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“Imagining a World beyond Work”

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Hello everyone! I am so glad to be here, and I am honored and that you chose me to be your baccalaureate speaker on this beautiful, important day. The first thing I have to say is that these words that I will speak are as much yours as they are mine, in that in endless hours of dialogue in classes like Workplace Justice, Philosophy of History, and Radical Queeries, your ideas, your responses to the text, and your approach to the issues at hand continually transform that way I think. Thus, for many of you, the following ideas will be familiar. I have two tasks to accomplish before beginning the speech. First, I want to welcome everyone: the graduates, their friends, their loved ones, their families. I welcome those of you who are from Richmond and the surrounding region, and thank you for welcoming me into your community during the five years that I have been here. I also welcome those who have come from much further away. Before I became a Professor, I worked in the airline industry as a flight attendant for United Airlines. I find air travel inspiring and exciting, a means to connect people as we are all connected today. But I know it is also completely exhausting. So if you changed planes at Dubai or Abu Dhabi or Amsterdam Schipol or Tokyo Narita or Seoul or Sao Paulo or Mexico City, and you still can’t figure out what time it is, welcome all the more. As a flight attendant turned history Professor, I also recognize that for many people, crossing the U.S. border right now is more difficult than it has been since the anti-immigrant upsurge of the 1910s, and perhaps ever, and that many people’s loved ones are not here because they are unable to enter the United States in the current political environment. I understand that many people have taken risks to be here today, especially those from North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Mexico, and I am humbled that you are here to listen to me, our students, and my colleagues speak today.

The second task is to thank everyone who made this event possible. Kelly Burke worked tirelessly, and as always did Bonita Washington-Lacey and everyone in the Registrar’s Office who checked your progress to get you here. Cyrus Buckman and Antonio Maestas also helped put this together, as did Tyler Tolman, who I am especially thankful for that fabulous introduction! I want to recognize the hard work of everyone who makes events such as this possible, those who cut the grass, set up the chairs, Knoll Bendsen’s heroic crew on the sound equipment, and those who prepare all of our food, pour our drinks, take out the trash, and clean our facilities. And I want to thank all of our administrative staff. I could not be the Professor I am without the work of Cheri Gaddis and Patty Collins in the Social Science Division office, and people like them are the foundation of Earlham’s success.

Okay, now into the issue at hand. The title of this talk is “Imagining a World Beyond Work.” Work is the most important keyword of this talk because I have spent my adult life doing and studying work. As the undergraduate student of the well-known labor Historian and activist Peter Rachleff, as a rank and file flight attendant, as an elected leader of what was then my union, the Association of Flight Attendants, AFL-CIO, as the dissertation advisee of the labor sociologist Jennifer Pierce, and now as an Assistant Professor who teaches about work and family in the History and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Departments, I have come to one conclusion. Rather than a means to satisfy our material, emotional, and

spiritual needs as we often imagine it to be, work much more often prevents us from satisfying those needs. Thus, a foundation of our effort to solve the immense social and political problems that all of us face must be a demand for less work, for a shorter work day, a shorter work week, a shorter work year, and a shorter work life, and for more time to live our lives according to our desires and to the desires of the people we love. This talk is therefore a warning, one that asks you consider that over the history of the United States, work has been much more likely to hurt people than it has been to meet their needs. But this talk is also meant to inspire you. There has been a long history of people who have resisted work, who have given their ideas, their energy, and sometimes their lives to open a space to live according to communities' collective needs rather than according to the discipline of the clock and the domination of mass production. As you hear some of their stories today, I ask you to imagine that world beyond work.

Work is the subject of this talk for two reasons on this particular day. First, today is the day when many of you will make the transition from the life of the mind to the world of work. This is a profoundly hopeful moment, and none of these words are meant to diminish that hope. The degree that you are about to receive gives you access to safer, more interesting, and better paying jobs than you could get without it, which is especially encouraging to those of you who are first generation college students whose families have made do without these resources, and for those for whom racism and class discrimination has tracked many people in your communities into prison or low-wage labor rather than into fair, liveable jobs. These words exist to make all of you think more critically about both the immense opportunities and the immense challenges that you will face at work.

Second, I teach labor and intellectual history, and today is a big, big day for labor historical reasons. Two hundred years ago today, on May 5th, 1818, in the town of Trier in the Province of the Lower Rhein in the Kingdom of Prussia, Karl Marx was born. Marx is by no means the first person to identify a problem with work. On the day he was born, the United States was already deeply divided over the issue of human bondage, over the forced labor of people of African descent. That conflict over race, citizenship, and work would soon tear the nation apart in a bloody civil war. What Marx did give us, however, was a comprehensive conceptual framework to understand the meaning of work, one that identified work as a source of our oppression rather than as a means to our freedom. It is these ideas that inspire the first – warning – section of this talk.

The first thing that Marx teaches us is that work is a relatively new idea. People have not always “worked”. Not until the middle of the 19th century in the United States did many people wake up every day and leave a place they called home for a place they called work where they performed a set of tasks that earned them money and a social identity. That means that even as Friends Boarding School graduated its first classes, and as those first students were sitting in this place with the exact excitement that you all are feeling right now, that most people in the world would never make a life transition that involved getting a first job and joining the workforce. Of course most people performed work. They woke up early to nurse their babies, harvest their food, make their clothes, and build their shelter, and to exchange items from baked goods to whiskey to jewelry that made their lives more livable and meaningful.

It was not until a revolution in new technology and new ideas in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, that some people began to reorganize their existence around the transition that most of you are making on this very day. With the gradual introduction of new machinery, new ways of harnessing energy such as the steam engine, and new ways of moving goods such as the railroads, people began to recognize that rather than making all those shoes and shovels and tables in individual homes, that they could be made much more efficiently in large quantities in one place, the factory. But for the factory system to work, the majority of people would have to transform the way they lived their lives, leaving their farms, moving to the city, and joining the factory system.

Karl Marx became the most important philosopher of the 19th century when he created a theory to explain this transformation. Marx's idea revolved around something called the labor theory of value. Now I promise I am not going to disappear into the theoretical abyss here, but we just need a few ideas to help hold the rest of the talk together. Marx argued that once people joined the industrial system, that they would go to work every day and perform labor that produced commodities. What Marx called the *value* of each commodity was the amount of *labor* it took to produce the product. In Marx's terms, the value of a pair of shoes would be something like three hours of labor. The owner of the factory would turn around and sell that product for money. But rather than making an equal trade of wages to fully compensate for those three hours of work, the owner of the factory would keep some of the money from the sale, keeping what Marx called a surplus. Since regular people couldn't afford to own machinery and steam engines and trains, they would have to sell their labor to the people who could afford those things. But they would sell it for less than the actual value they created in all those shoes and shovels and tables. Marx argued that in that gap between the value of a product and the wage that a person received to make it, the greatest antagonism of the 19th century was born. A revolutionary change was coming, where people could buy more useful, more interesting, and more beautiful things than they had ever imagined. But because the making of each of those products gave more money to the owners of the factories than to the people that made them, the gap between owners and workers grew as every day passed.

Okay, take a breath, we are now done with the purely economic argument. And we should be because Marx saw capitalism first and foremost as a set of social relations, one which drastically altered that way that people related to their loved ones. When those first graduates left this campus in the early 1850s, most people in Richmond and across the world spent their whole lives with their immediate kin, and were always connected to parents, siblings, children, neighbors, and friends. But when people began to get jobs, they left home to perform dirty, dangerous, boring work in the company of strangers. Marx described these broken bonds in visceral terms in the most famous lines of the Communist Manifesto in 1848. "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, and new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."¹

While one could read sorrow into Marx's words here, it is important to remember that he made this point as part of a broader argument that capitalism creates new relationships as it destroys old ones. Because of those new relationships, the transition to a work based society aroused new desires in people and broadened their horizons even as it broke old bonds. Joining the ranks of manufacturing workers would certainly force one to perform dirty, dangerous, boring work in the company of strangers. But some of those strangers were interesting and beautiful, and a worker could begin to lean on those strangers for friendship, sex, and love in a manner that may have been forbidden back at home. The Historian of African American women Tera Hunter describes this phenomenon beautifully in her book *To Joy my Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. She shows that while black women spent long hours doing manufacturing, service, and domestic work in Atlanta in the 1880s, their jobs created an increment of time between the end of the work day and sleep. Hunter demonstrates that many women could spend that time increment on their own terms, a freedom that their enslaved mothers and grandmothers were categorically denied. She could visit black owned businesses and peruse the merchandise. She could walk into a bar, sit down and have a drink, and strike up a conversation with a handsome man or woman of her choice. And although these freedoms were tightly constrained by constant economic scarcity and the hair trigger of white people's vicious racism, they were moments of pleasure nonetheless.²

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: International Publishers Company, 2014) 16.

² Tera Hunter, *To Joy my Freedom: Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 168-186.

The pleasures and desires of the industrial city appear in particularly vivid terms in the writing of W.E.B. DuBois, an intellectual who dedicated his life to explaining the connection between capitalist economic relations and African American life, and who reflected on those same post-Civil War Atlanta neighborhoods a century before Tera Hunter. DuBois argued that both formerly enslaved African Americans and poor and elite Southern whites saw the industrial engine of Atlanta, with its flourishing universities, its technological advances, and its dazzling array of commodities as the route out of the crisis of the Civil War. DuBois' work was a warning to black people, a Marxist admonishment that the growing wealth in Atlanta's black community was a false idol, and that intellectual life was the only route to freedom. But rather than casting his analysis in negative terms, DuBois framed the struggle for liberation in terms of desire – desires that were intellectual, emotional, economic, and erotic. In Chapter 5 of DuBois' most widely read book *The Souls of Black Folk*, for example, DuBois speculates that Atlanta was named after the Greek mythological figure Atalanta, a young woman who was a gifted runner, and who aimed to dedicate her young life to the pursuit of her athletic skills. Atalanta was beautiful, and despite her adamant refusal to settle down into marriage, she had many suitors. To avoid unwanted proposals that would curtail Atalanta's freedom to run, she would challenge all of her suitors to a footrace. She promised to marry any suitor who could beat her, but Atalanta knew she could outrun any man. Her strategy always worked until she met a young Hippomenes. Recognizing that he could not physically beat Atalanta, Hippomenes laid out three sparkling, golden apples along the race course. As she charged ahead of Hippomenes, the apples began to captivate Atalanta, and by the time she reached the third one she paused to gaze at it. Hippomenes overtook her, and her lust for the golden apple was soon cast on Hippomenes, and they made passionate love in the temple. But for that they were cursed, and Atalanta would never run again.

Now I have to pause for a moment and say the first time I read Chapter 5 I was like, “Oh no DuBois, what are you doing, giving some sexist Marxist lesson about the pitfalls of consumerism that frames women as gold diggers who only fall for men who buy them golden jewels?” But as I read on I recognized that DuBois was making the opposite point. DuBois stakes the future of everyone in Atlanta, black and white people alike, on who he calls “a young, black Atalanta.” DuBois wants Atalanta to fly, and to win the footrace. But to do so, he sounds the alarm to Atalanta that she must not be distracted by gold, the growing wealth of Atlanta's black and white middle classes. He implores Atalanta to remain focused on the dream of freedom, and insists that the burgeoning intellectual life of Atlanta's black universities will give her the passion she needs to avoid the temptation of the golden apple. As he roots for Atalanta to beat Hippomenes, he insists that the future of Atlanta – and of U.S. society in general – rests on the mind of a young, single black woman who is adamantly free and who is in charge of her own destiny. “Fly, maiden, fly,” DuBois ends the chapter, “for yonder comes Hippomenes!”³

You might ask at this point what DuBois' ideas about desire, temptation, and freedom have to do with the central concept of this talk: work. The social changes that DuBois reflected upon were deeply threatening to the established order of race, gender, and class in the United States, a threat that is particularly evident in an African American Marxist intellectual's suggestion that the intellectual pursuits of a young single black woman would liberate black and white society alike. I argue that the idea of work became a primary tool to neutralize this threat, and to tamp down the desires that DuBois referenced in the story of Atalanta. The concept of work was able to accomplish this task because it had been a bedrock of an emerging American identity since the first white Protestant settlers arrived in the 17th century. The German Sociologist Max Weber, another scholar writing in the Marxian tradition, was particularly cogent as he explained why this is true. Weber argued that capitalism flourished in the

³ W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994) 47-54

U.S. not just because of its economics, but because of its *spirit*, its emotional and moral characteristics. Reading the works of the strict Calvinist ministers who were the intellectual leaders of the early colonial era, Weber described the emergence of a particular protestant ethic, one centered on the notion of hard work. Puritan thinkers believed that every person received a calling from god into a particular vocation, a vocation that could involve the making of anything from bricks to ideas. To live a good life, one would dedicate their existence to answering that calling. Work, thus, was the end goal of life, a marker of the innate moral goodness which existed in answering god's calling. Working toward the calling would in turn occupy the mind and the body with action, and prevent people from succumbing to the temptations of the flesh; the visual, tactile, and erotic temptations that made the sin of indulgence ever harder to resist as the economy grew. By proving that an individual was answering god's calling and resisting temptation, work confirmed that a person had the right kind of values: thrift, sobriety, chastity, self-denial, deferred gratification, and personal responsibility. Conversely, those who did not work, or who resisted work, were assumed to embody the wrong kind of values: self-indulgence, immediate gratification, sexual excess, and irresponsibility. God would provide for hard workers with the right kind of values, and would abandon non-workers with the wrong kind of values.⁴

As Protestant secularism gradually displaced strict English Puritanism as the foundation of U.S. society, the protestant ethic – the notion that hard work is the primary marker of moral goodness – remained dominant, and that dominance became the primary means to refute calls for social change such as DuBois'. If god rewarded hard workers for answering the calling, then material comforts were a sign of god's blessing. The lack of material comfort was, in turn, a sign that a person had succumbed to the temptations of the flesh and was thus enduring god's condemnation. People are poor not because the history of the U.S. economy had funneled resources away from most people and toward a narrow group of descendants of the original white settlers. Rather, they are poor people have the wrong kind of values and deserve their poverty as a punishment for moral failure. According to the protestant ethic, work produces not economic *value* as Marx would have it, but rather moral *values*. The focus on values could in turn be used to condemn a young Atalanta for dedicating her life to her passions and her freedom rather than solely to hard work.

Dominant though the protestant ethic has been as a mechanism to tamp down people's desires, not everyone has believed it, and a vocal subset of the population has condemned the protestant ethic wholeheartedly. In that condemnation, people have imagined a world beyond work, one where work is a means to a more beautiful, interesting, and desirable life rather than an end in itself. It that world that I challenge you to think about today. I now turn back to history to demonstrate that imagining the world beyond work is both immensely controversial and immensely possible. That imagining was particularly evident on the cold night of November 22nd, 1909 at Cooper Union, the intellectual hub of New York City's Greenwich Village. Over the previous weeks, garment workers who made high fashion apparel for the growing middle class had staged a series of work stoppages. Most of those workers were Jewish or Italian women and girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five. They worked ceaselessly, sixty hours a week in six ten hour days with extended hours during demand spikes. Most of these workers lived south of the Greenwich Village garment district in the tenements of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Though they lacked adequate access to safe housing, sanitation, and food, historian Kathy Peiss has argued that these women nevertheless found access to what she called "cheap amusements". On their days off, young women garment workers would walk along 5th avenue and window shop, imagining themselves in the lavish gowns, bedazzled hats, and shiny shoes that they saw in the stores and that many of them made at work. They would walk through central park, and imagine themselves on leisurely carriage rides like the elite ladies who rolled past them. They would take the subway to the amusement park at Coney Island, and even if they lacked the money to ride the rides or play the games, they could gaze at the lights, listen to

⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons, translator (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) 154-182.

the music, and the watch the performances. In that gaze, and during those few fleeting hours that they spent outside of the garment factories and away from the tenements, these young immigrant women created a life beyond work.

That imaginary moved them to act politically. Groups of workers in individual garment factories began demanding raises in hourly pay that would allow them to spend less time in the factories. Barriers to achieving a better life outside of work were of course significant. Yiddish, Russian, and Italian were the languages of the factories, which made it difficult for workers to communicate across ethnic lines, and prevented them from getting better paying jobs that required English fluency. A growing number of activists recognized that although an immense risk existed in organizing, that they would have to take concerted action to advance their cause. Those at all factories and from all ethnic backgrounds would have to make the same demand and strike if those demands were not met.

Garment workers committed to this strategy that cold night at Cooper Union. As leaders of the garment workers' movement debated strategies for winning the raise, 23-year old Clara Lemlich asked in Yiddish for a chance to speak. Lemlich had been born into a Jewish family in the village of Gorodok, Ukraine in 1886, and immigrated to the United States in 1903. She had been in the country just six years as she took the stage. In the best English she could muster, Lemlich challenged the crowd. "I have listened to all the speakers, and I have no further patience for talk. I am a working girl, one of those striking against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in generalities. What we are here for is to decide whether or not to strike. I make a motion that we go out in a general strike." The audience heeded Lemlich's call. The next day, 20,000 garment workers walked off the job, and stayed out for two and a half months during the coldest part of the winter. Finally, in mid-February, the majority of the factory owners settled with the young women, and granted many of the economic advances that they sought.⁵

For those of you who know this story, you know that it involved a tragedy. One company, Triangle Shirtwaist, rejected the strike settlement, and refused to recognize the union or to grant the wage increases. Managers were particularly aggressive at Triangle, insisting that young woman had no business in a labor union or in any other type of political organization. Every day, they locked the doors to the factory stairways to prevent organizers from bringing socialist and anarchist literature into the factory, and to stop workers from sneaking pieces of fabric out of the factory that they could use to make dresses for themselves after hours. On the afternoon of March 25, 1911, as Triangle's workforce continued its covert effort to build a union, a fire broke out on the 8th floor of the building. With locked stairways, a single elevator car provided the only escape route. Flames tore through the piles of scrap cloth amid the sewing machines, temperatures soared, and the factory's oxygen was quickly consumed. The windows burst outward, and girls huddled on the ledges high above the street as they tried to breathe. Frozen in horror, middle class New Yorkers relaxing in Washington Square Park watched the flames overtake the huddled workers, who began to jump to their deaths. Minutes later, 146 people had been killed. Ideas like work and desire that organize this talk are abstractions. But as those abstractions were inscribed in a social movement and inscribed on burning bodies as they fell through the Greenwich village air, they were deadly real.

Work extinguished life that day in Greenwich Village. But these young women's ceaseless effort to image a world beyond work breathed new life into the labor movement. A generation after the fire, the labor unions that Clara Lemlich and her peers helped build surged forward. The new contracts that they won meant that by 1950, Clara Lemlich's grandchildren could take union jobs with starting pay of \$50,000 dollars per year, free health insurance, the ability to retire with a full, company paid pension at 50 years old. Because of their activism, the union members of those generations without a college expect better pay and benefits than many of you – and certainly many college professors – make in a professional setting today.

⁵ Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working Class Politics in the U.S., 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 53-86.

As I now conclude this talk, many of you may wonder how a young woman's struggle a century ago in Greenwich Village is relevant to the challenges you will face at work, especially when an obvious solution – labor unions – have lost most of their political and economic power. I have two answers to this question. First, every generation has its own solutions to the problem with work. When Clara Lemlich got on the stage at Cooper Union that day, there was no obvious playbook for a young, immigrant, Yiddish and Russian speaking Jewish woman in a country run by older, native born English speaking Protestant white men. She had to write her own script. She certainly had the socialist ideas of her Jewish ancestors to draw upon, just as her coworkers had the anarchist ideas of their Italian ancestors. But they had to adapt those ideas to a different continent with a different culture and a different economy. I am your labor history professor, but you will ultimately answer these questions on your own terms.

Second, there are concrete efforts to imagine – and to build – a world beyond work today that you can continue to learn from after you walk across this stage. In a move that caught the press, academics, the Trump movement, the resistance, and me completely off guard, public school teachers in West Virginia walked out on strike back in February. They did so without formal assistance from unions. A month later, teachers in Oklahoma and Kentucky followed suit, and now those in Arizona and Colorado are joining them. Socialist utopias West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Kentucky are most certainly not. But the teachers nevertheless organized under the hashtag RedforEd. Though officially a reference to the red t-shirts they wear on the picket line, it is not just bookish history teachers who would recognize the thinly veiled reference to the legacy of the birthday boy who started this whole talk off.

Teacher activists argue that school is about passion for ideas, period, full stop. When you have to teach from twenty-year-old textbooks, and spend your salary on office supplies and technological equipment because the district doesn't pay for them, teachers have no choice to make life about work, not ideas. After they leave school, many teachers report to the local Home Depot or Applebees or Kroger, starting their second shifts at second jobs that pay for the resources that their families and their students need. Walking off the job, teachers stopped working as they echoed W.E.B DuBois in insisting that life should be about thinking, and not just about work. In the process, communities often identified under the signs of American Nationalism, evangelical Christianity, and traditional family values were hashtagging Karl Marx, and winning millions of dollars of new resources in the process.

With the inspiration of my fellow teachers, then, I leave you with a challenge on Karl Marx's 200th birthday, one that might be easier than we all might think to begin to achieve. Marx did not argue that people should not work, or that we shouldn't dedicate our lives to achieving the things that we care about or that make us better people. What he said, however, was that for an oppressive economic system to keep oppressing, every one of us must help reproduce what he called the relations of production, the set of social connections that make an oppressive system seem normal. Social change, therefore, depends on disrupting these social conditions – disrupting a culture that somehow makes it feel okay that a tiny few of us have more than we will ever need, and that far too many of us will be forced to spend our lives performing work that hurts our bodies, our minds, and our hearts. An immensely hopeful writer, W.E.B DuBois had every confidence that a young Atalanta would make just such a disruption. Atalanta would recognize that the life of the mind, rather than the glitter of the golden apple that work speciously claims to provide, are the foundation of the struggle for freedom. I share DuBois's optimism, and I implore you to go forward resisting the discipline of the clock and imagining a world beyond work. Thank you.