

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Bruce Pietrykowski, *Work: What is Political Economy* (New York: Polity Books 2019)

Daniel James Joseph

Volume 86, automne 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074496ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2020.0060>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Joseph, D. (2020). Compte rendu de [Bruce Pietrykowski, *Work: What is Political Economy* (New York: Polity Books 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 86, 219–222. <https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2020.0060>

moves in that direction, this book primarily concerns itself with the latter.

The book's strongest section is what Marx would have called a "workers' inquiry" into the software side of the game industry: the exploitation of underpaid and precarious labor, the punishing practice of "crunch time" (the industry's term for long hours worked in game development), and the widespread use of non-disclosure agreements to prevent workers from talking about their work. Woodcock draws a damning portrait of an industry with an utter disregard for the well-being of its workers, one that pretends work is play and uses its own workers' love for video games to exploit them. The last chapter of this section, the "what is to be done?" discussion that is so often vague and disappointing in books of this kind, is refreshingly concrete. Woodcock describes the efforts of groups like Game Workers Unite and Tech Workers Coalition to unionize the game industry and sees reason for real optimism in their progress.

The second half of *Marx at the Arcade*, which turns to analyzing video games themselves, is a little disappointing. Not that a Marxist analysis of video game play is not worthwhile—quite the contrary. It's just that the findings here will feel obvious to anyone familiar with the games discussed: first-person shooters glorify violence; the *Civilization* series naturalizes capitalism and imperialism; war games like *Call of Duty* amount to advertisements for the military-industrial complex. All of these things are true, and all of them have been truisms of game studies for a decade at least. *Marx at the Arcade* has less to say about more recent developments, like the rise of free-to-play and "freemium" games, a business model in which games are free to begin playing but players are pressured to make regular in-game purchases, so their play keeps producing revenue long after a game's

initial release. Nor does Woodcock wrestle with the larger gamification of the internet, the way game-like mechanisms and incentives have been deployed in countless non-game settings to colonize and commodify the attention of millions who do not even think of themselves of gamers.

What the Old Moor would think of video games I cannot say, but game studies scholars have pushed harder on games and play than *Marx at the Arcade*, and it seems to me that darker conclusions lurk in Woodcock's own material. He opens *Marx at the Arcade* with memories of video games from his childhood, memories that resonate closely with my own. The unspoken thread connecting Woodcock's memories is not how much fun these games were to play, however, but how much work went into playing them. That theme, the blurring of lines between work and play, recurs throughout the book: the "work-as-play" culture of the software industry; the addictive, compulsive, repetitive nature of so many games; the combination of tedious play and unpaid work Woodcock describes as "playbour." If the Fordist capitalism of the 20th century strictly separated work time from play time, 21st-century capitalism now collapses that distinction, pretending our work is play and harvesting our leisure activities as unpaid digital labour. Those of us who grew up loving video games may find it hard to face their outsized role in that collapse.

ROBERT MACDOUGALL

University of Western Ontario

Bruce Pietrykowski, *Work: What is Political Economy* (New York: Polity Books 2019)

THIS REVIEW OF Bruce Pietrykowski's very insightful *Work* took much longer than I had planned because work got

in the way. The first was that I moved across the Atlantic, far from my home in Toronto, for work. I had no alternatives, really. I was out of Employment Insurance following my postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto and my savings were drying up. The Canadian academic job market had been a dead end for me. When I finally had my feet on the ground at my new job, the COVID-19 pandemic struck and I suddenly found myself locked (along with everyone else) inside, far from most of my friends and family. I had a lot of work to do, under unprecedented conditions.

While the lockdown kicked into full gear here in England I watched the stock market crash, the price of a barrel of oil drop to less than zero, and economists of all stripes warn of the worst recession since the Great Depression. This had me reflecting on why I was so far from home for work, and how what has pushed this system over the edge was the cessation of work for billions of people. With friends on Zoom, I started reading Marx's *Capital* again and started reading E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. A few months into these dense tomes I returned to Pietrykowski's *Work* and found myself enjoying it immensely. Informed by recent reading I found myself nodding along with the clear lines drawn between classic examples of political economy and history and contemporary issues. In this way the book functions as Cliff Notes of sorts for the classics and gives interested readers a wealth of citations and material on contemporary debates.

Key is that *Work* does not endeavour to offer ground-breaking new theoretical terrain, but instead situate the reader within the existing political economic literature. It begins with an introduction covering the origins of the field of political economy (in its Marxist, feminist, and post-Keynesian forms). There is a short

history of the transition from feudal to capitalist modes of production. Here are also the first of what will be numerous break-out text boxes that deal with some disagreements and discussions within the field. For example, here they concern the status of animals as workers and how political economists have come to understand slavery contra wage labour. These text boxes quickly communicate that while *Work* is less didactic than many academic course textbooks, it's still written as an introduction for readers new to the field.

The next chapter, "Inequality at Work: Skills, Wages and Productivity" builds on this core by starting with the problem of inequality and then working through a variety of apologia for, and criticisms of, inequality. I particularly enjoyed the discussion and criticism of human capital theory, something that I think about every time I enter a classroom filled with students who are told by politicians and universities that they are paying for valuable upskilling. Here Pietrykowski walks the reader through the arguments that neoclassical economists have made for decades about the unequal distribution of income in the economy as a function of skill acquisition. Pietrykowski then engages in a thorough critique showing how race, gender, and technology play an outsized role in determining wage inequality, while summarizing different political economic explanations of crisis and inequality.

Chapter 3, "Gender at Work: Caring Labor" covers a considerable amount of material concerning feminist political economy, beginning with the foundational discussions and debates concerning "productive" and "unproductive" labour, and the gaps in Marxist political economy that sprang from this. From here the concept of social reproduction is introduced and the basics of global housework are discussed. The lack of bargaining

power in a non-waged home-bound relationship is stressed alongside varying ways in which gender is performed and understood, and exploited economically, in different cultures. There is a discussion of feminist political economy's focus on caring and emotional labour (both paid and unpaid) as a gendered site of struggle. From here the discussion transitions to the wage gap and the gendered division of labour. Of special note is Pietrykowski's discussion of the structural shift in programming labour since the 1960s: as a site of feminine gendered labour that was systematically attacked and shifted by a variety of mechanisms to a profession dominated by men by the 1980s.

Chapter 4, "Managerial Strategies: Low-Road vs. High-Road" discusses the divide in managerial techniques. The "low-road" encompasses managerial styles of creating docile, compliant workers through illegally low pay, Taylorist scientific management, crude authority, and abuse. While this is most often associated with managerial styles in the 19th and early 20th century, Pietrykowski notes that it has not gone away for workers everywhere, such as those working at fast food restaurants like McDonalds or the massive Foxconn and Pegatron electronics factories of Shenzhen and Shanghai. The "high-road" strategies that prioritize worker happiness and consumerism as a source of managerial control offer an alternative form of exploitation here. Fordism's \$5 day and invasive social surveillance of workers is followed up with the post-1970s neoliberal turn towards a non-unionized flexible workforce, just-in-time supply chain management, and upskilling. Concluding the chapter is a section on "off-road" managerial strategies, which discusses the rise of the gig economy, zero hours contracts, and precarious work.

Chapter 5 offers an interesting juxtaposition with the prior chapters, looking

at the political economy of work in worker cooperatives. There is a brief history of the origin of cooperatives in the UK and then a discussion of the variations of worker control and participation. Pietrykowski then discusses the most commonly cited example of workers control over their workplace: the Mondragon cooperatives of the Basque region of Spain. This discussion of the specific mechanisms of Mondragon is a welcome addition to any discussion of democracy in the workplace, but I also would have liked to have seen more discussion of the substantive criticisms of the Mondragon system (such as Sherryn Kasmir's (1996) book *The Myth of Mondragon*). In a sense this is because the chapter is already quite attentive to the contradictions immanent to the capital accumulation process that confront worker cooperatives at every turn. Key though is that the chapter does prompt the reader to consider what democratic control of the means of production can look like, a necessary corollary to political economic critique.

The final core chapter, "Technology, Automation, and Skills: Restructuring the Workplace" covers many of the big questions debated in political economy around technology, value, and deskilling, job replacement. The history of resistance to technological change in the form of machine breaking in Normandy, the successive wave of Luddism in England, and the UAW's call for a 6-hour day as productivity increased is discussed here. Pietrykowski then describes how political economists have focused on the relationship between increased productivity, lower wages, and deskilling. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to discussing the question of automation and technological unemployment while citing a number of studies that have tried to look for a causal relationship between the two. Pietrykowski does a good job of contextualizing this debate as not particularly

new, nor as the one we should necessarily be focused on, despite its appealing sci-fi qualities. Instead it is just one piece of a puzzle in the class struggle which includes “globalization, off-shoring of production to low-wage countries, and anti-union and neoliberal free-market labor policies.” (121)

All in all, I think this book highlights a number of important fields of study and discussion in world of political economy that cuts across disciplinary boundaries. The one missing element, however, is any substantive discussion of the political corollary of Marxism: socialism and communism. While political economists are not necessarily advocating for either (there are quite a few liberals in our midst), it is a key dimension of the political legacy of Marxism and even left Keynesianism. It’s also a topic that I think it’s safe to say that those interested in political economy will want to discuss. The discussion of cooperatives gets us there in some regards, but I feel like it elides the ghosts of the 20th century’s many experiments in socialist production, for good or ill. It is a big can of worms to open in such a short book, but it is worth serious reflection, especially in light of the ongoing economic crash that the COVID-19 pandemic heralded. Nevertheless, I would easily recommend this book to my friends who are reading *Capital* for the first time as well as veterans of the field who are looking to update their knowledge with references to contemporary research.

DANIEL JAMES JOSEPH

Manchester Metropolitan University

Steven King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s–1830s* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2019)

IMPOVERISHED PEOPLE in late 18th and early 19th century England and Wales

fought tenaciously for poor relief, exercising their right, as it was commonly understood, to be supported by their parish of settlement in times of need. Evidence of the strategies they employed—claiming, negotiating, demanding, pleading, defending—show us they were not mere grateful recipients but, as has been highlighted in a number of studies over the past twenty-five years or so, had a degree of agency in their dealings with their relieving parishes. Steven King is one of many to have used letters written by paupers to demonstrate how they framed their claims for relief and how they conceived of their relationships with their parish authorities and wider communities. This book takes a significant step forward in developing the field of research.

Pauper letters are all over the archives, distributed across local and county record offices, libraries and collections of private papers. For this reason, much of the work on them until now has consisted of regional or county studies. In the course of the research project which led to *Writing the Lives of the English Poor*, King and his team assembled a corpus of nearly 26,000 letters to and from paupers and parish overseers in all parts of England and Wales. As a result, this original and important book is the product of a more systematic approach, and is on a wider scale, than has been attempted hitherto. This gives it a broader geographic and temporal span than earlier works and enables an empirical approach to the development of an analytical framework. The book’s focus is on England, and work on Wales is due to be published by King’s colleague on the research project Ben Harvey.

The book begins with a focus on the materiality of the letters and on the process of writing, sending and receiving them as much as on their content. King emphasizes the significance of different qualities of paper, of concerns about