Figures of unwork and ethics of care. Between knowing how to live and knowing how to write.

Graziano, V.

Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:
Graziano, V 2021, 'Figures of unwork and ethics of care. Between knowing how to live and knowing how to write.', Cultural Politics, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 175-192.
https://dx.doi.org/10.1215/17432197-8947879

DOI 10.1215/17432197-8947879
ISSN 1743-2197
ESSN 1751-7435

Publisher: Duke University Press

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

This document is the author's post-print version, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.

Figures of unwork and ethics of care.

Between knowing how to live and knowing how to write.

Valeria Graziano, Centre for Postdigital Cultures, Coventry University

valeria_graziano@yahoo.it

Author biography

Valeria Graziano is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Postdigital Cultures, Coventry University. Her research focuses on cultural practices that foster a creative redistribution of social reproduction, the refusal of work and the politicization of pleasure.

Abstract

The depth and significance of the shifts associated with the post-work society has provoked a newfound interest in the role of imagination in political thinking, made explicit by many authors who turned to the literary genre of utopian and sci-fi writing to sketch possible scenarios of the near future. This paper turns to another mode of constructing political narratives, a complementary mode often adopted in feminist storytelling: that of *figuration*. This article reclaims three specific figures of trans-individuation (or collective becoming) to demonstrate how it might be possible to build a public sphere of *unwork*: Bazlen, a write who never wrote but took care of other writers; the collective figure of Afro-American ‘othermothers’, as narrated by Patricia Hills Collins and bell hooks; and Amy, the little girl articulated by Carol Gilligan to give flesh to her 'ethics of care' proposition. Departing from these specific figures rather than from vast, panoramic views of a society-to-come, the article wishes to shed light on the problem of reimagining the labours (and pleasures) of social reproduction and creative action away from their subsumption into the work regime. It will show how processes of subjectivation sedimented in the collective imaginary as figures of public intellectuals impact the shape and sustenance of various modes of being together, understanding the production of thought and naming social cooperation. As the article shall describe, the relationship between living labour and knowledge (including the one embedded in technologies) is a nexus that can escape the violence of work only by locating the possibility of political action as a plural capacity located in a *materialist and feminist public sphere*.

Keywords: *antiwork, figuration, public intellectuality, ethics of care*

One of the most significant current discussions in political philosophy is the coming post-work society. The distinct factor in this scenario is the new potency, intelligence and ubiquity of automation, expected to replace 25% to 50% jobs in the next decade alone. As put by economic theorist André Gorz already in the 1980s: “The manner in which the abolition of work is to be managed and socially implemented constitutes the central political issue of the coming decades” (Gorz 4). The depth and significance of this shift has provoked a newfound interest in the role of imagination in political thinking, made explicit by the many authors who turned to the literary genre of utopian writing to sketch possible scenarios of the near future.

This essay turns instead to another mode of constructive political narratives, that of the figuration: departing from figures of subjectivation rather than from vast panorama views of a society to come. Such move away from the register of utopian writing is intended as a supplementary, rather than polemic, gesture. This is necessary in my view to address a crucial aspect that the current focus on the role of technologies in the abolition of work leaves in a state of abeyance, or of temporary disuse, namely the different processes of subjectivation we might rely on to bring about not simply a post-work, but an anti-work society, continuing the long tradition of the refusal of work from the perspective of class struggles, before it resurfaced as a preoccupation of governance and management. My main concern in this loaded debate around the end of work is indeed the extent to which it risks sidelining what it will imply in terms of the subjectivities that will bring it about, either by governing it or by suffering it. What will these subjectivities want? How will they behave and organize their activities? How will they value what they do? To whom will they feel accountable?

As I shall describe, the relationship between living labour and knowledge (including the one embedded in technologies) is a nexus that can escape the violence of work *only by conciving of political action as a plural capacity located in a materialist and feminist public sphere*. The essay will therefore reclaim three specific figures of trans-individuation (or collective becoming) to demonstrate how it might be possible, building upon Paolo Virno's work to which I will return later, to institute a different public sphere. The first two figures are that of Bobi Bazlen, based on a fictional character created by Daniele Del Giudice in his book *Wimbledon Stadium* (1983). The second is a figure based on the social role undertaken by 'othermothers' in black American culture, as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and other black feminist scholars. Despite the markedly different imaginaries and contexts that produced these figures, I am interested to read them alongside each other as they allow me to trace the contours of a materialist feminist public sphere, against the private and privative regime of work. They do so by reclaiming public intellectuality as a mode of social reproduction and, contiguously, by recoding social reproduction as a practice of public intellectuality.

The premise underpinning my proposed method of figuration is that the refusal of work has to take into account the perils implicated in the rejection of a subjectivity structured around its logic; not only for workers and breadwinners, but also for all of their so-called dependents. It must therefore perform a reorganization of those relations that are constitutive of the dichotomy private/public sphere and intellectual/reproductive labour.

In the concluding portion of this essay, the logic governing such reorganization will be introduced through yet a third figure: that of Amy, the little girl who refused to "perform

her job" as subject for a psychological test and by doing so allowed Carol Gilligan to coalesce her notion of an 'ethics of care'. In the first part of the essay, I will offer an overview of the debate on post-work to contextualize the necessity of a move towards figuration, to then move to explore the specific import of the anti-work figures that I have convoked here for the construction of a materialist and feminist public sphere.

1. Between Post-Work and Anti-Work, in a state of abeyance

The refusal of work as an inevitably human destiny has had a long and tortuous genealogy in modern philosophy. One has only to think about Nietzsche's *The Dawn of D*ay (1881), Paul Lafargue's famous treaty on *The Right to Be Lazy* (1883), or Bertrand Russell's *In Praise of Idleness* (1935) to appreciate the breadth of its deployment for thinking the horizon of a revolutionized society. Alongside its development in thought, the refusal of work has also appeared as an intermittent practice within the political struggles shaping modernity: from the nineteenth century demands for a ten-hour working day to the Italian autonomous movements of the 1970s, various working-class struggles have formulated their demands as a radical rejection of work, rather than an improvement of its conditions. More recently though, the trope of the end of work has resurfaced under a slightly different inflection than in the past. In current debates, the demise of work is mostly invoked as a transition, in the softer terminology of a 'post-work society' to come, understood as a liberation not so much of workers, but of capital, from the necessity of labour. Crucial to this passage is a focus on digital technologies that most often side-steps the thorny problem of their ownership and control.

However close post-work scenarios the reject the centrality of jobs might seem to the lineage of anti-work propositions, these should not in my view be conflated, and I will

insist here in maintaining an anti-workerist standpoint to make sense of the current conjuncture. What the anti-workerist tradition has to offer for this task is a distinctive capacity for positing the problem of the end of capital as one of re-subjectivation, complementing the more systemic overview produced by other Marxist approaches. Insisting on Marx's differentiation between the life-affirming quality of living labour and labour power and the dire conditions in which capitalism transforms each job and tasks into a soul-crushing drudgery, an anti-workerist approach thus asks: what would it mean to consider the possibility of revolution and build solidarity starting not from one's identity as a worker, but from its rejection?

The various coordinates offered by current post-work speculations could be described as mainly clustering around two perspectives that can be seen as utopian in genre. The first has been best captured by the slogan "fully automated luxury communism", which begun to circulate as a meme amongst the UK radical left before becoming the title of a book by Aaron Bastani (2018). A similar perspective is also found in Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams's influential *Inventing the Future* (2015), among others. Here, automation and ecologically sustainable technologies make it possible to surpass the scarcity of capitalist austerity, to transport society in the unbounded smooth space of an abundance economy. In this scenario, the common intelligence of the general intellect would become embedded into a networked machinic entity of extreme sophistication that would be able to take care of satisfying the enormous variations of needs and desires that traverse the social body. This vision certainly has the merit of avoiding falling prey to a certain nostalgia for a return to a simple life in a small, idyllic communities (an image that could lend itself to easy superimpositions with fantasies of a much more far-right flavour). However, the problem remains that by positing plentiful consumption

as the fundamental social relation able to substitute work, we risk forgetting how much of consumption is also a kind of work in its own right and how much the "labour of enjoyment" (Tomšič 2019) has increasingly become, since at least the post-war period, a work of *prosumption* fully enmeshed in capital exchanges. Since desire is never just personal, but always excessive and trans-individual, this seemingly secondary moment of the economic cycle cannot simply be left as a spontaneous occurrence to be dealt with after the advent of a post-work society, or as a natural drive to which humanity might somehow return to. In other words, the utopian vision of a luxurious, accelerated communism fails to provide a convincing blueprint for a politics of libidinal economy able to ask what principles would shape and guide the collective dimension of our desires once the constraints of capital and its consumerist seductions might be out of the way.

A second type of political imaginary of post-work often found in contemporary literature is connected more directly with a famous passage of Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology*, where they said that after the communist revolution it would be possible "to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as [one has] in mind" (vol. 1, 73). Here, as in other more contemporary versions of this kind of convivial frugality, the imagined organizational blueprint is based upon a combination of self-organized sustenance activities (such as rearing cattle) and intellectually stimulating endeavours (such as critiquing after dinner). The merit of this second kind of post-work imaginary is its ability to avoid the nostalgia for a centralised welfare state or a Keynesian economic model, as it hints towards more autonomously managed social landscapes. However, there are at least two different problems left unresolved in this proposal. One is the danger of assigning value to those activities that

are still recognizable as ‘useful’ in a rather classic sense, as found in a protestant, and notoriously proto-capitalist, morality. Thus, the time not spent rearing cattle should be judiciously dedicated to the virtuous exercise of one’s critical skills, for instance. The second issue one might take with the spontaneist versions of post-work utopia has to do with how much the fantasy worlds they depict centres on self-sufficiency, or on images of small communities organised as self-contained productive estates, thus once again resembling a deeply conservative idea of a society organized around an industrious *oikos*.

While the idea that a quote from Marx and Engels could lend itself to the construction of reactionary communitarian utopias might seem farfetched, it is important to remember that any kind of idyllic conception of society in which all members find their spontaneous place in production, no matter what its distinctive traits might be, lends itself to metaphysical derives the two authors would have disavowed. It was the freedom of determining own’s living labour that interested Marx and Engels, rather than a supposed spontaneity of volitions and occupations, as they knew that spontaneity is always a battlefield. And more importantly, the free time that is the very object of such spontaneity is a collective political construct, not a resource that can be individually obtained.

What emerges from the different shortcomings of the two utopian scenarios outlined above is a rather paradoxical situation, as both post-work imaginaries do not really explore how such society would reimagine precisely the relation between different activities or regimes of labour, beyond a vague conception of volition or automation. Across these discussions of post-work, the actualization of *unwork* remains up for grabs, in a state of abeyance, that is, unclaimed by its rightful owners. And who might those subjects of unwork be?

I borrow the term "unwork" [*désoeuvrer*] from the writing of Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community* (1991), where he discusses the need to think forms of collectivity that are not based precisely on a regime of production and relatedly, of identity, to use it here as a placemark for signposting those alternative to work for which many other candidate concepts can become available, each with different political implications. For instance, we can think of the classical Latin conception that opposed otium to negotium; or 'leisure time' versus 'worked time', like in the formulation of Andre Gorz in *Reclaiming Work* (1999). There are those who see 'play' or adventure as the *other* of labour (such as the American anarchist Bob Black) and those who prefer to turn to art for a viable alternative bluprint (a position most notably embraced by the likes of William Morris, Oscar Wilde and Marcel Duchamp). Yet in other theoretical contexts, work has been opposed to the idea of both labour and action, as in the long genealogy of Aristotelian philosophy culminating in the articulation of Hanna Arendt (1959) and more recently, Paolo Virno (1994).

In order to begin answering the question of who might be the subject of an antiworkerist proposition, I would now like to draw attention to two specific concepts operating as the opposites of work that have been particularly generative for current social struggles: the first is the notion of 'social reproduction', central to the recent global wave of feminist movements; and the second one is that of 'cognitive labour'[i], a key trope of mobilisations against post-Fordist production and its interlocking dimensions of globalisation, precarisation and gentrification. Juxtaposed, these two concepts of unwork could be said to cover more or less opposite ends of the spectrum of activities that frame the human condition. The first, social reproduction, has historically been differentiated

from work proper by being naturalised (meaning, genderised and racialised) and de-skilled. It preoccupies itself with the realm of necessity, and it is constituted of those social relations that can regenerate life in its quotidian and intergenerational dimensions, and it does so while relegated to the private sphere of the domestic, the familial and the informal. The second term, cognitive labour, deals with the superfluous (but for this reason not less needed) production of percepts and affects, knowledge and information, the invention of aesthetic and poetic forms, with semiotic and performative materials – and it has historically been differentiated from work proper through its particular relation with value, as a kind of labour that could not become alienated beyond a certain degree as born out of human freedom.

Yet, despite their diversity, each of these two regimes of activities have been described – in different ways – as containing the potential of going beyond capitalism, as given the right conditions they can become labours of love, but which I mean, following Spinoza, labours capable of producing joyful encounters between bodies thus increasing their capacity of existing in the world. Crucially, what these two regimes of labour share under the current phase of capitalism is that they ceased to operate as the outsides of work to become instead two of the most paradigmatic types of contemporary employment. This is true especially where the productivity of care (cleaning, cooking, maintenance, and so on) and cognitive operations (applied to designing and selling products or content) can be most effectively put to work by networked technologies making the relationships they generate fragmented, impoverished and insecure.

Imagining what a refusal of work can look like in the case of social reproduction and cognitive labour is complicated by the fact that staging a halting of production in these two realms would imply some kind of harm. On the one hand, the labour of care can never really stop without negatively impacting those who are cared for and who depend

upon that relation. On the other, in the case of labours of knowledge and creation, the difficulty of refusal is more subtle but not less pervasive, and it has to do with the fact that many of its practitioners (paid or unpaid, amateurs or professional) do not actually wish to stop at all. To do so would produce harm in the sense of negatively impacting their own capacity of practicing, albeit in negative alienated conditions, what constitutes a source of joy and self-realisation (this very characteristic is also at the core of the neoliberal self-entrepreneurial mantra inciting people to turn their passions into their work). Here, a straightforward conception of refusal of work would impede the dedication to those meaningful and pleasurable practices that simultaneously constitute the very objective of a liberation from work, as in Marx's fantasy. Because of these contradictions, rather than the possibility of a strike understood as a halting of production, as a withdrawal, both the subjects of care and of creative or cognitive work find themselves in the position of constantly having to invent forms of politics in which the intervention against work immediately coincides with an active reorganization of its conditions. Therefore, rather than approaching the refusal of work solely as a question of liberating time, cognitive and reproductive labour share one further trait as they posit the liberation of living labour in spatialised terms. They both played a crucial, exemplary role in the theorisation of the *common* as a political horizon. A labour of care freed from the shackles of the private *oikos*, where it is forced by the continual process of primitive accumulation, would provide the premise for a social reorganization based on processes that feminist scholars identified as *commoning* (cfr. Federici 2012). In the case of cognitive labour, intellectual, communicative and creative endeavours reorganised as free social cooperation hold the promise of a different kind of public space that has been named a *knowledge commons* (Hess and Ostrom 2006), against the system of

patents and copyrights turning all kinds of creations and discoveries into private property.

The nexus between refusing work while still labouring as a technique for undoing private property and opening up a different kind of public sphere has been at the core of of the work of Paolo Virno. Within the composite area of discussion that is *operaist* thought, Virno has provided one of the most elaborate accounts of the antiworkerist potentiality of cognitive labour, which he discusses in terms of 'general intellect'.

In the essay *Mondanità* (a concept translatable as 'worldliness' in English) especially, Virno elaborated on the need 'to oppose the current allegiance of work and intellect with that of intellect and action'[ii] (117) and the necessity "to develop the publicness of intellect outside of work and in opposition to work," (130). He highlighted the importance of reclaiming the concept of a public sphere away from metaphysical philosophy and abstraction (a problem he detects in Kant's and Wittgenstein's philosophies, among others) to replace it with a materialist account. From his perspective, the possibility of a materialist public sphere emerges from the simultaneous rejection of the dichotomy public/private found in classic liberal thought, in which the private became de-prived of political power and juridical status, and also of the coupling collective/individual used in social-democratic theories, in which collectivity is posited inevitably as a theory of the state that leaves the political import of individuality in a state of impotence.

Within post-Fordism both of these dichotomies stopped working, giving room for the shattering of other derivative conceptual pairs, such as worked time and free time, production and consumption, personal and public conducts. For Virno, this condition of dissolution of the old binaries is precisely at the hearth of the concept of the multitude, where the commonality among subjectivities is found not in an identity (such as that of

worker, writer, mother for instance), but in their status as exiles, in not feeling-at-home anywhere, not having access to any proper place per se, and therefore, not ever getting to decide whether to be part of a social and political form of life or not. Referring to the conditions under which cognitive labour is carried out in contemporary capitalism, Virno highlights how the classical choice between becoming an *intellectuel engagé* or an eremitic scholar dedicate to a contemplative life is no longer available to most, as there is no place from where such decision can be articulated. He concludes his reasoning on the possibility of a materialist public sphere by commenting: “what is uncanny today is the lack of spatialisation of the general intellect” (100); to which he adds a couple of pages later:

> is it possible to seriously discuss about the spatiality of intellect? Being able to answer affirmatively to questions like this is, perhaps, the very point of honour of materialist thinking. Obviously, thought does not occupy a place is space. However, it can institute its own spatiality. While it is in no place per se, it can nonetheless place things, open up space, and give room (*dare luogo*). (102)

Virno’s speculation on a materialist public sphere, understood as a yet-to-come allegiance between general intellect and common and a refusal of the practice of cognitive labour as work, opens up a generative line of theorization of the refusal of work as a matter of opening up spaces that can host different subjectivities and regimes of practice. Although powerful, Virno’s elaboration does not offer however a specific imaginal politics addressing the concrete mode of production of such materialist public sphere. Which processes could be picked up for instituting the refusal of work as a spatial practice?

In an attempt to answer such question, many intellectuals and artist operating from an antiworkerist standpoint have been turning to the genre of utopian thinking and the tools of sci-fi narratives. Paradigmatic among many is Kathi Weeks's *The Problem with Work* (2011), where she reconstructed the different uses of utopia in philosophers such as Nietzsche and Bloch. Another influential example of such approach is found in Peter Frase's *Four Futures* (2016), where the author actually sketched four different utopian/dystopian scenarios borrowing two key techniques from sci-fi writing, one where everything continues to carry on as normal and the reader is invited to follow current social drives to their utmost consequences; and a second one in which an unforeseeable event (historical, natural or technological) significantly disrupts the current social order and becomes an active agent of change. While this kind of re-evaluation of utopian thinking has been effective for replenishing the current political imaginary, highlighting the import of fantasy as a form of social intelligence and a necessary skill for interpreting data and hard fact as vectorial tendencies, the predominant turn towards the utopian genre cannot address a second question left open in Virno's account: how are we to account for the processes of subjectivation available to those who, while practicing care and cognitive labour under a regime of capital, yet struggle to bring about a materialist public sphere, where it might be possible to belong while assuming the impossibility, as he argued, of ever feeling-at-home that is common to all creatures?

In the second part of this essay, I will engage with this question to show how the production of a materialist public sphere needs to be conceived as a feminist project. I will proceed by introducing another kind of approach to imaginal politics, that of figuration. Mine is not so much as a critique of utopian thinking, but a proposition for a mode of thought that might be able to supplement it by elaborating a theory of subjectivation capable of avoiding the problems inherited from liberal and social-democratic thinking.

No matter how inspiring, utopian accounts can't show how to get there: Utopia as a land does not speak of the journey of its travellers.

2. Figures of Unwork

It is well known that Marx scorned a certain kind of ready-made utopian thinking and refused to engage with political philosophy as if it was just a matter of whipping up "recipes" for the "cook-shops of the future" (21). Yet, while Marx resisted giving out masterplans that would place others in the position of simply implementing them, he did not object giving examples on what he thought could be concrete measures and demands able to improve the life of the proletariat (as found, for instance, in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*). In a similar vein, Virno himself discussed the 'Example' as one of the key points of his strategy of 'Exodus' in 'Virtuosity and Revolution' (1994):

> To representation and delegation, the Soviets counterpoise an operative style that is far more complex, centred on Example and political reproducibility. What is exemplary is a practical initiative that, exhibiting in a particular instance the possible alliance between general intellect and Republic, has the authoritativeness of the prototype, but not the normativity of command. Whether it is a question of the distribution of wealth or the organization of schools, the functioning of the media or the workings of the inner city, the Soviets elaborate actions that are paradigmatic and capable of blossoming into new combinations of knowledge, ethical propensities, technologies, and desires. The Example is not the empirical application of a universal concept, but it has the singularity

> and the qualitative completeness that, normally, when we speak of the 'life of the mind,' we attribute to an idea. It is, in short, a 'species' that consists of one sole individual. For this reason, the Example may be politically reproduced, but never transposed into an omnivorous 'general program'. (142)

Virno's opposition to omnivorous general programmes echoes Marx's aversion to cookbooks as it highlights a danger of utopian thinking, namely the risk of setting up the descriptive as prescriptive, thus foreclosing political possibilities and experimentations rather than nourishing them.

The turn to figuration introduced by feminist thinkers can avoid this dilemma by providing an imaginal technique for the multiplication of propotypes, or of species made up of singular beings, that are authoritative without becoming normative. The practice of figuration involves the identification and elaboration of specific profiles, subjects or characters, historical or fictional (and sometimes both), who might give flesh to the collective practices and processes at hand. Figures are neither idiosyncratic like characters nor generalized as stereotypes, yet they provide a blueprint for thinking different subjectivities, conducts and regimes of labour. Donna Haraway (2004) and Rosi Braidotti (2015) in particular emphasised the importance of figuration for a post-humanist feminist horizon, via their well know articulations of the *cyborg* or the *monster*. As Peter Frase put it, many "writers in the anti-work tradition have often sought these new identities in the outlooks and practices of figures who are marginal to the production process and outside the working class" (2012). For instance, Lafargue's "Spaniards" in *The Right to Be Lazy* (1883)*;* the *witch* and the *waged housewife* in the work of Federici; or the fugitive *maroon* of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013). Figuration has also been a widely adopted technique of governmentality as well, at work both

in the media stereotyping which endlessly spawns figures of abjection, such as the *teen-age mother on welfare* (Tyler 2013), but also in legally constructed personae like the homeless *vagrant,* today at the centre of increased anxieties and criminalisation. Furthermore, on the level of concrete history of political struggles, figuration intersects with the practice of prefiguration, the most distinctive tactic of social justice movements since the 1970s (for a survey account, see Graziano 2016).

The merit of figuration for constructing an antiwork political horizon is that it allows us to elaborate on the modes and planes of refusal available to the paradigmatic workers of today, the workers of care and the workers of knowledge and creativity, that is, the workers who cannot stop their labour without harm, while they need to revolutionise the conditions in which they carry it out.

In order to provide an example of figuration and its relevance for antiwork politics, I will introduce two figures of unwork here. There is much that is different between them. One is a fictional character, an individual, a man, a white European intellectual; the other describes a collectivity of black women, US-based, living in dire conditions of racism and impoverishment. I understand that it would be crazy, dangerous even, to compare and link these up if treated as characters or, worse, social stereotypes. Yet, borrowing from them as figures of plurality (as I will argue, Bazlen for me is a plural figure too), taken together they unlock, each in a specific way, a crucial passage that the contemporary struggle against work (and capital) must traverse.

3. A writer who never wrote

The first figure is a fictional character from a 1983 Italian book by Daniele Del Giudice titled *Wimbledon Stadium* named Bobi Bazlen[iii]. The book tells the story of an unnamed researcher, probably a scholar, who travels to Trieste first, and then to London, following the traces of a strange intellectual and literary man who died some fifteen years earlier[iv]. The fact is, and this is the mystery that drives the protagonist's quest, that Bazlen was a "writer who never wrote". And so the mystery the researcher (the narrating voice) wants to solve is *why*. Given that Bazlen had left behind very little material, the researcher resorts to travel to Trieste in search of clues, and while there, arranges meetings with a number of Bazlen's former friends and acquaintances, all now elderly people, in order to ask them about the non-writing activities and motivations of the writer.

Through the series of encounters and conversations, Del Giudice's book slowly composes a collective portrait of his elusive protagonist. Both the figure of Bazlen and the supposed truth about the motivation behind his actions however are presented as always inevitably plural and partial, mediated by the views, faulty memories and preoccupations of the various interlocutors interviewed by the researcher. As it becomes apparent through the conversations with his former friends, many of which were indeed successful writers and poets, Bazlen did not write not because he was not capable of it, nor did he suffer from a writer's block or similar impairments, and no other contingent impediment stood in the way either. Bazlen non-writing was deliberate: a decision, or a preference, like Bartleby's refusal, if one likes. However, his motives were rather different, and most importantly, of a profoundly different political colour: rather than casting refusal as death, Bazlen non-writing activities were an act of extreme natality. And were something that, in the end, can be finally claimed as a form of writing too, as his was

"the comportment of one who writes" (117). Rather than seeking to add to literature through the production of a work, Bazlen feels that the form, that is constitutive of books, interrogated his own form of living. As one of the friends interviewed by the protagonists explains, he used to say that his life's goal was "to have fun living", which is different from "being happy to live" (36). Bazlen further thought that "the only value is 'first-time-ness' [*primavoltità*]" (38) of experiences. Bazlen's non-writing activities amounted to heterogeneous kinds of interventions in the lives of his writing friends: he would give money to help out those in need – as "he was very generous" (66); he would valorise their sentences asking them to write them down; he would take them out for dinner; talk with them for entire nights, so that in the morning they could write down the synthesis of their conversations. He would try to convince people to walk in the dark. He would introduce them to new lovers, describing people so that they appeared interesting and desirable. He would write up one of his friend's thesis to help him graduate and he would arrange for another one to cheat on her husband (75), or yet again encourage another to fall in love with his own ex platonic lover. He would exhort all of them to write, explaining the sense of what they just wrote back to them. In other words, and in many different ways, Bazlen activity was to "complicate the life of others" (74) as he had the "force of disposing" (79) of their lives in some sense, or perhaps, he just cultivated a peculiar interest in "living them" (80), as one friend tentatively offers as an explanation to the researcher.

Bazlen's non-writing activities could be compared in some sense with the Socratic approach. Both him and Socrates could be said to be eliciting knowledge production by refusing an idea that writing (or creating) must necessarily be centred on authorship. If indeed Bazlen's position could be rightly described as a kind of maieutic – insofar as

this style of production of thought was ascribed to the traditionally feminine role of midwifery – his ethics of interventions are deeply different from the Greek philosopher. While the latter engaged his interlocutors by asking probing questions until the answers would become generative of theoretically consistent points, Bazlen rather fostered in his friends not so much the sharpening of their writing or thinking skills, but their capacity for producing joyful encounters in their lives. Rather than a philosophy of mediation - as in midwifery - Bazlen's maieutic consists in the creative realization of possibilities of life, situations, and ambiences for his writing friends as the fundamental material conditions that they would have needed in order to write better.

This last point is offered as the final piece of the puzzle to the researcher during his conversation with the character of Ljuba, a former partner of Bazlen, now blind, who lives in London. For her, Bazlen had:

> the vocation of knowing how to communicate the things he thought were important. […] there is a point in life where a fundamental decision has to be taken. In that point things change, or have to change, and it is no longer possible to proceed through automatic, progressive adjustments. So that's it: many people, once arrived at that point, met him. And he helped them to change, or to decide. I think this was his passion, and his masterpiece. Nothing else. (116)

Thus, Bazlen did not write because he chose to intervene in another way in what Italo Calvino summarized as the "relationship between knowing how to be and knowing how to write" (Preface, 1983). He helped others to produce decisions, to generate conditions that could lend sense to what they were doing, so that writing could become meaningful. His preference for not writing is imminently generative, it is a persistence in wanting to relate to writing, to the public life of intellects in a different, defiant way. It could be

objected that his conduct does not have the power of subtracting the product, the final books he co-generated, from the marketplace. Yet what he could achieve was to alter the value that these products – these books – had in the life of their authors. Bazlen's strategy of intervention turns the book into a sub-product of a life well lived.

If we were to imagine Bazlen's nemesis, that would most probably be found in the aforementioned character of Bartleby, an oft quoted figure of refusal of work who has enjoyed an incredible popularity among post-structuralist thinkers. This Herman Melville character, from the novel *Bartleby the Scrivener. A story of Wall Street* (1856), has inspired the likes of Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jacque Rancière, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt and Slavoj Zizek.

Bartleby's story is therefore well known: told by the perspective of his perplexed and increasingly frustrated employer, a powerful Wall St. attorney, Bartleby is a copyist who one day begins to refuse each and every task assigned to him. He does however keep showing up for work, but he replies to everyone who asks something of him with the famous expression 'I would prefer not to'. For Deleuze as for others, this sentence opens up a radical form of resistance, destroying the possibility for others to object to the refusal. Deleuze emphatically writes: "Without a doubt, the formula is ravaging, devastating, and leaves nothing standing in its wake. Its contagious character is immediately evident: Bartleby 'ties the tongues' of others." (1993, 70). Negri and Hardt (2000) are perhaps the philosophers who made the most of Bartleby's refusal of work proper, a model of political refusal that they go on to map onto the refusal practices of the social movements in Seattle and Genoa. While for Zizek, the radicality of Bartleby lays in his ability to invent a mode of refusal that cannot be incorporated by the logic

of capital as a productive resistance, that is, legible and therefore able to be put to work (2006).

Despite the fascination Bartleby generated amongst political philosophers, it is hard not to notice that his act of refusal, however radical, does not yield much in terms of imagining what could happen in the space that it supposedly opens. In the novel, the actual character does not end up well: Melville has him die after a spiral descending into increasing apathy and possibly madness. Bartleby's workplace is not particularly impacted by his refusal, and it is safe to assume that business in Wall Street will carry on as usual after his demise. Thus, the figure of Bartleby seems to me paradigmatic of a certain mode of refusing work that is sadly quite readily available: one that descends those who practice it into depression, isolation and despair, leaving the practices of exploitation they preferred not to engage with rather unscathed. As mentioned earlier, what seems a more urgent task is to imagine how the auto-dissolution of oneself as a worker could amount to an act of self-care, and not self-arm, a possibility which is precisely what figures such as Bazlen (or the othermothers, the second figure I will introduce here) can help us bring into perception.

Moreover, rather than a sabotage of the language of others through a fixed, repetitive formula that turns his interlocutors into inoperative agents, as in Bartleby - Bazlen's use of language and communication is extremely idiosyncratic, it operates on the singularity of the occasion and the of the interlocutor. The fragmented memories of his friends hint to the fact that he would speak to each of them differently, with a different voice to attend to the singularity of their relation.

What further interests me in Bazlen's character is the way he performs public intellectuality as an ethic of care as an activity of maintenance and regeneration of the trans-

individual spaces of creativity that refuses the authorial enclosure that claims the capacity of creation (and procreation) as a private property. In a way, his figure acts in the opposite way that the recent profile of the professional curator personifies. Or, to put it in other terms, his character gives body to the trans-individual mode of production of difference in a way that raises the question: to whom does the capacity of action belong to?

Finally, Bazlen personifies a mode of materialist public intellectuality that share with social reproduction the peculiar characteristic of being valued in moral and social terms, but never so in terms of capital. What the figure of Bazlen exemplifies so well is the way in which activities such as discussing, insisting, commenting, praising, expecting, editing, reviewing, correcting, encouraging, questioning, asking, connecting, inspiring, warning, remembering, gossiping, and so on are the specific regimes of practice of public intellectuality when it concerns itself with its own social reproduction. His mode of refusal prototypes the refusal of co-optation of creative labour by remodelling it around the contours of a work of care. Crucially, this allows me to turn to the second figure I would like to introduce here, a complementary one to Bazlen, albeit in a non-dialectical fashion: this is the figure of the *othermothers* in the tradition of Black community organizing in North America, a plural figure whom, I will claim, conversely performs social reproduction as a practice of public intellectuality.

4. Othermothers

Othermothers, unlike Bazlen, are non-fictional characters, but social figures produced in the lived experience of black women in the USA. As Patricia Hill Collins (1991) articulated, until the 1980s, within black American communities, bloodmothers often

came to share their tasks and responsibilities with other members of their extended network of women, articulating a "community-based child care [...] extended beyond the boundaries of biologically related individuals to include 'fictive kin'" (179). Such conceptualisation of mothering as practiced across the Atlantic black diaspora opposes the understanding of social reproduction as simple biological maintenance as limited and political regressive; instead, othermothering, or what Bernice Johnson Reagon calls "the entire way a community organizes to nurture itself and future generations" according to Stanlie M. James "can be viewed as a form of *cultural work*" (45).

There is much at stake in James' claiming of othermothering as a form of cultural work. To be absolutely clear: she is assigning this status to the classic activities that are most commonly associated with childcare, and not to some niche pedagogical initiative. She is referring to the labour of feeding and bathing the neighbour's sons, as black rights activists Ella Baker used to do already as a ten-year-old girl (Hill Collins 180). She is referring to the tasks of making sure the neighbour's children get to school or of protecting them from violence by creating safe spaces, as described by bell hooks in her homage reflection on the women who raised her (1990). All these activities are deciphered not only as concretely to do with the necessity of life, but also as activities generative of intimacy and reciprocity. They are cultural – and I would add, political - activities insofar as they institute modes of becoming accountable in front of a collectivity, creating patterns of shared memories and meaning, the stuff of which cultures are ultimately made. The interpretative framework of psychoanalysis can be conveniently left aside in this context. What seems a much more useful tool of analysis here is the fact that reclaiming collective childcare as a form of cultural work entails the continuous construction and reconstruction of closeness, a characteristic of quotidian relations, as a mode for producing a common horizon. As Collins concludes:

> those African-American women who continue community-based child care challenge one fundamental assumption underlying the capitalist system itself: that children are 'private property' and can be disposed of as such. (182)

The figure of the othermothers therefore gives flesh to the possibility of social reproduction as a commoning function constitutive of public intellectuality, away from the privacy of the household. Because marginalised and impoverished black women in North America could never gain access to the private sphere as a 'protected heaven,' but had to rely upon forms of reciprocal support that gave rise to community othermothering and "women-centered networks" (119), they crucially instituted an idea of accountability against not only a public sphere that exploited and marginalised them, but also against the corresponding sphere of the private:

> The experience of community othermothers stimulates a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African-American women who often feel accountable to all the Black community. (Hill Collins 120)

Sociologists Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker further contributed to the articulation of the figure of othermothers as a mode of political intervention generative of a different public sphere. In their discussion of what they named a Women Centred model of organizing community, which they contrast with better known modes of political action, such as activism, militancy or public intellectuality (1998), they claimed that rather than starting in what is already presupposed to be a public realm, the Women Centred mode of organizing begins by "building expanded private sphere relationships and empowering individuals through those" (733), and in doing so it problematizes the very split between private and public. In order to elaborate their model, Stall and Stoecker draw

together a number of resources coming from feminist and black experiences, which show similar patterns of intervention in such dichotomy. In this vein, they revisit bell hooks' (1990) account of the construction of a "homeplace" in the history of African-American people, for whom the generation of a safe realm, "however fragile and tenuous […] where black people could affirm one another" expressly possess a "radical political dimension" (42). The authors also draw upon the experience of women's 'municipal housekeeping' of 19th and 20th centuries in the USA, where women cleverly "claimed the right to be guardians of the neighborhood, just as they were acknowledged to be the guardians of the family" (Stall and Stoecker 736); and also the activities associated with the Settlement Houses movement, initiated by social workers who insisted upon living in the neighborhood that they were supposed to care after and questioned the predominant model of social work as a professionalized intervention based on "detachment" (Stall and Stoecker 737).

Across these diverse examples, social preproduction was made to swell and trespass the confinements of the private, going beyond matters of filiation and sustenance to become a political invention of different institutions. What we find here is thus an inversion of the classic feminist proposition that the personal is political; rather, the opposite happens, as the political becomes personal. The pedagogy of othermothers as figures of politicization works by reframing the experience of problems that people might experience in the realm of the private as manifestations of larger systemic issues. Problems cease to become thinkable as political only by virtue of a quantum leap that detaches them from the context in which they operate.

The figure of the othermothers also allows us to de-naturalize communities as more than the sum of a number of discreet households: communities do not just exist, but they must be created and recreated; or, in Stall and Stoecker terms, "they don't just

happen", (community as event)", but "they must be organized (community as process)" (730). In the case of a pre-existing community – of workers, of proximity, or of practice, for instance – this organizing can actually look like a 're-organizing' of its constitutive relations, in view of the possibility of political mobilization. And crucially, this corresponds to a logic of re-organization of the division of labour in opposition to the one sustaining the current regime of work.

Community organizing, or the "craft of building an enduring network of people" (730) plays a great role in the formation of political mobilizations, however it has received less attention than social justice movements. The role of communities in relation to broader political movements is not only to provide "the informal backstage relationships between movement members" (729), but also to "sustain a movements' potential during hard times" (730). In other words, and importantly for my argument here, there are two fundamental tasks of communities vis-à-vis collective political action: the first is that of collective social reproduction proper; the second one is akin to creative action, as in their constitutive labour they prefigure, experiment and play with imaginaries of modes of relations that are also the ultimate goals of mobilizing.

The politics of the community othermothers thus operates according to a logic that differs profoundly from the more widely accepted agonistic public sphere, where mobilizing means strategizing for winning over opponents. Rather, the organizing of othermothers operates by undoing the distinctions between individual and collective problems. It refuses the given private conditions in which intergenerational relations are reproduced, to recommit such activities of social reproduction to a project of liberation from invisibilised and unpaid work. In so doing, the figure of the othermothers deepens and complements Bazlen's fictional proposition about the rearticulation of cultural

praxis as unwork. In both these figures, the refusal of work becomes an active participation in the transformation of the social conditions and institutions in which labour occurs, is divided and valorised. And both these figures sustain their refusals from the perspective of a specific life-affirming ethics of care that is deeply different than the one made possible by Bartleby's formula.

5. Refusal (Disobedience) as Care

A similar ethics of care as an act of generative refusal of work can also be traced in a third and final figure I wish to introduce here, which can be found in one the foundational studies on the subject: Carol Gilligan influential *In a Different Voice* (1982). In this work, Gilligan performed a critique of Lawrence Kohlberg's experiments on the psychology of moral development conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, in which women scored consistently lower than men. As part of his tests, Kohlberg had studied children's reactions to a series of dilemmas of his conception. In one of them, called the Heinz's dilemma, we learn that Heinz's wife is ill but they cannot afford to buy the medicines she requires. Heinz thus approaches the pharmacist, whom is not willing to give him credit nor to lend other forms of help. Participants in the study were therefore asked to determine whether Heinz should steal the drug?

Gilligan re-analysed the original responses of two 11-year-old children named Jake and Amy. Jake reasoned that Heinz should steal the drug, because a human life is more important than money. He suggests that the pharmacist may get money from elsewhere, but Heinz "cannot get his wife again" (Gilligan 26). Whilst he recognizes that stealing is against the law, he argues that a judge should "give Heinz the lightest possible sentence" (ibid.). Amy's reasoning, unfolds very differently, following what Gilligan will

name an ethics of care. She begins her reply by stating that Heinz "really shouldn't steal the drug- but his wife shouldn't die either" (28). Amy's attempts to solve the dilemma refused to depart from a set principle such as law or property, rather she preferred to consider the effect that particular actions might have on the relationships of those involved. For instance, Amy notices that if the illness is recurrent, theft would not be a long-term solution because

> If he stole the drug, he might save his wife then, but if he did, he might have to go to jail, and then his wife might get sicker again, and he couldn't get more of the drug, and it might not be good. So, they should really just talk it out and find some other way to make money. (ibid.)

Rather than casting the characters "as opponents in a contest of rights" she recovers their material, embedded quality "as members of a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend", an outlook that allows Amy to construct a new story, a new narration (a form of writing?) by "securing the inclusion of the wife by strengthening rather than severing connection" (30). In other words, Amy understands the possibility of taking decisions as contextual affordance, and only constructible in terms of real relational implications rather than abstract norms or strategies. Rather than looking for a higher principle, her figure recognizes a different task for ethical thinking, namely to restore and sustain mutual responsibilities.

For Gilligan then, Amy became a figure for thinking a different approach to moral problems found in an ethics of care and restorative justice activities; but from our perspective, she can also operate as a figure that posits care as unwork. Amy's lateral thinking, her trying to find solutions that could reconcile all parties without passing a moral verdict on the situation, is a compelling performative gesture of refusal that can

be contrasted again to that of Bartleby. By her conduct, Amy was able to undo not only the premises upon which the very nature of Heinz's dilemma is constructed, including private property (stealing, giving credit), but also her very performance as a compliant "worker", that is, as a docile subject of a psychological test. Like Bartleby, she refused the conditions in which she was subjectivized, yet she did not leave the scene, the space in which her labour would occur.

Importantly, the significance of the figure of Amy can also be expanded beyond a gendered outlook on care and its politics, often found in the feminist reception of Gilligan's work, to include a more intersectional set of concerns. When Joan Tronto, another key contributor to debates around the ethics of care, produced a survey study of the scholarship dealing with similar moral questions as those address by Gilligan's seminal study, she found that

> the differences Gilligan found between men and women may also describe the differences between working and middle class, white and ethnic minorities,

and that

> a gender difference may not be prominent among other groups in the population besides the relatively privileged people who have constituted Gilligan's samples. (82)

In this light, Amy should be even more rightly reclaimed as a vivid figure of unwork insofar as she is not just the embodiment of a specific social identity, that of women, but she is able to embody the ethics of a multitude of subjectivities who are in some form denied access to the current forms of public life.

6. Public spheres: Between knowing how to care and knowing how to write

The public sphere in which the figure of Amy can exist and can institute her own plurality would be contiguous with the ones produced by the activities of Bazlen and of the othermothers. The fruit of the labour of these figures is not concretized in an *oeuvre*, but in a place, a context, an ambience that gives a key public dimension to an ethics of care, where it would become possible to dissolve the current toxic allegiance between work and intellect Virno talked about. This public sphere would be both materialist and feminist, aiming to supplant the family as the proper place of intimacy and the service and cultural industries as the proper (and privatized) place for enjoyment. All these figures perform a positive refusal of work, understanding this as mode of disobeying its accepted system of valorisation, such as authorship; the legitimacy of familiar roles, such as children as private property; the terms of the questions that only account for justice in moral terms at the expense of ethics. Moreover, these collective figures practice the refusal of work not by embracing of more spontaneous or desirable activities, but as a relentless disobedience of the conditions of valorisation, interpretation and circulation of *both* their existing social reproductive and cognitive labouring. What becomes possible in the state of abeyance they chose to inhabit is the production of a disobedient pleasure in regard to the structures of reward at hand in the normative roles attached to their tasks, be it the authorial gratification, the motherly sacrifice or the pleasing child. Crucially, the figures of Bazlen, the othermothers and Amy found ways of producing things that *are not theirs*, thus undoing the fundamental relation of capital with living labour that finds in private property and the private sphere the necessary complements to the deprivations of work. Their practices of unwork can be the means for imagining, instead, the modes of labour that could sustain a materialist and feminist public sphere for and of the general intellect.

Bibliography

Bastani, Aaron. *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. London: Verso, 2018.

Braidotti, Rosi. 'Punk Women and Riot Grrls', *Journal of Performance Philosophy*, vol. 1, 2015.

Deleuze, Gilles. 'Bartleby, ou la formule' in *Critique et Clinique*, 1993.

Del Giudice, Daniele. *Lo stadio di Wimbledon*. Preface by Italo Calvino. Turin: Einaudi,1983.

Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction,and Feminist Struggle.* PM Press, 2012.

Frase, Peter. *Four futures: Life after capitalism*. Verso books, 2016.

Frase, Peter. 'The Politics of Getting a Life.' *Jacobin: A Magazine of Culture and Polemic*, 6, 2012.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* Harvard University Press, 1982.

Gorz. André. *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society*. Polity, 1999.

Haraway, Donna. 'Introduction. A Kinship of Feminist Figurations', *The Haraway Reader.* Psychology Press, 2004.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard University Press, 2000.

Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning And Black Study.* Wivenhoe, UK & New York: Minor Compositions, 2013.

Hess, Charlotte and Elinor Ostrom. *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons - From Theory to Practice.* Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006.

Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* Routledge, 1991.

hooks, bell. Y*earning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.* Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990.

James, Stanlie M. and Abena P.A. Busia (eds.), *Theorizing Black Feminism: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women.* Routledge, 1993.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy - The Process of Capitalist Production*, Vol. 1, part 1. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007 [1873].

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology* Vol. 1. International Publishers, 1972 [1932].

Melville, Herman. *Bartleby the Scrivener. A story of Wall Street.* 1856.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Srnicek, Nick and Alex Williams*, Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work.* London: Verso, 2015.

Stall, Susan and Randy Stoecker. 'Community Organizing or Organizing Community? Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment.' *Gender & Society* 12, no. 6, 1998.

Tomšič, Samo. *The Labour of Enjoyment: Towards a Critique of Libidinal Economy*. August Verlag, 2019.

Tronto, Joan. *Moral Boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care.* Psychology Press, 1993.

Tyler, Imogen. *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain.* London: Zed Books, 2013.

Virno, Paolo. *Mondanità: l'idea di "mondo" tra esperienza sensibile e sfera pubblica*. Vol. 1. Rome, Manifesto Libri, 1994.

Virno, Paolo. 'Virtuosity and Revolution'. Generation Online. http://generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude2.html. Accessed 23 Apr. 2018.

Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Zizek, Slavoj. 'Notes towards a politics of Bartleby: The Ignorance of Chicken', *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 4(4), 2006: 375–94.

---

[i] What I call here 'cognitive labour' has been referred to with a variety of names in the literature, including creative labour, semiotic labour, immaterial labour, general intellect, and so forth. While there are some distinctions between these conceptions, for the purposes of my argument I will keep 'cognitive labour' as this term encompasses creativity and knowledge-based practices, but also labour that is communicational, relational or affective.

[ii] This and all subsequent translations from Italian are mine.

[iii]This was the first book that Italo Calvino selected in his role as commissioning editor for the Italian publisher Einaudi.

[iv]The character of Bobi Bazlen is modelled after an existing literary critic with the same name, who lived in Trieste in the first half of the century and famously played a pivotal role in launching Italo Svevo's career, had friendly relations with James Joyce, hung out with poets Eugenio Montale and Umberto Saba, and more broadly contributed a great deal to the literary scene of his time. My account however refers to the fictional figure created by Del Giudice.