

On the Parasitic Character of Wage Labor

Paolo Virno

The ruthless critique of the welfare state and the renewed *epos* of the market have taken center stage in the political debate, to the point where a modern “dictionary of commonplaces” would necessarily have to begin with the concepts that inspire the polemic on welfare, intervention after intervention. In fact, these concepts are characterized by the somewhat phantasmagoric rigidity of *commedia dell’arte* character masks; to comment on each of them individually would be not just tedious, but also futile. It seems more worthwhile to concentrate on a single aspect of the debate, the one most helpful in terms of deciphering the new forms of social conflict—namely, the problem of how labor has become an excessive social liability between the decline of the welfare state and the new wave of economic liberalism.

That the crisis of the welfare state results from an ungovernable rise in social spending, destined to confront an expanding area of non-labor, is something we are told *ad nauseam*. In other words, the taxes raised on income derived from market transactions are supposedly being used to finance an inactive or “unproductive” social sector – one that tends to violate the rules of competition and remuneration.

In this account, labor and non-labor, labor and welfare, the free market and the political marketplace confront one another through a precise distribution of moral roles and values: economic viability versus social parasitism, entrepreneurial vitality versus the stagnation of welfare. It would seem, then, that the progressive expansion of the “leisure” sectors of the population has represented a grievous impediment to development. Let’s be clear: this account is nothing if not ideological. It’s a powerful ideology, to be sure, all the more powerful inasmuch as it presents itself as common sense, revealing the real causes of the crisis like a mirror—accurately, but the wrong way round.

A closer look, one that pierces through the veil of reassuring assumptions, reveals that the crisis of the welfare state results from the throttled, restrained, less-than-modest development of the area of non-labor, which is to say: *there isn’t too much non-labor, but too little*. The crisis results from a disproportionately large “active population”—a crisis caused, that is, not by the extent of welfare, but by the fact that welfare is made to expand, for the most part, in the form of wage labor, and, vice-

versa, by the fact that today wage labor increasingly presents itself as welfare.

"Dig holes and fill them up again"

Whoever genuinely wants to understand the affliction that undermines post-Keynesian states needs look not so much at the rise in "social spending" as at the rates of employment. It is these rates of employment that are excessive—and not so much with regard to administrative work or services, to be sure. Even if the hypothesis that these are the overdeveloped sectors were correct, such a hypothesis would still only be a way of avoiding the central problem, which is that of factory labor, or rather of its excessive development. This is the real issue: wage labor reveals itself everywhere as being at odds with competition, outside of every market logic, due to its inflationary but inflexible costs. Today the repetitive and rigidly organized manual labor typical of mass production assumes the paradoxical character of a fictitious activity, of genuine *faux frais* or false costs; it becomes a roundabout and disguised form of welfare.

Now, the achievement of decades of labor struggles is, extraordinarily, to have rendered physical exertion radically "anti-economic." Only the idiotic pride of the "producer" sees it with shame and embarrassment. And yet nothing is more inappropriate than timidity. The time has come to acknowledge, without anguish, the fictitious and crass character of the labor market, to champion this scandalous and undeniable reality as the result of a relentless struggle over the wage and the workday.

If the welfare state has reached the point of collapse, this is due precisely to the irrational defense of employment through public spending. *It's due to the attempt to make welfare and labor coincide wherever possible.* When the politics of full employment emerged in the 1930s, wasn't its battle cry "Dig holes and fill them up again"? What seemed a perverse limit case has become the rule at the very heart of social production, such that those who wander about like Diogenes with his lantern, forever in search of "parasitism," might be advised to direct their attention at the factory.

Automation plus guaranteed income, or, on economic realism

Labor ceases to be competitive when its costs turn out to be higher than the use of new machines. And that is the present situation: to expand or even maintain today's rates of employment would require a level of investment considerably higher than the large-scale introduction of automated productive processes.

It follows that automation and the introduction of a guaranteed income would constitute far more “economic” measures than the use of wage labor. This is because today, unlike in the nineteenth century, science has to be competitive, but labor does not. This is the first thing that would have to be acknowledged by those who invoke the market and its “invisible hand,” provided they don’t merely want to echo, in an inevitably farcical manner, the “spirit of Manchester.”

Automation plus guaranteed income: paradoxically, a “neoliberalism” that takes itself seriously would have to opt for nothing less, accepting that the social cost of direct monetary assistance is lower than that of labor, and breaking definitively the unjustified and parasitic link between the right to exist and the expense of labor force.

The bankruptcy of the welfare state constitutes a historical opportunity: that of measuring social productivity via activities that take place beyond the threshold of immediate reproduction. This is especially true since it’s clear that an individual whose income is guaranteed is far more “productive,” in every sense, than one who spends eight hours a day on the assembly line.

The Imposition of Labor and the Science of Administration

But the ability to think coherently and radically is clearly not a virtue that the “neoliberals” possess. This is as true of Friedman and his “Chicago School” as of their Italian counterparts. Without exception, their analyses refer exclusively to the goods and services market, placidly ignoring the transformations that have taken place on the labor market. In fact, they treat the latter as equivalent to the former, without acknowledging its specific character. Consequently, when the “neoliberals” don’t simply yearn for a drastic reduction in the costs associated with the individual employee, they propose measures intended to favor the spontaneous reduction of the area of non-labor—a proposal that is not only unrealistic, as has been seen, but also only appears to ameliorate the contradictions of the welfare state; in reality, it can only aggravate them.

As soon as one steps behind the scenes of the little theater where the ideological dispute over welfare takes place, it becomes possible to identify a point of profound agreement between the two parties. Everyone agrees, without exception, that labor is and will continue to be the main instrument of social *control* and political *legitimization* of the state. Whatever assessment is given of the volume of social spending or of the self-

regulating mechanisms of the market, there is no dispute over the necessity of linking the distribution of income to labor; this necessity must not be called into question in the political debate. The reason is essential: wage labor represents the only possibility of systematically simplifying, and hence governing, the complexity of social relations. Labor as such, not money: in fact this complexity is rooted in monetary flows, and it is due to them that it expands. The science of administration retains its operational centrality to the extent that it is concerned with the administration of labor.

The Pomp of Hypocrisy

Numerous examples from Italian history demonstrate that proposals for a monetary income de-linked from the expense of labor-power constitute an authentic political scandal and an intolerable index of contradiction. We will cite two particularly obvious examples: the national layoff fund known as the *cassa integrazione guadagni* and law 285 on juvenile employment.

With the diffuse and prolonged use of the Italian layoff fund, hypocrisy—that particular form of hypocrisy that is the work ethic—has come out in full pomp. As is well known, in the case of many enterprises the layoff fund has not been used to facilitate restructuring, but has become a semi-permanent institution. In fact, people who had not worked for months or years were guaranteed a wage. To be sure, this guarantee was obscured by the persistence of the "labor relation." To be guaranteed a wage, the worker had to continue to be formally employed. In a peculiar reversal of the real terms of the problem—an ideological reversal that nonetheless had material implications—the guaranteed income timidly disguised itself as the "anticipation" of a future return to work. In many cases, the result was that production was resumed, after an interval of variable length, but always under the same conditions as before, without any technological innovation; the layoff fund simply served as a subsidy for production. The explanation lies in the willful maintenance of an institutional link between the wage and labor; this link is typical of the system of the layoff fund. In fact the local, circumscribed, formally limited character of the guaranteed income that was thus made available, its character as an occasional exception rather than as a general rule, leads to the "expectation of work" becoming the only possible solution in each specific case. Needless to say, this "expectation of work" is harkened to by entrepreneurs and politicians, but hardly ever by workers; in any case, it's enough to ensure that non-

competitive enterprises can continue to exist indefinitely. The refusal of the guaranteed income as a general and explicitly recognized right brings with it, in this case as in others, the risk of a shortage of funds on the part of the entrepreneur.

As for the law on juvenile employment, it hardly merits more than a few ironic remarks, since its miserable failure is well known. With stunning ignorance, a genuine *work machine* has been set up for the new generations, clearly oriented towards a rigid command structure and the implementation of a full work day, while self-determination, mobility, and a preference for flexible employment have become deep-rooted habits for young workers. In other words, the state has promised a prolonged flow of wages in return for totally fictitious, but controllable labor—once again.

Translated by Max Henninger

Post-Fordist Semblance

Paolo Virno

The subject of these notes is “socially necessary semblance” under post-Fordism. By this little formula (of Marxian origin, by the way), I refer to the ensemble of mentalities, images of the world and of oneself, behaviors and beliefs which, while false (that is, semblances) nonetheless originate in and derive a certain legitimacy from certain quite real and persistent aspects of today’s mode of production. It’s not a question, in other words, of subjective errors produced by the dominant culture, but of representations forcefully suggested by a very concrete condition. What is needed is an identification of the grain of truth that sustains false semblance. Such an investigation aims at a materialist recognition of subjectivity as it exists within post-Fordist capitalism.

It would certainly be more comforting to assume that the illusions current today are the product of media propaganda and that they can therefore be refuted by means of a patient pedagogical project of clarification. Unfortunately this is not the case. There is a *material basis for ideology*, an objective foundation that reinforces and reproduces deception. To give a classic example: in the work of Marx, a considerable part of capitalist ideology is traced back to that rather concrete institution that