

## The Ethics of Work: Productivity, the Work Ethic, and Bohemian Self-Determination

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### Abstract

*Productive labor has served as a measure of right action for centuries. Not surprisingly, many societies have made productivity a social imperative, systematically enforcing the work ethic through culture and social institutions. The work ethic continues to dominate public policy and cultural beliefs concerning social welfare and citizenship, despite the role such ideology plays in perpetuating inequality. Recognizing the moral and ethical contradictions of productivity as a social imperative, various marginal groups have questioned the dominant work ethic. This article marshals historical and ethnographic data to shed light on the work ethic, its enforcement, inherent contradictions, and the resistance foisted by one marginal social type, modern bohemians. By electing to minimize paid work time, bohemians resist the economic, cultural, existential, and political imperatives to prioritize performing productive labor. Moreover, their work ethic challenges the way activity and time are commonly evaluated, embodying a critique of the workaday world.*

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...underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game.... The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period. (Marcuse, 1964, pp. 256-57)

Productive labor has constituted a measure of morality since long before Weber identified the Protestant work ethic. Not surprisingly, many societies have made productivity a social imperative, systematically enforcing the work ethic through culture and social institutions. The work ethic continues to dominate public policy and cultural beliefs concerning social welfare and citizenship, despite the role such ideology plays in perpetuating inequality. Recognizing the moral and ethical contradictions of productivity as a social imperative, various marginal groups have questioned and resisted the dominant work ethic. This article focuses on the dominant work ethic, its enforcement, inherent contradictions, and the resistance foisted by one marginal social type—modern bohemians. Bohemians approach traditional paid work with skepticism. While there exist important benefits to working, bohemians' skepticism implores us to examine the deleterious effects of productivity that push them to minimize paid labor time.

### 1. The Impetus to Work

To understand the pressures and inducements to work productively, we must first consider the concepts of work and labor. According to Marx, labor is the activity by which humans use their mental capacity, will, body and tools to transform nature to satisfy their needs and desires and reproduce the species ([1867] 1990, p. 283). Arendt (1958) adds that activities necessary for survival differ from those warranted by existential needs. She conceptualizes the constant activity directly necessitated by our metabolic animal existence as labor. We consume the products of our labor, thus they leave no permanent mark on the world. Unlike labor, work demands mental activity, planning, and creativity.

We are compelled to work by the desire to leave a mark on the world and dominate nature just as our biology subjugates us. However, the practical distinction between labor and work is losing salience as we increasingly serve our biological needs not through labor, but with work, especially paid work. In turn, work has become less distinctive and more laborious and repetitive.

In addition to subsistence and existential needs and desires, the structure and demands of the political economy motivate individuals to work. Consider capitalism. The goal of capitalist enterprise is to accumulate capital by extracting profit from the cycle of production and consumption. Profit derives from surplus value, or the value of a commodity beyond the capital necessary to sustain the worker and the production process. According to the labor theory of value, what generates surplus value is labor. Thus, productivity can be understood as the production of surplus value, an imperative of capitalism (Marx, [1867] 1990). While Marx's analysis of productivity targets capitalism, history indicates that most economic systems expect some type of productivity—not necessarily the production of surplus value to generate capital, but rather labor beyond individual needs or desires for the benefit of other individuals, the collective, or another social group.

Marx is quick to point out that increasing productivity does not necessarily benefit the worker. In fact, the more productive the worker, the poorer he or she grows relative to the business, its owners and investors. Marx adds that the “accumulation of misery [is] a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth” ([1867] 1990, p. 799). But wealth and misery are not equally distributed—businesses accumulate far more capital than workers do and workers amass a disproportionately large share of misery. Yet the threat of losing one's job or financial well-being is often sufficient motivation to maintain employment and work productively, especially when unemployment is high and social welfare programs for the poor and unemployed are meager. This was the case during the height of industrialization and continues today.

Nevertheless, we cannot assume that desperation fully accounts for productivity. Productivity has become a deep-rooted part of our culture, a normative social expectation. This is apparent in the extent to which we use a productivist ethos to evaluate how we spend time. Historian E.P. Thompson (1993) analyzes the role clock-time has played in labor and productivity. Prior to large scale industrial production, the pace of labor was irregular and unpredictable. Workers would toil only as long as necessary to complete a task and take frequent holidays; moreover, the intensity of their efforts was inconsistent. In addition, the stages of production took place in different locations. These conditions limited oversight of the production process. Once all the stages of production were centralized, overseers gained greater control over the amount of time each step took and how productive each worker was. Foreshadowing Taylor's (1911) scientific management, clocks were introduced into the industrial workplace to measure and regulate productivity. In effect, clocks became instruments of discipline, at first external discipline by the overseers who literally held the keys to the clocks to prevent workers from manipulating time. Eventually, clocks fostered self-discipline as workers internalized the costs and benefits of productivity and punctuality, and produced goods at a rate suggestive of a strong work ethic, even if this was as often appearance as it was motivational reality. Temporal incentives continue to foster disciplined productivity as Buroway (1979) demonstrates in his ethnography of factory labor, in which workers make a game of exceeding their daily quota for bonus pay. Today, clock-time is instilled in us from an early age. In school, we learn to fit activities into scheduled periods of time, so that once we enter the workforce, most of us have developed a mature, productivist sense of clock-time.

Weber ([1930] 1992) argues that the imperative to be productive is not only political-economic, but ideological as well. He examines the significance of the ethos of productivity in the Protestant Reformation and its centrality in the modern Western rational (largely secular) sense of right action. Early Christianity disapproved of profiteering and viewed poverty empathetically, but the Protestant Reformation changed that. According to the Protestant faiths Weber analyzed, hard work and success at one's calling combined with thrift and sobriety were taken as signs of morality. Not only did business owners emerge with a clear conscience, but they also gained an industrious labor force, whose calling was to be productive and increase the owner's profit. By removing the priest as an intermediary between believers and God, Protestantism made each individual responsible for the morality of his or her actions, and by extension, the Protestant work ethic made individuals responsible for their own socio-economic well-being. Even as the spiritual foundation waned, modern Western cultures internalized this work ethic, perhaps nowhere more than in the U.S.

Whether productivity became the arbiter of morality and ethics as a result of the emergence of the Protestant work ethic or the structure and cultural imperatives of modern capitalism in general, modern and post-modern culture continues to view work in moral and ethical terms. It is important to recognize that not everyone espouses quite the same work ethic. The work ethic of the ambitious, career-oriented professional is arguably the dominant work ethic, offering the most visible rewards of status, power, and capital (Jackall, 1989). Typically, the professional also enjoys existential benefits, such as meaningful work and commitment to their profession (which is not to discount alienation among professionals) (Ross, 2002). The unionized factory worker represents a variant of the professional ideal type. The unionized factory worker enjoys benefits, a living wage, and job security, at least historically (Wilson, 1996). Though their ties to the community and fellow workers may be strong, their affective commitment to the job is minimal (Jacoby, 1985). Typically, they “soldier” along, singling out co-workers with above average output as “rate-busters” in need of “re-education” (Buroway, 1979). As such, their work ethic does not entail exceptional productivity, only steady employment, which may or may not be meaningful. Nevertheless, these workers command moderate respect and status. They are viewed as upstanding members of the community because they display what appears to be a strong work ethic, even if they enact it ritualistically.

Another significant variant of the work ethic is that of the unskilled, low-wage worker in an unregulated or minimally regulated industry, in which employment is contingent on the availability of work and market demands. They work to subsist, and often barely do so. Their work ethic is predicated on desperation, the tenuousness of their employment status, and paucity of options (Ehrenreich, 2002; Bonacich and Appelbaum, 2000). Though they are far less esteemed than the professional or the unionized industrial worker, this third group is lauded for striving for self-sufficiency (Muirhead, 2004; Romero, 1992). These ideal-typical work ethics indicate the range of levels of commitment to the job, rewards, and underlying motivations. Despite the significant differences, these work ethics all frame productivity as a form of morality and social citizenship, or the individual duty to contribute to society.

## 2. Enforcing Productivity

Though the work ethic seems to emerge from individuals’ attitudes, aspirations, and circumstances, societies have made systematic efforts to encourage and even institutionalize the work ethic through the vilification of non-productivity. For example, post-Reformation Christian texts portray laziness as immoral (Lafargue, [1880] 1989; Thompson, 1993; Weber, [1930] 1992). At first, labor regardless of profitability satisfied the moral imperative to be productive. But with the advent of English and American poor and vagrancy laws, financial improvidence became an indicator of laziness and immorality warranting punishment (Feagin, 1975). The criminalization of poverty suggests that while labor alone may be considered moral, profitable labor is socially expected. This last point is underscored by the secondary importance assigned to non-paid activities such as parental child-rearing, house-work, and leisure (Crittenden, 2001).

When poverty is deemed immoral, even criminal, labor often emerges as the mode of rehabilitation. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) describes the use of labor combined with constant surveillance, supervision, and religious instruction to rehabilitate and discipline delinquent boys at the Mettray facility in France. Similar practices were implemented in the military, monasteries, and workshops. In the U.S., the arduous labor of the chain gang was used to break down convicts, both to rehabilitate and control them. Such practices continue today, only now new forms of productive labor such as license plate manufacture are implemented. Historically, forced labor has been used not only to turn criminals into moral, productive citizens, but also to punish and subjugate, as was the case in Nazi concentration camps, Soviet gulags, and Mettray. Foucault argues that labor, discipline, power, and social control are intimately linked.

Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body.... If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labor, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination. (Foucault, 1977, p. 182)

Discipline subdues the population politically while increasing their productivity. By imposing discipline, correctional institutions attempt to resocialize those whose behavior seems to deviate from the dominant social norms. The resulting self-discipline reflects external control and self-motivation.

The debate over poverty and welfare epitomizes the vilification of non-productivity and the institutional enforcement of the work ethic. In 1968, Oscar Lewis argued that the poor develop a unique value structure to cope with the unlikelihood of socio-economic advancement, sparking the culture of poverty thesis. According to this perspective, the poor fail to develop a strong work ethic. Charles Murray (1984) added that welfare discourages ambition and hard work, perpetuating dependence on public assistance. Lawrence Mead (1986) argued that government support is not simply an entitlement, but a benefit of citizenship with concomitant rights and obligations, including the duty to be productive. Herbert Gans (1972) countered that labeling the poor “undeserving” of public assistance as the culture of poverty adherents do represents an attempt to absolve the population of responsibility for ameliorating poverty and inequality.

One political response to the commonly held attitudes concerning the undeservingness of the poor has been to require public assistance recipients to demonstrate their merit by working. Under the auspice of promoting self-sufficiency, the federal government enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which mandates that welfare recipients must find work, enroll in school, or perform community service after two years of public assistance. To ensure that public assistance serves as a bridge to self-sufficiency rather than a path to dependency, recipients are allotted a maximum of five years of public assistance over the course of their lifetime (Hays, 2003).

These welfare-to-work reforms operate on certain assumptions: (1) that alleviating poverty is a matter of labor force *participation*, (2) that working at a job, no matter how poorly paid, is better than welfare, and (3) that working at a low-wage job will eventually lead to better jobs. Research indicates that these assumptions are not entirely justifiable. Prior to the 1996 reforms, Edin and Lein (1997) found that the women in low-wage work did not fare better economically than women on welfare, due to increased expenses for childcare, transportation, and other job-related necessities. The wage-earning women worked hard, with nearly 40% working at two or more jobs, yet they struggled to provide for their families. The jobs available to welfare-to-work participants offer low wages, starting at or near minimum wage, with few or no benefits or opportunities for promotion or skill development (Hays, 2003; Kilty and Segal, 2006). As a result, most welfare “leavers” end up cycling between work and welfare until their five-year allotment expires. At most, 10-20% of single mothers in welfare-to-work programs “have achieved relatively permanent, above-poverty stability” (Hays, 2003, p. 59), while the poorest female-headed families face greater struggles since reductions in government cash support and food assistance exceed any increases in family earnings (Kilty and Segal, 2006). Considering that working full-time, year-round at a minimum wage job has put families with one wage earner below the federal poverty line since 1996, it is no surprise that participants in welfare-to-work programs struggle to make ends meet (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996, 2011; U.S. Department of Labor, 2011).

In addition to the welfare-specific assumptions underlying the 1996 reforms, the ethos of welfare-to-work programs and the culture of poverty perspective in general suggest that the poor lack an adequate work ethic. The work requirement of the current public assistance program is purportedly designed to foster self-discipline, responsibility, and productivity, uplifting the moral character and social merit of recipients (Hays, 2003). When ethnographic journalist Barbara Ehrenreich (2002) attempted to live on the low-wage, low-skilled jobs most welfare-to-work recipients are able to secure, she found the work to be anything but uplifting. Instead, her experience indicates that working as a waitress, cleaning woman, and Wal-Mart employee is degrading and stressful; moreover, basic subsistence on such low wage jobs is nearly impossible. By the end of one month, Ehrenreich discovered that she could not make ends meet and had to take on a second job to pay her rent, just as her co-workers did. Such low-wage employment did not improve her work ethic; it only compelled her to commit more time to paid work. Hays confirms Ehrenreich’s conclusion that poor single mothers lack a living wage, not a work ethic, noting that “the Work Plan of welfare reform is more effective as a form of punishment than it is a positive strategy for independence” (2003, p. 60).

Enforcing the work ethic, as welfare-to-work programs do, not only assumes that the poor could ameliorate their situation with a stronger work ethic, but it also disregards the influence of social-structural forces. In effect, this blames the subjects of a hierarchical system designed to reproduce inequality. In lieu of culture of poverty explanations, political economists suggest that the structure of opportunities and distribution of resources play a far greater role in perpetuating poverty than individual actions, values, or choices (c.f., Wilson, 1996).

They contend that the behavior of poor people can be explained in large part by institutional impediments, including the history of racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination, residential segregation, limited economic opportunities, and obstacles to occupational advancement, as well as by structural developments such as the decline of affordable housing and stable, living-wage jobs for those with limited skills and/or education.

By many measures, the socio-economic conditions poor and working people face are declining. Unemployment rates are relatively high and the number of people living below the official poverty line has increased. In 2010, over 46 million Americans (15.3%) were living in poverty and many more struggled to pay for basic needs such as food and shelter, compared to less than 33 million (11.7%) in 2001, the height of the last recession (Bishaw, 2011; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008). Low and semi-skilled jobs offering a living wage are disappearing, while public education is losing funding. As a result, those with limited skills, education, or social capital are often compelled to take several part-time, low-wage jobs with no benefits. Hunger among the poor has also risen, while donations to food banks and funding for food programs have declined (Nord, 2009). Despite this trend, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg vetoed a Department of Health and Human Services policy proposal to expand the food stamp program to benefit an additional 43,000 unemployed, non-disabled, childless adults on the premise that every able-bodied adult has an obligation to work (Chan and Cardwell, 2006).

Despite persistent inequality, the imperative of productivity continues to hold sway over most Americans. The capitalist spirit, step-child of the Protestant work ethic, remains the dominant ethos not because it is imposed from above, as Bloomberg recently attempted to do, but rather because it is taken for granted by the overwhelming majority. Not only do “Americans remain strongly disposed to the idea that individuals are largely responsible for their economic situations,” but even the very people most negatively impacted by welfare reform and the stigmatization of poverty espouse this belief (Wilson, 1996, p. 160). Residents in inner-city areas where at least 40% live in poverty and are often unemployed “verbally endorse, rather than undermine, the basic American values concerning individual initiative” even though social conditions will lead many to fail (Wilson, 1996, p. 179). As Wilson’s study clearly demonstrates, espousing a mainstream work ethic is no guarantee that one will be employed or above poverty. If research has demonstrated that the lack of a strong work ethic is not the root cause of poverty, then perhaps there is a more compelling explanation for the long-standing enforcement of productivity. Political theorist Russell Muirhead (2004) argues that work is necessary for modern democracy.

Whatever else we are, as democrats we are a working people. We see this in our beliefs, such as the work ethic; in our self-understandings, which cause us to identify with our work; in our policies, which encourage and even compel work; in our behavior, for we work a lot, often beyond the dictate of needs; and in our values, which ally the working life with human dignity. This affirmation of the working life has its coercive side, but it also reflects in a democratic culture a kind of equality or shared condition that tempers even when it does not eliminate differences in income, wealth, power and ability. Any democratic culture must in some way affirm the value of work. The aristocratic disdain for work carried with it not only an affirmation of leisure but also a disdain for workers, who were thought too debilitated by the discipline of work to deliberate well or function as full citizens. The democratic faith, by contrast, is that work supports and expresses our dignity. (Muirhead, 2004, pp. 19-20)

As Muirhead states, most Americans believe that work is the basis of one’s dignity or self-worth. When the wealthy do not work, they are considered aristocratic; when the poor do not work, they are deemed lazy. Such a conception of work corresponds to American pragmatism, populism, not to mention capitalism. Muirhead assumes that a democratic society foregrounds equality, even if it is an equality of suffering and toil, and that America exemplifies such a democratic society. One would almost believe that this is a worker’s society, in which every worker is respected for their contribution no matter how minute. While many benefit from working, enjoying increased economic well-being, pride, respect, status, power, and contribution to the collective good, the negative effects of employment are undeniably widespread. Consider the vast literature on the alienating and degrading effects of most forms of employment, including Marx ([1848] 1988), Jacoby (1985), and Vallas and Beck’s (1996) studies of factory workers from the industrial revolution through the digital age of computerized automation, Schlosser’s (2001) examination of meat packers, Romero (1992) and Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (2001) studies of maids, Leidner’s (1993) research on fast food and insurance workers, Rogers’ (2000) work on temps, and Bourgois’ (1995) ethnography of low-level, inner-city drug dealers.

These effects are not limited to the low-wage or low-status workers. Studies on engineers, scientists, software programmers, architects, lawyers, and of course academics suggest that alienation and degradation impact professional activities (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994; Braverman, 1974; Granfield, 1991; Ross, 2002). Moreover, the discourse of work as a basis of equality obscures the practical tendency towards stratification on the basis of class and employment.

### ***3. Resolving the Contradictions of Productivity and the Dominant Work Ethic***

When considering the enactment, enforcement, and effects of the productivity imperative and the work ethic, what becomes clear is that there is a fundamental contradiction. The internalized and external cultural compulsions along with the existential, economic, and political imperatives to work productively contribute to social problems such as alienation, subordination, exploitation, and stratification among other incursions on one's life chances. To overcome the problematic aspects of work, some have proposed spending less time working, separating income from work, finding work that is more rewarding and suited to individual dispositions, and spending more time engaging in self-determined activities.

Technology figures among the utopian prospects for limiting labor time and effort. Lafargue ([1880] 1989) and others held out hope that technologies, which increase the rate of production and minimize physical labor, could limit working hours and emancipate humans from the alienating effects of employment. However, Braverman (1974) finds that automation has continued to degrade labor and subsume workers. He argues that the work process becomes more alienating and alienated as the role of humans in the production process is increasingly limited to manning the machines. Aronowitz (1992) counters that the degradation of labor thesis posited by Braverman presupposes "an anterior standard of craft" (p. 117). Just because machines have replaced many of the functions human labor once performed does not mean that workers have become servants of machines. Rather, their labor and skills have changed form. Now workers manipulate machine controls rather than hand tools. Likewise, the introduction of information technology and computerization into the work process has not necessarily de-skilled labor, but rather changed the requisite skills. For example, literacy has become a fundamental labor skill, regardless of how intellectual the job in question (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994). In other words, technology is not degrading in and of itself, but rather the instrumental uses to which technology is put tend to degrade labor. While new technologies may not have degraded the level of skill, most jobs continue to be degrading in an ontological sense—workers generally do not perform self-determined, self-generated activities as part of their job.

Given the indeterminacy of technology, scholars and policy-makers have advocated for structured mechanisms to promote greater self-determination. Some suggest that an income guaranteed by the State for all citizens would temper the injustice and unfreedom of employment by separating wages, the means of exploitation and domination, from the practice of labor (Van Parijs, 1995; Widerquist, Lewis, and Pressman, 2005). With a guaranteed income people could choose whether or not to work. Not only could people engage in self-determined activities outside of their job if they chose to have one, but their jobs would reflect greater self-determination as activities chosen under fewer constraints. Detractors of guaranteed income counter that economic growth and productivity would decline and work would be unjustly distributed, in that workers would inevitably support those who do not work, thus transforming the terms of exploitation, but not the fact. Muirhead (2004) suggests that guaranteed income could be engineered to resolve these problems; however, it would not eliminate the social and political necessity of work as the basis of democracy.

Given the centrality of work in American culture and the vulnerability of work and workers to exploitation, for work to fulfill its democratic promise, Muirhead suggests that it must be just; and for work to be just, it must fit both the individual and society. In Muirhead's conceptual framework, fitness has several meanings. Social fit is "the alignment between individual talent and social need" and personal fit refers to "the alignment between work and an individual's best purposes" (Muirhead, 2004, p. 159). The most fitting work fulfills the existential promise of work, granting the worker a meaningful life by way of a practice. Work as a practice "involves an activity that is coherent, complex, cooperative, and socially established; second, the activity motivates its participants through goods that are internal to the activity and gained through the effort to achieve excellence at the activity; and third, dedication to the activity extends the capacity to achieve excellence and intellectually grasp the goods involved in the activity" (Muirhead, 2004, p. 153). At its apex, a practice becomes the basis for a way of life.

While Muirhead agrees that capitalism tends to degrade work and alienate workers, he argues that the problem transcends capitalism. He asserts that fit and fulfillment rather than alienation, degradation, or exploitation constitute the basic problem with work. He suggests that by engaging in a fitting and fulfilling practice, individuals can simultaneously contribute to the social good and locate meaningfulness in their everyday lives, uniting the socio-political and existential functions of work.

There are two key limitations to Muirhead's approach. First, not all work will find the fitting person. Muirhead suggests that the least desirable, least fitting work, such as assembly line work, commercial farming, or sanitation, must be made more fitting by compensation outside of work, such as greater monetary rewards, limited work hours, or early retirement. He further suggests that to the extent possible, such unfitting, undesirable work should also be shared, at least symbolically, among all members of the community in order to prevent the stigmatization of the individuals designated to perform such work. Examples of this include community clean-ups of public space or shared domestic chores within a household (Muirhead, 2004, pp. 170-76). We must remember that Muirhead is a celebrant of the potentiality of work as a source of fulfillment, justice, and equity. For him the greatest degradation of labor stems not from exploitation or alienation but from aristocratic disdain. This perspective prevents him from fully acknowledging the great extent to which degraded labor degrades the worker regardless of whether the work is symbolically collectivized or well-compensated.

The second difficulty with Muirhead's model of ethical work is the fact that work, particularly the least fitting work, is often debilitating and dehumanizing. Ehrenreich's (2002) descriptions of her minimum wage jobs at institutions like Wal-Mart echo George Orwell's (1933) damning tales of life as an impoverished dishwasher in Paris' second-rate bistros in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. As an intermittently employed dishwasher, Orwell moves between hunger-fueled desperation when he is out of work and debilitating exhaustion when he does work. Part of the cruel irony is that despite his employment in the food industry, he often goes hungry. Similarly, Ehrenreich discovers the near impossibility of getting by on a minimum wage income, despite steady, full-time employment. These accounts describe the least respected, least valued jobs in industrial and post-industrial societies as a source of degradation, misery, poverty, and physical exhaustion, rather than fulfillment, self-development or existential meaning. Ultimately, Muirhead concedes that

A job is sometimes just a job. Discrete tasks truncated from other parts of life, jobs are done for the sake of something outside them, like meeting the demands of self-support or shouldering familial responsibilities—in short, for the money. At the extreme, jobs are like “gigs,” disconnected from the larger flow of one's life, akin to a musician's one-night engagement at the airport lounge. Often the only way to ensure that jobs satisfy the standard of fit is to bound them, so that they neither so exhaust our energies nor consume our time as to leave nothing for the rest of life. Limited in this way, they enable us to engage our most authentic energies and pursue our most important purposes *outside* of work. (2004, p. 10)

Muirhead's acknowledgment that some treat paid work like a series of gigs, and find their existential fulfillment outside of these gigs points to the bohemian ethos.

#### **4. Bohemians' Response to the Productivity Imperative**

As we have seen, there are a variety of proposals to minimize the negative effects of productivity and paid work, including strategic applications of technology, State guaranteed income programs, or models of just work. However, there are limitations to such solutions, limitations that bohemians' efforts to prioritize self-determined activities have the potential to overcome.

As a collective practice, modern bohemianism dates back to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, where non-conformist creative types marginalized themselves from mainstream society out of a drive for the freedom to explore new forms of creativity and express their dissatisfaction with bourgeois norms and politics. Theophile Gautier, a writer and member of the seminal 1830s generation of Parisian bohemians, described his social circle as “foolish youth [who] live somewhat haphazardly from day to day by [their] intelligence; painters, musicians, actors, poets, journalists, who love pleasure more than money and who prefer laziness and liberty to everything, even glory” (quoted in Brown, 1985, p. 1). This seminal generation of modern bohemians not only strove to shock the bourgeoisie as is often noted (c.f., Esler, 1971; Graña, 1964; Seigel, 1986; Wilson, 2000), but more fundamentally to live self-determined lives.

Several decades later, bohemian enclaves emerged in the U.S., particularly in downtown New York City. In the 1920s-30s, radical intellectuals, journalists, political activists, and modern artists mingled in Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side (Stansell, 2000). They were followed by the Abstract Expressionists and Beats in the 1940s-50s. In the 1960s, the Lower East Side became a center for the more radical tendencies of the counter-culture, including the Yippies and the Black Panthers (Gruen, 1966; Mele, 2000). And in the midst of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, a new and perhaps final underground of Super-8 filmmakers, self-taught musicians, and painters emerged in the neighborhood to create the East Village scene (Hager, 1986). What these generations shared was a bohemian ethos of non-conformity and self-marginalization from mainstream institutions. Perhaps the most significant manifestation of bohemian self-marginalization has been skepticism towards the workaday world.

The findings presented in this section are based on historical research on American and European bohemians since the 1830s and ethnographic interviews with and participant-observations of members of the well-recognized bohemian community on the Lower East Side of New York City since the 1970s. The ethnographic research primarily consisted of multiple, extended, semi-structured formal interviews with six key informants, and shorter, unstructured interviews and informal conversations with an additional 64 secondary subjects between 2003 and 2006. Subjects were recruited using snowball sampling, in which externally identified members of the bohemian community referred other members for participation in the study. Three of the key informants had achieved notable public recognition for their artistic and other bohemian activities (e.g., they had won major awards for their work and had been featured in numerous scholarly studies and news articles for their artistic and other bohemian activities); they were recruited for this study on the basis of their well-established recognition by the community as bohemians. The remaining three key informants were identified as bohemians by the first three key informants as well as dozens of additional secondary subjects in this study and had achieved more modest public recognition. Three of the key informants were male, three were female; all were White; these demographics are typical of downtown New York bohemian communities, given the small sample size (African-Americans, Asians, Latinos, and other non-White racial and ethnic groups are under-represented in the post-1970s downtown bohemian community, though they did participate in this artistic scene).

I interacted with and observed many others in the course of this study. In addition, in 2004 and 2005 I attended the Howl Festival, a weeklong celebration of the bohemian history of the Lower East Side. The bohemians in the ethnographic component of this study identify themselves as musicians, performers, actors, dancers, poets, writers, journalists, painters, filmmakers, sculptors, photographers, feminist intellectuals, political activists, and anarchists. These bohemians highly value their creative, intellectual, and political practices; yet very few of them earned their living by them. Like their predecessors, these bohemians do not hold a full-time, steady job working for a company or another person. Typically, the bohemians take short-term assignments, either as an independent contractor or temporary employee. Most are self-employed either at the time of the study or during an earlier period. A small number of subjects (under 10%) have engaged in undocumented or illegal work. Their jobs and assignments include construction work, commercial and decorative painting, furniture building, moving, bartending, food service and professional cooking, retail work, clerical work, translation, advertising work, web design and development, casting for commercials and print advertisements, commercial film work, writing columns for journals and magazines, artistic apprenticeship, and erotic dancing.

How much each person works depends on their financial needs and pay rate. Some of these “gigs,” as many subjects refer to their paid work, are relatively lucrative. For example, a few subjects report recently earning as much as \$40 an hour for advertising freelance work or \$250 a day for decorative painting. Other gigs, such as clerical work, apprenticing for other artists, or working in a bookstore, pay relatively low wages, usually barely above minimum wage. Generally, the more lucrative a gig, the fewer hours one works. The goal is not to cash in, but to clock out.

“Vivian,” an underground film actress turned singer-songwriter in her early forties, exemplifies the bohemian ethos of minimizing work time. She has avoided full-time employment throughout most of her life. In recent years, she has worked as a part-time music teacher and intermittent assistant casting director for films and advertisements. She also wrote a commercial jingle which generated enough earnings to survive for several months. The flexibility and brevity of the time commitment of such “gigs” allow her to record albums, tour with her band, and raise her son. Though she pays reduced rent in a downtown building regulated under the Mitchell-Lama housing program, she constantly struggles to keep up with the rising cost of living in New York City.



Regardless of pay rates, the bohemians like Vivian generally try to avoid a conventional, full-time, year-round work schedule. Considering how little time these bohemians spend on paid work, the question of how they survive arises. First, they live meagerly. Above all, bohemians try to minimize their housing costs. The younger bohemians often share their apartment or loft with roommates. Some squat, living illegally in abandoned buildings; however, this practice is declining. Others benefit from housing programs including rent regulation and homesteading, which offer below market rents that are subject to small annual increases or home-ownership in exchange for sweat equity.

Those with lower housing expenses tend to work fewer hours or would frequently quit their jobs and endure extended periods of unemployment to pursue their bohemian activities. For example, “Jeffrey,” an erudite autodidact, political activist, and performance artist in his mid-forties, has held several full-time jobs in arts administration, but quits each time his eclectic intellectual, political, and creative interests inspire him to work on a non-paying project. For nearly twenty years, he has lived in a large rent-controlled two bedroom, two bathroom apartment. He currently shares the apartment and splits the \$1000 per month rent with his girlfriend, a 40-year old photographer and videographer. His low rent has enabled him to endure unemployment for extended periods.

Bohemians limit their expenditures and acquisitiveness in other ways. For example, they generally do not accumulate expensive personal possessions, except for the occasional original painting or first edition poetry broadside received as a gift or barter. They rarely pay for their drinks at bars, since the bartenders and waitresses are often part of the same social circle. They typically forego middle class amenities, such as cable television and health insurance. For example, “Susan,” an actress, filmmaker, and writer in her 60s only had health insurance for two years of her adult life. When she needs medical care, she uses community clinics that provide healthcare at reduced rates for the uninsured. She explains that she just hopes to avoid a major illness until she qualifies for Medicare. Despite the risks, Susan prefers to avoid regular employment than work for health benefits.

In addition to living modestly, bohemians “hustle” to make ends meet. The Beats used the term “hustling” to describe living by one’s wits, rather than gainful employment (Rigney and Smith, 1961, p. xv-xvii), and the bohemians interviewed frequently used the term in this way. Hustles are not necessarily scams or illegal activities; rather they are ways to get what you need for little or no money. From where to get a meal for the price of a cup of coffee to how to obtain a free Christmas tree, bohemians’ cost-cutting strategies vary in complexity, bounty and legality. For example, one artist describes asking to take home scraps from a restaurant kitchen purportedly “to feed her dog.” A writer describes eating free pickles along with her cheap draft beer—that was her dinner. Many find their furniture on the sidewalk. Some have sold their letters and manuscripts to libraries. In 1971, Youth International Party co-founder Abbie Hoffman published *Steal This Book*, an anarcho-bohemian survival guide. He explains how to establish a pirate radio station, where to go for free housing, how to pilfer supplies at work, and so on. While many of the strategies are outdated or no longer feasible, he demonstrates that with a little savvy, luck and social capital, one can—or at least could—survive on the margins of the workaday world.

In general, bohemians’ work ethic is based on limiting employment to the minimum necessary for survival and instead prioritizing non-paid activities. More often than not, the bohemian’s job is “just a job,” if not simply a gig. While bohemians acknowledge that they cannot be free from performing paid work altogether, they limit their job time to pursue their life-defining activities. In practice this means they work for pay only as much as is necessary for subsistence; they reserve the rest of their time to do as they will, to engage in a meaningful practice, socialize with friends and family, travel, and sometimes simply waste time. In essence, bohemians privilege the freedom to determine how they spend their time over material comfort. Together, this practice and preference constitute the bohemian work ethic.

Implicit in bohemians’ self-marginalization from paid work in favor of a non-remunerative practice is the desire for self-determination along with a critique of paid work as limiting such freedom. One could argue that people are free insofar as they lead self-determined lives. Marx suggests that labor is the activity in which people can express and exercise their self-determination ([1844] 1988, pp. 76-77). However, as long as the conditions of labor undermine the capacity for self-determination, certain people will feel compelled to seek other outlets to exercise their self-determination, as is the case among bohemians. Freedom is not only a matter of engaging in self-determined action.

For, self-determination is constrained when one cannot imagine possible courses of action outside the parameters of the status quo (Marcuse, 1964). In other words, to be free one must be conscious of one's capacity for self-determination (Berman, 1963). By demonstrating how people internalize the ideology of the capitalist spirit so deeply that they take the ethical and moral grounds of the work ethic, productivity, and acquisitiveness for granted, Weber ([1930] 1992) uncovers a paradox in the modern condition: people are formally free and economically rational in their productive activities, yet they are ideologically fettered, which in turn limits their self-determination and more generally their freedom. Bohemians' rejection of the dominant work ethic indicates that their consciousness is not subjugated or subsumed under the imperative of productivity and the unfreedom it entails. Cognizant of the costs and compromises attendant with the choice to emphasize self-determination, bohemians' work ethic reflects a high level of freedom. They not only enjoy self-determination, they also demonstrate that real alternatives to the normative culture do exist.

The bohemian work ethic contrasts strikingly against the ideal type Protestant work ethic and its secular counterpart, the capitalist spirit. First, bohemians tend to live hand-to-mouth. Even if they could accumulate wealth, they rarely do. Yet their preference for destitution over paid labor does not necessarily imply that bohemians share the asceticism suggested by the Protestant work ethic. Despite their poverty, bohemians often manage to live seemingly decadent lives, in terms of their drug use, nightlife, travels, and other leisure activities. This decadence also has a wasteful, thriftless aspect, which simultaneously counters asceticism and accumulation. In this way, bohemians challenge the imperatives of both the Protestant and capitalist work ethics. Second, when bohemians do accumulate wealth, more often than not, there is considerable serendipity involved. They happened to be the one chosen by capital, whether embodied by investors, art dealers, literary critics, the media, or some other powerful institution, to serve its needs. This is not to suggest that bohemians are passive in their rise to mainstream success, but rather that their efforts are arbitrarily rewarded. Moreover, such financial success usually signals the end of their bohemian days, for capital puts them to work, demanding that they be productive.

Bohemians specifically challenge the temporal imperative inherent in the dominant work ethic. A writer explains that "in the underground, you learn to violate the taboos that support middle-class reality. You learn not only to waste yourself, you learn to waste time, disrupting the countdown toward death implicit in the chronology of production, with the timelessness of pleasure" (Sukenick, 1987, p. 25). A 30-something year-old singer succinctly expresses this perspective: "I've quit every job I've ever had—time is just too precious." For bohemians, the choice is clear: you either maintain control over your time and energy to do as you please or sell it on the market to make a living.

The freedom to determine how to spend time becomes an important site of bohemian resistance to the workaday world. Many bohemians display a strong ambition to make their mark with their life projects, which typically takes a full-time commitment. However, they do not evaluate such work time according to its productivity, but rather its existential value. Recall how the productivity of labor and the time it consumes is evaluated in terms of surplus value, or the value beyond the capital necessary to sustain the worker and the production process. Building on this, Marcuse proposed that freedom is the extent to which people determine why and in the service of what interests they engage in activities beyond their subsistence needs (1972, p. 215). This is exactly the form of freedom bohemians seek. They limit paid work to the minimum effort and time so that what they do beyond their subsistence needs is self-determined. Like nearly everyone else, bohemians must perform paid work to survive, but they attempt to strike a greater balance between productive labor and unproductive labor, between labor time and free time. In some cases, what they do may be lucrative, but it is in the first place self-determined. In fact, the desire for self-determination limits most bohemians' ambition for mainstream success.

The more radical and politicized bohemians resist the workaday world as a principled critique of the exploitation, domination and alienation inherent in employment for others' gain. These bohemians act out of solidarity with the working class, despite the fact that they often have the social and cultural capital to join the middle and professional classes. But even these politicized bohemians distance themselves from jobs and careers out of a drive to engage in a practice that offers existential fulfillment and greater freedom. While the politically engaged bohemians add another layer to bohemians' political significance, it is secondary to the politics that emerges from bohemians' everyday lives, for the political valence of bohemian life does not depend on political consciousness or intentionality, only on a practice of self-marginalization from a productivist, workaday world.

### 5. The Significance of Bohemians' Ethos for the Ethics of Work

Historically, bohemians have posed a challenge to the dominant ethos by questioning the value of productivity. While bohemians often labor intensely at their calling, they do not concentrate their creative, intellectual or political efforts on remuneration; this forces us to reexamine the taken-for-granted equation between labor and surplus value or, in Benjamin Franklin's terms, time and money. Why is it imperative that working for money be valued above all else? Why should social worth depend on economic status? Scholars and political organizers have long decried inequality. Bohemians engage in a different form of criticism, a critique based in everyday life practices. By focusing on those who live according to an alternative ethos, we can gain insight into the tacit choices made by participating in the workaday world and become aware of the extensive societal pressures drawing us into the mainstream.

Questioning the terms of labor is the political and ethical challenge bohemians pose. Bohemians' work ethic constitutes a violation of the time-labor calculus of productivity. For example, writing poetry to be distributed freely to friends in mimeographed magazines or on the Internet for no pay undermines the production of surplus-value. Yet writing poetry, like any creative activity, takes time; thus it takes time away from productive labor. Though the individual preference for passing the time with unproductive labor rather than spending it on productive labor is of a scale too small to provoke social change, the collective pursuit of artistic, intellectual, or political activity constitutes a visible resistance to the workaday world.

The critique implicit in the bohemian work ethic extends to consumption and poverty. Modeled on the meager existence artists and writers historically endured in order to make time for their creative activities, most bohemians live simple lives that de-emphasize consumption and accumulation. By not working at a steady job with regular hours and pay, bohemians voluntarily limit their access to certain social goods. They can only afford to pay nominal rents; they face considerable difficulty obtaining mortgages; and they have less capital to accumulate property. In short, they dispossess themselves of the American Dream. Yet, they do not consider themselves deprived. These are, as one bohemian described, "enthusiastic choices" that fit the bohemian ethos of resisting the system of paid work and the drive to accumulate capital. For some bohemians, voluntary poverty is a tacit choice, for others a conscious one; either way, it is a choice. Gold (1993) astutely points out that "voluntary poverty is not the same as poverty. And the Bohemian, however poor, considers himself among the elect, chosen to an elite of abstention from workaday society" (57). Mizruchi (1983) adds that unlike the involuntarily poor, the bohemian can join the "straight world" at will (p. 101). Keep in mind, however, that the choice to live in poverty is constrained. In order to make creative or intellectual work or engage in politics one needs time and space. Poverty is the price paid for free time, not simply the option of the privileged (Boury, [1911] 1990, p. 272).

Bohemia has the potential to play a critical role in society, despite the ethical ambiguities of voluntary poverty given the intractability of involuntary poverty. Arendt (1958) argued that people can create a public and participatory political arena by engaging in exceptional acts, namely, speeches and deeds with which individuals distinguish themselves by challenging conformity. In this formulation, even minor acts have political potential. Bohemians' non-conformity often takes the form of minor acts. They may sleep until noon, write a provocative poem, or simply refuse to hold a steady job. Taken separately, these minor acts may seem relatively indistinct. However, the totality of such an existence constitutes a lived resistance to the imperatives of productivity and consumption as well as a challenge to the dominant work ethic. Moreover, when bohemians engage in a questioning of the workaday world *en masse*, they constitute a visible resistance. The necessity of paid work for most people's subsistence tends to militate against widespread criticism or organization against the political economic basis of inequality. In this light, bohemians' way of life emerges as a practical critique of the workaday world, highlighting the compromises and contradictions inherent in one of the central institutions of modern life.

The bohemian ethos of prioritizing self-determined activity, limiting the time and energy forfeited to paid work, and relinquishing income earning opportunities and material comforts is not appropriate for everyone. By definition, it cannot be. For, the more popular bohemianism becomes, the more vulnerable it is to commodification and cooptation. Moreover, not everyone can tolerate the trade-offs of highly limited consumption capacity, relatively impoverished and high crime surroundings, and a generally tenuous economic existence.

Nevertheless, the symbolic significance of bohemian self-determination points to its broader impact. Bohemians exemplify the willingness to forfeit the American Dream and material well-being for existential well-being and self-determination. This suggests that the enforcement of the work ethic among the most vulnerable, destitute populations reflects a narrow vision of social welfare and civic duty. If the work ethic truly concerned morality or right action, it would not be linked to profitability. When bohemians challenge the conflation between productivity, profitability, and right action in the choices they make, they open the door to critiquing the enforcement of a profitable work ethic. While the critique embodied in modern bohemians' questioning of the workaday world remains significant, developments endemic to late capitalism including the rising cost of living, commodification of bohemian culture, gentrification of bohemian neighborhoods, and industry's cooptation of bohemian work patterns have placed great limitations on modern bohemian life. Not only do bohemians find their way of life more precarious, but their ethos is losing its distinction. Today, bohemians' output increasingly resembles productivity, as their art, intellectual endeavors, and politics, are being enlisted into the service of capital (Brooks, 2000; Lloyd, 2006; Ross, 2002). Moreover, the new bohemians' heightened ambition gives them the willingness and desire to work for major corporations (Halasz, 2007).

The new bohemian types represent a fundamental departure from the modern bohemian, for they do not subscribe to the critical re-evaluation of the relationship between time, value and activity. As an avant-garde theater director explains, "Bohemians have become servants of their own earnings and the public. Therefore there is nothing bohemian about what they do. To be personal and not manipulative, but hedonistic and enjoying life seems to be increasingly distant these days. Nothing is for fun. Nothing is for free." What spells trouble for modern bohemia is the conjunction of industry's efforts to use bohemia to attract and retain young employees in the creative sector, commandeer their innovations, and foster mainstream ambition, with the general extension of the productivity and consumption imperatives deeper into everyday life. As bohemians are enfolded into the productivist economy, yet another form of questioning fades into the past, leaving us to work more hours, more intensely, without question.

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