

The Future of Work: New Thinking on More Humane Possibilities

Bruno Gulli. *Labor of Fire: the ontology of labor between economy and culture*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2005.

reviewed by Anne O'Byrne

In those tantalizing passages where he offers a description of what our lives will be like after the revolution, Marx presents a world where not only will the state have withered away but labor itself will no longer exist. The prospect is immediately appealing. Once we get rid of the state and its necessarily oppressive structures and when we no longer have to ruin our bodies and numb our minds with labor, we will finally grasp and enjoy our freedom.

Won't we?

The problem is that our imaginations have to struggle with this thought. If I no longer have to tend the assembly line or teach classes or plough the fields, what will I spend my time doing? I could devote myself to my favorite leisure activities, but what is amusing for a Sunday afternoon might become tedious if I devoted much more time to it and, secondly, I would quickly begin to wonder about the purpose of my life if all I did was pass the time with hobbies. And, in the meantime, the young will still need to be taught and the fields ploughed. Marx does provide more clues, particularly with his delightful description, in *The German Ideology*, of a day in the life to come:

[Communist] society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.¹

Under capitalism each one of these activities must be classified as either labor or pastime; under communism they will have the character of free human activity and together they will make up the occasion for our fulfillment and flourishing as free human beings.

The contribution Bruno Gulli makes to this discussion in *Labor of Fire* is the claim that these activities all belong under the heading of labor. For too long, he argues, we have been content to let labor as it is conceived by capital and as it functions within capitalism to take the place of labor as such; we have fallen, lazily, into a way of thinking that assumes that the phenomenon of capitalist labor--that is, labor devoted to productivity, exchange and accumulation--exhausts the entire concept of labor. Once we begin to understand labor more broadly we appreciate its power, its life-giving capacity, its creativity, its role in imagining and building a future that is

different from the one ordained by the capitalist present, and undertaking this expansion of the concept is a worthwhile project. Yet, as Gulli well knows, this cannot happen in a vacuum. The very word *labor* had become overlade with meanings; the concept has been essentialized, naturalized, modernized, historicized and deconstructed, and a comprehensive list of relevant thinkers would have to stretch at least from Plato to Baudrillard. Indeed—and this is the source of the work’s greatest difficulties—Gulli is too keenly aware of this with the result that he takes on the expansion of the concept in multiple registers to enriching but also confusing effect.

The problem becomes clear immediately in the introduction as the author produces one label after another for the new category: “labor in itself,” “labor’s concept”, “neutral labor,” “living labor,” “ontological labor.” The richness and the confusion spring from the fact that each one comes with all the baggage of its own philosophical tradition. Is this a Hegelian in-itself? Or could the author have in mind a Platonic concept? Is early 20th century life philosophy at work in the thought of living labor or could this be a reference to Husserl’s life world?

How is a reader to make her way through this exciting morass? One solution, and perhaps the most charitable one, is to approach the volume as a set of loosely related essays (as distinct from a single sustained argument) on the question of how to understand labor in a way that opens up its emancipatory possibilities. Given that, the fact that the book has four chapters should not mislead us into thinking that this is a set of four essays. The first chapter alone is divided into 12 sections, several of which work together as a reading of Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts but others of which are better read as short (two to four-page) stand-alone pieces on, among other things, Lukacs, E.B. Pashukanis, the issue of totality and the source of private property. The other chapters have a total of 25 sections and there are, in addition, three mini-essays in the form of “Remarks” interjected at irregular intervals. Finally, despite its attempts to pull this embarrassment of riches together--first by illuminating the general problem and then by trying to set an overall conceptual apparatus in place--the introduction works best as another of these small essays.

The problem for the author is that capitalism both propounds a particular and particularly restrictive view of labor and behaves as though that were the whole story: labor is what generates value that can be exchanged and accumulated in the form of money. It is what produces capital and its success in doing so is gauged in terms of productivity. In Polanyi’s terms, this is labor as commodity. In the register adopted by Aronowitz and DiFazio, it is wage labor or the job. What they suggest as alternatives is not non-labor or something other than labor but rather labor understood as an activity that is part and parcel of life itself, an activity geared towards use rather than exchange and that values production but is not enslaved to productivity. After all, humans enjoy producing things. We objectify ourselves in the world through production; the suffering of the worker under capitalism is grounded not in the necessity of laboring but in the fact that we are alienated from what we produce and therefore from ourselves.

The labels for capitalism-beyond-capitalism to which Gulli devotes most attention in his introduction are

“ontological labor” and the related term “neutral labor.” “Labor,” he writes, is to social and political ontology as “being” is to pure ontology. It is a pithy riddle that invites critical reflection; surely if the reader can solve it she will have grasped something key to the work as a whole.

Ontology is that sub-field of philosophy that deals with the nature of being. Or is it? Perhaps it is inaccurate to claim that being can have a nature at all since it must precede all particularity of character or nature. So, beginning again, ontology is the sub-field of philosophy that deals with questions of being. Yet can it be a sub-field, if being is the *sine qua non*, that without which there is nothing? Perhaps the medieval philosophers were right and I must begin a third time, acknowledging ontology as *first* philosophy. Gulli is helpfully specific here. What he terms *pure ontology* is the work of 9th century philosopher Duns Scotus, and the neutral concept of being is Scotus’ thought of the concept of being as included in the more specific concepts of finite being and infinite being (for example), while they are not included in it. Crucially, the concept can be formally neutral with respect to finitude or infinity, but any real being must *be* either finite or infinite. So, taking the quotation marks around “being” in his riddle to indicate that we need to attend to the word as a word, “being” is the word whose meanings run beyond any given instance of being and the subject matter of pure ontology is the full range of the word’s possible meanings.

Transposing this onto the relation between “labor” (again, we must attend to the word as a word) and political and social ontology, we find that the many meanings of “labor” extend beyond the meaning of “slave labor” or “productive or unproductive labor” or any particular use of the word, and the subject matter of political and social ontology is the full range of “labor”’s possible meanings. What does this get us? The insight that not only is labor more than the activity of laboring under capitalism but it is fundamental to any and every mode of social being. Gulli concludes: “labor is present in all manifestations of the social”(2), a promising thesis indeed.

The author builds on this success by directing us to Vico and the identification of *poiesis* [making] and *praxis* [doing] which opens the possibility for a poetic/practical metaphysics which will in turn yield new insights onto social being. This is the point where the use of term “ontology” without qualification should drop out; having used it in a quite controlled way, the author now tries to make it do a great deal more work, work that it was, frankly, not cut out to do. He claims that labor has “huge ontological power” (12), that “ontology shakes the ground...of political economy” (17), that there is an “ontological power of affirmation” (23), that labor is the “ontological power” (24). And what can this sentence mean: “The direct producer re-appropriates the full ontology of organic labor”? Surely it must, rather, be a matter of re-appropriating the full being of organic labor? The result is that in much of what follows—particularly Chapter 1 “The Ontology of Labor”—the author makes his reader work hard to discern any consistency in the use of his terms.

Still, there are gems here. “Genuine Communism” (26) is one of the essays in Chapter 1 dealing with Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, so it is not surprising that the issue of utopianism should arise. This is the young Marx, the Marx commonly described as not yet having shaken off the thinking of his utopian socialist

forebearers. Gulli resists any temptation to leave the matter at the level of received wisdom, however, and argues instead that the utopian strand that emerges here is testimony to the fact that communism is, by its nature, utopian albeit in a way quite different from what is usually dismissed as utopian, that is, a thinking that seeks to build a society that has no place and that cannot have a place in the advance of history. Rather, as Marcuse puts it, utopia is here “that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies” (28). Taking this thought a step further, Gulli explains Marx’s genuine communism as what is contained in the movement of history; it is the society to come only in the sense that it is always already becoming. Rather than being no place, it is right here.

It is at moments like this--moments when he devotes himself to the analysis and explication of a single thorny conceptual problem--that the author is most successful. He is less successful on those occasions, such as in the essay “Remark 2: Vulgar Metaphysics and Poetic Metaphysics” (78), where he indulges in making broad philosophical claims—e.g., that Kant, Heidegger, the school of deconstruction and analytic philosophy in general remain stuck within vulgar metaphysics whereas Marx and Nietzsche do not—that are really the stuff of another, different, longer book. This could be an interesting and provocative thesis but in a two-page remark it can be no more than an odd assertion.

In the essay that gives the volume its title (*Labor of Fire*, p.84), Gulli gives his most incisive analysis of the distinction between productive labor on the one hand and living labor on the other. Productivity is a category of capitalism; labor becomes productive under capitalism. Yet, in this case, how are we to describe labor that does not come under the ambit of capitalism? Is it unproductive? Gulli refuses this description because it misses the point that labor, beyond capitalism, is neither-productive-nor-unproductive but, rather, creative. This is an important advance on a more traditional Marxian understanding of these terms.² Gulli writes: “productive labor is only that labor which produces surplus value, that is, unpaid labor; it is a form of living labor, but not the only one” (85). It is no loss to labor that its deepest logic is that of neither/nor because this is the double negation or double resistance in which labor returns to itself not as mere productive labor but as living labor. Only in the final move of this essay, at the point where he re-affirms a traditional understanding of the distinction between labor’s production of use value and exchange value, do I find myself disagreeing. Exchange value is demoted to a secondary position and understood as the mere product of mere labor, merely under capitalism. I am far more convinced by Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of exchange value in his 1972 work *The Mirror of Production*³ (a work Gulli engages in a later essay, “Critique of Labor as Such”). This is based on a conviction that our being is essentially social being (a claim with which Gulli would probably agree) and that this entails the pre-eminence of circulation and exchange in the social institution of value (a claim with which he would probably not).⁴ In the fourth and last chapter (which consists of four essays) Gulli hits his stride and produces a rewarding set of reflections on the relationship between creative labor and artistic production. Labor, he argues, is “being as sensuous human activity...[it is] the transforming and self-transforming activity of human beings” (147).

Understanding it in this way removes the ancient distinction between making (poiesis) and action (praxis) which in turn allows the author to undo the distinction between creation and mere making. Creative labor must fall within the greater category of labor, and the fact that art, under capitalism, is capable of producing works that are at odds with social reality is no more than testimony to the capacity of labor to set itself against the world as it is as the first step in the creation of a new world. The old ontological confusion does occasionally appear again, as in the too-quick identification of aesthetics with ontology and thus with “a practical and poetic disposition” (150), but the essays in this final chapter generate real and interesting possibilities. I would like to hear more about the moment when Heidegger and Holderlin approach Vico’s thought that poets are the true founders of social being, and about the approach that brings Adorno and Heidegger together—despite all the bitterness and jargon that divides them—on the distinction between the sensuous and the non-sensuous.

Hannah Arendt often described the real work of intellectuals as the work of keeping thought in motion. If thought is allowed to come to rest it quickly calcifies into dogma or becomes the received, common-sensical account of how things are. This has been the deepest danger in the triumph of capitalism (such as it is) since it complacency and resistance in the way of any attempt to even imagine a different world. The value of this work is in its unrelenting insistence that there are other worlds for us to bring into being, specifically, that there is a world where labor is free and creative and unconstrained by the demands of productivity. It is for others—for us—to discover how change can happen but the first step is always made by thinkers like Gulli who remind us, at the moment when despair looms, that capitalism does not capture and exhaust all that it is to be a laboring human being.

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NOTES

¹ Marx and Engels. 1978. *Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978, 160.

² See Harry Braverman. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 410-423. My thanks to GM for this reference.

³ Baudrillard, Jean. 1975. *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster. St. Louis: Telos Press.

⁴ This is a thought I develop in “Symbol, exchange and birth: towards a theory of labor and relation” (*Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30:3, 2004, 355-373).