

Night labour, social reproduction and political struggle in the ‘Working Day’ chapter of Marx’s *Capital*

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Abstract

This essay offers a new reading of Marx’s chapter on ‘the working day’ in *Capital Volume One* by exploring the textual theme of night-time work. Even as Marx emphasises how the lengthening workday enables the super-exploitation of producers’ wage labour, his depictions of nocturnal experiences highlight more forcefully the destruction of workers’ reproductive resources, capacities and relationships. Night comes to represent the contracted time, condensed space, petrified relational bonds and thwarted desires for human reproduction in a free, fulsome sense that includes reinvigorating oneself, caring for others and enjoying experiences apart from work or care. Night’s role as a privileged signifier and catalyst of these changes comes through in key passages about women, children and vampires, and in theoretically meaningful variances between Marx’s German paraphrasing of English sources and those original texts, which replace Marx’s phrases in English translations of *Capital*. Contemplating Marx’s ambivalent reflections on legal-political action to limit workday hours, I argue for making struggles over social reproduction in a capacious sense central to working-class politics today. I demonstrate the power of this Marxian analytic by considering the compression of social-reproductive time among today’s microworkers, who fuel the digital economy by performing platform-based ‘tasks’ at all hours for very low wages.

Keywords

Karl Marx, working day, social reproduction, microwork, night labour, *Capital*

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Introduction

Scholars in diverse fields have long been fascinated by Marx's account of the working day in *Capital's* first volume. The chapter stands out within *Capital*, in part, because it is rich with empirical material, including abundant quotations from child workers, English factory inspectors and news stories as well as blow-by-blow accounts of parliamentary battles over legal limits to daily work hours. These passages of Marx's major mature text are also distinctive for the profusion of metaphorical figures they contain, particularly grotesque images of monstrosity and blood. The chapter thus offers attractive material for probing the transits between literary technique and social-theoretical analysis.

Debate persists over what exactly these features of Marx's writing in the chapter imply for the conceptual status of the working day inquiry within the encompassing critique of capital formation. Postone (1993) gives the chapter only passing attention, taking the view that early industrialists' lengthening of the working day (to generate absolute surplus value) comprises a transitional moment on the way to the more advanced, distinctly capitalist and historically consequential development of work intensification through technology (to create relative surplus value). Althusser and Balibar (1979) caution generally against getting distracted by empirically dense passages in *Capital*, such as those in the discussions of the working day and primitive accumulation, the better to appreciate Marx's grand theory of historical stages in value's composition. By contrast, authors intrigued by Marx's acute sense for empirical subtlety and writerly expression in the chapter contend that precisely these features of the text make it of special interest (Godfrey et al., 2004; Leeb, 2018; Morris, 2016; Neocleous, 2003; Reddeman, 2015). On these readings, it would be a mistake to see Marx's graphically evident desire to document the metastasis of workers' labour hours, physical health problems and social degeneracies with scrupulous exactitude as leading him down a detour from the road to 'real theory.' On the contrary: from this perspective, which I adopt here, sparks of theory ignite from within the concrete particularities with which the working day chapter is studded, and they can illuminate otherwise imperceptible social experiences and political possibilities with uncommon clarity.

This is especially so when we attend to Marx's aghast fascination with capital's attenuations of workers' lives in the shadows of night. When we re-read the working day chapter through the lens of night-time activity, several themes congeal, as I argue below. Most obviously, Marx paints the night as the scene of capital's super-exploitation of workers' wage labour and the apotheosis of capital's drive to drain every ounce of life from workers' bodies through the production process. Yet examining Marx's representations of nocturnal experience in this chapter also brings to the fore a different structural consequence of capital's modernisation: the collective mortification of the working class by savagely precluding its social reproduction in physical, mental and cultural-relational terms. The interpretive optic of night activity also focuses our view on distinct patterns of time, space and gender that characterise capital's demolition of working-class social-reproductive capacities and relations. A close reading of provocative variances between Marx's paraphrased quotations in German of English-language sources and

those documents' actual texts, which editors substituted for Marx's words beginning with the first English translation of *Capital Volume One* in 1887, helps shed light on the special significance of the nocturnal for the working day chapter.¹

Approached as a meditation on the privations, indignities and horrors of the night, this peculiar stretch of *Capital* underscores that not merely the quantitative length but, more pivotally, the qualitative substance of everyday temporal experience is at stake in the constitution of the working day. Politically, this makes it imperative to broaden the notion of what it means to battle for a liveable working day by attending to needs and desires connected to social reproduction and to struggle for modes of living not centrally defined by work, as many Marxist feminist authors have advocated (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2004; Weeks, 2011). As I discuss, such a political approach would offer more promise than the efforts to limit work-day hours by law, such as the 19th century English parliamentary measures that Marx harshly criticises as inviting tolerated evasions of the law and achieving no meaningful change.

In this way, my re-assessment of Marx provides a fruitful basis for placing Marx's theory into catalytic contact with defining tendencies in today's precarious economy. The expansion and intensification of work during the wee hours has become a hallmark characteristic of precaritized work life in the wake of neoliberal shifts and the growth of platform-based labour. To demonstrate the power of the Marxian analytic that I derive from the working day chapter, this essay's final section examines workers' experiences in the rapidly expanding field of microwork, through which individuals earn tiny wage increments by performing minute jobs accessible via online platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk. This inquiry suggests how profoundly microwork is transforming working people's personal and collective lives in terms of social-reproductive activities and capacities. My reading of Marx and reflections on microwork accordingly underscore the need for anti-capitalist politics today to concentrate on rescuing and re-enlivening social reproductive times, spaces and relationships.

Night labour and the petrification of working-class reproduction

A clear objective in Marx's working day chapter is to shock the reader with harsh facts about capital's voracious desire to be fed by more and more hours of workers' days. On one level, the chapter certainly aims to expose and denounce the sheer quantities of time that capital increasingly demands from its labouring masses. References to night labour repeatedly serve this purpose. Thus, we read of wage labourers required to be at their posts from '6am to 10pm or further into the night' (Marx, 1977: 356), even, incredibly, to 'work from 6am on Friday to 4pm on the following Saturday' (Marx, 1977: 351), as competitive pressures stiffen in the expanding capitalist economy.² Marx's favoured metaphor of the vampire represents, in part, the demonic insatiability of capital's desire to consume more and more of the worker's vital energy and daily time, as commentators have argued (Morissette, 2013; Neocleous, 2003; Roberts, 2017: 129–131). Marx (1977: 367) validates this line of interpretation when he writes: 'The prolongation of the working day beyond the limits of the natural day, into the night, only acts as a palliative. It only slightly quenches the vampire's thirst for the living blood of labour.'

Capitalist production therefore drives, by its inherent nature, towards the appropriation of labour throughout the whole of the 24 h in the day.'

Probing Marx's specific language about capital's war on the 'natural day,' however, reveals a more complex side to his account of night-time experience. Within the chapter, Marx first uses this phrase in the opening section, writing:

...the working day does have a maximum limit.... This maximum limit is conditioned by two things. First by the physical limits to labour-power. Within the 24 hours of the natural day [*des natürlichen Tags*] a man can only expend a certain quantity of his vital force. Similarly, a horse can work regularly for only 8 hours a day. During part of the day the vital force must rest, sleep; during another part the man has to satisfy other physical needs, to feed, wash and clothe himself. Besides these purely physical limitations, the extension of the working day encounters moral obstacles. The worker needs time in which to satisfy his intellectual and social requirements.... (Marx, 1977: 341)

As Marx unfolds his account of impediments to the working day's totalisation of all daily time, he thus modulates what is initially a quantitative-analytical perspective with more qualitative considerations. What is at stake becomes not the mere ability of life to persist, measured according to a calculus of bodily inputs and outputs, but also the kind of life one leads, particularly one's life as a social being. Marx then seems to mark this refinement of his notion of the 'natural day' several lines later:

But what is a working day? At all events, it is less than a natural day [*als ein natürlicher Lebenstag*]. How much less? The capitalist has his own view of this point of no return, the necessary limit of the working day. As a capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one sole driving force [*Lebenstrieb*], the drive to valorize itself. (Marx, 1977: 342)

Fowkes's English translation, like the 1887 version, repeats the phrase 'natural day' and thereby obscures a significant textual moment: by subtly shifting the noun from *Tag* to *Lebenstag*, Marx underscores the transition from conceiving of time purely in abstract quantitative terms, according to the basic ideology that underpins and grows from the wage relation, to understanding time in the form of a 'life-day' (or a 'day-for-living,' since *leben* is also a verb) and in accordance with an expansive, qualitatively and socially attuned sense for what 'life' (or 'living') and its temporality means.³ Marx's contrasting reinvocation of 'life' (or 'living') when referring to capital's 'drive,' also absent in the English version, further emphasises the significance of this shift. From the very start of the chapter, Marx thus signals that capital's re-construction of the working day cannot be grasped by simplistic quantitative thinking or in terms of a crude life/death dichotomy. Indeed, his writing activates a critical progression of thought toward such sophistication on the part of the reader.

Within this critical context, night becomes a privileged signifier of capital's basic existential urge not just to exploit workers' labour time but also to extinguish all prospects for revolutionising daily time to re-make it as conscious 'lifetime.' Night comes to

represent the contracted time, abolished space, petrified capacities and thwarted desire for human reproduction, in a broad and varied sense that includes refreshing the body, invigorating the mind, taking pleasure in diverse affective sensations, engaging in intimate and social relationships and tending to shared efforts and environments. Most obviously, capital's conquest of the night destroys working-class reproduction in the sense of making human bodies decreasingly capable, physically, of functioning within the workforce required by industry. More fundamentally, and of crucial political importance: Marx's treatments of nocturnality in the working day chapter allude to the forfeiture of social-reproductive life in cultural and relational terms under capitalism as well as the possibility of a future 'life-day' defined by pursuits other than work. The chapter thus exudes a nascent post-work sensibility.

Bodily rest, physical nourishment, clean air, hygienic conditions of ordinary activity: night labour, for Marx, denies workers every one of these corporeal essentials. Again, it is easiest to read Marx's enumeration of these woes, replete with heart-rending quotations, as documenting workers' bodily debilitation and thereby laying an empirical foundation for politically galvanising moral condemnation – especially because most of the workers are children – or more pragmatic concerns about the industrial apparatus's continuing functional viability. Regarding workers' sleep deprivation, Marx quotes from a news story about the lace industry:

Children of nine or ten years are dragged from their squalid beds at two, three, or four o'clock in the morning and compelled to work for a bare subsistence until ten, eleven, or twelve at night, their limbs wearing away, their frames dwindling, their faces whitening, and their humanity absolutely sinking into a stone-like torpor, utterly horrible to contemplate. (Marx, 1977: 353)

A nine-year-old boy's testimony about going without sleep for two full days labouring in a pottery factory follows, then depositions from managers who have to 'bawl' at working girls 'to keep them awake' and struggle to keep their own 'eyes open' (Marx, 1977: 354, 356).

Making children's suffering central to the story reinforces the chapter's trajectory toward viewing night work as a more complex problem than the frames of excessive exploitation or physical wearing-down as such can convey. Of course, Marx evokes the temporality of immediate corporeal experience, as overwork exhausts and kills the body with each day that extends into darkness. Additionally, however, Marx points to a more extended historical time frame in which the working class as a whole is becoming more and more unwell and incapacitated. He quotes physicians who describe potters as 'a degenerated population,' with 'each successive generation' more sickly and stunted than the preceding one, prone to 'become prematurely old' and 'certainly short-lived' (Marx, 1977: 355). By inviting reflection on collective futurity, Marx also intimates the desirability of a more multifaceted indictment of night work and the socioeconomic system that makes nocturnal labour definitive of human experience.

When Marx describes the physical environs where factory workers labour through the nights, he both augments his catalogue of the evils destroying working people's health

and vitality and signals more clearly that what is lost cannot be fully understood through quantifiable measures of wellness. Marx gestures to the ways that night work dissolves crucial temporal and spatial contexts for personal security and human sociality. Describing a worker's forlorn attempt to find spots where he can catch a bit of sleep on the job, Marx quotes from a factory inspector's report:

The work of a London journeyman baker begins, as a rule, at about eleven at night. At that hour he "makes the dough".... He then lies down upon the kneading-board, which is also the covering of the trough in which the dough is "made"; and with a sack under him, and another rolled up as a pillow, he sleeps for about a couple of hours. (Marx, 1977: 359–60)

The vision of the baker stretched out on his hard-wood work surface, badly cushioned by scratchy sacks, suggests the common Marxian theme of the worker's reduction to a commodity through his own alienated labour. The image also graphically reinforces the chapter's insistent condemnation of the physical suffering that mounts for workers as capital tightens its grip on their nocturnal hours. Yet this tableau does something more, especially when considered in association with parallel passages nearby. In one, a nine-year-old mill worker reports: 'Slept on the floor of the furnace, over head, with an apron under me, and a bit of a jacket over me' (Marx, 1977: 369). Another passage describes the bleak circumstances in which a 21-year-old milliner had met her 'deathbed':

Mary Anne Walkley had worked uninterruptedly for 26 ½ hours, with sixty other girls, thirty in each room. The rooms provided only 1/3 of the necessary quantity of air, measured in cubic feet. At night the girls slept in pairs in the stifling holes into which a bedroom was divided by wooden partitions. (Marx, 1977: 364–65)

Tersely citing raw facts and figures, echoing the clinical recitation of the baker's hour-by-hour activities, and symbolically substituting sacks, jackets and aprons for blankets and pillows, these lines hammer on the theme of the stupefying extent to which workers' exploitation and mortification increases with the spread of night work. By depicting workplaces as sites for the uncanny epiphany of activities that should be taking place at home, however, these passages further evoke an awareness that night work destroys the spatial, temporal and familial infrastructure for workers' existences as social beings and as people engaged in relationships of mutual care. Marx's repeated expressions of dismay at workers being forced to eat on the job add to this effect, as when he associates match factory workers' night labour with 'irregular meal-times, and meals mostly taken in the workrooms themselves, pestilent with phosphorus' (Marx, 1977: 356). What expires on the nocturnal work-site 'deathbed,' in other words, is not only the tormented body of the individual worker. It is also the social-relational living tissue of working-class reproduction.

Reading Marx's original texts for *Capital* with an eye toward translation issues underscores further the sense in which the chapter is crucially concerned with not only workers' hyper-exploitation but also the destruction of working-class social-reproductive contexts and capacities. Above, I have quoted Fowkes's translation of the passage on the milliner.

Yet consider Marx's original language and italicisations in the last sentence above: '... während Sie Nachts zwei zu zwei *Ein* Bett theilten in einem Sticklöcher, worin *Ein* Schlafzimmer durch verschiedene Bretterwände abgepfurcht ist' (Marx, 1983: 198). Note that Marx italicises and repeats the word 'Ein,' which evokes the sense of 'one single' entity, such that the passage would be better translated: 'At night the girls slept two-by-two, sharing *a single* bed in a stifling hole, in which *a single* bedroom was furrowed by irregular wooden dividers.' By writing in this way, Marx calls attention to the massification of the working class: the extinguishing of all individual distinction and the emergence of a unified although utterly self-alienated working-class entity, as labouring bodies are conscripted into capital's service. The immediate textual context, in which Marx twice cites the *Odyssey*, enhances this signifiatory manoeuvre. First, he ridicules the idea that human beings could withstand the gruelling labour demanded of them: 'They are ordinary men, not Cyclops' (Marx, 1977: 363). Then, Marx draws from Homer an allegorical image for the homogenisation of workers' individual specificities:

From the motley crowd of workers of all callings, ages and sexes, who throng around us more urgently than did the souls of the slain around Ulysses, on whom we see at a glance the signs of over-work, without referring to the Blue Books under their arms, let us select two more figures, whose striking contrast proves that all men are alike in the face of capital – a milliner and a blacksmith. (Marx, 1977: 364)

Marx's allusion to the Cyclops does more than evoke an image of the inhumanly prodigious capacity to work for which these ancient monsters were renowned: it also recalls Odysseus's ironic declaration that he is 'Nobody!' when the Cyclops demands his name. This further underscores the theme that night-labour strips the worker of all personal distinction, which Marx then highlights by referring to the 'motley crowd' in Hades whose members are 'all alike.'

Even more crucially, however, the textual juxtaposition of these classical literary allusions with the milliners' modern plight suggests that we see the problem of collective alienation as a phenomenon of the reproductive sphere.⁴ The image of working-class people in the lines about the milliners' cramped and fetid sleeping quarters offers a picture of reproductive life rather than productive activity. The iconic scene depicts individual workers dissolved into one tormented and exhausted collective body in the squalor of futile attempts to rest and regenerate, in the beds where young women lie 'two by two' with one another behind a flimsy partition inside the factory instead of sleeping with family members or alone in a bedroom at home. In this paragraph, Marx notably does not emphasise how the labour process regimented and deploys the proletariat as an army of production whose soldiers single-mindedly fulfil their orders under the imperious command of the factory's generals, as he does in subsequent chapters (see Marx, 1977: 439–454, 544–553). The accent instead falls on the way night labour makes of the working class an abject mass by cancelling the temporal, spatial, bodily and social-relational conditions for working people's personal and common reproduction.⁵

In yet another moment of significant doubling, Marx twins the iconography of the milliners with an inverse image in a subsequent footnote about a dressmaker who turns her home into a workshop in her desperation to make ends meet: ‘If a dressmaker can get a little circle of customers, such is the competition that, in her home, she must work to the death to hold it together, and this same over-work she must of necessity inflict on any who may assist her’ (Marx, 1977: 365). Just as reproductive life is displaced into the workplace, so likewise, wage labour and its exploitative social relations are re-located into the home and re-shape the home space, making it serve value creation in an additional, more direct way than the regeneration of labour power. The lurid original German adds a flourish that goes missing in the translation: ‘inflict’ renders rather neutrally the verb *heimsuchen* which can connote haunting, thus reinforcing the theme that the pallor of death, so palpable in the factory, also spreads over this parallel *topos* of night labour (Marx, 1983: 198, fn 8). The term appears in a long quote from a London physician, whose testimony culminates with the familiar indictment of impossibly long hours and sickening corporeal conditions (Marx, 1977: 365). Yet once again, Marx is making a more subtle point. By pairing and doubling the factory/home scenes, he intimates that the bodily mortification diagnosed by the doctors proceeds apace with the extinguishment of reproductive activity as a spatialised structure of social relationality and sustenance.

Of course, it matters that the workers in these vignettes are women, even though Marx stresses that capital’s tightening grip on the working class through night labour obliterates all male/female distinctions. Featuring women signals especially strongly the damage to the reproductive sphere, given the historical gendering of reproductive labour in households and capital’s strategic destruction of women’s commoning practices (Federici, 2004). To be clear, I am saying that passages like this suggest a reproduction-focused critique of capitalism that breaches the limits of Marx’s own critical imagination, especially when it comes to issues of women and work that Marxist feminists have scrutinised more thoroughly than Marx did (Bhattacharya, 2017; Vogel, 2013; Weeks, 2011). Nevertheless, the text directs a stern and persistent gaze at the gap where the reproductive ‘life-day’ should be. It also tends to effect gender’s tenacious and poetic appearance even while trying to spirit it away. These textual features can and should be taken by critical theorists today as provocations to critically develop political struggles around social reproduction and work done by women.

Night labour, the temporal commons and the vampire

Marx’s complex elaboration of the many aspects of social-reproductive attenuation for workers comes through even more powerfully when we notice how he handles the temporal elements of this destructive process. The social-reproductive ‘commons’ subjected to capital’s enclosure is as emphatically temporal as it is spatial, and for Marx, capital not only broadens its grasp to all hours of the day but also generates a grimly different temporality of social existence through night work. In various ways, Marx suggests that as the 24-hour work cycle supplants the *Lebenstag*, wage labour becomes the near-exclusive content of the worker’s activity at all times and changes the experiential form of time

itself in everyday life. All time assumes a uniform structure as workers cease to experience meaningful distinctions between periods of time within any given day.

Marx's literary device of doubling (or trebling) fosters a sense of this temporal homogenisation. Referring to reports by a British newspaper on scandalous passenger deaths in railway accidents, Marx writes: 'Woche für Woche bringt dasselbe Wochenblatt gleich darauf, unter den "sensational headings": "Fearful and fatal accidents," "Appalling tragedies" u. s. w. eine ganze Liste neuer Eisenbahnkatastrophen' ('Week after week, this same weekly offers... a whole new list of railway catastrophes') (Marx, 1983: 197).⁶ Triply repeating the word 'week' exposes the irony of the broadsheet's conceit to be publishing 'news': such passenger deaths happen all the time. Marx then clarifies that they are the both the foreseeable result and mirror-image of railway workers' mortification through the elongation of a 'day's work' into work-through-the-night. He quotes 'a worker on the North Staffordshire Line':

Take as an example the following case, of the kind that happens daily [*täglich*]: last Monday, a fireman began his day's work [*Tageswerk*] very early in the morning. He finished it after 14 hours, 50 minutes. Before he even had time to take his tea, he was called back to work. He thus had dug straight through for 29 hours, 15 minutes. ... The man was a new hire and asked, what was understood to be a day's work [*Tageswerk*]. Answer: 13 hours, or 78 hours per week. (Marx, 1983: 197)

Marx is playing with the word 'day' [*Tag*] here, just as he does in the passage about the *Lebenstag* that I have discussed. He also seems to be doing this deliberately because he is paraphrasing the original English source, which editors of the English translations substituted for Marx's text, and taking poetic liberties as he does so. Through the stylistic move of repetition, absent in the original lines, Marx suggests that the day (and the week) have lost all internal differentiation for workers.⁷

This, in turn, lends the nod to the worker's abruptly cancelled tea time a slightly different implication than it has in the English source, where it reads as a simple marker of how heavily and insistently work demands press upon the worker. In the context of Marx's language plays to evoke how each moment, day or week mirrors and reiterates the next, 'no time for tea' signifies more precisely that the day's constituent time periods have ceased to retain any distinctness from one another, any qualitative character that is especially their own. It isn't just that the worker doesn't have *enough* time to refresh himself. It's also that all temporal experience is the same and all time units have become interchangeable. This is the extra layer of meaning behind Marx's dogged counting-up of workers' insanely protracted hours of work (Marx, 1983: 197). Beyond voicing outrage at the numbers in their own right, Marx is tacitly criticising the subordination of all time to the quantitative and thereby homogenising, meaning-evacuating logic of capital.

For Marx, night work at once catalyses and epitomises this temporal transformation. Further rhetorical adjustments that Marx makes when translating English sources bring his preoccupation with night time even more sharply into view. For example, a report on bakers' work hours issued in English notes that these workers 'continue in some

cases, at work, either in making or delivering the bread up to 8 p.m. on Saturday night, but more generally up to 4 or 5 o'clock, Sunday morning' (Marx, 1977: 360). Marx, however, substitutes 'Sonntag Nacht' ('Sunday night') for the last phrase (Marx, 1983: 195). From the same report, Marx then quotes a line originally written as follows: 'Towards the end of the week...the men begin on Thursday night at 10 o'clock, and continue on with only slight intermission until late on Saturday evening' (Marx, 1977: 361). Marx renders the sentence in this way: 'Gegen 'Ende' der Woche, d. h. [das heisst] am Donnerstag, beginnt hier die Arbeit um 10 Uhr in der Nacht und dauert bis tief in Sonntag Nacht hinein.' (Marx, 1983: 195). His scare quotes around the word 'Ende' add a dose of sarcasm to the very idea of referring to the 'end' of a work week that never stops, and this thematic focus perhaps explains his rather free translation of the phrase 'late on Saturday evening' as 'deep into Sunday night.' Marx thereby hints that measuring the exact duration of the multi-day shift is irrelevant because all time assumes the same form, with 'night' labour designating this generic temporality. Meanwhile, his doubling of 'Nacht' further reinforces the sense not just of the work-day's extension over more hours but also its signature characteristic of oppressive and unchanging self-identity. Elsewhere, whereas a boy pottery worker's testimony reads, in the original English, 'I worked two nights last week' (Marx, 1977: 354), Marx writes: 'Ich habe in der letzte Woche zwei Nächte durchgearbeitet,' inflecting the main verb to underscore that the boy has laboured not just at night but 'through the night' (Marx, 1983: 190). Marx thereby gestures toward the experiential quality of time's passage, beyond pointing matter-of-factly to a measurable segment of the 24-h cycle.⁸ Such temporal experience has become entirely uniform: it is nothing but ceaseless instrumentalisation by capital. Night labour both drives this qualitative temporal shift and encapsulates symbolically the new *form* that labour in general assumes.

If we now revisit the figure of the vampire and probe its temporal implications, a new optic on this intriguing metaphor and its significance for Marx's message in this part of *Capital* opens up. Most contributors to the ample literature on Marx's vampire zero in on this demon's unquenchable thirst for blood, its voracious drive to drink the victim dry of all living substance, as personifying the capitalist's (or capital's) drive toward total, lethal exploitation of the worker (MacLellan, 2013; Morissette, 2013; Neocleous, 2003; Reddeman, 2015). Some interpreters also emphasise that the vampire's monstrous character signifies the horrifying way that 'dead labour' in the form of industrial machinery overpowers 'living labour' as capitalism develops (MacLellan, 2013; Neocleous, 2003). In Roberts's (2017: 136–138) republican reading of the metaphor, the vampire's monstrosity alternatively indicates Marx's moral-philosophical and political judgment that wage labour is evil because it requires the 'use contrary to nature' of essentially human capacities which should be exercised free from domination. Few give more than a passing comment, however, to the vampire's iconic status as a creature of the night or to the complex issues of time toward which this figure gestures.

An exception to this tendency is the exhortation from Godfrey et al. (2004: 27) that readers attend to 'the specifically temporal aspects of the metaphor of vampirism.' These critics shrewdly observe that when Marx first invokes the vampire in the

chapter, he then immediately underscores time's crucial role in capital's domination of the worker:

Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has bought from him. If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist. (Marx, 1977: 342)

For Godfrey, Jack and Jones, it is significant that the vampire comes on stage just as Marx places issues of time in the foreground by unfolding his concepts of absolute and relative surplus value. This textual positioning, they argue, invites us to unspool the temporal intricacies of the metaphor rather than following the simple thread by which the night demon figures capital's extractive compulsions.

When one takes this perspective on the vampire, several provocative features of the metaphor that typically go unremarked stand out more prominently. First, the vampire is a night labourer, just like the workers whose plight Marx scrutinises throughout the chapter. Or rather, even more so, because the vampire can *only* work at night, whereas daylight effects the vampire's demise. In this way, the vampire symbolises in the extreme the worker's increasing absorption by night work and deprivation of the light of day, which in the inverted conditions wrought by capital becomes a threat to the wage-seeker's survival rather than living sustenance. The vampire thus signifies *both* capitalist and worker, and hence represents how capital dominates all human participants within the schema of value-creation, as only MacLellan (2013: 561), among multiple commentators, seems to have recognised.

Second, vampires place the issue of reproduction front and centre. Consider how closely the vampire figure tracks Marx's note about the dressmaker who 'inflicts' (in the mode of 'haunting,' like a spirit of the night) the same abusive treatment on her own hired hands that she receives from factory foremen. Vampires don't just suck the lifeblood from their victims: they also bring new vampires into being with each nightly bite. Additionally, the vampire's unquenchable thirst registers the impossibility under capitalism of satisfying the worker's reproductive needs and the fact that no amount of night labour can ever bring sufficient nourishment. On the contrary, the more intrepid the feeding, the more the hunger reproduces and magnifies itself. At the same time, the vampire also represents reproduction to excess, in the sense of re-creating violently urgent needs and needy beings who as producers can only generate more need rather than material things that would satisfy need.⁹ In this way, Marx's resort to vampiric images reinforces the thematic centrality of the destruction of workers' time, space and social-relational resources for reproductive activity, with night labour as the primary propellant of this transformation.

Third, even as vampires privilege the nocturnal time zone for the epiphany of capital's death-dealing visage, the vampire also points more subtly to the problem of capitalist time's general consolidation as an eternal present bereft of internal differentiation. To be sure, as Godfrey et al. (2004: 30) discuss, vampires embody a vacillation between

continuous and discontinuous time insofar as dawn always cuts short their time for feeding even as their bloodthirst boils incessantly: vampires are ‘aware that, even if for one day, they were to lose track of time, they will surely perish at sunrise.’ Yet this hyper-awareness of time, as a manifestation of temporal continuousness, modulates the vampiric symbolisation of temporal rupture. Along with the never-ending need for blood, still another continuity signified by the vampire is a relentless attuning to time’s passage and the constant exigency of using time to maximal advantage, under conditions in which time’s organisation is utterly beyond the individual’s control. Similarly, for workers subject to round-the-clock pressure never to let a moment go to waste, the triumph of the night simultaneously betokens the thorough merging of night and day: the lapsing of the notion of a ‘day’s work,’ or a week with a discernible ‘end,’ into a bad joke; the superseding of the ‘life-day’ by *Tageswerk*.

Multiple passages throughout the working day chapter remind readers of how a *Lebenstag* could be constituted were it not for capital’s predations. The foregoing analysis, I submit, throws acutely into relief Marx’s naming of the concrete reproductive experiences people lose when night labour spreads its shroud over mundane temporal experiences. Marx resumes this mode of address and summarises the damage when, about halfway through the chapter, he revisits the chapter’s *Leitmotiv*: ‘What is a working day?’:

Hence it is self-evident that the worker is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorization of capital. Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilment of social functions, for social intercourse, for the free play of the vital forces of his body and his mind, even the rest time of Sunday (and that in a country of Sabbatarianism!) – what foolishness! (Marx, 1977: 375)

Marx then reiterates his indictment of capital’s denial of ‘the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body,’ but the overarching point is that night work does not just mortify the worker’s flesh: it extinguishes a working-class social-reproductive world. Marx’s mention of ‘education’ and ‘intellectual development’ helps make that point and calls to mind a series of bizarre quotations from children that reflect their mental disfigurement: ‘Four times four is eight; four fours are sixteen.... We have a King (told it is a Queen)’ (Marx, 1977: 370, fn 66). His discussion of children’s educational stunting signals yet another collapse of temporal difference into uniformity, as working people’s potential life trajectories of intellectual cultivation lapse into life-long stultification, and as childhood loses any distinction from adulthood. Marx then shifts immediately to an extended account of children’s gruelling work hours under the ‘night system’ (Marx, 1977: 370, fn 66). He thereby reinforces the interpretation I have given in which night labour metonymically stands for the full gamut of assaults on working-class social reproduction, with steadily worsening effects over time.

Re-engaging the struggle over the working day

Significantly, the above recitation of social-reproductive activities that are ruled out when night labour comes to define the working day occurs at the start of the chapter's fifth section, the first of three on 'The Struggle for a Normal Working Day.' Summarising these destructive consequences thus helps Marx pivot from logging the ill effects of the working day's expansion to examining 19th-century political and legal battles to limit work hours in Britain. With my reproduction-oriented critique of the chapter as a backdrop, what features of Marx's explorations of parliamentary provisions and strategic moves in these political skirmishes might be newly illuminated?

In the chapter's latter sections, Marx seems to vacillate on whether struggles over the legal length of the working day offer viable venues for developing working-class political strength. For the most part, Marx doggedly exposes bourgeois parliamentary politics and policy-making as mere tools of capitalist domination and heaps contempt upon moralistic reformers who claim to be changing workers' lives through these processes. Yet a counter-current of meaningful silences and conspicuous excesses in the text suggests that involvement in legislative combat over the working day could help advance the radical working-class struggle.

The stronger line of thought in the chapter's later sections emphasises how futile and even counter-productive the political 'struggle for a normal working day' is. To be sure, Marx (1977: 382) acknowledges generally: 'The establishment of a normal working day is the result of centuries of struggle between the capitalist and the worker,' and this seems to validate workers' engagement in such struggles. Yet overall Marx aims at revealing the dysfunctionality of humanitarian policy inventions, the hypocrisy of their advocates, and the pointlessness of investing working-class political energies in bourgeois-liberal games. As Morris (2016: 220) argues, when Marx quotes a 'phantasmatic worker' who has decoded the capitalist's value-extracting machinations and takes a defiant political stand, this figure's declaration is meant to ring hollow: "'I demand a normal working day because, like every other seller, I demand the value of my commodity'" (Marx, 1977: 343).¹⁰ This passage in the chapter's opening section operates symmetrically with the chapter's final lines after the discussion of parliamentary conflicts over the working day:

For 'protection' against the serpent of their agonies, the workers have to put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital. In the place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man' there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day, which at last makes clear 'when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins.' *Quantum mutatus ab illo!* (Marx, 1977: 416)

Throughout the chapter, Marx has shown how night labour renders this clear division of time impossible in both quantitative and qualitative senses. Ridiculing the 'legally limited working day' as a 'modest Magna Carta' that offers only superficial 'protection,'

and mocking bourgeois law's pretence of imposing a 'social barrier' with any power, Marx scarcely needs the dripping sarcasm of his very last sentence (from the *Aeneid*) to drive the message home: a working day constrained by bourgeois law is as oxymoronic as a 'modest Magna Carta' and recapitulates that charter's institutionalisation of social domination.

Marx develops this theme throughout the chapter's latter stages in ways that further amplify its resonance. Marx's retrospective of the Factory Acts' legislative histories stresses that waging political struggles for 'a normal working day' has generally made things worse for workers. The 'system of relays' regularised through the 1833 Act, for example, was supposed to restrict children to only one of two seven- or eight-hour shifts per day. Yet it prompted factory bosses to introduce an evasive practise 'by which the work-horses were not changed at fixed stations, but were always re-harnessed at different stations' (Marx, 1977: 392). The Factory Acts of 1844 and 1847 reined in these abuses with respect to children and women but thereby incentivised owners to fire such workers, increase night work for adult men and eliminate workmen's meal breaks (Marx, 1977: 394–398). Subsequently, Marx observes, capitalists exploited loopholes in the regulations governing children's employment whilst packing courts that heard cases against manufacturers with business owners. In a way that prefigures a tendency in today's precarious economy, some employers broke up work time into fragments, forcing workers to be available for hire for 15 straight hours but only paying them for increments that added up to the new ten-hour maximum (Marx, 1977: 403–404). Legislative attempts to limit the working day in the 1830s–40s, Marx thus argues, not only failed at their task but inspired capitalists to concoct all manner of means to extend and intensify their hold on workers' time.

In contrast to the capitalists' seemingly boundless ingenuity and vigour in rebuffing working-day regulations, workers, in Marx's account, demonstrate little efficacy or effort in these events. This further casts reformist advocacy as a blind alley insofar as such political engagements seem to afford workers negligible opportunities for agency and collective power building. Recounting working-class involvement in controversies over the Corn Laws and the Ten Hours' Bill, for example, Marx (1977: 393) portrays workers as the dupes of Tory manipulators. To be sure, he also writes that subsequently, 'the manufacturers did not succeed in getting the workers to speak as they wished' when the former schemed to rally workers to repeal the 1847 Factory Act on specious grounds (Marx, 1977: 396–97), but it is unclear how workers were able to withstand the bosses' pressures. At one point, Marx (1977: 405) reports that workers launched a 'counter-stroke' against manufacturers' efforts to nullify the 1847 Act when they 'protested in Lancashire and Yorkshire in threatening meetings.' Yet this acknowledgement of working-class mobilisation is an exception that upholds the rule: Marx mainly constitutes the 'struggle for a normal working day' as combat between humanitarian reformers, on the one hand, and manufacturers and political elites, on the other hand. Adding to this effect, Marx quotes these actors abundantly, whereas in contrast to the chapter's earlier sections, individual workers' voices are scarcely heard. Instead, workers speak as undifferentiated masses: as the majority opinion in a survey, 'protestors' in the North, and signers

of an 1866 ‘Resolution of the Working Men of Dunkirk’ in New York State (Marx, 1977: 414–15).

Yet despite Marx’s main refrain that it is futile for workers to participate in bourgeois political wranglings over the working day, the latter portion of the chapter also intimates that such involvement could help advance radical struggle on a broad scale. Considered in historical context, the absence of workers as players and speakers in Marx’s account of parliamentary tussles over work-hours reforms could be seen as marking the importance of political strategy rather than signalling that workers should disengage from such conflicts. Marx hoped to publish the book in Prussian territory, and downplaying workers’ activism may have been a tactic to avoid raising the ire of Prussian censors.¹¹ Another remarkable silence concerns Marx’s reference to the Dunkirk resolution: Marx himself drafted this document, so he is actually citing his own work as an activist, as Fowkes notes (Marx, 1977: 415, fn), although Marx does not indicate this in his original German text; nor does the first English translation point this out. Quoting the Dunkirk resolution, a testimony to his own personal investment in working-class organising to limit the working day by law, Marx tacitly but tellingly affirms the value of taking up this fight. From this perspective, in turn, the textual excesses performed by the exhaustive survey of factory inspectors’ reports, along with the meticulous recounting of statutory advances and capitalist parries, seem like more than numbingly reiterated demonstrations of the legal struggle’s fruitlessness. Instead, they invite the reader to take parliamentary combat seriously as a genuine asset to the greater cause of working-class revolution.

Nevertheless, the tension between this textual dynamic and Marx’s hard edge of cynicism about reforming the working day persists unresolved as the chapter winds down, and the latter tendency is the more forceful and explicit of the two. Within the never-ending, exhausting grind of parliamentary processes, a danger looms of something worse than an unwise allocation of workers’ political resources of time and energy. Obviously, for Marx, the central point was for workers not to confuse reform with revolution: not to be content with weak and ephemeral trusses on capital’s exploitative powers but rather to abolish capitalism and build a new society conducive to real human freedom, above all through the socialisation and democratic control of production. Yet, if we read the working day chapter’s latter sections in light of the prior sections’ critique of capital as imperilling social reproduction, we gain an enriched sense of what such freedom entails along with a clearer understanding of how the battle for shorter hours can be a dangerous detour.

Shimmering in the gap between the text’s bending toward and recoiling from legally entangled political action lies the prospect of workers’ fight for free time, both within and beyond the turf of parliamentary manoeuvre, that would thematise what is qualitatively at stake in combatting the nocturnalisation of workers’ lives. Marx’s critique of labour and losses of the night implies that so long as contestants remain stuck on the number of waged labouring hours that the capitalist can control rather than what workers want to do with their waged, unwaged-working and non-working time, that fight will not yet have been joined. The first part of the chapter points the way toward declaring and launching this fight, thereby avoiding self-defeating politics. Parliamentary tussles need not be so counter-productive when contestants resist getting

hung up on numbers games and use the limited opportunities provided by the bourgeois public sphere to voice demands for a whole new form of life-day. The path forward, in the chambers and in the streets, leads directly into the ecologies of working-class social reproduction that capital has marked for extinction under the vampiric sign of night labour.

A critical phenomenology of night labour for wages and the non-waged nocturnal elements of the *Lebenstag*-under-duress thereby becomes vital to politicising these social-reproductive time spaces. This much is logically implied by my reading of the chapter as shining a spotlight on the receding of workers' reproductive relations, capacities and sense experiences, and as illuminating how labour in night-time's shadows both catalyses and symbolically encapsulates these transformations. Among these transformations that crisscross the productive and reproductive realms, women's social-reproductive activities and their concatenations with wage labour merit special emphasis. Marx's text prods our thinking in this direction, too. The critical lines of thought generated by the contemplation of night work, furthermore, concern not only working-class labour and politics in Marx's era but also the quest for freedom as night-time labour expands anew in today's economy.

Microwork and the politics of social reproduction

What might it entail, to conduct a critical phenomenology of current labour of the night in ways inspired by this reading of Marx? What problems would one consider and what questions would one pose about contemporary night work and night workers? The array of occupations in which night work features prominently has expanded with the growth of socioeconomic precaritisation. Along with night-shift workers who process meat in continuously operating packinghouses, sew clothes in *maquiladoras*, assemble mobile phones and perform innumerable other manufacturing jobs, there are night workers in warehouses, transport operations and shipping facilities who keep global supply chains perpetually in motion. Night-time care workers tend to the physical needs of the young and aged in more affluent people's homes and care facilities. There are nocturnal workforces of food delivery riders, Uber drivers, sex workers – and the list goes on. If we treat night labour as both effecting and metonymically signifying working-class social-reproductive catastrophe in terms suggested by Marx, what would we want to know about the experiences of all these souls of the night who 'throng around us'?

As an example of how we might proceed according to this Marxian analytic, I will conclude this essay by considering microworkers' circumstances. Especially in the global south but also increasingly in rich countries like the UK and the US, a mounting population of microworkers labour at all, and odd, hours to train artificial intelligence systems and complete consumer surveys, earning pennies for each tiny online task and often not getting paid at all. Recently, I conducted collaborative empirical inquiries, including a survey and follow-up interviews, into microworkers' experiences and motivations for providing this labour.¹² As a study of capital's effort to vanquish working people's social-reproductive capacities and contexts, Marx's working day chapter

offers a compelling basis for critically interpreting key aspects of our findings (even as Marx's (1985) [1880] questionnaire for French workers offers a historical touchstone for my methodological effort to mingle critical theory with worker-centred empirical research¹³).

The vast majority of UK microworkers say they engage in microwork because they can fit it so effortlessly into transient moments and spaces of everyday life, notably night-time hours. One only needs a mobile device to connect to platforms like Clickworker or Prolific, so the work can be done just about anywhere, anytime. Fewer than 10% of survey respondents reported doing microwork during normal business hours, and night is an attractive time for microwork because better jobs are available and there are fewer conflicts with daytime activities (see also Jones, 2021: 48). The wages are poor and highly uncertain: two-thirds of these workers earn £4 per hour or less from microwork and nearly all earn well below the minimum wage. Workers also spend lengthy stretches of time scouring platforms for tasks, and often they are abruptly 'screened out' from a job they have started, with no pay for time already spent on it. Yet, rather than expressing resentment at being exploited or unfairly treated, most UK microworkers feel quite content with their experiences of microwork, including their meagre and unreliable earnings. Why does microwork have such a draw, given its manifest disadvantages? How can Marx's critique of the working day, viewed as a commentary on social reproduction, help us solve this puzzle?

When one considers our interviewees' comments with Marx in mind, what jumps out are the ways microwork insinuates itself into workers' reproductive times and spaces and turns them to capital's advantage. It sheaths reproductive activities in a membrane of wage-seeking and wage-earning work, unobtrusively or comfortably nestles alongside them, latches on to them, or replaces them. Microworkers say they do short bouts of microwork while eating, watching sports, exercising outside, doing household tasks, riding public transport, having trouble sleeping, or when the baby takes a nap:

It's easily accessible. I can do it any time as well... I could do one at like midnight, or sometimes two in the morning. (Participant 12)

Football, when you're watching that, you can do two things at once. (Participant 4)

It's like, picking up the phone and going on Facebook for me? Just don't consider it as work. It's just a hobby. (Participant 6)

It's normally the evening. I'll quite often be at my computer, planning lessons or sorting stuff out. And it is when I fancy a break, I'll just click on the website, see if there's anything to do. (Participant 17)

When I'm having a hard time drifting off to sleep, it really is where that sort of fits around your lifestyle. (Participant 7)

It's actually quite a good stress reliever. ... There's nothing on Netflix, nothing on YouTube.... I'll log on to the system, I'll see what's on there. (Participant 7)

These statements suggest a style of work and a palette of work experiences that differ starkly from those of the bakers and milliners whose sad fates Marx decries. Nor do most UK microworkers have to work themselves to death due to dire poverty, although impoverishment is rampant among microworkers in Global-South countries, such as India or Kenya, where microwork has become prevalent, particularly among refugees and slum dwellers (Jones, 2021: 12–16). Microworkers in the UK mostly earn low incomes, but most rely on microwork for extra spending money rather than as their main income source. What precisely is the problem, then, especially if microworkers mostly do not mind this kind of work and even find it diverting or refreshing?

Marx offers a conceptual framework for pinpointing what is wrong with this picture, counter-intuitive though the juxtaposition of today's UK microworkers and 19th-century factory hands appears. The issue is the creeping grip of wage-earning on ever more facets of reproductive life and its relentless mortification of social-reproductive activities, abilities and relationships. To be sure, physical ill health does not register among UK microworkers in the shocking ways that London physicians discerned among English workers in Marx's day. Advancing unwellness shows itself, however, when microworkers speak of staying awake nights to search for more favourable tasks or micro-tasking when they cannot sleep, and when over a quarter of survey respondents report doing microwork because a disability or health problem makes other jobs impossible. With microwork's advent, capital has found new ways to extract value from the activities of sick people rather than shunting them into the surplus population of unproductive humans. Capital has also piloted new ways to cause worker illness, as is clear from workers' accounts of sacrificing sleep to microwork and compulsively adding wage-earning to daily activities, which reinforces the precarity-culture of anxiety and stress about never having enough work (Azmanova, 2020).

Beyond bodily and emotional debilitation, Marx also sensitises us to the waning of variety, richness and relationality in UK microworkers' social-reproductive experiences: the preclusion of a *Lebenstag*. If the dressmaker must set up shop 'in her home' to survive and the baker makes up his bed on the kneading board, the microworker converts any space at all into a work site, whether in the bedroom or kitchen, at home or at a place of paid employment, in transit or 'at rest.' In this respect, microwork lends unprecedented spatial saturation to the autonomist notion of the 'social factory' (Terranova, 2013), although as we have seen, Marx had already foreseen the dwindling distinctions between productive and reproductive spaces a century earlier. As in Marx's account, furthermore, women turn out to be bellwethers of this social transformation. A majority of UK microworkers are women, and women are a strong majority of UK microworkers who do fewer than 15 h of such labour each week and who neither view nor treat it like a 'job.' Thus, women are especially likely to see microwork as incidental to their daily lives and to view the subtle forms of domination it involves as trivial, even as microwork alters the contours of the care activities that women disproportionately perform and value.

Meanwhile, the vampiric temporality of the working day attains a new intensity among microworkers. Watchfulness for any moment when work or work-searching can happen becomes not only gauge-able by the tiniest increments of time but also even more immersive because the work is so innocuous and the tasks are perpetually available. Hence, one UK microvampire kept repeating how he used microwork to make his ‘dead time,’ a phrase he articulated no fewer than four times, more ‘productive’ and ‘useful.’ Doing this, he reported, was just as enjoyable as ‘watching YouTube videos.’ Evidently, social media had helped ‘deaden’ his daily time-flows, which he said slipped into nonstop scrolling whenever he got on TikTok. Of course, like microwork although in a different way, social-media activity offers ‘free labour’ to capital, in the form of comments and clicks that become commodifiable Big Data, as Dean (2014) and Terranova (2013) argue. In this sense, choosing microwork over TikTok or YouTube, as interchangeable and equally mildly enjoyable forms of work-cum-diversion, neatly expresses the qualitative homogenisation of daily time – the doubling of identical daily activities – that is such a powerful theme in Marx. Along similar lines, Jones (2021: 45–46) writes of the ‘gamification’ of wage labour when microwork platforms are modelled on game apps. Microworking can be seen as ‘gaming’ in the sense of gambling, too: one interviewee described microwork as ‘speculative’ and seemed to enjoy the risk-taking where ‘you don’t know [whether] you’re going to get’ any payoff for what you venture. The vampire’s nocturnal bite, as gothic writings and films remind us, is not just painful but pleasurable. It also reduces the desire to a singular nonstop craving even while amplifying it beyond all bounds.

Other comments by interviewees evoke a sense of how micro-wage-earning not only occupies all life spaces but desiccates the relationships on which human reproduction in the broadest sense depends, such as the following remark:

It makes me feel like I’m contributing towards something. I also feel like I’m part of a big team. ... When you look at the tasks that you’re doing, it’s not lost on me that someone across the country is doing this as well. (Participant 2)

In lieu of directly taking part in some kind of cooperative activity, whether cultural, economic or political, microwork substitutes the nebulous fantasy of belonging to ‘a big team.’ In Marx’s terms, the worker certainly fulfils a ‘social function’ by contributing to a tech firm’s optimisation of products and profits, but she forgoes any substantive ‘social intercourse’ (Marx, 1977: 375). The ultimate effect is to root the individual more firmly in her self-isolation, as though the Covid-19 quarantines, which led many of the people in our study either to start microworking or to increase their hours, had become permanent.

Words that are just as jarring to hear, if we let Marx’s critique of the working day attune our ears to them, come from UK microworkers who say they like microwork because they find it intellectually stimulating. One explains:

I find [surveys] especially fascinating, to hear other people’s points of views on products or services. And it makes me think, or encourages me to think about [new things]. I did one

recently on the wearing of glasses, and lenses. And I learned quite a lot about sort of how they branded [them] and the marketing side of things. (Participant 16).

One need not gainsay the satisfaction these participants report from doing microwork to see something awry here. The judgments that microworkers make either are overtly instrumental to business or involve distinguishing between surface-level appearances so that AI systems can better process information. Indeed, the modes of human brain activity that microwork encourages often sound like machine learning: workers emphasise learning to receive and respond to informational cues more efficiently. Spending time on these endeavours differs sharply from taking '[t]ime for education, for intellectual development...for the free play of the vital forces of [one's] body and [one's] mind,' as Marx puts it. For Marx, cultivating critical consciousness is a vital feature of social-reproductive life that exercises and develops creative human capacities to re-make the world differently and cooperatively. Microwork channels the restlessness of mind that could motivate such critical, collective effort toward less demanding and more socially harmless pursuits.

What would it take for UK microworkers to want to organise against these tendencies toward narrowed intellectual horizons, isolation, temporal vampirism and the absorption of reproductive lifetime and space into wage earning? At first glance, the idea of organising microworkers seems entirely chimerical. As Jones (2021: 70–72) discusses, the platforms typically block microworkers even from knowing who their fellow labourers are much less communicating with them.¹⁴ Vast expanses of social and geographical space and jagged disjunctions of time further dissociate workers from one another, reversing the industrial-era concentration of workers in factory spaces which Marx and Engels (1978: 479–480) pinpoint in the *Communist Manifesto* as a material basis for proletarian solidarity. Moreover, if microworkers are personally invested in the notion that microwork isn't really work, and most feel satisfied or at least not dissatisfied with their microwork experiences, the very basis of collective action would seem to be lacking.

These obstacles to organising microworkers nevertheless underscore a challenge that Left workers' movements have been facing for a long time. Post-Fordism and neoliberalism have so eroded the conditions for workplace-based organising that it has become indispensable to generate solidarity in the countless other social domains where working-class people suffer capital's domination, even if it feels light-touch. This is also precisely what Marx's indictment of night work as a figure for the despoliation of working-class social reproduction suggests: re-orienting the strategic gaze of working-class political organising from production toward reproduction and to the now-prolific work/life activities that partake of both categories.

New political possibilities can take shape when political actors shift the focus from defensively quantifying permissibly exploitable work time to lodging audacious demands for a *Lebenstag* that is replete with qualitative variety and richness. Microwork's easy adaptability to any stretch of 'dead time' that pops up in the course of everyday living, no matter how fleeting, should be taken as a sure sign that today's campaigns for shorter hours and four-day weeks are ill-suited to play central roles in a larger new Left strategy, as motivational and beneficial as such reforms certainly can

be. They need to be accompanied by activations of worker militancy that reinvigorate social-reproductive time, space, resources and relationality by expressly demanding the abundant, richly plural qualities of life that working people want and need.¹⁵


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Notes

1. For the 1887 translation, Eleanor Marx painstakingly retrieved the English-language sources from which Marx had translated selected lines into German. She then ‘fitted in properly’ the quotations from ‘the English originals’ in place of Marx’s translations of those texts, as Engels approvingly wrote to his collaborator Laura Lafargue in 1886 (Marx, 1990: 714). The MEGA editors likewise take a favourable view of Eleanor’s efforts: ‘This was above all necessary because a translation back to English of already-translated text would have led to great inaccuracies’ (Marx, 1990: 717). As I show, however, notwithstanding the value of Eleanor’s labours, the textual substitutions can obscure facets of Marx’s writing that point to crucial sub-textual currents of meaning in the working day chapter.
2. Except where otherwise noted, English versions of Marx’s text in this article come from Fowkes’s 1977 translation of *Capital Volume One*, in view of this translation’s familiarity to contemporary English readers. I provide my own translation of German passages in Marx’s original manuscript when there is a significant textual variance with implications for how to interpret the chapter’s argument and principal themes. Such variances usually although not exclusively concern Marx’s translations of original English sources into German.
3. I am grateful to Terrell Carver for pointing out this possible double-inflection of Marx’s term *Lebenstag*.
4. With regard to the controversy over whether there is more rupture or continuity between Marx’s early critique of alienation and his later work, I find convincing Postone’s (1993: 159) argument that only in the mature writings does Marx come to see alienation as ‘rooted in the double character of commodity-determined labor, and as such...intrinsic to the character of that labor itself.’ That said, if we attend closely to issues highlighted in this article, this raises the prospect of reconceptualising alienation further such that it includes sundering from the means of social reproduction.
5. In his commentary on this vignette from the working day chapter, Roberts (2017: 124) stresses the de-individualisation of working-class experience, as I do here. Yet Roberts keeps the focus

- entirely on ‘impersonal domination’ through the exploitative process of wage labour, thus missing Marx’s evocation of working-class reproductive life in the passage.
6. Compare the original English translation: ‘Every week this same paper brings a whole list of fresh railway catastrophes under the sensational headings...’ (Marx, 1977: 363, fn 55). This version omits the repetition in Marx’s text and thereby obscures the temporal collapse signified by his stylistic choice.
 7. Compare the original English quotation, which lacks the suggestive power of Marx’s (1977: 364, fn 55) poetic deployment of repetition in his paraphrasing of the source: ‘The following is an example which is of very frequent occurrence: One fireman commenced work on the Monday morning at a very early hour. When he had finished what is called a day’s work, he had been on duty 14 h 50 min. Before he had time to get his tea, he was again called on for duty... the next time he finished he had been on duty 14 h 25 min, making a total of 29 h 15 min without intermission.... He applied to the time-keeper...and inquired what they considered a day’s work, and was told 13 h for a goods man (i.e. 78 h).’
 8. Marx (1977: 368) repeats the formulation with reference to workers in the coal industry.
 9. See Hinkle’s (2008: 19) reflection on the vampire as symbolising an eternal infant who lives through suckling.
 10. Again, we should keep alert to Marx’s stylistic move of doubling terms to evoke theoretical meaning. In the prior enunciation of this demand that I quoted above, The Worker declares: ‘I therefore demand a working day of normal length,’ but the words for ‘demand’ (*verlange*) and ‘length’ (*Länge*) are cognates (Marx, 1977: 343; Marx, 1983: 180). This signals the fruitless circularity of a politics aimed at securing a fair wage for a day’s work by placing bourgeois-legal restrictions on the meaning of a ‘day,’ which capitalist practises ruthlessly negate in everyday experiences of labour.
 11. My thanks to Terrell Carver for informing me of these circumstances faced by Marx as he was writing *Capital*.
 12. All quantitative measures of trends among microworkers in this essay refer to results from our survey. See Muldoon and Apostolidis (2023) for more extensive analysis of our survey (n=1189) and 17 in-depth interviews of UK microworkers in 2022.
 13. See Hoffman (2019) for an examination of workers’ inquiries and ‘militant investigation’ that includes detailed discussion of Marx’s survey. See Marx (1985) for the text of this survey.
 14. Our field research found that workers ‘use forums and Reddit threads to discuss platform problems, bad requesters, as well as hints and tips around task completion,’ but such interactions did not yield political organising.
 15. I am grateful to Terrell Carver, Bruno Leipold and James Muldoon for feedback on earlier versions of this article, and to Tori Anderson, Obaida Chowdhury, Adrian Matak, Skye Oyama, Dimitra Prekka, Naimh Taylor, Charlie To and Will Toye for their work conducting interviews.

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