

Idle Labor: Distraction, Strike, Potential

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ABSTRACT: The article discusses the role of idleness in late neoliberal times in light of the glaring crisis that the institution of work is today going through. It suggests that today, as work becomes more and more problematic, and as the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism become more apparent and catastrophic, idleness becomes a viable existential and political option. In reading works of contemporary Israeli literature which are concerned with idleness and non-work, it shows the different potentials for resistance that are encapsulated in different forms of idleness and how they gain prevalence today. Leaning on thinkers such as David Graeber, Nancy Fraser, and Byung-Chul Han, the article first explains the manners in which work under neoliberalism brings about burnout and depression. Afterward, it moves on to reading contemporary Israeli literature by Michal Ben-Naftali, Noga Albalach, and Tahel Frosh. Reading these works through Giorgio Agamben's concept of inoperativity, the article discusses various forms of political idleness—idle labor, asceticism, and strike—while framing them facing the potential political imagination of a post-capitalist society.

THIS DISCUSSION OF IDLENESS ARISES out of a sense of historical urgency related to the catatonic nature of life today. Work, which has become rooted in every moment of human life, is at the same time increasingly losing its purpose. Despite the dramatic technological advances of the last century, bringing big increases in productive power, Western humanity hasn't managed to reduce its working hours—quite the contrary.¹ Many kinds of work and much work time have turned into what David Graeber calls “bullshit jobs”: meaningless and purposeless labors in which workers find no value and cannot feel they are contributing to society, or where they pass the time in boredom or carrying out bureaucratic tasks.² As Franco

¹ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Terminal Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013).

² David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

“Bifo” Berardi and Byung-Chul Han have shown, neoliberal subjects are available for unceasing potential work. The cell phone, email, and laptop allow the hi-tech worker, student, designer, or publicist to be connected at all times, and every moment is an opportunity to market oneself; for the Uber driver or the delivery person, unlimited work is always available. In white collar jobs, a large proportion of the time—in the office or at the computer in a cafe, at home, or in shared workspaces—we are idle or busy with redundant tasks. Meanwhile, looming over blue-collar jobs is the sword of automation, which can abolish whole fields of work. At the same time, the care and teaching professions are losing status, and salaries and work security are being steadily eroded. The very jobs whose essential nature was rediscovered during the coronavirus pandemic are still perceived as having low social value.

The crisis taking place today in the world of work has been considered from many perspectives. Graeber shows that jobs are increasingly turning out to be devoid of value and meaning.³ Daniel Susskind argues that the automation of the future will extinguish many forms of work and lead to “a world without work.”⁴ It is a process already well under way, and it is crushing the standing of workers throughout the world. According to Adam Kotsko, work in the neoliberal era is a mechanism for creating infinite guilt and debt (both moral and literal).⁵ Moishe Postone puts forward a Marxist interpretation of the crisis in work, arguing that stagnation in the value of work is part and parcel of capitalist logic and its historical process.⁶ Capitalism doesn’t achieve the growth it reaches for, and so it has to accelerate. The world economy therefore shifts to the intensive model of neoliberalism, which tries to maximize every opportunity and expands work time without end. While we manufacture objects with greater efficiency, the economic (surplus) value of production is concomitantly eroded, and we have to do more work. The crisis in work comes to light *as* work becomes more productive. Neoliberalism doesn’t bring about higher economic growth, and it has been stagnant since the 1970s, even while its productive capacity continues to grow.⁷ All our considerable efforts come to nothing because they are aimed only at economic value (surplus value) and not at the production of goods; our work doesn’t release capitalism from its busyness.⁸

This article will not focus on work but on what it tries to eradicate. I will consider the present as a time of idleness, of work whose aim is the infinite creation of surplus and abstract value (capital), but which has less and less to do with what the work is for and what it means, apart from economic reasons of profit. This is leading to an increasingly normative opposition to the demand to work. This article was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that moment, during which most of humanity stayed home in isolation and removed from activity, it seemed more urgent than ever to study the connection between idleness, freedom, and work. I will propose a political conceptualization of idleness and of the possibilities it opens up, not only as a

³ Ibid.

⁴ Daniel Susskind, *A World without Work: Technology, Automation, and How We Should Respond* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

⁵ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

⁶ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁷ Moishe Postone, “The Current Crisis and the Anachronism of Value: A Marxian Reading,” *Continental Thought & Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom* 1, no. 4 (2017): 40.

⁸ Ibid., 49.

way of coming to terms with the neoliberal order and global capitalism but also as a horizon for thinking beyond them. I am not putting forward a left-wing manifesto for a future without work or a call for universal basic income (recent theoretical works and public policies point at the right direction).⁹ I will explore the potential of a life without work existing within the world of work.

As Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams put it in *Inventing the Future*: “What is needed, therefore, is a counter-hegemonic approach to work: a project that would overturn existing ideas about the necessity and desirability of work, and the imposition of suffering as a basis for remuneration.”¹⁰ I argue that the idleness that is already part of our lives hints at possibilities of collective ways of living beyond the world of work.

In Brian O’Connor’s opinion, being idle has to do not only with work but also with the question of appropriateness:

Idleness [...] is not only a state of not working, though that is a key marker. It involves a departure from a range of values that make us the kinds of people we are supposed to be in order to live well. The very idea of being a “self” of the appropriate kind is therefore placed in question. [...] Idleness is experienced activity that operates according to no guiding purpose. The absence of purpose explains its restful and pleasurable qualities. Idleness is a feeling of non-compulsion and drift.¹¹

What is missing from many texts dealing with the crisis in work is an awareness that idleness is to a significant extent an already established norm, even if the processes by which it is recognized mark it as a state of degeneration. I am not arguing that because our work is “idle,” it is an esoteric key which only the penetrating gaze of the critic can discern. On the contrary, the understanding that our work is mostly in vain is gradually becoming taken for granted. Idleness is perhaps the foundational norm of our time, based on a fundamental tension: the collapse of work subtracts meaning from the lives of an increasing number of people, and their lives become idle in almost every sense except for the creation of economic value (and this too is shriveling). But because of the totalizing nature of work, it is almost impossible to formulate a space of idleness unconnected to one productive project or another. We don’t have time to be idle, while there is increasingly less meaning attached to, and possibility of, economic prosperity arising from work. There is then no sharp distinction between work and idleness: idleness isn’t opposed to work but operates according to its totalizing logic and creates various modes of idle activity and active idleness. Still, we cannot really be idle, in a pure sense, without feelings of guilt and actual debt. The age of idleness is paradoxically the time in which idleness is just about impossible.

Idleness therefore appears as a form of burnout, corrosive of and out of place in the other normative institutions where it raises its head. Work and leisure are bourgeois institutions, while asceticism and the strike are emancipatory and risible, idleness being their contemporary and inappropriate way of appearing. To borrow Postone’s words, “The historical dynamic of capitalism [...] increasingly points beyond the necessity of proletarian labor while reconstituting that very necessity. It both generates the possibility of another organization of social life and yet

⁹ Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso Books, 2016).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹¹ Brian O’Connor, *Idleness; A Philosophical Essay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 5.

hinders that possibility from being realized.”¹² Idleness—as an expression of and response to the crisis of work—is then an “inverted” form of life perceived as a catastrophe,¹³ which is nevertheless a pointer from current circumstances toward possibilities beyond capitalism. In a world without work, inactivity and idleness will no longer be seen as inappropriate. That is to say, liberal emancipatory thought imagines freedom and the removal of dependence as the aim of liberation. But the emancipation of idleness constitutes a critique of the liberal-individualist ethos and seeks to interrupt this dialectic. The human doesn’t “free” him/herself but lives in shared distraction, collective and passive, in *relation* to the conditions of production.

In this article I will discuss concepts of idleness in relation to categories of work, leisure, asceticism, and strike/refusal of work. I will show how idleness relates to work and leisure; how it functions in relation to the desire to break with the exhausting neoliberal social order; and how it is related to the political force majeure of the strike. I will open the discussion with the condition of idleness today in relation to work and consider the concept of potentiality as non-action in the work of Giorgio Agamben, which will be essential for an understanding of idleness as a form of passive potential. My starting point is the politicization and multivalent attribution of meaning to idleness. All manufacturing is by nature a process of turning things (materials, bodies, ideas, symbols) into bearers of meaning. The discussion of idleness—as that which is opposed to the political and to productivity and cancels itself in relation to them—sees it as meaningful, or, in other words, as productive (in its unproductiveness). I will write from within this tension, when idleness becomes productive and loses its ineffectuality.

I will distinguish different forms of idleness. First, there is redundant action, pointless activity whose results are unimportant and meaningless and which are nevertheless necessary to the system’s logic. Such is the endless filling of forms, conferences, continuing education programs, feedback, meetings, and other perturbations which fill our time and whose quantity is only increasing.¹⁴ Second, there is active idleness: even when we are idle during work time we are still available for endless practices of advancing the project of selfhood, for example by loitering in social networks. Idleness is projected onto the future. Here the differences between work, idleness, and leisure are blurred. I choose to use the term “busy idleness” and not “leisure” because it concerns activities whose uselessness everyone is aware of (as opposed to leisure, which has, at least on the face of it, a limited and definite purpose), and despite which we are compelled to perform.¹⁵ Much of the neoliberal subject’s idle time is then spent on social networks at despondent “work” on the project of the self being created there.

The third form of idleness is purposeless and passive activity related to work, whether at work or performed by the jobless, oppressed, or homeless. I will call it “unemployment,” because this concept encapsulates the contempt in which society holds its unemployed and the guilt that the latter feel. I will argue that it is precisely in unemployment that there is an emancipatory potential, which I will try to delineate. It depends on the weakness of the liberal ethos of the active, autonomous subject and in the formulation of political life as a radical experience of passivity. The paradigmatic example of unemployment is *Bartleby*, the scrivener in Melville’s

¹² Postone, “The Current Crisis,” 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2015).

¹⁵ Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*.

eponymous short story, who “would prefer not” to work. Agamben and Gilles Deleuze find revolutionary potential in *Bartleby’s* preference for weakness, neutralizing the privileging of free will.¹⁶ If neoliberal theology uses free will to exploit its subjects and make them experience guilt and debt, the image of the idler with a weak will allows us to think about action beyond the category of will and thus gains fresh significance.

As Kfir Cohen Lustig shows, neoliberal conditions of life isolate people, and the dominant cultural and theological tone today is that of the private subject, responsible for himself and living in “the real liberal fiction of self legislation.”¹⁷ Within this logic, forms of private idleness are a mere existential or poetic gesture negating social conditions and the dissemination of work, while remaining a private and liberal response: the character of *Bartleby* dies in prison. So I am not suggesting that idleness today *is* political or radical, but that the passivity of the idler, who depends on the support of society and not on his/her own individual will, necessarily strengthens a political possibility realizable in a future which abandons the autonomous will as a bounding horizon.

I look at representations of idleness in contemporary Israeli literature, in works by Noga Albalach and Tahel Frosh. The discussion of Hebrew literature is important because Zionist culture has always represented work not only as a matter of productivity but also as a principle by which moral and political value can be accumulated. This is as true of the labor movement as it is of the contemporary notion of the start-up nation, associated with both nationalism and work.¹⁸ Following Cohen Lustig, my discussion avoids focusing on questions of nationalism or categories of identity, themes with which Hebrew literary criticism is replete. Cohen Lustig locates contemporary Hebrew literature as a global literature which comes into being in relation to the social conditions of late capitalism, which is its political boundary. He is concerned with the connection between social conditions and the making of literature; I, on the other hand, will focus here on how literary creation is related to work and the idleness which goes along with it. The theologies of work and idleness, these hegemonic ideological forms, find expression in the work of Albalach, while Frosh’s poetry formulates an emancipatory horizon beyond the theology of work.

The discussion of literary creation will be from two slightly different perspectives. In the reading of Albalach’s novellas I will try to show how idleness is represented according to today’s bourgeois-liberal logic. Against this, Frosh’s poetry shows commitment to and a desire for a poetic-political project of critiquing the neoliberal world and formulating ways of escaping it. Seeing that Frosh and I are both participants in this shared project, I will think with her about the critique of late capitalism, going as far as what I understand to be the boundary points of her work currently.

To a great extent, the discussion in this article derives from Agamben’s thought, generally associated with questions of sovereignty. I will emphasize its Benjaminian-Marxist sources, as well as its theory of suspended power. In the heart of the Western political-economic machine, Agamben finds a space of inoperativity which is tied to the control wielded by economic and political forces. This concerns a current possibility, but it is reframed as unemployment or is absorbed by “selfing.” Idleness is today the suspended, inoperative, and potential form of human action, and not something other than or separate from action. What can become the agent of

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “*Bartleby: or The formula*,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 68–90.

¹⁷ Kfir Cohen Lustig, *Makers of Worlds, Readers of Signs: Israeli and Palestinian Literature of the Global Contemporary* (New York: Verso, 2019), 56.

¹⁸ Hilla Dayan, “Neo-Tziyunot: Portrait Sociology” [Neo-Zionism: A Sociological Portrait], *Teoria Ve-Bikoret [Theory and Criticism]* 52 (2020): 87–112.

release is not creativity and activity, but that free time and idle activity which are expressions of the potential of humanity as a non-working animal. Emancipatory action doesn't have to be designated as aiming for another world, but as a freeing of idle time already available within this world: negating the compulsion to work will free human potential.

THE AGE OF IDLENESS

In *Bullshit Jobs*, Graeber describes a society in which many workers doing bullshit jobs feel that their labors are without meaning or value. People doing bullshit jobs find their bosses forcing them to fill any free time with meaningless tasks, or they feel that their position or even the whole field of work is meaningless. This is busy idleness, or useless toil. Alongside them are jobs in which people do nothing, mostly using the time on social media and maintaining the project of self-making. This is active unemployment. These forms of idleness visit "spiritual violence" on their subjects.¹⁹ The ethos of the world of work leads to a situation in which work itself, when it becomes an end and not a means, is in practice degenerate, violent idleness.

Han and Berardi clarify the subject and object of this spiritual violence: free will. Han makes a distinction between industrial supervised society and the society of free will and neoliberal achievement of the last forty years, on the one hand, and between the oppressive structure of biopolitical supervision—characterizing the society of supervision—and what he calls the "psychopolitics" of neoliberal society. "Neoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom," he writes. "Everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty—emotions, play and communication—comes to be exploited. It is inefficient to exploit people against their will. [...] Only when freedom is exploited are returns maximized."²⁰ Assimilating supervision into the category of will, into the "permitted" and the "can," creates links between idleness and work: work doesn't negate and suppress (will) power but is what gives it space and time. Activity, freedom, and the human ability to act in an emotionally and intellectually engaged way are exploited for the sake of profit creation. This is "liberated" work, without coercion, dependent on the initiative of the working subject; following technological innovations and globalization, it can be done at any time.²¹ It depends on the desire of the self to prove him/herself and get stronger. Berardi explains how this situation leads to depression and anxiety, the plagues of late capitalism, even before COVID-19.²² A similar claim is central to Han's book on the society of initiative and achievement which turns into "burnout society."²³ What is exploited in the society of initiative and achievement is what connects human potential (of mind and body) with its realization and performance, via the category of individual will. The suffering of idleness is recognized and has legitimacy; it is an open secret, and consensus about it gives legitimacy to work. Time spent surfing the internet and resting from work, for example, "clear the head" for work and enable one to continue over long hours. And from another direction, Han says that the self becomes an initiative-subject, involved in the project of the self on social networks, which will advance work matters or private affairs (though one can no longer separate the two).

¹⁹ Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 278.

²⁰ Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (New York: Verso, 2017), 15.

²¹ Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 89; Cray, 24/7.

²² *Ibid.*, Berardi, 98–101.

²³ Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

This is busy idleness/useless toil/vacuous work. The two forms aren't mutually exclusive: the neo-liberal initiator finds himself doing vacuous tasks "because everyone does them." It's important to distinguish between the capitalist initiator and the subject who identifies as an initiator. The first invests his capital in order to generate more capital, while the initiator-self is invested in making idle symbolic gestures—"likes" on Facebook, showing academic CVs—which promise nothing but appear as hopeless speculation and as payment of a debt of guilt.

Both idle employment and busy idleness exist within the conventional political logic of work. The idleness they embody are two forms of accepted impotence, civilized and necessary according to the logic of the time. The links between idleness and work have to do, then, with what society counts as appropriate and what it deems condemned. The musician, yeshiva student, and academic are seen as idle good-for-nothings by a society in pursuit of economic gain, while someone holding down a bullshit job is considered productive. Inactivity is seen as idleness as long as it doesn't produce value, that is to say, capital. Furthermore, the totalized work of late capitalism spills over into leisure time, and its logic—expressed in the accumulation of symbolic capital, idle employment, and busy idleness—spills over with it.

WORK AND LEISURE

The classic model of work in modern capitalist society is based on the split between work and leisure: work during the day and rest at the end of it. Norbert Elias distinguishes work, a frame where we function within constraints and well-defined action, and an idea of leisure—a space and time in which our spontaneity and freedom are expressed.²⁴ However, Elias argues that modern man is busy with cultural leisure activities that aren't at all spontaneous and free. Leisure activities aren't taken to be good in themselves but are aimed at some other goal: we do sport to be fit, or meditation to be better prepared for a day of work.²⁵

Elias, who was writing in the 1960s, had an optimistic vision of the future of leisure and work: technological advances would increasingly shorten work hours, and humanity would have to learn to be at leisure. But in the West time at work is expanding, and work invades leisure time to the point that one can't distinguish them.²⁶ We work at the weekend, answer emails during the evening, take the computer with us on holiday, or go out for a mandatory company day of fun with colleagues. The working week, once a feature of organized workplaces and now freely structured by the individual, has become a week of work in which work and leisure are congruent.

The laborer, writes Benjamin, is at all times devoted to a ritual in which he/she demonstrates indebtedness to capitalism.²⁷ This is why neoliberal corporations are so interested in setting the terms of employment, because, as in a cult, the space is both work and living space. We can see this through the lens of Elias's concept of spontaneity. He argues that we have to think about the

²⁴ Norbert Elias, "Spontaneity and Self-consciousness," in *Excitement Processes: Norbert Elias's Unpublished Works on Sports, Leisure, Body, Culture*, ed. Jan Haut, Paddy Dolan, Dieter Reicher, and Raúl Sánchez García (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 23–76.

²⁵ Elias argues that this is connected to our socialization, which doesn't introduce us to a logic of spontaneity, unrelated to productivity. For the modern person, enjoyment outside of work evokes guilty feelings about being childish. That is to say, for us to learn to enjoy (to use) free time without guilt, there would have to be wide-ranging social change, Elias argues, or a change in the processes of socialization (*ibid.*, 29).

²⁶ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 10.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," trans. Rodney Livingston, in *Selected Writings: 1913–1926*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus P. Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

“rational” characteristics of leisure activities which allow us to be in zones of spontaneity, feeling, and creativity.²⁸ Contemporary workplaces have responded to this demand, and the hi-tech space is full of game rooms and time for creative pursuits. Spaces and forms of supposedly “anti-capitalist” existence, such as the Burning Man festival or mindfulness meditation, have been appropriated by the hi-tech companies in Silicon Valley, and before them by the neoliberal logic of self-realization.

Han criticizes the obligation to be involved in creative work as part of what he calls “doping society,” a society using drugs for the sake of efficiency and to cope with the tensions of work.²⁹ Berardi, for his part, calls it “Prozac culture” and argues that a period of sustained highs induced by pharmaceutical drugs is followed by physiological and emotional collapse, with social and economic fallout.³⁰ If in the dichotomy of work and leisure there is a split between disintegration and hope—the weekend is dedicated to enjoyment and the week to work—in this congruence of work and leisure, functioning under influence (Dionysian or sharpening of the senses) penetrates the workspace. The occasional drink after work turns into something planned and obligatory according to the logic, hierarchy, and tension of work. The WeWork company founded by entrepreneur Adam Neumann, now a billionaire, a company claiming to join work and community, and indeed life, would hold wild parties involving drink and drugs.³¹ Someone constrained not by the frame of fixed work but by the gig economy could find it agreeable to function without a clear boundary between pleasure and work, using anesthetics and stimulants. These processes confine the subject to a cycle of hedonistic work (and not hedonistic leisure), resting on the subject’s freedom to work, enjoy, and consume and on his being required to continue creating and marketing himself—on social media—as a subject well-suited to leisure.

I will try to explain the confluence of leisure and work with the help of Agamben’s concept of potentiality. Agamben takes his cue from Aristotle, who argued that potential cannot be harnessed to use, for it would then always be at a lower level than the realized, concrete object, and would thus lose its very quality of potentiality; it would express only what is.³² He writes, “Potentiality is not a transition from possibility to fact: if every potential was realized, it wouldn’t be potential. What makes a painter a painter isn’t her ability to paint when she is painting, but her ability to not paint. A painter is someone who can also paint at times when she isn’t painting. Potentiality exists when there is non-action as a form of lack. It is the ability *not* to (in-ability), not a lack of power but the safeguarding of power in a situation of inaction.”³³

Agamben goes on to claim that in implementing potential, impotence (“impotentiality”) also serves, just as it is, as potential. He relates to Aristotle’s assertion that “a thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential.”³⁴ He interprets it as follows: “If a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then

²⁸ Elias, “Spontaneity and Self-consciousness,” 63–64.

²⁹ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 30.

³⁰ Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 166–67.

³¹ Eliot Brown, “How Adam Neumann’s Over-the-Top Style Built WeWork. ‘This Is Not the Way Everybody Behaves,’” *Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 2019.

³² Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 35.

³³ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 179.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

there is truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such.³⁵ Potentiality thus “*preserves itself* as such in *actuality*.”³⁶ Potentiality doesn’t exist just in states of latency but also in realization. Catherine Mills pursues the theme: “Aristotle’s phrase concerns the conditions in which potentiality is realized; potentiality is not destroyed in the passage to actuality, with im-potentiality [the potential to not be] set aside or overcome. Rather, the potentiality to not be or do is conserved in the passage to actuality.”³⁷

This concept undermines the idea of (self) realization—not because it proposes that humans are without potential, but because when this potential is realized it keeps within itself a potential as lack. Potential is realized when it appears saturated as inoperativity, as action whose potential is uncovered: “a specific kind of action that, moreover, does not minimise but rather augments the possibilities of use.”³⁸ Here the idea of potential (like power) becomes its impoverishment (like impotence). For Agamben, someone “realizes” him/herself when they leave within them “islands” of impotence: these are expressed as lateness/delay, play, dance, pleasure, creativity, or political action. The free and full existence of potential depends on the inactivity at the heart of action. The inactivity is not action (individual, neoliberal) that strives to capture, be efficient, and realize potential and doesn’t need to aim at extracting potential. It doesn’t need to make the most of anything. Instead of these, Agamben proposes a category of use in which not only can action occur in a collective form (which is the political sting of the concept), but it also weakens categories of need, so that the potential of the object stays free: use is a form of non-activity of subjects and objects. The object of use doesn’t belong to anyone (the law is remote, as is the question of ownership), and neither does it exist within the logic of consumption and destruction, and for these reasons it is full of potential. This is the object of inactivity, which can be used over time, and, more importantly—which can be shared.

How is Agamben’s concept of potential different from the work of today? The totalizing logic of work is the opposite of the inactivity Agamben sees as redemptive. I want to suggest that work’s totality is not the totality of use but of potential. If potential depends on its non-realization, the expansion of work into every domain of life renders work, by definition, void, non-activity. The neoliberal theology of efficiency hides great spaces of idleness within it. Work today appears as complete potentiality, and so it cannot realize itself: there’s no possibility of, or reason for, a direct link between commodity creation and hours of work, because there is a surplus of commodities. And so, as Postone and Graeber describe, in our work we don’t create commodities, but surplus work hours instead. For example, we can answer emails at any time, but for most of the time that isn’t what we are doing. There would be no availability of work if it constantly realized itself by fulfilling its potential; it depends on the inactivity immanent to it.

Work binds human potential within it, not by suppressing it but by translating suppression into its logic. One of the examples given by Graeber is of Eric, a young man employed to supposedly maintain a computer system in a design firm, even though he had no qualifications for the task. Eric quickly saw that there wasn’t any work to do, that his bosses were unconcerned about him doing nothing, and that his position had been created as part of a bureaucratic skirmish. Eric therefore stretched the limits of his idleness, coming to work drunk and unshaven or going

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 31.

³⁸ Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 33.

absent for days at a time. His bosses responded by raising his salary. Eric sank into depression and finally resigned.³⁹ While this may be an esoteric example, it merely touches the tip of the iceberg of jobs created and retained simply because they already exist. Add to this the other activities we are required to perform in order to maintain a proper existence in the system: gestures, actions, form-filling, proposals, presentations and meetings (and people who are supposed to manage, summarize, and archive these activities), and also virtue signaling, flattery, and “participation” in the space of social media. And although these latter are idle activities outside of the logic of work, the subject must sustain them in order to answer the imperatives of work and propriety. Work is a space where every moment is one that can potentially be activated by the will, and is also one where the work, the role, and the mind of the person become progressively useless. Work for the sake of work in late capitalism is saturated with potential (in idle employment and busy idleness) tied to the logic of work and the principle of profit accumulation dependent on it.

I will now examine literary representations of these issues. As I will show in a discussion of the novellas of Albalach, the logic of liberal freedom (which is at the core of the late capitalist work ethic) pushes toward a return to the bourgeois-bohemian solution of revitalizing leisure through the literary act—a return to cultural-symbolic creativity. The literary responses I describe below stem from the crisis in work and leisure and formulate a model in which idleness—which is paradigmatically present in work and leisure—appears as a trans-historical springboard for the reconstruction of the autonomic place of creative human beings. They thus paper over the crisis which was responsible for their very literary movement in the first place. The result, perhaps unsurprisingly, is that it is precisely in cultural discourse that unemployment is more active than ever.

LITERATURE AND IDLENESS

Cohen Lustig argues that in the global era “the autonomization of private life [...] now comes to be separated from direct political powers, resulting in the real liberal fiction of self-legislation. [...] The social process of autonomization separates immediate experience (private life) from the conditions of possibility (public life) that are now abstracted and governed by global networks.”⁴⁰ The global subject’s dominant experience is of private liberal autonomy. This is the immanent nature of global capitalism which has “no outside.”⁴¹ The global conditions of life delineate a boundary for thought and literature and for the political imagination which they respond to. I propose thinking about representations of idleness as a symptomatic response to this suffocation and to neoliberal conditions of work and life: the autonomization of the individual and the loss of the social, the expansion of the requirements of the place of work and the concealed, abstract congruence of work and leisure, which seemingly displaces idleness while designing new forms of it.

In recent years many prose works have been published, mostly by women, describing a contraction inward, a movement of seclusion. Among these are the novellas of Noga Albalach and the *Woman Reclining* novels of Maayan Goldmann (2018), *There Was a Woman* by Yael Neeman (2018), *A Dress of Fire* by Michal Ben-Naftali (2019), and *Autobiography of a Door* by Nurit Zarchi (2018). In other periods when Hebrew literature was no stranger to images of idleness, say in the withdrawn protagonists of Brenner and Gensin, searching for work and purpose at the beginning

³⁹ Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 221–22.

⁴⁰ Cohen Lustig, *Makers of Worlds*, 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

of the twentieth century (in the liberal-capitalist world), questions of livelihood and the national project were the backbone of the work. Unlike those earlier works, for those I have referenced work is the established space from which we have to escape. The lives of the withdrawn female protagonists are a response to the seemingly static time of late capitalism, in which there is no universal project or political spirit to join⁴² and which could be of use as a basis for writing (I will come back to this problem when I address the poetry of Tahel Frosh). Their femininity is connected not only to the discussion of the autonomy of a woman's voice ("a room of their own") but seems also to be a project of liberation and upturning the liberal impasse (in what Nancy Fraser calls "the cunning of history").⁴³ The liberal woman is torn between wanting to create autonomously and having to deal with and thrive in the world of work. The alienated relations of the female protagonists of these stories to their fertility brings out the tension between these women and the neoliberal and Zionist project, and the sense of there being no horizon. Either they are no longer fertile (Albalach), or they are childless (Neeman, Ben-Naftali), or they refuse fertile couple-hood.

I will begin with Albalach's novella "Esther," where we see a response to neoliberal repression/displacement embodied in almost radical idleness. Esther, a single or divorced woman in middle age, is situated in a global context: she lives in an abstract space, in "one of the European cities." The novella is written as an open letter to her son and describes the process of "liberation" Esther is going through. The novella's protagonist goes on holiday once a year to some generic hotel where she stares at TV and doesn't do anything. Idleness appears within leisure and accentuates it: instead of a holiday of cultural activities she embraces absolute and "trashy" idleness. "The television: my focus on these holidays. It's the only time I watch TV, and that's why it's so important."⁴⁴ Television, perhaps the global object per-se, is core to her time away.

It is evidently a paradox, since every house has a television. But to support idleness she has to get out of routine, an exit represented ritually and performatively by a meticulous detailing of her organization of space. The idleness exposes the potential for action: "I reached towards the dresser and picked up the remote control. At the end of the double bed were two big cushions. I piled them up, that's to say I raised them and put them at the head of the bed, resting myself against them; then I pressed the green button."⁴⁵ This is to make use of objects moving along two vectors, and arranging the room becomes ritualized only because of how it is described, conferring meaning on idle activity and giving it value. The objects concretize their potential, the cushions "are piled up" only for her to go back and lie down, and even the human body, agent of the action, turns itself into an object of use—"resting myself against them." The idleness allows the self to use itself and the transformation of the I into an object that one places in a resting position. But the body is so placed only so that it can be in a state of rest, and the activity is non-activity, impotentiality:

Now it begins. Now the holiday begins. Flicking between the channels, quickly moving past each one. If you thought I would tour museums, parks, markets, you were wrong. I take a room in a hotel in another city and watch television. That's what I do. Enliven the quiet room with random voices: a woman with a newscaster's voice, and then drums drumming, and after that the screeching of car brakes and Let's go! sing the children and after the children win the prize

⁴² Ibid., 84.

⁴³ Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review* 56 (2009).

⁴⁴ Noga Albalach, *Esther Ve-Adina* [Esther and Adina], trans. Mark Joseph (Tel Aviv: Achuzat Bayit, 2019), 13.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

for a jingle I don't recognize [...] and I interrupt it with a thrust of the remote and move on to tennis, in other words the sound of the ball being hit and the whistle as it cuts the air, some seconds of this being enough for me to decide to switch to a man in a firefighter's helmet who speaks to me, really to me, and still I move on to a channel of recordings of people laughing.⁴⁶

Esther's idleness exposes its global aspect and shrinks global movement to the easy gesture of channel-hopping (an image reminiscent of the COVID-19 lockdowns). Esther's response to globalization is not to scatter herself in every direction—LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram—but to limit herself. The fantasy of contraction is not only one of control. It also has to do with abstaining from the surplus and seeming plenitude outside and engaging with the more restricted one on TV. The work of idleness doesn't deviate from the logic of globalization but is a kind of distraction within it. Esther sees it as a need:

I paid money and I got what I needed. That's how people consume football matches, chocolate, TV series, computer games. In panic attacks, in addictions. But my panic attack is completely planned, brilliantly controlled, it is, heaven forbid, not spontaneous. My addiction is time-bound, and I wait for it the whole year round. It seems to meet a need for entertainment, for not thinking, idleness, squandering time, unlike the rest of the year, which is the opposite of all this, the complete opposite, punctiliousness and frugality.⁴⁷

The spendthrift language of idleness becomes condensed, measured, and controlled. There's no time to waste when you're idling: Esther goes out for a cheap meal opposite the hotel and comes straight back. What does her behavior mean, amazingly realizing both a decadent ideal involving bodily and mental atrophy and an almost spartan control of body and desire? The use of the term "consume" situates Esther in history: this is a response to life in consumer culture and not the psychological caprice of an individual.

Idleness here isn't simply the negation of work but rather, in fact, of leisure. This is an idleness apart from leisure, taking in moral and aesthetic directives and restrictions bearing on the concept of self as a locus of value. "All year I am concerned with seriousness, I diligently seek it out, in cinema, theater, bookshops, the library. I am crazy about quality. [...] I specialize in good taste, perhaps too good, I have infused my whole life with it. It takes me away from myself, from my life. Life doesn't taste good. [...] This kind of thinking abandons me as soon as the screen lights up."⁴⁸ Leisure is shown as a cultural imperative situating a person in a certain milieu and a set of obligations and aspirations, an active idleness of good and refined taste, as opposed to the random flipping between channels. The whole array of good taste is meant to make the most of leisure time, of the cultures of the subject, for the sake of elegance and intellect, bordering on madness ("I am crazy about quality"). Idleness appears in relation to necessity (at work) and to will (in leisure), and to the need to realize oneself, neutralizing them. The schizophrenic and chaotic skipping between TV channels brings freedom from the imperatives of leisure and culture: idleness is leisure in the form of distraction. It brings leisure to fullness, and in an organized and isolated space floods it with a schizoid sequence of information and images. Rather than freedom, it is a passive devotion to the logic of consumer culture itself. Idleness appears in relation to the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 16.

demands of leisure, of busy idleness. If one is to stop producing, the body has to completely free itself, not least from the logic and temporality of the society of profit and consumption.

After the schizoid journey in televisual space, Esther's idleness finally materializes as a therapy in which the body and desire are refashioned. Esther rediscovers herself, leaves the space of idleness, and returns to erotic leisure practices: she goes to a bar, meets a man with whom her emotional and sexual life are rekindled. Esther's idleness is ultimately a dialectical action which frees the potential which has returned and is embodied as acts of self-realization: she is no longer idle and distracted. Idleness here takes on a role which in the past was given to leisure: a momentary break with the bourgeois order, serving to re-eroticize the subject which can then reintegrate within this order. Idleness does not stray from its construction in the bourgeois narrative as purposeful action. Initially appearing as a moment of emptiness and freedom from the many imperatives of self-creation (non-leisure), it then returns to that project with renewed vigor. The moment of apparent deviation confers on idleness an enabling dialectical role, in that the cultural action of leisure frustrates the political or erotic projects of the subject.

IDLENESS AND SECLUSION

Like idleness, seclusion and depression are seen as (moral and physical) impairments and are associated with inactivity. In her essay "On Asceticism," Michal Ben-Naftali locates the recluse on the threshold of the social: "She sits away from the holiday table, on the margins of the gathering, the blessed and the blessings, entering the four healing walls of a lack in which she can withdraw from what was."⁴⁹ She avoids the imperative of productivity and the temporality of action: "To let others pass in front of her, to stay back, to confine friction to tiny matters which portend nothing except the simplest everyday behavior."⁵⁰ The life of the recluse relies on libidinal-economic value: "She is thrown into the world and from it, and lives with intensity alongside life, beside desires, adjacent to inception and cessation, sometimes to insanity."⁵¹ It is an existence with a basically unhappy core "with the characteristics of depression."⁵²

Ilai Rowner argues that Ben-Naftali's formulation of retreat derives from a "tremulous position" which does not dialectically negate expression but is speech appearing in the impossibility of its appearance or in its tense and fragile appearance. Ben-Naftali, Rowner shows, presents retreat, and discourse about it, in the context of questioning "how to talk about it," which is the endpoint of writing which "claims above all to be renunciatory: renunciation of the authority displayed by knowledge and by the received means by which knowledge is expressed; renunciation of sovereign appropriation and intellectual appropriation as complicit in dynasty and polis."⁵³ Nevertheless, the action of retreat ("going out from society") still preserves necessity and will, not only loneliness and renunciation: "to break with necessity or will, preferring a hidden and aloof space, without group identity or witness."⁵⁴ It is a retreat akin to that of the monk or nun, heavily dependent on willpower, and while, as an action of necessity it is bound to the negation of

⁴⁹ Michal Ben-Naftali, "Al Ha'Prishut" [On asceticism,] trans. Mark Joseph, in *Al Ha'Prishut* [On Asceticism] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2009), 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵³ Ilai Rowner, "Al Haktiva Ha-masa'yit shel Michal Ben-Naftali" [Michal Ben-Naftali as an Essayist], *Teoria Ve-Bikoret* [Theory and Criticism] 45 (2015): 201.

⁵⁴ Ben-Naftali, "On Asceticism," 12.

the subject, it also has the quality of intensity. This negation is linked to the prevailing order in a relationship of forfeit and control. Retreat marks the boundary of the social, the possibility of its crossing; and the fear, madness, and death found on the other side mark the symbolic boundary of the symbolic order of language. But the small cell of seclusion indicates, and for a good reason, not only a space of depression, sickness, and death but also the space of the intellectual or poet (and so seclusion is fertile ground for writing, the royal road of literature, or writing in general) and the forceful and willful narrowing down of the renunciate.

Freud finds two ways of responding to loss: melancholy, expressing a narcissistic taking in of the lost object and a blocking of the channels of the subject's libidinal investments; and mourning, a practice of freeing libidinal investments through work.⁵⁵ The recluse, as in Ben-Naftali's essay, opposes the work of mourning, liberating one from the imperative to recover and from the project of the self. Asceticism achieves distance from those modes. This distance organizes the protected space of seclusion, and instead of creative living it proposes an alternative project of writing. The idler differs in some ways from the recluse, particularly in explicit opposition to creativity and activity. Still, the idler doesn't have a "strong will" and isn't subject to any kind of necessity. Idleness eludes will and necessity, inasmuch as it doesn't avoid action, but rather is inaction, and ineffectual and impotent action. Ben-Naftali's recluse displays two possibilities: "sparse redemption" through a strong will and the choice of seclusion, or reducing down in passivity and necessary retreat in the presence of enormous social power. Because the power is that of global capitalism, it means that the recluse, having no community, and exercising willpower as an existential, Archimedean point, is led to a private existence; for where else could willpower lead? From another side, late capitalism exercises its power through privatization and turning the human being toward autonomy, thus producing the possibility of individual choice in the renunciate or writer. The recluse has no community because the historical conditions to which she is responding do not allow its establishment. This is in contrast to other historical times when communities were indeed established—the clearest example being the Franciscan monks. So it is to them that Agamben ties the concept of use, opposite to that of consumption;⁵⁶ it is an emancipatory horizon which has no place for the recluse, in the full force of their individual will and rejection of collective possibility. The tension between idleness and retreat is related to the potential of idleness to neutralize individual will for the sake of participation of some kind.

Participation arising in this way appears in the second novella of Albalach's book, "Adina." Middle-class Adina undergoes an experience of awakening relating to a crisis at her workplace. She has an outburst at her colleague, and after a series of events she leaves the job. I will discuss here some apparently marginal scenes, which are in my opinion paradigmatic in pointing to the possibility the novel expresses and to its limits. In the first days after the crisis, during which she works from home, Adina finds herself in a further argument, this time with paid nannies who are sitting on a bench under a window of her house. "One of them had a particularly strident voice, kind of hollow and metallic, which cut the air. It wasn't that she was shouting, just innocently talking [...] but I couldn't concentrate. These nannies sit around shamelessly in the building

⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, 1914–1916: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (UK: Random House, 2021).

⁵⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

courtyard; they just sit for hours and talk.”⁵⁷ But when Adina makes peace with her idleness, she joins the nannies:

I got dressed, took my coffee and went down. Without saying a word I sat down beside them on the bench. Their conversation stopped. That’s how I wanted them, quiet. Even though it was clear that the moment I stood up they would get back to talking, and all the more vigorously at that. Anyway I went on sitting there beside them, drinking my coffee. The nannies looked at me, they were surprised, they were not used to their privacy being invaded. [...] There was a newspaper on the bench, and I began to leaf through it. The nannies went back to their conversation. Initially they spoke quietly, as if not to disturb me, but afterwards they adapted to my unfamiliar presence and spoke normally. It was nice to sit with them in the yard. There were shady trees and a breeze. Really nice.⁵⁸

Unlike the recluse, shut up in her house and hostile to sound, the idler is defiant and goes out. Both actions are in response to economic realities: when Adina sits beside the nannies, she is idle, while they are not, despite the appearance (and our assumption) of their idleness. What is not proper is the fact that while Adina has passed the age when she can have children, she does not plan on working. It is not normal for a woman of “working age” to sit on a bench during the day and read a newspaper, as opposed to the nannies who have jobs as paid mothers (double work, since it frees the mothers themselves for other work, some of which exists only because liberal women are enslaved to the work order).⁵⁹ The work of reproduction or caring for others which Adina no longer wants—the novella describes her relationship with her daughter who has left home—situates her as a foreign element in the order of reproduction, care, and work. She is within and beside it, a perturbation, an idle woman disturbing work; but the idle work of the nannies grates on Adina’s ears from the moment she leaves her seclusion: what kind of work is this, that they can “sit for hours and talk”?

Adina’s idleness is temporary, fleeting, and ironic: “It was nice, even too nice.”⁶⁰ The idle woman looks at herself from outside and sees the inappropriate surplus of pleasure, that it “was really nice,” and, shocked, abandons her idleness. As in “Esther,” the horizon of action in idleness is limited because it is obligated to the ethos (propriety) of productivity and the conversion of potential into creativity. The novel opens with a declaration of creative intentions:

I look out the window. The yard is empty. The nannies aren’t there yet. My gaze is held by the vacant bench where they sit. I move slowly if at all. I am in no hurry. Where could I rush off to? More than anything I would like to say how I go down to the bench, and there, sequestered with the nannies, sit a toddler on my knees. I would describe how his downy hair brushes my lips, how his beautiful baby chatter infiltrates. But these things don’t happen. The bench, meanwhile, is vacant. So I sit here, I’m not hurrying. My story is written anyway, a story of passing days.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Albalach, “Adina,” *Esther and Adina*, 104.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁹ Rona Brier Garb, “Avodot Shkufot” [Transparent jobs], *Mufteuh: Ktav-Et Lexicali Le-Mahshava Politit* [Lexical Journal of Political Thought] 15 (2020): 79–100.

⁶⁰ Albalach, “Adina,” *Esther and Adina*, 138.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 245.

Adina concludes her story when she looks outside. Inside her home is the “here” of the story, a hidden and protected room of her own like that of the recluse. It is, too, an abstract space. The philologist Émile Benveniste says of the term “I” that it indicates a pure and abstract discursive presence: “What then is the reality to which *I* or *you* refers? It is solely a ‘reality of discourse,’ and this is a very strange thing. I cannot be defined except in terms of locution, not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. I signifies ‘the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I.’”⁶² Similarly we might say of “here” that it is the place where the speaker is found, the abstract birthplace accompanying the I of discourse. Temporality here is also frozen: time is arrested in a “meanwhile.” This abstract space depends on the global object of the private house. The act of seclusion doesn’t truly express avoidance of productivity but establishes an alternative abstract and global creative space: literature.

Shifting away from the aesthetic turn the novella makes, notions of work here are not abstract but painfully political and gendered. Rona Brier Garb points to the “transparent” care jobs—jobs which don’t count toward the gross national product—as one of the sources of liberal feminism’s weakness, and indeed of neoliberal capitalism.⁶³ Put simply, when mothers aren’t required for work, both they and those inactively employed nannies will have time which is currently tied up in work. Adina’s sitting beside the nannies is an inactive form of work, illustrating their working conditions and displaying the potential for a disjuncture between action and profit. Moreover, it creates a tension between the abstract “here” and “I” and the historical and political reality of “transparent labor.”

When Adina fetishizes and internalizes her idleness, she draws on a notion that idleness and retreat are a refuge from the capitalist imperative to work while remaining part of that order. Idleness is a private poetic gesture that doesn’t venture into the political: the idle potential doesn’t stay “outside.” The publicly defiant time-wasting idler (both time and leisure are wasted) retires to her private room and makes of the outside a fetish, a lack into which creative desire sinks (“the bench, meanwhile, is vacant”) and out of which writing is born. So idleness turns busy. The poetic ethos evokes a different rhythm (“I am in no hurry”), and yet still Adina takes on the caring role (grandmother), which serves as a transparent add-on enabling the parents to work. One way or another, the romantic longing for idleness which nourishes poetic-erotic action is a well-trodden path. Literature preserves the bourgeois and liberal stance as an existentialist “here” which is both abstract and fetishized. In order to construct an emancipatory horizon, we have to look in a direction beyond social and political forms of inaction: toward the strike.

IDLENESS AND THE STRIKE

An excellent example of how the concept of work today has become enlarged is the strike with workplace approval. In 2018 a strike was held in Israel to protest a law which would forbid LGBTQ couples from receiving the help of surrogate mothers. Many hi-tech companies allowed their employees “a strike day” within their terms of employment. This is the most recent stage of the coalescence of work and theology in the start-up nation: the workplace contains the strike, which

⁶² Justin Clemens, “The Role of the Shifter and the Problem of Reference in Agamben,” in *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life*, ed. Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron, and Alex Murray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 46. Garb, “Transparent Jobs.”

⁶³ Garb, “Transparent Jobs.”

is now not directed against it.⁶⁴ Striking and working together constitute a unitary political category, which despite liberal expectations is no longer connected to the claims of workers in their workplace. The workplace absorbs the politics of the state, thus marking itself out as an alternative, not only for the domestic space of leisure but also for political space.⁶⁵ The strike is connected to the privatized politics of identity and avoids addressing work conditions themselves: the struggle is for the right of LGBTQ couples to form nuclear families which will be economically productive units.⁶⁶

This event draws attention to how the strike has lost its political power, appearing as a form of idleness. Following Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin argued that the strike is a form of political inactivity aimed at altering and displacing power. The strike is connected to the nature of sovereignty, built as it is on the tension between the power constituting law and the power protecting it. Benjamin distinguishes between the political strike, which strives to introduce “a modification [into] relatively stable conditions,”⁶⁷ and the proletarian general strike. He discusses the means and ends of different forms of the strike. The aim of the political strike is to improve the working conditions of the strikers, and it is therefore seen as a legitimate form of passive violence, its purpose acceptable to the state. The monopoly on violence remains with the state as long as the strike stays within the law, as opposed to the proletarian general strike, which

declar[es] its intention to abolish the state [...] while the first form of interruption of work is violent since it causes only an external modification of labor conditions, the second, as a pure means, is nonviolent. For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work.⁶⁸

It is particularly interesting in this context to see Agamben’s messianic interpretation of the concept of the general strike. For him, the utopia of the future formulated in theological concepts as a world to come isn’t concretized in making a new world, but in turning this world into one without work and unemployment: it “revokes the factual condition and undermines it without altering its form.”⁶⁹ It seems that the political urgency of this time, not least the recent COVID-19 emergency, fits this statement of Agamben’s and reveals its meaning.

I will examine the relationship between idleness, the strike, and our time through a discussion of Tahlia Frosh’s poetry, which perhaps stems from a basic conflict with the work imperative. The interesting point here, to my mind, is that it is not only the lower classes who experience disappointment with work in the neoliberal era. Expressions of distress in literature, in the poetry and thought of the higher classes, show that among neoliberal subjects everyone feels at odds with the system. In many senses, the mostly bourgeois protest of summer 2011 was the first time that problems of the system’s legitimacy were recognized from within neoliberal neo-Zionist

⁶⁴ Anat Bein-Leibovitz and Tal Schneider, “Meha’at Ha-LaHaTaBim: Ha-Histadrut ve Ha-Haverot Ha-Gdolot Ba-Meshek Mitztarfot” [The LGBT protest: The Histadrut and large companies join in], *Globus*, July 19, 2018.

⁶⁵ Dayan, “Neo-Zionism: A Sociological Portrait.”

⁶⁶ Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons*.

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 284.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁶⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 24.

hegemony.⁷⁰ Capitalism has always promised to screw the poor and improve the lot of everyone else (and only then the poor)—the entire notion of social mobility and meritocracy depends upon this structure (and justifies it). But late neoliberalism, in Kotsko’s formulation, “has progressively transformed our world into a living hell,”⁷¹ as the prose of Albalach and the poetry of Frosh seem to suggest.

Frosh’s poems contain a demand for a political strike which would undermine the neoliberal and neo-Zionist hegemony; while drawing on the collective interest, the strike seeks to get free of it. This is a demand for history to shake off the stasis that late capitalism is imposing on it and to imagine a horizon beyond the world of work. The poem “Emergency Announcement” was written at the time of the social protests of 2011 and relates to Frosh’s demand—which is fundamental to her poetry—that people become active, in a major key, not to be left within the four cubits of depression and retreat (and poetry) but to spread out into the streets,⁷² to become a poetic-political force which can seize the historical moment: “In all the following circumstances, please immediately stop work and take to the street [...] stop working leave everything go and sit in the open air outside the home of the minister / of defense, of the treasury, the prime minister / the whole government, go sit outside / the homes of the rich of Israel, your employers, and if you chance to see them, sit in their laps.”⁷³

Frosh proposes a model of the strike involving gathering and a demonstration of inactivity: “sit in their laps.” Going out to the streets is both strike action and protest: “Stop working leave everything [...] flood the streets / of Tel Aviv and remember: what to say no to and what yes.”⁷⁴ The tone, addressing the masses as in a manifesto, is Frosh’s gesture in a major key, unlike the forms of leisure and seclusion I discussed above. In this strike the work is what we have to liberate for the good: “stop working if your workplace has pay differentials [...] if you see there are abusive managers or managers /at all, if you or someone alongside is being asked to work more than seven hours a day.”⁷⁵ The poem moves indecisively between outright rejection of work and rejection of work only when it’s exploitative (“if you see there are abusive managers or managers / at all”); between economic and political strike action.

It is a duality that also appears in the poem “On Work,” where work is presented as a sadistic master: “Our king for thousands of years already / it has a golden whip and SM sex appeal.”⁷⁶ Idleness appears here as a problem within work: “I am an unproductive worker, work. The worker’s bulletin was lost on me. / I don’t have a thick skin, smooth speech, quick hands, strong teeth, a flexible demeanor. / Here I love to relax in the sun, sky-gaze, drink wine / meet people, gossip and write poetry.”⁷⁷ Three categories of the relationship to work appear here: proper work, idleness at work, and idleness liberated from work. Despite the ceaseless pull toward idleness

⁷⁰ Dayan, “Neo-Zionism: A Sociological Portrait.”

⁷¹ Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons*, 222.

⁷² Four cubits refers to “an individual’s personal space (B. Eruvin 48a)” (*Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2006), a place of recuperation after the calamitous collapse of major collective structures of existence (trans.).

⁷³ Tahel Frosh, *Betza [Avarice]* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2014), trans. Mark Joseph, adapted from Adriana Jacobs, “Money, So Much Money: Reading Tahel Frosh’s *Avarice*,” *Dibur Literary Journal* 5 (2018) (“Poetic Currency” issue).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

(sky-gazing, gossiping, and writing poetry), the poem returns to depoliticization and to the imperatives of work, ironic indeed but nevertheless explicit:

Work, I am neither a communist / nor a socialist / and not a capitalist either / damn it! / I am in favor of work that one doesn't have to do / work that brings in a lot of money for little time spent / I am for work that everyone except one's bosses respects / I am for work that isn't going anywhere / I am for work. This is the beginning of a joke except that I am going on with it / for the sake of human existence.⁷⁸

If so, unemployment appears as an inappropriate form of life uninvolved with the concept of the political strike or the logic of work: it remains a desire that one has both to need and to spurn. This image of idleness, as both a desired horizon and designating moral ugliness, appears in "The Mountains of Spain":

It can't be true that I've only just discovered / this innate, chronic refusal / to think about money, to charge, to want / to work for it. It's a curse // I inherited from my mother / along with a taste for aesthetic pleasures / and that unholy union of wealth and beauty / not to mention a fancy for coffee I'm served / in a café, and pastries and lace dresses.⁷⁹

Idleness here appears as a relation to money: a wealthy person can be idle. The aesthetic objects—coffee, lace dresses, pastries, and bracelets⁸⁰—are related to the "curse" of capitalism, responsible for "that unholy union of wealth and beauty." Frosh distinguishes between idle and "productive" activity such as "thoughts of love and / lust and my will to breathe the air."⁸¹

The unholy union holding together Frosh's potential for movement is between activity and a concept of appropriate existence, between human action and its value, and not only its economic value. Frosh suggests a series of appropriate actions and a concept of proper and necessary work, "for the sake of human existence." These repress the desire for an aesthetic unemployment which is neither creative nor productive, and which returns again and again in her work. The wish to gaze, gossip, and eat pastries, and the attraction to a hedonistic idleness, block the possibility of political statement in the poem "Possibility of Departure": "And I looked at her and didn't say to her: / shalom, I am Tahel, let's talk / about a redistribution of the money. / I was about to strip and scream / someone would need to scream / but my mouth [lit. the mouth] was busy chewing."⁸² There is a separation here between aesthetic and compulsive activities associated with the capitalist order (pastries and chewing) and creative activity associated with the political strike and protest (poetry, sex, the naked body); between the counterfeit, connected to the creation of economic value, and the authentic, free of such value. It is a separation reminiscent of Albalach's ethos. So even within the logic of the strike, unemployment is presented largely as a problem, perhaps even as a problem the system itself creates. It is not action and potential in general that Frosh seeks to free, but the human herself, and for the sake of proper action. The potential I find in idleness is precisely in the possibility it brings to light of getting utterly free of the question of profit and the value of an action, that is to say of the union of work and a

⁷⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁹ Tahel Frosh, "Mountains of Spain," trans. Adriana X. Jacobs, "New Hebrew Writing," *World Literature Today* (May–August 2015): 88.

⁸⁰ The Hebrew word צמיד *tsamid*, "bracelet," is sonically, visually, and lexically close to צימוד *tsimud*, "union."

⁸¹ Frosh, "Mountains of Spain."

⁸² Ibid., 37–38.

respectable existence. Frosh's problematization of unemployment—something always desired and spurned—gives rise to the insight that we have to focus on what a person will be free to do, and not only on the attempt to think about the new and proper world of work. The aim isn't to modify political conditions (proper work), but to undo the prevailing circumstances for the sake of "a wholly transformed work,"⁸³ or inactivity as a poetic-political ideal.

The attempt to bring about a "more appropriate work" is perhaps connected to the failure of the political project indicated, for example, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. For them, technological change and massive migration, which have changed the face of the world, have created a productive and communicative multiplicity which late capitalism cannot control, "absolute democracy in action."⁸⁴ Human productivity will be harnessed to revolutionary political forms via communications technology. In this sense, Hardt and Negri's revolutionary subject is not a representative of the masses but an initiatory diversity which serves as a productive force in political action. "The multitude has internalized the lack of place and fixed time; it is mobile and flexible, and it conceives the future only as a totality of possibilities that branch out in every direction."⁸⁵ But what Hardt and Negri describe as a revolutionary form has been translated, ironically and tragically, into the privatized neoliberal subject who in every situation searches out possibilities of branching out. Late capitalism hitches up revolutionary means—in communications, the absence of time and place, the free will of its subjects, and even their strike action—and privatizes them within today's compulsory and enabling society, in which productivity is indeed present in everything but loses all revolutionary momentum; similarly lost are community, independent communication, and cooperative economy.

This is Srnicek and Williams' critique of what they call "folk politics," clearly seen in the protest of 2011. The weakness of this sort of politics is that it does not seem to sit well with any political program (as Frosh puts it: neither communist, nor socialist, and not capitalist either). In her unpolitical existence, which is also nonhierarchical and unrepresentative, she overlooks that strikes and demonstrations do not have a political effect but are swept aside by the neoliberal order; the weakness is inherent to a struggle without demands. Frosh relates to how the protest ebbed away in her poem "Summer Poem": "But it was that end of summer weather with autumn cold already felt."⁸⁶ The movement out to the streets, "settling" there and "sitting in the lap of capital," are nothing but an expression of how folk politics and its concepts of the strike are detached from power. Political action combines idle activity and active idleness. "This is politics transmuted into pastime—politics-as-drug-experience, perhaps—rather than anything capable of transforming society."⁸⁷

The abstract and moral discourse about "social justice" conducted in the human rights NGOs, the socialist discourse about the "power of the producer," the horizontal movements of folk politics which have no demands, like the social protest—all these fail to achieve political articulation. The problem with folk politics isn't only the lack of hierarchy and its inability to get involved in party-political power. The problem is also that the relevant political project has no need of getting involved in changing working conditions. Its interest isn't in a struggle over

⁸³ Benjamin, *Reflections*, 292.

⁸⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 410.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁸⁶ Frosh, "Summer Poem," *Betza* [Avarice], 32.

⁸⁷ Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 25.

work, but over the right to idleness. The “negativity” of the idle individual, his/her passivity and weakness of will, become central in such politics and poetics and need to be central to current and future political questions. In “The Mountains of Spain,” Frosh writes: “on Wednesday at the employment office / I’ll place my finger on a square and a red / electronic eye will scan its ridges / and a machine will print out / the words: move along / there’s no work. And I’ll be happy.”⁸⁸ Here the subject is passive in relation to the (biopolitical) bureaucratic power which registers and locates her. Moreover, the encounter is with a machine, which comes up with the only liberating and radical statement imaginable at this time: get out of here. The freeing movement throws the idle subject back into her life (and not into any new world), but this time freed. This is the (revolutionary) idea of idleness. Just because of the weakness of will of the idle person, who takes no initiative and is uninterested in work or purpose, his very figure shows that radical change in our forms of life would depend on coming to terms with the productive idea itself and transforming the passivity associated with it into political purpose. Political power needs to be built around demands which are unconnected to proletarian control of the means of production. The left-wing political struggle requires that idle and inactive time be dislodged from the control of work systems and placed within the human sphere. It isn’t human activity we have to free but its potential—that which always depends on passivity, and which today exists as various forms of idleness. When idleness (bullshit jobs, depressive seclusion, chronic unemployment) is finally released from the work imperative it will become a potential space allowing new forms of life and human purposes into view which are not part of the logic of productivity and profit. According to Srnicek and Williams, this is why we need full automation, total unemployment, and a universal basic wage. For Benjamin, this is the general strike in which “the real state of emergency” appears: humanity without work.

UNEMPLOYMENT, LOCKDOWN AND POST-CAPITALISM

Idleness, surrender, and passivity, which are a departure from the work-based order, formulate a space in which the sovereign’s coercion and the political demand of the Left coalesce in the same movement and the same image: mass unemployment funded by the state. We have seen glimpses of this vision during COVID-19. As unemployment grows, the state has to save itself by increasing support for the unemployed, at the risk of losing what is left of its legitimacy and faced by the specter of revolution, both from the Left but mostly from the populist Right. The general strike becomes an act of central government, and in this transition the potential in the idleness of an imprisoned humanity is freed up.

That is to say that the logic of work is an inadequate response, but also that of the private retreat. For the “true” idle individual (the idler in a world to come) is one whose activity is unconnected to any purpose (of self-realization) or necessity (the work imperative): there’s no difference between drawing, architecture, or sewing and eating pastries, reading, or swinging in a hammock. These activities do not need to be directed to the creation of value but have a purpose of their own. The idea of idleness points to a world in which we work without necessity, compulsion, or blame, out of distraction. In a world without work, though, idleness could finally lose its meaning and become pure potential, inactivity without otherness subjugating it. In this article I have tried to show that without an anchor in collectivity and significant political action, idleness is negated and becomes isolation or a form of creativity. Liberating human idleness

⁸⁸ Frosh, “Mountains of Spain,” 24.

means reorganizing the basic conditions of our existence, from which it arises. This movement doesn't mean making time or potential available, but freeing them. Neither does it provide a new value basis or standard of propriety. We have to transform the idleness which is at present a passing moment, full of potential but also frustration, sadness, and loneliness. Not only, then, is an adequate *new* social contract required, one which is more appropriate to the relationship between citizen and state—welfare provisions, universal housing and income, and, in particular, less work—but also a horizon in which the question of work, propriety, and organization of the social is no longer in the hands of the state, precisely because its citizens depend so absolutely on it. “We might come out from it in a condition of extreme loneliness and aggressiveness. But we might also come out with the desire for embracing, caressing and for laziness.”⁸⁹ A

⁸⁹ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Diary of the Psycho-deflation,” *Bifo* (blog), *Verso*, March 18, 2020.