

## Introduction

### *Cultural Value of Work*

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I have a friend, Katherine, who does not, in the conventional sense of the word, work. She is disabled, or believes that she is, suffering from intense anxiety and incapable of even the least mentally or physically taxing of employment – say, stuffing envelopes or washing cars. We – you, me, my relatives and friends, all US taxpayers and even, indirectly, people around the world – support her. We buy her meds. We pay her rent. Until she contracted chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD), we bought her cigarettes. Now, instead, we subsidize her oxygen tanks. We paid the lawyers who argued before the Social Security Administration that she needed \$1,600 or so that we give her every month, that she should have access to subsidized housing, free counseling, and discount pharmaceuticals, and that she should never have to seek gainful employment.

Yet Katherine does work. A white woman with graying reddish hair and blue eyes, originally from the North American Midwest, she now lives in Florida, where she occupies a position in a social network of people in positions similar to hers – other disabled wards of the state. This is her work. It requires expending energy, meeting deadlines, scheduling, and the giving and receiving of prescription and illicit drugs, information, intimacy, medical advice, and friendship. It involves taking advantage of relatives and friends and experimenting with credit card fraud, payday lending, pawnshops, recycling, shoplifting, identity theft, shopping at thrift stores and flea markets, drug dealing, prostitution, and other behaviors that those of us whose incomes derive from conventional sources might have trouble even imagining.

Much of the work that Katherine accomplishes is either poorly paid or not paid at all. In this sense, it is like the unpaid work that individuals perform to care for each other inside their households: Cleaning, cooking, raising children, running errands, beautifying yards, maintaining homes, etc. Little of this work is counted in government economic databases or considered in conventional economic analyses as anything but incidental to Gross Domestic Products, money supply, behavior of the Federal Reserve, or the New York Stock Exchange. Even Karl Marx, more conscious of the influence of history and society over economics than many economists, dismissed people like

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Katherine as the so-called lumpenproletariat – unemployable, unenlightened, sick, downtrodden, and often foolish, stupid, and frustrating mass of people who spend their days idly, watching television, queuing up at plasma banks, sleeping in shelters, or marshaling just enough energy for scams, scavenging, hustling, or standing on a street corner with a cardboard sign that reads, “Veteran. Will work for food.” Marx’s lumpens were thieves, prostitutes, vagabonds, vagrants, the mentally disturbed, and others who, bereft of class consciousness, contributed little to society, let alone social movements or revolutionary ideals.<sup>1</sup> Yet, perhaps, we deny lumpens at least some of the credit they deserve.

I like to think that Katherine, suffering her own kind of exile, shores up some deepwater greatness rather than merely crawls from one clambake to the next. If nothing else, Katherine provides her siblings and their spouses endless material for brainstorming, troubleshooting, gossip, phone calls, information pooling, and no small amount of amusement. The fact is Katherine is funny – she can be witty and slapstick along with being strange, loony, and absurd. Once during a job interview, she said to her prospective employer, “What I’m really good with is a calculator.” Another time she said that an employer of cafeteria workers would not hire her because he could tell that she – yes, Katherine, this near bag lady – had too much class.

More diverting, however, is her ability to lie, a trait evidently necessary among people in her circumstances. Her lies can be incredibly elaborate, as in the time she had convinced her sister that she was working in an office, telling detailed stories about imaginary coworkers; or the black boyfriend she invented; or the neighbor who was the head of counterterrorism for the entire US government yet somehow had trouble making rent, owned no car, and spent most of his time at home – evidently waiting for his next deep cover assignment. But more often her lies are simple and straightforward, with modest goals that usually involve asking for money or avoiding uncomfortable social situations. She once claimed that her son was in a fender bender and she needed a thousand dollars to repair the damage so her insurance rates would not increase; that she lost a \$100 bill among the lettuce in a supermarket and

<sup>1</sup> Many social scientists invest a good deal of scholarly labor in defining terms, such as lumpenproletariat, peasant, worker, and are constantly updating and revising them to shed or add this or that bit of ideological knowledge. The linguistic gymnastics of this can, at times, be quite impressive and intellectually stimulating, but at least as often they are distracting – digressions from clear prose and obsessive. Fussy. Today’s scholars might refer to Marx’s lumpens as marginalized, downtrodden, or, my favorite, subaltern – a term that seems to have been applied to just about anyone who is not wearing a necktie or does not buy specialty coffee daily. My apologies to those whose theoretical knowledge is such that, when I use a term like lumpenproletariat or peasant, their minds resonate with all sorts of connotations. I hope it will become clear in my ethnographic work how I distinguish among people like Katherine, Guatemalan peasants, Mexican and US fishermen, immigrant entrepreneurs, etc.

now had no money for food; that she suffered migraines that prevented her from traveling to a family reunion . . .

Of course, Katherine's friends and family learned long ago to believe little she says, yet she can be entertaining, amusing, and a source of lively talk even if often frustrating and usually, ultimately, quite sad. Still, what is interesting about people like Katherine is what they contribute to society while they take from it – what they give for what they receive. Katherine embodies a massive social safety net – SSI, as it is known, or Social Security Insurance. In return for her benefits, she provides the people who know her with arguments for and against social safety nets. Her behavior could support positions and opinions all across the political spectrum, from conservative politicians arguing that she is taking state resources unnecessarily (which she is) to leftists arguing that her condition points to a structural flaw in a system that should focus more on rehabilitation (which it should).

More concretely, her family derives relief from the burden of supporting her – a burden made heavier with her constant lying, whining, abusing credit sources, overdrawing her bank account, suffering migraines, begging, and appealing to their sympathies. This relief allows them to deploy their resources elsewhere, in purchases of appliances and cars for example, or buying mutual funds, bonds, and stocks, or hiring landscaping crews, administrative assistants, or domestic servants. In this sense, the state safety net called SSI subsidizes them – they who happen to have the resources to support Katherine and still live comfortably, in large houses, driving expensive cars, spending disposable income and generally enjoying life. Together they could pool funds and come up with the \$1,600 or so per month that she lives on without difficulty. Katherine's parents and all of her siblings are pretty well off, fiscally quite solidly upper middle class; splitting \$1,600 among them would involve little more hardship than skipping one night a week dining out. The income disparities within Katherine's family reflect, to some extent, that which we find in society, the ratios ranging from a low of around ten to Katherine's one to as high as around 600 to Katherine's one.

Yet her family members choose to let the government – a federal government that is far from fiscally fine – support their daughter, sister, cousin, niece, mother, and sister-in-law. They do this despite their political convictions, from both the right and the left, that the federal government should balance its budget. Still, they fail to do their (admittedly quite small) part to help the government accomplish this.

On the one hand, this is selfish, greedy, morally questionable, and downright wrong. On the other, they can justify it by saying that they have paid into the system their entire lives and now they should get this little peace of mind, this relief from the financial burden of supporting Katherine, in return. These opposing views make their behavior toward Katherine both a political

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economic and a moral economic issue – a contradiction that they resolve in their own minds with the aid of various ideological positions, religious perspectives, and philosophies. Katherine’s behavior teaches us about the workings of the overall economy and how this social segment contributes to it. Katherine is not alone among people who believe they are besting the system, living by lies and their wits, yet whose annual incomes from such scams are less than what they could earn as a crew kid at McDonald’s, a clerk at Family Dollar, or a greeter at Walmart. If it were not for her Social Security payments, Katherine would earn maybe \$800 a year.

What fascinates me about Katherine and her companions is how they manage to occupy the margins of an economy that has been marginalizing more and more of its people – even its people who work. “Expelling them,” as Saskia Sassen says (2014). Yet have they been fully expelled? Among their economic activities they have been providing low-cost marijuana to people suffering from occupational, combat, and other injuries, saving them the high costs of pharmaceuticals; repairing bicycles, microwave ovens, and other appliances and tools that they collect on public streets and reselling (and recycling) them in flea markets and other commercial venues; selling contra-band cheaply; distributing flyers advertising sales; and rescuing the homeless from homelessness by letting them “crash” in their apartments.

In these and other activities, their livelihoods contribute to the quality of life of the working poor. Living in the same apartment complex where Katherine lives are people working at McDonald’s, clerking at Family Dollar, and greeting at Walmart. More interesting is that they overlap, in their neighborhoods and at work, with undocumented immigrants, temps, permanently part-time employees, and others whose participation in the labor market is variegated and incomplete. And infinitely more interesting is that these latter members of the labor force overlap with full-time employees, professionals, entrepreneurs, property owners, and the rank-and-file of the global workforce. They, we – you, me, Katherine – are all in this together.

The connections extending from Katherine and her friends to workers and professionals around the world are fascinating to me because of a growing tendency in local, regional, national, and global economies to construct workforces that separate workers from one another rather than connect them in collectives like labor unions, worker organizations, or imagined communities of class and class consciousness (Durrenberger 2012; Durrenberger and Erim 2005; Parry 2020). Instead of tracing the connections, perhaps it might be more enlightening to get a sense of how the separating, the dismantling, takes place. Recently, Katherine broke up with her boyfriend, a toothless, pot-bellied, illiterate man named Fred. This was a personal instance of dismantling that had subsequent repercussions throughout Katherine and Fred’s social network. When Katherine said that she did not want to see him again, Fred would not

accept it. He began calling everyone they knew, alternately pleading with them to help him get her back, denigrating her, or accusing friends of convincing her to leave him. In his accounts of their relationship were expressions of joy, bitterness, contentment, struggle, rage, forgiveness, accommodation, apology, and denial – to name just a few. Police had to be called in, a restraining order issued, the security guards at her apartment complex put on alert – a condition that was not so uncommon for them, given that many of the tenants were in similar straits as Katherine and Fred. Finally, physically free of him, she still received word of his sorrow and anger through the network of those similarly positioned, similarly sad, and angry. His sorrow consoled her, feeding her a sense of self-worth.

Estimating the value of sorrow and anger is not like estimating the value of a reliable labor force, a work of art, or a carrot, but for many generations, social scientists have attempted to estimate the values that people attach to intangible conditions and states of mind like sorrow and anger, even if referred to by other terms like depression and alienation. In Katherine's case, Fred's continued desire for her nourished her relationships with those members of her network who enjoyed talking about it, consoling her, and drawing a sense of self-worth from it themselves. It satisfied social relational and psychological needs.

And it altered, overtly and subtly, the social relationships connecting Katherine to drug dealers, prostitutes, perpetual patients, and the other disadvantaged, downtrodden, marginal people she spent her time with. Similar processes of separation, or dismantling, occur within populations of people who supply labor to various industries around the world, and especially workers who work in settings foreign to them and far from their home communities. Once separated, they become reconnected to other workers and other cultural settings that are sometimes forged by themselves and other times by their employers and governing states. Neither Katherine nor Fred was a member of any labor union, workers' center, or other organizations that might have provided them with stability in their ability to continue carrying on in the ways they had. Nor is it likely that any worker organization will ever take the time to organize people with so few ties to the formal wage labor market. Katherine and Fred were just bouncing about the low end of the largely illicit labor market, dependent on fragile networks (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009).

The connections among social relationships stemming from labor, livelihoods, and work and the resources of the state, the street, the natural environment, and other parts of the worlds we inhabit, and the ways people understand and justify them, influence how we think about the central subject of this book: Labor. I investigate labor initially through an appreciation of wage and

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reproductive labor.<sup>2</sup> This is because, unlike many other forms of labor, reproductive labor is pan-human and wage labor is nearly pan-human. Reproductive labor has been part of being human since the beginning of human time and wage labor since the beginning of capitalism. Today, wage labor has diffused around the world with the expansion of capitalism into new frontiers and economies – even those that are nominally socialist or communist. Along with reproductive and wage labor, I also discuss cultural labor, domestic productive labor, ethical labor, and a few other forms of labor that have acquired cultural value in the recent past or have been part of being human since ancient times.

At the core of any economy is labor: The human energy organized and deployed to convert earth's natural resources and society's social resources toward the satisfaction of human needs and desires. At the core of any capitalist economy, however, is *wage* labor: That social and contractual relationship between employers and workers that is guided by laws and understandings regarding how many and what hours one is supposed to work, rates and forms of pay, equipment provided or brought to the production process, the requirements of subordination and supervision, the legitimate and illegitimate enforcement of workplace discipline, and other attributes of today's advanced capitalist workplaces and social classes. It is labor that Karl Marx argued must be available and free for capitalism to emerge historically, writing, "The historical conditions of its [capital's] existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities. It arises only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence finds the free worker available, on the market, as the seller of his own labour-power" (1976: 274).

Others might argue that more important than labor to a capitalist economy are markets, or perhaps the money supply or the banking system, or stocks, bonds, commodities, or even widgets, but it is the organization and deployment of human labor power that brings these parts of the economy into existence and maintains and sustains them. It is the labor of merchants, bankers, brokers, factory workers, taxi drivers, janitors, and others that bring into being and sustain markets, the money supply, the stock market, capitalist enterprises, and other explicitly economic phenomena. And it is in the reification and mystification of these explicitly economic phenomena, particularly markets or, tellingly, *the market* – how we make icons and fetishes out of them – that labor relations and their human repercussions have been blurred and disguised, their fundamental principles hidden in space and through time,

<sup>2</sup> Although I probably should not have to define reproductive labor, recently I was having lunch with an economist who asked me what I meant by it: Reproductive labor, discussed in great detail in Chapter 4, is the labor involved in raising children and reproducing households, families, and communities.

their protagonists marginalized and rendered invisible at the lower reaches of income levels yet championed and valorized at the higher levels.

In this book, I bring labor back to the visible core from the periphery of what we consider the economy. Although focused on labor, it is not a rehashing of Marx's labor theory of value but an ethnographic and anthropological appreciation of the many forms that labor can take and what these forms mean for the creation of happiness, satisfaction, and other values in people's lives and livelihoods. Next, following other colleagues (e.g. Binford 2013; Garcia Colon 2020; Zloliniski 2019), I begin with a brief consideration of foreign contract labor: Or a form of wage labor that has ceased to be sensitive to market dynamics, is under government control, nearly completely separates reproductive from productive labor, and where workers are available to employers without being completely free – in short, an extreme form of wage labor.



Early in the morning of May 14, 1982, three days after the first anniversary of Bob Marley's death, Carlton Lewis met me on the paved road three kilometers north of Christiana, Jamaica. May is a rainy month in Jamaica and the paths up the slopes of Yankee Valley, where Carlton lived, were treacherous enough when it was light, yet Carlton had climbed out of the valley in the dark. Still, his clothes looked crisp as he approached. It was foggy that morning. As we waited for the beams of a minibus bound for the Parish capital of Mandeville to emerge from the fog, I assured him once again that, at the screening for sugar workers we were bound for that morning, I would not let anyone know that I was with him.

We were headed to what Jamaicans carrying job cards called “the hand test” – a two and a half-hour session during which over 300 young men would file past representatives of the US sugar industry and the Jamaican Ministry of Labour to answer a few simple questions and show them their hands, eyes, and teeth. Carlton had received his job card – his ticket into the screening – from the local Member of Parliament (MP), Len Kirby, who gave Carlton a card because Carlton's mother had died and Carlton was in debt to Kirby for her funeral expenses. As a rural MP, Kirby received over 300 job cards that he distributed to individuals and members of his reelection committees along lines of political patronage – people who, in turn, used them for themselves or gave them to young, strong men related to them. Many of the men in Mandeville that morning held job cards that Kirby, or Kirby's committee members, had given them.

The hand test was a labor recruiting gathering. It took place in a large public park in a section of Mandeville known for small market stalls and rum shops. The potential recruits were assembled on the park's open spaces at six-thirty in



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the morning, two hours before five rented Audis and a Ministry of Labour van turned into the park and parked beside the pavilions where the men would be screened. During those two hours, Carlton and I spoke with many of the men around us about their prospects. All of them hoped they would be chosen and most believed they would. Rumors had spread that the labor pool for the upcoming season was low. Over eighty percent of them, they repeated, would receive a telegram the following fall that said only, “Come to Ministry of Labour, Kingston. Bring baggage” – a telegram telling them they had been accepted into what was officially known as the Farmworker Programme. Everyone at the park that morning called it the sugar program.

Sugar is to the Caribbean what corn is to Iowa or tobacco to North Carolina, but these men were not hoping to harvest sugarcane in Jamaica or any other part of the Caribbean. They wanted to cut sugarcane in southern Florida, in the vast, mucky fields stretching south of Lake Okeechobee toward the Everglades, nearly reaching Alligator Alley. Later that year, both Carlton and I would spend time there, Carlton cutting sugarcane and me observing and interviewing workers in and around the sugar labor camps, but that morning in Mandeville, Carlton knew little about where he was going.

Soon after the Audis pulled into the park, the Ministry of Labour officials spotted the only white man who was not part of the screening team and approached to escort me out. Carlton, against my wishes, intervened. I had told him I did not want them to know I was with him. I wanted nothing to jeopardize the possibility he would be chosen. I wanted nothing, let alone me, to derail his dream.

But Carlton was his own man. Tall, lanky, and infinitely calm, he confronted the Ministry of Labour officials with his quiet demeanor and confidence derived from being the father of twelve daughters and a single infant son. He had two gold teeth. When he smiled with half his mouth, as he usually did, only one of them gleamed. He had to laugh to display both. Gently, he touched the arm of the Labour Ministry man who had asked me to leave. When the man turned, Carlton explained that I was his friend – a designation that any anthropologist enjoys hearing from someone whom, quite frankly, he relies on for connections, data, information, and access to culturally different contexts – and asked the man to reconsider expelling me, telling him I was only there to observe.

By means of this simple intervention, Carlton bought me time. The official went to confer with his colleagues. Meanwhile, I took the opportunity to interview the men from Florida who had arrived in the Audis. One of them I had already met, but in Clewiston or Belle Glade – one of the small, inland south Florida communities just south of the levee that contains Lake Okeechobee. He was the human resources manager for US Sugar Corporation. I began interviewing him, first confirming that the vast majority



of the men they screened that day would end up working in Florida's sugarcane. The Jamaicans were right, he said. The labor pool was indeed depleted. Too many workers had surpassed their peak productivity period of three to four years. Too many workers, the following season, would not be called back.

About midway into the interview with a second white man, this one with the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, the officials from the Ministry decided that it was best that I leave. They gave me the name of their boss, Alston Smith, the Minister of Labour who, around a year later, would be convicted of misuse of the sugar workers' savings accounts. He would have a difficult time in prison, but at the time, he was still a free man, defrauding his countrymen. The Ministry officials told me that, if I wanted to observe the hand test, I would need to get permission, in writing, from Mr. Smith. Quite diligently, I wrote all this down, showing the Ministry officials that I was armed with note cards and a fountain pen – the intimidating weapons of investigative journalism and the ethnographic craft. It did seem to bother them; I was not unaware of the power of my nationality and color. Before leaving, I arranged to meet Carlton after the screening at a nearby rum shop.

Waiting for Carlton, I ordered coffee and set about recording what I had heard and witnessed that morning on a few index cards from the small pack I always carried. Later that day, in the evening, I transferred this information into one of my field journals, just three entries after a passage about riding in a minibus through Spanish Town, rounding the town's market clock as the bus nosed through the thick market crowd the moment that Marley's *Redemption Song* came on. On this first anniversary of Marley's tragic, untimely death, radios across Jamaica, all day long, were celebrating his remarkable talent and his life. Whatever findings my research on the sugar program might produce paled in light of his beautiful musical essay on the slave trade – music enjoyed, even relished, ironically, in a place where the British sold slaves.

I had been conducting research on the sugar program as a graduate student at the University of Florida since around the time of Marley's death, when two professors took ten of us students down to south Florida to interview workers in the cane. It was there I met the human resource manager for US Sugar. After crunching numbers from that research, I chose central Jamaica as a follow-up study site and moved there in January 1982. I wanted to study guest workers. I wanted to study what scholars called managed migration.

That day in May was Carlton's introduction to managed migration. Three days earlier, the entire country had swelled with sadness and pride over the enduring presence of its most world-renowned citizen, but the day of the hand test Carlton submitted to the degrading procedure of being examined as though he were a horse. After feeling his hands for calluses and checking his eyes and teeth, the labor recruiters asked him, "Can you work ten hours a day?"

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“Yes, boss,” Carlton answered.  
“Seven days a week?”  
“Yes, boss.”  
“Can you eat rice and pork three times a day?”  
“Yes, boss.”

Carlton answered like this, as calm and deferential as a sleeping mule, for the opportunity to harvest sugarcane in the United States – for the chance to become a guest worker, legally authorized to take a job that, supposedly, no US citizen would want.



Managed migration – the hiring of guest workers – is one of the ways that capitalism has sharpened the wage labor relationship to its most efficient, separating productive labor from the spaces and responsibilities of its reproduction by 100s or 1000s of miles. Around the world, wage labor relations have become nearly as common as relations between parents and their children, yet wage labor has assumed nearly as many forms as the labor of raising children. Given the global expansion of human trafficking, undocumented labor migration, and managed migration, many seem to believe that workers, whether paid wages or not, function most efficiently when they are completely cut off from family life.

For many years during the 1980s and 1990s, US farm labor markets evolved in ways that favored single male and single female migrant farmworkers who traveled from crop to crop without their families (Griffith et al. 1995; Heppel and Amendola 1995; Commission on Agricultural Workers 1992; Hahamovitch 2011; Zolniski 2019). Farmworker housing provided less space for farmworkers’ children. Crew leaders and farm labor contractors hired more and more single men. Farmers objected to having children in the seasonal crews on their farms, worried about the hazards of machinery, chemicals, and livestock along with the possibility of fines for violations of child labor laws. Gradually, families were winnowed out of many of the harvests, along with many US citizens and work-authorized foreign workers. Farm labor contractors began hiring mostly undocumented immigrants and, in a few cases, grower associations like the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, the New England Apple Council, and the North Carolina Growers Association helped farmers gain access to guest workers like Carlton. By the time the National Agricultural Workers Survey was developed, in the mid-1990s, over half of the US farmworkers were undocumented immigrants and the majority of those single males. If you break the labor force down and focus only on seasonal, harvest labor, the proportion is even higher.