

# 21st Century Labor: The Meanings and Future of Work

Mellon Faculty Seminar 2020-2021

Erin Tarver, Oxford College & Carla Freeman, ECAS

**“ Work may be more source of livelihood or the most significant part of one’s inner life; it may be experienced as expiation or as exuberant expression of self; as bounden duty, or as the development of man’s universal nature. Neither love nor hatred of work is inherent in man, or inherent in any given line of work. For work has no intrinsic meaning.” C. Wright Mills 1951:215**

**"A good job not only has to pay well, it also has to offer hope." James Baldwin**

**"Work is external to the worker. . . . It is not part of his nature; consequently he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself. . . . The worker therefore feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless. Karl Marx**

The landscape of work today is in profound flux. The 21st century is witnessing a new post-industrial revolution of sorts, with the growth of AI, the outsourcing of skilled, professional work, the evasion of employment protections enabled by tech "disruptors" and "contract" work, as well as the economic, political, and social precarity heightened by the current pandemic and the growing social justice movements against racism. At the same time, long-standing patterns of inequity and exploitation along lines of race, gender, and class remain remarkably stable. How will the future of work unfold and what will its meanings hold for the next generation? What role will the Liberal Arts and Sciences play in this future? These are among the questions posed by this year’s Mellon Faculty Seminar.

## Prelude / Setting the stage

James Shulman, [“A Good Job for Humanists \(Links to an external site.\)”](#), The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, February 2017.

Steve Dorman and Kelli Brown, [“The Liberal Arts: Preparing the Workforce of the Future \(Links to an external site.\)”](#), AACU, Fall 2018, Vol. 104, No. 4

Daniel Susskind, [Trust and the Future of the Professions \(Links to an external site.\)](#)  
[International Labor Organization: The Future of Work We Want: A Global Dialogue \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Background resources:

Marx, *Capital*;

Weber, *The Protestant Ethic & the Spirit of Capitalism*

C. Wright Mills, *The White Collar*

Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work*

## **Schedule of Readings**

### **September 24: Social Reproduction and 'Women's Work'**

Ann Petry, *The Street* (Tayari Jones)

Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (excerpts) (Carla Freeman)

For this meeting, please focus on Part I-- especially "The Restructuring of Housework and Reproduction in the US" (37-49); "Affective Labor" (59-72) and Part II, "Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution" (pp101-122).

### **October 22: Work and the Social Reproduction of Race and Class**

James Forman Jr., *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (Salmon Shomade)

Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor* (excerpts) (Craig Perry)

Please read the following: [Preface to the Morningside Edition](#) [\\_download](#)(ix-xiv); Chapter 1 (1-7); and then the Afterword to the Morningside Edition (200-218).

If you would like to read more, please read chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9.

### **December 3: Labor in the Professions and the Growth of Emotional Labor**

Aida Harvey Wingfield, *Flatlining: Race, Work, and Health Care in the New Economy* (Jessica Ham)

Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart* (Prefaces and Part I) (Stacy Bell)

### **January 28: Race, Inequality and Work**

Keith Payne, *The Broken Ladder: How Inequality Affects the Way We Think, Live, and Die* (Melissa Yang)

Film: *Parasite* (Nick Fesette)

### **March 4: Representing Work: Visible and Invisible Labor**

Laurence Weschler, *Domestic Scenes: The Art of Ramiro Gomez* (Susan Gagliardi)

Jane Welch Williams, excerpts from *Bread, Wine & Money: The Windows of the Trades at Chartres Cathedral* (pp. 10-11, 19-36 - and please read this [introductory note from](#)

[Elizabeth](#) [\\_download](#)) (Elizabeth Pastan)

## April 8: The Nature of Contemporary Work and its Future(s)

David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* pp. 1-66, 145-164, 239-268 (Bruce Knauft)

Also recommended: Bruce's forthcoming piece, "[Trump's Corruption and the Virus of](#)

[Polarization: Race, Class, and the Reign of the Wealthy](#) [\\_download](#)," from *The Anthropology of Trump* (Routledge)

Jeremias Prassl, *Humans as a Service*, Introduction and Chapters 1-2, and **either** 3-4 or 5-6 (Erin Tarver)

A note to help you choose: chapters 3-4 offer more detailed analysis of life in the gig economy; chapters 5-6 seek solutions to protect workers using labor law.