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Work, under Scrutiny: Examining the Emancipatory Potential of the Work Ethic

El trabajo, bajo escrutinio: examinando el potencial emancipatorio de la ética del trabajo

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Fecha de recepción: 14 de mayo de 2023

Fecha de aceptación: 22 de septiembre de 2023

Abstract

As a key component of the logic and discursive potential of capitalism, the evolution of the set of values that conform the work ethic has been closely linked to the changes in the forms of the capital accumulation process in Western societies during the 19th and 20th centuries. In this context, the work ethic has served both to dominate and to emancipate, naturalizing subordination to waged labor at the same time that it served as a legitimizing discourse for the increased recognition of marginalized groups. To explain this contradiction, I will make use of the concept of antinomies employed by Kathi Weeks to explain the ethic's dynamism. Departing from the resources of Week's theory, and through the case of the American welfare reform during the end of the 20th century, the dominating potential of the work ethic will be uncovered with the aim to disincentivize its use in future social movements.

Keywords: work ethic, capitalism, work, spirit, Weeks, United States.

Resumen

Como componente clave de la lógica y potencial discursivo del capitalismo, la evolución del conjunto de valores que conforman la ética del trabajo ha estado estrechamente ligada a los cambios en los modos de acumulación capitalista de las sociedades occidentales durante los siglos XIX y XX. En este contexto, la ética del trabajo ha

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servido tanto como para dominar como para emancipar, naturalizando la subordinación al trabajo asalariado al mismo tiempo que servía como discurso legitimador de un mayor reconocimiento de grupos marginados. Para explicar esta contradicción, se hará uso del concepto de antinomias empleado por Kathi Weeks para explicar el dinamismo de la ética. A partir de los recursos de la teoría de Weeks, y mediante el caso de la reforma del sistema de bienestar estadounidense de finales del siglo XX, se descubrirá el potencial dominador de la ética del trabajo con el fin de desincentivar su incorporación en futuros movimientos sociales.

Palabras clave: ética del trabajo, capitalismo, trabajo, espíritu, Weeks, Estados Unidos.

Introduction

The phenomenon of labor seems to occupy a special position in today's Western societies. On the one hand, its centrality in capitalist societies is evident, as all social life and its development seems to revolve around the allocation of individuals into different working positions in order to earn a living wage and contribute to the expansion of the economy. On the other, this naturalization of work does not lend itself to public scrutiny and is rarely exposed as a social convention in the way in which other institutions, such as the family, have been in recent decades. Proof of this is the fact that, while the workplace is still "the site of many of the most palpable and persistent relations of domination and subordination that people confront"², such wage subjection is rarely considered a structural matter or an issue of public concern. Broadly speaking, it is in this context of naturalization of work within capitalist relations of production in which the formation of a work ethic is made possible.

Indeed, the different demands for a work ethic have evolved mostly in the context of (waged) labour's eminently private institutionalisation, and as such have often been implemented as a disciplinary measure. Of course, this concept is by no means a novelty of the last century, but one dramatically expanded as a result of Europe's industrialisation. For instance, E.P. Thompson's study on the evolution of time perception in the advent of industrial capitalism described how the imposition of notions of time apprehension by employers on industrial workers was key in the pursue of economic growth. Such a cultural shift, which started to be induced as early as the

² Weeks, Kathi, *The Problem with Work*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011, p.23.



17th century, eventually culminated through a “marriage of convenience” of the Puritan ethic with industrial capitalism, which effectively separated “work” from “life” and vilified the labor force’s leisure time³. The result of such an overwhelming change of paradigm was that “the workers [began] to fight, not against time, but about it.”⁴

However, far from being a fixed set of values, the work ethic has been involved in a complex evolution that has gone hand-in-hand with shifts within the capitalist mode of production in the late 19th century and 20th century, and as such has been contested, reformulated, and reappropriated by various sectors of Western societies, often contributing to improve the recognition of historically marginalized groups. Nevertheless, I will argue that the core characteristics of the work ethic, that have remained more or less fixed over time, ultimately prove detrimental for this kind of social movements, and that as a result it is imperative to move beyond its discursive logic. I will start by offering a general overview of the changing values promoted by capitalism since the late 19th century, mostly relying Boltanski and Chiapello’s work on the “spirit of capitalism”. Later, through Kathi Week’s own essay on the matter, I will go over the different manifestations and uses of the work ethic and incorporate Week’s use of “antinomies”, which allows to convey the contradictory implications of the ethic’s imperatives, to explain its overall resilience through time. Finally, through the example of the American welfare reform of the late 20th century, where the work ethic proved instrumental in the unravelling of the US’s welfare state and the penal upsurge that ensued, I will apply the previous bodies of theory to illustrate the ethic’s potential instrumentalization and its consequences. I will then close with a final reflection on what I consider to be the main takeaways.

Committing to capitalism

When talking about anything resembling a “spirit of capitalism” it proves impossible not to think of Weber’s text, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which to this day is still the most influential study on the development of the capitalist work ethic in Western societies. In general terms, Weber’s use of the concept makes reference to the “attitude which seeks profit rationally and systematically”⁵, an ethic whose

³ Thompson, E.P, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism”, *Past & Present*, No. 38 (Dec., 1967), p. 95.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 85.

⁵ Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London & New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 27.

summum bonum is the accumulation of wealth. Such a motivation was contemporary to the development of “modern” capitalism in the 20th century Western world, which witnessed the shift from an economy of needs (and the more conservative ethic of “economic traditionalism” that ensued) to an economy centred around the “struggle for profit free from the limits set by needs”⁶. By contrast, Boltanski and Chiapello’s use of the term encompasses a wider range of value systems, as it alludes to “the ideology that justifies people’s commitment to capitalism, and which renders this commitment attractive”⁷ in different moments in time. In this sense, their work on the spirit of capitalism focuses on the justifications that accompany the shifting forms taken by the capitalist mode of production and legitimize capitalist accumulation in the eyes of the general public. The internalization of this sets of values also serves as a constraint on capital accumulation, somewhat limiting, both morally and legally, the means of enrichment. According to the authors, the key catalyst for changes in the spirit of capitalism⁸ is none other than criticism: given how capitalism’s sole promise of accumulation is inherently amoral, its effective response to historically particular criticism has provided the system with the “moral foundations that it lacks”⁹. A good example of this, also provided by Boltanski and Chiapello, is the increased role of the State in the new capitalist order after the Second World War, the so-called “Golden Age” of capitalism where there was a prevailing consensus that “the economy of private enterprise [...] needed to be saved from itself to survive”¹⁰. Key in this process are three dimensions: “Excitement” (related to the emancipatory promise of capitalism), “Security” (how it can provide stability) and “Fairness” (how the capitalist organization contributes to the common good).

The three spirits of capitalism common to the changing processes of capital accumulation across Western societies are summarized by the authors through the following table:

⁶ *Idem*.

⁷ Boltanski, Luc & Chiapello, Eve, “The New Spirit of Capitalism”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 18, No. ¾, Spring-Summer 2005, p. 162.

⁸ For the contents of this work, the general definition of the capitalist mode of production will be understood through the characteristics laid out by Boltanski and Chiapello, namely: a) “A minimal format stressing the need for unlimited accumulation by pacific means”, b) Competition and c) Wage-earning. *Ibid*, p.162.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.163.

¹⁰ Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Extremes*, London: Abacus, 2003, p.273.



	First spirit End of nineteenth Century	Second spirit 1940-1970	Third spirit Since 1980s
Forms of the capital accumulation process	Small family firms Bourgeois capitalism	Managerial firms Big industrial companies Mass production States economic policy	Network firms Internet and biotech Global finance Varying and differentiated products
Excitement	Freedom from local communities Progress	Career opportunities Power positions Effectiveness possible in "freedom countries"	No more authoritarian chiefs Fuzzy organisations Innovation and creativity Permanent change
Fairness	A mix of domestic and market fairness	Meritocracy valuing effectiveness Management by objectives	New form of meritocracy valuing mobility, ability to nourish a network... Each project is an opportunity to develop one's employability
Security	Personal property, personal relationships Charity, paternalism	Long term planning Careers Welfare state	For the mobile and the adaptable Companies will provide self-help resources To manage oneself

Table 1: Three spirits of capitalism.¹¹

In Boltanski and Chiapello’s model, any of such spirits can only be consolidated in a particular moment in time “if its justifications are concretised, that is, if it makes the persons it is addressing more aware of the issues that are really at stake, and offers them action models that they will actually be able to use”¹². More specifically, changes in the spirit of capitalism are a result of changes in “justificatory regimes”, the argumentative devices that support a specific social order based on a principle of justice. However, such regimes require to pass more or less standardized procedures, or “tests”,

¹¹ Boltanski, Luc & Chiapello, Eve, “The New Spirit of Capitalism”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 18, No. ¾, Spring-Summer 2005, p. 166.

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 163-164.

in order to be sufficiently institutionalized. To illustrate their model, the authors offer the case of the 1968 “crisis” of capitalism in France, marked by both social criticism (which incorporated critiques towards exploitation, inequalities, and overemphasis on individualism) and artistic criticism (arising from intellectual circles and focused on addressing concepts like oppression and standardisation, vindicating ideals of liberation and autonomy) which both lead to capitalist institution’s losing authority over their workforce. As Boltanski and Chiapello argue, there were two main strategies undertaken by employers to escape such legitimacy crisis. The first, which lasted until 1973, involved only addressing social criticism by negotiating with trade unions on wage levels and disparities and national agreements, as well as on the tightening of selection mechanisms to better resemble a meritocratic process. This did not prove sufficient to appease the crisis, however, and the low profits coinciding with the first oil crisis caused employer organisations to attempt a second strategy, turning towards the more artistic criticism. The new strategy thus caused the displacement of previously established tests only designed to deal with social criticism, mostly based around professional relationships, in favour of a closer communication with the workforce which addressed the artistic criticism. Aided by sociologists and new consultants with an understanding of the crisis, this second strategy also involved “acknowledging the validity of the demand for autonomy”¹³, extending work benefits to various management positions (like flexible schedules), and changing the organisation of labor by attempting to improve working conditions and breaking down “large integrated companies into a series of small units that were connected through a network of contracts”¹⁴ (by employing temporary labor or subcontracting).

The results of such strategies were successful. The dismantlement of the large integrated firm caused social criticism, which had built an “isomorphic relationship” to it, to lose influence on employer’s decision-making power. Artistic criticism, on the other hand, was appeased by both the – admittedly superficial – incorporation of its values into the new capitalist ideology, as well as by the involvement of its supporters in France’s public powers. Not late after, however, this successful enterprise again led to dire conditions for the workforce. As best explained by Boltanski and Chiapello themselves:

Changes in the nature of tests, and silence from disorientated critics, enabled capitalism to spread once again, freeing it from most of the constraints that it had previously had to

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 177.

¹⁴ *Idem*.



face. One outcome of this process was that the wage/profit ratio again began to benefit capital. The cost was rising inequality, precarious working conditions, and the impoverishment of many wage earners.¹⁵

This outcome is partially explained through one of the main changes to come with the third spirit of capitalism in France, namely a deep reorganization of the workforce favouring a casualization of employment. Under pretences of increased flexibility, forms of temporary work started to become more prominent since the second half of the 1980s¹⁶, a process which was translated into a “a development of employment practices with a very marked preference for casual hires”, where casual workers like temps needed to demonstrate a “constant engagement in their work”¹⁷. Again, the standardization of these new forms of contract¹⁸ and the new forms of management of the labor force that came with them are all part of the larger changes in the capitalist mode of production, and are reinforced by the new ways in which such mode of production is understood and legitimized. Thus, the process through which the promise of self-management replaces the figure of the authoritarian chief would be strongly tied to the restructuring of the workforce under this new organizational regime.

This overview of the model, although leaving out a big part of their theory, intends to extract some useful tools that can help in the rest of my argument. The first is the role played by criticism and tests. Boltanski and Chiapello’s emphasis on criticism as the main trigger for the changes in the spirit of capitalism is illustrative of the system’s inherent amorality and its reliance on an ever-changing system of values, an unstable process that has nevertheless proved capitalism’s resilience over time. Further, the existence of tests and their implementation points at the necessity of the new spirit of capitalism to be not only discursively, but also materially, realized, in order to fully legitimize the new ideology. Such elements, as well as the spirit of capitalism’s evolution along the 20th century, can help explain the role and nature of the work ethic as a legitimizing mechanism for waged labor.

A conflicting work ethic

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.178.

¹⁶ Boltanski, Luc & Chiapello, Eve, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, New York, USA; Verso Books, 2007, p.225.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 227.

¹⁸ Indicative of this phenomenon is the fact that “The temporary work enterprise Adecco thus became the premier private employer in France in 1997.” *Ibid*, p. 224.

Kathi Weeks' work on the evolution of the work ethic in the United States draws many parallels to the processes described in Boltanski and Chiapello's text. Heavily influenced by Weber, Weeks identifies five antinomies that "continue to animate the work ethic in the United States over the later course of its history, through the industrial and postindustrial periods"¹⁹. However, for simplicity's sake, I will only consider three.

The first is the "independence-dependence" antinomy, which is also thoroughly discussed in Weber's work. The commendation of labor as a means to social and political emancipation in the early industrial period, combined with the Puritan ethos' tendency of tracing an individual's salvation to their own responsibility, led to the work ethic becoming an individualizing discourse. Indeed, such a reformulation of work as a means for independence shifted the focus from the relations of subordination inherent in waged labor. The end result is palpable to this day, where still, "as an individualizing discourse, the work ethic serves the time-honored ideological function of rationalizing exploitation and legitimizing inequality"²⁰. I will further discuss this antinomy when considering the case of the US. However, two considerations on this aspect of the work ethic seem fundamental: one, the key role played by the work ethic in "engineering profitable modes of individuality"²¹ that can be more easily controlled, thus avoiding forms of worker mobilization. The development of this particular aspect seems clear from the evolution in the spirits of capitalism, which by the third offers individualized promises of development ("Fairness" dimension) and management ("Security" dimension"; see Table 1). Second, the inherent tension of this process, where "The task of fashioning productive forms of subjectivity, workers who are simultaneously self-directed and manageable, poses an ongoing puzzle for capitalist and particularly post-Fordist management techniques"²². Here, the presence of criticism takes centre stage yet again: new demands for independence from the workforce allows capital to renew its legitimacy and optimize their productive subjectivities.

Moving on, the "subordination-insubordination" antinomy recognizes the role of the work ethic as a mechanism of subordination, but also its use as a weapon of insubordination. This latter use of the work ethic first materialized through the "laborist work ethic" of the industrial period, which "draws on a variant of the labor theory of value to celebrate the worth and dignity of waged work and to contend that

¹⁹ Weeks, Kathi, *The Problem with Work*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011, p.42.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 52-53.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.56.

²² *Idem*.

such work is entitled to respect and adequate recompense”²³, something which aided in the creation of a collective consciousness in the industrial proletariat and to achieve victories for the working class²⁴. With the start of the post-industrial period and the novel focus on work as a means to self-development, criticism helped to spark the mobilizations of the 1960’s and 1970’s which, as previously mentioned, ultimately lead to a reform of the spirit of capitalism. Nevertheless, despite the adaptability of the legitimizing devices of the capitalist mode of production, this aspect proves specially unstable, given how “As more people demand that their work be recognized as relevant to the dominant ethic of work, the class specificity of the ethic becomes increasingly exposed to view”²⁵. This highlights the somewhat dynamic nature of the work ethic at a base level. While its values have been predicated by public and private institutions for their own gain, the work ethic is not solely imposed from above by some sort of malevolent puppet master, but has rather been historically reproduced by capitalist societies in various degrees and, as such, is subject to being reappropriated by social groups for their own causes. However, this can potentially backfire, as it will be later shown: for now, one need to look no further than the case of the “laborist work ethic”, which unwantedly helped undermine and naturalize the subjection to waged labor still suffered by the industrial proletariat.

Lastly, Weeks mentions the “inclusion-exclusion” antinomy, which explains how the ethic’s legitimizing influence has been utilized to discriminate other social groups on the basis of race and gender, and how the role of criticism has had the result of both emancipating such groups while also submitting them to the logic of work. Regarding race, the discriminatory potential of the work ethic in the US has been primarily aimed at its African American population. In the early industrial period, the work ethic’s newfound inclusivity in terms of class was often defined in opposition to the institution of slavery and its racialized subjects, something that continued to be the case after the institution of slavery was abolished. In his study of African American populations in Philadelphia, W.E.B Du Bois explains how, while the formal emancipation of black women and men first lead to many being hired as servants in the North and South – thus reassuming many of the positions they occupied under slavery – the next generation found itself unable to thrive outside of this context, in great part due to extreme racial

²³ *Ibid*, p.59.

²⁴ Such “dignification” of waged work is what lead authors like Paul Lafarge to criticize the French proletariat for proclaiming “as a revolutionary principle the Right to Work” and contemplating the 1848 law limiting factory work to 12 hours as a “revolutionary conquest”. In Lafarge, Paul, *The Right to Be Lazy and Other Studies*, Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021, p. 9.

²⁵ Weeks, Kathi, *The Problem with Work*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011, p.60.

prejudice²⁶. This phenomenon was even more accentuated in the case of black women, who in Philadelphia virtually only occupied positions involving domestic and personal service²⁷. Said discrimination did not only come from employers, but also from white laborers, so much so that “whiteness” became a prerequisite for joining certain trade unions²⁸. No doubt that this disdain can also be partially attributed to the employer’s schemes, who made use of the precariousness of the black labor force to drive down wages, thus intensifying existing prejudice to further confront the white workforce against African Americans. Nevertheless, this exclusionary dynamic has been a constant in the US, with it legitimizing “a continuous calling into question of the work commitments and habits of different immigrant and racialized populations”²⁹.

Gender discrimination has also been a historical given in the work ethic’s discourse, mostly in relation to the women’s long time relegation to unwaged housework. This can also be traced back to the advent of industrial capitalism, where the feminization of domestic work made it a model for nonwork, in contrast to the “masculine” waged work³⁰: prior to that point, “housework had the character of manufacture rather than service”³¹. Such a clear-cut division strengthened the institution of family, thus increasing its influence as a method of social control and its subsequent promotion by figures of authority like employers and politicians. Further, its role in reproducing the workforce cannot be overlooked: Marxist critiques have long emphasized the role of domestic labor in “catering for [the] personal and reproductive needs”³² of the waged workforce.

Of course, although Weeks identifies all these different antinomies as constitutive of the work ethic since the era of industrial capitalism, their individual influence varies according to the specific productive model of capitalism and concrete form of labor organization that are being considered. As such, some of its historically and spatially particular forms are more defined by one of the antinomies, with others becoming more prominent in other forms of the capitalist mode of production. Take for example the “laborist work ethic”, which can be considered the definitive form taken by

²⁶ Du Bois, W.E.B, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, p. 137.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 109.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 128.

²⁹ Weeks, Kathi, *The Problem with Work*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 62.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.63.

³¹ Notably in 17th century southern colonies of America. In Oakley, Anne, *The Anne Oakley Reader: Gender, women and social science*, Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2005, p.109.

³² *Ibid*, p.112.

the work ethic under the conditions of Western industrial capitalism. Its emphasis on the labor theory of value and its strong working-class component is a direct consequence of the productive model of its time, where paternalism was the rule, and the hierarchical relationship between capitalists and the proletariat as direct personifications of capital and workforce was arguably more accentuated than ever. It is no surprise, then, that this specific formulation, which in turn embodies the “subordination-insubordination” antinomy, was the most prominent in the work ethic’s discourse during this time, and materialized in the formation of labor movements. Moreover, if we again turn towards Boltanski and Chiapello’s work, we can recall how the changes in the capitalist mode of production and work organization under the third spirit of capitalism in France, now emphasizing a casualization of work, were tied to the new promises (which also took the shape of specific demands and expectations towards the workers) of self-management, a clear turn towards the paradoxical “independence-dependence” element of the work ethic.

Before moving to the final analysis, some considerations are in order. Regarding its evolution, there is no doubt that the work ethic has also been employed towards the goal of improving the living conditions of these historically discriminated social groups, namely through the Civil Rights Movement and the second wave of feminism. Indeed, since the post-Fordist period, demands for equality of working opportunities have relied on elements of the work ethic to gain traction, with an unquestioned effect. As an example, in the case of the US, feminist mobilization contributed to women virtually replacing men from office and white-collar occupations by 1981³³. However, notwithstanding the clear discrimination among social classes of this extension of rights³⁴, the adoption of the work ethic rhetoric in gender and racial mobilizations has made them inadvertently complacent to the fundamental set of values of capitalist work society, in a similar manner to the legitimizing effects of the aforementioned “laborist work ethic”. As remarked by Weeks, this “both limits the scope of the demands that are advanced and fails to contest the basic terms of the work society’s social contract” resulting in a “mode of rebellion susceptible to co-optation”³⁵. Although it could be

³³ Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Extremes*, London: Abacus, 2003, p.317.

³⁴ Such breakthroughs in Western societies were mostly targeted towards married, middle-class women, as, considering the sizeable gender wage gap, the initial emancipation of middle class women was more a result of artistic criticism towards autonomy than social criticism (in Boltanski and Chiapello’s terminology). Furthermore, “Among the poor, or those with tight budgets, married women [had already gone] out to work after 1945 because, to put it crudely, children no longer did so”. In Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Extremes*, London: Abacus, 2003, p.318.

³⁵ Weeks, Kathi, *The Problem with Work*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 69.

argued that operating within this pro-capitalist framework was the only possible way of achieving any institutional recognition at the time – especially considering the Cold War context in which they were framed –, it nevertheless demonstrates the role of the work ethic in channelling criticism and, as such, in helping renew the spirit of capitalism.

The work ethic and the tyranny of workfare

So far I have attempted to describe how the work ethic and its discursive evolution has been tightly associated with the ability of the capitalist mode of production to respond to critiques and reformulate its core set of values, thus assuring compliance with capitalist accumulation, since the early industrial capitalism. I will now seek to link many of the concepts discussed thus far with a specific period in American politics in order to illustrate the extent of the work ethic's role as a disciplinary mechanism: the *fin-de-siècle* welfare reform.

The arrival of Ronald Reagan to the White House symbolized a change of paradigm in American politics, triggered by a reaction to the more progressive policies and social movements of the past decades and the 1970's stagflation period³⁶. His arrival also coincided with the rise of the financial sector in the American and global economies, and new organizational rationalities (which entailed more reliance on temporary labor and downsizing³⁷) after the disappearance of the large integrated firm (see Table 1). Despite an increased governmental presence in American society after the Second World War, which led to initiatives like Johnson's 1960 "War on Poverty" and the development of a large share of social programs, subsequent opposition by later presidencies³⁸ and inefficient reliance on private actors resulted in an underdeveloped and "residual" welfare state, restricted by criteria of eligibility³⁹. The stigmatization of the disastrous American welfare system led to a socio-political reaction that helped bring Reagan to power, and later Clinton's New Democrats, both of which reformed the already scarce provisions of welfare into obligations of workfare, that is, the requirement to have a job to be considered eligible for assistance. This transition can be

³⁶ Wacquant, Loïc, *Punishing the Poor: the Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009, p. 129.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.57.

³⁸ "Although the cost of AFDC never reached 1 percent of the federal budget, every government since Jimmy Carter has promoted its reduction as a top priority." *Ibid*, p.49.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.46.

effectively illustrated through the passing of two federal laws. First, Reagan's Family Support Act of 1988, which was adopted by many states and made access to public aid dependant on specific behavioural norms⁴⁰, and Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) which effectively reversed the concept of welfare as entitlement by establishing quotas on assisted parents, requiring them to work within two years and limiting support to five years⁴¹, and excluded various categories of people from the welfare rolls.

How does this reflect the work ethic's implicit logic? First, the transition from welfare to workfare was not an event solely justified on the basis of needing to cut public spending and increase the country's productivity, but was publicly legitimized through a parallel elevation of work and a debasement of the country's most vulnerable populations. Indeed, during the public signing of the PRWORA, Clinton both indicated his intention of overcoming "the flaws of the welfare system for the people who are trapped on it", later asserting that "a significant number of people are trapped on welfare for a very long time, exiling them from the entire community of work that gives structure to our lives", as well as, quoting Kennedy, claiming that "work is the meaning of what [the US] is all about"⁴². The functioning of the work ethic's "independence-dependence" antinomy is clear here: under this logic, instead of those forms found under capitalist relations of subordination, the "real" domination would take place under the effects of welfare, which creates unproductive individuals unable to socially emancipate themselves and give meaning to their lives through (waged) labor. Further, once freed from the corrosive "culture of dependency" fostered by welfare, the work ethic's mandate of personal responsibility kicks in, leaving it to the vulnerable individual to thrive and achieve her own freedom. Here we can also recall the promises of self-development and self-management offered by the third spirit of capitalism, and how they complement this antinomy, which in a similar manner to the French case seemed to reach its peak in this particular context.

Second, this instrumentalization of the work ethic also highlights the relevance of the "inclusion-exclusion" antinomy. I have already touched upon how the social movements that took place in the US, although achieving considerable improvements in recognition, failed to discursively distance themselves from the discriminatory dynamics of work organization under capitalism and, as such, became subjected to the work ethic's

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.59.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.88.

⁴² "Signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 in the Rose Garden at the White House", August 22, 1996. Courtesy: William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

logic. This phenomenon is palpable in such a situation, as the discourse of a “culture of dependence” was directly linked to racist and sexist depictions of lower-class communities. Indeed, stereotyping of black individuals as “lazy” was a main factor for the opposition against welfare spending⁴³. Not only that, but in a country where in 1991 “58 percent of all black families [...] were headed by a single woman and 70 of all children were born to single women”⁴⁴, the measures signed by Clinton directly aimed at these demeaning depictions, namely the “welfare queen” – described as a “black woman with a long-term addiction to the dole and a willingness to use childbirth as a way to prolong and increase her welfare check”⁴⁵ –, and the “African American teenage mother”, as PRWORA’s both abrogated “the right to assistance enjoyed by lone mothers with young children under the Social Security Act of 1935”⁴⁶ – by forcing parents to get a job within two years and establishing lifetime caps of five years – excluded teen mothers who refused to live with their parents and denied “aid to unwed mothers under eighteen and to children born while their parents were on welfare”⁴⁷. Considering that single mothers, both low-waged and on welfare, usually struggled to make ends meet⁴⁸ and had their social status lowered just by being on welfare⁴⁹, this measure only reinforced many of the methods of symbolic violence exerted against both women and African-Americans. In this sense, its targeting of black single mothers both stresses the feminine depiction of nonwork and the questioning of the work commitment of racialized populations. It also reproduces the “culture of poverty” discourse which, by combining the two types of prejudices, criticizes deviant family structures “claiming that the traditional patriarchal nuclear family is fundamental to economic success”⁵⁰.

Finally, this unravelling of the welfare net was complemented with an elevated severity of the State’s punitive mechanisms which, starting in the 70’s, aimed at covering the increasing precariousness later worsened by the workfare reform, an operation that not only was unsuccessful in substantially improving poverty rates, but also increased its

⁴³ Soss, Joe, Schram, Sanford F., Vartanian, Thomas P. and O’Brien, Erin, “The hard line and the color line”. In *Race and the politics of welfare reform*: The University of Michigan Press, 2003, p. 239.

⁴⁴ Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Extremes*, London: Abacus, 2003, p.322.

⁴⁵ Soss, Joe, Schram, Sanford.F., Vartanian, Thomas P. and O’Brien, Erin, “The hard line and the color line”. In *Race and the politics of welfare reform*: The University of Michigan Press, 2003, p. 244.

⁴⁶ Wacquant, Loïc, *Punishing the Poor: the Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009, p. 88.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ Edin, Kathryn and Lein, Laura, "Work, welfare, and single mothers' economic survival strategies", *American Sociological Review*, 1997, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Apr., 1997), p. 257.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 261.

⁵⁰ Weeks, Kathi, *The Problem with Work*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 64.



intensity⁵¹. This method of “cleaning up the streets” through mass incarceration resulted in America’s imprisonment index growing in 538% from the year 1975 to 2000⁵², a phenomenon that disproportionately affected African Americans, who by 1993 were seven times more numerous in penitentiaries than white inmates and by 1995 made up 53% of the incarcerated population, a rate that had tripled in the last twelve years⁵³. Such an increase, however, is not explained by the rise of violent crime (which was virtually stagnant in the last two decades of the 20th century), but by the “the extension of recourse to confinement for a range of street crimes and misdemeanours that did not previously lead to a custodial sanction”⁵⁴.

Both processes are compliant with the same implicit logic of the work ethic: the virtuosity of work, while having an emancipatory potential, needs to be exercised by the individual under her full responsibility. Thus, any failure to do so can only be attributed to a lack of commitment or virtue on her part. As explained, this rhetoric has served to justify both capitalist relations of subordination and the loose ends of the capitalist mode of production, namely the continuously increasing inequalities. Its discriminatory function has also been efficient in instituting illegalities (in Foucauldian terms), that is, the process of labelling and treating the offenses of those deemed as outsiders of the legal order, a phenomenon bound to specific social groups: as the welfare-penal reform shows, the stereotypes that legitimized the unravelling of welfare provisions for those worse off and their subsequent situations of precariousness were effectively covered by an extended recourse to mass incarceration specific to the type of crimes associated with them.

Additionally, federal laws like PRWORA represent the further institutionalization of the work ethic through direct codification as the legal imposition of workfare. Such event is the culmination of a particular “legal consciousness” of American society, defined by sociologist’s Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey as the process through which “each person’s participation sustains legality as an organizing structure of social relations”⁵⁵. Echoing what was explained alongside the

⁵¹ “[...]in 2002, the gap between the average income of poor households and the federal poverty line (taking into account housing support, food stamps, and inkind assistance) came to \$2,813, which is 23 percent more than in 1996 in constant dollars.” In Wacquant, Loïc, *Punishing the Poor: the Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009, p. 97.

⁵² *Ibid*, p.127.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 125.

⁵⁵ Ewick, Patricia, and Susan S. Silbey, *The common place of law: Stories from everyday life*: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 45.

“insubordination-subordination” antinomy, the work ethic has, to some extent, been historically reproduced by all of American society as a “cultural code”⁵⁶ that has configured many of its characteristics and developments, like its defence of meritocratic individualism, lack of an overall efficient welfare system and the legal and penal transformations described above, as well as been reappropriated in favour of the recognition of marginalized social groups. The specific forms taken by the American State to ensure capitalist accumulation have greatly contributed to its continuity, like for instance through the historical reliance on private enterprises to manage social provisions, consequently shaping the “schemas” of American citizens, understood as the “generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social life”⁵⁷.

However, the proliferation of this specific set of values and schemas is not the result of an equal procedure. What the welfare reform shows is how the instrumentalization of the work ethic by American authorities has contributed to rendering any artistic criticism that inadvertently worked under its logic, mostly those related to recognition and autonomy, completely obsolete under the generalized promises of the third spirit of capitalism: namely, the promises of self-management and self-development that also constitute an integral part of the ethic’s “independence-dependence” antinomy. Under the welfare-penal reform, formal recognition proved insufficient against the mechanisms of exclusion of the work ethic, which effectively channelled the racism and sexism inherent in the targeting of marginalized groups and profiles: as a result, the Foucauldian bounding of illegalities to the lower strata of society, in themselves part of this capitalist logic, overwhelmingly affected African-American communities, and the caricature of the single mother as the “welfare queen” reproduced the feminization of nonwork present in the third antinomy. Thus, the work ethic successfully legitimized the targeting of marginalized groups from an institutional level.

Therefore, while its important to reiterate the unstable nature of the work ethic, it would be a mistake to overstate the role of the general public in the re-enactment of its detrimental effects across time. While the responsible public officials are themselves products of this historical constitution of American society, insofar as they participate of the capitalist mode of production and are therefore inscribed in its logic, the codification of the work ethic was only realized through mechanisms specific to the American State, and as a result are not the culmination of a horizontal process. In other

⁵⁶ In Ewick & Silbey’s terms. *Ibid*, p.40.

⁵⁷ *Idem*.



words, while it is true that the inevitable participation within the forms of social relations that constitute and reproduce the capitalist mode of production make it impossible not to act within its logic to some extent, the perpetual presence of the work ethic in capitalist societies, and most notably the US, is a result of the enterprises of particular social groups in positions of power that can instrumentalize and intensify pre-established sets of values for their own gain. As such, the discursive changes that bring about new spirits of capitalism (and consequently new formulations of the work ethic) are themselves limited by the social framework they inhabit; but within that field of action are directed by those entrepreneurs (indistinctively of their public or private nature) that are in the position to address those criticisms. The opposite phenomenon can be seen in the case of the aforementioned racial and feminist social movements that, while disruptive in some respects, were also successful as a result of their considerable compliance with the work ethic, a logic by which they were inadvertently shaped. Therefore, while it might be impossible to steer clear from all of its mandates in the interaction with social reality, the discursive alignment with the work ethic must be avoided in order for criticism to try to move beyond its logic and fight the potentially oppressive frameworks of capitalist assimilation that, to this day, have helped shape the evolution of the spirit of capitalism.

Conclusion

As with any evolving set of values, the mostly erratic set of social forces and dynamics that constitute today's Western capitalist societies make predicting its potentiality a hopeless enterprise. This is, of course, also the case with the work ethic. From the perspective of the early industrializing period, it would perhaps seem unconceivable that the ethic's content could be key in framing some of the 20th-century's most culturally impactful movements. However, recognizing the positive consequences of a specific discourse must not distract us from the whole picture. As I have tried to show, the effective evolution and development of the process of capitalist accumulation is closely tied to its ability to renew its legitimizing mechanisms every step of the way, something in which the work ethic plays a vital role. In my view, the discursive naturalization of work under capitalist relations of production is detrimental to the development of not only marginalized groups, but society in general. While being self-aware of this phenomenon might only be partially successful on an individual level, given how the institution of waged labor is inseparable from the capitalist logic that we all participate

in, the struggle against work and the virtues it claims to confer is necessary in any social and political movement that attempts to improve the lives of its members for the better. So far, however, few have succeeded in directly opposing such a pivotal component of the spirit of capitalism as is the institution of work. One can only hope that this may change in the future.

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