

# THE POINT IS TO CHANGE IT

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Jason Read, *The Double Shift: Marx, Spinoza, and the Politics of Work*, Verso, 2024, 214pp, £16.99 paperback.

Workers have always been promised rewards for their work, but recently such rewards have been getting thinner. Debasing conditions, widespread precarity and chronic occupational stress and illness all accompany decades of real wage decline. Yet, whenever there are strikes for improved conditions, something strange happens. You might have noticed it. Grumbling down the pub, side eye in the break room, harassment at the picket line. A trade unionist receiving insults for wearing a coat that is too fancy.<sup>1</sup> In Jason Read's *The Double Shift*, the salient concept for understanding these phenomena is 'negative solidarity', a term coined by the political theorist Alex Williams in a blog post in 2011. As Read develops it,

1. Chal Ravens, 'What Are Working People Supposed to Wear?', *Novara Media*, 12 January 2023.

Negative solidarity is not just an inversion of solidarity, a focus on the individual rather than the collective, but one in which any collectivity, any connection between one individual's struggles and another's, is actively refused. Negative solidarity is a transformation of one's own particular destitution into a virtue – a virtue that is founded upon an attachment to the trials and tribulations of work. It is the belief that because one has suffered through work, or believes that they have suffered, then others should too (p10).

Those who rely on state benefits, along with trade unionists and striking workers, are the object of resentment and hostility, perceived as having shirked their duty to work. That this is so prompts the central question of Read's book. Why are so many workers still so attached to work?

*The Double Shift* develops the theoretical resources needed to grapple with such a question and gives a convincing answer of its own. Marx's writings provide a solid foundation for the study, but Read contends that to fully understand work we need to think about it as an outlet for our striving, as the vehicle of intimate and troubling desires. Work is never just a bodily practice, or a material compulsion, but always also an imaginative encounter and interpellating experience. By reading Marx alongside Spinoza's reflections on the imagination and affects, Read establishes a dual perspective that shifts between the social and the individual, interpreting them as 'two sides of the same coin' (p6).

There are three further 'double shifts' in the book, each of which formulates the problem of work in slightly different terms. The first, the

shift between economics and politics, makes a novel connection between the labour process under capitalism and the question of equality. Read develops Marx's argument – that this process is both 'concrete,' in so far as particular tasks are completed, and 'abstract,' in so far as labour power is expended to create value – by positing that these two aspects of labour produce their own 'ethics' and identifications in the worker. Each ethic implies, as its corollary, a vision of society: the equality of different tasks (and the people doing them) in the case of abstract labour, and the fitness of a particular individual to a task (within a hierarchy of tasks and individuals) in that of concrete labour. This immediate connection between work and the political 'short-circuits the division between base and superstructure' and prefigures Read's second shift: between bodies and ideology (p2). This chapter explores the affective dimension of work, comprising both how the wage relation directly shapes our desires (while posing as the independent means to their realisation) as well as the satisfactions and frustrations that particular tasks bring about. These affects, which evade a conventional understanding of ideology in their immediacy, are worked into and sustain cultural narratives about agency, independence and duty through work. Finally, the shift between poiesis and praxis, or between production and action, illuminates how work and individualism have come to be seen as the only available strategies for acting in the world. Marx and Spinoza are productively combined to explain not only how the economy is naturalised and made invisible to us (a process akin to commodity fetishism) but why our most intense emotions are directed away from it, towards politicians and other workers rather than capital. In the final chapter, negative solidarity emerges as a concrete articulation of these shifting relations: it is a 'subjugated ethic of abstract labor', where an emphasis on the generic productivity of one's work displaces the unsatisfying nature of the tasks to be carried out, creating a vision of equality between all those who labour (p190). It is also 'a specific articulation of material conditions and their representations', in which pain, discipline and frustration are reworked into the foundation for self-fulfilment and moral worth (p111).

Popular culture is one place where these processes can be observed. Read closes his chapters with novel readings of seven American films and television series from the past twenty-five years. So, *Office Space* and *Fight Club*, both from 1999, fail to grasp that their ethics of concrete labour can't transcend or solve the wider problems of work under capitalism. The adage to 'do what you love' is not only not a solution, but masks how 'the division of labor intersects with other divisions across race, nation, and ethnicity' (pp73-4). The cult television series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *Better Call Saul* (2015-2022) use 'object point-of-view shots' and montage to reorganise mundane affects into a mythic valorisation of work as a means of personal transformation. *Compliance* (2012) and *The Assistant* (2019) habituate us to the contradiction of a free subject who can act on anything except the means of their survival,

the selling of their labour for wages.

But if popular culture is a site of ideological retuning, it is also the place to seek liberation from our contemporary ideology of work. Read's reasoning here bears resemblance to Jacques Rancière's theory of the 'distribution of the sensible,' which articulates the link between that with which we occupy our time and the way we justify that use of time through systems of belief, story and sense perception. In this account, the modes of perception available to us determine what we deem fit to do, where and when we do it, which in turn determines our sensory experience, in a constantly self-reinforcing dialectic. For both Rancière and Read, since this dialectic links the organisation of social life with its appearance, social life can be altered through interventions at an aesthetic level. In the conclusion to *The Double Shift*, Read turns to Boots Riley's 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You* to suggest that it not only reveals the imaginative leaps necessary to apprehend our exploitation through work – shifting to the register of science fiction via the grotesque figure of the 'equisapien' – but also the limitation of that understanding without a clear path for action. The film's protagonist can only act on his outrage because he has access to collective action and because its affective pull is so strong. By depicting 'the joy of refusal and power' that animates resistance, *Sorry to Bother You* shows us that solidarity, and not just work, is as intimate as it is political (p202).

On finishing *The Double Shift*, two further lines of enquiry seem most pressing. The first would be a more precise charting of the aesthetics of negative solidarity, within a serious commitment to the aesthetic as a site of liberation. For example, to grow the corpus addressed by Read's book, shows like *The Bear* (2022), *Uncut Gems* (2019), *Boiling Point* (2021) and *À plein temps/ Full Time* (2021) have recently depicted work as a place of battering by fortune, as if the fracturing of the neoliberal consensus, or the wild fluctuations of the economy during and after COVID-19, had transformed work into a game of chance.<sup>2</sup> Their pulsating soundtracks, fast cuts and breakneck dialogue rework stress into a tale of individual athleticism, while further abstracting other people into something less predictable than the weather. Drama's reliance on the event is conducive to this sort of representation, but what of other forms and media?

The second departure would be to think about negative solidarity in relation to class, which primes our expectations of work and is itself a concrete articulation of the material and mental. For example, what Dan Evans calls the 'old petty bourgeoisie' – the UK's population of small business owners and self-employed tradesmen – might at times eschew collective action because they perceive it to be corrupt, but at others because work is delivering the material wealth they expect from it.<sup>3</sup> While Read's text takes a Marxist definition of worker, this class sit somewhere between proletariat and capital, often owning their own means of production. How does this complicate their attachment to work, particularly in relation to their own abstract labour? Read's framework

2. Temenuga Trifonova, 'Precarious Lives: The Deepening Pathologies of Neoliberalism in French Cinema (1980 to the Present)', *Literature and Aesthetics*, 33:2, 2023, pp60-77.

3. Dan Evans, *A Nation of Shopkeepers: The Unstoppable Rise of the Petty Bourgeoisie*, Repeater Book, 2023.

can contain these musings, and more, on the path to radically changing our working conditions. In that, it is a fascinating interpretation of the ideology of work – all the while remaining well attuned to the fact that the point, as the saying goes, is to change it.

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