

CONCLUSIONS

Towards the New Cinema of Work and Idleness

'Enough of crimes and bloodshed, enough of Kigali ... Long live holidays!'

Jean-Luc Godard in Film Socialisme

'Workers of all countries, call it a day!'

Krisis-Group, Manifesto Against Labour

In the conclusions to this book I would like to return to Marx's concept of fetishism. The author of *Capital* uses it to illuminate the fact that every commodity placed on the market hides the labour that was put into its production. There is a mystique to a commodity. Consequently, capital is also fetishised; its origin and development and, especially, its menacing, destructive aspects are obscured. We can thus infer that in contrast to commodities and capital, labour is a simpler and more transparent concept – labour is, more or less, what it appears to be, as suggested by the title of Marx's magnum opus – 'Capital', not 'Labour' or 'Work'. Even if we agree with Hardt and Negri's argument that Marx discusses wealth before discussing labour for reasons of heuristics and not because he regards labour as less important than capital (Hardt and Negri 2006: 64), the aforementioned impression remains.

Yet as many authors have noted and as my investigation confirms, work is far from a simple concept, and the dominant discourses from both the right and the left do not represent it as so. It tends to be rendered as a necessary and ennobling, empowering and liberating activity for everybody – as something without which a man is not truly worth his name. A small but symptomatic example of this approach is the recent information, circulated in practically all British mainstream media, that one of the most privileged members of British society, Prince William, almost immediately after his wedding returned to work as a helicopter pilot. The idea behind such a swift return to one's toil was to demonstrate to the public that the royals are by no means an idle bunch. On the contrary, they respect the 'labour idol' more than the Christian God, with his concept of labour-free Sunday too Fordist for current standards. The clear message to the rest of the population is

that they should abandon their idle lives and try to match the hardworking residents of Buckingham Palace. This message is also conveyed, in a more heavy-handed way, by introducing schemes such as ‘workfare’, which forces unemployed people to work for less than a living wage in jobs with a high degree of alienation, at the sanction of withdrawing their benefits.

I do not deny that work can give people pleasure and provide their lives with purpose, as well as with a sense of material and psychological security. But such nonalienated work is a rarity and opportunities for it are diminishing every day. Academic professions, and many of the so-called ‘creatives’ and members of the ‘cognitariat’, which became integrated into the regime of producing profit, are good examples to illustrate this trend (Ross 2008). For the majority of the working population work has always been a source of pain, or at best tedium. It does not enrich, but impoverishes our lives as demonstrated by the fact that those who can afford not to work, except a small circle of martyrs and researchers, take up this opportunity.

Equally, I agree that work is needed to sustain the world’s population materially and culturally, but I see a great imbalance between the edification of work in the dominant discourses and the real need for work in contemporary society. I also observe an asymmetry between the material and cultural rewards that certain occupations afford their performers and their social usefulness. The rule appears to be that the less work is needed, the more it is advocated and the less clear the benefits of certain types of work or even the more unnecessary and environmentally unsustainable their products, the more rewards they bring the workers. A case in point are the huge salaries of stock market speculators, scientists working on extreme forms of life or production of new types of weapon, lawyers specialising in copyright protection, movie stars or journalists engaged in repackaging trivial information. By contrast, sectors dominated by women and immigrant workers, such as agriculture, food processing, construction work, childcare, caring for the elderly and cleaning, which are indispensable to every society, are paid poorly and bring little social recognition. The contrast between high material and cultural benefits of superfluous or harmful work and low rewards for useful toil, to use William Morris’s term (2008), demonstrates that differences in work rewards are a function of the political power of its performers and recipients, hence of a capitalist class system. This rule can be seen as reflecting what is known as the Lauderdale Paradox, arising out of the inverse ratio of the two kinds of value (use value and exchange value), as one of the chief contradictions of capitalist

production. Exchange value dominates use value: making more money (at whatever cost to human or environment) is deemed more important than doing useful things (Sugiyama 1996).

The edification of work by forces of capital can thus be explained by a simple fact that capital feeds on labour, to evoke Marx, like a vampire on a living body, so it always needs more labour, real and potential, and ideology is one of the means to achieve this goal. The less work is needed to sustain the population, the more capitalism needs pro-work ideology to obfuscate the reality. This explains the near-religious zeal with which neoliberal governments and the economic elite preach that 'any job is better than no job' (Krisis-Group 1999). Conversely, widespread withdrawal of labour, coupled with its moral and cultural downgrading brings a risk of collapse of the capitalist system (*ibid.*).

The extolling of labour on the part of the mainstream left, on the other hand, which manifests itself, for example, in demands to lower rates of unemployment rather than increasing unemployment benefits (never 'idleness benefits'), can be seen in part as a legacy of 'crude communism' or 'Bolshevism', the system inaugurated by Lenin, which was meant to be merely the means to a future free of alienated labour, but which became a permanent feature of living in the socialist East (Harrington 1974). It also has to do with the conviction that without aiming for full employment the working class will lose all its remaining political and moral power. Such a view is partly supported by the fact that trade unions are still important, perhaps even the central point of resistance against capitalism, more so than the old left-wing parties and organisations of unemployed people. Nevertheless, the fight for jobs, rather than for fairer distribution of the surplus product and value, the defence of the welfare state and the demonetisation of social and cultural life demonstrates that the left has been reduced to fighting the right on the right's terms.

Ensuring full employment is not a Marxist ideal, far from it. For Marx and his followers, under conditions of capitalism, workers lose their real and potential power through work, and the development of machines and science only speeds up this process. To quote Marx, 'The increase of the productive force of labour and the greatest possible negation of necessary labour is the necessary tendency of capital' (Marx 1973: 693). We can see clearly that such a claim perfectly suits contemporary, post-Fordist times, when great advances in technology are accompanied by an unprecedented loss of political power for the workers and the highest level of unemployment. Conversely refusal to work, used on a large scale,

forces the employers to negotiate the conditions of work and often leads to an improvement in the workers' conditions and political position. Such a programme has a higher chance of success, the more widespread it is; the further capital has to search for a surplus population willing to replace the striking or reluctant workers. Ultimately, as Marx predicted, socialism would only win if it became a global movement, matching the global character of capitalism. As long as it is not, namely as long as there is a lack of solidarity between different types of workers, as well as workers and nonworkers, it is doomed to failure.

To repeat, we do not need more work and, especially, we do not need work that produces high profit, but less of it. Equally, as Karl Polanyi proclaimed, we need economy embedded in the needs of society, not the other way round – the needs of the economy, which means the needs of capital, have to dictate what society can afford and at what cost. For that, however, the neoliberal project, which gained a near-hegemonic status in the current world, should be abandoned and replaced by a new regime, which imposes limits to capital and hence limits to economic inequality, and time and strenuousness of work. This system should ensure the existence of zones that are outside of the market regime, such as health and education, and regulate trading in essential resources such as land and water. In order for such a programme to work, however, it should be universal, so there are no safe havens for billionaires nor 'special economic zones' where poor people can be exploited with impunity. What will the social cost be of such a programme? Inevitably it will affect the working practices and social position of those whose main work is to create capital and those who constitute privileged sectors of workers by, for example, creating technological innovations or producing art. The overall results might not be to everybody's liking, but in my view the so-called privileged West will lose less than it fears. Besides, inculcating and cultivating the fear of a possible loss of privileges and in this way preventing solidarity with those who do not have them, has always been an important weapon of capitalism. The likely alternative to this programme is widespread misery, conflict, impoverished culture and the accelerated depletion of the Earth's natural resources, which might be deadly not only for those at the bottom of the human pile but also for those at the top. We already see some of these dangers materialising in the rise of terrorist attacks and other types of violence, such as riots, apparently lacking political purpose but in reality pointing to the failure of nominally democratic governments to represent the whole of society. Yet the clearer the problems and risks of continuing the current politics, the more

forcefully presented is the argument that any alternative is economically unsustainable or even illogical.

What is the role of cinema in fulfilling a programme of reversing neoliberalism and preventing other systems of similar effects? In order to answer this question we should realise that cinema is a part of the economy and a system of signification, a powerful ideological tool, being able to change people's minds, the latter being of special importance to me. Although it is widely conceded that it plays this role now to a lesser extent than it used to, nevertheless it has hardly become superseded by any other form of art. Not a long time ago Alain Badiou, echoing the old pronouncement of Lenin, maintained that it is a 'mass art', where 'mass' is a political category, or more precisely a category of activist democracy, of communism, because the artistic productions that the erudite or dominant culture declares incontestable are seen and liked by millions of people from all social groups at the very moment of their creation (Badiou 2009).

I will divide its role of affecting the masses into three interconnected tasks: documenting, analysing and projecting; the same tasks that many authors cited in this book also took upon themselves, such as Marx, Polanyi and Harvey, in their respective fields of research. The crux of the matter is to establish how best to fulfil it in the direction that I outlined: by whom and how. In this book I privileged the role of filmmakers and professional interpreters, namely critics and film historians, although this role can and should be fulfilled by other individuals and groups, such as policy makers and ordinary viewers, who construct in their heads their own versions of the film and share them with fellow viewers.

European films considered in this book are not lacking in material documenting the exploitation of workers and undervaluation of labour. Much more rarely films depict the pleasures and advantages of work; such representations are limited to certain films from the 1960s, usually made in the East, and even there the rewards of work are coupled with disappointments. They show that from the 1960s the position of workers has deteriorated: their lives are less stable, their political power has diminished and they are squeezed out from the places where they could share their experiences. Films about concentration camps included in this study further illuminate the link between work, dehumanisation and extermination. In the same way they point to the temptation to use other people's work as a means of not only amassing material wealth but a sense of importance and impunity, of playing god. By and large, the films discussed show that classes understood as groups of people of strikingly different standards of living, political power and opportunities to

change their lives exist, and class divisions have solidified in the last thirty years or so.

Yet the condemnation of alienated work is not balanced in these films by extolling its opposite – idleness. In most cases idleness is not depicted as a different, pleasant and potentially permanent mode of functioning in the world, but as an aberration from the norm and a temporary state. The typical scenario for the protagonist of a film about idleness is for him or her to either become disillusioned about idleness and join the world of paid employment with extra enthusiasm, thus presenting it as a state that capitalism can easily take advantage of, as argued by Marx, or mental breakdown and spiritual or even physical death. Hence, they ultimately show that idleness as an alternative to work is not truly possible in the current system.

European cinema scores somewhat lower as an instrument for analysing the realities of work. In a smaller proportion of films we see the links between the vicissitudes suffered by the workers or advantages enjoyed by them and the character of macroeconomy. The majority of filmmakers limit themselves to showing only one part of the equation – the situation of the worker in his or her immediate environment, or of a capitalist detached from the worker. Notable exceptions are films from the 1970s, as exemplified by *Man of Marble*, *O Lucky Man!* and *Tout va bien*, reflecting the fact that this was a period when dramatic change was expected, yet when it happened it was not always in a way hoped for by the workers. This unwillingness or inability to analyse the situation of work after the 1970s is projected onto the heterogeneous styles of the discussed films, with fewer and fewer films using epic narratives and the vast majority limiting themselves to painstaking depiction of an individual in his or her immediate environment (for a discussion of this trend in French cinema see O’Shaughnessy 2007), as if pointing to the heterogeneity of grievances and the difficulty of creating a coherent strategy for acting upon them.

Finally, the majority of filmmakers, even those ostensibly committed to the left-wing cause, do not encourage viewers to change the capitalist status quo by illuminating advantages of the action in the right direction. Projecting a ‘radiant future’ is hardly on the agenda in the films discussed, especially after the 1970s. An attempt to change things by collective action ends up in defeat, as in the case of the anarchists and workers presented in *Old School Capitalism* by Željimir Žilnik. By and large, it appears that the filmmakers accept, to paraphrase the opinion presented in *O Lucky Man!*, that revolution is opium for the masses and intellectuals

alike. If anything, the past is radiant, as in the depiction of the 1970s in films made in the 1990s and 2000s. This does not mean that improvement cannot be enjoyed by an individual, but this happens on capitalist terms, namely thanks to him or her rejecting solidarity with ‘fellow travellers’. Improvement is thus always at the expense of sacrificing universalist ambition, and in a way reinforces the capitalist ethos.

In addition, improvement can happen by an ‘internal revolution’ or ‘limited utopia’ – finding an outlet for one’s frustrations, enjoying some short-lived victories, working on one’s self. Such a solution also suits a capitalist, as this does not undermine the drive towards the creation of capital, in the same way that internal exile suited the authorities of countries that adopted ‘crude communism’. However, even this scenario is used more rarely as we approach the present day. Again, the style of films from this period, which feeds on earlier styles, rather than attempting to revolutionise cinematic language as, I believe, was the ambition of modernist filmmakers such as Antonioni or Makavejev, betrays a withdrawal from large political agendas into small life projects.

This unwillingness to project a better future for the working class can be explained by these films’ attempted realism, both in the sense of focusing on what is going on here and now and in being supposedly realistic about the chances of changing the world, namely accepting that it is today easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism (Jameson 2003; see also Badiou 2007: 4–5). One such factor is the consequence of earlier revolutionary movements, such as the protests of 1968 and the Solidarity movement of the 1980s. Although they were, in the short term, successful, in the longer term they facilitated the victory of the forces against which they fought. For many their failure confirms the idea that, to return to Leszek Kołakowski’s phrase, ‘the skull of communism will never smile again’ (Kołakowski 1999: 418) or that, as Jacques Rancière claims, the only actuality of communism is the actuality of its critique (Rancière 2010: 136). Films from the 1980s point to the success of neoliberalism’s ability to present itself as non-ideological, rational, as economical science and common sense, rather than a distinct ideology serving a specific class. Consequently, anybody who opposes it risks being taken not for an idealist in a positive sense, but for a madman. Another factor contributing to the success of neoliberalism is its extolling of individualism, pronouncing that everybody can be a winner if only she or he tries really hard – as proved by the cases of so many winners, from Bill Gates to J.K. Rowling. Individualism is thus painted as a

universalist project – as the most just system one can imagine. Simultaneously, it projects an image of people who attempt to unite as if they were a mob made up of those who renounce their most basic human right of being an individual and pose a threat to democracy. A widespread association of crowds with totalitarian orders – Nazism and crude communism – strengthens this association. I concede that marching together makes one feel less of an individual than engaging in an individual activity, for example writing a book, a sentiment which, I believe, is shared by many academics and intellectuals at large, and most likely by representatives of many other categories of workers. Yet as Marx argued, only by coming together and fighting in the name of all workers do we increase the chance that everybody one day will be treated like an individual and his or her alienation will be overcome.

To quote Harvey again, ‘In a time when the class struggle has receded as a unified force in the advanced capitalism, ... is this not also a time when the painting of fantastic pictures of a future society has some role to play?’ (Harvey 2000: 49). In this passage Harvey appeals to everybody interested in and capable of engaging in ideological work or, as one can say, in producing pro-communist propaganda, but for me his words come across as particularly directed to the ‘painters’ of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – filmmakers. I certainly crave such fantastic, future-orientated cinema, in order not to lose hope that change is possible, a hope especially important for those who care for future generations, more likely to suffer from insecurity and alienation than those who live now. I would like it to show a world where nonalienated work prevails over alienated, the alienated work is shared, and there is plenty of scope for idleness, which is treated not as an appendage to work, but activity (or passivity) in its own right, and which does not need to be paid for by a sense of shame or guilt.