



# Subverting capital's temporality: A critical reappraisal of laziness

Yari Lanci

## abstract

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis we witnessed a revival of discussions about a presumed 'laziness' of Southern European countries. In addition to the diffusion of the so-called regime of austerity and the rise of unemployment, at a national level, refrains around the notion of laziness have been coupled with the neoliberal emphasis on self-responsibility as regards the individuals' capacity (or lack thereof) to construct themselves as 'employable'. This article argues that the laziness refrain is used as an accusation to enforce and maintain specific politico-economic relations of production. This is done also by means of personifying a morally charged high ground that underpins the subject making the accusation, which is in turn used to undermine modes of existence that are formally forged and presented as falling out and compromising the 'idyllic' conditions for the extraction of an expected amount of profits. I will thus critically reappraise the idea of laziness in a series of literatures so as to challenge its construction as an anthropological universal and highlight its contemporary (and historically determined) configuration. To do so, I will isolate scenes in which 'laziness' has been tackled, by different theorists, in its philosophical status, in its relation to the ideas of 'action' and 'activity', in its connection with 'work', and its antagonistic relationship with 'time' within capitalist social relations.

## Introduction

Pulcinella, or Punch, the famous Neapolitan puppet-buffoon of *commedia dell'arte*, has hanging on his bedroom wall a notice stating 'Do it tomorrow'. It is the first thing he sees when he rises from bed each morning. When faced with a new days' demands of successive 'things to do', simply reading this notice is enough to short-circuit any attempt at doing what Pulcinella has to do, is supposed to do, or has been asked to do, in an eternal postponement of his daily tasks.

I want to start with this anecdote in order to reframe what is often nowadays conceived under the umbrella term of 'laziness', with exclusively negative connotations, for it seems that the common understanding of the concept conceals its most fundamental (and subversive) trait: the voluntary reluctance to exploited work. When we speak about laziness in a strictly negative sense, we tend to erase the historicity, complexity and heterogeneity of the term and negate the critical potential that is inherent within some of its manifestations, in addition to overlook the material (and discursive) circumstances that allow such a construction of this category. This does not mean this piece will exhaustively map and fully unleash such critical potential, and it is not my intent – even inadvertently – to offer a political program taking laziness (in whichever form the reader decides to grasp it) as its point of departure or its core principle. I will, however, embark in an analysis of the use of the term and venture to trace the uneven genealogy of its contemporary usage in the conviction that a more systematic critical reading of this notion can lay some ground for such a task. Rather than following a chronological trajectory in this exploration, I will instead attempt to reappraise 'laziness' *vis-à-vis* the relation this concept entertains – progressively, while the analysis unfolds – with exploited labour under capitalism and, primarily, with its set of temporalities. Indeed, this article will gradually develop starting from the attempts to a more 'neutral' and philosophical understanding of this notion and its relation to 'action' and 'activity', hover over its connection with 'work' (where time freed from work could be utilised for actions and activities with some form or other of ultimate social utility), and slowly

proceed towards its antagonistic nexus with 'time' under capitalist conditions of production.

The central tenet of this text is that today's moralising discourses seeking to inculcate individuals or groups as 'lazy' or 'idle' is to be conceived of as intrinsic and functional, rather than secondary, to the politico-economic logics of government under capitalism. As a consequent corollary of this, laziness could also be thought of as one of the most effective means to, at once, unbalance the pre-established and ideal set of temporalities of capital that allow the relentless extraction of profit, and as a potential means to create interstitial 'spaces' within and outside its temporal cages. Understanding the terms of this confrontation entails grasping that, on the one hand, the current implications of the use of the notion of laziness are historically determined and reflect specific politico-economic necessities (which I will touch upon). This is to say that 'laziness' cannot be thought of as an anthropological universal despite repeated attempts over the centuries to render it as such. On the other hand, for the very reason of fabricating and categorising 'laziness' as in stark opposition to the dominant (neoliberal) logics of government, the modern ideological constructions of this category disclose the intrinsically political rationality of such a way of governing and expose it to criticism and overt confrontation, particularly on the terrain of the measurement and control of productivity and the government of time. In other words, while not advocating for an alternative (if innate) human 'productivity' which could be deployed differently (outside and beyond capital), I would argue that the present construction of 'laziness' is to be understood against the backdrop of a capitalist setting which condemns it inasmuch as laziness as such severely damages the structural temporal logic of capital. I will thus re-read different manifestations of this concept in order to highlight its contrast to the temporalities of today's configurations of capital. Laziness against capitalist time, not (yet) as a political non-capitalist 'production'.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The reference here is to the Italian Workerist tradition whose analyses I extensively rely upon in what follows, especially with regard to the resistance to work, but with which I do not necessarily share some of the more 'politicised' and 'vitalist' theses of some of its exponents.

Let us then briefly look at a recent manifestation of the ideological use of this term, before setting out in more detail some understandings of ‘laziness’ in the writings of key thinkers who have enquired it in its traits as a conceptual category, in relation to work and its ideology and, most importantly, as an alterity in opposition to the temporalities of capital.

### **A revived outbreak of the noble art of wasting time**

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, and following the diffusion of the so-called regime of austerity, it has not been uncommon to hear or read about the inclination to laziness of the P.I.I.G.S.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, the citizens of the PIIGS countries were not particularly happy about being compelled to pay back a debt that, as individual citizens, they had never contracted. Yet instead of pointing to the first (this time quite blatant) signs of dysfunctionality within the EU, it was often easier to refer to an alleged idleness and parasitism of the people of Southern Europe. For instance, in 2011, in the years preceding the rapid escalation of the crisis in the Eurozone, the German chancellor Angela Merkel not only claimed (incorrectly) that people in Southern Europe on average retire earlier than in Germany, but she also criticised them for supposedly enjoying more vacation time. As she put it, ‘We can’t have a common currency where some get lots of vacation time and others very little. That won’t work in the long term’ (in Böll and Böcking, 2011). Others, like the conservative columnist David Brooks, while scolding Greece, Italy, and Spain for not having ‘lived within their means’ in contrast to countries such as Germany and the Netherlands – who instead ‘have played by the rules and practiced good governance’ – puts forward a morally laden argument: ‘People who work hard and play by the rules should have a fair shot at prosperity. Money should go to people on the basis of merit and enterprise. *Self-control should be rewarded while laziness and self-indulgence should not*’ (Brooks, 2011, emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

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2 Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain are the European countries most affected by the recent crisis of sovereign debt.

3 It is quite telling that only a few paragraphs below, Mr Brooks is perfectly aware that ‘It’s true that Germans benefited enormously from the Eurozone and the

Furthermore, the whole discursive field gravitating around different variants of the idea of laziness seems to have been assimilated also by those whose suspected laziness is being denounced. The implementation of neoliberal policies in the relatively recent past, in addition to the rise in the rate of unemployment, gave way to a surprising (yet paradoxically banal) consequence: the anthropological stigma of 'being lazy' proclaimed by the dominant ideological discourse has been absorbed, 'from below', by the subjects directly affected by the generalisation of the contemporary framework of precarity. The progressive disappearance of the standard Fordist employment relation (the permanent contract), the multiplication of new regimes of casualization of labour (part-time and fixed-term contract, project contracts and so on), and the unprecedented proliferation of forms of unpaid labour (stages and internships) have all manifestly contributed to shape the individual's self-perception of being 'lazy' as the cause for the lack of a steady income. From this perspective, which is to say from the perspective of the precarious worker and perfectly in keeping with the theoretical backbones of neoliberalism, laziness appears to be one of the traits comprised in the internalised logic (and subjective experience) of a subject conceiving herself as an enterprise, where the lack of a steady income is linked to a lack in proper (i.e., not-'lazy') investment in her human capital.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that official statistics do not altogether support arguments against the 'laziness' of the PIIGS such as those reported earlier, in that the amount of annual hours actually worked per worker has been on average much higher in the PIIGS countries than in Germany and the

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southern European bubble, and that German and French banks are far from blameless'. That does not seem to prevent him to advance a rather biased and inconsistent argument.

- 4 On precarity and its link with neoliberalism, see Mitropoulos (2005) and Tsianos and Papadopoulou (2006). As concerns the relation between a conception of the self as enterprise and neoliberalism, see the canonical Foucault (2010). The most interesting takes on precarity, not as a merely recent neoliberal phenomenon but rather as something structurally embedded in the logics of capital, can be found in Di Bernardo (2016) and Neilson and Rossiter (2008).

Netherlands in the past twenty five years or more,<sup>5</sup> let us assume for the sake of the argument that this is not relevant, as critique should be ideally undertaken starting from the claims (and regimes of ‘truth’) of the object to be criticised, so as to then dismantle it from within. Therefore, I want to draw the attention to the allegations of self-indulgence, idleness, and laziness just mentioned. Despite their individual idiosyncrasies (of which more later), these terms have increasingly become part of the vocabulary deployed in mainstream discourses as a response to the series of economic crises leading to the 2008 crash and its prolonged and ongoing aftermath. What is the reason for these charges and the use of these terms? Why are these charges usually categorised as such?

The crisis in the Eurozone broadly speaking, the rise of the neoliberal discourse on flexibility at work and its emphasis on self-responsibility and investment in human capital, are not the first semantic fields or historical moments in which the laziness-refrain has been nonchalantly deployed. One could trace it back to at least Aesop’s fable of the ant strenuously and patiently saving up food for the winter and, when winter comes, refusing to feed the begging grasshopper who had instead been singing throughout all summer. Indeed, thinking about the ‘laborious’ North of Italy blaming the ‘lazy’ Southerners for depleting the results of their hard work is only one of the most persistent and unshakeable examples. ‘It’s because they can enjoy the sun much more’, the Austrian Milan claims; ‘They complain because they can’t even *experience* the sun’, the Reign of the Two Sicilies counters – the implication being that Northerners would do exactly the same if only there were some sun to enjoy. This becomes curiously plain again when tabloids such as *The Sun* or *The Mirror* fear an exponential flurry of suspicious sick days on the rare sunny summer days in England (Cambridge, 2017; Stretch, 2015). The presence of sunny weather appears to be one of the contributing factors, but by itself it does not seem enough to account for the severe demonization of laziness, as a category, especially when framed by moral distinctions. Thus, we need firstly to understand this peculiar category

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5 Data gathered from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). [<http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=ANHRS>]

in some of its traits in order to then shed light on the implications of its (overtly ideological) contemporary usage.

### **Laziness as a relation to the self, itself, and work**

The French semiotician Roland Barthes elegantly attempted to define the notion of laziness outside moral categories and delimit its formal conceptual parameters. In an interview from 1979, he distinguishes different kinds of laziness some of which are passive and are undergone painfully. Examples of this kind can be found in the sense of rebellion one experiences when confronted with boring or irritating tasks, such as 'mail, manuscripts to read, and so on'.<sup>6</sup> In those cases, Barthes argues, 'I rebel and tell myself that I just can't get everything done, like a student who can't do his homework' (1985: 339). This is a kind of laziness which imposes itself on the self, instead of the other way round, and is very different from the 'glorious and philosophical form of laziness' which, Barthes specifies, takes the form of 'not doing anything' (*ibid.*). Yet the French philosopher does not advance an argument – and neither does the present writer – for that pure form of laziness which, in any case, he is aware it is almost impossible to detect in modern Western culture. Instead, Barthes is at pains to disentangle his actions and activities from particular ends. One of the successful forms of laziness, he suggests, would consist in an 'activity that is minimal, gratuitous, without finality' (*ibid.*: 341). In his examples, knitting is one of the practices that might be included in this category, provided that who is knitting does not have in mind the final piece of clothing to be produced. Accordingly, laziness is here embedded in an operation performed simply for its own sake, with no external ends. One can thus claim that one of the first elements defining laziness is the liberation of any activity from externally determining forces and the performance of a certain relation to itself.

If we were to keep following Barthes in his interview, we would easily find a strong reference to what defines laziness by its absence: the category of work. In this sense, a leisurely activity such as reading – experiencing art in

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6 Although 'boredom' is often listed as one of the foremost traits of certain forms of laziness, its analysis would have necessitated another article.

its diverse manifestations appears very often to be one of the forms active laziness can take – falls outside Barthes’s conceptual grid: ‘So, what do you want someone like me to do if he decides to do nothing? Read? But that’s my work. Write? Again, work’ (*ibid.*: 340). Furthermore, he mentions painting as a form of laziness he would indulge in. Painting was not Barthes’s specific profession and, thus, it was not subjected to any kind of external expectation, either in the form of some level of productivity or meeting a certain threshold of aesthetic quality. Either physically and intellectually active or passive, laziness seems to produce a painful experience of the will insofar as the activities it congeals in become (or are subjected to) work.<sup>7</sup>

Such initial (and partial) understanding of the term appears to draw closer to the well-known Aristotelian concept of *praxis* (action, doing) in contrast to *poiêsis* (making, production). For Aristotle, ‘action and production are generically different, for production aims at an end other than itself; but this is impossible in the case of action, because the end is merely doing well’ (1976: 209). However, Aristotle could formulate the notion of a form of activity freed from external ends only in a society, such as Ancient Greece, which allowed a part of its population to be liberated from the realm of necessity and the performance of necessary tasks for its own reproduction, including restoring oneself from the energies spent in different forms of *poiêsis*, through the use of slaves. Accordingly, we are getting nearer to what renders unfeasible a simple equation of laziness with Aristotle’s general non-instrumental form of activity with ‘no other end beyond the doing’.<sup>8</sup> This is so because, as we will shortly see, the notion of laziness always implies the existence of a social, political, and economic dimension against which the ‘lazy’ individual is measured. As Peter Fleming recently put it, in a

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7 Here, I am not referring exclusively to salaried work, and the argument should include forms of unpaid labour individuals perform in advance for a future hypothetical (monetary or symbolic) reward that might never arrive, the production of knowledge (academia included) standing as one of the chief examples of what Marco Bascetta termed ‘the political economy of the promise’ (2015).

8 ‘For the arts of making have some other end beyond the making...but in the processes of doing there is no other end beyond the doing’ (*Magna Moralia*, 1197a3-13).

different yet related context, 'The ritual of labour has undoubtedly been existentially entrenched and generalized as the key standard by which we are judged' (2015: 19). At the same time, this dimension markedly goes against any form of non-instrumentalism, as this would be considered as a 'waste' of the individuals' potential to work. Such a dimension – in other words, a specific set of social relations – measures individuals in terms of, amongst other things, their 'productivity'. It is in the range of such framework of measuring that (morally charged) ideological claims flourish and become instrumental in framing certain subjects as 'functioning' (living within their means, disciplined, productive), while others are 'deviant' (lazy, unproductive, parasitic).

The link between laziness and work displays further aspects as soon as our attention shifts to the relation between laziness as commonly understood – by the dominant contemporary ideological discourse with its negative connotations, as we said – and the lack of contribution to (any) society, thus, the allegation of social parasitism. Questioning a widespread understanding of any cultural category implies interrogating the premises on which it appears to be based: what kind of 'contribution' to society are we talking about? And what kind of societal order is the lazy subject being a parasite of, since what seems peculiar in many discussions on laziness is the link to the avoidance of work? The lazy rascals and grasshoppers in Southern Europe must be really damaging something by presumably not working enough – or worse, by doing other things. This something is a specific politico-economic framework ensuring the continuous reconstitution and reproduction of a specific set of social relations. At the same time, it is worth specifying that if laziness is being enquired in relation to the category of work, the latter evidently cannot be posed as an abstract generalisation and must unavoidably be understood as end-oriented, otherwise it would not be 'work' under the specific set of social relations I have been alluding to or, differently stated, labour under capitalism. Let us then check how various thinkers have tackled, in different ways, the ideology of work as a fetter to the development of humanity and society.

## Laziness against (the ideology of) work; idleness as social utility

The 'anti-work' literature is vast. One needn't necessarily turn to Weber to trace the links between an already existing religious blameful attitude towards idleness and its conflation with the needs of the emerging industrial production. It would also be too soon to call to testimony Marx and his lifetime efforts against the brutalities of capitalist exploitation. But one could be content, for the moment, to check what his son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, wrote in a very peculiar pamphlet at the end of the nineteenth century.

Despite its title, Lafargue's 'The right to be lazy' is not so much a polemical defence of the presumed pleasures of idleness or its definition, but rather a harsh anti-capitalist attack against the ideology of work – a 'mental aberration', 'dogma', 'madness', 'mania', 'vice', 'extravagance', 'curse', and 'the most terrible scourge that has ever struck humanity' (Lafargue, 1883). Lafargue's polemic is directed primarily at work in itself, whose intolerability for the working class he somehow, and rightly so, takes almost for granted. Yet in the midst of a very confused (if not superficial) series of justifications of his proposal for a three-hour workday – all his emphasis on overproduction in the central section of the pamphlet seems misplaced – his wordy rage focuses on two categories of people. On the one hand, as the source of the issue *per se*, Lafargue attacks Christian religious thought, liberal thinkers, and moralists for having 'perverted nature' by instilling the disastrous dogma of the virtue of work into the too easily influenced working class. On the other hand, he is even harsher with that same working class for permitting the indoctrination to take place and repeat thoughtlessly, 'like Arcadian parrots', the lesson of classical bourgeois political economy about work increasing the wealth of nations. 'Shame on the proletarians!', he thunders, for allowing themselves to be reduced, throughout their lives, to empty biological containers drained of their energies by the immense efforts of exploited labour. Why can't they even bear the thought of staying with their arms folded? (*ibid.*: 7 and 15).

Work has frightful consequences, it cripples human natural inclinations, and people should do something else instead. What are humanity's inclinations

untampered by work? What could we do instead? How would we spend our time? On this, the literature is vaster than the one on the abolition of work and centuries of politico-philosophical thought differ wildly. Without falling into the trap of discussing (let alone defining) anthropological universals, I just want to dwell on what thinkers agree upon regarding some of the forms laziness can take outside the capital-labour relation. Besides, as Adorno put it, what is ultimately an important consideration for the issue of non-working time is that 'it is hard to ascertain anything in human beings which is not functionally determined' (2001: 188).

With Lafargue – and although he never clearly specifies his assumptions about human nature – there are few references to the 'natural instincts' of the proletariat. For Lafargue man is a free being which should never be subjected to the toil of work. Only when kept to a maximum of three hours per day, work would be useful to the social organism and would function as 'mere condiment to the pleasures of idleness'. Once having proclaimed a generalised 'regime of idleness', the proletariat would in fact reserve 'the rest of the day and night for leisure and feasting' (Lafargue, 1883: 11). However, he comes across as relatively conflicted about whether debauchery is a feasible manifestation of his idea of idleness. Interestingly, the French socialist activist assumes a paradoxical moralising perspective towards debauchery and self-indulgence, but only in settings of aristocratic luxury and enforced consumption. He refers to the first capitalist as 'a steady man of reasonable and peaceable habits...[who] contented himself with one wife or thereabouts' and who left to the aristocracy what he ironically calls 'the noble virtues of debauchery'. With the development of capitalist production, in contrast, the class of non-producers was led to over-consumption, 'unbounded luxury, spicy indigestibles, and syphilitic debauches'. In Lafargue's view, not every capitalist could endure 'the fatigues of debauchery' (*ibid.*: 13–4). Lafargue's point could be thus summarised as follows: firstly, he conceives laziness as an umbrella category for the enjoyment of life's pleasures which, untampered by the obligations to work, would find their appropriate times to be indulged in; secondly, he does not question the actual use of time beyond the obligatory three daily working hours, and does not have any concern in a subjective experience of laziness

for laziness' sake, or liberation from work as generally leading to the realm of play, in other words, a relatively hedonistic and non-instrumental understanding of laziness. Whereas debauchery could easily be included in one of the forms such laziness can take, it is interesting to note how Lafargue's hedonistic viewpoint has some reserves on it, as if he is involuntarily enforcing a further moral differentiation amongst the series of activities in which laziness might crystallise.<sup>9</sup>

Fifty years after Lafargue, Bertrand Russell suggests that a reduction of the workday to four hours would be enough to entitle a man to 'the necessities and elementary comforts of life' (1935: 25). He argues that in the 1930s the advancements in technology and industrial production had already made possible the reduction of the total amount of work required to provide the necessities of life for everyone. Russell is indeed baffled by high rates of unemployment while the employed population is overworked. Surely, he continues, reducing the employees' hours of work and redistributing them amongst the unemployed seems the only reasonable choice.<sup>10</sup> With a fairly distributed four-hour work day, humanity could use the remaining hours as they might see fit, and Russell contends that everyone would give in to their scientific or artistic inclinations, otherwise impaired by fatiguing work. In a world in which the hours of necessary work are kept to a minimum, 'every person possessed of scientific curiosity will be able to indulge it, and every painter will be able to paint without starving, however excellent his pictures may be' (*ibid.*: 27). Others with medical, political, or economic interests could pursue their inclinations and increase their skills, freed from the need to toil for forty hours per week or more. Russell's attention to indulging one's own intellectual, practical, artistic inclinations is tied to a specific understanding of human nature (their eventual contribution to society) and suggests that, left on their own, individuals would not experience their

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9 As with other 'paths' I necessarily cannot undertake in this article, it would be particularly interesting to embark in future work on a series of reflections regarding further, non-instrumental types of laziness (among which one should admittedly include 'debauchery').

10 Russell is not considering that, often, a high rate of unemployment is what keeps the cost of employed labour to a minimum, see (Marx, 1990: 789).

laziness only as pure frivolity or passive activities. Indeed for Russell, idleness challenges the immoralising and negative connotations of laziness as being an activity without social purpose.

His take on laziness can thus be clearly placed in opposition not only to that of Lafargue, but also contrasted to the one articulated by Barthes. As we have seen earlier, the latter was concerned with identifying particular activities which would be radically freed from external ends, particularly at the individual level – for Barthes at issue is exactly a rupture with the search for an increase of personal productivity or improvement, as these would inevitably be integrated in the category of work. The Marxist historian Peter Linebaugh is aligned with Russell's standpoint when seeking to positively appraise laziness (in terms of social utility), as he shows how the idleness of English weavers in the eighteenth century also allowed important contributions to mathematics. Such a standpoint on idleness is already distant from the negative connotations the term usually takes and shows that 'what was "idleness" to [some] was civilization to others' (Linebaugh, 2006: 263). These perspectives consider the availability of disposable time as ultimately resulting in activities entailing some form or other of general social utility.<sup>11</sup>

These takes on 'laziness' – at any rate outlined here in opposition to work – have evidently not entirely liberated its full subversive potential. In order to understand the structural reasons that support the current ideological discourse which gravitate around the category of laziness and contribute to its constant renewal, reframing this category primarily entails opposing it to how capitalism conceives 'productivity' and to the very capitalist form of wealth. But note, productivity must be understood as inherently the creation of value for capital instead of the satisfaction of needs (creation of use values), whereas the capitalist form of wealth does not assume the form of Marx's 'real wealth' as free disposable time, as he remarkably put it in the *Grundrisse*. Also, although 'laziness' could be understood as indicating a productivity 'other' than that of capital, this does not necessarily mean conceptualising this category as the umbrella term for a 'naturalized

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11 This seems to be the case also in David Frayne's recent book (2015).

ontology of labor and a utopian vision of a future in which this essence is fully realized in the form of an unhindered productivity' (Weeks, 2011: 81) – as Marx somehow seems to point at, in very different and at times conflicting ways, throughout his work.

In this regard, Marx's perspective is striking in its internal tensions, ongoing unsteadiness and radical displacements, to use Sandro Mezzadra's terms in characterising the development of the German philosopher's thought throughout his life (2018: 28 and *passim*). The following passage in the *Manifesto* is paradigmatic of Marx's general (yet only initial) condemnation of laziness, with some implications on his specific concept of work: 'It has been objected that upon the abolition of private property all work will cease, and universal laziness will overtake us. According to this, bourgeois society ought long ago to have gone to the dogs through sheer idleness; for those of its members who work, acquire nothing, and those who acquire anything do not work' (Marx and Engels, 2002: 238). The same could be said in relation to Marx's later critique of Adam Smith's understanding of 'work as sacrifice', in the *Grundrisse*, whereby laziness is defined in the terms of a 'negative state', alongside unfreedom and unhappiness (1993: 613). This is plainly in opposition to Lafargue's dream of full leisure in a three hour work setting or work as 'mere fun, mere amusement, as Fourier...conceives it' (*ibid.*: 611).<sup>12</sup> On this, even in later years – although in an increasingly conflicting way compared to his first works – Marx seems to retain a productivist perspective on the general concept of labour, possibly due to some remnants of the modern epistemic cage Marx was presumably trapped into, according to Foucault's notorious assertion.<sup>13</sup> Yet at the same time, in the very moment Marx works through his first systematic formulation of what would become his critique of political economy in *Capital*, it is possible to find moments when Marx, while talking about different cases for the emergence of the

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12 Until the end of his life, Marx never seemed to maintain a particularly friendly relationship with the 'French' way of doing things as concerns theory, politics, and in private life, as he wished his sons in law to be 'taken by the devil' in a letter to Engels in 1882 – 'Longuet as the last Proudhonist and Lafargue as the last Bakuninist! *Que le diable les emporte!*' (Marx and Engels, 1992: 375).

13 "Marxism exists in nineteenth century thought like a fish in water: that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else" (Foucault, 2003: 285).

availability of freely disposable time, poses laziness (at least) as one of the modes of existence to be coupled alongside the engagement in socially useful activities. Indeed, in keeping with the critique of work in Russell mentioned above, Marx had already advanced claims for which 'the creation of *disposable time* is then also creation of time for the production of science, art etc.' (Marx, 1993: 401n\*), but then added that the reduction of necessary labour involves the appearance of 'both idle time and time for higher activity' (*ibid.*: 712). Moreover, how are we to read Marx's smirking admiration for the '*Quashees* (the free blacks of Jamaica)' who, after the abolition of colonial slavery regarded 'loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good' instead of submitting themselves to the imposition of wage-labour demanded by the plantation owners (*ibid.*: 325–6)? Here, as we can see, laziness is also portrayed as that which opposes the capitalist coercive standardization of 'free' wage-labour.

### **Laziness between economic and moral imperatives**

Historically, the religious and moral condemnation of laziness has not been aimed at the prevention of certain activities in themselves. Perhaps better, for the moralists and the 'metaphysical lawyers of the bourgeois revolution' (Lafargue, 1883: 11) the accusatory attitude against laziness was fundamental to justify their aim of preventing disorderly or debauched behaviours. However, in view of reframing the category of laziness while contrasting it to the contemporary discursive use of the term, it is necessary to read it within the history of strategies to avoid exploited work. This does not mean that the earlier Christian vilification of *acedia*, or prohibition against sloth and moral guidance to a life devoted to work, completely withered away with the emergence of the needs of industrial production – physical exhaustion becoming the main issue with the change in the nature of labour (Rabinbach, 1992: 35–6). Rather, the nascent industrial paradigm secularised the earlier religious discourse on laziness (Wendling, 2011: 78).

In a similar vein, it should be noted that the recent accusations of 'laziness' of the PIIGS mentioned in the first part of this article could certainly be interpreted as part of the perennial cultural stereotyping of South-European

lifestyles that for quite some time has been embedded in the history of Europe (and the EU). We should thus bear in mind that the contemporary condemnation of ‘laziness’ cannot be linked only to the aims of neoliberal policies or bound exclusively to the rise of capitalism, as we saw with the fable of the ant and the grasshopper (or any narrative of that type) and the references to the Protestant work ethic. However, in relation to both the secularisation (and, as it were, ‘subsumption’) of the religious discourse on laziness in the nineteenth century and the current renewed occurrence of attacks on supposedly ‘lazy’ countries or individuals (as for instance today’s unemployed population in the Global North, benefit ‘scroungers’ and so on), we should hark back to what Marx argued as regards his reading of the historical episode of ‘the so-called primitive accumulation’, at the end of Volume One of *Capital*. As he put it, ‘The knights of industry...only succeeded in supplanting the knights of the sword by making use of events in which they had played no part whatsoever’ (1990: 975). This is a strikingly compelling formulation as it implies that in the fabrication (and endless maintenance and reproduction) of specific relations of production, capital made (and *makes*) use of a multiplicity of elements that had already emerged or were already present, and which had and have been generated by a diverse array of historical contingencies. This is why, for the purposes of our case, one should indeed consider the religious condemnation of sloth and the perpetual socio-cultural stereotyping of South-European lifestyle – these, evidently, could be dealt with more systematically in future work.

In the course of lectures held at Collège de France in 1973, published with the title of *The punitive society*, Michel Foucault resets the parameters onto which a history of laziness should be genealogically inscribed. This is an extremely important contribution, for it makes intelligible the links between the religious, moral, and then economic demonization of laziness – between the seventeenth and nineteenth century – and the voluntary refusal of exploited labour under capitalism. *The punitive society* is undoubtedly the series of lectures in which Foucault most closely shares with Marx many analytical categories for the study of the emergence of capitalist industrial production. In this sense, Foucault’s arguments in the 1973 lectures remind one of Linebaugh’s comments on the term ‘idleness’ when the latter

contended that “‘Idleness” is both a moral category and an economic one: it is the refusal to accept exploitation’ (2006: 428).

Over the course of the last century or so, laziness has been codified and institutionalised in the distribution of leisure activities. It has also been integrated into the economy by its organisation within a system of consumption, or constructed as functional to the mere regeneration of a capacity for labour expended during work hours ‘in order, presumably, that one can work all the more effectively afterwards’ (Adorno, 2001: 189–90 and 194). Conversely, Foucault’s proposal for a history of laziness in the 1973 lectures includes ‘the ways one evades the obligation of work, steals labor-power, and avoids letting oneself be held and pinned down by the production apparatus’ (2015: 189). On this view, laziness and idleness might take many visible forms, but they are all related to workers (or *potential* workers, such as vagabonds) compromising the idyllic conditions for the extraction of an expected amount of profits, not only as concerns production proper but the overall cycles of the capitalist mode of production. This is a crucial point, for how would a worker ‘steal’ her own labour-power – a capacity for labour that the capitalist considers as belonging to him – if not by dissipating her ability to work and ‘wasting it foolishly’, as the dramatic character of a worker ironically puts it in Marx’s first volume of *Capital*?<sup>14</sup> Gambling, sports, drinking and general debauchery are all activities that, for the bourgeois and the religious moralist alike, dissipate the workers’ full potential to work, that is, to be subjected to exploitation with a specific level of productivity.<sup>15</sup> This is why Foucault’s take on laziness does not (and cannot) consider only leisure and self-indulgence as the main trait for its definition. The point is almost irrelevant, and it bypasses effortlessly any hedonistic conception of laziness that assumes the form of ‘partying hard’ – a reactive approach reminiscent of Nietzsche’s *ressentiment* – so common in

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14 ‘Very well! Like a sensible, thrifty owner of property I will husband my sole wealth, my labour-power, and abstain from wasting it foolishly’ (Marx, 1990: 343).

15 Without embarking on the more nuanced technicalities of Marx’s labour theory of value and the debates around it, one should bear in mind that the level of capitalist productivity is measured, among other things, in relation to the labour time socially necessary to produce commodities.

overworked metropolitan settings<sup>16</sup> (it is still necessary to consider that this version of being ‘lazy’ is certainly the result of contemporary logics of exploitation, functional to the maintenance of contemporary regimes of valorization and, as if that was not enough already, also becomes a sort of anthropological stigma, as I argued at the beginning of this piece). What is crucial is that which the capitalist mode of production attempts to get hold of so as to adapt it to the necessities of the production apparatus – what in human beings escapes the persistent inscription of the capitalist social relations. Overtly challenging the anthropology of labour of ‘some famous post-Hegelians’, which considers work (and the capacity to work) man’s concrete essence, for Foucault the time and life of man are not labour by nature but ‘pleasure, discontinuity, festivity, rest, need, moments, chance, violence...it is all this explosive energy that needs to be transformed into a continuous labor-power continually offered on the market. Life must be synthesized into labor-power’ (2015: 232).<sup>17</sup>

Thus, as we briefly anticipated earlier in relation to Barthes’s attempts at defining a non-instrumentalist and ‘purer’ understanding of the notion of laziness, since the rise of capitalism the great immorality of workers lies in interfering with the (potential and actual) conditions for the extraction of surplus-value by means of the dissipation or ‘waste’ of one’s capacity for labour.<sup>18</sup> Despite the diversity in the lively debate on Marx’s concept of ‘abstract labour’, the majority of scholars seem to agree on the fact that labour-power (in its dual abstract and concrete character) needs to be socially validated in reference to its expenditure in time. We can see now how the different forms of ‘laziness’ usually put under moral scrutiny appear in their direct implications in terms of economic damage. The war capitalists

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16 In her lucid analysis of Marx’s work, Amy Wendling seems to reach (although from a different perspective) a similar conclusion on this point when she claims that ‘If I recreate, or “blow off steam” like an engine, in order to work more productively the following day, then my leisure activity is as commodified by the logic of exhaustion as my labor’ (2011: 116).

17 For an interesting perspective on Foucault’s discussion of an ‘untamed ontology’ of life, see Noys (2012).

18 For a lucid analysis of the ways in which liberal thought constructed the category of ‘waste’ (unproductive use of land and labour), see Neocleous (2014).

wage against the working class has one of its kernels in the sequestration of the time of their life and its synthesis in a capacity for labour that needs to be adapted to the different ways the production apparatus extracts surplus-value and its temporalities.<sup>19</sup>

### **Alterity and opposition to capitalist time**

Once fixed to the production apparatus – the previous battle emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century with the illegalization of vagabonds and beggars (Marx, 1990: ch. 28; 1993: 736, 785–6) – the development of the division of labour with manufacture and large-scale industry meant that a worker would not produce a commodity on her own but was subjected to the mechanical measure of labour time and synchronization to the work of others (in this way also reproducing and maintaining the average of socially necessary labour time for the calculation of the value of all commodities). As Linebaugh remarks, ‘it was probably Marx who first recognized that “idleness”, more than anything else, was the form of resistance most effective in “the period of manufacture”’ (2006: 225). In this respect, Marx’s position on laziness can be certainly seen at first as a condemnation of the idleness of those living out of revenue but, as we saw above, also as a strategic resistance to the wage-labour form and the imposition of the abstractions of its temporal measuring. Laziness in its confrontation to capital’s set of temporalities is one of the most effective ways to unbalance the ideal conditions for the extraction of profits, and it is enacted against *and* beyond the capital-labour relation, theoretically and practically. Only when considered in the way outlined here it can be politicised.

In *Discipline and punish* (1975), Foucault shows that between the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century a whole series of

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19 The anecdote at the beginning of this article seems to have been influenced by an old Hungarian fairy tale in which a very old woman tries to escape Death. After the first visit, she convinces Death to come the following day asking him to write ‘Tomorrow’ on her door – ‘The Old Woman who Outwitted Death’, in Stanovský and Vladislav (1961). Pulcinella’s trick to defer and avoid work curiously puts under a different light the relation between work and death, cf. Baudrillard (1993: 38–43).

disciplinary mechanisms appeared in conjunction with the emergence of industrial production. What is interesting in the lectures he gave only two years earlier is that these disciplinary apparatuses aimed at capturing (and penalizing) specific modes of existence that appeared to fall outside the temporalities of capitalist production. As he puts it in *The punitive society*, ‘The time of people’s existence had to be fitted and subjected to the temporal system of the cycle of production’ (2015: 211). Laziness in all its forms is in harsh contrast with such a homogenization of the time of life in relation to the homogenized (and measurable) time of the continuity of production.<sup>20</sup> When what is targeted is a mode of existence that is at odds with the conditions for the existence of abstract time in capitalist production, then, laziness as the refusal to be subsumed by capital’s set of temporalities becomes a process of subjectivation in itself – if we follow Deleuze in his reading of Foucault’s ‘subjectivation’ as the making of a mode of existence. In this sense laziness should be thought of as a mode of existence that confronts and challenges a diverse array of mechanisms set up for the reproduction of specific conditions of production and the resulting extraction of profit. In particular, laziness disrupts capital’s apparatus of sequestration of people’s lives by unbalancing its ideal set of dynamic (yet fixed) temporalities and which the immediate concreteness of individual lives perceives them as ‘a real [*phenomenon*], not a merely *supposed one* existing merely in the imagination’ (Marx, 1993: 831).<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the point *is* to unbalance and interrupt the chronocratic continuity of capitalist temporality, a temporality pre-established in keeping with capital’s intrinsic need for self-valorisation *via* exploited work. This means thinking about strategies to destabilise and interfere with the imposition of (abstract) labour as ‘the labour of socially necessary labour time’.<sup>22</sup> Is this a battle on such a social average? Very likely so, and the spectre of Foucault’s

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20 See also the fundamental Thompson (1967). It is in relation to these points that Linebaugh can argue that ‘In the eighteenth century the watch assumed new functions; it became a measure of labour time or a means of quantifying “idleness”’ (2006: 225).

21 For a compelling reading of the complex concept of ‘real abstraction’ in Marx’s tool-box, see Toscano (2008).

22 Bonefeld (2011); see also his (2010).

critique of the fabrication of the 'norm' invisibly yet inevitably haunts this article. The ideological discourses on 'laziness' spread in so far as the lazy mode of existence systematically challenges the reproduction of the unbalanced set of social relations allowing this very discourse to emerge. To bring exploited work to an end and rethink the category of wealth as freely disposable time, as Marx posed it, capital's temporal grids must be confronted and tampered with. Being strategically lazy – in the way described here, within, against, *and* beyond the capital-labour relation, as the claim of alterity in opposition to the needs and the conditions posited by capital – jeopardises such a pre-empted set of calculable temporalities so that not even Punch's illusory psychic trick of 'doing it tomorrow' will be necessary.

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While revising this article according to the feedback provided by the reviewers and the editorial board of this journal, I was disturbingly aware of the internal contradictions of writing about laziness as a way of tampering with the temporal requirements of capital, broadly speaking, and simultaneously being subjected to a deadline and/or the not-too-subtle pressures to write and publish in contemporary academia. My ostensible hypocritical position in completing this text simply shows the extent to which I have been compelled to internalise 'the political economy of the promise' (*supra*, n7) as one of the modes of existence of the personification of my economic function. In the poignant words of Francesco Di Bernardo: 'precariousness is...quite simply the condition of the working class under capitalism. It always has been, and it always will be' (2016: 14).

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## acknowledgment

A very early version of this text appeared translated in Bulgarian for the magazine *дВЕРСИЯ*, #5/2016 (<http://dversia.net>). I want to thank Neda Genova for giving me the chance to write on this topic and translating my original version. I also want to thank her for having provided insightful feedback since the first draft and unlocked more than a few impasses amidst the muddled thoughts I had on this theme.

## the author

Yari Lanci is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Against the grain of common sense and public construction of an 'employable' persona, he is trying to justify theoretically that, as many others (who however do not often overtly claim it), he cannot bear the thought and everyday experience of working in general, and even more so in today's form of generalised regime of precarity. His research project focuses on the role of capital's sequestration and government of time in the fabrication of exploitable subjectivities, with particular attention to the readings of these processes in the works of Karl Marx and Michel Foucault. He is the co-editor of *Foucault and the history of our present* (Palgrave, 2015) and the translator of Sandro Mezzadra's

monograph on Marx titled *In the Marxian workshops: Producing subjects* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018).

Email: [yarilanci@gmail.com](mailto:yarilanci@gmail.com)