

IDLENESS FOR ALL

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Intellectual work today stands in an antagonistic relationship to the larger culture of work now dominant in the Anglo-American capitalism. This demands that intellectual work as 'knowledge work' legitimates itself by criteria of efficiency, productivity and global competitiveness.¹ In the face of such demands, I want to suggest that we need to think about the opposite of work, or at least the opposite of work as it is currently conceived. The model I will suggest for such a thinking-through is provided by Walter Benjamin's concept of idleness in *The Arcades Project*, specifically the short section on *Müßiggang*, Convolute **m**, although that model is informed by a long radical tradition.²

'Do nothing!' hardly seems a call to arms for the modern intellectual. Action is the watchword of the modern institution and universities are not immune. 'Actions' have to be attached to every minute. Action plans proliferate. Time is filled with meetings that produce more actions, with targets that produce goals to be achieved, outcomes to be met, outputs to be counted. Academic life is part of a larger culture of work that values visible products and perpetual motion. At some point in the 1990s the phrase 'the 24/7 society' crossed the Atlantic and was embraced by a nation increasingly enamoured of the work-culture of the US. One of the many policies borrowed by New Labour from the New Democrats was 'workfare': schemes which try to get the unemployed, particularly women - and especially single mothers - 'back' to work through a mixture of incentives (for instance, tax credits) and disincentives (that is to say withdrawal of benefits). Cutting benefit for single mothers was one of the 1997 governments first acts, as symbolic as it was real, a concrete sign that Blairism was not a masquerade behind which old Labour would return to power. Marx would have recognised the origins of New Labour's glorification of work from the Gotha programme, which he criticised as follows:

The bourgeois have very good grounds for falsely ascribing *supernatural creative power* to labour, since precisely from the fact that labour depends on nature, it follows that the man who possesses no other property than his labour power must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves owners of the material conditions of labour.³

If the idle and property-less poor were to be dragged back into the productive economy, for the middle class, New Labour's partial commitment to gender equality means the right of both partners in heterosexual relationships to

1. See Deborah Cameron's distinction between 'intellectual work' and 'knowledge work' in this issue.

2. *The Arcades Project* is composed of sheafs or 'convolutes' of notes and citations ordered by upper case letters A-Z (A is 'Arcades'; B is 'Fashion') and then lower case letters a-r (with some gaps). The work was unfinished at Benjamin's death. Citations below refer to the numbered paragraphs within each convolute, which are ordered [A1, 1], [A1, 1a] etc. See Peter Buse, Ken Hirschkop, Scott McCracken, Bertrand Taithe, *The Arcades Project: an unguided tour*, Manchester UP, forthcoming 2005.

3. Karl Marx, 'Notes to the [Gotha] Programme of the German Worker's Party, cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge MA., Belknap Press, 1999, [X5, 1]. Also cited in 'Modernism', Section III of 'The Paris of Second Empire in Baudelaire', in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London, Verso, 1983, p71. Also in Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History', in *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken, 1969, p259.

participate fully in the world of work. Sitting (for now) in a property the value of which has tripled in the New Labour era, money rich and time poor, with disposable incomes their parents could not have dreamed of, paying for less children born later in life (once both careers have been established), the middle-class couple become employers themselves, recruiting an army of low-paid workers: cleaners, gardeners, childminders, nannies, *au pairs*, and tutors - if they still risk state education. Increasingly though, the middle class does not have the time to commit to the lengthy negotiations that have allowed them to get the best deal out of the post-1945 settlement. Opting out is accepted by New Labour's modernisers as inevitable, its institutionalisation the basis for the continuing 'reforms' of the despised 'one-size-fits-all' public services that were the basis of collective provision. University top-up fees are just one part of a process that seeks to introduce a market into all areas of public life, so that all forms of intellectual work can be priced.

This modernising project does not just create inequalities in itself, it responds to an income structure that had been growing more unequal since the Thatcherite 1980s, a tendency which the two Blair/Brown governments has not mitigated. Despite all the changes in the tax and benefit system designed to help the working poor, the rich are getting richer more quickly than the poor get less poor.⁴

But what are the new rich doing with their money? Not, it would appear, devoting themselves to a life of leisure. They are working harder than ever, employing more people to pick up after them and spending the excess on a range of private services designed to relieve the stress of overwork or just the effects of excess itself. Leisure time is dedicated to self-improvement, self-indulgence or repairing the damage: the private gym; Pilates; Yoga; meditation; the delicatessen; the gourmet restaurant; the café bar; aromatherapy; acupuncture; the osteopath; the therapist. The idea that we might all work less or that we might rethink the structure of the labour market is not part of the political agenda in Britain or the US. The *Independent's* defiant response to the latest panic about the British propensity to take a 'sickie', was unusual in challenging a culture that views not working with, at best, suspicion and, at worst, macho derision. Why don't we all, its editorial suggested, work less?⁵

It is this general climate rather than 'dumbing down' that has given intellectual work its crisis of legitimation. Pure research, thinking for its own sake, being what used to be called a 'freethinker', are not just unfashionable, but unaccountable in the sense that they cannot be entered into an audit sheet. There was a brief moment in the 1960s when play (in a reprise of earlier liberal education theories) was once again considered an important part of early education and university became a fully-funded opportunity to remove the necessity of work for at least three years. Now anti-utilitarian distractions have been expunged from the national curriculum. Financial pressures deprive most students of the space to think.

4. Faisal Islam, 'Our Robin Hood's Uphill Struggle', *The Observer*, 14/03/04, <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/business/story/0,6903,1168739,00.html>>.

5. The *Independent*, Editorial, 'Long Hours, sick days, and the British workplace', 24/05/04.

Teachers are bound by set targets and tests. Academics are under pressure in a severely underfunded system. There are countervailing, but weak resistances, to the new climate. The influence of European social democracy in the shape of work directives has mitigated some of the worst aspects of the British culture of work; but it is only necessary to read the long list of reasons why an employer need not permit an employee to have flexible working hours to see how far the odds are stacked against the employee. These can be one or more of the following:

- burden of additional costs;
- detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand;
- inability to reorganise work among existing staff;
- inability to recruit additional staff;
- detrimental impact on quality;
- detrimental impact on performance;
- insufficiency of work during periods the employee proposes to work;
- planned structural changes.

With collective bargaining under attack and in decline, the ability of labour to press for less working hours has been weakened. If we add to this the loss of the traditional privileges accorded to elite higher education institutions, the time for speculative thought is further reduced. The professionalism (some would say proletarianisation) of academia (as opposed to an earlier Oxbridge style amateurism⁶), defunding, market pressures⁷ and, in Britain, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) have all conspired to cramp intellectual work and to limit its scope: for example the role of academics as public intellectuals intervening in politics, the community or the media.

In this context, idleness is an endangered activity. All British academics have just been asked to participate in a 'transparency' exercise to show that no moment of their time is idle; that they are continuously involved in productive work. So what arguments can be deployed against the new work culture? In a forensic critique of New Labour's policy for Higher Education, Stefan Collini concludes: 'that there are some kinds of intellectual enquiry that are goods in themselves, that need to be pursued at the highest level, and that will almost certainly continue to require a certain amount of public support'.⁸ But try making that argument to your budget manager or the Faculty accountant and see how far you get. Yet there is an urgent need to think through an alternative to the current situation.

What follows is a move to the abstract and the theoretical, and therefore even less likely to convince the bean counters. But Benjamin's concept of idleness offers three areas which are of some help. First, idleness can be productive, akin to Keats' diligent indolence as both not-work and an alternative form of creative activity. Second, idleness as a form of anti-work, becomes useful rather than instrumental in the sense of use described by William Morris in his distinction between 'useful work' and 'useless toil'.⁹

6. See Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: a twentieth-century life*, London, Allen Lane, 2002, pp103-6.

7. See Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: the commercialisation of Higher Education*, Princeton University Press, 2003.

8. Stefan Collini, 'HiEdBiz', *London Review of Books*, 25, 21 (6 Nov 2003), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n21/coll01_.html>.

9. William Morris, 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil', in A.L. Morton (ed), *The Political Writings*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1973, pp86-109.

Third, the recognition that in all societies, excepting perhaps the semi-mythical realm of Benjamin's reconstructed primitive communism, the space and time to think has depended upon a brutal division of labour. There is no going back to an elite system of education that does not require a new form of exclusion.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

10. I am grateful to Elizabeth Harvey for her help and guidance on the translation of Müßiggang. She also directed me to the motto of the University of Liverpool: 'Haec otia fovent studia' (These periods of idleness encourage study).

11. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *Pelican Freud Library* Vol. 14, J. Strachey (trans), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p341; the German *müssen*, comparable to the English 'must', only achieves a sense of compulsion in Middle High German, before that it is closer *können* (can) or *dürfen* (to permit or allow).

Benjamin's chosen term for the concept he explores in Convolute **m** of *The Arcades Project* is *Müßiggang*,¹⁰ although the convolute also includes the more pejorative 'das Indolenz' or 'l'indolence', and 'Faulheit' (which is closer to laziness) and the French 'l'oisiveté'. *Müßiggang* is a literary term derived from *Muße*, 'leisure', and *Gang*, 'walk, course or passage'. It might be translated literally as 'idle walk', the mode in which Benjamin's urban characters, for example, the flâneur, saunter through the arcades and the appropriate pace for thumbing through the *Passagen-Werk* itself. A related word is *Müßigkeit*, meaning 'futility' or 'pointlessness'. Paradoxically, *das Muße* stems from the same etymological root as *das Muß*, meaning necessity, an origin which, suggests the kind of linguistic ambivalence discussed by Freud in relation to words such as *heimlich*, both 'homely', 'intimate', 'familiar', and 'secret', 'secretive', 'kept from sight'.¹¹ *Muße* incorporates a sense of its opposite, the necessity of work. While Benjamin never comments explicitly on this root, Convolute **m** is exemplary in its form as an attempt to represent a complex of political, philosophical and aesthetic problems for which the concept of *Müßiggang* stands as the starting point for critical and creative thinking.

ALL WORK AND NO PLAY MAKES JACK A DULL BOY

Idleness is proverbial: in English 'the devil makes work for idle hands'; in German 'Müßiggang ist alle Laster Anfang' (Idleness is the beginning of all sins). By its nature it does not lend itself to the continuity or sequence that Benjamin sees as a requirement of *Erfahrung* (long, considered or reflective experience) [m2a, 4]. It is epigrammatic. Its mode has all the pleasures of uncertainty. Yet this does not mean that it is unproductive. Idleness, Benjamin suggests, is both not-work and anti-work: it involves a resistance to the Calvinist work ethic [m3a, 1] and to Taylorisation [M10,1]. But idleness might also be its opposite, the possibility of a different kind of work, which would not be work as bourgeois society, or indeed the German Social Democrats, understood it. Idleness is premonitory of unalienated work, which only becomes a possibility, according to Marx - again in the 'Critique of the Gotha Programme':

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis

between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want ... [X5, 3].¹²

This is the kind of distinction William Morris made when he wrote: 'the ideal of the future does not point to a lessening of men's energy by the reduction of labour to a minimum, but rather to the reduction of *pain in labour* to a minimum'.¹³ The theme of replacing alienated labour with pleasurable, satisfying work is part of a tradition in popular and socialist writing that runs from the medieval idea of Cockagne through Charles Fourier, Karl Marx and George Orwell, to Herbert Marcuse. It includes E.P. Thompson's work on the temporality of pre-capitalist forms of work-time and his analysis of the time discipline that is integral to industrialisation.¹⁴ More recently the work of André Gorz and eco-socialist politics have refused to accept a bourgeois work ethic as the norm. Convolute **m** should in relation to that tradition of socialist critique, one which, with the notable exception of the Green movement, has almost been silenced in public debate in Britain, but which remains part of political debate in Europe, notably in France where Lionel Jospin's government introduced a statutory thirty-five hour week.

MODES OF IDLENESS

As an exemplar of intellectual work, Convolute **m** takes a long view (that of 'long experience' or *Erfahrung*), a view that requires time and leisure. Behind the collage of excerpts which gives it its form, lies a historicist account that the Convolute both recognises and then supersedes. A Marxian narrative of development takes the reader through three modes of production, for which Benjamin finds corresponding modes of idleness. In the first section of the Convolute [m1], excerpts on ancient, feudal and capitalist modes of idleness stand in sequence at paragraphs [m1, 1], [m1, 2] and [m1, 3]. Outside the sequence stand two alternative modes of idleness, primitive and post-capitalist, which call the historicist account into question. Unlike the first three, these two are not directly accessible. Primitive idleness is only available through its residues in the present. Future idleness can only be anticipated through the traces of possibility that exist in the present or what Benjamin elsewhere calls *Jetztzeit*, now-time. Both these modes explode the antitheses of work and not-work and cannot be bound by a determinate class history.

IDLENESS AS FORM

The structure of Convolute **m**, is not and cannot be in a final and complete shape because such a form would be incompatible with idleness, the definition of which involves *Unabschließbarkeit* 'unfinishability', which is also, for Benjamin, one of the characteristics of intellectual work [m2a1]. But **m** is, in terms of *The Arcades Project* as a whole, exemplary in its structure in

12. Translation used, Eugene Kamenka (ed), *The Portable Karl Marx* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, p541.

13. William Morris, 'Review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*', *The Political Writings*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1984, p252.

14. E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, London, Merlin, 1991.

that it attempts to bring the concept of idleness to consciousness through its form. Each section rewrites the preceding sections often by a form of repetition that subtly changes its meaning. Thus, although short in comparison to other convolutes, it cannot be rushed. It calls for an idle pace and a high degree of distraction. The discrete, juxtaposed paragraphs gesture to other parts of the Arcades Project and to other parts of Benjamin's work. It can be read alongside **M**, 'The Flâneur', **J**, 'Baudelaire', and **X**, 'Marx'. It has correspondences with, at least, **H**, 'The Collector', **I**, 'The Interior, The Trace', **O**, 'Prostitution, Gambling' and **a**, 'Social Movements'. If this seems to propose that every part of the Arcades Project needs to be read in relation to other part, that suggests too systematic a conception of the text, which requires a sauntering pace and an idle sensibility to allow the correspondences to emerge. The idler has relationships with Benjamin's other urban types: the gambler, the flâneur, the collector and the brooder and the student, but these types are not distinct. Gamblers, flâneurs and students are all idle, but idlers have tendencies towards gambling, flânerie and studiousness.

Idleness is both a temporality and a sensibility. As a temporality it can be imposed by modernity as 'enforced idleness', but as a sensibility, it might be cultivated in opposition to modernity's most deadening forms. Benjamin quotes Rousseau: 'The idleness [l'oisiveté] of society is deadly because it is obligatory; the idleness of solitude is delightful because it is free and voluntary' [m4,1].

The effect of the Convolute's structure offers a discrete example of one of the aims of the Arcades Project as a whole: to convey the relationship between a determinate and a dialectical approach to history or what might be called enforced work and productive intellectual work. The accounts of different modes of idleness, ripped from their literary and historical context then placed in the collage of the Convolute, are chosen and positioned in such a way as to tease out their contradictions. The first excerpt begins with the ancient world, which is cited, apparently favourably, as a counterexample to the protestant work ethic:¹⁵

Noteworthy conjunction: in ancient Greece, practical labour is branded and proscribed. Although essentially left in the hands of slaves, it is condemned not least because it betrays a base aspiration for earthly goods (riches). [m1,1]

The ideal of intellectual work, 'studious leisure', is valued by the Greeks, an ideal that looks back to primitive idleness and forward to a future of unalienated work. But Benjamin's commentary on his source, Pierre-Maxime Schuhl, brings to light the central contradiction: ancient idleness is bought at the expense of a class of slaves. There is, in effect, no going back to a golden age of intellectual work. Its legitimation must take into account the division of labour on which it depends.

15. Oddly Weber is not mentioned anywhere in *The Arcades Project*.

In the second excerpt, on feudal idleness, both the active and the contemplative life are bound to the wheel of fortune; but, while both lives are subject to it, idleness permits a greater freedom, bound, 'immobile' to the centre of the wheel rather than to its outer edge. The intellectual life already permits a separation from the realm of necessity. But under capitalism, as observed by Saint-Beuve and Marx, the class of 'connoisseurs and amateurs' - who, in *The Arcades Project*, always appear as relics of an earlier time - has 'practically disappeared' [m1,3]. In bourgeois society, according to Marx, industry is victorious over 'heroic laziness [Faulheit]' [m1a1]. In a scenario (familiar now even to the formerly leisured professions like academia), idleness ceases to be a privilege and only exists as a form of resistance.

IDLENESS UNDER CAPITALISM

The intervention of Marx, marks a new section in the Convolute, [m1a], and the introduction of a concept of redemptive idleness, a concept found, like so many of Benjamin's critical terms, in the work of Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire, reinventor of a notion of the heroic for modernity, seeks to salvage idleness for the nineteenth century: 'In the figure of the Dandy, Baudelaire seeks to find some use for idleness, just as leisure once had some use' [m1a,2]. Just as Benjamin finds a dialectical conception of modernity in Baudelaire's lyric poetry, he finds a dialectical relationship between idleness and 'toil' in the process of creative work he undertakes:

Baudelaire knows the '*indolence naturelle des inspirés*'; Musset - so he says - never understood how much work it takes 'to let a work of art emerge from a daydream' ... Barrès claimed that he could recognize 'in every little word of Baudelaire a trace of the toil that helped him achieve great things'.¹⁶

16. Benjamin,
Charles Baudelaire, op
cit., p66.

In Part III of 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', Benjamin cites 'Le Soleil' as sole example of a poem where the poet is shown at his 'labours':

Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime
Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime
Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés

(I go practising my fantastic fencing all alone, scenting a chance rhyme in every corner, stumbling against words as against cobblestones, sometimes striking on verses I had long dreamt of.)¹⁷

17. Ibid., p67.

For Benjamin, Baudelaire, as heroic idler of the modern age, becomes an

example of the intellectual as guerilla, fighting to reconfigure modernity in the face of the imposition of a new regime of work. The relationship between the outlaw intellectual and commodity culture is summed up in the following paragraph of Convolute **m**, which consists solely of the epigrammatic ‘*Erfahrung* is the outcome of work; *Erlebnis* is the phantasmagoria of the idler’, a sentence that condenses the Convolute down to a single phrase, but which, for that reason, needs some unpacking.

Like the proverbs cited above, the epigram appears at first to oppose a positive with a negative: work, leading to full and connected experience (*Erfahrung*) is positive; idleness, leading to the distracted and fragmented experience (*Erlebnis*) that characterises a phantasmagoric modernity, is negative. But the sentence reverses the expected moral opposition. *Erlebnis* is the phantasmagoria experienced by the idler; the idler does not produce it him or herself. Shock experience, paradoxically, is produced by work or, more precisely, alienated labour, as well as being the fragmented experience of the city under capitalism: ‘The shock experience which the passerby has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker “experiences” at his machine’.¹⁸ Whereas the worker is, at least for the duration of the working day, bound to the machine, the phantasmagoria of the city of consumption presents the urban idler with the possibility of a new kind of work, although that very possibility is, for the time being at least, dependent on the worker’s bondage. Two divergent outcomes are possible: Baudelaire’s model of creative idleness or a ‘new field of force in the form of planning’ [m1a,4]. Against the latter is juxtaposed the idea of ‘total *Erlebnis*’ for which the correlate is total war [m1a,5].

18. Ibid., p133.

THE TRACE

The alternative to total *Erlebnis*, which Benjamin suggests involves an empathy with exchange value, is a form of idleness appropriate to historical enquiry - the pursuit of the *Spur* or trace.¹⁹ The introduction of the trace opens a new section of the Convolute, [m2], which now completes the break with a historicist narrative. The idea of the trace, offers the possibility of breaking out of the degraded experience of modernity. The traces of the past might be found in the present, while the configurations of the future might be found in the hidden aspects of modernity. Ironically, the very distractedness (*Zerstreuung*) induced by *Erlebnis*, might also create the right mode to hunt and collect the traces of past and future. The hunter, as both primitive and modern figure, must cultivate a kind of distracted attention:

19. *Die Spur* means both trace and spore in German.

Whoever follows traces must not only pay attention; above all, he must have given heed already to a great many things. (The hunter must know about the hoof of the animal whose trail he is on; he must know the hour when that animal goes to drink; he must know the course of the river to which it turns, and the location of the ford by which he himself

can get across.) In this way there comes into play the peculiar configuration by dint of which *Erfahrung* appears translated into the language of *Erlebnis*. [m2,1]

The figure of the hunter now appears as one who practised the earliest mode of idleness, one which was, at the same time, unalienated work:²⁰

Erfahrungen can, in fact, prove invaluable to one who follows a trace - but *Erfahrungen* of a particular sort. The hunt is the one type of work in which they function intrinsically. And the hunt is, as work, very primitive.

Tracing the residues of the hunt in the present - and not unusually with Benjamin the method is the same as the hoped for outcome - allows the possibility of future configurations of unalienated work:

The *Erfahrungen* of one who attends to the trace result only very remotely from any work activity, or are cut off from such a procedure altogether. (Not for nothing do we speak of 'fortune hunting.')

They have no sequence and no system. They are a product of chance, and have about them the essential interminability that distinguishes the preferred obligations of the idler.

In the modern world, the hunter is replaced by the student. Study, properly conceived, represents for Benjamin the form of resistant intellectual work appropriate to his times and, I would suggest, ours. He connects the primitive hunter with the modern student as harbinger of the future: 'The fundamentally unfinished collection of things worth knowing, whose utility depends upon chance, has its prototype in study'.²¹ 'The text is a forest in which the reader is hunter. Rustling in the underbrush - the idea, the skittish prey, the citation - another piece "in the bag"' [m2a1]. Benjamin's conception of an ideal life of study goes back to an early essay written during his participation in the German student movement, 'The Life of Students', where intellectual work is seen as antithetical to professionalism or a vocation: 'scholarship, far from leading inexorably to a profession, may in fact preclude it. For it does not permit you to abandon it; in a way, it places the student under an obligation to become a teacher, but never to embrace the official professions of doctor, lawyer, or university professor'.²² In opposition to the bourgeois profession, idleness has a relationship to a form of privileged decadence, where the spaces of decadence, for example the bachelor's studio, are connected to sexual libertinism or experimentation: 'the *studio* became a sort of pendant to the *boudoir*' [m2,3].

Individual creativity, that which makes intellectual work possible, however, is at odds with the general idleness that pervades commodity culture and which is visible in journalism, the mass entertainment and the alienated experience of routine work. [m2a] introduces the modern conditions that

20. There is, of course, a major problem with this vision of primitive communism in that, in its desire to seek an image of unalienated labour, it fails to see the gendered division of labour simply because it does not include women. This failure of vision has implications for Benjamin's conception of the urban savage, the flâneur, although his masculinist perspective is not always as easy to categorise as some accounts have suggested.

21. The unfinishability [*Unabschlussbarkeit*] of unalienated labour does raise a question about the unfinished status of *The Arcades Project* itself. Did its method make it unfinishable?

22. Benjamin, 'The Life of Students', in M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings (eds), *Selected Writings Vol. 1: 1913-1926*, Belknap Press, Cambridge MA., 1996, p38.

require idleness as a 'form of work preparedness', specifically, 'the news service and nightlife' [m2a,2]. These are socially enforced forms of idleness. Reportage and the feuilleton reflect *Erlebnis*. In response, the individual idleness of the poet is anti-work as defined by the Calvinist ethic: 'Idleness seeks to avoid any sort of tie to the idler's line of work, and ultimately to the labour process in general. That distinguishes it from leisure.' [m3,1]. In the face of the enforced 'atrophy of experience' imposed by commodity production and the phantasmagoria of the modern city the urban idler has to resort to guerrilla tactics. As Benjamin remarks in *Convolute M*, "The Flâneur": 'the idleness of the flâneur is a demonstration against the division of labour' [M5,8].

Section [m4] of the *Convolute* begins the dialectical synthesis where socially enforced idleness is countered by its knowing appreciation: 'Idleness can be considered an early form of distraction or amusement. It consists in the readiness to savour, on one's own, an arbitrary succession of sensations'. Significantly, this is distinguished by Benjamin from mass culture: 'But as soon as the production process began to draw large masses of people into the field, those who "had the time" [*frei hatten*] came to feel a need to distinguish themselves en masse from labourers' [m4,1]. Modern idlers attempt a kind of partial transcendence - imitating the gods - that temporarily overcomes the shock experience of modernity: 'The idler's *imitatio dei*: as flâneur, he is omnipresent; as gambler, he is omnipotent; and as student, he is omniscient.' [m4,3]. These are both real and ideal types. Their ambitions are for transcendence, their reality is a partial success in combating its opposite, empathy, which synchronises itself with shock experience without challenging it. Their individual idleness, 'in a bourgeois society that knows no leisure, is the precondition of artistic production', a prefiguring of unalienated work not otherwise available under capitalism: 'idleness is the very thing that stamps that production with the traits that make its relation to the production process so drastic.' [m4a4].

The final section of **m**, completes the dialectic by bringing modern idleness back into relation with the historical traces that allow it to achieve its full meaning and to gesture to its potential. The limitations of the modern idler's perspective are described in terms of Hegel's 'bad infinity', a false transcendence; but there is an open-endedness, an unfinishedness, to idleness than means that it cannot be curtailed by a Hegelian dialectic:

The student 'never stops learning'; the gambler 'never has enough'; for the flâneur 'there is always something more to see'. Idleness has in view an unlimited duration, which fundamentally distinguishes it from simple sensuous pleasure of whatever variety. [m5,1]

The *Convolute* ends, incompletely, in the synthesis that brings together the hunter and the idler as one: 'The spontaneity common to the student, to the gambler; to the flâneur is perhaps that of the hunter - which is to say,

that of the oldest type of work, which may be intertwined closest of all with idleness. [m5,2]. It mops up with four citations that allude to the historical sense that is needed to make that connection: Flaubert on the melancholic mind set that is needed to imagine the historical past; Baudelaire on the flâneur as modern savage; Spengler on the urban poor as nomads and the modern intellectual as '*intellectual nomad* ... wholly microcosmic, wholly homeless, as free intellectually as hunter and herdsman were free sensually' [m5,6].²³ The utopian synthesis is that outlined by Benjamin in the Exposé of 1935:

In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of prehistory - that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society - as stored in the collective unconscious of the collective - engender through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.²⁴

What do Benjamin's historical promiscuity and experiments with thought in modernist form do for the current debate about intellectual work? Does his profoundly utopian vision make him impractical in a negative as well as positive sense for current debates about intellectual work or can he take us further than Collini's liberal 'good in itself'?

It is not difficult to object to the oppressive work ethic that has now become more deeply embedded than in the nineteenth century, seeping into the private and intimate spheres through mobile phones, remote voicemail and, once everyone's darling, now a weed escaped from the groves of academe - email. It is more difficult to think one's way out of it. The work culture - I prefer regime - in which we now exist is addictive. It offers self-esteem only through more work. One of the original attractions of intellectual work, and of education itself, was as a way out of drudgery. Intellectual work and its dissemination through speaking, writing and teaching (in Benjamin's sense of teaching, when it means opening up the world that the 'researcher' has discovered for him or herself and wants to introduce to others, rather than the dull repetition of formulas created by a disciplinary or professional field) was meant to be fulfilling. But hitherto this way out has been only for the few and it is that traditional position of privilege that leaves intellectual work so vulnerable to instrumentalist measures of its worth (or, more usually, to paraphrase Wilde, its price). The irony is that the inclusion of more people in higher education is leading not so much to the knowledge economy, where everyone gets a share of privileged time, but to an economy of knowledge. Universities become knowledge factories, parcelling up information in byte-sized chunks to deliver to students as

23. The idea of the modern savage is expanded at length in *Convolute M*, 'The Flâneur'. See [M11a,5-M14,3] and *passim*.

24. *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp4-5.

they pass by on the conveyor belt. The nature of work too has changed. As Madeleine Bunting has argued, following Gorz, the new work regime requires the reification of personality and emotions where earlier forms of industrial work had a deadening effect.²⁵ The answer then must extend beyond the academy and into questions about the nature of work itself. A proper critique can only come from a different way of looking at the world, a way such as that offered by the politics of eco-socialism. As Kate Soper and Martin Ryle have put it:

25. Madeleine Bunting, *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives*, London, Harper Collins, 2004.

Even in the wealthiest societies, almost everyone's life is dominated by the combined impact of the capitalist mission to enhance profits by cutting jobs and of the puritan insistence that work is the condition of pleasure, a 'moral' insistence which in our kind of society is an all too material fact ...²⁶

26. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, *To Relish the Sublime: Culture and Self-Realization in Postmodern Times*, London, Verso, 2002, p183.

Under this regime, idleness is a form of resistance:

... Unmet needs for more free time, greater autonomy, more space for self-chosen activity, constitute a counter-systemic potential, a pressure against the bars of the 'iron cage'.²⁷

27. *Ibid.*, p184.

Changing individual priorities is one limited way to assert a different value system, working part-time (for those who can rather those who must), for example, to do more useful work and less useless toil. There is also scope for the resistance tactics advocated by de Certeau, particularly taking time out of the daily routine for moments of idleness and forms of creative truancy.²⁸ Some of the best work gets done, like Conrad's best novels, while avoiding the big project. But these are guerrilla tactics. The current work regime is based on an inequality of income that loosens commitment to collective provision and reproduces itself in its addiction to constant work and the commodities it can buy. There will always be people, like Benjamin himself, who have a precarious existence outside the academy and produce startling work. Some free thinking will be produced illicitly in the spaces funded for specialist knowledge. But intellectual work for more than the few will only flourish if we all work less.

28. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

Benjamin's concept of idleness offers little comfort for nostalgic and conservative thinkers. But it preserves a utopianism in the belief that intellectual work, despite the most unpromising of environments, can presage a collective engagement in fulfilling work. That collective engagement in thought and action is the necessary precondition of what intellectual work might be. Until then we have to fight for the time to do the thinking (and the dreaming) that might free us from the situation we are in. Our slogan should be: Idleness for all!