

# **Wage labor**

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## WAGE LABOR

In his 1847 essay "Wage Labor and Capital," Karl Marx outlines his theory of for-wage work, a concept that is central to his entire analysis of human exploitation in capitalism. Wage labor is the process by which workers sell their labor power to capitalists for a predetermined price, usually in blocks of time such as hours or weeks. Marx wrote, "wages are the sum of money paid by the capitalist for a particular labor time or for a particular output of labor. . . . The capitalist buys this labor power for a day, a week, a month, etc."<sup>1</sup> Workers, in effect, merely auction off their days, which are then "owned" and put to someone else's use. Because workers labor only to subsist, they have no real connection to the work they do, the products they create, or the services they render:

The worker works in order to live. He does not even reckon labor as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity which he has made over to another . . . what he produces for himself is not the silk that he weaves, not the gold that he draws from the mine, not the palace that he builds. What he produces for himself is wages.

By selling their labor power, workers become commodities themselves, little different from the objects that they make. This is foundational to Marx's conception of alienation, which means people's estrangement not only from their work but also from each other—and, ultimately, from themselves.

Marx understood work as necessary for human self-actualization; labor is, in fact, the "essence" of what separates people from animals. Yet capitalism and its dependence on wage labor has warped work in such a way that humans no longer feel alive and purposeful when they do it. Wage labor is, on the contrary, deadening and repulsive because it has no meaning to those performing it other than the acquisition of a meager salary. Capitalists seek to increase profits even more by paying workers as little as possible. Marx often contrasts this grim cycle of wage labor to the supposedly "free labor" of artistic creation, but this is a questionable distinction. In Marx's idealized view, artistic labor is unfettered from the relentless pace of capitalism that demands constant toil.

More recent characterizations of art and work echo Marx. Artists are popularly believed to be "off the clock," unmonitored and unregulated agents of free will, subject only to their own whims and desires. Instead of being trapped by the grind of wage labor, artists work when they feel like it—when inspiration hits—and are reimbursed, if they are successful, for the pieces they create. There is some historical precedent to this lasting fiction. Jackson Pollock, for instance, was paid a modest monthly salary by Peggy Guggenheim. This freed him from having to hold a time-consuming job, allowing him to focus primarily on painting. For contemporary artists, however, especially those living in countries with little state support for the arts, the reality is

quite different. They do not know if their work will sell or where art materials (much less rent) will come from. Dependent upon the ever-shifting criteria and tastes of grant-making agencies and galleries, contemporary artists are often under the thumb of the market in an especially intense way. Many artists, of course, support themselves with teaching or other jobs but receive little or no compensation for the hours they spend making art.

While artists usually calculate the prices of their pieces in relation to their own time and expertise, these prices are meaningless if their work does not sell. A group active in the late 1960s called the Art Workers' Coalition suggested that all artists should receive wages, regardless of how much art they sold. This was seen as particularly urgent for artists whose works did not take the form of tangible objects and whose labor might therefore be difficult to "see." How might artists seek remuneration within an economy that values only the completed product? To put it more pointedly within the context of wage labor: What is an artist's time worth? A number of artists have broached this question as they attempt to legitimate their own work hours by proposing a system of wage labor. Although Marx saw it as the root of workers' problems, such a system could still present itself as a more appealing alternative to having artistic labor go unpaid.

The sculptor Ed Kienholz, for instance, in his *Concept Tableaux* (1963–67), sold written descriptions of large-scale works and would only execute

the pieces if the collector agreed to pay for materials and an hourly wage. Working under the logic of wage labor means that artists structure their art making within the regime of the pay scale, demarcating and accounting for the time they spend on a piece. Marx notes that an hour of labor power is a commodity, just like a pound of sugar: "one is measured by the clock, the other by the scales." The measurement of labor by the clock is manifested most visibly in Tehching Hsieh's yearlong performance, *Time Piece* (1980–81), in which Hsieh punched a time clock on the hour every hour for a full year. Hsieh mimes the empty rituals of work, turning clock punches into his only act of labor—one whose very frequency renders any other type of work impossible. Hsieh's work makes clear that the flip side of not ever going to work is, of course, that you are never *off* work, either; the workday expands to fill every minute. Who pays for these hours logged?

JBW

1. All quotations are from Marx's "Wage Labor and Capital," first presented in lectures in 1847 and published in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in 1849. A later version, edited by Friedrich Engels, clarified the distinction between "labor" and "labor power." A translation of this edited essay appears in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 203–17.