The sometimes confusing array of ways in which the class relations in society are interpreted is not only a problem in the news media and the other various representations produced by the culture industry. The problem exists in the social sciences as well. In the social sciences, research on the American working class has been, to a large extent, framed by the contrast between the conceptual framework of historical materialism (the western Marxist tradition) and the dominant paradigm in social science, which includes foundational texts by Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. In the theoretical framework of historical materialism, the concept of class must be deployed within the wider philosophical and political context concerning the normative issue that is sometimes referred to as the “labor question”, whereas for conventional social scientists working in the dominant tradition the theoretical context that frames the analysis of the concept “class” plays a much more limiting role. In conventional social-science discourse, the issue of class is often distilled down to questions of description, method and accuracy of measurement. Indeed, the sometimes contentious discursive exchanges between those working within the framework of historical materialism and their interlocutors in the social sciences frequently get displaced through, and encoded by, academic debates concerning methodological procedures and techniques for measurement of empirical phenomena.

In conventional social science, the concept of class is typically separated, analytically, from the concept of work so that class is understood as an outcome, in order to frame the issue more generally within a theoretical context that is designed to map patterns of inequality in distributions of wealth and income. In historical materialism, on the other hand, class is conceptually fused together with work, so that class is conceptualized in terms of activity rather than outcome. This difference approaches what Thomas Kuhn, in the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, refers to as a paradigmatic incommensurability, because the manifestation of these differences reveals that in contrast to the framework of historical materialism, social scientists working within the dominant paradigm deny the existence of a working class that exists in antagonism with a capitalist or ruling class. A relationship of that kind simply does not appear in the research results produced by the dominant paradigm in social science.

To return to the normative dimension, it is also important to note that historical materialism does not break from the humanities, because to focus on production and work involves an examination of the unfreedom which pervades the workplace in capitalist
social formations. The critique of unfreedom in the workplace animates much of the
research on the working class within the paradigm of historical materialism. While class
and class struggle are core concepts for those working in the Marxist tradition, it is
important to note that historical materialism is not itself a unified discourse in the social
sciences, as there are several distinct intellectual trajectories that have developed in
response to particular empirical problems. Failure to acknowledge these distinctions
leads many conventional social scientists to incorrectly claim that the Marxist point of
view suffers from crude economic determinism. Part of the problem is that conventional
social science relies almost exclusively upon a reading of the Communist Manifesto to
construct its understanding of the Marxist concept of class, ignoring all of Marx’s more
nuanced analyses of class relations and intra-class fractions, like The Eighteenth Brumaire
of Louis Bonaparte and The Class Struggles in France, to say nothing of the sophisticated
appropriation of Georg Hegel in the Grundrisse and the three volumes of Capital:
A Critique of Political Economy. A truncated reading of Marx leads Weberians like John
R. Hall, the editor of Reworking Class, to claim that “the once dominant Marxist theory
that predicted a historically decisive struggle in the capitalist world between two
classes – workers and owners – is widely recognized as inadequate” (p. 1). This volume
should be seen as an attempt both to provide an alternative view of class as well as to
correct some misinterpretations of the Marxist view on class.

I

On the one hand, what is being studied differs from one paradigm of social research to
another. For reasons having to do with methodological training in their disciplines,
professional social scientists working in the dominant paradigm tend to ignore both the
asymmetrical structural relations that constitute the labor process as well as the history of
the transformation of the social relations of production. Instead, the preferred objects
constituted for analysis are income, education and status levels – what mainstream
sociologists refer to collectively as socio-economic status or “SES” for short. SES is the
central organizing concept in the field of inequality studies in conventional social
science, referred to as “social stratification.” It is important to emphasize that the modi-
fying term “economic,” in the concept SES, is severely restricted to only indicate levels
of income and wealth, phenomena that are said to allow for the expanded exercise of
power in the marketplace. The legacy of narrowing the viewpoint of stratification studies
to the space of markets was forged by Max Weber’s attempts to merge sociological analy-
ses with the marginal utility theory developed by the Austrian School of Economics,
which included important figures such as Carl Menger, Friedrich von Wieser and Eugen
Bohm von Bawerk. The reification of market interactions within conventional social
science means that most stratification research focuses exclusively upon lifestyle differ-
ences, “life chances,” and the unequal distribution of resources, but not on how wealth
is produced in the first place. Weber himself argues in volume two of Economy and
Society that “class situation is…ultimately market situation…the market is the decisive
moment…” (1978, p. 928). This difference in orientation regarding the concept of class
leads Weberians to construe class in terms of questions such as “What does an individual
have?,” and “What is an individual likely to obtain?”, whereas in the tradition of histori-
cal materialism the questions are “What does the person do?”, “What is the individual
likely to do?” and “Will they maintain or change the existing social relations?”
In short, what happens at work during production is outside of the ordinary conceptual framework in the social studies of class inequality. For example, the so-called “occupational ladder” theorized by conventional sociology is understood as a continuum of social status ranks leading from one rung of the ladder up to the next all the way from bottom to top, leaving no conceptual room for understanding a break in the structure of the ladder that would separate individuals into distinct classes (and class fractions) with contradictory interests based upon their relation to the process of production as well as their opposing relationship to one another. Viewing class in terms of a status location on a continuous vertical ladder involves a conceptual process that constructs the phenomenon “class” as a thing that can be located in social space, whereas in historical materialism class is understood as an antagonistic relationship that takes place in time, as a phenomenon that happens. The difference between viewing class as a thing and understanding class as a relationship that develops historically turns upon epistemological differences that orient the direction and content of social research. This dissimilarity between the concept of class in historical materialism and the social–science concept of SES is only partly explained by methodological differences due to the preference for historical analysis among Marxists, and the preference for survey research and statistical methodology among conventional sociologists. The differences go beyond the contrast in methodology. Class and SES are notions that differ from one another in the sense described by Thomas Kuhn, where competing concepts exist within a larger context of incommensurable theoretical paradigms. In short, the issues at hand regarding class versus status are not reducible to questions regarding the proper procedures of measurement. Measuring is ultimately not the issue.

Rather than beginning and focusing the analysis upon the conditions of poverty and inequality (outcomes) as in the conventional paradigm, the tradition of research in historical materialism begins with laboring activity in the analysis of capitalist society because this way of fusing the concepts of class and work places an emphasis on the agency of individuals. By setting the focus on the practices of working people, the researcher is able to reveal the ways in which workers exercise a certain amount of power within the struggles that condition the forms of the workplace and their everyday life outside the workplace. The conventional focus on class as an outcome, however, implicitly assumes a relative disempowerment of workers, since they are mapped onto the bottom of the distribution of wealth, power and status. Mapping and measuring class as outcome conceals and silences working-class agents.

Exploring the region beyond the “market” is the raison d'être for historical materialism. This is not to say that Marxists ignore market dynamics, especially labor market formations, but to ignore the moment of production results in a one-sided point of view on economic activity in general that distorts the understanding of the class relation in capitalist social formations. In an effort to address this weakness in conventional social science, contemporary Marxists continue to analyze the process of proletarianization: namely, the de-skill ing of workers in all segments of the economy through the relentless separation of mental and manual labor that follows from the application of specific forms of technology designed to dominate workers on the shop-floor of the workplace, in both blue- and white-collar working environments. The knowledge of the production process as a whole is wrested away from the minds of workers on the assembly line (as well as office workers isolated in cubicles) and situated within the manuals and computer programs of engineers and computer programmers working for management. Ultimately, this knowledge itself becomes a force of production as it is objectified within machines.
that displace workers on the factory floor and position them as mere appendages of the machines. Key figures in this tradition of sociology include Harry Braverman and Michael Burawoy, who, despite being recognized in the field of sociology, still constitute the minority perspective in the field of stratification and inequality studies.

The process of proletarianization is not limited to manufacturing sectors in the economy. White-collar workers, service-sector workers, and skilled workers in the biotech fields have all been subject to the process of proletarianization. In recent decades, medical doctors who work for health-maintenance organizations (HMOs) have organized themselves into unions as a response to the relative proletarianization of their field. Doctors are among the groups of workers who have shown the fastest rate of growth in new union membership in the United States, as they resist the growing bureaucratic structures of HMOs that threaten to diminish the autonomy of doctors working on the hospital floor. In 1972, one of the first unions for physicians was organized, which today includes dentists under the name Union of American Physicians and Dentists (UAPD). The UAPD exists under the umbrella of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). There is also the Doctors Council in New York City, which is affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Both of these cases demonstrate that income and education (SES) do not determine or constitute class, for while professional physicians as a whole earn an average yearly income of roughly $270,000, these doctors’ unions have been organized to fight against employers for better working conditions, which is a fundamental issue for the labor movement more generally. Professional physicians have very good “life chances” in the Weberian sense, but they also sometimes constitute themselves as a class in terms of their activity; namely, they see their interests as workers to be in conflict with the interests of their employers (HMOs). This phenomenon is far outside the purview of the dominant paradigm in social science, which is incapable of explaining how medical doctors actively seek collective representation of their interests against their employers. In a rather rudimentary manner, conventional social science understands “doctor” as merely a status position near the top of the occupational ladder.

This does not mean, however, that Weberian themes are incommensurate with historical materialism. On the contrary, as we will argue below, there is a way to displace the age-old Weber/ Marx antinomy concerning the concept of class within sociology by shifting the analysis away from concerns about measurement and occupational ladders, and toward framing an understanding of how workers resist work and challenge the power of capitalists to organize the economy throughout various changes in the social formation of capitalism. When the sociological lens shifts to a focus upon the cultural struggle against work, the conceptual wall between Weber and Marx becomes rather porous. We will return to this shift in analysis later, in section III of this essay.

From the point of view of historical materialism, the process of proletarianization is a tendency within capitalist development, not a telos in an Hegelian sense, or a “law” of motion within a framework of social physics as developed by Auguste Comte and his followers. Because proletarianization is a contingent aspect of capitalist development, Marxists focus on historical analysis to explain the particular conditions that make possible the emergence of various processes of proletarianization in particular sectors of the economy. This tendency is referred to as part of the logic of capital accumulation, and because class is understood within historical materialism as a relationship and not a thing, the logic of capital exists in perpetual tension with the counter-logic of labor, i.e. resistance exercised by workers against capitalist working conditions, if not against work
The epic struggle for shorter hours of work, which developed into an international labor movement during the final two decades of the nineteenth century, is a leading example of the counter-logic of labor. Indeed, the struggle against work is understood by many Marxists to constitute many cultural forms produced by the working class. (This part of the reader contains many selections by scholars who have studied the cultural struggle against work.) Furthermore, developments of particular technologies that are key variables in the process of proletarianization must be understood as a response of capitalists to recalcitrant workers. Technology is never deployed in a neutral social environment. The very form and content of technology is the historical product of class struggle. The chapter by Stanley Aronowitz and William Difazio and the chapters by Mike Davis and Harry Braverman address these issues.

Many conventional social scientists, on the other hand, have argued that “Marxism” is an antiquated methodology, lacking the proper tools needed to accurately describe post-industrial or post-modern society. Professional researchers working in the dominant paradigm often turn to questions of method and measurement in an attempt to “prove” that Marxist concepts do not square with empirical reality. In this way, political differences between competing traditions in the social sciences are said to be resolved by an appeal to “truth.” The move here is to attempt to demonstrate that concepts used in the paradigm of historical materialism do not accurately represent the “real” world, in an effort to relegate the Marxist project as a whole to the garbage can of history. The problem, however, is that it is impossible to move from one paradigm to another without radically changing concepts that frame the issues at hand. The question of how objects of knowledge get produced in the first place is left out of disciplinary maneuvers within what Kuhn might refer to as “normal” social science. The group of intellectuals sometimes referred to as the Frankfurt School points to the irony of this strategy; namely, that debates concerning measurement turn our attention away from the matter at hand: social class. From the efforts of professional methodologists we learn a lot about how to do certain kinds of research and the correct ways to conduct measurement with certain kinds of instruments, but not so much about the phenomenon itself, “class.” As a result, in many of these discourses on method, the means become the ends. Conventional social scientists working within the dominant paradigm very rarely reflect upon their categories of knowledge that produce the object of analysis in the first place. Ironically, the discipline of sociology has under its own umbrella of various discourses a rich tradition of such reflection in both the sociology of knowledge and Critical Theory. The sociological discourses on stratification and SES, however, are largely at epistemological odds with those two traditions, because Critical Theory demands reflection on the constitution of facts within scientific discourse, whereas in much of stratification research the emphasis is placed upon technical questions regarding how to follow certain steps in the correct procedural manner when applying instruments of measurement.

As Critical Theorists like Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno point out, methodology and/or measurement is ultimately not the issue; rather, the concept of class cannot be adequately understood unless it is embedded within the labor question, which transcends the positivistic frame of mind that attempts to separate values and facts. Not only must the sociological analysis of class consider the transformation of the labor process – which cannot appear inside the methodological imperative within mainstream social science that focuses on voting data and market interactions outside of the space of actual production – but in addition, the concept of class must be deployed in a normative framework which focuses upon exploitation and, most importantly, the possible liberation
from work, what Marx refers to in *Capital Vol. 3* as the movement from the “realm of necessity” to the “realm of freedom.”

Key figures in the history of conventional sociology like Durkheim, on the other hand, argue that happiness can be found within work, and that “too much” free time causes anxiety among and within individuals, a condition that he coined “anomie.” Following Plato’s theory of justice in the *Republic*, Durkheim believed that inside the social division of labor there exists – *in advance* – a location uniquely designed to match the aptitudes of every individual in society. As long as each individual is able to “freely” locate their occupational niche in the division of labor, then we can claim that we have arrived at a “just” society. Society functions properly and as it *should*, while individuals find meaning in their lives through attachment to the division of labor. Contemporary followers of Durkheim like William Julius Wilson (in the book *When Work Disappears*) continue the neo-functionalist line of reasoning which assumes, *a priori*, that individuals without work suffer from anomie. The argument here is that people need structure in their lives, since on their own they are incapable of controlling their insatiable desires, which left unchecked by the major institutions of society cause the individual to suffer under the crushing weight of their own infinite/unreasonable wants. For Durkheim, workers must not be exposed to too much education and leisure, because if they were, then they would lose their appetite for work, which would throw society into a state of chaos and dysfunction. The question of income and material standard of living as it relates to work is secondary in this line of reasoning because structuring human activity is the main focus.

Indeed, Durkheim’s emphasis on society as a moral community revealed an animosity toward material needs and desires. This particular Durkheimian perspective on the individual who is said to need order as a means to find happiness as well as to be able to function properly in society is a *metaphysical* view, based upon the philosophy of Plato’s *Republic*, but the metaphysics of Durkheim’s description of the needs of the anomic individual in modern capitalist society remains *unconscious* in much of the research conducted in professional sociology today. It is understood *a priori* that the said individual needs his/her free time filled up with structured activity. Research on the class/labor question in the Durkheimian tradition assumes this rather dogmatic perspective on what it means to be human. Thus it exists as an ontology that lurks below the sociology. Furthermore, by identifying constraint as the essence of the social *per se*, and by looking to bolster social authority whenever it seems to sag, Durkheimian sociology tends toward political conservatism through its apologetic stance on the relationship between power, domination and social class within the capitalist division of labor.

Historical materialism draws upon Aristotle rather than Plato. Aristotle’s argument that unstructured leisure time – what Edmund Husserl in the *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* described as the phenomenology of constituting time on your own hands – is necessary for an authentic, gratifying human existence seems to have been lost upon Durkheimian sociologists, but it was a central organizing principle for leaders of the American labor movement during much of the nineteenth century, many of whom, like Samuel Gompers, were familiar with the writings of Marx. Gompers was a cigar roller. It was common practice for cigar rollers to pay individuals referred to as “lectors” to read books out loud to give the rollers something to think about while they worked. Perched atop a makeshift platform in the center of the factory, the lector would read the news in the morning and then shift to literary and political texts in the afternoon including texts by Dostoyevsky, Goethe and Marx among many others. Such activity would be
condemned by Durkheim, since he believed that broadening the “horizons” of workers too much would make it impossible for a worker to adjust to and “freely” accept very narrow and specialized tasks as the condition of his or her existence, and therefore create instability in the division of labor.

Marx, of course, drew many of his questions for social research from the Aristotelian tradition. For the workers who built the international movement for shorter hours of work, the problem was too much work, not too little. In the late nineteenth century, the workweek was six days long, and the workday was typically 12, sometimes 14 hours long. In the United States, the 40-hour workweek and the eight-hour workday were not achieved until passage of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act by Congress during the New Deal era. The epic struggle for shorter hours of work, which drove the labor movement for nearly a century, is a topic that remains alien territory for conventional stratification studies. It is interesting that Durkheim ignored the struggle for shorter hours of work while writing the Division of Labor in Society, which was published in 1893 and later became a foundational text in the field of sociology.

For Marxists on the other hand, the struggle against work is understood to occupy a central place in the content of working-class culture as well as being one of the driving forces that contributes to the development of particular social formations. Included in this part of the reader is an excerpt from Aronowitz and DiFazio’s book Jobless Future, which tells the story of union workers who secured a deal with management that instituted a guaranteed annual wage without work, in exchange for agreeing to management’s plan to implement new technologies at the workplace. The excerpt is based upon DiFazio’s earlier case study of dock workers in his book Longshoremen: Community and Resistance on the Brooklyn Waterfront. Against arguments made by the followers of Durkheim, DiFazio reveals that individuals who lack work, but who have income, do not fall into the abyss of social disorganization, deviance and anomie. On the contrary, the experience of these union members demonstrates that free time with an income translates into both more happiness among individuals and stronger social bonds within the community. These are social bonds formed largely outside of work, in leisure spaces like the pub, the bowling alley and the billiards hall.

**II**

Within the dominant paradigm in sociology the emphasis has been, and continues to be, on the perceived absence of class consciousness among working people in the United States. The dominant view in recent years has been that American workers either remain relatively conservative when compared to their European counterparts or that class is simply not a significant factor in the process of identity construction among American workers. According to sociologists like Paul Kingston (The Classless Society) and Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (The Death of Class), race, ethnicity and gender are more salient identity markers than class when looking at how post-industrial workers understand themselves. Historians like Lizabeth Cohen, however, have revealed that the opposite is the case. In her important book, Making a New Deal, Cohen argues that during the Great Depression workers developed a sense of community based upon their class identity precisely because they could not rely on their ethnic communities to support them in times of profound economic crisis. Because the Great Depression overwhelmed their ethnic network of economic support, workers in Chicago and other parts of the country
took it upon themselves to make a “new deal,” in part by fighting against corporate interests in the struggle to shape the contours of the new Keynesian welfare state.

Furthermore, if we keep the concept “class” fused together with the concept of working activity, then we have a much richer analysis of identity formations. Pakulski’s claim that class is not relevant to how individuals construct their identities only makes sense if we separate the concept of class from working activity. When we keep the focus on work when thinking about the concept of class, we see that the problem of work crosses the identity boundaries created by race, gender, sexual preference, occupational status and so on. Unfortunately, most sociological studies on the social construction of identity fail to consider the phenomenon of work as a contributing factor.

According to Robin Leidner, whose chapter “Identity and Work,” appears in the edited volume, Social Theory at Work, “relatively few contemporary theorists have put work at the center of their analyses of identity in late or postmodernity” (p. 424). The concept of class that Pakulski works with is a static notion of class, which in part explains why some conventional sociologists seek to jettison the concept altogether. If class is understood as process rather than as a thing, then the theoretical paradigm shifts significantly. We agree with Kathi Weeks, who argues in her important book The Problem With Work, that “the politics of and against work has the potential to expand the terrain of class struggle to include actors well beyond that classic figure of traditional class politics, the industrial proletariat” (p. 17). In short, we take the point of view that when the concept of class is fused together with the concept of work activity, then we see class not as a location, or a category assigned to individuals. Rather, class is something we do, something we perform as a significant part of our everyday life activities.

The most recent attempts to jettison the concept of class in sociology depend on particular interpretations of history. The position of sociologists like Pakulski and Kingston is frequently combined with two older arguments: (1) property and wealth have been widely redistributed in the United States, leading to economic conditions that alleviate the struggle between classes, and (2) class conflict has been further resolved through the institutionalization of negotiations between labor and management inside the structure of the modern state. These two points explain why Durkheimian sociologists see labor disputes as merely “industrial” problems that require technical solutions, which can be achieved by tinkering with the existing system through “helping” workers to fit into the system of production.

Marxists, on the other hand, see such phenomena as revolts against the logic of capital, which point beyond mere technical questions and toward normative questions about the purpose and experience of work as well as the possible transcendence of alienation and unhappiness that is produced by work. Marxists inspired by Aristotle always have an eye on the possible expansion of the sphere of leisure, which informs their analysis of working conditions and the class relations that constitutes the very possibility of capitalism as a mode of production.

For sociologists like Kingston, evidence for the lack of class consciousness among American workers is said to exist on the basis of voting behavior, where it is argued that if working-class individuals do not vote in terms of what mainstream sociologists consider to be “real” class issues, then a consciousness of class among workers is supposedly not present, ostensibly because they are satisfied. In contrast, recent scholarship in labor history by historians like Jefferson Cowie reveals the lack of complexity in analyses like Kingston’s, which relies too heavily on voting patterns. In his book Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class, Cowie has convincingly argued that voting
Representing the Working Class

for a Republican candidate during the key decade of the 1970s did not mean that working-class Americans lacked class consciousness per se. Cowie has revealed that in some cases working-class voters (primarily union members) in the 1970s believed that either a socially conservative candidate or a communist candidate would be more willing to stand up to corporate power than a liberal one. In the words of a truck driver quoted by Cowie, “I’m either for him [Wallace] or the Communists, I don’t care, just anybody who wouldn’t be afraid of the big companies.” Here we see a willingness to vote in two quite divergent directions, and this difference can only be explained by careful historical analysis that goes beyond examination of voting records. Cowie reveals a peculiar form of class consciousness in the 1970s that was interwoven with right-wing populism and racism. Unique cultural and political-economic conditions help explain how working-class consciousness merged with conservative populism in this period of US history.

What historical studies like Cowie’s have demonstrated is that class consciousness is historically variable and only historical analysis can explain how it emerges and what particular form it takes within certain cultural and political-economic conditions which are shaped by conflict. If a researcher were to observe only a vote cast for a conservative like Wallace, then the possibility for understanding that the same person was considering casting their vote for a communist would be missed. Class consciousness is not a static thing that corresponds to a hypostasized category of knowledge existing in a reified social-science discourse. In short, there is no universal class consciousness.

Rather, class consciousness is always over-determined by other factors including the social constructions of race, gender, sexual preference and other such phenomena. Furthermore, class consciousness must also be analyzed in relation to specific political opportunities. If the structure of power relations does not provide an avenue for the expression of working-class consciousness within the state, we cannot conclude that such a consciousness does not exist. Voting behavior must be seen as one aspect among many variables in understanding the history of class politics in the United States. Indeed the very concept of politics must be expanded to include the realm of the mundane, everyday life experience of working-class people. Again, this involves going outside the boundaries of conventional social science. Given specific historical circumstances, contradictions may exist both in the social relations of production and within individuals. Critical Theory places an emphasis upon how these kinds of contradictions and complexities do not fit neatly within a static form of concepts and research protocols that assume a logical form which is unable to adequately grasp contradictions that exist in our society.9

Another very important issue to consider is that since the early part of the twentieth century, the disciplinary preference in sociology has been for the concepts of “status” and “strata” over class because these concepts point to the existence of inequality but the absence of either exploitation of workers or antagonism between classes in capitalist society. Furthermore, the concepts of strata and status fit into a logical schema that exists prior to the conduct of research. This line of inquiry stems from Max Weber’s famous statement – found in his essay “Class, Status, Party” – that “classes are not communities.” Weber sought to point out that class as a concept can only describe social divisions in terms of the unequal distribution of power and wealth in society, rather than shared cultural affiliations, because such affiliations are said, a priori, not to exist. Weber made this argument in part because he was profoundly influenced by neo-classical economics, especially the Austrian marginalist school, which in turn meant that he focused exclusively on the labor market, to the exclusion of the labor process.
For Weberians, workers are understood in terms of isolated individuals competing against one another for jobs in a marketplace, rather than as individuals who labor together in the process of production, or as individuals constituting a cultural community that seeks to find cooperative strategies to gain power and leverage against their employers, or as a community constituted in leisure spaces that cannot be reduced to the economic realm. A prime example of the latter phenomenon is the rich history of the struggle for shorter hours of labor initiated by US workers and their unions, which became a vibrant international labor movement that existed more or less at the same time that Weber was claiming that there was no such working-class community. The struggle for shorter hours of work was both a labor-market strategy and a point-of-production strategy. Reducing the amount of hours worked was a market strategy to extract higher wages and better working conditions from employers (because working shorter hours drives down unemployment), but in order to achieve that goal workers used the strike weapon as a means to exploit their leverage at the point of production. The struggle against work was also an end in itself, because the expansion of free time, what workers in the labor movement referred to as “8 hours for what we will,” was seen as a valuable cultural good. Against Weber, class did become a community formed around the struggle for shorter hours of work. The intellectual tradition that both denies the empirical existence of class consciousness and therefore by extension the very concept of class and class conflict in the United States began in earnest with Weber’s colleague, Werner Sombart, and the publication of Sombart’s 1906 book, Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?

According to Sombart, if it could be demonstrated that socialism has not been able to gain traction in the United States, then it is reasonable to suggest further that class consciousness is absent from most American workers, and as class consciousness goes, so does class as a useful concept for sociologists. Sombart attempted to demonstrate that workers in the United States were better off than their European counterparts, and that this relative affluence explains why socialist ideas have not been able to enjoy as much influence in American society as they have in Europe. Sombart’s famous passage, “all socialist utopias founder on apple pie and roast beef,” encapsulates his attempt to demonstrate that capitalism was able to deliver the goods to the American working class, thereby derailing any possibility of the development of a community of working-class individuals existing in antagonism with the capitalist class. Sombart’s emphasis on “apple pie” and “roast beef” reveals an irony, namely that it is Sombart and his anti-Marxist followers who are guilty of economic determinism, not the Marxists. Furthermore, Sombart wrote these words in the midst of a vigorous socialist movement in the United States spearheaded by Eugene V. Debs, who received 6 percent of the vote in the 1912 presidential election. Debs was also active in the organization and creation of the Industrial Workers of the World (also known as the “wobblies”) in 1905, a year prior to Sombart’s infamous observation. At their peak, the wobblies mobilized more than 300,000 workers in various labor conflicts across the country and had more than 100,000 members. For more on the wobblies, see Chapter 6 by Mike Davis.

The other key figure in the field of sociology who has influenced those seeking to discredit the Marxist perspective on the phenomenon of class is Ralf Dahrendorf, whose book Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society (published in 1959) bridges the gap between the generation of Sombart and more contemporary sociologists like Kingston and Pakulski. In fact, Pakulski explicitly draws upon Dahrendorf’s view that class conflict was overcome during the development of capitalism in the twentieth century via
integration and mitigation of class conflict within the Keynesian welfare state, which was said to have been able to appeal to the rational side of capital and labor, since both sides shared a mutual interest in economic growth. Like Dahrendorf, Pakulski argues that capitalism has passed through the phase of class conflict as the state has been able to diminish the conflicts between industrial workers and industrialists. Sociologists working against Marxism prefer the Durkheimian term “industrial society” over “capitalism” as a means to shift attention away from antagonism between classes on the one hand, and the condition of alienation among workers on the other hand. For Critical Theorists like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, however, the integration of the labor movement into the Keynesian welfare state indicated that modern capitalism in the United States and Europe had become a “totally administered society,” rather than a rational, social-democratic society based upon the peaceful resolution of class conflict. As was the case with Sombart, Dahrendorf’s analysis proved to be flawed when, in roughly a decade after publication of his book, American workers led one of the largest revolts against work in the history of the modern working class. For several generations, professional social scientists have sounded the death knell of class conflict, and yet their prognostications ring hollow in the ears of actual workers laboring in the global capitalist system of production.

The other major flaw in the Weberian and Durkheimian traditions has to do with the fact that while conventional sociologists cannot deny the extreme inequality of wealth distribution in western societies, they have been unwilling to examine just how wealth gets produced in the first place. Marxists focus on the point of production in capitalist society precisely for this reason: to demonstrate how wealth is created through the exploitation of workers. As Erik Olin Wright has correctly observed in his collection of essays in *Approaches to Class Analysis*, part of what sets historical materialism at paradigmatic odds with the dominant perspective in sociology is its emphasis upon exploitation, which in turn is based upon normative commitments not shared by the other traditions in sociology. The dominant traditions in sociology cling to the methodological imperative that leaves no room for normative evaluation in a putatively scientific discourse on the contours of inequality. This difference is what makes Marxism a form of Critical Theory, insofar as the inclusion of norms into scientific discourse points to the transformation of society as much as to the mere representation of it among a constellation of concepts.

Wright’s emphasis on the spatial location of different classes in relation to the production process does not, however, exhaust the research pursuits of Marxists in the social sciences, nor does his definition of the normative dimension of historical materialism. Wright’s analysis has been criticized for failing to account for cultural aspects of class formation over time, and his reduction of Marxism’s normative perspective to “radical egalitarianism” is also too limiting. There also exists a commitment to freedom and libertarianism in the tradition of historical materialism, but this side of the conceptual framework is less well known among social scientists.

The libertarian perspective in historical materialism is best articulated as the freedom from work, a phenomenon which has been emphasized by Critical Theorists like Antonio Negri, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, among others. One distinctive characteristic of Critical Theory is an engagement with philosophical traditions that rarely cross the path of social science discourse, including the tradition in philosophy that has the labor question as its object of thought. The theoretical link between the concept of class and the labor question that plays such an important role in historical materialism can be traced back to Aristotle. In Book One, Section 4 of *The Politics*, Aristotle argued that if
machines “worked all by themselves” there could be no masters and no servants as we know them. In the words of Aristotle, “If every instrument could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others, like the statues of Daedalus, or the tripods of Hephaestus, which, says the poet, of their own accord entered the assembly of the Gods; if in like manner, the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre, chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves” (emphasis ours). 

The class division constituted by the relationship between masters and servants turns upon the labor question: who will do the necessary work, and under what conditions will they work? But if there is no work to be done (or very little as in an automated post-scarcity environment) the bond between master and servant cannot exist, or at the very least the bond is radically transformed. Due to the application of labor-saving technology, the class relation (as constituted by the yoke between masters and servants) has taken on various forms in the long history of the various transformations of the labor process over the millennia. At certain points in time, this history leads in the direction of the abolition of the relationship itself, as Aristotle speculated. It ultimately depends on the historical conditions of class struggle. The question that still reveals the wildcard of this specific history is: how will workers respond to proletarianization, globalization and automation?

It is also important to note that Marx’s understanding of the abolition of work is not merely a utopian dream, because the process of proletarianization within capitalism is already moving in the direction of reducing the amount of labor time necessary to reproduce the expanding wealth of society. As the leaders of capitalist industries often make clear, capital turns to automation when workers become intractable (see Chapter 15 by Roberts for more on this issue). This phenomenon is always indeterminate, based upon the contingencies of class struggle. Therefore, Marx was analyzing an existing tendency in the historical development of actually-existing, empirical capitalism. Studying the empirical history of class struggle does not, however, mean that speculation has no role to play, which is why Marx insists on the continuing relevance of the humanities like, for example, the philosophy of Hegel and Aristotle.

Marx’s link to Aristotle is most clearly articulated in the famous “fragment on machines” section in the Grundrisse, where Marx describes how the worker in capitalism eventually “steps to the side of the production process,” as techno-science, which is objectified in labor-saving machines and computers, becomes the principal power of production. It is at this point that knowledge displaces muscle power as the prime mover of the capitalist production processes. It is with Aristotle’s argument in mind that Marx claimed that abolishing class divisions in society necessarily involved the abolition of work. In Volume Three of Capital, Marx argued that labor’s fight for shorter hours of work was the prerequisite for the potential transformation of the class relation and the expansion of the “realm of freedom.” His Aristotelian point of view is best captured on page 325 of the Grundrisse (Notebook III in the “Chapter on Capital”). There Marx argues that the historic destiny of class struggle could only be fulfilled if and when the development of the productive powers of labor, which capital incessantly whips onward with its unlimited mania for wealth, and of the sole conditions in which this mania can be realized, have flourished to the stage where the possession and preservation of general wealth require lesser labor time of society as a whole, and where the laboring society relates scientifically to the process of its progressive reproduction, its reproduction in a constantly greater abundance; hence where labor in which a human being does what a thing [robot] can do has ceased. [emphasis ours] #11
In this passage, Marx has described how science itself has become a force of production. The radical transformation of the labor process that has followed from the application of computer-based technologies in recent years is further evidence that Marx was on the correct path in understanding the tendency toward the abolition of work under capitalism when workers successfully fight against capitalists over the conditions and duration of work itself. This history is contingent, as it depends upon a manifold of social, political and cultural particularities. The jobless future can go in different directions, either toward unemployment and relative deprivation among masses of workers, or the future can bring more leisure time and a higher standard of living. It all depends on the past, present and future of the labor movement. Abolishing work is the necessary if not sufficient condition for eradicating class domination. Workers must also constitute themselves as a class, which cannot emerge automatically from the historical transformation of the labor process (see Chapter 13 by Aronowitz and DiFazio and Chapter 15 by Roberts for more on this issue).

III

In the field of history, Marxists have had more influence than in sociology, especially in the field of labor history. Historians have also corrected mistakes made by some Marxist political economists who have tended to reduce labor to a dependent variable in the history of the development of capitalism. Marxists who have focused their attention on proletarianization have described and explained the transformation of the labor process in great detail, but most of these analyses – Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* is probably the best example here – have overlooked the reactions and practices of workers. This problem follows from the fact that the working class constitutes itself, in large part, *outside* of the production process. Analyses that focus on proletarianization cannot, by definition, explain the emergence of class consciousness, because this perspective situates labor *a priori* as a dependent variable in the history of the development of capitalism. It has been the task of labor historians to show how and when class consciousness has happened.

As in sociology, Sombart’s question also generated discussion and debate in the field of American labor history, but unlike in American sociology, which has more or less given up on the concept of class in favor of the concepts of “status” and “strata,” labor historians have developed research perspectives that point to the continuing relevance of the Marxist concept of class, although there are significant differences in how labor historians frame the important issues surrounding the labor question.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, labor historians like Selig Perlman (whose book *A Theory of the Labor Movement* appeared in 1928) accepted Sombart’s thesis that American workers were not interested in socialism, which indicated to Perlman a certain kind of conservatism that he referred to as “pure and simple” unionism. The peculiar form of syndicalism among American workers was interpreted by Perlman as conservative when compared to European workers who advocated for their representatives to seek power and representation within the state apparatus. Perlman leaned on this conception to explain why America was the exception to the rule regarding the question of why socialist ideas and policies have had a significant influence in every western democracy except the United States. The argument here was that while American workers do sometimes join unions, they do so only for economic reasons, i.e.
bigger paychecks and better working conditions, rather than political reasons like seizing state power through building a separate labor party. Perlman was convinced that because workers did not seek to intervene in state politics like their European counterparts, the conclusion must be that American workers were not as “radical,” or at the very least, much less “political.” Perlman argued that American workers were satisfied with incremental gains within capitalism and had no desire to challenge the system itself. The generation of labor historians who followed Perlman (sometimes referred to as the “new” labor historians) responded to Perlman’s argument in three distinct ways.

First, many of the new labor historians agreed with Perlman that any move away from a strategy to seize the state apparatus signified a lack of radical class politics, but generations of labor historians after Perlman argued that it was the leadership of the labor movement that became relatively conservative, not the rank and file. This position led many labor historians to follow the lead of Herbert Gutman in order to find class consciousness and radical politics among workers in places beyond the formal institution of the labor union itself. Gutman, like E.P. Thompson before him, emphasized the need to focus on culture, in order to examine how the working class constitutes itself outside of the labor process. Labor historians began investigating the school, the bar, and other spaces in the public sphere as a means to excavate a class consciousness among regular workers not in charge of the direction of the official labor movement. (See Chapter 15 by Roberts and Chapter 17 by Rosenzweig.) Workers unorganized by labor unions were also considered a very important part of the story. In short, the view among generations after Perlman was that the formal structure of the labor union itself was, and in some cases still is, a barrier to the expression of the true consciousness of rank-and-file working people.

Ironically, it was Max Weber who provided labor historians with a new way to construe class, and in turn reconfigure historical materialism, while forging a critique of Sombart and Perlman. In Weber’s classic essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, historians found new ways to frame class consciousness not as the desire to take over the state, or manage the means of production; rather, class consciousness emerges from the practice of resisting work. One of Weber’s keen insights in his essay was that in order for the Puritan work ethic to gain hegemony in western culture, the “traditionalism” of European workers would have to be destroyed. By “traditionalism,” Weber means the common practice of workers to find ways to work the minimum amount necessary in order to enjoy the culturally and historically defined material standard of living in a given society. In Weber’s (2001) words, “the opportunity of earning more was less attractive than working less… Wherever modern capitalism has begun its work of increasing the productivity of human labour by increasing its intensity, it has encountered the immensely stubborn resistance of this leading trait of pre-capitalist labour” (italics ours, p. 24).

Gutman’s emphasis on culture and everyday life of workers outside of the formal dealings of the institution of the labor union, and E.P. Thompson’s path-breaking analyses of the cultural dimensions of class were inspired by Weber’s analysis of the problem of “traditionalism” among European workers, that is to say a problem for the capitalist class, insofar as “traditionalism” was a cultural phenomenon that stood opposed to the capitalist work ethic.

Thompson’s focus upon culture and class has led to the flowering of an entire generation of scholars working under the rubric of cultural studies who have produced a myriad of new ways to study working-class consciousness including studies of representations of class in popular music, film, paperback-trade novels, as well as studies of
the significance of clothing styles, and the expansion of working-class leisure activities in the twentieth century more generally. This development has resulted in a relative break from the epistemological point of view dominant in labor history before E.P. Thompson that focused almost exclusively on the institution of the labor union. In short, the school of thought that became known as British Cultural Studies, including the works of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Paul Willis and Dick Hebdige, revolutionized the study of the working class by expanding the scope of how and where to look for working-class consciousness.

A key development in this shift of focus was to look at micro-level resistances, what the anthropologist James Scott refers to as “hidden transcripts,” a kind of resistance practice that is much less visible than a strike or an election. According to Scott, hidden transcripts are forms of resistance that are purposely constructed to fly under the radar, so as to escape the attention of the manager and/or employer, and other figures of authority. A strike, on the other hand, is understood by Scott to be a “public” transcript, for it exists for everyone in society to examine, read and interpret. Crafty and sometimes deceitful forms of resistance, however, not only remain hidden from public view, but are much more frequent and intimately interwoven into the fabric of everyday life among working people. For example, Robin D.G. Kelley, author of the book *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*, focuses his first chapter on workers at McDonald’s finding ways to resist work through a myriad of micro-tactics including: slowing down the pace at work, blasting music and dancing while flipping hamburgers, creating and wearing hair styles that signify a counter-culture, walking a certain way (gangsta limp) while working, creating games to accompany food preparation, leaving work early and handing out free cheeseburgers to friends who happen to stop by the store. These are good examples of the application of the concept of “hidden transcripts” to the ubiquity of micro-resistance practices that constitute a significant portion of working-class everyday life and culture. Scott refers to the hidden transcript as an “art” of resistance because it involves an aesthetic dimension, which is captured quite nicely by Robin Kelley’s description of the *styles* of resistance created by his former co-workers.

These practices of micro-level resistances help focus our attention on the struggle against work as the crucial element of working-class everyday life activity, rather than the organized strategies of the official labor union institutions. In short, just because workers are not on strike, or are not active at the voting polls does not indicate that there is a lack of class consciousness among workers. The combination of public and hidden transcripts of resistance constitutes what we call in this reader the “counter-logic of labor,” which exists in opposition to the logic of capital. Many of the selections are largely organized around precisely this concept (Kelley, Davis, Enstad and Roberts).

The second direction of research for the new labor historians looking for ways to respond to Perlman’s assessment of American workers was to examine the history of other labor unions besides the American Federation of Labor (AFL) like the Knights of Labor (KoL) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) because these institutions posed a serious challenge to the AFL under the leadership of Samuel Gompers. The strategy for historians like Leon Fink and Kim Voss was to challenge Perlman’s claim that American workers were conservative on the grounds that Perlman focused too much attention on the AFL as the true representative of working-class consciousness. The Knights of Labor and the IWW were seen as more radical unions because they sought to seize the means of production, and during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the AFL had to vigorously compete with these other unions for the hearts and
minds of American workers. Most labor historians point to structural barriers that prevented the Knights and the IWW from winning the battle against the AFL, and that if it were not for certain structural barriers such as US labor law, and the superior capacity for violence on the part of the capitalist state, these other institutions might have had more success in organizing American workers. In short, the argument against Perlman was that American workers have had plenty of class consciousness, but so far political opportunities have not allowed workers to prevail in their struggle against capital. (For more on the IWW, see Chapter 6 by Mike Davis.)

Third, there is yet another position taken by labor historians who agree with Perlman that American workers are relatively conformist. This time the blame for their relative conservatism is placed upon consumerism and mass media institutions that developed in the twentieth century, rather than on the leadership of the AFL. This position holds that workers succumbed to capitalist ideology during the rise of consumer capitalism, the phase of capitalism also referred to as monopoly capitalism. Not only did American workers have to struggle against the violence of the capitalist state (in the form of the police and the army) but in addition workers and unions have had to struggle against capitalist ideology, which emanates from a different segment of the state, what Louis Althusser refers to as the “ideological state apparatuses,” including schools, the media, church, etc.17 This narrative, constructed by historians like Sean Wilentz, describes American workers as, once upon a time, radical in the ante-bellum period when they resisted the emergence of the waged-labor system and the discipline of factory work, but by the late nineteenth century accepting of the waged-labor system because they found compensation for declining political power in the buying of more commodities.18 The rise of advertising and the emergence of a new class of capitalist henchmen in the early twentieth century (what Stuart Ewen refers to as the “captains of consciousness”) derailed the socialist project by distracting workers with expanded shopping opportunities as well as mass media forms like film and recorded music, which taken together create an ideological bulwark that is said to keep workers from focusing on the serious business of building a socialist state.19 It is assumed in this perspective that consumption is a relatively frivolous activity, which diverts workers from the more serious project of working toward a socialist state. But more recent work by historians like Nan Enstad and Lizabeth Cohen challenges this point of view by situating popular culture not as a distraction produced by the culture industry, but rather as an important resource for workers seeking to organize resistance to the demands of their employers, while also creating a political bloc to influence the shape of the state (see Chapter 8 by Enstad and Chapter 15 by Roberts).

In some ways, the perspective in the new labor history which sees popular culture and consumerism as a problem privileges the discourse of the ante-bellum labor movement, referred to as “artisan republicanism,” because this early form of the labor movement resisted the development of the wage system and argued that the growth of waged labor threatened the very possibility of independence and therefore freedom and democracy. The “good” society was understood by artisan republicanism to be one consisting of a myriad of small producers who each owned their means of production, which in turn would guarantee both their independence as well as their moral virtue, secured through hard, meaningful work. In short, the new labor historians tended to romanticize the early form of the labor movement due to a perspective that views consumption and leisure activities as relatively trivial compared to the traditional socialist project of seizing the state. The work of Sean Wilentz in particular seems to measure radicalism by the standard of artisan republicanism, the discourse of the ante-bellum labor movement.
A key feature of Wilentz’s communitarian discourse is the emphasis upon moral virtue and the value of the work ethic. One major problem with this rather romantic view of the discourse of artisan republicanism follows from its place in history, a time before work had been thoroughly divided up into monotonous, meaningless tasks. For most workers laboring in industries after the Civil War, work had lost whatever meaning and gratification it may once have had in the artisan, craft traditions. Daniel Rodgers’ book *The Work Ethic in Industrial Society* demonstrates that the Calvinist work ethic lost much of its cultural appeal after the rise of proletarianization during the Industrial Revolution radically transformed the labor process. Second, Wilentz’s communitarian celebration of work and civic virtue remains at odds with the libertarian impulse that animated the movement for shorter hours of work. Under conditions where work is imposed from without and lacks both intrinsic satisfaction and moral value, working-class culture shifts to a quest for happiness and pleasure beyond work, and breaks from abstractions like citizenship based upon moral virtue derived from artisanal forms of work. Finally, a major contradiction in the history of artisan republicanism that is mostly ignored in Wilentz’s analysis is the question of race. As David Roediger has demonstrated in his book *Wages of Whiteness*, the ante-bellum labor movement was animated by racism as much as it was animated by the opposition to waged labor. Indeed, the American working class developed its class identity as producers by creating an identity of “whiteness” in opposition to “black,” which signified slave labor. Whiteness came to be associated with “free” labor in opposition to slaves (see Chapter 4 by Roediger).

In short, all three of these responses seek to challenge Perlman’s thesis, but each one has an argument that details when and how the American labor movement failed in its quest for socialism. Recent work by historians like Howard Kimeldorf, Lawrence Glickman, Nan Enstad and Jonathan Cutler has sought to challenge the narrative that the post-bellum labor movement “sold out” to consumer capitalism, allowing for the development of a conservative American working class. There has been a shift of focus away from the question of “when and how labor lost,” to reinterpreting the politics of the post-bellum labor movement. A change in perspective seems appropriate especially when one examines the great labor upheavals during World War II, the late 1960s and early 1970s. One such change in perspective is the argument that legitimate worker radicalism has had a home for a long time in the movement for shorter hours for work, which should not be interpreted as somehow less political than strategies for re-capturing the means of production and seizing state power.

The issue turns upon the conceptual divide that developed within the labor movement after the Civil War which, according to Lawrence Glickman, has created two distinct perspectives in both the labor movement and American politics more broadly: namely, what he calls “producerism” and “consumerism.” For Glickman, in both these perspectives, the central question regarding the goal of the labor movement remains the same: how is democracy, freedom and independence possible in industrial (and now post-industrial perhaps) society? In the discourse of “producerism” freedom and independence can only be possible when individuals have access to, and control over, the means of production. The key archetypes in this discourse are the ante-bellum yeoman farmer and the heroic artisan master-craftsman, as both of these figures were able to produce their own means of subsistence through control over the means of production. Furthermore, when ante-bellum yeoman farmers and master-craftsmen interacted in the marketplace, these types of producers secured an exact equivalent for their labor. They understood that they spent a certain amount of time and resources on making a
product and when they took it to market they got all of the proceeds from their sale. This narrative viewed all non-producers, including merchants, bankers, absentee owners/employers, slave owners and speculators, as parasites living off the labor of producers, the people whose work is the foundation of society.

The explosion of the system of waged-labor in the early nineteenth century radically changed the political-economic environment. If individuals depend on others in order to provide their subsistence (wages), then said individuals fall into a relationship of dependence, which in this conception is fundamentally at odds with a democratic form of government, because democracy presupposes universal independence among the citizenry. Furthermore, workers who labor for a wage do not get an exact equivalence for their labor, as they are forced to share the wealth produced by their labor with their master/employer. In short, from the point of view of the discourse on artisan republicanism, a true and legitimate democracy is only possible in a society where all individuals have the capacity to produce their own subsistence through access to and control over the means of production.

In the “consumerist” discourse of the late nineteenth century American labor movement on the other hand, the assumption is that relentless proletarianization has made it impossible to turn the clock back to a society of small-scale independent producers. Under monopoly capitalism, labor needs a new strategy focused on the shorter hours of labor. The shorter-hours movement anticipated the relentless universal drive of proletarianization and developed a strategy to reduce the demand for labor as the appropriate response to elimination of jobs that is concomitant to proletarianization and automation.

Another key element in the labor-movement discourse on shorter hours is that because the technological transformation of the labor process has boosted productivity to such enormous levels, there exists the very real possibility of achieving a relative post-scarcity environment. This way of looking at the issues should be considered a version of left-libertarianism, as opposed to Glickman’s awkward and imprecise term “consumerism.” The left-libertarian discourse on shorter hours stipulates that workers must fight to enjoy the fruits of rising levels of productivity. The most effective way to wage this struggle is to tighten labor markets by withdrawing the participation in work through the application of shorter hours of work, which after the Civil War was expressed in the movement for the eight-hour workday. The incredible wealth produced by the application of technology to the labor process signaled the possibility of an expanded rise in the standard of living. “More” became the slogan of the “post-bellum” labor movement under Samuel Gompers: more leisure time, more pianos in the homes of workers, more homes owned by working people, more newspapers read by workers, more fine clothes and foods, etc.

Consuming goods and expanding leisure activity does not, by definition, exist in opposition to the “serious” business of building a labor movement. Private recreation has a political dimension, revealed in the phrase: “picnics one day did not preclude strikes the next.” New research by labor historians like Nan Enstad and Michael J. Roberts (see Chapters 8, 10 and 15) has demonstrated that consumption of previously thought to be trivial items like rock-and-roll records, fancy hats and shoes did not distract workers from the serious business of organization and political action. In fact, Enstad has demonstrated the opposite: namely, women workers who had developed a taste for fine hats and fancy shoes were among the most militant workers of the early twentieth century. Women who desired to consume popular culture were also the most willing to go on strike.
Glickman also argues that, in the discourse on shorter hours of work, workers can be free, and democracy is a distinct possibility if workers have ample leisure time and a high standard of living, which would allow for more education and more involvement in civic life. The goal was to keep demanding more and more leisure time, while simultaneously fighting for higher wages and better working conditions until work as we know it becomes a thing of the past. Asking for “more,” then, was fundamentally a political and cultural act, not “merely” an economic demand.

Finally, within the tradition of historical materialism, it is understood that the refusal of work, as the core of class struggle, has the potential of transforming capitalism from the inside out. If workers are able to fight successfully for shorter hours “all the way down” so to speak, then would it make any sense to continue calling our political-economic system “capitalism,” if people are only working, say, one day a week? These are the stakes raised by Marx’s analysis in the *Grundrisse* when he scrutinizes the implications of new forms of technology that are continually shaped by class struggle. Herein lies the true radicalism of the fight for shorter hours. It is for these reasons that we argue for a reformulation of the concept “class” that focuses upon work and the fight against work, for what is ultimately at stake is freedom. As Kathi Weeks argues in her book *The Problem With Work*,

rather than develop a politics of class focused primarily on issues of economic redistribution and economic justice – particularly a politics that seeks to alter wage levels to redraw the map of class categories – the politics that...[we are] interested in pursuing also investigates questions concerning the command and control over the spaces and times of life, and seeks the freedom to participate in shaping the terms of what collectively we can do and together what we might become...the politics of work that [we] would like to see elaborated would also levy a critique at its unfreedoms. [p. 23, italics ours]

This, then, is what Critical Theory, historical materialism and cultural studies offer as an alternative to conventional social science. Rather than focus only on how to measure “class,” should we not also insist upon a critique of the unfreedom at the core of the phenomenon we call class? What about the spaces and times of life beyond work? Doesn’t that matter? Otherwise, why pursue this kind of research?

Notes

7 Durkheim argued that “no doubt it is good for the worker to be interested in art, literature, etc... who cannot see, moreover that two such forms of existence are too opposed to be reconciled, and
cannot be followed by the same individual! If a man has become accustomed to vast horizons, total views, and fine abstractions, he cannot be confined within the strict limits of a specialized task without becoming frustrated.” (Selected Writings, Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 178–9.