfare states: in the US, the American Society of Civil Engineers (2016) has estimated that there is a whopping USD\$2 trillion investment gap over a 10-year period for the nation's crumbling infrastructure. Others estimate that there is a USD\$15 trillion shortfall in infrastructure investments worldwide (Infrastructure Outlook 2018). If we take the limited view of judging neoliberalism on its own terms—an 'immanent critique'—by asking how well neoliberalism serves the interests of capital, it seems clear that neoliberalism is dysfunctional.

How dissimilar this is to the grandiose designs of certain mid-twentieth century Big State Keynesians, which once had a positive vision. In the words of one 1930s newspaper account: neither dictatorship nor regimentation, but a balanced national economy as a basis for a higher form of individualism, with service as its ideal, is the purpose of the National Recovery program of the Roosevelt Administration. (New York Times 1933: para. 1)

This meant, and would still mean, pumping billions into the economy, allowing the state to redirect flows of bodies, power, natural resources, and re-engineering the 'process of social metabolism' (Marx 1976: 198) to safeguard life, to improve life chances. But the Keynesian state was not so much a big state—all modern states, even highly neoliberal ones (such as the US and United Kingdom), occupy a significant percentage of social resources, as measured by the proportion of public spending in terms of gross domestic product—as an *anti-surplus state*, a state whose primary purpose was to counteract the formation of surplus populations.

### After post-Fordism

This has also been the view taken by Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson, who saw farther than most, presaging the crisis of the mid-2010s even as he wrote under the thick ideological pallor of neoliberalism. In *When Work Disappears*, Wilson (1996) proposed a plan at once simple and ingenious: instead of individualising and moralising entanglements with 'social disorganization' theory and culturalist analyses of a 'new underclass' (e.g., see Wacquant 2008; Wacquant and Wilson 1989), or Murray-and-Hernstein-style sociobiological misanthropism (see Fischer et al. 1996), Wilson proposed providing millions of jobs to low-skilled dwellers of the urban ghettos—indeed, to the whole of the US public who found their lives disrupted and dislocated by the steady decline of employment opportunities. The problems of the ghetto were not to be found in the breakdown of what Daniel Moynihan (1965: 5) termed the 'Negro American family', as his much-touted report had claimed, or cognitive deficiency, as the racist vision of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) imputed, but simply the decline of employment levels and deterioration of (previously) high-quality jobs. With 'ghetto joblessness' at an all-time high, and the private sector failing to employ those deemed unworthy by corporate America, Wilson (1996: 225) suggested a 'policy of public-sector employment of last resort'.

The long shadow cast by neoliberalism forced Wilson (1996: 225) to hedge his proposal in all sorts of ways, but after several hundred pages his plan was alluringly straightforward: 'Many workers, especially those who are not in the official labor force, will not be able to find jobs unless the government becomes an employer of last resort'. Infrastructure spending would be a central plank in this reform agenda—this attempt to engineer capitalism with a human face. Spending USD\$1 billion dollars on road maintenance, Wilson (1996) pointed out, would directly employ 25,000 people directly as well as indirectly create another 15,000 jobs. A good social democrat—Wilson modelled his proposal on Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA), which, Wilson cited approvingly—resulted in the construction of more than 650,000 miles of roads, more than 120,000 bridges and 8,000 schools. A 'WPA-style jobs program' (Wilson 1996: 231) would be expensive, but empirical research suggested that US\$12 billion dollars of state spending would result in 40,000 jobs (Wilson 1996: 226)—importantly, these would be low-wage, unskilled jobs, aimed precisely at those left behind by neoliberalism, including far more than just

'inner-city' dwellers. Accordingly, it would target 'broad segments of the U.S. population' (Wilson 1996: 235) bringing security and safety to those devastated by neoliberalism.

Why do social scientists, including criminologists, not talk about the need for a more proactive social state in the twenty-first century? Why was Wilson's (1996) proposal largely met with deafening silence? Most of the objects of social-scientific study—social pathologies in all their forms, including crime, poverty and homelessness—would likely be seriously reduced in the wake of a reconstructed New Deal, or what the British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has termed a 'People's Quantitative Easing', including intensive investments in 'infrastructural development, job-creation and high-technology industries' (Seymour 2016: 8). However, social scientists are strangely timid, afraid to get their hands dirty with the perceived impurity of political advocacy. Such timidity is largely misguided, a point long ago recognised by Pierre Bourdieu (2008: 380–381; see also Shammass 2018), who rebuked the academic community for its 'flight into purity'. The social-scientific aversion against commitment would have been 'criminal', Bourdieu (2008) claims, if, say, a biologist were to fail to disclose the devastating effects of a noxious virus on human populations. Yet, as Bourdieu observes, criminologists are not subject to such demands. By and large, society does not make such ethical demands on social science, even though a policy involving the retrenchment of the welfare state 'has effects that can already be foreseen thanks to the resources of social science' (Bourdieu 2008: 380), and despite the fact that such policies are in part advanced by intellectuals and academics instrumental in expediting ideological transformation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999). On Bourdieu's (2008: 381) account, the dichotomy between scholarship and commitment, which Alvin Gouldner (1975: 1–26) termed the 'myth of a value-free sociology', is dangerous if not outright devastating:

As I see it, the scholar has no choice today: if [they are] convinced that there is a correlation between neoliberal policies and crime rates ... how can [they] avoid saying so?

This was well understood by Sweden's early social democrats as well as those criminal justice and psychiatric experts who sympathised with the interwar social-democratic program. Olof Kinberg (1934), a Swedish medical doctor, expounded on the classical vision of crime contained in social democracy:

No offender is an isolated phenomenon who like a meteor suddenly strikes from who-knows-where. On the contrary, he has a history and has thousands of connections with other people, with social conditions and various institutions. He is, in fact, not solely ... a particular, individual, spiritual nature, but is also the symptom of a certain cultural condition in the society in which he lives.

Offenders bore the stamp of a social order and were products of their environment. In this respect, imprisonment was the most facile of actions that a state could take, because it was society, not the offender, who was in need of treatment. Similarly, Karl Schlyter (1935), Sweden's leading social-democratic spokesperson on criminal justice affairs in the 1930s (and later Minister of Justice) who published and spoke extensively on the need to 'empty the prisons', took the view that it would be far better to prevent the formation of a punishable surplus population than to expend energy on devising rehabilitative schemes or reforming carceral conditions. Instead, the point was to facilitate, 'through social reforms', a 'change [in] the environment that creates the clientele of the prison' (Dagens Nyheter 1934).

As Per Albin Hansson (1932: 5), Sweden's social-democratic prime minister throughout large parts of the 1930s and 1940s, noted, the primary objective of Swedish social democracy was to combat unemployment and, thereby, 'transform society'. Writing in the early 1930s, Hansson (1932: 4) viewed this as an urgently required task:

The whole world is being shaken by a terrible crisis. Everywhere one sees the distress and misery of the masses. The ranks of the unemployed are counted by the millions—in America ... 11 million, in Germany, 5 million, in England 2–3 million, in Sweden, 200,000!

In this way, 'unemployment makes itself felt in almost all areas' (Hansson 1932: 14). One of these areas was crime and attendant pleas for greater punishment. Social democracy entailed being 'deeply aware of the fact that the greatest safeguard of good order is to organize society so that everyone may find security and well-being there', Hansson (1932: 24) wrote. Thus:

where injustice prevails, where people suffer from shortcomings, where a constant concern for what tomorrow may bring weighs on the minds of the people, where society neglects its duty of care, dissatisfaction grows, preparing the fertile ground of desperate acts. (Hansson 1932: 24)

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

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

One of the reasons for this aversion to materialism in penology is the very low esteem in which the work of Rusche and Kirchheimer (1939) is held—the most famous Marxian attempt to analyse punishment—and more broadly, the theoretical approach it is said to represent. Hailing from the Frankfurt School, Rusche and Kirchheimer applied the doctrinal positions of 'critical theory' to the sociology of punishment. Famously, they argued that there was a *direct* link between economic modes of production and concrete punishment practices. Foucault (2015: 245) was appreciative of their work, noting that 'Rusche and Kirchheimer's great work, *Punishment and Social Structure*, provides a number of essential reference points' for the development of a political economy of punishment (see also Box 1987). Yet, it is probably fair to say that scholars working today find this kind of approach excessively reductionist. However, this is only because

the materialist doctrine is taken too literally, too unequivocally: most would recognise that there are layers of mediation exercised by such entities as the penal or carceral field (e.g., see Goodman, Page and Phelps 2017), or that we should expect to see a direct correlation *at all times* between unemployment and incarceration rates. In part, this is because joblessness is being supplanted with a deteriorating quality of jobs, so that millions of Americans, for example, are struck from the unemployment records maintained by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics while being caught up in cycles of underemployment, low-quality employment and the exigencies of ‘flexible capitalism’ (Sennett 2006)—what we might call the ‘Uberization’ of the economy (Fleming 2017), or, more generally, ‘platform capitalism’ (Srniczek 2016). Taken too literally and reduced to a narrow band of statistical indicators, the political economy approach to punishment must surely seem absurd if not outright false. Nonetheless, there are no good reasons why such a narrow approach should be taken today.

### The trouble with work

We have forgotten the lesson taught by Frances Perkins, President Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor (the first woman to occupy such a high position in the US federal government), who spoke of big-state spending as promoting a ‘higher form of individualism’ (New York Times 1933). It is a myth that aggressive Keynesianism necessarily entails a brutal sort of collectivism, as Hayek and many of the neoliberal Mont Pèlerin Society’s members insisted in the 1940s and later. In a letter to Richard Nixon, Milton Friedman (1971) wrote:

as we are all painfully aware, the academic community in general, and the private organizations devoted to supporting or participating in research on current public issues, in particular, are dominated by a collectivist philosophy and a hostility toward private enterprise and individual initiative.

This orthodox assumption, that collectivism is necessarily opposed to ‘individual initiative’, is one of the central neoliberal clichés that should be dismantled. Instead, it is neoliberalism that involves rampant collectivism, with its figure of the ‘indebted man’ (Lazzarato 2011) weighed down by student loans and housing mortgages (on a bubble-prone housing market), amid the exceedingly competitive crush of millennial life (Berardi 2009). Instead, the anti-surplus state is the foundation of a true individualism, a point long ago recognised by Oscar Wilde (1891: para. 13), who said, ‘with the abolition of private property ... we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism’. A flourishing individualism is only possible when the foundational needs of material life have been met, or, as Mack the Knife in Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* phrases it, ‘but till you feed us, right and wrong can wait!’ More pithily: first bread, then morals. Decent, stable work that is adequately remunerated constitutes the necessary condition for a thriving human subject. Instead of a job-creating state, or an anti-surplus state, neoliberal statecraft involves the proliferation of an ideology of workfare, or ‘work activation’, with an attendant trope of ‘job training’ (Wacquant 2010). However, job-training schemes are largely ineffectual, pushing the burden of responsibility onto the individual worker for their state of joblessness. Job training injects individual responsibility into the core of the welfare state. This individualising move finds its perhaps most comically absurd expression in various fictitious job-training schemes aimed at the unemployed, which have been described as ‘Potemkin companies’ in honour of Catherine the Great’s famed general. Thus, in France:

More than 100 Potemkin companies ... are operating today ... and there are thousands more across Europe. In Seine-St.-Denis, outside Paris, a pet business called Animal Kingdom sells products like dog food and frogs. ArtLim, a company in Limoges, peddles fine porcelain. Prestige Cosmetique in Orleans deals in perfumes. All these companies’ wares are imaginary. (Alderman 2015: para. 4)



The fiction of operating a false firm is meant to equip the unemployed with the requisite skills and discipline to function in the real labour market. One could go further in this criticism by noting that these fictitious firms only serve to highlight the fiction that is the 'real' economy, too: in *Empty Labor*, Roland Paulsen (2015) estimates that office workers routinely waste around two hours of labour time each day on 'empty' tasks, such as surfing the internet. David Graeber (2015) goes even further, arguing that it is not so much the vacuous pockets within the working day that require our attention but the widespread proliferation of 'bullshit jobs', whole swathes of occupations that are, in some sense, meaningless or superfluous to human need: 'a world without teachers or dock-workers would soon be in trouble', Graeber (cited in Jeffries 2015: para. 7) writes, 'but it's not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs or legal consultants to similarly vanish'. While this is tantalisingly put, more rigorously we might say that there are no objective standards for determining which jobs are 'valid' and which are 'pointless'. The fictitious absurdity of Potemkin companies highlights the narrow moralism of the supporters of workfare and proponents of 'labour activation' policies, who equate unemployment with shirking or laziness.

This point was recognised by some nineteenth-century radicals, including the French socialist Paul Lafargue. Above all, a worker produces not goods, services or even surplus value, but superfluity, on Lafargue's (1904) account: through their labour, all employees also produce the conditions for their own and others' unemployment. Lafargue's quasi-Keynesianism *avant la lettre* is largely consistent with the observable facts: wherever market economies have reached a sufficiently advanced stage, one of the primary political problems becomes the problem of creating enough jobs, with even advanced, interventionist states often failing to do so, and a resultant overhanging threat to the social order posed by even slight increases in joblessness. In his visionary work of heterodox Marxism, *The Right to Be Lazy*, Lafargue (1904) predicted what might happen when automation technologies reached a sufficient state of maturity: the labour market, Lafargue (1904: 36) believed, will:

when all social forces are brought to it ... be so overfilled that it will be well nigh a matter of compulsion to forbid work: it will be almost impossible for this swarm of hitherto unproductive human beings to find employment, for they are more numerous than the locusts.

Lafargue implicitly attacked Marx (he was Marx's son-in-law, having married his second daughter, Laura) and what he came to see as the Marxian fetishisation of work—a piece of bourgeois ideology, so Lafargue believed, unthinkingly adopted by communist theoreticians, beginning with Marx's conviction that human beings are distinguished by their capacity for work: we humans are working animals, and, therefore, we cease to be animals at all, Marx claims in *Capital*; as Erich Fromm (2013: 34) would later put it, 'labor is the self-expression of man, an expression of his individual physical and mental powers'. With the ideology of producerism, labour becomes an unhealthy fetish. Lafargue's ironic appraisal of work was that, given a sufficiently advanced technological state, market economies would generate a superabundance of goods, with attendant unemployment and social misery, so that there would be no-one available to consume them—certainly not at levels commensurate with a modest, sensible way of life. (Lafargue's writings are full of scorn for the profligate bourgeoisie and their excessively indulgent habits.) As a result, advanced capitalism produced surplus populations, or swarming 'locusts', Lafargue (1904: 36) says, as Marx, too recognised, in *Capital* (e.g. Marx 1976: 781-794).

At the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, a similar insight led Keynes to propose capping trade surpluses, with an international 'bancor' currency and an International Clearing Union set up to oversee the system (see Varoufakis 2016). The theoretical groundwork for this plan had been laid down in Keynes's (1936/2013: 338-339) interwar *General Theory*, in which he noted that advantages accruing to exporting countries necessarily represented a deficit to importers:

The fact that the advantage which our own country gains from a favourable balance is liable to involve an equal disadvantage to some other country ... means ... that an immoderate policy may lead to a senseless international competition for a favourable balance which injures all alike.

Keynes's (quoted in Kriesler and Nevile 2016: 34) plan, premised on the view that trade was a 'mechanism for exporting unemployment between developed nations', ultimately failed because of the great power dynamics in play at Bretton Woods (e.g., see Steil 2013), but it would have incentivised countries running export surpluses to rebalance them.

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

Lafargue's almost existentialist—certainly humanistic—interrogation of the centrality of work finds its counterpart in the Italian philosopher Franco Berardi's (2009) twenty-first century syncretisation of Marxism and humanism. Writing on the effects of competitive neoliberalism on human wellbeing, Berardi (2009: 82) notes that:

what is really experienced is the production of scarcity and need, compensated by a fast, guilty and neurotic consumption because we can't waste time; we need to get back to work.

To Berardi, the narrow category of wealth, understood as the accrual of economic capital, is at the heart of our contemporary predicament. Today, wealth is 'no longer the ability to enjoy things, bodies and signs in time, but the accelerating and expansive production of their loss, transformed in exchange value and anxiety' (Berardi 2009: 82). Far from veering off into excessive idealism or naïve voluntarism, Berardi (2009: 169) fuses Marxian concerns over workers' rights with a humanistic critique of the work-and-wealth-centric worldview:

Perhaps the answer is that it is necessary to slow down, finally giving up economic fanaticism and collectively rethink the true meaning of the word 'wealth'. Wealth does not mean a person who owns a lot but refers to someone who has enough time to enjoy what nature and human collaboration place within everyone's reach.

Similarly, in an academic world straining under the burden of research assessment exercises and the symbolic violence of (perceived) prestige in 'top-tier' publications—what Sayer (2015) calls 'The Insult of the REF' (or Research Excellence Framework)—some researchers have called for a

return to 'slow scholarship' (Hartman and Darab 2012) over those '*fast-thinkers* who offer cultural "fast food" ' or 'predigested and prethought culture', to use Bourdieu's (1998: 29) memorable phrase.

However, this critique of hypercompetitive economism is also redoubled by mounting ecological and environmental troubles: the Earth cannot sustain such an economic structure any longer, recognised long ago by the 'deep ecology' of philosopher Arne Naess (1973). The difficulty for an anti-surplus state, then, lies in striking a balance between the need for a social state (to counteract the predictable spread of social pathologies) and an ecological state (which does not devastate our terrestrial biosphere). Among the promising candidates for resolving this conundrum, if not outright contradiction, is some form of guaranteed income. As Wacquant (2008: 7) writes:

Public policies aimed at combating advanced marginality will have to reach beyond the narrow perimeter of wage employment and move towards the institutionalization of a right to subsistence outside of the tutelage of the market via some variant of 'basic income'.

Both social policies (to alleviate social suffering) and ecologically sound policies (to prevent ecological devastation) are needed now: to do one without the other would combat human suffering in the long run.

## Conclusion

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

To combat the formation and solidification of vast surplus populations—what is needed across the (so-called) post-industrialised world<sup>9</sup>—is a second New Deal, a new age of social democracy for the twenty-first century. While the 2008 financial crisis breathed new life into the idea that 'we are all Keynesians now' (Friedman 1966)—a phrase first coined by Milton Friedman and repeated by Richard Nixon, demonstrating the reluctant admission by neoliberals that even in times of crisis, Keynes's basic counter-cyclical insights were unavoidable—we are, nevertheless, not nearly Keynesian enough. To some critics, the idea that the state itself should take up direct responsibility for employment smacks too much of twentieth-century command economies. However, what other options are available? The spectre of surplus populations makes command economists of us all. In the US, one survey suggests that one-third of all workers are now considered 'contingent' (freelancers, 'self-employed', and the like), giving rise to a highly insecure 'gig economy' wherein ontological insecurity abounds. Late-modern neoliberalism has given

birth to what one perceptive commentator has called the '50 Cent economy' (Pein 2018), named after the US hip-hop artist whose guiding maxim is 'get rich or die trying'. Even in the absence of unemployment, the qualitative deterioration of employment calls for a new tack in steering social life. Criminologists should be at the forefront of such debates, for their objects of study are shaped by the presence or absence of work, the deterioration or revalorisation of employment, indeed, the whole 'ensemble of ... social relations' that Marx and Engels (1998: 570) rightly saw as formative of our collective species-being.

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

<sup>2</sup> The complete text of the Morgenthau Plan is available online at World Future Fund (n.d.).

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

<sup>4</sup> This quotation is taken from an (unofficial) movie script, which is available online at Script-O-Rama (n.d.).

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

<sup>6</sup> These, and other principles, are available on the Millions of Jobs (n.d.) website.

<sup>7</sup> For a full-text version of this resolution, see the US Congress (2017) website.

<sup>8</sup> For a list of past prize winners, and its relatively unequivocal slant favouring particular theoretical paradigms, see the Stockholm University (2018) website.

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

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