Disability Antiwork Politics

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ABSTRACT

Disability theorists have long argued against the valorization of work under capitalist social relations; I explore some of the key arguments for why. Similarly, feminist theorists critiquing productivism have suggested that we should aim not just for better work, but for less work. Given this, it is surprising that disability arguments against what has been called productivism have not been taken up by theorists arguing against work. In this paper, I argue that feminist anti-work theories should be engaging critical disability theorists on work. However, I claim that in turn critical disability theories benefit from help envisioning how we make meaning in ways not organized around wage work. Following this approach, I turn to science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin's anarchist politics for an orientation towards such imagining.

1. Introduction

Sunaura Taylor is now a major figure in disability studies, an acclaimed painter, and an award-winning popular author. Though I have followed her work over the last twenty years, I still go back to a piece she published in *Monthly Review* in 2004 called *The Right Not to Work: Power and Disability*. She opens the essay by saying: "I have a confession to make: I do not work. I am on SSI [social assistance]. I have very little work value (if any), and I am a drain on our country's welfare system. I have another confession to make: I do not think this is wrong, and to be honest, I am very happy not working. Instead, I spend the majority of my time doing the activity I find the most rewarding and valuable, painting" (Taylor 2004). As I will explore, Taylor is one of several disability theorists making a compelling case against the valorization of work based on a structural analysis of the place of disability under capitalist social relations. We might expect theorists in the still-emerging tendency of "antiwork" politics, particularly those feminists engaged in theorizing social reproduction, to engage in disability arguments against what has been called productivism. They have not. In this pa-

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per, I argue that feminist anti-work theories should be engaging critical disability theorists on work – that, indeed, the failure of such engagement has limited current anti-work theories. However, I think that even critical disability theories about work can be supplemented with imaginative scope about making lives not organized around wages. I turn to science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin's anarchist politics for an orientation towards such imagining.

2. Antiwork politics

Gifford v. Sheil is a lawsuit between two influencers – young women who make their living unboxing, showing, and recommending products on Amazon.com. Sydney Nicole Gifford is suing Alyssa Sheil for stealing her brand – unboxing and showcasing things, on the background of a beige and white apartment, with links to Amazon pages where viewers can buy those exact products (Sato 2024). Doing this is their job, what they do for a wage, although that wage is determined by an algorithm and there is no obvious person who is their boss; they are key cogs in the interlocking wheels of what Nick Srnicek has called "platform capitalism" (2016). The labor processes of platform capitalism rely on digital infrastructures to capture and extract value, notably in the form of data about attention that can translate into the production of value. I think Srnicek and others who examine the transformations of work in the digital age are correct in identifying data as a terrain that capitalism can exploit. This is a permutation of existing neoliberal capital relations, in which individuals are the salient unit of analysis, each going to market and responding to demand. Who do we work for? Even when we seem to be working directly for a consumer – the Uber customer, the person who buys a product through our site after we review it – we are part of a system that carries a moral and practical imperative: Work. As Kathi Weeks argues, "That individuals should work is fundamental to the basic social contract; indeed, working is part of what it is supposed to transform subjects into the independent individuals of the liberal imaginary, and, for that reason, is treated as a basic obligation of citizenship" (2011: 8). Under neoliberalism this obligation becomes more individually responsibilized; the distribution of life-chances is imagined to be based on work; if you work hard, the story goes, you can have a good life. But we know that working hard, at least under the conditions of work available to us, just makes for a very hard life. The world's wealthiest people do no work at all and have a great deal of material ease.

Whether it is material or immaterial labour, building the thing or unboxing it on screen, work matters. As Weeks argues in *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*,

> From the perspective of the refusal of work, the problem with work cannot be reduced to the extraction of surplus value or the degradation of skill, but extends to the ways that work dominates our lives. The struggle against work is a matter of securing not only better work, but also the time and money necessary to have a life outside work (2011: 13).

Weeks is in generative dialogue with activists and theoretical interventions from feminists who formulated demands for Wages for Housework. These interventions powerfully identified the degree to which the creation of surplus value in capitalist social relations depends upon the unpaid labor of those – mostly women – who reproduce the worker and the workforce. This includes bearing and raising children (future workers), doing emotional care for the worker home from a long day, and all the maintenance tasks that go into making them able to venture forth for another day (Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, & Selma James 1975; O'Brien 2023; Toupin 2018). Weeks builds out a set of worries about feminist revalorizations of the unpaid labor upon which paid labor depends: "We should focus not only on revaluing feminized forms of unwaged labor but also challenge the sanctification of such work that can accompany or be enabled by these efforts" 2011: 13).

Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek take up this call in their book *After Work: A History of the Home and the Fight for Free Time,* compellingly arguing that if we simply replace unpaid reproductive work with wage work, we are merely redistributing labor, not transforming the social relations that constitute its suffering. Instead, they argue that we should formulate an approach to social reproduction that "values freedom for all – that *recognises* reproductive labour as work, that *reduces* this work as much as possible, and that *redistributes* any remaining work in an equitable manner" (Hester & Srnicek 2023: 11). Increasingly, feminist theorists are generating important work on the complexities of an increasingly care-based economy (Nadasen 2023) and asking how the people giving care can be part of any conversation about the urgent need for care to be part of our shared social world (Nishida 2022). And we are seeing a turn towards, as Sarah Jaffe argues in the very title of her critique of professions that are

framed as inherently self-fulfilling, such as teaching: *Work Won't Love You Back* (2021).[1]

Weeks objects not just to alienated labour under capitalism, but to work altogether. Even on the left, as Weeks argues, we fall into the trap of limiting our aspirations to better work, rather than aiming to reduce work. As Weeks writes of Erich Fromm's socialist humanism:

> Fromm's cure for capitalism is not more work, as Lenin once prescribed, but better work. 'The central theme of Marx,' Fromm insists, is the transformation of alienated, meaningless labor into productive, free labour' [Fromm 1961: 43]; this is the means by which we can finally realize our true humanity. (Weeks 2011: 86–87)

Work remains the limit of the horizon of freedom – all we can aspire to is better work. And the ideal of non-alienated labor, as Weeks notes, also implies a conception of what it is to be human.

I am committed to antiwork politics largely because of my disability politics; as I will elaborate below, critical disability theory has crucially shown the ways that productivism limits our collective freedom. And so, it is notable – and, honestly, a little shocking – that the antiwork conversation that Weeks has helped shape does not engage disability in any substantive way; this essay is a small contribution to a much broader needed intervention here.

3. Disability and work

Under capitalism, disability is often defined as durably lacking the capacity for wage work. It can be difficult to call to mind all the people who do not work. Part of the responsibility for this occlusion lays at the feet of the labor movement's turn toward articulating the dignity of work and the worker as a way to attack the capitalists who profit from our labour. Kathi Weeks characterizes this, following Baudrillard, as a turn towards a "laborist work ethic" functioning against but alongside the Protestant work ethic. She sees the laborist work ethic as drawing on "a variant of the labor theory of value to celebrate the worth and dignity of waged work and to contend that such work is entitled to respect and adequate recompense. Rather than malign the shiftless poor, for example, this version of the ethic takes aim at the idle rich" (Weeks 2011: 59). Here both shiftlessness

[1] There is also a generative and important feminist conversation ongoing under the umbrella of "social reproduction theory," which I am not engaging in this paper.

(partially in the sense of not having a work shift) and idleness (whether it is rich or poor idleness) can be read in terms of their implied reference to disability and those unable to work. The laborist turn is tempting for anyone moved – appropriately! – to honor the dignity of workers and disparage social parasites such as landlords, billionaires, and capitalists. Of course, there are many rich people who do not work, and who have never worked. However it is crucial to perceive the ways that the temptation to characterize anyone who does not work as a social parasite implies that disabled people, children, elders, and anyone who doesn't work is also a social parasite (Rose 2017).

Again, from the point of view of capitalism, disability is defined by work capacity; people who are classified as unable to work over some period of time are considered disabled. Work produces disability even when it is not so classified; that people become disabled through their ordinary work practices has long been a traction point for opposing unjust work conditions. One question about the relationship between work and disability remains: how to oppose disabling working conditions while affirming the worth of disabled lives? As Taylor writes, the imperative toward productivism affects all of us who live under capitalism, not just people who can work under current conditions:

> Disabled people are brought up with the same cultural ideals and ambitions and dreams as their able-bodied counterparts; we too are indoctrinated to fetishize work and romanticize career and to see the performance of wage labor as the ultimate freedom. (Taylor 2004)

Advocates of universal income, or the abolition of wage work more generally, point to the fact that people manifestly spend enormous amounts of time and energy on unwaged making and doing. And inheritors of movements for communal luxury point to what Henri Lafarge called "the right to be lazy" (Ross 2016). The best approach to this turns out not to be grounding self-worth or survival in wage work – we can oppose unlivable work and ableism at the same time. But doing so invites more consideration of the ways that disability is a significant part of the workings of capitalism.

As Marta Russell argues, disabled people under capitalism are not merely defined according to their capacity to work, they are also rendered the material on which others perform that work and, under capitalism, generate profit. Being made to be the material of the world, as against the human who is defined as those who transform that material, is a structural condition that has

also been obtained in relation to chattel slavery, genocidal practices of many kinds, ecocide, and imprisonment. Russell writes:

> Disabled persons who do not offer a body which will enhance profit-making as laborers are used to shore up US capitalism by other means. Entrepreneurs and rehabilitation specialists have made impaired bodies of use to the economic order by shaping disablement into big business and turning the disabled body into a commodity around which social policies get created or rejected according to their market value. The corporate solution to disablement – institutionalization in a nursing home, for instance – evolved from the realization that disabled people could be made to serve profit because public funding guaranteed the revenue. (2019: 19–20)

State classifications here entangle themselves with managerial classifications, and both with capitalism. Disabled and incarcerated people – anyone institutionalized, but also those made the subject of piece-work – are thought of as fungible, their whole selves made into interchangeable units. Shortly I will turn to elaborate ways that Ursula K. Le Guin's and Victor Frankl's existential valuing of the fundamental specificity and uniqueness of the individual might be a bulwark against the ableism of productivism.

Russell argues that we need such a bulwark even on the left. As she writes:

> If work defines human worth and work is the central criterion for human validation, then the worker has their pride and the capitalist has their labor to exploit, two sides of the same paradigm. If work was to be the end-all of existence, then disabled people (who could not work) inevitably would be marginalized, and relegated to a corner of society. (2019: 202)

I follow a tendency in disability activism that believes we ought to go beyond resisting the marginalization of disable people, but that we should actively love and center disabled people; we should love ourselves and each other not despite our disabilities, but with and through them. If we are to love disability, it is necessary but not sufficient to highlight the need for different pacing of work (Wendell 1997; Bailey 2021). We need instead a formulation of flourishing that does not revert to valorizing the productivist paradigm.

Depending on social conditions, being "too disabled to work" may render people "deserving" of social assistance. While this may look like anti-productivism, it frequently recapitulates the idea that we only deserve to live if we contribute something to society (Abberley 1996, 2002, Graby 2015, Jones

2022). As Russell puts it in discussing the creation of limited "needs-based" welfare state options, "Disability became an important 'boundary' category whereby people were allocated to either a work-based or a needs-based system of distribution" (2019: 18). Part of this allocation is about time – the time of our bodies, how long someone experiences conditions that make them unavailable for labour, how long work takes.

All of us are now or will be in the future disabled, and many of us experience situation-dependent disability. Even people stably classified as disabled have uneven experiences that do not fit or meet the classificatory standards to which they are expected to conform, depending on the social and material conditions they experience. And this fluidity in who is disabled shifts not just with life course, but also in terms of when and how our labour is exploited. This is not only about physical disability. Robert Chapman begins his history of capitalism by placing neurodivergence, rather than class, at the centre of his analysis (2023: 15). In *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism,* Chapman argues that looking at shifting classifications of employability helps us think about the role of disability in what Marx and Engels formulated as the "reserve army of capitalism." This is the pool of workers on hand to be mined for their capacity to create surplus value – to be employed – but who are not currently working. The people who could potentially be hired serve as a threat against those currently employed (don't act up, there are lots of people who would be grateful for your job!), as well as being available in periods of industry expansion. Chapman argues that disabled people are a key part of this surplus population:

> Thus, the existence of a surplus population is no less necessary for capitalism than is the existence of workers, since capitalism both creates an ever-expanding surplus population and relies on them to act as a reserve army. Put another way, disabled people – who make up much of the surplus – need to exist for capitalism to exist, and are hence part of what is both produced by, and sustains, the system. [...] On this view, then, it is not just the case that certain environments, especially when driven by capitalist logics, are disabling for people with impairments. It is also that capitalist logics both produce and require disablement, which is itself primarily determined in relation to the needs of capital at any given time (2023: 149).

Chapman helps us perceive the vital importance of thinking with the specificities of different disabilities as they are produced, lived, and struggled over; if we focus only on physical disabilities we may well lose touch with the internal logic of capitalism's capture and engagement with disability.

Thinking with mental illness and disablement surfaces the constitutive ambiguities and double-binds of disability as it is organized through capitalist social relations: Divergent people are routinely incarcerated simply for their psychiatric or mental disablement – we are called to believe that this is appropriate and justified. But, as Chapman argues, "Capital also requires us to be sceptical enough about the reality of mental illness and disablement so that it can get away with not providing healthcare or support for the majority of those who need it" (2023: 143). Sasha Warren's book *Storming Bedlam: Madness, Utopia, and Revolt* historicises this split between people needing treatment (often in the form of forced institutionalisation) and becoming part of a "subclass of patients, the chronics, who were beyond help, whose idle vegetation was supported by precious state funds." Warren argues that the "contradictions of psychiatry in a capitalist society tend to create a surplus of chronicity" (2024: 239). Space prevents a thorough exploration of the history and self-generated theory of psychiatric survivors movements, in places such as the Icarus Project in North America or *das Socialistiche Patientenkollektiv* (the Socialist Patients' Collective/SPK) in Germany, but I believe that these movements significantly help us think about the imperative to reject the equation of worthiness with work.

As disability theorist Paul Abberley argues in his paper "Work, Utopia, and Impairment," being able to work is important for being integrated into a social polity; when disabled people access accommodations to make work possible for their specific body-minds, they are folded into a logic of preventing or curing disability. He writes,

> This logic allows for the integration of perhaps a substantial proportion of any existing impaired population into the social work process, but only insofar as the interface between an individual's impairment, technology and socially valued activity produced a positive outcome. Thus the abolition of an individual's disablement is ultimately dependent upon and subordinate to the logic of productivity. (Abberley 1999: 74)[2]

[2] Abberley's thinking here is situated in the early binary in disability theory between disablement and impairment; while this distinction was always unsteady I think it is fair to say that it does not

He argues that disability social movements both theorise and embody in their practice an alternative to this logic, a demand not only to work less and better but also to rest and play more.

Russell highlights the difference between work-based and needs-based systems of distribution. She asks, if a work-based system fails in the ways so many people argue it does, what about a turn to the needs-based system? After all, most people in this world do not have what they need to live with any degree of stability and joy. Needs-based approaches have been advocated by proponents of Basic Income in various forms; such approaches highlight the cruelly low rates of social assistance available to people who are not working and open the question of how much money would constitute "covering the basics."

Rich people have different standards for what constitutes "the basics" than impoverished people – and tend to feel that others should be able to live well on exponentially less than they do. Thus, in the city where I live, the median annual salary is $120,000, $10,000 a month before taxes. Social assistance – tellingly, currently called "Ontario Works" – pays $8,796 annually to single people with no dependents ($343 a month for "basic needs" like food and medicine, and a maximum shelter amount of $390 a month). The disability support version pays $1,169 a month, $14,028 a year. Increasingly, Medical Assistance in Dying is being deployed not because people have incurable conditions that will cause them great suffering before their inevitable death, but simply because they cannot afford to find an apartment.[3] The median worker in Ottawa likely feels that their salary covers the basics; likely, they do not think at all about how someone is supposed to get by with a 23rd of their income. Needs are not met on less than $9,000 a year, not even basic needs. Monthly rentals for studio apartments are routinely over $1,000 a month, food costs money, and people need things like phones and internet access. As Fady Shanouda and Terry-Lynn Langdon argue, carving out the possibility for disabled people to have access to inessential luxuries and unnecessary beauty can be a vital demand (2022). Returning to Abberley, centering the demand for unnecessary beauty for disabled lives

structure our thinking about disability in the way it did in the 90's. He was one of the early people discussing antiproductivism in disability studies in ways I think deserve more uptake.

[3] See for example the case of "Sophia," who received MAiD when she was unable to get access to an apartment that would not trigger her Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/woman-with-chemical-sensitivities-chose-medically-assisted-death-after-failed-bid-to-get-better-housing-1.5860579).

involves the "development and proselytisation of values and ideas which run profoundly counter to the dominant cultural problematic of both left and right" (1999: 77). Such an approach invites us to formulate practices of disability, of work, and of freedom beyond the classificatory and material impulses of capitalist exploitation. As Leah Laksmi Piepszna-Samarasinha writes, "Our bodyminds never fit that well into capitalism" (2018: 246).

4. From each according to disability

Hopefully, the previous section has elucidated that capitalism relies in part on the production and exploitation of a shifting social and material set of relations called "disability." It may seem obvious then to think that opposing capitalism would organically cause one to also oppose disability oppression. This turns out not to be the case. Recall the antiwork approaches with which I began this paper. There are at least two significant dangers in basing our political aspirations on laborism, or the idea that only work gives life meaning and dignity. The first, which Weeks explores, is the danger of failing to imagine a world beyond work or to constitute meaningful antiwork politics. The second, which antiwork politics does not meaningfully engage, concerns all of those who are structurally made to not work, to be worked on. I follow Russell and other Marxist disability theorists in including in this category disabled people, imprisoned people, elder people, and anyone (ware)housed in institutions. Grounding antiwork politics in disability politics offers so much to the project of transforming our social world. Approaching anticapitalist struggles from the perspective of disability may, indeed, be the only way to effect fundamental transformation. Importantly, it offers a corrective to the pervasive ableism of the left, which follows from Marxism's equation between the category of humanity and the capacity to work.

Consider the slogan "From each according to ability, to each according to need." I have a magnet on my fridge from an Anarchist Book Fair that says this; I have always liked it. Many on the left turn to this slogan for a shorthand approach to the idea that all of us have something to offer the collective world in which we live, and that we ought to have what we need to live in that world without reference to exchange relations. Someone whose abilities were not valued on the wage labor market would deserve to have their needs met as much as anyone else. However, the slogan has taken on many different valences and has a deeper history than we generally perceive. As Luc Bovens and Adrien Lutz explain (2019), this slogan has inspiration from several biblical verses, had uptake

in the 19th century collectivist Saint-Simon tradition, was foregrounded by Marx, Étienne Cabet, and Louis Blanc, and shifted tone and content under Stalin (with the Soviet Constitution of 1936). Bovens and Lutz productively explore the question of what abilities and capacities are, along with the question of who deserves to have their needs met, across these different contexts.

As they write, "The Saint-Simonians coined a version of the earliest slogan 'To each according to his ability; To each according to his works' in the epigraph of their journal in 1829" (Bovens & Lutz 2019: 253). For Saint-Simonians, working against the idea that people can or should inherit their position in society or place of work, the formulation of "to each according to his ability" named the idea that we ought to be given work to do that suits our abilities – a kind of transitional egalitarian impulse, though one that does not assume equality or sameness between abilities. Indeed, again according to Bovens and Lutz, an organizing principle here was around a "social stake" - "the resources that a person puts into society generating social utility, including both his human resources (ability and effort) and his financial resources (capital). Benefits should be proportional to this social stake" (2019: 247). As we will see, this formulation – the proportionality of benefits to input – shows up often.

If you remove hierarchy from the equation, not only refusing inherited hierarchies but attempting to disrupt hierarchies in practice, the shift from "*to* each according to their abilities" to "*from* each according to their abilities" becomes more interesting. Thus, the Marx-Cabet-Blanc version of the slogan posits that each person has something specific to themselves to offer, and that they ought to offer the work that they can do to the social polity. But they ought to receive what they need regardless of what they offer – in this version of the slogan, the work we do should not determine whether we receive what we need. In a further transformation, often ignored by the contemporary left, article 12 of the Soviet Constitution of 1936 offered the formulation:

> In the U.S.S.R. work is a duty and a matter of honor for every able-bodied citizen, in accordance with the principle: "He who does not work, neither shall he eat." The principle applied in the U.S.S.R. is that of socialism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work". (Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics)[4]

[4] As Bovens and Lutz point out, this is a return to another biblical formulation, a phrase from 2 Thessalonians 3:10 (2019: 251), which Lenin took up. Thus, as they write: "To each according

Although the Marxian formulation – by which we offer the work we can and receive what we need – is obviously much to be preferred to any social assistance we can currently access, seeing the arc of this slogan has been revelatory for me. The formulation in the 1936 Soviet Constitution, returning to the sense in which people who do not work do not deserve to eat, shows the shortness of the arc between "to each according to their need" and "to each according to their work." It also underlines the ways that "work" and "need" are fundamentally defined by ableism and nationalism ("work is a duty and a matter of honor for *every able-bodied citizen*"). Of course, social assistance and immigration alike are confined to people with papers; they are alike too in the continual grind against disabled people having access to dignified lives and movement across borders. So rather than simply turning back to the transitional sense of people deserving to have what they need regardless of what work they do (from Marx as influenced by Blanc), I wonder how we can have much bigger aspirations than mere need. Lately, I am internally reframing the slogan as "from each according to their disability, to each according to their unpredictable pleasures." We want bread, but roses too.

Marx's ableism is complexly emergent from his productivism, and both connect back to the question of what it is to be human. For Marx, what makes us human is our capacity to mix our consciousness or idealizations with the material of the world in transformative ways. I have a lot of love for the ways we humans do this kind of mixing. Making things is one of my favorite activities, right up there with appreciating things other people have made. And this making is not just about producing physical objects – we practice this kind of mixing of material and immaterial when we dance, sing, or teach. Being alive and in co-production of the world *with* the world is one of the beautiful things we do here on this planet. I find Marxist valorizations of the dignity of good work as the antidote to alienation under the wage relation moving and important. This is precisely why I am also so concerned about them. Lifting up work and its products slips quickly

to his work" has its biblical origin in a passage from Paul in which the measure of heavenly reward is one's labor and in another passage in which Paul admonishes believers that they should work for their food. Marx takes this to be a principle of remuneration in the transitional phase before societal conditions permit us to implement "to each according to his needs." He proposes that remuneration should be proportional to both intensity and duration of work. Lenin, on the other hand, takes it to be a self-evident principle that is at the core of socialism. Blanc proportions remuneration in the transitional phase relative to work as a social gradient of functions within the workhouses, while mixing this with welfare provisions for the needy (Bovens & Lutz 2019: 254).

into demeaning people who do not work and dismissing immaterial labor. Work is thus a question for disability and feminist theories.

Marxist human exceptionalism also erases the sense in which nonhuman animals could be productively seen as part of the working class, but more importantly a focus on work as the sole ground for dignity reinforces oppression and limits our imagination (Hribal 2007). Often the response to human exceptionalism in Marx is to point to the ways that animals too have conceptions of themselves, and theories of mind, purposefully change the world around them, and are exploited as key links in the production of surplus value. But even this response replicates the view that what makes a life worth living is productive labor. At best, we are offered forms of labor less alienated than those available to us under capitalism's thumb. But why is this the most we can imagine?

5. Finding meaning other than work

Not everyone is currently disabled, of course, and the move to say "we're all a little disabled!", even when well-meant, erases the material conditions and real context that reliably constitute some lives as disabled and others as "normal."[5] But attending to the social and material constitution of disability, humanness, and productivity shows us that disability undergirds some of our most fundamental social relations of oppression and benefit. We can shift our mode of analysis so that we start from this approach rather than rendering disability an afterthought or irrelevance. Liat Ben-Moshe and Jess Whatcott (2021) offer such a mode in their discussion of science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin's widely-read story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." The story describes a rich, flourishing society, full of intelligent, caring people. The hitch is that their happiness is bought at the expense of confining a child in a broom closet, withdrawing human contact from them, and keeping them in misery. This story is often framed and taught as an intervention in a particular mode of utilitarianism, positing a balance of suffering in which the ease, security, and happiness of the

[5] I think back to a former graduate student, Blake MacMillan, who was writing a dissertation about adaptive ski racing before his untimely death in 2016. As he conducted research into the ways that coaches and athletes fit and refit ski equipment for disabled high-level downhill ski racers, MacMillan came to think that, as he put it in the title of his dissertation, "All Sport is Adaptive Sport." This is to say that everyone who engages in sport engages bodily practices and uses equipment and clothing that shapes and enhances their capacities to do their sport. Shifting our conception of sport, and perhaps not only elite sport, to centre the adaptive work that every athlete relies upon is part of a general move to start from the disabled subject in our analysis and dreaming.

many depend upon the privation, institutionalization, and suffering of the few. Ben-Moshe and Whatcott make several vital interventions in the long conversation about the story. They situate the fictional Omelas in the historical place Le Guin referenced in writing it – the word itself a reversal of the name of the city of Salem, Oregon, the site of significant historical struggles against forced disability institutionalization. Read in terms of the ongoing struggles against eugenicist confinement, the story becomes much less allegorical. And it matters whose perspective the reader takes in the story – that of the townspeople who decide that their happiness is worth the child's immiseration, or that of the confined child. Ben-Moshe and Whatcott write:

> When we read "Omelas" from the perspective of the disabled child, as many mad and disabled people do read it (rather than from the perspective of the townspeople that face the dilemma or the Faustian bargain), then the William James/Dostoyevsky thought experiment falls apart. If the story was written from the perspective of the disabled child, the trade-off of suffering for promised happiness would not make sense. This only is a dilemma because the story is not written or rarely interpreted from the perspective of disabled people (2021: 16).

Starting from the perspective of the disabled child changes how we think about freedom. The model of freedom the townspeople accept starts from the idea that their flourishing is worth someone else's pain; it begins from the idea that the reasoning subject is not themselves disabled. But if we begin from the subject position to that of the non-productive being – the child, the disabled subject, the one who receives care – we might also shift our perception of how society should be organized, and what it should accept.

What does it mean to not make or contribute anything? I return to Sunaura Taylor's evocation of the right not to work. Taylor writes:

> The right not to work is the right not to have your value determined by your productivity as a worker, by your employability or salary. Many disabled people, especially severely disabled individuals, do stay home and thus do not work or are held hostage in nursing homes and are denied gainful employment. What I mean by the right not to work is perhaps as much a shift in ideology or consciousness as it is a material shift. It is about our relation not only to labor but the significance of performing that labor, and to the idea that only through the performance of wage labor does the human being actually accrue value themselves. It is about cultivating a skeptical attitude regarding the significance of work, which should not be taken at face value as a sign of equality and enfranchisement, but should be analyzed more critically (2004).

In a system organized around the imperative to work, actively claiming a life worth living that is enthusiastically not-working becomes an audacious thing. In the conclusion to her compelling essay, she argues:

> People can be useful in ways other than monetarily. The individuals who I marched with may not have paying jobs, but they spend hours each day organizing protests and freeing people from lives in institutions. Isn't this a valuable way to spend one's time? Disabled people have to find meaning in other aspects of their lives and this meaning is threatening to our culture's value system. (Taylor 2004).

I turn in closing to some gestures, mostly from Ursula K. Le Guin's speculative fiction, towards what such non-work meaning-making might be.
One of the main characters in Ursula K. Le Guin′s novel *Malafrena* is Itale, an idealistic young nobleman who has decided to leave his rural home to go to the city and try to contribute to making the revolution.[6] Itale asserts:

> Freedom consists in doing what you can do best, your work, what you have to do, doesn't it? It's nothing you have or keep. It is action, it is life itself. But how can you live in the prison of others' servitude? I can't live for myself until everyone is free to do so! (Le Guin 2016: 36)

This statement is firmly in the intellectual space of that moment in 19th-century revolutionary European discourse, which was in part organized through an attention to the individual. And yet, it resonates with Le Guin's depiction of freedom in the far future and in other worlds, which is much more collective, unfinished, and open-ended. But framing work as *life itself* raises some worries about those of us who cannot or choose not to work.[7] Ultimately I think Le Guin's work opens space for non-workers, as well as for a formulation of work beyond capitalist capture.

[6] As Le Guin reflected on it, the novel is about "the generation in Europe that came of age in the 1820s and broke their hearts in the revolutions of 1830" (2016: XII). This is one of Le Guin's most realistic novels, though it takes place in a version of our world in which there is a small extra country called Orsinia in Eastern Europe.

[7] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for noting that under contemporary conditions, *life itself* is reduced to mere work, particularly under neoliberalism. For more on this important point, see Cooper 2008, Franklin 2000, Rose 2007.

6. Working at freedom

Le Guin's political theory is organized around the idea that society ought to facilitate each of us doing what we can do best, holding that any individual can do that only on the condition that everyone else is also free to live for themselves. In this section, I begin with the question of how work and freedom are connected in her writing in order to open broader questions about disability and work. Le Guin frames all political revolutions as continuously unfinished, in process. There is no final form we are collectively aiming for – instead, the practice of freedom is, fractal-like, a continual unfolding into something we have not yet done. To be free is to surprise ourselves, to become more specifically, uniquely, magnificently, ourselves. This is how she defines the work we can do best, and in some ways, it is what Le Guin sees as the best purpose of our lives. On a societal level, there is a different imperative to remain in perpetual formation, which is to say, available for transformation.

A key text through which Le Guin investigates this form of freedom is her "ambiguous utopia," *The Dispossessed*. This novel is set on a moon called Anarres, where anarchist-communists have set up a society based on mutual aid, solidarity, and cooperation. Their form of anarchism is called "Odonianism," based on the work of an in-world philosopher, Laia Aseio Odo. Work is a central issue in the novel, but it is non-capitalist work. There is thus an interesting scope for us to consider whether there are non-capitalist and pro-disability orientations we might take up towards work. The novel offers a critique of a supposedly anarchic society in which certain fixed hierarchies are beginning to surface more than 150 years after its inauguration. Crafting a society organized around nourishing the possibility for individuals to manifest freedom in this sense is important, because, for Le Guin, only individuals have the power of creation – only individuals can transform our collective world. The social world, or any sites through which we institutionalize social relations, will be in continual danger of calcification, reification, and hierarchical tendencies. She implicitly argues that the aliveness and necessary ongoing transformation at the root of a good society relies on individuals being free to do their work.

The unique flourishing of the individual within a flourishing society is called, in *The Dispossessed*, our "cellular function." Le Guin's main character in the novel, Shevek, is perhaps a useful figure to any academics, theorists, artists, people who resist productive work, or dilettantes, at a moment when it may feel decadent, parasitic, or wrong to spend time doing anything impractical as

the world burns. Shevek is a theoretical physicist, and it is not clear to him that his theoretical work is as important as getting in the harvest or taking care of the babies. Indeed, many people around him view his work as not contributing in obvious ways to the revolution or the good of his society. There is a general figure on Anarres of the "nuchnibi," the freeloader who does not ever accept difficult postings, who just mooches around, often living a solitary life. It is a question whether Shevek is a nuchnibi, and reading this book in terms of disability politics has raised the question for me of whether disabled people are this, too. I think for Le Guin disabled people are not nuchnibi, and that the circuits of value she offers around work might hold some promise for us in theorizing an anti-work politics that welcomes collective care based on ontological dependence (Nishida 2022).

At a key juncture in the novel, Shevek has an insight about his need to do theoretical physics, which could be seen as a kind of nuchnibic tendency, since it is not obviously useful in the way growing food is: "He recognized that need, in Odonian terms, as his "cellular function," the analogic term for the individual's individuality, the work he can do best, therefore his best contribution to his society" (Le Guin 2011: 333). Writer and psychologist Viktor Frankl grounds his case for personal meaning-making in a complementary conception of the moral weight of uniqueness. He writes that in our "specific life circle, every single human being is irreplaceable and inimitable, and that is true for everyone" (Frankl 2019: 36). Even in our imperfections, we have access to uniqueness. He writes:

> Let us not forget that each individual person is imperfect, but each is imperfect in a different way, each "in his own way." And as imperfect as he is, he is uniquely imperfect. So, expressed in a positive way, he becomes somehow irreplaceable, unable to be represented by anyone else, unexchangeable. (Frankl 2019: 47)

We are not fungible. Oscar Wilde similarly centred the value of individuality, even in imperfection, writing: "There is no one type for man. There are as many perfections as there are imperfect men" (qtd. in Williams 2021: 21). All of us will be imperfect in some way that is uniquely our own.

Such an orientation understands individuality as existentially interesting, as a starting point for politics. We are all unique, and our moment in history and our place in the world means that no one can fill in for us, no one can take our place: because of this, we have something to offer. On the one hand, this is

a very obvious claim, but consider how rare it is that we have the actual conditions to be like no one else and to experience that as a good thing. Under capitalism, the unique, imperfect hours of our life are translated into the wage relation - we are made, if we're lucky enough to have wage work, equivalent to money. At so many points in our life, we are homogenized, made adjunct to various machines, and disciplined to fit into boxes and timetables not our own. Our time in all its uniqueness and specificity is rendered fungible, available for exchange on the market. Taking mere uniqueness as a basis for meaning is interesting. From this approach, there is value in your existence simply because it is "irreplaceable, unable to be represented by anyone else, unexchangeable," as Frankl puts it (2019: 47).

Frankl argues that rather than any person asking what the meaning of our life is, looking outside ourselves for an answer, life is asking us the question of meaning, and we answer it with the activities of our lives. He says, "The question life asks us, and in answering which we can realize the meaning of the present moment, does not only change from hour to hour but also changes from person to person: the question is entirely different in each moment for every individual" (Frankl 2019: 34). Figuring out how we can flourish requires not only an understanding of our own specific formation, but also attention to how we are placed in history - and, indeed, the actual moment we experience in any given moment. This is another layer of our uniqueness and specificity. It also opens the question of what it means to know what our cellular function is.

In *The Dispossessed,* people do follow their inclinations and find their passions, with more freedom and openness than many of us experience under capitalism. "Kleggich" is the word in their language, Pravic, for the grunt work of running a collective world, often tedious drudgery, necessary labor, satisfying to have done even when it is unpleasant to do. I propose to read kleggich as something like social reproduction – all that needs to happen so that people individually and society collectively can continue. In the book, kleggich always needs to be done and people are socially pressured to not shirk their part, being expected to offer one day of their week to it. But kleggich is not work; work is what people do that has the quality of fulfilling their cellular function. Pravic uses the same word for "play" and "work" (though Le Guin does not tell us what this word is).[8]

[8] Historian and science fiction writer Ada Palmer coins the idea of the voker/vocateur to name having a passion, an avocation, for one's work in the world – perhaps this is close to the idea Le Guin gestures towards in the idea of play/work (2017).

Under advanced capitalism, it is hard to conceive of "play/work" that is not immediately recuperated into neoliberal self-mastery schemes. For many of us, the definition of work is that it is something that we would not do if we were not paid to do it, in the context of needing to pay to live. Under capitalism, everything we do that involves exchanging the hours of our life for money so that we can live might be defined as kleggich. Even in this context, where most people justly hate their jobs, it is common to be told that we should love our work, and that if we love it enough we will not experience it as work (Jaffe 2021).

Recall the character Itale, who leaves home to try to contribute to the revolution. His cousin, Laura, understands much later Itale's decision to go. She thinks:

> They had all known what to expect of him, here, all they asked of him he could have done, easily, too easily. He had had to go off and try to find what it was that he and only he could do, what was necessary to him. So, in [the city of] Aisnar, if she chose, she could avoid ever staking herself. She could do and be all they asked of her, and the reward was sure. (Le Guin 2016: 244)

She chooses to "set freedom first," to stake herself, to work at freedom. But she reflects:

> What she had at stake, what she had to give and lose, she thought, did not amount to much. She had no talents at all, no great intellect, and nothing special to undertake. All she had to do was, like all things women had to do, a matter of daily redoing, an endless reaffirmation, nothing ever finished and complete. It would never be done, and it had to be done. It was her life she wanted, the whole of it: not a reward. Such as it was it was hers to live, so long as she would take the risk; so long as, having received her inheritance, she would not let it become a prisonhouse; so long as she set freedom first. But it was very difficult. No one had ever spoken to her about what freedom is for a woman, what it might consist of and how it is to be won. Or not won, that seemed the wrong word for a woman's freedom. Worked at, perhaps (Le Guin 2016: 244–245).

This definition of individual freedom begins from the idea that there is some work that is necessary to us, something that is ours to do, our own work. It is our gift, but it is also our burden. Le Guin argues here that we can know that something is *not* our work to do if we can do it easily, too easily, without ever staking ourselves, and with a sure reward. The implication is that we can identify our work if it is something that takes attention or effort, something during which we are *not* avoiding staking ourselves, something which we don't know will turn out. Our individual activity, as she frames it here, will always be something that

only we can do, but that we cannot yet do completely, that we have not mastered. It will never be finished. Our individual work calls upon us to surprise ourselves, to become more than we or others knew we were. And yet it is something that we can work at, which is to say that it is recognizable to us, within our ambit. Here the specificity of the individual is meant to name something that opposes atomized self-reliant individualism; this form of attending to individual flourishing can only happen within the context of a flourishing social and physical ecosystem. Implicit in Laura's reflection is a critique of the limitations of what is framed as women's work, and the limit on the imagination imposed by that frame.

This part of the cellular function analogy makes an ethical and political demand on each of us to become what only we can be, but also to refuse to do only what we know already that we can do. It implies an ethical and political demand on our society to nourish the conditions under which we could do that kind of work. Freedom consists not in continuing to do things that come easily to us – rather, it is the unique, lively exercise of surprising ourselves with what we and only we can do. Only we know when we are living in bad faith, when we are doing what we can do too easily; working at freedom is taking ongoing responsibility for the unfurling of our possibility. And a good society is one that nourishes each person's freedom in this sense.

There is a very long commitment to and conversation about individualism in political philosophy, of course. Following Le Guin, I am interested in how this conversation shows up in anarchism of many stripes; how the individual stands in relation to society is often in question. So for example, individualist Max Stirner argued for conscious egoism and understood society as based only on self-interested contractual agreements. In sharp contrast, anarchist communists like Peter Kropotkin argued that mutuality and interdependence were central to individual existence and that in some ways there is no such being as an individual (Stirner 1995, Kropotkin 1955).

Le Guin falls squarely in the anarchist-communist lineage of Kropotkin largely because of her focus on mutual aid and co-constitution as a ground for freedom. At the same time, her approach to the question of individualism articulated as the cellular function offers something substantial to this conversation. Thinking about kleggich with her centers a feminist commitment to the good of socially necessary labour. It is central to the analogy of the cellular function that the individual and society are co-produced; neither is merely instrumentally useful to the other. As Shevek thinks about his own work in theoretical physics as

his cellular function, he reflects: "A healthy society would let him exercise that optimum function freely, in the coordination of all such functions finding its adaptability and strength. That was the central idea of Odo's *Analogy"* (Le Guin 2011: 333). The book referenced here is the (fictional) political treatise *The Social Organism*, which we readers of *The Dispossessed* glimpse only in snippets quoted by characters, in the ways they reference it, in how their society falls short of Odo's vision.

In this reflective scene, Shevek explicitly considers whether the people of Anarres's failure to live up to Odo's ideals discredits her political project. Le Guin writes:

> That the Odonian society on Anarres had fallen short of the ideal did not, in his eyes, lessen his responsibility to it; just the contrary. With the myth of the State out of the way, the real mutuality and reciprocity of society and individual became clear. Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice -- the power of change, the essential function of life. The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind (2011: 333–334).

Le Guin's conception of mutual aid here highlights the co-production of personal freedom and a living society. Mutual aid is currently frequently framed in terms of the interactions between people; here, Le Guin frames it instead as a kind of reciprocity between individuals and society. The formulation of individual freedom as articulated in *Malafrena* is foundational to this conception of mutual aid: Only the person who manifests the *power of moral choice, the power of change,* is propagating *the essential function of life* – continual revolution, continual transformation. In order to offer continual revolution on a societal level, however, individuals need to be supported by the society they live in. And this returns us to the question of what, besides refusal to compromise, we individuals owe our society if we are to practice a form of freedom that meets the ideals of mutual aid.

I have, however, several worries about Le Guin's conception of freedom as something we work at in a continual exercise of unfolding our existential possibility.

If antiwork theorists do not centre disability in their accounts, neither does Le Guin. The anarchist society of *The Dispossessed*, as I mentioned above, manifests a scorn for people who do not pull their weight or who use more of the social goods that are collectively produced than they contribute; this is ableist.

The formulation of play/work, along with an assessment of which cellular functions are socially desirable, constitute part of why Le Guin subtitled *The Dispossessed* "an ambiguous utopia." Sunaura Taylor's conception of the right *not* to work needs to be part of any conversation we have about what it would mean for society to truly manifest mutual aid.

There is no need to structure the world around wage work; the world is abundant and there is enough for everyone. We are currently distributing material conditions such that only some people experience abundance and leisure, and we can make other choices. A key question for what those other choices should be begins with asking whether it is possible to think of play/work, as Le Guin thinks of it in *The Dispossessed* and *Malafrena,* as part of a project of disability liberation. It's not enough to typify the demeaning kind of work, kleggich, as "wage work" and to lift up something called "playwork." Simply adding "play" does not escape the ways that working, on yourself or for others, has been recuperated into neoliberal regimes of perpetual self-improvement. Certainly a conception of freedom based on rejecting that which we can already *easily, too easily do* can fall into the "never stop improving" mode invoked by home improvement and health food stores alike. I think Le Guin's conception can serve disability liberation if we pay attention not only to the *mode* – practising something that we have not yet accomplished – but to the *content* of our practices. From this approach, we might need to cultivate capacities that have been stolen from us. These capacities might be those that would help us resist capitalism's theft of the time of our life through the wage relation; they might be things we take back from the gaping maw of the demand to make ourselves and everything we care about fungible; they might be things that cannot be monetized.

For many of us, it is hard to rest, play, or have non-directed time. The most obvious reason for this is that so many people are working zero-hours contracts, for Uber, on fish processing ships that never dock, in an Amazon warehouse, or several jobs at once. People on disability or social assistance do not have enough money to pay rent, eat enough, or have any sense of security and abundance. So there is a material basis of actual precarity that underlies the felt sense of having a hard time playing. There is also an immaterial basis for the imaginative impoverishment around play – the monetization of our attention and the gamification of our lives may tend to narrow the scope of what we might do (Nguyen 2021). But play has been a keyword in thinking about freedom at least since Fredrich Schiller formulated his conception of the "play drive" as the capacity that defines what it is to be human. Turning from the realm of work and

productivism and towards the aesthetic may be a surprising first step towards a world in which no one is in the broom closet.

Our capacity to play, to create forms of beauty that do not yet exist, is currently considered something to exercise if we have time after work. Waywardness and idleness are somewhat suspect, even on the left. Productivism is compelling. Disability theorist Akemi Nishida asks, "What does it mean to recognize and value people based on their bare existence, which emanates energy, instead of evaluating them solely on their functionality and its usefulness to the political economy?" (2022: 25). As Hester and Srnicek argue in *After Work*, free time is a "prerequisite for any meaningful conception of freedom." They continue:

> *The struggle against work - in all its forms – is the fight for free time.* It is only on the basis of this free time that we can be allowed to determine what to do with our finite lives – to commit ourselves to life paths, projects, identities, and norms... The fight for free time is ultimately a matter of opening up the realm of freedom itself and maximizing the extent of autonomously chosen action (Hester & Srnicek 2023: 11).

The question here is what it would take to genuinely be able to choose what we do and who we are – with our time and in our lives. Hester and Srnicek identify many of the problems of intensifying unpaid work, all the labor that goes into keeping house, raising children, and caring for one another, and they explore many beautiful and practical suggestions for creating communal luxury and collective care. A post-work world would also be a world in which there would need to be substantial deliberation about how to collectively shape the balance between kleggich (necessary labor) and work-play. Creating the conditions for genuine collective deliberation matters because "adjudicating between competing values is a core element of a truly free society, given that the use of our time would no longer be determined by coercion, dominance, or market discipline. Instead, we would be faced with the immense question of our own desires" (Hester & Srnicek 2023: 185). I take it that our own desires pose us immense questions in at least two ways. First, our desires can be difficult to discern at all. Second, the conditions of the world shape what we can meaningfully want – we can desire more audaciously as we make a shared world in which others too can access more expansive pleasures. How would we or could we answer this immense question of our own desire in the context of pervasive oppression, and servitude?

So I return to Itale's reflections on freedom in *Malefrena,* which are another way to talk about what Le Guin calls the cellular function. How, as anarchist-communists, do we shape societies that nourish both the best each individual can offer – life itself – while also contributing to living and ongoing social worlds? None of us can live for ourselves until everyone is free to do so, and yet we can live in ways that might open more freedom to others, in the present and for different futures. We cannot predict what that future will look like because as we move toward it we change the material and imaginative conditions of the collectivities we're part of, and ourselves as well in the doing. So whatever emerges is profoundly uncertain. When Odo is quoted in *The Dispossessed* saying, "To be whole is to be part," she is mapping a practice of dwelling with that emerging and unpredictable co-making. To be a whole, someone who is living in a good way, is to be part of something, inside the world. It is to be partial, to be on the side of life in this way – partial to living. And it is to actively make something – become part of it – that is made bigger, more complex, and more itself the more you are yourself. This is a practice that you don't have or keep, but offer. Starting from the perspective of the child in the broom closet in Omelas, or from the stance that disabled lives are worth living, we can begin to tell a story in which non-productivity, uselessness, idleness, and play are an integral part of any good society. We can be against work, but for a kind of freedom that, in Le Guin's terms, can be *worked at.* We might fulfil our cellular function with exactly the life only we can live, even as we cannot yet imagine what such a life will be.[9]

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