CHAPTER 1

Mapping the Work Ethic

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, "A PSALM OF LIFE"

The idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.

MAX WEBER, *THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM*

There are two common answers to the question of why we work so long and so hard. First, and most obvious, we work because we must: while some of us may have a choice of where to work, in an economy predicated on waged work, few have the power to determine much about the specific terms of that employment, and fewer still the choice of whether or not to work at all. Whereas this first response focuses on necessity, the second emphasizes our willingness to work. According to this account, we work because we want to: work provides a variety of satisfactions—in addition to income, it can be a source of meaning, purpose, structure, social ties, and recognition. But while both explanations are undoubtedly important, they are also insufficient. Structural coercion alone cannot explain the relative dearth of conflict over the hours we are required to work or the identities we are often expected to invest there; individual consent cannot account for why work would be so much more appealing than other parts of life. No doubt our motives for devoting so much time and energy to work are multiple and shifting, typically involving a complex blend of coercion and choice, necessity and desire, habit and intention. But although the structure of the work society may make long hours of work necessary, we need a fuller accounting of how, why, and to what effect so many of us come to accept and inhabit this requirement. One of the forces that manufactures such consent is the official morality—that complex of shifting claims, ideals, and values—known as the work ethic.

This chapter develops a critical analysis of the work ethic in the United States. Max Weber's account of the Protestant work ethic will serve as an archeology of the ethic's logics and functions that will guide our brief explorations of two later—and comparably ideal typical—versions of the ethic: an industrial work ethic that dominated US society through the culmination of the Fordist period in the years following the Second World War, and a postindustrial work ethic that has accompanied the transition to post-Fordism. The analysis seeks to recognize the power of the work ethic and to identify some of its weaknesses—that is, the chapter's goal is to attend at once to the coherence and the contradictions of the ethic's elements in a way that can account for both its historical durability and its perennial instabilities. As we will see, the elements that make the discourse of the work ethic so forceful and tenacious also render it always productive of antagonism. The work ethic has proved to be a trap, but it is also sometimes a weapon for those who are subject to its strictures.

I want to advance three general claims in this chapter: first, we cannot take on the structures of work without also challenging the ethics on which their legitimacy depends; second, despite its longevity, the ethical discourse of work is nonetheless vulnerable to such a challenge; and third, a claim that I will make more explicitly toward the end of the chapter, because of its particular significance to post-Taylorist labor processes, our "insubordination to the work ethic" (Berardi 1980, 169) is now more potentially subversive than ever before. In short, I want to argue that confronting the dominant ethic of work is necessary, possible, and timely.

THE PRIMITIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITIES

Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* remains a touchstone for studies of the work ethic, including this one, for good reason. As an unintended consequence of the Reformation, the Protestant work ethic, as Weber tells the story, bestowed on work a new and powerful endorsement. This new ethic entailed an important shift in expectations about what work is or should be, and a distinctive conception of what it means to be a worker. What characterized the Protestant ethos in particular was the ethical sanction for and the psychological impetus to work; ascetic Protestantism preached the moral import of constant and methodical productive effort on the part of self-disciplined individual subjects. This was no mere practical advice: "The infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness," Weber maintains, "but as forgetfulness of duty" (1958, 51). One should set oneself to a lifetime of "organized worldly labour" (83) *as if* (and not, as we will see, precisely *because*) one were called to it by God. Weber's brilliant study of how and to what effect we came to be haunted by the legacy of this Puritan ethic introduces the essential components, fundamental dynamics, and key purposes of the new ethic of work that developed in conjunction with capitalism in Western Europe and North America.[1]

Weber offers an archeology of capitalist development that is in many ways comparable to the one Marx proposed in the brief account of primitive accumulation toward the end of the first volume of *Capital*. There Marx countered the political economists' morality tale about two kinds of people, the industrious and the lazy, with a very different kind of origins story, this one about the violent usurpation by a few of the common property of all (1976, 873–76). In equally polemical fashion, Weber takes on his own enemy, the structural teleologies of the economic determinists, and presents a sharply contrasting analysis that emphasizes the unpredictable emergence and historical force of ideas. Marx and Weber each offer an account of how two classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, came to be; but where Marx focuses on their relations to the means of production as propertied owners and propertyless workers, Weber concentrates on the development of their consciousnesses as employers and employees. Weber explains the ideas that gave the political economists' parable about the ethically deserving and undeserving its authority and insists that this story must be understood as more than an ideological cover for the use of force; it was itself part of the arsenal of historical change in Europe and North America, and part of the foundation upon which capitalism was built. Indeed, the two analyses mirror one another, with the role of consent and coercion reversed: in one, the proletariat must first be forced into the wage relation before its consent can be manufactured; in the other, consent to work must be won before necessity can play its role in inducing compliance. The private ownership of property may be fundamental to capitalist exploitation, but that does not in itself guarantee the participation of exploitable subjects. Thus to Marx's account of the primitive accumulation of private property, Weber adds a story about the primitive construction of capitalist subjectivities.

One could pose Weber's project—as indeed many have—as a historical idealist alternative to Marx's historical materialism, an analysis centered on cultural forces to counter Marx's privileging of economic production. And certainly Weber's insistence on the role of ideas in history is sometimes cast in terms that match Marx's occasionally polemical claims about the primacy of material forces. But both Weber and Marx recognize that, formulated as a dichotomous pair, neither materialism nor idealism is adequate; they may at times serve some rhetorical or heuristic purpose, but they should not be treated as viable methodologies. Weber is clear that neither a "one-sided materialistic" nor "an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation" will do; thus in the final paragraph of *The Protestant Ethic*, he reminds us that the cultural explanation of economic developments that he has so vigorously defended is insufficient without an economic explanation of cultural developments (1958, 183). For his part, Marx affirms that production involves the fabrication not just of material goods, but also of relationships, subjectivities, and ideas; cultural forces and forms of consciousness are inseparable from, and thus crucial to, whatever we might delimit as a mode of production.[2] "Production thus not only creates an object for the subject," Marx observes, "but also a subject for the object" (1973, 92). Although each thinker may have tarried with a different line of emphasis, neither denies that understanding and confronting the contemporary work society requires attention to both its structures and its subjectivities.

Finally, just as Marx's account of primitive accumulation in *Capital* stands out as a brief historical exploration of a phenomenon he was otherwise dedicated to explaining in terms of its current logics, Weber's *Protestant Ethic* can also be profitably read, rather against the grain of traditional interpretations, as more a critical study of the present and its possible futures than a historiographical narrative of beginnings and ends, or a sociological analysis of causes and effects. In keeping with this line of interpretation, I will treat Weber's famous argument about the historical relationship between capitalist development and religious belief less as a strictly historical claim than as a genealogical device. Indeed, what I find most compelling about Weber's presentation is not the argument about the religious origins of capitalist economic institutions, but the way that putting the analysis in a religious frame enables Weber to capture and effectively convey both the specificity and the peculiarity of this orientation to work. The discussion that follows will thus focus more on the rhetorical force of the causal argument than on the details of its empirical adequacy. As we will see, posing the historical claim about the unholy melding of religion and capitalism in terms of a neat causal argument—with its sharp and definitive contrasts between a "before" to the Protestant work ethic that Weber casts as "traditionalism" and an "after" that he assumes to be secular—serves to highlight, clarify, and dramatize this capitalist ethos, to train our attention on and school our responses to the phenomenon. Each of these transitions—first from the traditionalist to the Protestant orientation to work, and then from that religiously informed ethos to a secular one—offers an opportunity to defamiliarize what was already in Weber's day, and certainly is today, an all too familiar formulation of the nature and value of work.

Though cast as an elegantly simple and straightforward causal argument, Weber's account nonetheless manages to convey many of the complexities of this animating ethos of capitalist development. The Protestant work ethic is not a single doctrine so much as it is a set of ideas, a mixture or composite of elements that sometimes work in conjunction and other times in contradiction. Indeed, it is by Weber's reckoning a highly paradoxical phenomenon, at once powerfully effective and spectacularly self-destructive. The paradoxical character is nowhere more evident than in Weber's claim that this Puritan brand of productivism unwittingly sowed the seeds of its own destruction: the rationalization it helped to fuel eventually undercut the religious basis of the Protestant ethic. While the ascetic ethos of work lives on in the spirit of capitalism, as the "ghost of dead religious beliefs" (Weber 1958, 182) its existence and effects are now far more mysterious, a haunting that is at once palpably present and strangely elusive. Weber's analysis is attentive to several points of instability on which my reflections on the ethic's later manifestations will build. As we trace its later iterations under the Fordist and post-Fordist periods of US history, we see that some of its elements remain constant while others shift. Indeed, the history of the work ethic in the United States—from the Protestant to the industrial and then to the postindustrial work ethic—reveals the precariousness of what is at the same time a remarkably tenacious set of ideas, dispositions, and commitments. What makes this normative discourse of work so adaptable also renders it constantly susceptible to contestation and change.

The exploration of the work ethic that follows identifies in Weber's original argument a set of antinomies that continue to animate the work ethic in the United States over the later course of its history, through the industrial and postindustrial periods. Three of these antinomies stem from the content of the ethic's prescriptions as it mandates at once the most *rational* and *irrational* of behaviors, promotes simultaneously *productivist* and *consumerist* values, and advances both individual *independence* and social *dependence*. Two more emerge as we consider the history of struggles over the ethic and its application: how it has served as an instrument of *subordination* but also as a tool of *insubordination*, and functioned as a mechanism of both *exclusion* and *inclusion*. These five pairs are conceived as antinomies rather than contradictions to highlight the effectivity of their internal conflicts without presuming their dialectical resolution and teleological trajectory.[3] Whether such dynamics will produce disciplinary devices or weapons of the weak, and whether they will generate a progressive historical development, let alone sow the seeds of their own destruction, remain open questions.

DEFAMILIARIZING THE WORK ETHIC

At the heart of the Protestant work ethic is the command to approach one's work as if it were a calling. It is here that we find the first and, perhaps for Weber, most remarkable of the discourse's constitutive antinomies: the unlikely confluence of the rational and the irrational. Arguably the most important message that Weber manages to convey—the central finding and dominant theme of his analysis—is that the work ethic is irrational at its origins and to its core, and yet it is prescriptive of what is taken to be the most rational forms of practical economic conduct. Indeed, this religious doctrine played no small part in the rationalization that is for Weber so distinctive of Western modernity. It is this doubling with which Weber seems so preoccupied. "We are here," he insists, "particularly interested in the origin of precisely the irrational element which lies in this, as in every conception of a calling" (1958, 78). Key to this "irrational element" is, as we will see, the noninstrumental qualities that Weber discerns in what we commonly take to be the most instrumental of endeavors: disciplined, productive work.

This irrationality of our commitment to work as if it were a calling is, however, also the element of this new cultural orientation to work that Weber may have struggled most to bring into focus. This "peculiar idea" of one's duty in a calling, "so familiar to us to-day, but in reality so little a matter of course" (54), has settled into the cultural fabric, making it difficult to grasp on its own terms. The value of work, along with its centrality to our lives, is one of the most stubbornly naturalized and apparently self-evident elements of modern and late, or postmodern, capitalist societies. To examine its social and historical specificity and understand its impact on our lives, this most familiar of doctrines must first be rendered strange. Indeed, given the normalization of these work values, perhaps the most important task and lasting achievement of Weber's analysis is the powerful estrangement from the reified common sense about work that it manages to produce. In this case, the periodizing frame and story of the ethic's religious origins serve Weber well; the alternative historical perspectives they identify provide the reader with the possibility of critical distance. In fact, the ethic is defamiliarized from two directions: first by considering it from the perspective of the "traditionalist" orientation to work that it supplanted, and second from the perspective of the secularized world from which the reader can then look back.

In a genealogical move, Weber finds early in his analysis a point of historical contrast in relation to which the work values now considered so obvious and necessary are revealed to be the product of a specific and indeterminate history. "Traditionalism" is Weber's label for a precapitalist orientation to work that treats it as no more than a means to concrete and finite ends. The "immensely stubborn resistance" of those who prefer working less and meeting their traditional consumption needs to working and having more (60) was, as Weber tells the story, "the most important opponent with which the spirit of capitalism, in the sense of a definite standard of life claiming ethical sanction, has had to struggle" (58). From a traditionalist perspective, the new Protestant ethic of work —the willingness to dedicate oneself to work as an end in itself, living to work instead of working to live—makes little sense. Once it supplants older orientations, however, "economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship, so irrational from a naïve point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not under capitalistic influence" (53). From such a "foreign" and "naïve" point of view, we can perhaps grasp what is so strange about this new way of thinking, this confounding of means and ends, "where a man exists for the sake of his business, instead of the reverse" (70), and begin to appreciate the ways this commitment to work is "so irrational from the standpoint of purely eudaemonistic self-interest" (78).

It was precisely this attenuation of the relationship between work and economic utility, the strange new noninstrumentality of waged work, that made the work ethic a significant spur to capitalist development. According to Weber, the promise of additional wages for longer hours of more intense work was not originally an adequate incentive to adopt new work rhythms and routines. The problem is that although keeping wages low could serve as a reliable way to induce workers to submit to longer hours and greater effort, such a strategy was soon recognized to be incompatible with the long-term viability of the system of waged labor (61). Since wage incentives do not necessarily function as a stimulus to work longer hours at a more demanding pace, and wages can be lowered only so far if labor power is to be reproduced, the Protestant ethic tapped into other sources of motivation. Material need, Weber suggests, is not the only, or even necessarily the most effective, inducement to work. The moral justification for hard work for long hours thus serves to accomplish what neither raising nor lowering wages alone can do.

Not only does the idea of work as an end in itself render the satisfaction of concrete needs less relevant, but it also makes the specific qualities of the work less germane.[4] The Protestant ethic is in this sense a democratizing force: neither the quality nor the status of work is important; what matters is that it is approached with methodical dedication, or, in Weber's formulation, "*as if* it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" (62; emphasis added; see also Muirhead 2004, 106–8). The ethic is thus well-suited to an economic system predicated on labor abstracted from the specificity of the working person and the particular task; it helps to render both the qualities of the work and the satisfaction of concrete needs irrelevant to the logic of now limitless production (Bauman 1998, 8; see also De Angelis 1995, 112–13). To the extent that the quantity of the worker's effort is now more significant than the quality of the work, the ethic is well attuned to a new cycle of capital, production not for finite consumption but for continuous accumulation.[5]

The contrast to traditionalism provides Weber's analysis with an initial distancing mechanism; but we gain even more critical leverage through its estrangement from a different direction, by looking back on the Protestant ethic from the perspective of the secular world for which it served as midwife. Weber's text opens this angle of vision early on by organizing the argument in accordance with the protocols and in the language of social science, addressing us from the beginning as denizens of the rationalized world whose origins we are to explore.[6] The irrational element of the new dogma of work is again highlighted, but this time as we focus our attention on the specific Protestant doctrines that fueled it—the strangeness of which, from a modern perspective, Weber need not belabor. Of these doctrines, Weber singles out Calvin's view of predestination, the psychological effect of which he insists was "extraordinarily powerful" (1958, 128). It also stands out for the way that it further compounds the irrational noninstrumentality of the behaviors it prescribes. As Weber explains it, the doctrine encourages the believer to work as if working were an end in itself, but not because by doing so one could earn a place among the chosen; one's fate was predetermined and could not be altered through the performance of good works. Commitment to work is prescribed rather as a way to assuage the anxiety produced by such uncertainty and to strengthen one's confidence in being among the worthy elect (112). This orientation to work was thus less the result of one's faith in the afterlife than constitutive of it; hard work and success are not a means to salvation, but at most signs of it. To the extent that work acquires more meaning as an act of signification than as a production, there is something ritualistic about our adherence to its discipline. As a means to neither concrete material nor spiritual rewards but rather as an end in itself, the instrumentality of work discipline is even further weakened. Not even religiously instrumental, the rationality of the behavior appears increasingly tenuous.

If we pause for a moment to examine the development of productivist norms since the period of Weber's focus, we can get another perspective on this gap between means and ends. Weber's study explained the subjective constitution of the proletariat and bourgeoisie; the story continues once they are successfully converted to the new values and rhythms of industrial discipline, and later still as they adjust to the conditions of postindustrial production. Once the world is made hostile to the religious basis of the Protestant ethic, new rationales emerge for what remains a fundamentally similar prescription: to dedicate oneself, fully and methodically, to work. Where religion in the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries may have demanded a life devoted to work, the promise of social mobility—that one could by one's own disciplined effort and persistence pick oneself and one's family up by the bootstraps —had emerged in the United States by the early nineteenth century as the most recognizable rationale of this official ethos of work (see Rodgers 1978, 10–12). This industrial work ethic, as a secular version of the old ethos, focused not on the question of mobility in the afterlife but rather on its achievement in this life. After the middle of the twentieth century, another element, present but not as stressed in the industrial discourse, came to the forefront of the new postindustrial work ethic—an element that characterized work as a path to individual self-expression, self-development, and creativity (see, for example, Bunting 2004, 168; M. Rose 1985, 77–92; Zuboff 1983, 166).[7] Thus the transcendental rationale of the Protestant ethic served historically as what Fredric Jameson calls a "vanishing mediator" between precapitalist and capitalist economies (1973). It was first supplanted by the social rationale of high Fordism, the promise of mobility, and then also by a more individual justification and the promise of an even more immediate gratification—namely, fulfilling and meaningful work.[8] Indeed, the history of the work ethic in the United States demonstrates the adaptability of this ascetic ideal as it spans time and travels across space. As it turns out, the means to the different ends—that is, the behaviors that the ethic prescribes—remain consistent: the identification with and systematic devotion to waged work, the elevation of work to the center of life, and the affirmation of work as an end in itself. The ethic's goal, however, the supposed reward for this ethical practice, has proven surprisingly flexible.

To appreciate the strangeness of this confounding of means and ends, let us return to Weber's critical account. The analysis culminates in the final pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, where he describes the fate—the iron cage—to which the ethic delivered us, and at which point the ethic was drained of its religious content and absorbed into the secular culture of capitalism. Its secularization did not, however, eliminate the irrational qualities of the new economic ethos. Indeed, after the demise of this rather short-lived religious mandate, our continued devotion to the ethic's precepts appears even more difficult to account for in terms of a familiar means-ends rationality. At least the Puritan could explain his or her adherence to work discipline in relation to spiritual practices and meanings. Once the religious rationale loses its force, the continued devotion to work becomes more mysterious. Thus, "where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all" (Weber 1958, 182). Haunted by the work ethic, our commitments remain difficult to defend; attempts to explain them often exhibit more the qualities of post hoc rationalizations than sufficient accounts of our motives.[9] Yet the puzzle of our motivation would seem to be of little practical concern; when we have no memory or little imagination of an alternative to a life centered on work, there are few incentives to reflect on why we work as we do and what we might wish to do instead. Rather, our focus is generally confined to how, to draw on a famous phrase from another text, "we shall set to work and meet the 'demands of the day' " (Weber 1946, 156).

Once again, the religious framing of the narrative serves to amplify Weber's final indictment of the now-secularized spirit of capitalism and the dependence on waged labor that it promotes. By the end of his analysis, one can detect an unexpected nostalgia for the religiously motivated ethic, a phenomenon that the text had prior to that point treated with a detachment that would seem to be fueled by equal parts scientific objectivity and ethical distaste. From the perspective of the Puritan worker, there is a hollowness, a purposelessness, to our secularized "*workaday* existence" (149). The historical trajectory along which this new subjectivity of work develops lends to Weber's final characterization, borrowed from Goethe, a tragic dimension: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved" (1958, 182). Cast as a delivery from the flames of religion to the fire of disenchantment, the secularization of the ethic is greeted with Weber's patented ambivalence as an ambiguous form of progress, at once welcome, calamitous, and inescapable.

A "WORLDLY ASCETICISM": PRODUCTIVISM MEETS CONSUMERISM

Weber's insistence on the religious origins of secular ethics calls our attention to a second antinomy through the improbable pairing of the terms "worldly" and "asceticism." On one hand, the Protestant work ethic is, as Weber emphasizes, a fundamentally ascetic morality, one that "turned with all its force against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer" (166). "Life" with its wealth of possibilities is subordinated to the disciplinary demands of work. This injunction to delay other gratifications and focus instead on methodical effort for productive ends remains at the core of later formulations of the work ethic. "Of all the pillars of the work ethic," Daniel Rodgers observes, "the predilection to see the moral life as a mustering of the will against the temptations within and the trials without remained the strongest, the least affected by the industrial transformation" (1978, 123). The "sanitizing effects of constant labor" (12) and the focus on work as the arena in which the individual can, with the proper self-discipline, will his or her own self-development and transformation continue to be affirmed today under the conditions of post-Fordist production. Nonetheless, as a worldly asceticism—rather than an otherworldly one—the prescription was and remains rife with difficulties. The worldliness of, for example, unruly bodies, seductive pleasures, and spontaneous enjoyment poses a constant challenge to the mandate for such focused attention to and diligent effort in properly productive pursuits. Ascetic Puritanism sought to fashion—and here the complexities of the project are revealed—a "life *in* the world, but neither *of* nor *for* this world" (Weber 1958, 154; emphasis added).

Thus, on the one hand, this worldly brand of asceticism, with its elevation of productive work and prohibitions on luxury and idle amusements, placed constraints on consumption. "On the other hand," Weber observes, "it had the psychological effect of freeing the acquisition of goods from the inhibitions of traditionalistic ethics" (171). The Puritan ethos serves to restructure our needs and desires as employers and employees, but also as producers and consumers. Its prescriptions were never, by Weber's account, confined to one's practice and comportment as a producer. In fact, it is precisely the ethic's attention to both production and consumption, its potent combination of ascetic denial and worldly desire, that accounts for its powerful contribution to early capitalist development. For "when the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity," the result is the "accumulation of capital through [this] ascetic compulsion to save" (172). The work ethic forged a functional link between productive and consumptive behaviors, originally by dividing their responsibility between two classes: "The treatment of labour as a calling became as characteristic of the modern worker as the corresponding attitude toward acquisition of the business man" (179). Thus, for example, in addition to encouraging workers to accept the primacy of work over the times and spaces of nonwork, the doctrine also taught workers to respond to wage incentives, to recognize and accept a necessary connection between their contribution as social producers and their corresponding rights to individual consumption. The work ethic continues to affirm the legitimacy of this connection: consumption goods are the reward for and sign of one's contributions and status as a producer. As an antinomy rather than an oxymoron, the "worldly asceticism" of the Protestant ethic functions not despite, but because of, the pairing of terms.

The description that Weber evoked of "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" stands as a revealing indictment of the ethic's prescriptions for dedicated production and controlled acquisition at an early stage of capitalist development that depended on hard work for meager rewards from one class, and the accumulation of savings by the other. Yet, as Weber noted early on, this antinomy is at once central to the historical significance of the Protestant work ethic and key to its demise. This worldly brand of asceticism sowed the seeds of its own destruction as, over time, "these Puritanical ideals tended to give way under excessive pressure from the temptations of wealth" (174). But although the Puritan relationship between pleasure and denial at the heart of the Protestant ethic was undercut, similar dynamics serve to animate subsequent versions of the ethic. In the Fordist period of industrial capitalism, with efforts to sustain a level of mass consumption adequate to the exigencies of mass production, a new relationship between production and acquisition was forged. Consumption, rather than savings alone, emerged as an essential economic practice; as opposed to mere idleness, nonwork time was recognized as an economically relevant time, time to create new reasons to work more (Hunnicutt 1988, 46). Instead of one class of producers and another of savers, under Fordism, producers were expected to do double duty as ascetically indulgent consumers. As earning wages gave us the right to spend, working hours authorized leisure time. Thus the producer-consumer antinomy continued to serve as an energizing force under Fordism.

The expansion of consumption and consumer-based identities in the

Fordist period has led a number of commentators to conclude that the work ethic was finally and completely laid to rest, that by the early twentieth century it had been replaced by—depending on the account—a leisure ethic (C. Mills 1951, 236), a hedonistic consumption ethic (Bell 1976, 63), or an aesthetic of consumption (Bauman 1998, 2). According to such accounts, work had once again been reduced—this time by the seductions of commodity culture—to a mere means to an end, and consumption had replaced work as a site of intensive subjective investment. Indeed, the history of the work ethic in the United States reveals many recitations of this claim, usually motivated by a fear that the work ethic is losing its hold on a new generation, with all kinds of potentially dire economic, social, and political consequences.[10] What these arguments fail to recognize is that the work ethic was always already also an ethic of consumption, one that avows the necessary, legitimate, and indeed ethical link between hard work and whatever might count in different economic phases as deserved and responsible spending. The work ethic in its various incarnations helps organize, manage, and justify the changing relationship between production and consumption. It was and remains a way to sustain a functional relationship between the purchase of labor power and the sale of commodities by forging an ethical link between restraint and indulgence. As Weber notes in the case of the Puritan ethic, the enjoyment of wealth was never the problem; the danger, rather, was that one would no longer see the need to continue to work. "In fact," Weber claims, "it is only because possession involves this danger of relaxation that it is objectionable at all" (1958, 157).

Conditions of Fordist and post-Fordist production do not undermine the work ethic, though arguably they do intensify the potential instability of this core antinomy. As the mandate for one class to acquire savings becomes a Fordist prescription for the rationalization of mass consumption, the tensions at the core of the older Protestant ethic—exemplified by its support for a worldly brand of asceticism—are heightened. Under the conditions of post-Fordist production, the relationship between production and consumption that the ethic helps to manage is rendered even more fractious and fragile. More specifically, the claim that the relationship between work and income is necessarily and legitimately mediated by the wage becomes more difficult to maintain. The growth of immaterial forms of postindustrial service, cognitive, and communicational labor ensures that the relationship between a worker's contribution and his or her reward are more difficult to measure; the expansion of part-time, temporary, and insecure forms of employment renders the relationship between employment and income more precarious; and the decline of Fordist and Keynesian ideologies that insisted on and managed the wage-consumption connection at the industry and national levels makes the relationship between a worker's labor and his or her wage even more tenuous. I will explore the implications of these developments further in chapter 3. Here, I want to emphasize that the work ethic functions, as Weber originally recognized in the Protestant case, to stimulate consumption in some relation to production; it prescribes both productivist and consumerist values, insisting only on their necessary connection, their mutual dependence. Though a constant source of the ethic's instability, prescriptions for whatever may be conceived at any particular moment as "rational acquisition" or "legitimate" consumerist indulgence remain at the heart of, rather than beyond the purview of, capital's productivist ethic.

AUTONOMY AND COMMAND: MANAGING INDEPENDENCE

A third antinomy at the heart of the work ethic that Weber's analysis suggests is its promotion of work as a path to independence and the fact that the individual is thereby subject to dependence on waged labor and delivered to the sovereignty of employers. Although the wage relation has come to be considered the hallmark of self-sovereignty, it nonetheless remains a relation of subordination, and the autonomy that work is expected to ensure maintains an uneasy relationship to the ongoing subjection that it also authorizes. This produces a tension that must be carefully managed, as both the independence of the worker and his or her submission to the wage relation fuel social production. It is this paradoxical figure of what we might call the sovereign individual subject of exploitation that is increasingly the source of surplus value.

Work is often understood and experienced as a field of individual agency and as a sign of and a path to self-reliance. The Protestant work ethic hailed the individual as a moral agent, responsible for achieving the certainty of his or her own salvation (see Weber 1958, 115). Work was in this sense a mechanism of *spiritual independence*: rather than relying upon religious institutions and authorities, "the conscientious Puritan continually supervised his own state of grace" (124). The link between waged work and independence was solidified in the industrial period, when work became lauded as a means to *social and political independence*. Wages freed the worker from dependence on state aid and family support. Waged work thus became seen as the sine qua non of self-reliance. By this account, the "free" labor market provides the institutional setting—"a very Eden of the innate rights of man"—in which individuals can seize control of their own fate; individuals meet in this realm as buyers and sellers of a commodity, labor power, and "contract as free persons, who are equal before the law" (Marx 1976, 280). Of course, the progress of industrialization posed many challenges to the claim that waged work was best characterized as a state of independence rather than dependence. And yet, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon argue, it was in this period that waged labor became increasingly synonymous with independence. Whereas individual—or, more precisely household—independence had been a status that only property ownership could confer, over the course of the industrial period it became increasingly identified with wage-earning. Indeed, whereas working-class activists had previously decried waged labor as a form of "wage slavery," they now claimed "a new form of manly independence within it" (Fraser and Gordon 1994, 315–16). In the process, dependency is redefined in such a way that it does not include capitalist relations of subordination in its field of relevance (325).[11]

As Weber points out, the work ethic—and this remains consistent over the course of its historical transformations—is an individualizing discourse. The individual's economic achievement or lack of achievement depends on and is reflective of his or her character. What could be seen as the responsibility of a collective becomes the duty of every individual; thus, refracted through the lens of Puritan ethics, "St. Paul's 'He who will not work shall not eat,' " once understood to be relevant to the community as a whole, now "holds unconditionally for everyone" (1958, 159). That is, moral responsibility now lies with the individual rather than the community, and rich and poor alike "shall not eat without working" (159–60). This becomes even more applicable over the course of the industrial era, once waged work becomes normative; and it is especially true in the postindustrial period as the breadwinner norm becomes increasingly universal, an expectation not just of household heads but of every adult citizen. With fewer instances of "legitimate" economic or political dependence, "whatever dependency remains, therefore, can be interpreted as the fault of individuals" (Fraser and Gordon

1994, 325). Independence becomes less a matter of the types of relationships one finds oneself subject to and more a quality of one's character (332). "Postindustrial dependency" thus becomes at once increasingly illegitimate and "increasingly individualized" (325).

As an individualizing discourse, the work ethic serves the time-honored ideological function of rationalizing exploitation and legitimating inequality. That all work is good work, that all work is equally desirable and inherently useful is, as William Morris once noted, "a convenient belief to those who live on the labour of others" (1999, 128). The Protestant ethic also "legalized the exploitation of this specific willingness to work," Weber observes, insofar as it "interpreted the employer's business activity as a calling" (1958, 178). From the perspective of the work ethic, governments are seen to protect the welfare of citizens by defending their right to work, while employers are not so much extracting surplus value as they are meeting the concrete needs of their employees for work. Just as the Protestant ethic gave the bourgeois businessperson "the comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence" (177), the work ethic offers in all periods a powerful rationale for economic inequality (see Beder 2000, 48; Bauman 1998, 65). Comparable to the way that the "unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace" (Weber 1958, 159), today the morally suspect state of poverty can be attributed to the lack of individual effort and discipline. After all, "God"—today we could add the market—"helps those who help themselves" (115). As an individualizing discourse, the work ethic eschews institutional support for what is supposed to be an individual responsibility and obscures the structural processes that limit his or her field of opportunity.[12]

But the work ethic serves more than simply the classic ideological function of passing off the values and interests of one class as the values and interests of all. It also serves a more disciplinary function: beyond manufacturing common meanings, it constructs docile subjects. The work ethic thus possesses not just an epistemological force but an effectiveness that is properly ontological. Indeed, what is essential about the work ethic, as Weber originally described it, was what it could do: deliver workers to their exploitation, not just by manufacturing subjects' consent to capitalist exploitation, but by constituting both exploiting and exploitable subjects. By Weber's account, the subjectification function of the ethic is crucial. More than an ideology, the new discourse of work is a disciplinary mechanism that constructs subjects as productive individuals.[13] The impact of the Protestant ethic was comparable to monastic existence insofar as this worldly asceticism sought "methodical control over *the whole man*" (119; emphasis added). It was and remains, in this sense, a biopolitical force, one that renders populations at once productive and governable, increasing their capacities together with their docility. As Foucault once described the production of disciplinary individuality, "discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)"; it produces "both a productive body and a subjected body" (1979, 138, 26). The individuated subject is both more useful and more manageable; "the individual is not, in other words, power's opposite number; the individual is one of power's first effects" (Foucault 2003, 30).

The Protestant ethic was so effective because it was not merely imposed on the individual from the outside, by the state or by the church. We "must take account," Weber remarks, "of the great difference between the results of the authoritarian moral discipline of the Established Churches and the corresponding discipline in the sects [generally more typical of Protestant communities] which rested on *voluntary submission*" (1958, 152; emphasis added). For example, the Calvinistic state churches may have "enforced a particular type of external conformity, but in some cases weakened the subjective motives of rational conduct" as well as that "liberation of individual powers" that was the focus of Weber's interest. Rather than enforcing conformity, the Protestant ethic is effective to the extent that it is internalized by the individual. The effect, moreover, is not just to shape the individual's beliefs and values but to promote the individual's constitution in relation to and identification with productivist norms. The ethic is advice not just about how to behave but also about who to be; it takes aim not just at consciousness but also at the energies and capacities of the body, and the objects and aims of its desires. The ethic's mandate is not merely to induce a set of beliefs or instigate a series of acts but also to produce a self that strives continually toward those beliefs and acts. This involves the cultivation of habits, the internalization of routines, the incitement of desires, and the adjustment of hopes, all to guarantee a subject's adequacy to the lifetime demands of work.[14]

So on the one hand, work is conceived in this discourse as a field of individuation and independence. On the other hand, of course, the wage relation is a hierarchical one, which requires individuals to submit to command and control. This antinomy—that work and its ethical discourse produce both independence and dependence, captured by Weber in that strange *self*-discipline he struggles to account for—renders the wage relation always potentially unstable. The ideal of independence can always serve as a critical standard against which the organization of the labor process and the conduct of its managers can be assessed, and a demand around which workers can organize for reforms. In fact, the ideal of individual independence has been invoked over the course of US history to inform struggles against everything from wage slavery to bureaucratic unionism. Even the hard-won reforms of the Fordist period—the laws governing wages and hours, and social wage provisions that offered new opportunities for many workers to advance into the middle class and mitigate their immediate dependence on the whims of employers—were accompanied by new concerns about the state of independence that they secured. The critique of the iconic "organization man" of high Fordism and the standardized individuality of the 1950s called into question the quality of the freedom that such progress entailed. And although new forms of white-collar employment were seen to afford new autonomy for some workers, by the early 1950s, critics like C. Wright Mills were calling into question whether this new middle-class worker—as "the servant of decision, the assistant of authority, the minion of management"—had achieved or relinquished his or her individual independence (1951, 80). These critiques in turn helped to inform the struggles against worker alienation of the 1960s and 1970s and the consequent reorganization of work and its management under post-Fordism.

But the precariousness that the antinomy generates is not only due to the static contradiction between the ideal of autonomy and the reality of submission, or because of the conflicting interests of capital, which demands dependence, and workers, who clamor for independence. A deeper source of conflict stems from the fact that capital needs individuals whose control poses ongoing problems. Even Taylorism, that science of management with its utopia of the assembly line, recognized that workers are more valuable as individuals. That is, the Taylorist organization of work processes in the industrial factory was not just about homogenizing a mass workforce and standardizing its output; it was also promoted by its early boosters as a method that attended to the specificity of each job and the monitoring and measurement of each individual worker (see Rodgers 1978, 56). Indeed, much of management theory and practice is focused on precisely this task: managing capital's dependence upon independence, engineering profitable modes of individuality. Again the example of Taylorism proves instructive. Although Taylor is usually remembered as the architect of a labor process typically thought not to depend on the subjectivity of workers, but to concentrate instead on organizing the work process down to its last detail so that employers can be less concerned about their voluntary compliance and enthusiastic participation, even he sought to fashion productive subjectivities. As Leslie Salzinger notes in her reading of Taylor's account of his success in raising the productivity of the iron worker Schmidt, this was accomplished in part by asking Schmidt over and over again if he was a "high priced man," using this interpellation as a way to motivate Schmidt to work faster and to accept Taylor's detailed control over his work. "Taylor creates the very subject he ostensibly recognizes," Salzinger writes, "giving him a power over Schmidt that goes beyond that of controlling his behavior to that of defining Schmidt's self" (2003, 17).

The dependence on independence and the tensions it produces intensify under the conditions of post-Taylorist production. I will develop this point in more detail later in the chapter. Here I will just note that even more than in industrial production, profits in the service- and knowledge-based economy depend increasingly on simultaneously activating and controlling, on releasing and harnessing, the creative, communicative, affective, and emotional capacities of workers. "As it is no longer possible to confine subjectivity merely to tasks of execution," Maurizio Lazzarato observes, "it becomes necessary for the subject's competence in the areas of management, communication, and creativity to be made compatible with the conditions of 'production for production's sake.'" The task of fashioning productive forms of subjectivity, workers who are simultaneously self-directed and manageable, poses an ongoing puzzle for capitalist—and particularly post-Fordist—management techniques: "Thus the slogan 'become subjects,'" Lazzarato continues, "far from eliminating the antagonism between hierarchy and cooperation, between autonomy and command, actually re-poses the antagonism at a higher level, because it both mobilizes and clashes with the very personality of the individual worker" (1996, 135). The individual autonomy and independence that work is supposed to, and to some degree must, enable thus coexists uneasily with the subjection and dependence that it nonetheless secures (see also Gorz 1999, 38–39).

THE WORK ETHIC AND THE LABORING CLASSES

Whereas *The Protestant Ethic* provides insight into the first three antinomies, the final two require that we move further beyond the historical territory of Weber's account. Specifically, they require special attention to the industrial period and the dynamics of class struggle, antiracism, and feminism that emerged in that period and continue to shape our own. The antinomic relationship between subordination and insubordination enabled by the work ethic can be demonstrated through the example of class struggle; I will use a brief consideration of the histories of race- and gender-based struggles in the following section to highlight a final antinomy in the way the ethic has been deployed as a mechanism of both exclusion and inclusion.

The particular limits of Weber's account can be illustrated by returning again briefly to the similarities between Marx's account of primitive accumulation and Weber's story of early capitalist development. As noted above, each author focuses on a different "vanishing mediator" in the transition to a capitalist society: state violence for Marx, religious doctrine for Weber. Whereas Marx insists that "force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one" (1976, 916), Weber claims that it was Puritanism that "stood at the cradle of the modern economic man" (1958, 174). Marx's story of primitive accumulation and Weber's history of the Protestant ethic also end on similar notes. According to Marx, once the capitalist mode of production is in place, the "bloody discipline" deployed to create a class of wage laborers is supplanted by a less direct mode of force, the "silent compulsion of economic relations" (1976, 905, 899). Weber's account concludes with the replacement of the self-discipline of the Puritan by an economic order capable of determining the lives of every individual with "irresistible force": "the Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so" (1958, 181).

The problem is that each of the texts wraps up the narrative too neatly. The story does not end with the assisted birth of economic man; this is, rather, when the hard work begins, with the raising and cultivating of productive subjects. Although Weber recognizes that beyond just forcing the wage relationship on those without other options, "victorious capitalism" also "educates and selects the economic subjects which it needs," the *Protestant Ethic* neglects to pursue that line of analysis (181, 55). Thus, in the same way that many have since revised Marx's original analysis—which had confined the techniques of primitive accumulation to a founding moment—in order to account for the ongoing use of violence and dispossession as means of accumulation throughout capital's history, we need to amend Weber's story line to register more clearly the imposition of waged labor as a continual process.

In fact, of course, US history reveals a protracted campaign, particularly over the course of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, to impose industrial work habits and values on both the formerly enslaved and successive waves of immigrants (Genovese 1974, 303; Gutman 1977, 14). Since the ascetic ideal of work did not hold the same attractions for, or have the same power to interpellate, those for whom Protestant doctrine, the industrial period's promise of mobility, or the postindustrial prospect of fulfilling work was less likely to resonate, it was and continues to be an ongoing struggle to spread these work values across divisions of occupation and income. But the history of class struggle in the United States reveals another of the ethic's animating antinomies, showing how it has been wielded as a weapon by both sides. That is, while the ethic has functioned to maintain the subordination of workers to the conditions of abstract labor, it has also served as a weapon of their insubordination.

As we have seen, Weber clearly recognizes the work ethic's function as a mechanism of subordination. Although the gospel of work in its Protestant version was a "specifically bourgeois economic ethic" (1958, 176), and remains in its later secular instantiations most closely associated with the professional and managerial class, this does not mean that the working classes have been exempt from its strictures or immune to its appeal. After all, the Protestant ethic also provided the bourgeois business owner with "sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God" (177). The work ethic was and remains "an ideology propagated by the middle classes for the working classes with enough plausibility and truth to make it credible" (Barbash 1983, 232).

What Weber did not recognize was that it could also serve as a tool of insubordination. Although industrialists and their managers struggled to inculcate the work ethic among laborers, its adoption proved to be something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, managers often succeeded in expanding the reach of the traditional ethic of work; on the other hand, the ethic was not always adopted in the form or with the results they sought. First, the split between means and ends introduces a certain indeterminacy. To function as a disciplinary force, the industrial work ethic is articulated—contrary in some respects to the original Protestant ethic—in terms of earthly goals and tangible rewards. These then serve as ideals around which workers can struggle for reforms—demanding, for example, higher wages ensuring more social mobility, and better, more satisfying work. Second, the process of inculcation through which willing subjects are fashioned does not establish a mimetic relationship between culture and subject; the norm that is internalized is always in some ways altered or hybridized in the process. The battles fought within the discursive frames set by these competing versions of the ethic operate to continually transform their terms.

Since the nineteenth century, the working class has developed its own version of the work ethic, and this alternative work ethic from below has been useful to the political projects of contesting the structural exclusions and cultural marginalization of the class.[15] This "laborist work ethic" of the industrial period, one of several dissident versions that we will continue to discuss in the following section, draws on a variant of the labor theory of value to celebrate the worth and dignity of waged work and to contend that such work is entitled to respect and adequate recompense (Tyler 1983, 200). Rather than malign the shiftless poor, for example, this version of the ethic takes aim at the idle rich (199). The laborist ethic was a key element of the class composition of the industrial proletariat, both helping to construct it as a class and serving as part of its arsenal. By highlighting and valorizing its productive role, Baudrillard notes how this laborist work ethic helped to constitute the working class as a class, serving to render it legible and appealing as a collective identity: "The ethic of rational labor, which is of bourgeois origin and which served historically to define the bourgeoisie as a class, is found renewed with fantastic amplitude at the level of the working class, also contributing *to define* it as a class, that is to circumscribe it in a status of historical representability" (1975, 155). Defined in terms of a "productivist vocation" to match that of the bourgeoisie, the working class could wage its struggles from a position of dialectical opposition, a position that maximizes both the intelligibility of working-class demands and at another level—as we will see in the next section—their recuperability (156–59).

The laborist ethic was a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the industrial proletariat that helped to secure a host of working-class victories well into the middle of the twentieth century. Taking seriously the familiar descriptions of what work could be and could do, workers have struggled to make waged work live up to its ideals and deliver on its promise of social mobility and individual fulfillment. In this way, the ethic has served to augment the power of the dominant class at the same time that it has served to enhance the counter-power of the working class. Working-class campaigns in the 1930s against exploitation, fueled in part by the laborist ethic, helped to secure the social welfare and regulatory provisions of the Fordist wage relation, not to mention new management efforts at co-optation in the form of the human-relations movement. The postindustrial work ethic, with its new emphasis on work as an avenue for personal development and meaning, was at least in part a response to the rebellions in the 1960s and early 1970s against the disciplinary subjectivity of the Fordist period and the problem of worker alienation that they helped to publicize. The human-resources movement that had come into its own by the 1980s attempted to change work processes in ways that would address, in profitable terms, the problem of work quality posed by activists. Thus the shift from the industrial ethic's focus on work as a path to social mobility to the postindustrial emphasis on work as a practice of self-realization is part and parcel of the confrontation of competing versions of the ethic and the struggles over the organization and meaning of work that they signified and facilitated (see Bernstein 1997; M. Rose 1985; Storey 1989).

Class struggles over the application of the work ethic can produce another unintended effect. As more people demand that their work be recognized as relevant to the dominant ethic of work, the class specificity of the ethic becomes increasingly exposed to view. As always, the work ethic with its various claims about the rewards of work—whether those rewards are coded as social mobility or self-development—shifts from a credible ideal to sheer propaganda depending on the conditions of work and the individual's position within the complex, intersecting hierarchies of the work society. The further the discourse travels, the more its precepts are abstracted from the real conditions of work, and the more often it is reduced to a crudely ideological phenomenon: its universal claims about the benefits and gratifications of a lifetime devoted to work may reflect some of the experiences of one class but mystify those of another.

RACE, GENDER, AND THE PROPAGATION OF THE WORK ETHIC

The history of the work ethic in the United States reveals not only its class inflections but also its instantiations as a racialized and gendered discourse. The previous discussion highlighted the potential dual use of the work ethic as an instrument of class domination and a tool of class insubordination, a utility that has served antiracist and feminist struggles as well. A brief look at the racialization of the discourse, and a longer consideration of its gendering, can reveal another of its contradictory dynamics: the way it has served as a mechanism of both exclusion and inclusion. More specifically, I want to focus here on one way the ethic came to be more inclusive—that is, how it extended its reach beyond the bourgeois class of the industrial period and today's professional and managerial class by being rendered simultaneously exclusive of other groups. This focus on both the inclusions and exclusions that the work ethic sustains recalls Weber's dual emphasis on the egalitarian and hierarchical effects of the new work values. To some extent, the discourse was a democratizing force that elevated all forms of waged work to the status of an ethically worthy practice; at the same time, however, it was a powerful source of hierarchy that played a crucial role in the legitimation of inequality, now read as a reflection of individual character rather than a consequence of the structure of waged employment. This last antinomy is a characteristic of any disciplinary norm, which, as Foucault explains it, is simultaneously a force of homogenization and of differentiation, at once prescribing "a conformity that must be achieved" and tracing "the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences" (1979, 183).

Consider, for example, how the ethic came to be more inclusive in terms of class by means of its exclusions based on race and gender. In the early industrial period, elements of the white working class came to identify with waged work as a mark of independence and status by way of their racial identities. The legitimacy of and identification with what had been resisted as "wage slavery" in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries was established "in time and in comparison" to the institution of slavery and those constructed through its sustaining discourses as its abject subjects. The embrace of whiteness, as David Roediger explains, "was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline" (1991, 13). The othering of various immigrant groups delivered a similar reward to wage laborers, paying what W. E. B. Du Bois called a "public and psychological wage" to the white working class (quoted in Roediger 1991, 12). Thus the work ethic traveled down the class ladder in part on the energies of racism, ethnicity, and nationalism. The racialization of the work ethic also played a role in the postindustrial economy by facilitating the acceptance of white-collar work. Indeed, C. Wright Mills notes that, despite the fact that most of such work was routinized and unskilled, white-collar workers in the United States could nonetheless claim greater prestige than blue-collar workers on the basis of the whiteness and citizenship status of those in the white-collar occupational niche (1951, 248). Once again, the norm's exclusions based on race, nation, and ethnicity fueled its inclusiveness in terms of class. One's status and comportment as a waged worker, as a member of the working or middle class, was not just a matter of asserting one's moral worthiness and social standing as "a worker," but as a white worker, a working man, an American worker, or, to recall an earlier example, a "high priced man"—that is, via one's relative privilege as a racialized, gendered, national, or classed subject.

These ideals of work continue to receive no small amount of their charge from these marginalizing practices. Regardless of the wages, intrinsic appeal, or status of one's work, it can serve as a means to assert one's moral superiority and thereby legitimate one's economic privilege over a series of racialized and gendered groups. Over the course of US history, there is a continuous calling into question of the work commitments and habits of different immigrant and racialized populations. Whether it was the panic about the inability of US corporations to compete with a more vigorous Japanese work culture or the ongoing debates regarding the supposed inadequacies of the work orientations of "inner city residents," "the underclass," "welfare mothers," or "illegal aliens," the work ethic is a deep discursive reservoir on which to draw to obscure and legitimate processes and logics of racial, gender, and nationalist formations past and present. In particular, as the history of racialized welfare discourse demonstrates, the work ethic continues to serve as a respectable vehicle for what would otherwise be exposed as publicly unacceptable claims about racial difference (see Neubeck and Cazenave 2001).

The work ethic is not only a racialized but a gendered construction; women too have served as the excluded others of its various historical articulations. This was enabled by the historical processes through which work in the United States became equated with waged work, waged work was linked to masculinity, and unwaged domestic work was reconceived as nonproductive women's work. This lack of recognition of feminized domestic labor emerged with early industrialization, as unwaged household work came to stand as the (naturalized and feminized) model of nonwork that served to contrast and thereby sustain a (now masculinized) concept of work. As Jeanne Boydston explains it, the gender division of labor thus morphed into a gendered definition of work (1990, 55). Unwaged women (and those waged women who found themselves judged in relation to this normative model), not subject to the morally purifying and invigorating effects of work discipline, were a justifiably dependent class. The work ethic could then be embraced as a masculine ethic while nonwork—a rather more expansive category including everything from leisure practices and consumption work to unwaged agricultural, household, and caring labor—was devalued by its association with a degraded femininity. Within the industrial gender order that emerged from these processes, blue-collar manufacturing work was defined as men's work, and its masculinization helped to promote acceptance of and identification with it as work not only befitting a man (Fraser and Gordon 1994) but as instrumental to becoming a man (see, for example, Willis 1977, 150–51; Baron 1991, 69).

To take a slight detour from the narrative, it is important to recognize the link between the gendering of the work ethic and the disciplinary norm that governs another site of labor, the family ethic. Indeed, the family ethic functioned as a supplement to the work ethic, serving to discipline not only unwaged women in the household, but waged workers as well. The family ethic as a mechanism of social regulation and control was, as Mimi Abramovitz observes, based on the gender division of labor, and served to articulate and rationalize its terms (1988, 37). But it was not only applied to the field of unwaged domestic work. Throughout the industrial period, the conformity of all workers to the traditional model of the family—a nuclear, heterosexual, patriarchal model—was promoted by employers, politicians, religious leaders, and reformers as a crucial adjunct to work discipline, serving as another sign of the worker's dedication to work and adherence to the productivist ethos. This family ethic emerged in the Fordist period as an important means by which to manage the production-consumption nexus. Thus Henry Ford was convinced that a stable and disciplined labor force was reproduced through the institution of the traditional family, and he required that his employees adhere to the model (May 1987). "Culture of poverty" discourses have long focused their critical sights on family structures—including the "Negro family" of the infamous Moynihan Report—claiming that the traditional patriarchal nuclear family is fundamental to economic success (see Roschelle 1999, 316). The institution of the family has, of course, undergone dramatic changes since the period of high Fordism. But just as the work ethic has managed to survive the transformations of work, the ghost of dead family values continues to haunt us as well (Stacey 1996, 49). As one White House report from the 1980s put it, the family, as the "seedbed of economic skills, money, habits, attitudes towards work, and the art of financial independence," plays a key role in the transmission of work skills and ethics; "neither the modern family nor the free enterprise system would long survive without the other" (quoted in Abramovitz 1988, 350–51). The family ethic endures in this post-Fordist period, serving various family-values campaigns as a tool of political-economic discipline arguably for many of the same reasons it was defended earlier: for the role it plays in reproducing a stable and able workforce with little in the way of public funding—or, to put it another way, because otherwise we might "destroy the golden egg that produced cheap labor" (Kessler-Harris 1990, 39).[16]

To return to the major line of argument, the fact that some are excluded from the dignity and worth conferred by the work ethic can serve to render its prescriptions more attractive to others. Thus the inclusion of more white and male workers in the scope of the ethic's logics was facilitated in part by the exclusion of many black and women workers from the status of hard-working and disciplined breadwinner. However, while these articulations of the ethic in relation to gender, race, and class identities and relations served to facilitate its propagation among, in the examples treated above, broader swaths of the white male working class, it also generated conflict as these various exclusions were contested and resisted on the one hand and—as the discussion that opens the next chapter illustrates—refused and disregarded on the other hand. We have already touched upon the historical importance of the laborist ethic. The work ethic has been a similarly powerful weapon in the arsenal of antiracist struggles. Demanding recognition of the history of hard work and the commitment to productivist values, the supposed whiteness of the work ethic has been challenged at every turn. Claims about the strength of the work ethic have been enlisted in antiracist discourses and projects of racial uplift from Booker T. Washington's efforts to educate students who "would learn to love work for its own sake" (1971, 148) and Anna Julia Cooper's promotion of not only the economic but the social benefits of black women's unwaged household work (Logan 2002) to William Julius Wilson's argument that unemployed and underemployed residents of the "urban ghetto" are, contrary to those discourses that seek to pathologize their "choices," more likely to share than to eschew dominant work values (1996, 179–81).[17]

Although these demands for inclusion have undeniably been important historically and effective politically, I want to focus here on the limitations of such efforts to secure recognition of the moral respectability of excluded or marginalized workers and the ethical status of their labors. The discussion that follows will focus on feminism's relationship to the work ethic to illustrate some of these limits. Feminist reformulations of the work ethic have abounded since the nineteenth century, when "the work ethic brought its enormous reserves of power to the women's movement" (Rodgers 1978, 184). As noted in the introduction, two general feminist strategies for confronting women's marginalization in relation to work and its dominant ethic emerged to respond to the industrial period's imagination and engineering of the gendered relationship between waged work and household labor. One such response accepts the characterization of domestic work as nonwork and focuses on integrating women into waged work. The tradition of liberal feminism has long praised the virtues and rewards of waged work for women. Thus in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft decried the enervating and corrupting indolence encouraged by the norms of middle-class femininity, insisting that "trifling employments have rendered woman a trifler" (1996, 77). But the work ethic may have received its most unconditional support within feminism in Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, which declared that a woman "can find identity only in work that is of real value to society—work for which, usually, our society pays" (1963, 346). Deluded by the feminine mystique "and the immaturity it breeds," the housewives she interviewed were prevented "from doing the work of which they are capable" and making that "serious professional commitment" she prescribes (253, 349). Although these examples drawn from first- and second-wave liberal feminism exemplify a more white and middle-class discourse, befitting those for whom the ideology of separate spheres and anxiety about feminine idleness resonated most, they no doubt also held attractions for a broader cross-section of women who, as Zillah Eisenstein once observed of Friedan's argument, not only may have identified with that class position even if they did not inhabit it, but may have been attracted to the liberal ideals of equality of opportunity and individual independence upon which the arguments are predicated (1981, 178). This emphasis on the "right to work," what Gwendolyn Mink describes as the "labor market bias" of US feminism (1998, 26), continues to characterize broad segments of mainstream feminism.

One feminist response, therefore, was to adopt the traditional work ethic's singular focus on the value of waged labor and claim that women should have equal access to the virtues that employment opportunities could bestow. A second response to the characterization of women as nonproductive citizens insisted instead on the status of domestic work as real work—that is, on its standing as a comparably worthy form of socially necessary and dignified labor. Thus, for example, the home economics movement of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries imported a version of this same ethic into domestic work, insisting that household labor requires a level of discipline, efficiency, and systematic effort comparable to that required of industrial labor (see Rodgers 1978, 200–201; Ehrenreich and English 1975). Besides once again creating more work for women—in the first approach, by adding a second job to women's lives; in the second, by raising the standards of domestic work—there were additional drawbacks to each of the strategies: whereas the first risked perpetuating the invisibility and devaluation of unwaged domestic work, the second threatened to reinforce the discourse of separate spheres and with it what Charlotte Perkins Gilman decried as "domestic mythology" (2002, 36).[18]

Second-wave feminists were particularly interested in this second approach, insisting on revaluing feminized forms of not only domestic labor but pink-collar wage labor as well—including, for example, caring work and sex work. The proponents of the classic gynocentric ethic of care claimed that caring labor was real work and should be recognized and valued as such. Though more interested in finding in caring labor another model of ethical work than in imposing the model of waged work on the practices of care, some of these second-wave authors nonetheless echo aspects of the ethical discourse of waged labor in making the case for caring labor's significance and worth. Thus the ethic of care could also be construed as an ethic of work. Beyond the long-standing problem of gender essentialism that haunts the project, this and other efforts to expand conceptions of what counts as work also risk tapping into and expanding the scope of the traditional work ethic.[19]

Feminist analyses of sex work offer an illustrative example of the limitations of certain efforts to claim the title of work when that also involves making use of the legitimacy conferred by its dominant ethic. Introduced originally as a way to intervene in the feminist sex wars, the label "sex work" sought to alter the terms of feminist debate about sexual labor (Leigh 1997). For example, as a replacement for the label "prostitution," the category helps to shift the terms of discussion from the dilemmas posed by a social problem to questions of economic practice; rather than a character flaw that produces a moral crisis, sex work is reconceived as an employment option that can generate income and provide opportunity. Within the terms of the feminist debate about prostitution, for example, the vocabulary has been particularly important as a way to counter the aggressive sexual moralizing of some in the prohibitionist camp, as well as their disavowal of sex workers' agency and insistent reliance on the language and logics of victimization. The other side, however, has produced some comparably problematic representations of work as a site of voluntary choice and of the employment contract as a model of equitable exchange and individual agency. More relevant to our topic here, it is important to recognize how much of the rhetorical utility of the label "sex work" stems from its association with conventional work values. For those involved in sex worker advocacy, the term can serve not only as a way to foreground the economic dimensions of such labor practices, but as a way to insist on their essential worth, dignity, and legitimacy, as—in the formulation of one advocacy group—"service work that should be respected and protected" (quoted in Jenness 1993, 67). I do not mean to deny the vital importance of these efforts, only to point out that they often tend to echo uncritically the traditional work-ethic discourse. Thus the prostitutes' rights group COYOTE ("Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics") may succeed in calling off one of our old tired ethics, but in the process of doing so, taps into and reproduces another. The approach usefully demoralizes the debates about the nature, value, and legitimacy of sex for wages in one way, but it often does so by problematically remoralizing it in another; it shifts the discussion from one moral terrain to another, from that of a suspect sexual practice to that of a respectable employment relation.

All of these dissident versions—the laborist, antiracist, and feminist appropriations of the work ethic—have proved to be powerful weapons for change. Harnessing the ethic has served to render legible and legitimate a host of demands for equality. The laborist ethic "turned necessity into pride and servitude into honor" (Rodgers 1978, 181), thereby providing a vehicle for the development of class consciousness and a lever of power for the labor movement. Antiracist affirmations of the work ethic challenged racist stereotypes and served as a potent weapon in the struggle to gain access to employment opportunities, as well as bolstering struggles for equal access to and reform within a number of sites and contexts. Feminist articulations of the work ethic similarly served to garner sympathy for and expand the appeal of a broad set of demands for women's rights. There is no question that claiming equal rights and opportunities as productive citizens has proved enormously effective as a way to challenge class, race, gender, and sexual hierarchies.

But all of these demands for inclusion serve at the same time to expand the scope of the work ethic to new groups and new forms of labor, and to reaffirm its power. Thus the laborist ethic may have helped in the struggle to win Fordist concessions, but it did so by affirming the ideal as a lifetime of "dignified" work (see also Rodgers 1978, 181). "The 'class of laborers,'" Baudrillard observes, "is thus confirmed in its idealized status as a productive force even by its revolutionary ideal" (1975, 156). Although opposed to the work society's hierarchies, such tactics were complicit with its ethics. This is a potential problem with both of the long-standing feminist strategies regarding work and its dominant values: the demand for inclusion in the form of "real" (that is, waged) work for women and the demand to expand the category of work to include what has been mischaracterized either as idleness and leisure, or as private, intimate, and spontaneous acts of love—but in any case, as nonwork. Each of the approaches risks contesting the gendered organization of a capitalist work society by reproducing its fundamental values. Claiming one's place as a productive citizen and one's value in relation to the legitimating ethic of work, whether or not the original ethic is thereby altered, remains in this specific sense a mode of rebellion susceptible to co-optation. Struggling only within, rather than also against, the terms of the traditional discourse of work both limits the scope of the demands that are advanced and fails to contest the basic terms of the work society's social contract. For all their successes, few political movements have managed to confront directly what Weber calls the "social ethic of capitalistic culture" (1958, 54).

POST-FORDISM AND THE WORK ETHIC

The political and economic developments associated with post-Fordism exert some new pressures on the work ethic. Current trends suggest that our attitudes toward work are of increasing importance to the continued viability of contemporary modes of work and their governance. One could argue that with neoliberal restructuring and the shift in the balance of power between capital and labor that it signals, the coercive inducements to hard work and long hours are often sufficient to deliver manageable workers to the labor market. Indeed, the increasing mobility of capital in comparison to the ongoing restrictions on labor's movement alters the political landscape. The threat of job loss attributed to the pressures of global competition puts workers on the defensive, while the contraction of social welfare provisions further enforces individuals' dependence on the wage relation. The precarious position that so many workers find themselves in echoes that of Weber's Puritan, whose restless anxiety and uncertainty kept his nose to the grindstone.[20]

In such a climate, one could conclude that capital is—to recall Weber's claim about an earlier period—back "in the saddle" (1958, 282, n. 108) and thus no longer in need of its old ethical supports. But that would be only part of the story; in other respects, the willingness of workers to dedicate themselves to work as the center of their lives and as an end in itself may never have been so necessary. There are at least two reasons why our attitudes toward work take on renewed significance in the context of post-Fordism. First, workers' investment in the work ethic is increasingly relevant because in many forms of work—for example, in many service sector jobs—employers want more from their employees than was typically demanded in the factories of the industrial era: not just the labor of the hand, but the labors of the head and the heart. Post-Taylorist work processes therefore tend to require more from immaterial laborers than their sacrifice and submission, seeking to enlist their creativity and their relational and affective capacities. It is not obedience that is prized, but commitment; employees are more often expected to adopt the perspectives of managers rather than simply yield to their authority (Bunting 2004, 110). Whereas Fordism demanded from its core workers a lifetime of compliance with work discipline, post-Fordism also demands of many of its workers flexibility, adaptability, and continual reinvention.[21] If originally the work ethic was the means by which already disciplined workers were delivered to their exploitation, it serves a more directly productive function today: where attitudes themselves are productive, a strong work ethic guarantees the necessary level of willing commitment and subjective investment. Especially in the context of service work and work with an affective or communications component, the individual's attitude and emotional state are considered crucial skills, along with empathy and sociability.[22] Indeed, the very distinction between a worker's skills and attitudes becomes difficult to sustain, since, as Robin Leidner notes, "the willingness and capacity of workers to manipulate and project their attitudes in the organization's interest are central to their competence on the job" (1996, 46). Thus, Doug Henwood claims, "employer surveys reveal that bosses care less about their employees' candlepower than they do about 'character'—by which they mean self-discipline, enthusiasm, and responsibility" (1997, 22).[23] As Arlie Hochschild observes in her groundbreaking study of interactive service sector work, "seeming to 'love the job' becomes part of the job; and actually trying to love it, and to enjoy the customers, helps the worker in this effort" (1983, 6). Indeed, now more than ever, "workers are expected to be the architects of their own better exploitation" (Henwood 1997, 22).

But it is not only a matter of what kind of labor power is often sought. When workers are given more responsibility and more discretion, and particularly when the job involves providing services and instilling in clients and customers certain kinds of emotional or affective states, the workers' performance is more difficult both to measure and to monitor. How does one determine an individual employee's contribution to increasingly cooperative labor processes, particularly those that draw on workers' affective, cognitive, and communicative capacities? ("This call may be monitored for purposes of quality assurance"—but it probably is not.) When individual contributions to collective production processes are more difficult to discern, employers focus on measuring what they can, increasingly resorting to proximate measures. Personality testing is thus on the rise as one kind of proxy for behavioral assessment, and in this way, "the emphasis becomes the total behavior of the individual rather than the specifically 'productive' behavior" (Townley 1989, 106). Putting in long hours can also be used as an indication of commitment, which can in turn be a signal of productivity. A worker's devotion to work serves as a sign of his or her capacities just as it once served as a sign of his or her status among the elect. Strong work values are thus increasingly highlighted in management discourses as a significant remedy to the new problems of surveillance simply because they render it less necessary. Thus, we see a growing trend in the United States and elsewhere to both select and evaluate workers on the basis of their attitudes, motivation, and behavior. This is becoming increasingly the case not just for workers in the higher-paid reaches of the employment hierarchy but for those in the lower-paid levels as well: these criteria are being used on white-, pink-, and increasingly blue-collar employees, in both the industrial and service sectors (92; see also Ehrenreich 2001).

MANAGING POST-FORDIST INDEPENDENCE: BEING PROFESSIONAL

These post-Taylorist labor processes pose new challenges for management efforts to construct workers who are, to recall an earlier discussion, both independent and dependent, both autonomously creative and responsive to command. The crude subjectification of Taylor's Schmidt is guided now by a myriad of management theories and a major industry that aids in the manufacture of productive corporate cultures: the relatively simple industrial psychology of the Fordist era had been remade into the complex art of cultural fashioning and emotional engineering typical of many managerial regimes today. The problem for many employers is one of encouraging employee self-development, but only as a "human resource"—or, as some critics of this logic of managerial control describe it, "encouraging autonomous employees to use their alleged independence to express their resourcefulness as well as to submit themselves to continuous self-scrutiny and audit in the name of accountability" (Costea, Crump, and Amiridis, 2008, 673–74). The impoverishment of this conception of individual development, tethered as it is to a mandate to produce value, is made painfully clear in the management guru Tom Peters's description of work as an opportunity to maximize one's chances of future employment, as what can "teach you new skills, gain you new expertise, develop new capabilities, grow your colleague set, and constantly reinvent you as a brand" (1997, 94).

Just as the Protestant ethic encouraged workers to treat their work as if it were a calling, today one noteworthy management technique involves asking workers to approach their work as if it were a career. Taylor asked the iconic industrial laborer Schmidt if he were the "high priced man" who embodied the Fordist work ethic of social mobility; the comparable injunction for many postindustrial service workers is to "be professional." The discourse of professionalism today enjoys a wide application, serving as a disciplinary mechanism to manage the affects and attitudes of a service-based workforce that is less amenable to direct supervision. A brief excavation of the category's purposes and applications from the industrial to the postindustrial labor orders can suggest the significance of the increasingly ubiquitous deployment of the figure of the professional and its codes of comportment.

The category of professional work was once defined narrowly. Confined to those jobs that were subject to a measure of self-regulation, required specialized knowledge, and involved a relatively high degree of discretion and judgment, the label was traditionally reserved for the fields of law, medicine, and the clergy. To be a professional was to have a career—a calling—as opposed to a "mere" job: "To the professional person his work becomes his life. Hence the act of embarking upon a professional career is similar in some respects to entering a religious order" (Greenwood 1966, 17). The professional's relationship to his or her calling entailed an erosion of the temporal boundaries between work and life, and a different calibration of the qualities of emotional investment between the times and spaces of work and life outside it. As Lisa Disch and Jean O'Brien observe in the case of professorial labor, the professional regards him or herself as incommensurable and, therefore, is willing to do what needs doing rather than only what he or she is paid to do (2007, 149). Professional socialization has always served as a disciplinary mechanism, one that can induce the effort and commitment, entitlement and identification, and—perhaps above all—the self-monitoring considered necessary to a profession's reproduction as such.

The expansion of the professional strata and of the ideology of professionalism was something C. Wright Mills noted in his early anticipation of the changes in work wrought by the move to a postindustrial labor order and the new ways that subjectivity is put to work in white-collar occupations. Whereas the term once suggested a certain mastery of a field of knowledge linked to a specific skill and expertise, increasingly the mastery that a professional is expected to achieve is over what Mills called "the personality." In other words, whereas the high-priced man of Taylor's narrative was required to discipline his physical efforts, today's professional is supposed to gain control over his or her thoughts, imagination, relationships, and affects. Certainly one purpose of this is to promote the kind of self-discipline and subjective investment long associated with being a professional. And because, like the high-priced man, the professional "wears a badge of prestige" (C. Mills 1951, 138), the practice of hailing a wide range of workers as professionals also serves to cash in on the term's cachet and encourage employees to identify with jobs further up the labor hierarchy. To recall Weber's description of the Protestant work ethic, according to which all waged workers were expected to approach their work industriously as if it were a calling, those in low-waged service-sector jobs under post-Fordism are asked to approach their work professionally as if it were a "career." This professionalization of work, the expansion of what is considered a profession and, more important, the number of workers who are expected to "be professional" is one way this disciplinary subjectification is extended both up and down the labor hierarchy in a post-Taylorist age.

Professionalization in this broader application is more about style, affect, and attitude than about the content of the work. Mills notes that white-collar workers' "claims to prestige are expressed, as their label implies, by their style of appearance" (241). In contrast to the uniforms typically required of blue-collar workers, white-collar employees wear their own clothes, mass-produced and standardized though they may be, both at work and at home. This is, Mills observes, reflected in the amount of money that white-collar workers, especially women, spend on clothes. As the studies of two very different contemporary workforces each affirms, the "collar" metaphor has always been about clothes, and clothes in turn are key signifiers of the professional. Carla Freeman's (2000) study of pink-collar office workers in the Caribbean focuses on how the workers were encouraged to identify themselves as professionals, an identification that centered crucially on styles of clothing. This was a source of many pleasures, even or particularly when there was little else about the work that was comparably satisfying. In this case, the discourse of professionalism links the practices and identities of production with those of consumption; indeed, that is part of the attraction of professionalized work, one of the ways that this ideology of the professional promotes consent to and identification with work. Linking professional status and identity to the practices of consumption taps into the many ways that style and dress can serve as statements of individuality, markers of status, objects of pleasure, and sites of aspiration. The professional look, and the time and resources necessary to achieve it, tie us not only economically and socially but also aesthetically and affectively to work. What Andrew Ross dubs the "no-collar" nonconformist mentality of a higher-paid technoscientific knowledge and informational workforce in the United States is signaled by a fashion style quite explicitly opposed to the dress codes of the organizational white-collar worker of high Fordism. Indeed, the creativity and individuality of this no-collar style serves to capture visually the ideal of work that the post-Fordist work ethic celebrates. The carefully crafted theatricality of style signifies the kind of creativity, risk, and iconoclasm that these Internet industries try to sell to both customers and their own workers, to both their "external" and "internal" clients (see Ross 2003, 3, 32, 50).

The workers described in both Freeman's and Ross's accounts used clothes and style as a way to distinguish their employment sector from others (as pink-collar rather than blue-collar, or as no-collar in contrast to white-collar) and, by the same token, to display their status as individuals within that setting rather than merely as members of a "collared" class fraction. But as Hochschild notes in her study of flight attendants, another iconic pink-collar labor force, by defending the intensive managerial control over the workers' appearance through "continuous reference to the need to be 'professional,'" the standardized results may be imbued with honor and the aura of autonomy, but they nonetheless remain highly regulated.[24] According to the industry's standard of professionalism, "the flight attendant who most nearly meets the appearance code ideal is therefore 'the most professional.'" Consequently, she observes, "for them a 'professional' flight attendant is one who has completely accepted the rules of standardization" (1983, 103).

Today the term "professional" refers more to a prescribed attitude toward any work than the status of some work. To act like a professional —to be professional in one's work—calls for subjective investment in and identification with work, but also a kind of affective distancing from it. A professional invests his or her person in the job but does not "take it personally" when dealing with difficult co-workers, clients, patients, students, passengers, or customers. As an ideal of worker subjectivity, this requires not just the performance of a role, but a deeper commitment of the self, an immersion in and identification not just with work, but with work discipline. The popular injunction to "be professional," to cultivate a professional attitude, style, and persona, serves as one way that the autonomy, especially of immaterial workers, can be managerially constituted up and down the post-Fordist labor hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

The five antinomies we reviewed earlier in the chapter are indicative of both the capaciousness of the discourse and its limits, its seeming unassailability and its vulnerabilities. To return again to the original Protestant ethic, Weber cautions us to remember that Puritanism was not a seamless and monolithic force, but in fact "included a world of contradictions" (1958, 169). Together these antinomies suggest that although the hegemony of the work ethic may be substantial, it is also always incomplete, tenuous, and shifting. First, what is from one perspective often taken to be the most rational of behaviors appears irrational once we probe a bit further: that part of the cultural devotion to work that cannot be explained by simple economic necessity often proves strangely inexplicable. Second, the relationship between the ethic's productivist and consumerist prescriptions may be functional, but the tensions between them also generate instabilities and openings for critique. On the one hand, this relationship serves to coordinate production and consumption; on the other hand, stipulating levels of consumption and production that can be adequate to one another risks stimulating desires for consumption that cannot be met through the available forms of employment. Third, a discourse that prescribes at once dependence and independence proves a constant source of potential disorder. The work ethic may invoke the ideals of individualism, but the subjects of those ideals must be managed in accordance with the strict exigencies of capitalist production and reproduction. Fourth, whereas the work ethic in its different historical instantiations has proven enormously useful in cultivating exploitable subjects, it has also been deployed as a weapon of the weak, serving simultaneously as a resource both for the accumulation of capital and for those who would contest its methods. The ethic's promises about work are instilled as desires, beliefs, interests, and hopes that are never fully met; in that sense, the ethical anchor of the capitalist wage relation can also produce wants and needs in excess of those that are merely functional to its reproduction. Finally, the ethic's means of transmission are also key to some of its contradictory dynamics. Spreading as it does through processes of othering and its oppositions—whereby these others could be constructed as abject but also, potentially, as resistant subjects—introduces another element of unpredictability. My claim is that the antinomies that animate the work ethic account for both the continued authority of its prescriptions and the precariousness of its dominance.

The importance of the ethic persists under the conditions of post-Fordism, as does its vulnerability. The ability of work to harness desires for a life beyond work depends, perhaps now more than ever, on the power of the work ethic. The ethic's consistent prescriptions for our identification with and constant devotion to work, its elevation of work as the rightful center of life, and its affirmation of work as an end in itself all help to produce the kinds of workers and the laboring capacities adequate to the contemporary regime of accumulation and the specific modes of social labor in which it invests. But the changes in the labor processes that make work values more important to capital may also render them less plausible. With each reconstitution of the work ethic, more is expected of work: from an epistemological reward in the deliverance of certainty, to a socioeconomic reward in the possibility of social mobility, to an ontological reward in the promise of meaning and self-actualization. Indeed, for the anxious Protestant of Weber's account, the quality of work and quantity of wages, the nature of the concrete task and the amount of income it earned, were less relevant than the level of effort the worker applied. Today, in contrast, both the quality of the labor process and the quantity of its material rewards are relevant to the ability of the discourse to deliver on its new ideals of work.

With so much at stake, weighed down with so many expectations, it is no wonder that the ethical discourse of work is becoming ever more abstracted from the realities of many jobs. Within the two-tiered labor market, we find new modes of "over-valorized work" at one end of the labor hierarchy and "devalorized work" at the other (Peterson 2003, 76). Making labor flexible results in an increase of part-time, temporary, casual, and precarious forms of work. At one end, as Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio note, "the quality and the quantity of paid labor no longer justify—if they ever did—the underlying claim derived from religious sources that has become the basis of contemporary social theory and social policy: the view that paid work should be the core of personal identity" (1994, 302). At the other end of the labor hierarchy, work is expected to be the whole of life, colonizing and eclipsing what remains of the social. At the same time, the work ethic is more insistently—and perhaps desperately—defended. "Never," André Gorz observes, "has the 'irreplaceable,' 'indispensable' function of labour as the source of 'social ties,' 'social cohesion,' 'integration,' 'socialization,' 'personalization,' 'personal identity' and meaning been invoked so obsessively as it has since the day it became unable any longer to fulfill *any* of these functions" (1999, 57). Today we hear once again about the potentially drastic consequences of a weakening work ethic among yet another generation whose members, it is feared, will fail to be successfully interpellated. Given the work ethic's internal instabilities, we might conclude that its advocates and promoters have cause to be concerned. Where attitudes are productive, an insubordination to the work ethic; a skepticism about the virtues of self-discipline for the sake of capital accumulation; an unwillingness to cultivate, simply on principle, a good "professional" attitude about work; and a refusal to subordinate all of life to work carry a new kind of subversive potential. My claims are that, given its role, the work ethic *should* be contested, and, due to its instabilities, it *can* be contested.