

# 1 | Introduction

The main part of this book is about how and why people spend large amounts of their working hours on private activities. Why is this worth studying? Well, that is the other part of the book. There are two threads running throughout the study: One is theoretical – how can we conceive of resistance at work and why have we heard so little about it? The other is empirical – do the rather large proportions of our working hours that we spend on private activities signify a hitherto unrecognized type of resistance against work? Of course, the two threads will intertwine as we move along, but initially I will keep them separate for pedagogical reasons.

## 1.1 The theoretical problem

Part of the problematic of this book derives from what I have tried to capture in another book (Paulsen, 2010), namely *the critique of work*. The critique of work has a long tradition and is becoming increasingly relevant as productivity grows and the eulogized ambition to “create jobs” echoes more and more hollowly. There are conservative elements in the critique of work dating back to Plato and Aristotle, in which the stupefying effects of work have long been scrutinized (see Applebaum, 1992; Beder, 2001; Tilgher, 1931). There are anarchist elements in the critique of work in which the inherent power structure of wage labor is criticized for being incompatible with a life of freedom and dignity (Black, 2009; Illich, 1978; Kropotkin, 1927 [1892]). The critique of work can be found in mainstream sociology (Bauman, 2004; Beck, 2000; Wright, 2010). It is at the core of (early) critical theory (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2010 [1956]; Marcuse, 1955), and yet well practiced outside the boundaries of continental philosophy (cf. Keynes, 1991 [1931]; Leontief, 1986; Russell, 1996 [1935]). It is also vital in both the ecology movement (Gorz, 1994; Jackson, 2009; Schor, 2010) and

the radical feminist movement (Méda, 2008; Solanas, 1967; Weeks, 2011).

In most of its variations, the critique of work represents one of the darker streams in social theory. In it, you find the most depressing accounts of social life, including advanced explanations of why work society survives its own technology and why it is so hard to break the symbolic spell of work. A fundamental argument is that work is not merely external, not merely a threat *against* life – *work infiltrates life*. It structures time, thought and emotion. According to some commentators, the colonizing aspects of work have become so intense during later years that work is even *absorbing life*. The spheres in which we can forget our work-based identities and in which there is no (disguised) imitation of the principles of work are steadily shrinking. Consequently, we lose contact with non-submissive, spontaneous, and recalcitrant ways of being, and instead of championing autonomy, we fear it.

There are several concrete tendencies in working life supporting these gloomy contentions. “Work without boundaries” (Allvin et al., 2011) is not only a psychological concept denoting faint tendencies of “work becoming life”; it is also about more tangible phenomena such as longer working hours, endless responsibilities, fleeting operational procedures, rapid precarization, and a capsized “work–life balance” (see also Hochschild, 1997). Central to this development is the tendency towards more *immaterial labor* in which workers’ sensorial capacities are no longer required (Gorz, 1989; Sennett, 1998), a deskilling process (Braverman, 1998 [1974]) that runs parallel to greater demands on attitudes and personalities. With these demands and the growth of the service industries, work becomes more and more perverted in the sense that we are being paid for things that appear less and less as “work” in any substantial sense. A subject dear to the sociology of work is *emotional labor*, i.e. work in which we are not paid for production of either commodities or services, but for the display of emotions (see Hochschild, 1983; Mills, 1951). More recently we have also become aware of *aesthetic* or *sexualized labor* gaining ground on the labor market, i.e. work in which employer demands are not only concerned with work performance and emotion, but with employee corporeality including look and “sex appeal” (see Warhurst and Nickson, 2007, 2009). These and other tendencies are often cited when “work absorbing life” arguments are defended, and rightfully so.

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Considering the amount of time we spend “working for the man,” it is hard to overstate the impact that these changes have on our lives.

Yet there are gaps in the pessimistic line of reasoning that makes the generalized notion of the absorbed worker appear somewhat exaggerated. Most fundamentally: if we are all so absorbed by work, how can there be a critique of work? The typical old-school critical-theory answer is that capitalism absorbs everything, including its own negation (cf. Adorno, 2005 [1951]; Marcuse, 1955). Today, we also see veiled forms of neo-functionalism pushing the argument a bit further (cf. Contu, 2008; Fleming, 2009; Žižek, 2009); not only can capitalism integrate just about every form of symbolic negation, it also derives its nutriment from this very critique: “This is the time in which grim and downtrodden employees at the heart of corporate hegemony proclaim to be communist. And even the CEO agrees work sucks. Capitalism persists, not despite, but *because* of this mode of critical awareness,” Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming (2012: 29) assert. But how can we know whether the employee proclaiming to be communist is just “incorporated” by the firm, or slowly awakening? Is it not easy to reject all types of employee resistance as – “in fact” – harnessed and “co-opted” forms of managerial discourse?

If we put aside the argument that everything happening within capitalism strengthens it, the everyday negations of work society become hard to ignore. The child’s stubborn refusal to sit still, the teenager’s truancies from school, the depressed forty-year-old doubting the meaning of his or her career, are all examples that anyone can either recognize in themselves or notice in their surroundings. In several major economies (including the US, the UK, Germany, Israel, Belgium) a growing majority of the working population says that they would quit their current jobs if they had the economic possibility to do so (for an overview, see Paulsen, 2008). Worldwide, only 13 percent of employees actually like going to work, according to a recent Gallup study. Sixty-three percent are “not engaged” the study says – these employees are essentially “checked out” – and the remaining 24 percent are not just unhappy at work; they are “more or less out to damage their company” (Gallup, 2013: 17). In Sweden, there is also a growing majority saying that they prefer future productivity gains to be cashed in as reduced working hours rather than higher wages (Sanne, 2007: 50). Many are even prepared to negotiate their current level of material wealth in order to free more time: 40 percent of fulltime working

mothers say that they want to reduce their working hours even if it means decreased incomes (Larsson, 2010: 8). When the wish to weaken the obligation to work is so strong, it is odd, to say the least, that the main endeavor of our most powerful political parties is to “create jobs.” Concerning the non-existence of a significant, formally organized countermovement, the pessimism of some of the authors referred to above seems well founded. The question, then, becomes: How do we survive work society? What do we do with our wish to work less and live more? Does *status quo* necessarily mean acceptance? And what happens with the unrealized longings for another life? In the laudable attempt to explain why people do not resist, the critique of work has made it harder to see how anyone could resist.

The relatively small literature on oppositional practices that we find elsewhere usually ignores labor and economic power. It is focused on symbolic and quite harmless types of resistance, or on singular acts of open defiance that sooner or later are knocked down. With the growing insight that these are far from pre-revolutionary times, we see a greater interest in so-called passive resistance (see Certeau, 1984; Graeber, 2004; Scott, 2012). As Federico Campagna puts it in *The Last Night*: “This is not the time for assaults, but for withdrawal.” There may be a day in the future when we will see “the heroism of open battlefields” (Campagna, 2013: 44), but for now, efficient resistance entails other tactics.

The expanding research field of *organizational misbehavior* (see Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995) offers extraordinary insight into what these tactics can look like in the sphere of labor. It is not only relevant to organizational theorists, who too easily tend to assume that employees readily internalize whatever managerial dictates fall from above; it is also, and for similar reasons, relevant to critical theorists. The study of workplace sabotage, theft, effort bargaining, and other types of misbehaviors suggests longings and frustrations that seem incompatible with the concept of the absorbed worker. When I began working on this study, the explicitly political ambition was to add to this knowledge about everyday negotiations of work society. A vague intuition, bolstered by my pilot interviews, told me that people not working while “at work” was key to our understanding of how life can strike back at work, and more generally, how subjectivity can flourish in the very institution around which our most oppressive power structures are constructed. What I found, however,

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was a much more complex phenomenon, challenging not only clear-cut distinctions between “resistance” and “adjustment,” but also the notion of the rational firm.

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*Empty labor is everything you do at work that is not your work.* All who work know what empty labor is. We all take breaks; we all go to the bathroom. Many of us also make private phone calls, write private e-mails, and surf the web for our own purposes while at work. Most of us spend a great deal of time on this type of non-work-related activities. Different reports suggest that the average time of empty labor per employee is between 1.5 to 3 hours a day (Blanchard and Henle, 2008; Blue et al., 2007; Bolchover, 2005; Carroll, 2007; Gouveia, 2012; Jost, 2005; Malachowski and Simonini, 2006; Mills et al., 2001). By measuring the flows of electronic audience between indexed internet sites, it has also been observed that 70 percent of the US internet traffic which by the turn of the millennium passed through pornographic sites did so during working hours and that 60 percent of all online purchases were made between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. (Mills et al., 2001: 3). This kind of “cyberloafing” is not restricted to the US (in which most of the surveys have been conducted), but is also prevalent in nations such as Singapore (Vivien and Thompson, 2005), Germany (Rothlin and Werder, 2007), and Finland (Grahn, 2011).

Despite these survey results, there have been very few studies of empty labor, and even fewer (if any) conducted by a non-management scholar (i.e. without the managerial aim of learning how to control, reduce or gain from empty labor). Considering the recent media attention that the phenomenon has received, this is indeed a considerable “gap” in working life studies. As a result, the way work is publicly discussed seems to differ noticeably from how working life scholars study it. Why this discrepancy?

Consider the following headlines: “Swedes laze away their working hours” (*Dagens Nyheter*), “Facebook labelled a \$5b waste of time” (*Sydney Morning Herald*), “You’re wasting time at work right now, aren’t you?” (*TIME*) (see West, 2007; White, 2012; Zenou, 2011). Although it is not a new phenomenon, the media attention is slowly making empty labor more and more evident to the collective mind. There may be many reasons for this. For instance, social media have

made our engagement in private matters during working hours much more public. Each time we send an e-mail, update our Facebook status or twitter away a message, *when* and sometimes even *where* we do it is visible for all recipients, and so what used to be private may well become blown out of proportion. It may also be that there are companies with vested interests in keeping up employer demand for filtering and monitoring software that lie behind the “studies” on which some of the newspaper articles are based. Especially when inquiring into articles that present estimates on how much cyberloafing generally costs employers, I have often been unable to get access to more than press releases that reveal very little about how the studies were conducted.<sup>1</sup> The ill-concealed purpose of this pseudo-science business is at times appalling, and explaining how they time and again manage to get into some of the more respected newspapers may itself be subject for another book.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to assume that not all headlines are taken out of thin air. Most of the more reliable studies of empty labor come from organizational psychology and (uncritical) management studies. The partiality of these studies is often evident already in the terms they use to describe the phenomenon. “Time waste” is probably the most frequently used term, which in itself judges what is “waste” and what is not. Otherwise, empty labor has also been referred to as: “anti-social behavior” (Penney et al., 2003), “counter-productive work behavior,” “poor quality work” (Ones and Viswesvaran, 2003), “deviant behavior” (Vivien and Thompson, 2005), “shirking,” (Henle and Blanchard, 2008), and “futzing” (Mills et al., 2001).

<sup>1</sup> According to Dan Verton (2000), 30 to 40 percent in productivity losses may be the result of cyberloafing, and Dan Malachowski and Jon Simonini (2006) attracted much media attention when asserting that time waste may cost US employers up to \$544 billion annually. Based on similar calculations, Richard Cullen (2007) estimates that the collective working hours spent on the interactive internet site facebook.com cost Australian businesses \$5 billion a year. In the US it has also been suggested that water-cooler conversations about the Super Bowl have the potential of costing employers up to \$821.4 million in lost productivity (D’Abate, 2005: 1011).

<sup>2</sup> A typical example: in a relatively long article in a Swedish newspaper under the headline of “They put price tag on the drivel,” the CEO of a firm called Before states that drivel at the workplace generally costs the average company one million dollars a year but that they have developed “a model” to push down the costs to \$400,000. This was not an advertisement (Gianuzzi, 2008).

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A central reason why empty labor has not been more studied by sociologists who share other partialities is that it is hard, though by no means impossible, to integrate the phenomenon of empty labor into the popular framework that speaks of *work intensification*. My study does not falsify the widespread impression, evident from an abundance of quantitative studies, of increasing work-related tension and strain, and more technically, of an average increase in the proportion of effective work performed for each working hour. What I suggest is that, behind these data, the intensity of work is stratified in layers that remain to be specified. For the moment, the measures most commonly used to measure work intensity suffer from several shortcomings. Tony Elger, who has written extensively on work intensification, contends that “any assessment of trends in effort and work pace is notoriously difficult as there is little appropriate aggregate data” (Elger, 1990: 83). Francis Green, who is one of the few who have conducted nationwide surveys in this field (mainly in Britain), also acknowledges that there are other problems associated with these studies (Green, 2001, 2004). For one, the type of subjective reports that are most frequently employed, makes for a considerably less precise measure than the time-based estimates referred to above. Survey questions like “Has there been any change in this workplace compared with 5 years ago in how hard people work here?” which are given five response alternatives along the Likert scale (Green, 2004: 723), can only reveal changes in the subjective experience of work intensity. Now that busyness has become the new “badge of honour” (Gershuny, 2005), we might suspect a desirability bias in how people respond (cf. Harpaz and Snir, 2002). Yet, when one looks closer at the statistics gathered by Green, these subjective experiences vary a lot. In one of his surveys (Green and McIntosh, 2001: 295), about 30 percent of the respondents claimed to be “working at very high speed” more than half of their working hours, whereas 30 percent said they “never” did so, and 17 percent “almost never.” While the majority seems to enjoy relatively calm working days, we thereby have a thin segment that works at the pinnacle of its capacity all the time. When this segment grows from including 7 percent to 10 percent of the working population, there is an average intensification of work. But this intensification does not affect everyone.

My focus is on the opposite extreme, on those who never work hard. Why has so little, if anything, in the sociology of work been written about this group, whereas the articles and books about the

stressed-out fraction of humanity can be counted in the thousands? The major part of my theoretical discussion will be concerned with this issue. Certainly, unperturbed slackers constitute less of a social problem, but might they not tell us something valuable about working life, something that might even help us to understand the intensification of work on a deeper level?

### 1.3 The (ir)rational institution

Modern sociology, both in critical and legitimizing versions, has a long tradition of emphasizing the *rationality* of capitalist production. This emphasis can even be observed in the study of workplace misbehavior; whereas management tends to be depicted as an anonymous, almost impersonal force, those resisting management are *individuals* with emotions and frustrations – irrational and human. This divide between the rational structure and the irrational individual was unfortunately also quite present in my pre-understanding as I approached the field of empty labor. This study will present an abundance of examples where it is rather “the structure,” represented by the organization of the labor process, that appears to be irrational. For a while, I strongly believed that what the interviewees told me was spectacular. Now, I am not sure if anyone outside the tribe of social scientists would find any of my results surprising.

Returning to the media reports, the scandals concerning employees’ online activities have succeeded each other at increasingly short intervals. During 2010 in Sweden, twenty municipalities reported having fired employees for “inappropriate” internet usage (Lindström, 2010). When it came out that a public authority like the Swedish Migration Board had had some employees surfing the web for private use up to 40 hours a month, there was a great deal of moralizing concerning employee behavior (Brattberg, 2007; otherwise, the debates following these scandals have mainly treated the degree to which employers have installed electronic surveillance devices to control their employees). Less has been said about the apparent possibility of surfing long hours on the web without any noticeable decline in performance.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the debate on workplace surveillance is most legitimate and of almost global relevance. In 2005, the American Management Association survey found that 76 percent of companies monitor which websites their

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Take for example the Swedish Civil Aviation Administration, where seven persons lost their jobs after it was revealed that some of them had been visiting pornographic websites during up to 75 percent of their working hours: whereas the dismay mainly concerned the most obvious offense, that they had visited *pornographic* websites, there was no reflection on the fact that well-educated professionals to all appearances could spend 75 percent of their working hours on (very) private activities without anyone outside the automated monitoring system taking notice (cf. Roos Holmborg, 2009). Why so?

My guess is that what may appear as an empirical outrage to many sociologists could be more of a triviality to the “unenlightened masses.” Not only in the sociology of work, but also in the wider “conflict tradition” (cf. Collins, 1994) of sociology, the phantom of rationality has long been assumed to govern production. The notion of a ruthless capitalist rationalization process that, as if governed by an anonymous law of nature, speeds production and colonizes human societies (until the system implodes) was already present in Karl Marx. Marx was among the first to predict the intensification of labor, or, as he put it, that once “a normal working-day whose length is fixed by law” was legally established we would see a “closer filling up of the pores of the working-day, or condensation of labor to a degree that is attainable only within the limits of the shortened working-day” (1976 [1867]: 534). In Max Weber, who is best known for his “iron cage” of rationality, we find many examples of the same belief in modern rationality, and outside the conflict tradition, Émile Durkheim happily praised the “order” of this system which, at least in his early theory, was derived from the division of labor. With such great grandfathers, it is no wonder that sociologists have been so occupied by trying to discern different rationalities (ranging from cold instrumentality to the all-embracing principles of functionalism) in our institutions and especially in work. But what if work is no more than a bad joke for many employees? What if the very idea that work should necessarily have anything to do with production is unfounded?

Anyone familiar with a fraction of the last fifteen years of western popular culture will know that there is a great gap between how

employees visit and that 65 percent use filtering software to block certain websites (Riedy and Wen, 2010: 87). It has also been estimated that 27 million online employees are monitored internationally (Ball, 2010: 88).

sociologists write about work and how work is depicted in more crowd-pleasing productions. Consider a sitcom television series like *The Office*, or a cult film like *Office Space*. Although these accounts are parodies, it is precisely the lack of both rationality and meaning in office work that makes for the satire. “Put the key of despair into the lock of apathy,” Ricky Gervais says through one of his characters in *The Office*, “turn the knob of mediocrity slowly and open the gates of despondency – welcome to a day in the average office.” This is a pretty clear message, and even if part of the purpose is to provoke laughter it might be said that “humor is also a way of saying something serious” (T.S. Eliot). In fact, some of the most influential works on working life that we have seen recently (i.e. that reach a public) have indeed been humorously written, and most successfully by office workers themselves. In her bestseller *Bonjour Paresse*, Corinne Maier offers a valuable inside perspective on the corporate world that according to her is “shrouded in mystery.” Maier opens the book (that eventually cost her job) by declaring that social science has miserably failed to understand the mechanisms of office work: “Millions of people work in business, but its world is opaque. This is because the people who talk about it the most – and I mean the university professors – have never worked there; they aren’t *in the know*” (Maier, 2006: 4).

Maier’s contention is that work is increasingly reduced to “make-believe,” that at the office, “image counts more than product, seduction more than production” (Maier, 2006: 49). Under these circumstances, pretended obedience and fake commitment become part of the labor process in which the slightest dissociation from simulation may result in the collective embarrassment of everyone. As she recalls:

One day, in the middle of a meeting on motivation, I dared to say that the only reason I came to work was to put food on the table. There were fifteen seconds of absolute silence, and everyone seemed uncomfortable. Even though the French word for work, ‘*travail*,’ etymologically derives from an instrument of torture, it’s imperative to let it be known, no matter the circumstance, that you are working *because you are interested in your work*. (Maier, 2006: 34)

Whereas “the absorbed worker” is thus recognized *as a role*, it is precisely the difference between what we say we do and what we actually do that Maier highlights. This gap between image and substance is also a recurring theme in Scott Adams’ *Dilbert* series. Again and again,