Part 2

The analysis of identity
Transformations of working identities

Labour and the self

Daniel Mendelson

Introduction

To speak of a single work or labour identity would be as grievous an error as the essentializing universalisms espoused by early theorists of gender and race. Just as W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of the veil and Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) maxim ‘one is not born a woman but becomes one’ overlooked the diversity of experience of their respective Othered peoples, forcing a false amalgamation of experience, so too should we be careful to not speak of any universal experience of work. Theorists of labour have increasingly identified that one individual’s work is another’s leisure, and vice versa; lines in contemporary times have blurred further, as especially noteworthy with reference to professional athletes (though arguably debates surrounding pleasure and work have been intimately intertwined since the beginning of ‘professions’ in the case of sex workers). This chapter will attempt to defend a multifaceted approach to work identities, as the mechanisms of certain trends such as globalization are reasonably identifiable, but vitally, their phenomenological impacts are quite diverse. The variegated social, aesthetic and even physiological experiences of work will be a primary overarching theme of the following exposition.

Of course, this is significantly due to the preliminary problem of describing exactly what ‘work’ is; as André Gorz (1999: 3) notes, ‘[w]hy do we say that a woman “works” when she takes care of children in a nursery school and “does not work” when she stays at home to take care of her own children?’ For many thinkers, the inherently subjective and socially constructed nature of the topic is what makes the study of work so intriguing.

A second initial consideration, interrelated to the sundry perceptions of work that will be explored in the following piece, will be that of social-historical change. All too often, social-historical change is portrayed as a positivist occurrence, leading in a sole direction: improvement, growth, progress, and among some theorists, perfection. But the reality of contemporary work identities contrasts any such notion. As will be explored in the final section of this chapter, millions of workers inhabit torturous identities, living what Giorgio Agamben (1998) has termed ‘bare life’, in which one is biologically alive but politically dead; following Zygmunt...
Bauman’s (1989) thesis of the Holocaust being decidedly at home in modernity, perhaps the same is true of such debased labour, as barbaric treatment reaches its pinnacle with technological rationalization and innovation.

This is not to say that social-historical change is unapparent or, when apparent, always negative. Analysis of the Industrial Revolution reveals the interrelation of benefits (technological innovations, immense wealth) and costs (awful working conditions, immense poverty). In the tradition of Anthony Giddens (1984), it will not be argued that such impacts can be reduced to simplistic zero-sum pathways of gain and loss. Rather, the contention will be made that only through a multifarious perspective of historical narratives, one that resists posing simplistic, exponential, single-directional movement, can the globalized nature of work identity be understood.

Given how momentous labour has been to human history and sociality, it would be impossible to cover the entire topic in a book-length piece, let alone a single chapter. The rationale behind the specific theorists explicated below is based on the notion that a critical analysis of an issue is best accomplished through exploration of debates. Chronologically organized, the preliminary section provides an in-depth analysis, defence and critique of classical social theorists Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx, situating their contrasting views of modernized labour. Following this exposition, contemporary theorists of labour will be explicated, beginning with the cautionary tales of short-termism and uncertainty in Ulrich Beck, Richard Sennett and Bauman. A manifold section of critique will initiate with the tempering optimism of Giddensian-influenced theorists of reflexive work; yet the counterpoint of reflexivity will itself be critically evaluated using Arlie Hochschild’s (2003/1983) powerful account of ‘emotional labor’. Finally, two brief case studies will illuminate the darker side of labour identities, simultaneously reinforcing much of the previous theory, while further exploring the deficiencies of any approach that fails to consider the most debased of labourers.

### Historical and intellectual development of labour identity

Classical social theory is in a precarious position; written between a century and a century and a half ago, it is argued that such analyses cannot help but be outdated. Truly, this is the case in some regards, as especially evident regarding women’s work identities. Yet for all the social-historical change that has occurred since Durkheim’s theories on division of labour and Marx’s writing on alienating work, there are significant continuities. Additionally, the framing of contemporary issues surrounding labour is provided with an essential background by such previous thinkers.

Astute readers will note that Max Weber, author of *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), has been omitted from this section. Truly Weber contributed a vital perspective to early theories of work identity, especially his thought on bureaucracy, rationality, and work ethic. These terms’ prevalence in contemporary society is a testament to his insights. Yet as the purpose of this section is to illustrate the differing views on work as modernity took hold in factories under the first century of the Industrial Revolution, Marx was chosen as the more telling counterpoint to Durkheim.

### Durkheim, labour’s division and solidarity

Durkheim’s contributions to the early sociological inquiry of labour are best situated within the backdrop of his life’s mission: to affirm sociology, then a suspiciously novel discipline, as an appropriate (or perhaps, the only) method of solving the predicaments of a changing sociality. Like many of his contemporaries, he sought to address the, at times, uneasy progression
Transformations of working identities

from traditional to modern civilization. When he presented his dissertation in 1893, the later canonized *Division of Labour in Society*, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that sociology would survive the turbulent atmosphere of exclusionary academia. Yet Durkheim seemingly relished the challenge. Indeed, as Steven Lukes notes in *Emile Durkheim: his life and work*, the fierce defence of his first major work won sociology ‘the right to be mentioned at the Sorbonne’ (1973: 299). He would go on to refine his position for the prodigious quarter of a century that remained of his life, which was unfortunately cut short in part, some suppose, by the grief of the loss of his son in the Serbian campaign of the First World War. However, this chapter’s focus will be on that seminal early work, elaborating specifically on the interaction between the then modern labour identity and social collectivity.

**The transition of solidarity types**

Essential to understanding *The Division of Labour in Society* is the distinction Durkheim made between mechanical and organic solidarity. Intriguingly, the former is associated with pre-modern societies, while the latter is attributed to a developing modernity (the idea of a not fully developed organic solidarity is an important caveat, and will soon be explicated). These classifications seem illogical at first glance: was not the Industrial Revolution the age of mechanics? Was not the nostalgia for a less-developed past often coupled with an ‘organic’ societal essence? Yet, in considering more deeply Durkheim’s functionalist brand of sociology, complete with his ardent biological metaphors, the terminology is quite coherent.

Starting with the former, Durkheim intended mechanical solidarity as a reference to the lack of structural division, and hence a ‘mechanical’ simplicity that characterized an organism without a complex organization. Regarding work, this referred to the lack of differentiation among most labourers, as they spanned very few specializations (religion, war and agriculture being dominant), and hence a lesser level of interdependence was exhibited. Indeed, as he stated quite plainly without any of the wistfulness of those who lamented the trajectory of modernity:

> If we try to construct intellectually the ideal type of a society whose cohesion was exclusively the result of resemblances, we should have to conceive it as an absolutely homogeneous mass whose parts were not distinguished . . . they would have no arrangement; in short, it would be devoid of all definite form and all organization. It would be the veritable social protoplasm, the germ whence would arise all social types.  

*(1964/1933: 174)*

Restricted levels of individuation, bonded mostly through a strong religiously based collective consciousness and a repressive, universally held penal law, summed, for Durkheim, to a mechanical identity.

On the other hand, modern society was likened to an evolved biological cell with diverse division in function and high levels of organization and interdependence; hence, he attributed the notion of an ‘organic’ solidarity (Durkheim 1964/1933: 111–33). Mutual interdependence is essential, both for ribosomes, mitochondria and the nucleus, and likewise for the individual labourers in society. The chef can hardly be expected to conjure her magic without the farmers and butchers, let alone the maker of her pan, knife, stove and refrigerator. To some extent differing from Weber and Marx, one can see his perspective of organic solidarity as being quite positive: people are different in their abilities and interests, and ideally develop mutual respect through such co-beneficial arrangements. One can take pride in the utilization of their talents and abilities to contribute to the greater function of the grand social cell, society.
Not quite fully organic

However, what are vitally significant, and perhaps quell some of the critics that fail to make it to the third section of The Division of Labour in Society, ‘Abnormal Forms’, were the clauses Durkheim supposed that tempered his optimism. Key to these was the notion of anomie, and the incomplete transition within modern civilization to an organic solidarity.

Anomie, quite simplified, refers to an absence of norms; for Durkheim, this often had a wea-risome effect on individuals, and troubling consequences for society. Mechanical solidarity was almost completely absent of anomic states, as evidenced by two universally held norms (which obviously differed in kind between clans and cultures): religious belief and penal punishment (Durkheim 1964/1933: 70–110). One might say there was little grey area in these primitive civilizations, as the laws and rules were quite simply constructed and nearly unanimously under-stood. Yet the absence of anomie is not always positive. Breaching norms had brutal conse-quences, as violence was essential to their upholding (Giddens 1972: 10).

A fairly apparent observation, but unfair critique of Durkheim, is that for all the supposed benefits of organic solidarity, anomic labour identities were rampant. More recently, the eco-nomic downturn, which gained traction on the amorally greedy and risky actions of extremely wealthy individuals, signified a social cell that is not quite in tune with the metaphorical bio-logical ideal. Many workers lost significant portions of their hard-earned savings, while bonuses larger than a lifetime of the median salary continued to be paid out to the executives at fault. Yet crucially, Durkheim believed that organic solidarity was still in its infant stages, and that modern civilization still had progress to make, as ‘at certain points in the organism certain social functions are not adjusted to each other’ (Durkheim 1964/1933: 354).

Essential to his view of labour identity, and perhaps most insightful, was that mutual respect among workers of different kinds was encouraged under a division of labour, but additionally required strong moral norms and equal opportunity for the pursuit of one’s talents and specific abilities. It was not enough to simply have differentiation, as Durkheim critiqued Hebert Spen-cer’s position; division of labour must involve a fair diffusion of specialization, and in doing so, it moderated competition instead of fruitlessly attempting to suppress it (Durkheim 1964/1933: 354, 365). Across his corpus, there are not recommendations akin to Marx’s abolition of private property, as Durkheim supposed that there was an intrinsic hierarchy among individuals. Yet he also believed that through the obliteration of anomie and increased organic solidarity, instead of material superiority determining ability, superior ability would determine material rewards. With the former in place, organic solidarity would never be fully realized.

Inequality could not (and should not) be eliminated, but rather would be rational; indeed, the cell only functions effectively in response to the diversity of tasks and stimuli it encounters because there is difference among the parts. However, that difference could not be fraudulently surmised, as such an arrangement would deteriorate any sense of solidarity. Durkheim would certainly be disappointed by the lack of advance towards clear moral imperatives among con-temporary labourers, but the ill outcomes would not be wholly surprising.

Dividing labour and contentious identity formation

This is not to say that Durkheim’s view on working identities avoids stinging critique. A ‘spon-taneous’ division of labour in which ‘intrinsic’ abilities allowed individuals to pursue their ‘natu-ral’ talents has much potential, optimistically; organic solidarity could certainly follow if all believed to be playing their working part in the grander structure of society, and that their counterparts were similarly involved in the social cell. Many take pride in their labours, and the
resulting contributions to the progress of modern civilization. Yet Durkheim’s prudent caution, noted earlier, that ‘certain social functions are not adjusted to each other’ is a significant predicament.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the thesis surrounds the crux of the work, namely the definition one attributes to ‘spontaneity’ in the division of labour. As Durkheim states, this element of the arrangement is essential; forced division of labour creates tension that unsettles organic solidarity and encourages anomic behaviour (1964/1933: 383–5). Even if granted the ideal set of individuals whose differences would harmoniously comprise the necessary labours for society’s functioning, Durkheim’s thesis is based on the (now) politically incorrect notion that some individuals are simply suited to lesser work. As he states, ‘labour is divided spontaneously only if society is constituted in such a way that social inequalities exactly express natural inequalities’ (cited in Giddens 1972: 12). Feminists have rightly lambasted this aspect of his theory, as one could easily deduce from his perspective that women were ‘naturally’ matched with domestic labour. Though such work involves a diversity of difficult tasks and requires a nurturing patience that should be coveted among human characteristics, the darker and deeply troubling implication of this statement is that women are therefore unsuitable for ‘professional’ endeavours. For a theorist that stressed the wrongful direction of cause and effect in social situations, it is either a glaring omission, or extremely wishful thinking, to suppose that our ‘natural inequalities’ are not, to a large extent, socially determined.

Marx, alienated labour and spirit life

Though Marx primarily addressed the issue of work through the demonizing lens of labour’s alienating, estranging and deteriorating features, it is essential to regard his philosophical orientation as anything but anti-work. Indeed, these aforementioned virulent declarations may give, at initial glance, an impression that he despised the idea of labour, and considered work to be a nuisance at best, and a plague on humanity at worst. From this standpoint, it is tempting to conclude that Marx’s views on work do not speak to identity to the extent of categorical division in Durkheim or Weber’s take on work ethic and rationality, given his undeniably critical spirit. This position is incredulously misplaced, and misunderstands the fundamental position Marx attributed to labour in the composition of society.

Rather, his social theory makes a strong proclamation (at least in the earlier writings) concerning the inherently intertwined nature of one’s labour and identity. The power that lies in work was, for Marx, its candid and usually cruel route of self-formation. Truly, his primary focus was on its ability to effect self-deformation, perhaps best exemplified in the work of his friend and contemporary Friedrich Engels in the influential Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844 (1950/1887). One should not be surprised by their depressed impressions given the awful circumstances of nineteenth-century factory work. Yet, if labour is so significant as to enable horrible distortions of human life and activity, Marx’s critique of capitalism also simultaneously affirmed labour’s primary role in the making of one’s identity. If work can separate ‘species from man’ (cited in Tucker 1978: 75), it necessarily is also involved, provided optimal circumstances, in the positioning of oneself in organic relation to their species being.

Without a proper background, the arguments surrounding ‘species being’ and ‘inorganic nature’ seem fanciful and lacking in objectivity. Even supporters of Marx, usually proponents of his later work Capital (1906/1867), dismiss the radical humanism of the famed Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Marx 1964/1844; for critique, see Althusser 1971). Yet for the purposes of a classical exploration into work identity, arguably no better engagement exists. As will be briefly explicated in the conclusion of this subsection, his view went beyond the
Durkheimian functionalism concerned with collectivity and sociality of categories of work; debatably, Marx provided a deeper analysis of the secular spirituality of labour in reaction to two of his primary influences, Georg Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach. To fully understand and situate this philosophical position, it is necessary to first explore what Marx meant by estranged labour and alienation.

Estranged labour and the four aspects of alienation

David B. Riazanov, the director of the Marx–Engels Institute in the 1920s, is said to have remarked that Marx was translated twice: first from his difficult handwriting to legible German, and then from German into (in Riazanov’s case) Russian. The implications surrounding the translation of Marx’s famed section *Die entfremdete Arbeit* (here, ‘Estranged Labour’) are significant, as is the case with deciphering many philosophical works for an audience not versed in the native language of the text. Following Martin Milligan’s (cited in Tucker 1978) interpretation, the recurrent term in Marx’s work *Entfremdung* is translated as ‘estrangement’. The creation of this sense of estrangement is referred to through the term *Entaussässern*, or alienation (though, as Tucker insightfully notes, a more literal translation would be objectification). The interaction of the process of alienation and its resulting estrangement from one’s fruits of labour is key to an understanding of identity formation in Marx’s thinking.

Alienation begins with the uniquely externalized nature of labour under capitalism. From the infamous proclamation, ‘[w]e proceed from an actual economic fact’, Marx (ibid.: 71) makes the claim that an inverse relationship exists between the wealth produced by one’s labour and the individual’s personal financial situation. While this ‘fact’ is clearly an absurd generalization in contemporary society (though the final section of this chapter will support its continuing relevance concerning largely invisible labourers, as witnessed through brief case studies of immigrant meat workers in the USA and global sex workers), in the mid-nineteenth century, it was a remarkable observation. City life provided images of wealth never before observed by rural migrants, but the harsh reality was that their share would not increase, obfuscated and pilfered through structural objectification of their labour power.

Indeed, while Marx at times nostalgically portrayed a romanticized version of pre-modern labour, it was certainly the case that a tradesperson even in feudal times was more directly linked to the products of their labour than the factory worker of early capitalism. He did not deceive himself into thinking a labourer had more wealth in centuries past, or had life any easier; but Marx’s Unthinkable, as Charles Lemert (2007) has termed it, was that modernity should have provided a better life. As Marx (cited in Tucker 1978: 71) succinctly stated, contradictorily, ‘[w]ith the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men’. Noteworthy from this analysis was the congealing, as Marx had it, of labour in a product, one that was foreign to the interests of its producer. Of course, work often results in external products; this was not novel. Yet Marx argued, beyond this given, that the process of alienating objectification constructed a newly felt estrangement, one in which the labourer was physically and mentally separated from his toils: ‘the more values he creates, the more valueless . . . the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker . . . the more ingenious labour becomes, the duller becomes the worker’ (ibid.: 73). The labourer, in effect, was reduced in factory work to an exploited commodity making machine, producing products for ‘an alien world antagonistically opposed to him’ (ibid.: 74).

This estrangement through one’s labour product was only one of four dimensions of alienation proposed by Marx; the others follow a similar logic. Workers were also estranged from themselves. In devoting physical and mental energy to the creation of the alien product described...
above, the process itself contorted the life of the labourer, wherein one ‘no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating . . . in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal’ (ibid.: 74). Once again, some may challenge such a statement in contemporary society, but the less fortunate labourers among us are undoubtedly far more constricted; those confined to sweatshops have been noted to be denied even the most basic ‘animal’ functions. Indeed, as stated at the outset of this chapter, work identities are not definable in singularities, or even dualities. A continuum is the only possible framework to make sense of the modern phenomenology of labour. But even within democratic nations with labour laws, as Barbara Ehrenreich’s (2001) brief colleagues at Wal-Mart could attest to, there is the sting of Marx’s proclamation: our activity turned against us, our self-estrangement.

Most abstract and theoretical was the third level of estrangement, namely the separation from one’s species being. By species being, Marx meant, quite simplified, what makes us human. Instantly a paradox seemingly arises: how is it that one could be other than what one is? Many consider freedom to be paramount to the human experience; the language surrounding prison ‘taking away inmates’ freedom’ is a testament to this. Marx believed alienating labour to be near to imprisonment, in that it did not serve beyond a ‘means of satisfying a need – the need to maintain the physical existence’ (cited in Tucker 1978: 75–6). Answering only to this need was part of the third process of alienation. The fourth and final stage of estrangement is simply a cumulative deduction; after alienation from one’s product, oneself, and one’s species being, it is not a large leap to suppose that workers are estranged from each other. Yet it is perhaps the deeper philosophical point on estranged species being that is most pertinent to modern discussions of labour.

Species being and work identity

Evaluated through a contemporary lens, Marx’s writings on estrangement and alienation are argued to be cursory generalizations. Movements of workers are seemingly more connected to their labour than ever before, as a significant and growing group have attained the status as ‘new independent workers’, as Daniel Pink (2001) contends in Free Agent Nation. Forcefully, Pink and those of a similar standpoint challenge the relevance of bourgeois versus proletariat, factory owners versus workers, property owners versus the property-less in an age of blurred categories of employment and class. What these analysts fail to register are the massive groups of workers who embody anything but independence, as outlined in the case studies of the third section of this chapter. Yet beyond these ideal alienated types (ideal in the Weberian sense; they are very sad cases), the lasting resonance for society at large, even those most affluent among us, is the loss of ‘live-activity’, as estranged labour is capable of tearing from us our ‘species life, [our] real species objectivity’ (Marx, cited in Tucker 1978: 76), a claim which necessitates further explication.

‘The animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life-activity’ (ibid.: 76). What distinguished humans and animals, for Marx, was that our life-activity is conscious, and this fundamental difference is what makes us species beings. Our freedom derives from producing beyond immediate needs. As he brilliantly deduced, ‘[o]r it is only because he is a species being that he is a Conscious Being, i.e. that his own life is an object for him’ (ibid.: 76). Estranged labour, however, had the effect of reversing this connection between life and object, as commodities preceded workers’ identities.

Herein the muddled connections of estrangement versus organic life-activity come to light, especially considering Marx’s critique, influenced partly by Feuerbach, of Hegel’s philosophical
religiosity. Marx was building a secular notion of what it is to be human, and based it on the free fulfillment of one’s intellectual and physical powers. Harnessed away from one’s self, life’s purpose was necessarily limited. As he lamented, “estranged labour . . . transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him . . . in degrading spontaneous activity, free activity, to a means, estranged labour makes man’s species life a means to his physical existence” (ibid.: 77). Marx did not feel it necessary to utilize a framework of the dualistic religious soul to feel estranged. For all the proper critiques of Marx, including his neglect of the specifically feminine perspective, and the universalist nature of his claims, the inversion of life’s relation to objects, and the resulting detriment to species life, is quite truly a widely held predicament to this day.

To finish on this note, however, would only do justice to half of Marx’s conception of labour identity. The reversal just explicated does have severely menacing consequences, but there also is an inherent optimism to his critique. The inverse of this reversal clues into the importance he attributed to labour identity; species being, intimately linked with free, organic work, is a wonderfully unique possibility of humanness. Indeed, labour beyond coerced tasks is, for Marx, a fundamental aspect of humanity, intertwined with the ‘laws of beauty’ (ibid.: 76).

Contemporary labour identities

‘The “jobs for life” has disappeared’, commences Ulrich Beck’s (2000: 2) influential book, The Brave New World of Work. Translated from German, it is quite possible that Beck did not mean jobs, but rather meant careers; for as Richard Sennett (1998: 9) notes in the preface of his work, The Corrosion of Character,

The emphasis is on flexibility . . . this emphasis . . . is changing the very meaning of work, and so the words we use for it. ‘Career,’ for instance, in its English origins meant a road for carriages, and as eventually applied to [labour] meant a lifelong channel for one’s economic pursuits . . . The word ‘job’ in English of the fourteenth century meant a lump or piece of something which could be carted around. Flexibility today brings back this arcane sense of the job, as people do lumps of [labour], pieces of work, over the course of a lifetime.

This passage has been reproduced at length for the simple reason that Sennett here acutely encapsulates the position of many social theorists concerning contemporary working identities. Beck and Sennett share two readily identifiable commonalities: each uses the word ‘new’ in the title of their works, and, additionally, the allusion to Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World by Beck (or his English translator) and the diction of ‘corrosion’ throughout Sennett’s writing clearly indicate, at the very least, an apprehensive position to labour in the late twentieth century. Though occasionally theory is unfortunately aloof, there is substantial objective evidence that grounds these claims: Sennett (1998: 22) cites Manpower Inc., a temporary job agency, as the largest employer in the United States; Beck (2000: 2) cites the decrease in German full-time job holders from nine in ten in the 1960s to only two-thirds in the 1990s. Along with Bauman (2004), the trio cover a diverse set of theoretical stances, but all three argue persuasively regarding the precarious situation of temporary work.

As will be explicated below, the terminology differs: appropriating their thematic arguments, Beck refers to risky work, Sennett to corrosive work and short-termism, and Bauman to liquid work and redundant labour. Their foci are significant, but so too are the works of feminist theorists of labour; later, Hochschild’s pioneering concept of ‘emotional labor’ (2003/1983) will also be engaged. What might be said of this section is that just as Durkheim and Marx were
both intrigued and afraid of the shift from labour identities in traditional civilizations to those in modern societies, so too are many theorists today concerned and frequently ominous (thereby less Durkheimian) in their assessments of contemporary work and predictions for the trajectory into the future. New paradigms necessitate novel philosophies and critiques, yet classical theory continues to be significant.

But as was stated at the outset of this chapter, it would be quite mistaken to appropriate an essentialized view of labour in which a universal phenomenological work identity attempts to encapsulate all working individuals. The pernicious atmosphere portrayed by Beck, Sennett and Bauman will necessarily be counterpoised against and critiqued by those who relish the new world of work, as embodied by Pink in his ‘manifesto’, Free Agent Nation (2001), and parts of Anthony Elliott and John Urry’s forthcoming Mobile Lives (2010). These thinkers will be situated within Anthony Giddens’ notion of reflexivity (1984), illustrating that a deterministic approach to working identities removes, to an unreasonable extent, the agency of individuals in forming their future trajectories. To assist the comprehension of the diverse array of literature covered in the subsequent sections, the following broad categorical divisions will be made: concerns surrounding new work (Beck, Sennett and Bauman), a critique of the aforementioned concerns (Giddens, Pink, Elliott and Urry), followed by a special consideration of the authentic (especially feminine) self under new labour (Hochschild and Goffman).

**Precarious labour**

Beck, Sennett and Bauman have all made distinct contributions to the analysis of the new structure (or lack thereof) of work, yet for all their differences, much is similar as well. Each sees an era, typically referred to as Fordism, as having ended, replaced by a neoteric arrangement that bears little in resemblance to previous conceptions. Fordism takes as an archetypal example its namesake, Henry Ford and his motor company, in illuminating the practice of labour in the early twentieth century. Ford’s workers were among the first to experience a production line, in which each individual was responsible for a single task as the product moved from its bare essentials to a finished, sellable commodity. However, more importantly, this standardized atmosphere extended well beyond the physical process of production: their lives too ran in a similar fashion. An individual would often perform the same task from entering the workforce as a young adult until retirement. Consistency was expected at the job, but was likewise provided for the labourer. It was a cyclical union between the labour process, the labourer’s product and the labourer’s identity – a steadiness that kept all boats from rocking too much. Sennett refers to an ‘era of relative stability’ (1998: 23). As Daniel Cohen notes, Ford claimed to double the wages of his workforce so that they would be able to afford to buy their wares, but this was a farce; rather, the point was ‘to fix them to the chain’ (cited in Bauman 2000: 58). All three theorists in this subsection convincingly demonstrate the demise of such a labour system, a contention with which even Pink would agree.

What they each contend in a different flavour of caution, a supposition decidedly opposed to Pink’s perspective, is that the calming foreknowledge of what was to come for one’s working lifetime has been replaced by a troubling and frequently incapacitating dread: the dread that accompanies not knowing when one will be in or out of the labour force. Even when working with the same employer, location and tasks can change instantaneously and drastically. The standardization of production has not changed; Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation (2002) and George Ritzer’s McDonaldization theses (1993) explicate quite clearly that fast-food companies have taken Taylorization, or the scientific management of labour, to a consistency-driven extreme. Yet what has eroded is the need for multinational companies, as Ford tried, to still steady their
workers. Stability is now one-sided. Sennett’s quote at the outset of this section stressed flexibility as a key theme of labour today. For Bauman (2000: 2), it is fluidity, as his ‘liquid’ metaphor so elegantly encapsulates,

these features of fluids . . . unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape . . . While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but ‘for a moment’ . . . these are the reasons to consider ‘fluidity’ or ‘liquidity’ as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways novel, phase in the history of modernity.

Many observers may consider these trends obvious. After all, the news is constantly filled with technology stories and CEO profiles that clearly illustrate themes of speed. Stringendo refers to a quickening of tempo, but literally means a tightening, and its aptness of metaphorical application in contemporary society is no secret.

Yet the particularly significant contribution of each theorist is to elaborate on the disconcerting effects of going from moderato/allegretto to presto. Beck speaks of the risk inherent to a ‘second modernity’, wherein ‘securities, certainties and clearly defined boundaries of the first modernity’ lose ground to ‘insecurities, uncertainties and loss of boundaries in the second modernity’ (2000: 70). Vitally, he explains, risk as a concept may vacillate between ‘an activation principle that is the glory of human civilization’, or on the other end of the spectrum ‘a creeping or galloping threat to human civilization and civil spirit, a catastrophic possibility that progress will swing round into barbarism’ (ibid.: 71). Which occurs cannot be known, and Beck has recommendations for avoiding the latter (which will addressed in the conclusion of the chapter), but the ‘blurring or fuzziness which marks the picture of work’ (ibid.: 70) does not exactly elicit substantiated optimism. Sennett, in several personal case studies, documents the difficulties encountered by workers trying to keep up with the times: one apt archetype is Rose, whose desire to be perceived as youthful (in order to compete in the labour market) led her to using ‘soft contacts, which were horrible’, and as he deftly notes, ‘[they] irritated her eyes; at the office she looked like a woman constantly on the verge of tears’ (Sennett 1998: 92).

Perhaps the most insightful admonitory theorist of contemporary work identity is Bauman, whose acute eloquence has an unfortunate outcome in that some readers misconstrue his project. Indeed, even Sennett misreads the prescriptions of Liquid Modernity, claiming that it ‘adds up to more freedom in modern society, a fluid freedom’, and even going so far as to associate Bauman with the ‘apostles of the new capitalism’ (2006: 12–13). This is an erroneous statement and could not be further from his perspective. Rather, Bauman (2000: 150) writes of a ‘docile population, unable and unwilling to put up an organized resistance to whatever decision the capital might yet take’. Our supposed freedom is increasingly tempered since even when we might try to make plans, ‘our earnest efforts to “put things in order” often result in more chaos, formlessness and confusion . . . our labour to eliminate contingency and accident is little more than a game of chance’ (ibid.: 136). As far as our identities fare in such a game, there is no sense of brightness in a ‘resemblance to the famed cyber-mole who knew how to move around seeking an electrical socket to plug into in order to replenish the energy used up in moving around in search of an electrical socket to plug into in order to replenish the energy’ (ibid.: 139), continuing until one cannot find the next socket in time, or decides (perhaps is forced) to end the search prematurely. Conceivably Bauman’s vision is a kind of freedom, but one accompanied
Transformations of working identities

by a stinging paralysis of life only on the move, as he quotes Emerson, ‘in skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed’ (ibid.: 209); this is not a desirable safety, nor is the ‘freedom’ under liquid modernity covetable either.

Another distinct contribution that Bauman makes to the discourse and semantics of contemporary labour identities is the transition from ‘unemployed’ to ‘redundant’. The prefix ‘un’, as he suggests, implies an ‘anomaly . . . a manifestly temporary and abnormal condition . . . patently transient and curable’ (Bauman 2004: 10). Unemployment was a phase; the unemployed individual would necessarily seek to remedy the juncture by finding employment, just as the unhealthy take measures to lead themselves to recovery. Further, such a linguistic framework also indicated a society whose concern for labour was paramount to identity, a perspective illustrated above through Durkheim and Marx. But not so for redundancy, whose semantic implications are of ‘permanence and hints at the ordinariness of the condition’, and as Bauman deftly adds, ‘[i]t names a condition without offering a ready-to-use antonym’ (ibid.: 11). Not only are those that are redundant dispensable and disposable (quite literally, as will be shockingly elaborated on in the final section), the most unfortunate part for such individuals is the feeling that ‘[t]he others do not need you; they can do as well, and better, without you’ (ibid.: 12). Durkheim’s organic solidarity and the elimination of anomie seems a distant goal.

Criticism of contemporary labour identities: reflexive labour

One could deceptively quote Marx as having written, ‘Men make their own history’, though clearly the philosophically poignant and precarious qualifier that directly followed, ‘but they do not make it just as they please’ (cited in Lemert 2004: 42), expressed the heart of his sentiment. The role of the social actor in the making of societies has since been fiercely debated in social theory. This is not to say that Marx was the first to struggle with issues of free will and determinism, or that social theory is the only discipline concerned with its implications: from the Ancient Greeks through to the Renaissance, and still today with the advents of quantum physics, a diverse set of thinkers, from philosophical and scientific backgrounds, have contributed to our acceptance or refusal of freely, self-directed action. Literary figures have also weighed in, as two-thirds of a century before Marx wrote The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1785) memorably opined,

The best laid schemes of mice and men
Go often askew,
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
For promised joy!

How often our plans go askew maps the spectrum of what is known commonly in sociology as the structure-agency debate. For those in the former category, at the extreme, social structures such as schools, government, law, religion and family determine our everyday actions and future trajectories. One such social theorist was Claude Lévi-Strauss, who wrote of life as a card game, the shuffling done before we are born, with our only choice involving how to play the predestined cards in a given rule system (1966/1962: 95). This is reminiscent of Bauman’s more sobering passages. Since very few sociologists are at the other extreme end of the spectrum (as social structures are integral to the discipline), one such polemical figure was the former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who declared that there was no such thing as society; rather, there were only individuals, whose independently performed actions constituted all of humankind. In presenting the views of Beck, Sennett and Bauman thus far, hardly any attention has
been paid to less structural views of labour identity. The latter’s encapsulation of the modern worker as a cyber-mole especially ran against the notion of a freely operating labourer.

Most stinging to deterministic perspectives are those theorists who have transcended the structure-agency dichotomy, of which Anthony Giddens’s theories of reflexivity and structuration are paramount. In some ways, Durkheim’s functionalism was an early attempt at such a feat. As was previously discussed, the contentious idea of ‘spontaneous division of labour’ implied certain levels of constriction via social structures. But the organic solidarity felt thereafter in the glow of each member spontaneously coming to contribute their functional role to the operation of a grander society would provide a healthy sense of individuality. Still, Durkheim’s outlook tended to stress the difficulties of a self-aware agency within modern arrangements. Many divergent contentions surrounding the theory of manipulated individualism, wherein varied structures loom large over dopey individuals, were claimed by members of the Frankfurt School; one such dope was Marcuse’s (1964) one-dimensional man, unable to see the contradictions in society well enough to critique it. Giddens challenged these notions of the ignorant, puppet-like actor. Unlike those explored above who see the individual as a paralyzed robotic ‘agent’ in the face of a second, late or liquid modernity, the theory of reflexivity defends a decidedly more aware actor, one who can potentially thrive on the monitoring, adjusting and changing of the self in relation to others and societal structures. By no means casting away structures as did Thatcher, Giddens rather stresses that ‘actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their activities and expect others to do the same for their own; they also routinely monitor aspects, social and physical of the contexts in which they move’ (1984: 5). Structures still matter, but their role in the formation of identity is as part of a cyclical directing of the self. In a critique of the famed neo-Marxist Louis Althusser’s argument that individuals imbued with ideology are only provided identity via an interrogated ‘hailing’ by the state (the ‘hey you, stop!’ of a police officer is the example he gives), Giddens notes that such a perspective fails to incorporate ‘a theory of action which recognizes human beings as knowledgeable agents, reflexively monitoring the flow of interactions with one another’ (ibid.: 30).

While contained in the theory of reflexivity are some hurdles, including the inherent uncertainty of changing selves in need of consistent monitoring and modernized addictions (beyond traditional substance abuse), within the refashioning and acclimation to modernity are significant benefits. A topical example provided by Giddens is the initial pain framed around intimacy and relationships in ‘disrepair’, with divorce rates constituting half of all marriages in many nations. Bauman in *Liquid Love* (2003) laments such ‘top-pocket’ relationships, accessible and disposable, hence consumable and commodified. But it is essential to acknowledge that the ‘‘til death do us part’ of marriage was as much a prison to some as paradise for others. Giddens’s interviews in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) explicated the not widely enough held suspicion that women often felt locked into relationships, trapped by traditional formations of marriage. With regard to work identities, so too were many of the more reliable labour situations: the deadening of skilled work and injunction of thoughtless, menial labour documented by Harry Braverman in *Labor and Monopoly Capital: the degradation of work in the twentieth century* (1974) could provide certainty for the worker’s identity, but little else of benefit. What good is attempting to prevent the corrosion of character as caused by short-termism if it only solidifies an alienated, uninspired identity? Modernity requires that actors change over the courses of their lives as the social structures around change in tandem. Elliott aptly summarizes Giddens’s view, ‘[t]he relationship between self, society and reflexivity is a dynamic one, involving the continual overturning of traditional ways of doing things’ (2007: 48–9). The contemporary world is one in which reflexivity has only recently been fully realized, but already is quite essential to a more com-
plete satisfaction with one’s trajectory of identity. In embracing such an arrangement, there is a significant chance to be dynamically engaged with one’s self in a positive manner.

Though Giddens’s structuration theory is not concentrated on labour as much as the previous theorists, numerous other authors have made loosely Giddensian claims regarding contemporary labour. Daniel Pink, the populist author of the work *Free Agent Nation* (2001), wrote of the release from the shackles of lifetime obedience and devotion to a company unaware of individual workers’ presence. At least some of today’s ultra flexible individuals thrive in their open environment, more attentive to their desires and needs from working life, and the subsequent balance with private life. Anthony Elliott and John Urry’s work *Mobile Lives* (2010) further documents the advent of such trends, presenting the stories of established, yet pressured professionals whose varied (geographically, mentally and emotionally) working lives would probably be described by Bauman as a paralyzing chaos; but Elliott and Urry, while acknowledging such risks (especially over the long term with regard to dwindling resources), also illuminate the potentialities of reflexively oriented lives.

Though the socioeconomic statuses of individuals in *Mobile Lives* are quite high even for industrialized nations, and Pink’s free agents are only slightly lower by global percentile of earnings and wealth, reflexivity is not simply a bourgeois-only club. A widely blogged *New York Times Magazine* article by Sara Corbett (2008) entitled ‘Can the cellphone help end global poverty?’ defended the idea, through a profile of Nokia’s ‘human behavior researcher’ and ‘user anthropologist’ Jan Chipchase, that the poorest workers in the world also benefit from reflexive awareness, utilizing a significant ‘knowledge multiplier’ (Elliott and Lemert 2006) of modernity, namely the mobile phone. From farmers in Nepal getting the best prices for their produce to a ‘live-in housekeeper in China who was more or less an indentured servant until she got a cell-phone so that new customers could call and book her services’: these ‘just-in-time’ moments, or what Giddens might consider rapid cycles of reflexivity (evaluating a constantly changing situation and monitoring when best to make one’s move), are arguably more beneficial than for Pink’s or Elliott and Urry’s individuals. As Corbett (2008) deftly notes, most Blackberries and iPhones are for convenience, rather than the life and death type of reflexivity employed by ‘a mother in Uganda who needs to carry a child with malaria three hours to visit the nearest doctor but who would like to know first whether that doctor is even in town’. Beyond the passive, confused ignoramuses that are portrayed in the darker portions of Beck, Sennett and Bauman, Giddens’s notion of reflexivity as applied to labour illustrates the need to see a grander spectrum of involvement with identity.

**Emotional labour, hidden labour and the privilege of reflexivity**

The term ‘emotional labor’ was introduced by Arlie Hochschild, popularized through her major work *The Managed Heart: commercialization of human feeling* (2003/1983), and though published before Giddens’s *Constitution of Society*, it provides the grounds for a partial critique of reflexivity in the realm of work. Both Hochschild and Giddens emphasize the importance of Erving Goffman’s seminal *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman’s influence for these divergent theorists is contained in his dramaturgical metaphor: even in some of the most banal face-to-face interactions between individuals, highly managed attempts at specifically desired self-portrayals occur, such that each person becomes like an actor. Of great importance for Goffman was the situational effect on acting; expanding on the dramaturgy, one’s front stage is the self we desire (or need) others to see, as might occur at a job interview, a first date, or even a passport interview. As intriguing, however, is the backstage, where the actor decides that acting is simply not necessary or as vital as in front stage situations, as might occur in the
privacy of one’s home or vehicle. This is not to say that the backstage is unable to find its way into situations normally only considered to be front stage. The maintenance of front stage composure is by no means easily accomplished. The backstage may also be thought of as a break; keeping the show on at all waking hours, with all our expected conscious and unconscious manipulations, contortions and adjustments, is physically and emotionally draining. Partly for this reason, Giddens stresses from Goffman’s work the immense accomplishments of everyday life, often taken for granted, that are possible solely through such reflexive directing of interactions.

While Hochschild would certainly agree with Giddens on this point in Goffman, she posits an exception to reflexivity by bringing attention to those who do emotional labour, which requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others – in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place’ (2003/1983: 7). At first glance, this sounds fairly analogous to Goffman’s focus on bodily tact and Giddens’s monitoring of the self. However, her distinguishing observation follows from the potentially forced nature of the actor, as one who is caught between inner feelings and outward projections. For all the controversy over the ‘authentic’ self within the dramaturgical perspective, at least there is a sense of self-directedness; yet many contemporary working identities, especially in the growing service sectors, are denied this tempered autonomy. What happens when our front-stage performance is directed by our employer? For instance, the focus of much of Hochschild’s analysis surrounds flight attendants, whose ability to smile no matter what emotion a difficult passenger may make them feel is paramount to the job, as she summarizes, ‘in the flight attendant’s work, smiling is separated from its usual function, which is to express a personal feeling, and attached to another one – expressing a company feeling’ (ibid.: 127). Indeed, this is by no means limited to one occupation: a manual for legal secretaries advised, ‘[y]ou are pleasant under strain . . . executives hire secretaries for pleasant dispositions . . . [as one executive commented]: ‘I need a secretary who can stay cheerful even when I get grouchy, work piles up, and everything else goes wrong’ (cited in Hochschild, 2003/1983: 148).

It may be tempting to write off Hochschild’s thesis as insignificant to working identities, but there is a decidedly ominous trajectory to the commercialization of a false emotional labour self, especially for women. Much of emotional labour is done in the service economy, which Sennett and Jonathan Cobb point out in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972) is perceived by the public as among the lowest categories of work in Western society. It is also done by a ratio of nearly five women for every two men (Hochschild 2003/1983: 171). Of course, emotional labour is not limited simply to females, as by Hochschild’s estimation, one in six men are expected to do some degree of feeling management. Yet at a three to one ratio of women to men across all realms of emotional labour (ibid.: 11), and significantly worse forms of emotional contortion for the former (ibid.: 162–71), there is an undeniable patriarchal legacy. An interview (cited in Hochschild 2003/1983: 183) with a sex therapist who treated approximately fifty flight attendants for ‘loss of sexual interest’ and ‘preorgasmic problems’ is especially revealing:

These women don’t ever get the chance to decide who they are, and this shows up in their sexual life . . . they don’t get the chance to explore the other sides of their character and to discover their own needs, sexual or otherwise. Some of them have been so fixed on pleasing others that while they don’t dislike men, they don’t actively like them either . . . They hold onto their orgasmic potential as one of the few parts of themselves that someone else doesn’t possess.
To stress again, Hochschild is anything but a disbeliever in reflexivity, or its potential benefits in certain situations. The same could probably be said, to a lesser degree, for Beck, Sennett and Bauman. Yet as Hochschild encapsulates, contemporary work is infused with contradictions and impediments to reflexivity, such that our self-monitoring may even be a more painful option than complete disconnection and disassociation from one’s labour, in which case Bauman’s cyber-mole becomes a (slightly) less insidious metaphor.

**Hidden labour: case studies**

Reflexivity is a grand concept, to which a diversity of successful labour identity strategies and innumerable technological benefits are attributable (the history of the personal computer is a prime example of reflexive innovation); yet its contemporary arrangement is inextricably intertwined with those for whom reflexivity is impossible. Many of the conveniences that allow for a fuller evaluation of our lives are produced via hidden labour. The following case studies of immigrant meat workers in the USA and global sex slaves will be quite brief: entire book-length works often fail to fully cover the enormity of information that slowly pilfers through censored mediums (for a solid introduction to slavery, see Kevin Bales (1999) *Disposable People*, for sex slaves in particular see Julia O’Connell Davidson (2005) *Children in the Global Sex Trade*, and for immigrant meat workers, see the movie *Food Inc.* (2008), chapter 8 of Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* (2002) and Phillip Martin (2009) *Importing Poverty?*). The point of this section, therefore, is not to cover an immense amount of detailed material in less space than would be possible, but rather to critique perspectives of labour identity that solely consider privileged workers, additionally grounding the theory in tangible contemporary challenges. These hidden labourers show the importance of certain theorists explored thus far, especially surrounding Marx, materiality and exploitation, Bauman, short-termism and disposability, and an extreme version of Hochschild’s emotional labour thesis. On a broader level, surreptitious forms of labour illuminate further themes of great importance for social theory: first, as already discussed, the breaking of positivist and essentialist perspectives of work identities, and additionally labour’s relation to colonialism, cosmopolitanism and globalization. Though these individuals experience ‘bare life’ in Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) sense (biologically alive, dead in almost every other respect), their labour identities are of vital importance for achieving a fuller picture of work.

Before embarking on this short but difficult section, a brief clarification of terminology regarding ‘slaves’ is required. Pink unashamedly abuses the term without any context, referring to exploited temporary workers as ‘tempslaves’ (2001: 214–19). Surely the exploitation of these relatively privileged (from a global perspective) individuals is a worthwhile site of critique, but their classification as slaves prevents a rigorous academic inquiry into forced labour. Slavery is, by Bales’s definition, ‘the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation’ (1999: 6). The meaning of ‘total control’ is not exact, but it often involves encounters with foreign languages and laws, and frequently mired in intimidation, both physical and mental; it is not applicable to doing safe, but boring work for low, but liveable wages. For the purposes of this chapter, Bales’s categorical separation will be used, and those that cheapen the identities of forced labourers like Pink should be considered irresponsibly misleading.

**The story so far (as told through hidden labourers)**

It was argued above that Marx’s notions of alienation and estrangement were more relevant today than the inverse relationships he proposed between labourer and capital; this is certainly the case with the types of work performed by Giddens’s reflexive agents and even Sennett’s
corroded professionals, but immigrant meat workers in the USA (among others) tread disturbingly close to Marx’s ominous predictions. Surely, these latter individuals would feel alienated and estranged if they had any idea of another possibility. Yet what becomes most significant is the unthinkable contradiction between effort and remuneration, both purely monetary and surrounding identity. As Marx (cited in Tucker 1978: 73) stated over a century and a half ago,

The laws of political economy express the estrangement of the worker in his object thus: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more value he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker . . . the more ingenious labour becomes, the duller becomes the worker.

While not true of Pink’s free agents, these ‘laws’ describe exactly the aforementioned meat workers. Tyson Foods, the second largest food producer in the world, slaughters, processes and packages 2.2 billion chickens per year. Though acquitted in 2003 of knowingly hiring illegal immigrants, it is widely argued that not only do upper-level management know of such hiring, but in fact arrange directly for smugglers to deliver new ‘employees’ (Martin 2009: 94). By virtue of both advanced machinery and absurd Taylorization of the chicken ‘assembly line’, each individual is equivalent to hundreds of traditional butchers in terms of productivity. Schlosser (2002: 173) notes that each worker can make upwards of 2.5 million incisions per year, and yet, they are among the most debased of all. *Food Inc.* (2008) describes the precariousness of their status, intimidated into working one hundred hour weeks, sleeping in factories, rarely if ever being paid: ‘the more value he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes’. Also, Schlosser (2002: 169–92) focuses on the scandalous percentage of life-altering injuries, titling his chapter on meat workers ‘The most dangerous job’ (though official statistics would be even higher if illegal immigrants received ‘official’ medical attention): ‘the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker’. Clearly, Marx’s proclamations cannot be claimed to be absent in contemporary society, and need only be adjusted to include the exploited female meat workers as well.

Shifting to more recent analyses of labour identity, despite the debate over the implications of contemporary trends in work, all would agree that labour has been affected by the increasing speed of modernity; once again, hidden labourers shed much light on these insights. Bales describes how slaves were once a significant investment, often costing multiple years’ salary for slave owners in nineteenth-century America. Due to these high costs and the constraints of distance under old forms of transport, they were relatively sparse and spent a long period of time with the individual who purchased them (often through multiple generations). Today, a slave can be purchased for as low as $15 USD and distance does little to hinder the practice, resulting in ‘short-term relationships’ in which slaves are ‘disposable’ (Bales 1999: 14–15). It is often cheaper to let a slave die than treat them for medical ailments. In Thailand, Bales notes, ‘[g]irls are so cheap that there is little reason to take care of them over the long term’ (1999: 59); a positive HIV test is a death sentence, usually by starvation (Thailand now has the highest rate of HIV infection in the world). Short-termism takes on a decidedly revolting direction within modern forms of slavery, as Bauman’s warning of ‘wasted lives’ (2004) is tragically enacted. The contemporary analysis of working identities is embodied in the lives of the most depraved workers, albeit under a significantly more sinister trajectory.

Additionally, Hochschild’s emotional labour reaches its utmost stage for sex slaves, forced to put on front-stage sexual performances for upwards of twenty clients per evening despite the physical and emotional scarring of a sexualized netherworld. If their front-stage act is not convincing,
sex workers are beaten. Unlike the flight attendants of *The Managed Heart*, who held onto their orgasmic potential as a last vestige, there is no such opportunity for these hidden labourers.

**Grand themes, future sites of analysis**

The tendency to both universalize work identities and suppose positivist eventualities of progress have both been critiqued throughout this chapter; even the most maligned individuals provide substantial evidence against such approaches. It is tempting to see all sex workers as the most dominated and exploited of labourers. Yet this has been shown to be untrue through ethnographic work by multiple theorists. O’Connell Davidson stresses that prostitution ‘does not refer to a uniform experience’, as there is a ‘continuum in terms of earnings, working conditions and the degree of control that individuals exercise . . . the experience of those at the top of the hierarchy is vastly different from, some would say incomparable to, that of individuals on the lowest rungs of the sex trade’ (2005: 34). Indeed, prostitution (in a slight number of cases) is a freeing experience, given the accounts of homosexuals oppressed in their home countries, who describe their new-found sexual freedom as sex workers (ibid.: 50–1). Just as individuals differ in their phenomenological experience of professional work in the West, so too do the (mostly) marginalized labourers.

The erratic path of meat workers in the USA over the twentieth century illustrates the difficulty in speaking of stable trajectories of working identities. Though technocrats of a positivist persuasion frame modernity as a constant process towards a better world, it is decidedly untrue of those who carry out Schlosser’s most dangerous job. While it is correct that the horrifying contemporary working conditions are not that different from those described a century ago by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* (1906), there was a period in the middle of the century in which meat work was among the most respected and safest of blue-collar jobs in America (*Food Inc.*, 2008). It has indeed been a roller coaster for the industry, but unfortunately the highs have been abolished, and not only for illegal immigrants: a recent study found that pig-brain mist, only possible due to the practice of using high-pressure compressed air in the processing of the animals, was being inhaled by workers, causing rare immune disorders (Keim 2009). It is clearly the case that work identities change over time, but to posit any sort of linear progression would ignore the multitude of decidedly less certain routes.

Finally, labour speaks to broader themes of globalization and cosmopolitanism, and perhaps no better exemplars exist than the case studies of this section. While Elliott and Urry’s (2010) globetrotting professionals embody the more glamorous side of these issues, it is the teenage girls who travel across many nations against their will that represent the dark side of globalization; they are brief globetrotters before being imprisoned in a single room for the rest of their lives. The ills of globalization continue with the illegal immigrant meat workers who are ‘fired at will’ (Schlosser 2002: 176) after years of debilitating labour to provide a cheaper meal to the marketplace at one of the most American of institutions, fast food. There is mounting evidence that several of the largest food companies have unofficial deals with the Department of Homeland Security to give up a few of their illegal workers per day for deportation; this satisfies the government, while not affecting the production line too greatly (*Food Inc.*, 2008). Labour identities are increasingly affected and affecting processes of globalization and cosmopolitanism, but it is extremely important to remember legacies of colonialism to temper the optimism of the more romanticized global workers. As David Held (1999) astutely notes,

the notion of globalization as the precursor to a single world society or community is deeply flawed . . . global interconnectedness is not experience by all peoples or communities
to the same extent or even in the same way... On the contrary, as both Bull and Buzan have argued, growing interconnectedness may be both a source of intense conflict (rather than cooperation) as well as a product of shared fears and deeply held animosities (Bull 1977; Buzan 1991).

**Conclusion: the continued significance of labour identity?**

The theorists explored thus far have been chosen among the multitude of thinkers on labour identities in an effort to present the significant debates surrounding work. Marx’s scathing critique of the Industrial Revolution’s estranged workers was counterpoised with Durkheim’s hopeful approval of modernizing divisions of labour; Beck, Sennett and Bauman’s cautionary gloominess of short-term work was tempered by the mostly auspicious thesis of reflexive labour via Giddens, Pink, Elliott and Urry; reflexivity was then critically assessed concerning agency under Hochschild’s emotional labourers. Because the analysis focused on the more privileged workers, brief case studies of the most deprived labourers were presented, reinforcing many of the themes of the chapter, and simultaneously critiquing a perspective that fails to take into account hidden labour.

Yet for all the proclamations against universalizing statements of labour identities and valuing of critical analysis through debate, one glaring omission remains: every theorist was seen to posit work as vital to identity. The vast majority of thought on labour follows this supposition. Orwell, in his early work *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), concludes with a passionate plea for ridding the dehumanizing idleness of the tramp’s life. In a related way, William Julius Wilson persuasively reinforces the importance of work to identity in *When Work Disappears* (1996). Brilliantly combining theory and data, he illustrates that for those robbed of legitimate employment opportunities, there is a grave danger of feelings of inadequacy and helplessness, usually leading such individuals to pursue illegal means of hoisting themselves to the level of the gainfully employed.

However, provocative and convincing arguments have been made to the contrary; one of the most notable was ironically Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue (however, it should be noted Marx notoriously claimed if Lafargue represented ‘Marxism’, he himself was not a ‘Marxist’). In his most well-known piece, *The Right to be Lazy and Other Studies*, Lafargue (1883) attempted to dismantle the discourse that supposed labour as essential to one’s life spirit, stating:

> And meanwhile the proletariat, the great class embracing all the producers of civilized nations, the class which in freeing itself will free humanity from servile toil and will make of the human animal a free being, — the proletariat, betraying its instincts, despising its historic mission, has let itself be perverted by the dogma of work. Rude and terrible has been its punishment. All its individual and social woes are born of its passion for work.

Though slightly cursory theoretically, Lafargue had cued into a key idea. Arguably, the work of Beck and Gorz has refined this position. Both theorists, by different approaches, address what they see as the inevitability of less available labour hours (Beck 2000; Gorz 1999). Both also argue for the potentialities of such an arrangement, with Beck calling for increased engagement in civil society and Gorz encouraging a more voluntary approach to accomplishing society’s tasks. Even Pink (2001: 183–95) can be credited for insights on this issue, as he argued that with flexible labour comes more time for family, friends and one’s own creative projects.

Is the future of work then one where employment, as traditionally defined, will be insignificant? Unlike Beck, I hesitate positing a ‘vision of the future’ (2000: 121–79). As was already elaborated at length, pathways of labour identities are precarious and eccentric. While trends point
towards such transformations, there are no analogous laws of work in a Newtonian tradition; labour takes on a decidedly more quantum framework, based on probabilities rather than certainties. Yet for those who desire guiding proclamations through the blizzard of identities and the constantly morphing world of labour, one assured fact is that impoverished individuals will continue to be forced into exploited work (to varying degrees) without extreme intervention. Until such hidden labourers are made visible, their conditions of ‘bare life’ exposed and battled with the utmost vigour, work will surely continue to be relevant for the most nefarious of reasons.

References


