

ENGL 7480/8480: Cultural Texts & Theory

The Problem of Work

M: 5:30 – 8:30

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“This is me expressing myself!” -Joanna, from *Office Space*

Work is the contested middle term in the stark opposition (or dialectical antithesis) between capitalism and utopia. As subjects of the modern Western world, we are instilled with the demands of the Protestant work ethic, even when it doesn't pay. We aspire to finding good work that is fulfilling while often recognizing that such a position depends on the conditions of austerity and exploitation in other places. Work has been posited as both freeing and enslaving, a point captured all-too-well by the Nazis' slogan for its victims: *Arbeit macht frei*. Utopian visions frequently call for a system of full employment, while capitalists know that such a state of affairs would spell ruin, as unemployment is crucial to keeping wages suppressed and the masses busy at, well, work (or looking for work). Work and its rewards are mediated and valued along an unequal spectrum of race and gender, citizenship or migratory status. Migrants fleeing violence imposed by the Global North are portrayed as stealing the jobs of the right kinds of citizens, those who wouldn't do the work in the first place. At the heart of all of this, as every good historical materialist knows, is the fact that all value is ultimately derived from labor, not from the sly operations of salesmen or tech executives.

These are just some of the contradictions surrounding work that have motivated countless philosophers, artists, journalists, and activists to wrestle with its meanings, its cultural values, and its possible obsolescence. In its current forms, work cannot escape the marks of capitalist dystopia, but in our collective study of a range of cultural texts and theories, we will work to envision alternative ways of being, thinking, and playing on the horizons of that dystopia. And we will also address some of the exploitative contradictions and conditions structuring contemporary higher education, which affects us all.

Reading will likely include:

- Marx and Engels on wage labor and capital
- Fictional texts on Black migrant labor in the Global North
- Theoretical and journalistic writing by Marxist Feminists (Angela Davis, Kathi Weeks, Leigh Claire LeBerge, Barbara Ehrenreich et al.)
- Comic films exposing the futility of bourgeois “work”
- And not least, students' recommendations for the seminar based on their own research areas and interests.