Negative Solidarity: The Affective Economy in Neoliberalism's Decline

Jason Read

Spinoza's question of political thought, "why do the masses fight for their servitude as if it was salvation," has taken on an unanticipated economic and social relevance since the post-2008 economic recession. With that question now displaced from its 17th-century context of taxes and bread, wars of glory, and despots, it is possible to see a struggle for servitude in how the masses clamour for more jobs, more austerity, and further persecuting the disadvantaged in the name of fiscal discipline. In a post on the blog *Splintering Bone Ashes*, Alex Williams has dubbed this particular struggle for servitude "negative solidarity." Williams defined it as "an aggressively enraged sense of injustice, committed to the idea that, because I must endure increasingly austere working conditions (wage freezes, loss of benefits, declining pension funds, erasure of job security and increasing precarity) then everyone else must too."[1]

We can point to multiple instances of negative solidarity, and with them, a changing trajectory of both imagination and affect as its meaning (i.e., its objects and narratives) shift. There is the iconic figure of the "welfare queen," and with her, the entire racialised demonisation of benefit programs for the unemployed and impoverished. There is also the migrant figure, likewise chastised for dependency and laziness on the one hand and sometimes for "stealing jobs" on the other. More recently, negative solidarity has been aimed at the public services worker – the teacher or government employee who continues to benefit, albeit ever so slightly, from union protection and collective bargaining. Such workers are seen as failing to engage in the necessary discipline and suffering of work. That "negative solidarity" can take on so many different figures – mostly pure fantasies disconnected from actual conditions – suggests that, at its core, it articulates an imagination and a particular structure of feeling. It is not so much a reflection of actual conditions and real relations as of a particular way of representing or perceiving those conditions. Articulating and elaborating a definition of negative solidarity entails a necessary

1 Alex Williams, "Negative Solidarity and Post-Fordism," *Splintering Bone Ashes* (blog), January 31, 2010, https://splinteringboneashes.blogspot.com/2010/01/negative-solidarity-and-post-fordist.html.

detour through affective economy. The affective economy is understood in two senses: first, that the economy (i.e., the relations of production and distribution) circulates and produces affects, sensibilities and desires, as much as goods and services, and second, that these affects are a necessary element of producing and reproducing the very conditions of work.

Affective economy: A definition

According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Spinoza did not just pose the question of negative solidarity (of why people fight for their servitude as if it was salvation) but also offered the basis of an answer. To grasp how, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "desire of the most disadvantaged creature will invest with all its strength, irrespective of any economic understanding or lack of it, the capitalist social field as a whole,"[2] it is necessary to think of desire's immanence to the economy. Desire must be posited as part of the infrastructure, without passing through the mediations of ideology, the family, or the state. Deleuze and Guattari's provocation exceeds their articulation in *Anti-Oedipus* to become a general problem of contemporary Marxist thought: there is a general turn towards understanding subjectivity to be not only directly produced by the economy (i.e., without passing through superstructural mediations), but also reproducing the economy as well (i.e., to be a necessary condition of social reproduction).[3] This insight is found in Deleuze and Guattari's work and Althusser's re-examination of ideology and reproduction. It is also apparent in neo-Spinozists such as Frédéric Lordon and Yves Citton. The causes of this conceptual change, no doubt complex and numerous, have as much to do with the changing nature of capitalism itself as with the history of worker and student struggle. As capital requires more intensive, cooperative, and relational work, it needs a subject that is not just docile and compliant, showing up for work each day, but also actively desires to be put to work. They must fully identify with their work. Spinoza's identity of bodies and ideas makes it possible to grasp an economy increasingly predicated on the identity of economy and subjectivity.

---

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 229.

3 "Instead of adding a theory of the 'superstructure' to the existing theory of the structure, he [Althusser] aims at transforming the concept of the structure itself by showing that its process of 'production' and 'reproduction' *originarily* depends on unconscious ideological conditions. As a consequence a social formation is no longer representable in dualistic terms – a thesis that logically should lead us to abandon the image of the 'superstructure.' Another concept of historical complexity must be elaborated, with opposite sociological, anthropological, and ontological prerequisites": Etienne Balibar, "The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser," in *The Althusserian Legacy*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (NY: Verso, 1993), 8.

How does Spinoza, a philosopher from the 17th century, make it possible to grasp this rather recent transformation? First, there is Spinoza's definition of subjectivity, of the human essence, as defined by desire. As Spinoza writes, "desire is the very essence of man insofar as his essence is conceived as determined to any action from any given affection of itself."[4] As much as Spinoza's definition posits a universal essence, it does so in a way both singular (we all have different desires depending on our particular constitution) and relational (our constitutions are the effects of our encounters and relations with others). Put differently, desire is transindividual. Desires are necessarily different and unique, determined by the affections; everyone desires according to their unique history. As Spinoza argues, we do not desire something because it is good. Instead, "we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it."[5] Desire is fundamentally intransitive, lacking a specific telos, object, or orientation. The history of relations determines desire's object and orientations. Everyone strives to increase their joy, their capacity to act and think, but how this joy is defined is partly determined by the history of past encounters. I desire those things that seem to me to be the cause of past joys, even if I am often ignorant of the true causes of my desires or the effects of my attachments.

Everyone equally strives, but not all striving is equal. Spinoza's "conatus," or striving, is always caught between two determinations: (i) the history of encounters that assigns an individual specific objects and desires without adequately grasping their relations, and (ii) the possibility of a life oriented from an adequate comprehension of its conditions and an increase of its joy. These two different determinations are manifested in different senses of joy. One is determined by the encounters and relations that one is subject to, while the other is determined by one's capacities. This ethical division between the passive and active life animates Spinoza's thought. It is, as André Tosel argues, an ethical materialism – a materialism oriented by the division and difference of modes of individuation, considered primarily in terms of their individual, biographical relations. This materialist ethics takes as its terrain of inquiry affects, desire, and imagination as constitutive of subjectivity.[6]

Frédéric Lordon argues that Spinoza's mode of subjection can be expanded beyond the ethical distinction of modes of life to the history of the production and reproduction of subjectivity under capitalism. Doing so entails expanding the encounters that shape one's desires from the biographical to the structural. Spinoza provides an opening of this transition from the ethical to the social when he writes

4 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. and ed. Edwin Curley (NY: Princeton UP, 1994), EIIIDI.

5 Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIIIP9S.

6 André Tosel, *Du Matérialisme de Spinoza* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1994), 18.

that "money occupies the mind of the multitude more than anything else."[7] Money is the universal equivalent of desire not just because of past positive experiences in one's biography but also an institutional history – we live in a market society where money is the condition of any desire. Lordon can then map the coordinates of desire's institution onto two axes. The first axis is the division between production and consumption, the two separate spheres of activity in capitalist society. Production and consumption relate to wage labour and the commodity form, the two structural conditions of capitalism. Production and consumption also form the basis of different organisations of desire, joy and sadness. The second axis, drawn from Spinoza, is that of joy or sadness understood as an increase or decrease in one's power and potential.

Using Lordon's coordinates, it is possible to chart desire's history under capital. The first phase corresponds to the initial formation of capitalism, what Marx called formal subsumption. The primary institutional basis for capitalism at this stage is the absence of any alternative to wage labour, destroying the commons or any sustenance economy. Activity, the necessary activity that sustains life, is organised and oriented according to wage labour. To paraphrase Hobbes, who captured the affective composition of primitive accumulation better than Spinoza, "fear" is the "passion to be reckoned with" at this stage of capital.[8] Fear, in this sense, is the idea of future hardship or sadness. Fear is a motive, a driving force orienting the striving, the conatus, but an unstable one. People compelled by fear will work, but only as much as needed to stave off punishment or losing their job. Those who do not work do not eat, and the fear of starvation or homelessness keeps them working. Fear is not only a limited incentive but also a fundamentally unstable one. It can drive one to revolt almost as much as it can compel one to obey. Lordon then maps a second stage that roughly corresponds to Fordism and the rise of consumer society. The institutional effect of Fordism is to destroy the pleasures and pride of concrete labour – the pleasures of a particular skill – in favour of a general shift of desire away from labour towards consumption. Ford's "five-dollar day" establishes an affective economy, exchanging sadness and frustration at work for the pleasures of the newly emergent consumer society.

The final, or at least most recent, change in this affective economy reorients pleasure towards work. However, it is no longer the pleasure of a particular skill or a result but the pleasure of employment itself. It is a desire that is, as much as possible, modelled on abstract labour. The modern subject of capitalism is described by terms stripped of reference to any particular task or activity and instead refer to employability as a general ideal. The modern individual is a professional entrepreneur of him or herself. Formal subsumption, Fordism, neoliberalism – these constitute the

7 Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIVAPPXXVIII.

8 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651; reis., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 177.

rough schema of the history of desire under capitalism, of the conatus. It is a history that moves from the negative affects to joyful, from fear to joy, and from consumption to production. A transition that is less a liberation, freedom from fear and wants, than a subjection. It culminates in the modern ideal to find one's realisation, one's passion, in the structure and activity of work itself. The new mantra is "do what you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." However, in practice, this is less about revaluing a trade, or the pleasures of specific concrete labour, than finding a passion for constantly mobilising one's potential. "Professional" no longer refers to a set of skills or knowledge but a particular subjective comportment of engaged detachment. It is a history in which the gap between the capitalist's interest and the worker's striving shrinks to become barely perceptible. A world of motivated self-starters, or what Lordon calls "joyous automobiles."[9]

Negative solidarity

With the provisional structure of affective economy outlined here, it is possible to map out a subsequent stage beyond Lordon's sketch of neoliberalism, something coming after the affective economy of neoliberal motivation. In *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*, Jennifer Silva lays out some directions of the affective economy in what could be called late-neoliberalism. Silva examines what happens to lives in the United States during the post-2008 recession. These are the lives of primarily working-class people caught up in debt, with dwindling job prospects, and often living with their parents. They have been denied the promised life of careers, families, and homes of their own – they are mourning the slow decline of the Fordist dream. What Silva finds striking is the lack of any anger or political mobilisation on the part of those left out of the American dream. Being left out of the dream of a steady and linear career does not entirely exclude one from the mythology, from the ideal of work and discipline. As she describes her general findings:

> At its core, this emerging working-class adult self is characterised by low expectations of work, wariness toward romantic commitment, widespread distrust of social institutions, profound isolation from others, and an overriding focus on their emotions and psychic health. Rather than turn to politics to address the obstacles standing in the way of a secure adult life, the majority of the men and women I interview crafted deeply *personal* coming of age stories, grounding their adult identities in recovering from their painful pasts – whether addiction, childhood

9 Frédéric Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*, trans. Gabriel Ash (2010; reis., NY: Verso, 2014), 53.

> abuse, family trauma, or abandonment and forging an emancipated, transformed and adult self.[10]

To describe this shift along the lines outlined by Lordon, we can see a new affective orientation, one sustained neither by consumption (which is too limited, reduced to basic necessities to capture desire), or even production (as work becomes stripped of not only any joys but any fantasy of mobility and accumulation). The failures of consumption or wage labour to offer any joys do not lead to their rejection or a critical attitude to capitalism. What emerges instead is an ideal of work as discipline; self-transformation becomes the source of validation. Personal worth is found not through what one can buy, or even what one can sell of oneself, but in the sense of self-transformation or responsibility for one's condition. In other words, responsibility matters, not the results or outcome.

The focus on self-responsibility, of taking responsibility for overcoming all of one's hardships and traumas, entails a massive distrust of any collective or institutional solution and a corresponding suspicion of those who engage in them. Pride in taking responsibility for one's fate is an attempt to construct a joy, a positive condition, out of a negative sad affect. It attempts to make the difficulty of changing or altering one's condition into a source of pride or joy. Spinoza argues that the mind tends to dwell on things that increase its joy and power.[11] Lordon argues that this effect is not an innate tendency towards affirmation or liberation; rather, it explains how people can put up with the most limited possibilities for joy and power. It is less a line of flight than what keeps us confined in whatever situation we find ourselves. The tendency to affirm joy leads individuals to dwell on those tiny pleasures of the workday, the small talk and casual Fridays, or in this case, the satisfaction and sense of responsibility that stems from relying only on oneself. As the possibility of aspiring for more, even systemic change, is increasingly reduced, the tiny pleasures of daily life are elevated into objects of desire. Lordon describes this double-edged movement as follows:

> symbolic violence consists then properly speaking in the production of a double imaginary, the imaginary fulfilment, which makes the humble joys assigned to the dominated appear sufficient, and the imaginary of powerless, which convinces them to renounce any greater ones to which they might aspire.[12]

---

10 Jennifer M. Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (NY: Oxford, 2013), 11.

11 Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIIIP54.

12 Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital*, 110. Note that the translation has been slightly modified here.

We can find a similar affective composition of working conditions and attitudes towards work in David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs*. While Graeber spends much of the book documenting and detailing the prevailing alienation of the pointlessness of a bullshit job, he also explains why bullshit jobs do not produce universal disdain and even rebellion. As Graeber writes, "workers … gain feelings of dignity and self-worth *because* they hate their jobs."[13] Graeber's formulation inverts the classic definition of alienation in which negative affects, loss of self, purpose, and activity lead to a critical relation to work. Instead, it is because one finds work to be painful, demeaning or difficult that one stays attached. Work finds its justification in and through its difficulty. This becomes, in part, an attachment to that demeaning, difficult or taxing dimension as a point of pride. It inverts the basic Spinozist principle that one endeavours to imagine things that increase one's joy and capacity; more precisely, it attempts to imagine one's suffering and incapacity to transform it as a point of pride, converting it to pleasure. Such a transformation of sadness into joy, passivity into activity, has as its necessary condition the sense of being completely overpowered and overwhelmed by one's conditions.

This sense of being incapable of changing one's conditions can be real or imagined. As Spinoza argues, the imagination of being powerless is the same as being actually powerless because "whatever man imagines he cannot do, he necessarily imagines; and he is so disposed by this imagination that he really cannot do what he imagines he cannot do."[14] Such an imagination has genuine effects not only on how one conducts their life but on how one imagines the conduct of others. As Graeber argues, those who take pride in their work because it is difficult are angry at those who do not work *and* those whose work is not sufficiently difficult or demanding. In recent years in United States politics, teachers and teachers' unions have been held as particular targets of contempt for their job protections, as a unionised workforce; the supposed ease of their job, shorter working days, and summers off; and the fact that their job is perceived to be rewarding. This was summed up in the attempt to identify teachers and other public service workers with the "welfare queen."[15] Others' joy, real or imagined, becomes the source of resentment. The pride taken in one's work is inseparable from the anger and jealousy one has towards others, or towards what one imagines as their imagined life of pleasure or ease.

If the fulfilment comes from the small pleasures of the workday, or work itself seen as a source of pride, then the imaginary powerlessness comes not just from the contemporary labour situation, which is increasingly subject to the rules of capital

13 David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 242.

14 Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIIIDEFXXVIII.

15 Daniel Martinez Hosang and Joseph E. Lowndes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2019), 19.

and profitability, but the overall sense of reduced possibility and resources that permeate social life. This increased sense of austerity comes from declining wages and a dwindling tax base. As Monica Potts describes the attitudes in Arkansas in a *New York Times* profile:

> There's a prevailing sense of scarcity – it's easy for people who have lived much of their lives in a place where $25 an hour seems like a high salary to believe there just isn't enough money to go around. The government, here and elsewhere, just can't afford to help anyone, people told me. The attitude extends to national issues, like immigration. Where I see needless cruelty, my neighbours see necessary reality.[16]

In this prevailing sense of austerity, an individual's difficulty in paying their bills, their increased debt, is projected outward into a world in which scarcity is the rule and generosity, even equity or justice, is a kind of luxury. It does not matter that this scarcity is artificial, produced in a context of ever-increasing wealth for the wealthiest one per cent who pocket the proceeds of declining wages and massive tax cuts. What matters is the increasing perception, the image, of limited resources and possibilities. This imaginary of limitation and powerlessness is internalised as a valorisation of one's toughness, hardness, and discipline. These become the only joys left.

It is possible to understand such a subject as the rugged individual posited against society, which is how it is often presented. The claim of being an individual, free from collective influence or belonging, is as important as being responsible. Such claims cannot be taken at face value. The prevalence of the same attitudes and ideas, the claim from so many disparate and different people to be "an individual" would seem to negate in its enunciation what is being articulated. Such an individuation is transindividual even if, in this case, the transindividuation takes on the paradoxical status of refusing any collective relation.

This suggests a "negative individuality" as a necessary corollary of negative solidarity. This individuality is not only negative in refusing any collective belonging but, ultimately, in its constitution as individual as well. The very conditions that undermine collective belonging, the persistent sense of precarity and inability to construct a coherent trajectory, also undermine the possibility of individuation, of constructing an individual life or identity.[17] The destruction of individuation through labour is augmented by the rise of consumer society – which effectively promises a world of "freedom, equality, and Bentham" – that has turned out to be a world of manufac-

16 Monica Potts, "In the Land of Self Defeat," *The New York Times*, October 4, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/opinion/sunday/trump-arkansas.html.

17 Robert Castel, *La montée des incertitudes: Travail, protections, statut de l'individu* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2009), 443.

tured desires and digital surveillance.[18] The negative solidarity that manifests itself as a kind of free-floating anger and frustration has, as its corollary (and condition), individuals tossed and turned by the conflicts of affects and imagination without an ability to even orient individual thought or act.

The sketch of a post-neoliberal subject is a highly ambivalent one. Its ambivalence stems from the ambivalence of the affects, the tendency for every positive affect – joy, hope, love – to be shadowed by its opposite and risk becoming it. In this case, joys and pleasures are not only inseparable from pains and tribulations but a kind of transformation or revalorisation of them. The pride of work is a transformation of pain into pleasure, difficulty into responsibility. It also reveals the connection between striving and the imagination. The attachments to responsibility to a sense of worth found in work are strategies for coping with declining prospects for improved material conditions, for the pleasures of consumer society. They are remnants, often images of bygone conditions and decaying dreams. What we increasingly see in austerity is the oldest myths and legends of capital and capitalist accumulation revived against its current material reality. A moral veneer to the capitalist relation is provided by this revival, not in violent expropriation of the commons but in the narrative of so-called primitive accumulation – the story of the frugal capitalist and lazy worker. As Marx writes:

> This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one the diligent, intelligent, and above all frugal elite; the other lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread by the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential. Never mind! Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins.[19]

Primitive accumulation persists, not as a myth about the origins of capital but as a lingering morality play about the present. Work, especially work understood as *real* (i.e., coded as productivist, masculine, and often white), is understood to be the source of at least symbolic value, even as its market value declines. As the Bible says, "those who do not work should not eat" – not because their work is necessary for the

18 Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*, trans. David Barison, Daniel Ross, and Patrick Crogan (Stanford: Stanford UP), 48.

19 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (1867; reis., NY: Penguin, 1977), 873.

community's survival but because it is necessary to make them worthy.[20] Moreover, those who do not sufficiently fit the productivist ideal (teachers, caregivers, bureaucrats) are seen as not really working. Alternatively, to use the parlance of our times, they do not have a "real job."[21] They are suspect as well. The narrative at the heart of primitive accumulation was always defined by temporal displacement; it was an idealised version of the present, the hard worker who saves enough to become a capitalist, projected onto the past, onto capital's origins. Now it is projected into the future, the moral ideal of hard work outlasts its material necessity. As the biological necessity of work retreats into historical memory, and many jobs are far from being necessary in the sense of survival, work continues to be the basis of a moral distinction, separating the good from the bad. What connects the past and the present, the fantasy of survival and the morality of work, is an increasing sense of scarcity and the virtues of difficulty. The story about the moral value of work is all that remains as working time is increased and work itself is subject to the logics of casualization and precarity.

Spinoza's understanding of the constitution of ideas, of the mind as a spiritual automaton, is as important for grasping the contemporary sense of work as his understanding of desire's organisation. It is as much a matter of inadequate ideas as it is the reorganisation of desire. Just as our desire is oriented by our encounters and affects our mind, our thinking is a sort of spiritual automaton shaped by its encounters and relations. As Spinoza argues, so-called universal notions, such as "man" or "dog," often stem more from confusion than comprehension. They are inadequate ideas, unable to grasp or comprehend their genesis. They are particular ideas and impressions passed off as universal ideas. As Spinoza describes this process:

> It should be noted that these notions are not formed by all in the same way, but vary from one to another, in accordance with what the body has more often been affected by, and what the mind imagines or recollects more easily. For example, those who have more often regarded men's stature with wonder will understand by the word *man* an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men – for example, that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped or a rational animal.
>
> And similarly concerning the others – each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body. Hence it is not surprising that so many controversies have arisen among the philosophers who have wished to explain natural things by mere images of things.[22]

---

20 Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1960*, trans. Michael Shaw (NY: Seabury Press, 1978), 83.

21 Hosang and Lowndes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots*, 25.

22 Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIIP40Schol.

Similarly, we could argue that work, labour, and productivity are said in many senses. When it comes to work, there is the general physical notion of energy expended in displacement and transformation; the economic sense, of activity, any activity, done for a wage; the more diffuse sense in which any activity defined by effort and difficulty is dubbed work, such as homework or housework; and, finally, a moral idea of discipline and value attached to the last two meanings. These different meanings of "work" traverse physics, anthropology, economics, and ethics, shifting from natural necessity to specific social relations. The different senses do not only, as the passage from Spinoza indicates, stem from different encounters and relations, in which everyone would have their own personal and idiosyncratic definition, but there is, in every society, an attempt to impose and standardise one definition, imposing its particular sense over all others.

The dominant sense is a motley collection of everything ever believed, made up of remnants of puritan struggle, Fordist promises, and contemporary anxiety. Its anachronisms are tailored to the current conjuncture in which more is demanded of employees and less is offered in exchange. The dominant sense of work is a conjunction of the ethical and the anthropological to support the economic. As Moishe Postone writes, "this apparently transhistorical necessity – that the individual's labour is the necessary means to their (or their family's) consumption – serves as the basis for a fundamental legitimating ideology of the capitalist social formation as a whole, throughout its various cases."[23] The socioeconomic necessity of working to procure commodities is given the veneer of an anthropological or biological necessity for survival. It is this necessity that becomes the basis of its moralisation.

There is a dominant sense of work, a dominant meaning, as much as there is a dominant affective constitution of labour. Negative solidarity can be understood as a particular affective composition oriented around work. In the first instance, this composition is made up of a joy, a joy rescued from sadness and powerlessness. Work is seen as a point of pride precisely because it produces sad affects. Or, if work is unavailable or sporadic, there is still the pride in a kind of discipline and independence. This joy, or this particular transvaluation of sadness into joy, is coupled with a kind of anger or indignation at those perceived not to work hard enough, are not engaged in real work, or who rely on political power or corruption (these things are more or less synonymous) to keep their jobs. This affect, this anger, aimed at everyone from the unemployed who benefit from the last remnants of social protection to those public employees who still have union protections, must be seen as both an exclusion and an inclusion. Of course, the fantasy of the welfare queen far exceeds the reality of existing programs for the unemployed, which have been cut to a bare minimum and increasingly tied to requirements for work. Despite this, there

23 Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 161.

is still a popular bumper sticker in the United States defining this particular kind of indignation: "Keep Working: Millions on Welfare Depend on You." The person affixing such a bumper sticker is not just angry at the person supposedly living off of their labour, but as it addresses, or interpellates, its imagined audience, it draws them together in shared indignation. There is a sense of a "we," a collectivity of "real" workers, "real Americans," an imagined universality, albeit a weak one, defined by both work as an ethical norm and basis of community. This norm only exists in its violation, in the sense of indignation at those who do not work. This is what puts the solidarity in negative solidarity. There is a unity, a community, albeit loosely defined in and through their shared engagement in work, in productive work. Work that is defined through both its physical difficulty, or at least the stoic fortitude it takes to endure it; its economic centrality, or perceived economic centrality; and ethic of individual commitment, rather than collective protections. The solidarity is negative in that it eschews any collectivity (unions are seen as the deviation rather than the expression of this collectivity precisely because they undermine the shared commitment to work that defines it) and in the way it functions as a strategy. Negative solidarity can only see any improvement, collective bargaining, protection of employment, and so on as not only partial, and thus somehow corrupt, but also as deviating from the fundamental ethical basis of work itself, which demands individual strength and fortitude. As much as negative solidarity is aimed at others, at those who are perceived not to work, seeking to discipline those who rely on state spending or those protected by union agreements, it ultimately further attenuates class struggle, obscuring actual divisions with imagined ones. It is anti-solidarity presented as imagined solidarity. The attachment to work and independence ultimately undermines its status in the world, as individual workers are left to fend for themselves.[24]

Affective economy/mythic economy

From this provisional sketch of the present, it is possible to not only bring affective economy into the present, thereby theorising a fourth period or late-neoliberalism, but also to refine and expand an understanding of affective economy. Turning back to Lordon's conception, we can see two connected limitations. First, Lordon's schema of three periods makes the fundamental error of any periodisation of history, presenting history as the displacement and transformation of self-contained epochs understood as entirely different relations to work. Against this division between different periods and times, it is possible to argue for an incomplete and partial overlap. Workers driven by fear of losing their wages were not displaced by Fordist

24 Hosang and Lowndes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots*, 56.

dreams of consumption, just as working to consume has not been displaced by the neoliberal fantasy of being an entrepreneur driven by one's passionate investment in their work. These different organisations of desire coexist. They coexist not just in the same world distributed across a global economy that combines sweatshops, modern factories, and technology entrepreneurs, often within the same company or producing the same commodity, but also in the same city. These ultimately coexist, if we consider them in terms of their primarily affective dimension, in the same individual.

Lordon's emphasis on a particular affect and a particular affective orientation – love or fear – aimed towards the activity or the wage, risks overlooking one of Spinoza's central insights about affects: their ambivalence. Spinoza argues that the human body is "composed of a great many individuals of different natures," and that, when it comes to the objects of desire, "one and the same object can be the cause of many and contrary affects."[25] This complexity gives rise to the vacillation of the affects. A similar ambivalence traverses the wage relation. Sometimes one works just to pay the bills, and the fear of not being able to do so is what drives one to work, and at other times one is motivated by the possibilities of consumption, all of this is topped off, as it were, by the desire to do the work that one loves. These different affective orientations do not (only) define three separate epochs in the history of capital. They identify different affective orientations distributed not only across the same globe, nation, or city – but also across the same individual during the working day.

This brings us to the second limitation. In failing to see the heterogeneity of the affective composition of the present, Lordon fails to recognise that any unity of the present moment, its ability to hold together in the image of capitalist society, consumer society, or neoliberal gig economy, is as much an effect of the assemblage and organisation of ideas and the imagination as it is the organisation of affects and the striving of bodies. There is a dominant idea, or image of work, of its reality, value and effects, that organises work's disparate experiences and conditions. Or, more to the point, desires are structured as much by myths and ideals as they are by their material conditions. Our desire, the conatus, is oriented as much by our imagination as by the material conditions that structure labour and consumption. Spinoza writes, "both insofar as the mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being and it is conscious of this striving it has."[26] Spinoza's formulation is broad, even ambivalent. The mind strives to preserve itself but does so according to its understanding or misunderstanding of what will preserve itself at a given moment. All acting, all thinking, is strategic, as Laurent Bove argues, motivated by an attempt to affirm and maximise

25 Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIIIP17Schol.

26 Spinoza, EIIIP9.

its power. However, strategies differ according to different understandings or imaginations of the given situation.[27] Spinoza writes, "the mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body's power of acting."[28] Spinoza stresses the indeterminate nature of this striving; those with inadequate ideas and adequate ideas equally strive. Just as striving orients the imagination, compelling us to imagine those things that aid or capacity to act, the imagination conditions and limits striving, determining our sense of what is possible or desirable. Sometimes what we imagine to be the condition of increasing power, adding or augmenting our power of acting, is our subjection. Desire and imagination, body and mind, are subject to the same causal relations and conditions that make up history. Just as the striving of our body is constrained and captured by the wage relation and the commodity form that channels our desires, our mind is constrained and captured by the images and narratives of the culture industry.

Work is not just the basis of our economy but our ideology. Narratives of self-transformation through work inundate us. The labour relation cannot be separated from the narratives we use to make sense of it and orient ourselves, from the Horatio Alger myths to modern-day Silicon Valley gurus extolling us to find our true passion and calling in work.[29] Work is a short-circuit between the classes, not just in that it is the linchpin of the relation of exploitation of labour-power that links the two. As labour-power, it is what the capitalist class needs from the working class; and what the worker must necessarily sell to the capitalist. At the level of material conditions, this exchange links and divides the two classes; what the capitalist treats as just another commodity and cost of production is the very life and existence of the worker. At the level of representation, or myth, work does not so much divide the classes, placing them on two sides of the conflict, but unites them in the image of a common project and a universal condition. Work is not just the universal fate of humanity in the sense of the aforementioned saying, "whoever does not work shouldn't eat," but is the general condition for social belonging. To work is to be worthwhile; it is the precondition of self-respect and ethical belonging.[30] The modern capitalist increasingly presents themself as a worker and insists that they work as much as their workers, if not more so. As Étienne Balibar writes, "the capitalist is defined as a worker, as an 'entrepreneur'; the worker, as the bearer of a capacity, of a 'human cap-

27 Laurent Bove, *La stratégie du Conatus: Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 15.

28 Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIIIP12.

29 Yves Citton, *Mythocratie: Storytelling et Imaginaire de Gauche* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2010), 27.

30 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem With Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 62.

ital.'"[31] Or, to put this into contemporary parlance, capitalists are "job creators." The image of work does not divide capitalists from workers but unites them in a shared enterprise – a shared necessity made possible by the good graces of the capitalist.

Negative solidarity can thus be understood as both a particular organisation of affects, of joy and anger – pride in work and indignation at those who do not work – as well as a particular image of work, one that stresses the anthropological and moral necessity of work – everyone must work – while equally filtering this universality through the particular image of work – of work understood as "productive," something arduous enough to count as "real work." As much as real work is identified by its difficulty, its joylessness, and lack of protections, these elements are not enough to completely identify it. The image of real work, of productivism, cannot be separated from how this image is informed by and shaped by gender, race and nationality. Even within spheres of production, the "working class" is often identified with industries such as coal mining (predominantly white and rural) rather than textile production, electronics, and meat processing (much more urban and diverse).[32]

Therefore, to offer something of a conclusion: every affective composition, every organisation of desire, joys, and sadness, is also an imaginary composition, an organisation of ideas and images. They are but two different ways of viewing the same thing. Any attempt to grasp the economy or society solely through affects or the imagination is necessarily incomplete. However, when it comes to political practice, there are strategic reasons for favouring the imagination or the affects, or confronting the image of work. Negative solidarity, like every affective composition, is an articulation of both desire and imagination, and like all such articulations, it is finite and capable of being unravelled or rearticulated. There is nothing necessary about the connection between a moralising ideal of work and pride in one's hardship, as intractable they may appear. Understanding the affective and mythic dimension of the reproduction of the present is the first step in transforming it.

References

Balibar, Étienne "The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser." In *The Althusserian Legacy*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker, X–X. NY: Verso, 1993.

Balibar, Étienne. *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*. Translated by James Swenson. NY: Routledge, 1994.

Bove, Laurent. *La stratégie du Conatus: Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza*. Paris: Vrin, 1996.

31 Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (NY: Routledge, 1994), 52.

32 Hosang and Lowndes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots*, 43.

Castel, Robert. *La montée des incertitudes: Travail, protections, statut de l'individu*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2009.

Citton, Yves. *Mythocratie: Storytelling et Imaginaire de Gauche*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2010.

Deleuze, Gillles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983.

Graeber, David. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. London: Allen Lane, 2018.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994. First published 1651.

Horkheimer, Max. *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1960*. Translated by Michael Shaw. NY: Seabury Press, 1978.

Hosang, Daniel Martinez, and Joseph E. Lowndes. *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity*. Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2019.

Lordon, Frédéric. *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*. Translated by Gabriel Ash. NY: Verso, 2014. First published 2010 by La fabrique éditions.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. NY: Penguin, 1977. First published 1867 by Verlag von Otto Meisner.

Postone, Moishe. *Time, Labour, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996.

Potts, Monica. "In the Land of Self Defeat." *The New York Times*, October 4, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/opinion/sunday/trump-arkansas.html.

Silva, Jennifer M. *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. NY: Oxford, 2013.

de Spinoza, Benedict. *Ethics*. In *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, translated and edited by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. Original published 1677.

Stiegler, Bernard. *Acting Out*. Translated by David Barison, Daniel Ross, and Patrick Crogan. Stanford: Stanford University, 2009.

Tosel, André. *Du Matérialisme de Spinoza*. Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1994.

Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem With Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.

Williams, Alex. "Negative Solidarity and Post-Fordism." *Splintering Bone Ashes* (blog). January 31, 2010. https://splinteringboneashes.blogspot.com/2010/01/negative-solidarity-and-post-fordist.html.