

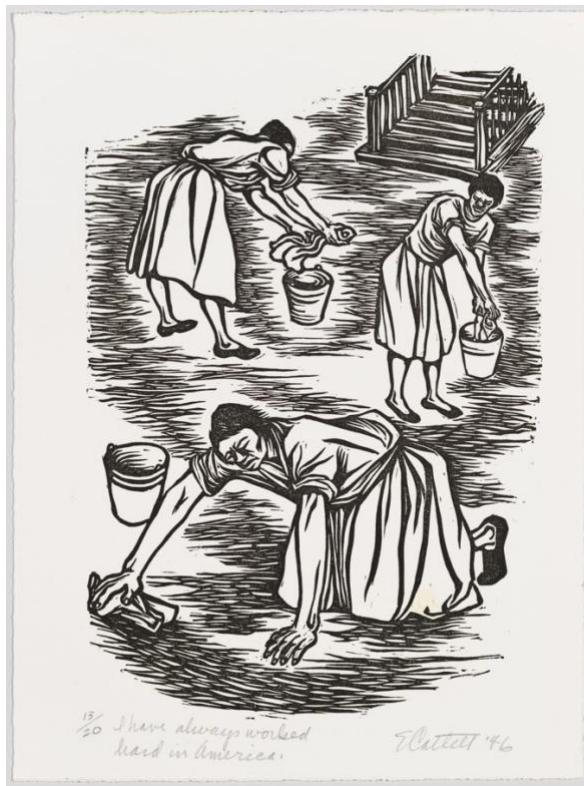
From Strike to Revolution: The Politics of Work and Work Refusal

PS 276 - Spring 2025, Bard College

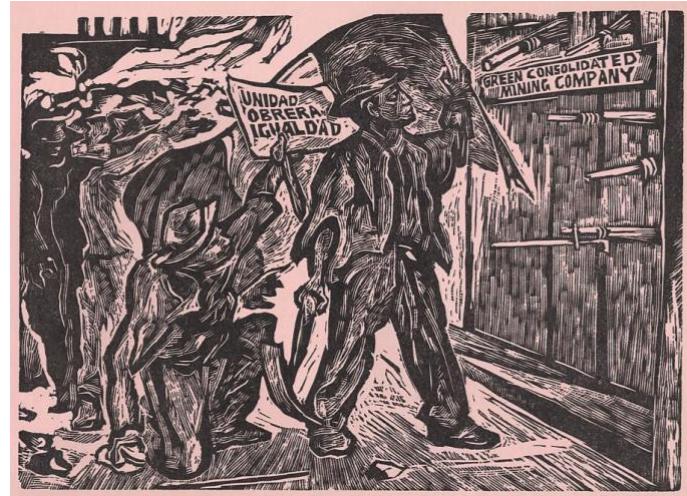
Instructor: Dr. Jess Feldman (they/them) – jfeldman@bard.edu

Course Times and Location: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30 – 2:50 pm – Olin 202

Drop-in Hours: Wednesdays 2–4 pm in Fairbarn 303; or by appointment (send an email!)



Elizabeth Catlett, “I have always worked hard in America” (1946, printed 1989)



Pablo O'Higgins, “The strike of Cananea [1906]; Mexican workers claiming equal rights with the American workers” (1960)

Most of us spend over a third of our waking lives working for a wage. Many of us also perform unwaged work, for example, taking care of ourselves and our loved ones. Does decent work provide our lives with meaning and thereby promote human flourishing? Do we work just to survive? Or is work merely a “mechanism by which individuals are incorporated into the capitalist mode of cooperation” (Kathi Weeks)? And if work is neither necessary nor a social good, how might work be transformed—or even abolished?

In this course, we explore answers to these questions by reading works of political theory, labor history, and literature, with particular attention to the critical interventions of workers’ movements, as well as feminist movements and the Black Radical Tradition. Beginning with a survey of theoretical perspectives on work, we then turn to political movements to transform our working life. Finally, we consider the effects of automation on work and the possibility of a society free from work. We will read texts by John Locke, Karl Marx, W.E.B Du Bois, Hannah Arendt, James Boggs, Angela Davis, and others.

No prerequisites required.

By the end of this course you will be (better) able to:

- Understand, analyze, compare, and evaluate works of political theory
- Summarize and reconstruct important arguments in the history of political thought
- Explain the history and theory of capitalism
- Use political theory concepts and frameworks to better understand the world around you
- Write clear, convincing, and rigorous arguments

Course Requirements and Policies

Readings

Reading on paper is more conducive to note-taking and annotation, and less conducive to distraction, than reading on a screen. I have tried to make reading on paper as easy as possible by having all readings printed in a Course Reader. **All students are required to purchase a Course Reader from Bard's campus print shop. It costs \$30, which can only be paid by cash or check.** To pick up the course reader, you should go to Central Services at the Carriage House between the hours of 9 am and 5 pm on a weekday.

You will also need to purchase two books from wherever you like to get books:

- Sayaka Murata, *Convenience Store Woman*, trans. Ginny Tapley Takemori, ISBN: 978-0-8021-2962-8 – \$17.00
- Kristin Ross, *The Commune Form*, ISBN: 9781804295311 – \$19.95

If for whatever reason you are having difficulty purchasing the reader or books, please let me know as soon as possible. The two books are also available on reserve at the Stevenson Library.

Assessments:

- **Every class** – Quotation/Comment/Question (QCQ) Points – 15% of final grade
 - For every class, students will come to class with a printed document (hand-written or typed) with: 1) a quotation of about 1-3 sentences that they found compelling, surprising, or interesting; 2) a comment they would like to contribute to the discussion and 3) a question regarding the reading. QCQ submissions will serve as anchors for our discussion of readings for the day. You have 3 “freebies” meaning **you should complete a total of at least 20 QCQs**. Guidelines for how to complete this assignment can be found after the “Course Schedule” below.
- **Tuesday, October 7** – In-Class Essay I – 10% of final grade
- **Tuesday, November 4** – Essay Workshop – 5% of final grade
- **Friday, November 7** – Essay II due – 15% of final grade
- **Monday, November 24** – Pamphlet Proposal (1000 - 1500 words) – 15% of final grade
 - Each student will write a proposal for a pamphlet/zine on a topic relating to the politics of work, like some of the pamphlets we’ve read in class on the general

strike. In this pamphlet you should explain in clear and concise language a topic we've discussed in class and apply it to a contemporary issue related to working or work refusal.

- **Tuesday, December 16** – Pamphlet and Presentation (1000 - 1500 words and no more than 12 minutes) – 25% of final grade
 - Each student, having selected a topic, will describe a contemporary phenomenon within the realm of work. These presentations should use at least one concept from course readings to analyze the issue and, based on your analysis, explain potential responses that would address the issue. The presentation will take place at a “Zine Fair” open to the public.
- Participation – 15% of final grade
 - Students are expected to participate consistently in class. This includes attending all classes, completing all assignments before class, and participating in all in-class activities.
 - There will be opportunities for every student to speak in class, and all students are expected to do so.
 - It is also important to listen closely and respectfully to what others have to say. Please share the floor. If you are speaking more than others, consider hanging back and giving other students a chance to add their voices.
 - Regular attendance is necessary to receive a participation grade for each class. You are allowed two unexcused, no-questions-asked absences over the semester. After that, any absence will cause a 1% drop in your grade (a 3% drop is the equivalent of the loss of a third of a grade, e.g., A- => B+). Students with more than five absences ordinarily cannot pass this course.

Drop-in Hours

Drop-in hours are Wednesdays, 2-4 pm in Fairbarn 303. Please come by during this time to discuss assignments, reading, or class performance, or to have a more freewheeling discussion about any of the topics we've discussed in class. I'm also available to discuss broader academic matters with you if/when it's helpful. If you are struggling in the course, or with school more broadly, please come in and explain the situation to me as soon as possible so we can work out a solution together.

If you aren't available during Drop-in Hours, just send an email to jfeldman@bard.edu to let me know you'd like to meet and we will find a mutually agreeable time.

What to do if you're having difficulties

In general, if you're having a difficulty with the class—with the way the class is structured, or with something that affects many/all students—I encourage you to talk with each other first, and present a shared case or demand to me. This is a useful skill to develop, both for college and beyond.

I'm also always happy to discuss study habits, homework management methods, etc., and to work with you to assure you get the most possible out of our class. If you are struggling psychologically

during our time together, I can help connect you with services on campus that can help — just ask.

Academic Integrity and “AI” Policy

Just like you, I am committed to Bard’s policies regarding cheating and plagiarism. This means that I must report any instances of academic dishonesty. To avoid this unpleasant outcome, please alert me if you are tempted to cheat or plagiarize so we can find another way forward for you (I don’t believe in thought crimes!). Unfortunately, many cases of academic dishonesty are inadvertent; but they cannot be excused for that reason. Be sure to educate yourself about proper citation practices (we will also go over these together) and consult with me if there is any risk of improper citation. Any student who plagiarizes all or part of a paper (including passing off work from another class as work for this class) will receive a failing grade for this course. The use of any sources, including Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, at any stage of an assignment should be documented, cited, and described in a separate cover letter. The presence of any artificially generated text in an assignment that is not cited as such will be treated as a case of plagiarism.

I strongly discourage the use of LLMs or “AI” writing tools like ChatGPT for any part of this course. Throughout the semester, we will critically discuss the effects that “labor-saving” technologies like LLMs have on those who are meant to use it, including the phenomenon of “deskilling.” As we read and discuss, I trust you will form or deepen your own opinions on these topics. But one of the skills the course is designed to help you strengthen is thinking through writing. LLMs undermine the building of this skill. If you don’t think you can write without LLM or generative “AI” tools, this is not the course for you. If you are concerned about completing the work on time, the solution is to ask for an extension or to organize with your classmates to reduce the workload for all.

Accessibility

Bard College and I are committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students. If a student with a disability wishes to request accommodations, they must register with Disability and Access Services (DAS). <https://www.bard.edu/accessibility/students/> Any information regarding a student’s disability will remain confidential. Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advanced notice to implement.

If you are already registered and have an existing accommodation plan with DAS, request that the office forward your accommodation letter to me.

If you experience any unforeseen access barriers in this course, or have disability-related or accessibility questions, please contact DAS for a confidential discussion: disabilityservices@bard.edu.

I recognize that there are multiple ways to learn, and I encourage you to discuss your learning style

and comprehension requirements with me during my office hours or by appointment.

Technology In Class

Unless you are granted an accommodation from Disability Access Services, there is no great reason to use an electronic device in this particular class. This course benefits from your active attention and participation in complex discussion. Most note-taking you do will be quick jots to support thinking “in the moment”, not for later study; free-writes are best done by hand to prevent the word-processor temptation to edit as you write instead of just writing. The temptation of distraction is also very great when a device connected to internet is in front of you. Distracted students distract other students.

All that said: Phones should be off and out of sight (unless there is some emergent exception, about which you should please speak to me beforehand.) Laptops are not banned, but neither are they encouraged, and I reserve the right to ban laptops should they prove distracting. If you choose to use a laptop, you should be on task, have your internet/WiFi turned off, and should avoid excessive typing while others are speaking.

QCQ– Adapted from Diane Silva Pimentel, Katie Tabb, Rob Cioffi, and Ann Lauterbach

We will use a process called QCQ (Quotation, Comment, Question) to support your participation in this class. For every class, you should read the assigned materials and hand in, at the beginning of class, a sheet of paper with typed or handwritten answers to the following prompts:

- **Quotation:** Select a quote from the reading that you find especially compelling, interesting, puzzling, or surprising. It should be brief (1-3 sentences). Remember to include a source in parentheses (who said it, what book or article, page number).
- **Comment(s):** These are not to offer general overviews or summaries, but your own “gut” responses to something in a text that has touched you, annoyed you, rattled you, confused you or (even) comforted you, given you pleasure, sparked your interest. Think of them as antithetical to something ChatGPT would produce. While I encourage you to make your writing spontaneous, reflective and personal, it should still be clear and articulate in style, and ready to be shared with the class. Above all, your responses should remain grounded in the relevant texts by including close observations and citations of ideas, language and other features that you find particularly salient. (Aim for 100-150 words, about the length of this bullet point.)
- **Question(s):** As you read, take note of what questions come to mind. Develop one or more thoughtful question(s) that you would like addressed in class discussion of the material. This can be a question of meaning (what does this information tell us), interpretation (how do we make sense out of this information), connection (how does this information connect to other readings and discussions in class), or evaluation (what is the accuracy or validity of the information). This should be a question about which you are genuinely curious and/or are not sure of the answer. Questions about matters of fact readily answered in the reading (e.g. “Who should “UNITE!” according to Marx and Engels?”) will not be counted as satisfactory.

Guidelines

- QCQs can be hand-written or typed
- A QCQ that meets all the criteria above will earn a check (✓). If I’m particularly impressed by your QCQ you’ll get a check-plus (✓+) which is a bit like a gold star, except better and more special.
- Every check counts as one point, with a maximum of 20 points. That means you have 3 “free passes”, i.e. you can skip 3 QCQs without penalty.

Date	Topic	Reading/Assignment	If you want to read more on this topic:
Part 1: What is work?			
Tuesday, September 2	Introduction		
Thursday, September 4	Work is toil, work is salvation	Elizabeth Anderson, <i>Hijacked</i> , Chapter 1***	Max Weber, <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i>
Tuesday, September 9	Work is the foundation of property	Locke, Second Treatise, chapter 5***	G.A. Cohen, <i>Self Ownership, Freedom, and Equality</i> ; C.B. Macpherson, <i>The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism</i>
Thursday, September 11	Work is wage labor, born in the English countryside	Ellen Meiksins Wood, <i>The Origin of Capitalism</i> , Chapter 5, p.95-115	
Tuesday, September 16	Work is exploitation	Karl Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," ***	
Thursday, September 18	Work underlies modern class conflict	Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Communist Manifesto," parts I, II, and IV ***	
Tuesday, September 23	Work is part of the "active life"	Hannah Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action"***	
		Hannah Arendt, "Prologue," <i>The Human Condition</i> ***	
Thursday, September 25	Work is part of the "active life" (cont'd)	Hannah Arendt, <i>The Human Condition</i> , Chapter IV "Action," §§26 – 31 (p. 188-230)***	
Tuesday, September 30	In-Class Essay 1		
<p>Part 2: Who are workers?</p> <p>"The lowest workers in society, even those who do work that is widely considered servile or morally suspect, can still make a claim for recognition through their standing as workers."</p> <p>–Jason Read, <i>The Double Shift</i></p>			
Thursday, October 2	The worker is part of a class	E.P. Thompson, "Preface", <i>The Making of the English Working Class</i> (excerpt) *** Vivek Chibber, <i>The Class Matrix</i> , (excerpt)***	
Tuesday, October 7	The worker is part of a class – an alternative view	William Clare Roberts, "Class in Theory, Class in Practice," <i>Crisis and Critique</i> 10.1***	Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance;" Sidney Tarrow, <i>The Language of Contention</i> , (excerpt) ***
Thursday, October 9	Are slaves not workers?	David Roediger, <i>Wages of Whiteness</i> , Chapters 2 and 3***	
Tuesday, October 14	NO CLASS – Fall Break		
Thursday, October 16	Are slaves not workers? (Cont'd)	W.E.B. Du Bois, <i>Black Reconstruction</i> , Chapters 1-3***	
Tuesday October 21	Are women not workers?	Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community"***	
Thursday October 23	Are women not workers? (cont'd)	Angela Davis, "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective"*** Marvel Cooke, "The Bronx Slave Market"***	Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode"; Joan Scott, <i>Gender and the Politics of History</i>
Interlude: Freedom at work?			
Tuesday October 28	Negative, positive, and republican freedoms	Elizabeth Anderson, <i>Private Government</i> , Chapter 2***	
Thursday October 30	How, if at all, does work offer Keiko freedom	Sayaka Murata, <i>Convenience Store Woman</i>	

Date	Topic	Reading/Assignment	If you want to read more on this topic:
Tuesday November 4		In-Class Essay Workshop	
Thursday November 6		NO CLASS	
Friday November 7		Essay 2 Due via Email	
	Part 3: Strike and Revolution	"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." – Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach"	
Tuesday, November 11	Theorizing the strike	WATCH: <i>Harlan County, USA</i> (1976), dir. Barbara Kopple Alex Gourevitch, "Quitting Work but not the Job"***	John Medearis, "On the Strike and Democratic Protest," <i>Nomos: Protest and Dissent</i>
Thursday November 13	The revolutionary general strike	Georges Sorel, "The Proletarian General Strike" Jean Jaurès, "The General Strike and Revolution"	Ralph Chaplin, "The General Strike for Industrial Freedom" [IWW pamphlet], Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike
Tuesday November 18	The general strike of enslaved people	W.E.B. Du Bois, <i>Black Reconstruction</i> , Chapter 4***	Cedric Robinson, <i>Black Marxism</i> ; J.L. Feldman, "Between General Strike and Dissensus," <i>Political Theory</i> 51.4; Nikhil Pal Singh, "Reconstructing Democracy," in <i>Black is a Country</i> ; Lawrie Balfour, "Unreconstructed Democracy and the Claim of Reparations," in <i>Democracy's Reconstruction</i>
Thursday November 20	Feminist general strike	Verónica Gago, <i>Feminist International</i> , Introduction and Chapter 1***	Maria Pia Lopez, <i>Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience and Desire</i> ; Cristina Vega, "Revisiting and Recreating the Strike," <i>Critical Times</i> 5.3
Monday November 24		Project Proposal Due	
	Part 4: After Work	"[T]o call ... traditional work values into question is not to claim that work is without value. It is not to deny the necessity of productive activity or to dismiss the likelihood that, as William Morris describes it, there might be for all living things 'a pleasure in the exercise of their energies'. It is, rather, to insist that there are other ways to organize and distribute that activity and to remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work. It is to suggest that there might be a variety of ways to experience the pleasure that we may now find in work, as well as other pleasures that we may wish to discover, cultivate, and enjoy."	-Kathi Weeks, <i>The Problem with Work</i>
Tuesday November 25	Race and Automation: Revolution of the Unemployed?	James Boggs, <i>The American Revolution</i> , introduction and chapters 1-4, 7-8	Katrina Forrester, "Capitalism and the Organization of Displacement: Selma James's Internationalism of the Unwaged," <i>Political Theory</i> https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591
Thursday November 27		NO CLASS – Thanksgiving	
Tuesday, December 2	The Promise of Automation	Jason Smith, <i>Smart Machines and Service Work</i> , Introduction - Chapter 2	
Thursday, December 4	Automation and The Servant Economy	Jason Smith, <i>Smart Machines and Service Work</i> , Chapters 5 - 7	
Tuesday, December 9	The Commune Form – Subsistence	Kristin Ross, The Commune Form – Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2	Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholt-Thomsen, The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy.
Thursday, December 11	<i>The Commune Form – Defense</i>	Kristin Ross, The Commune Form – Chapter 3 and Conclusion	
Tuesday December 16		Zine Fair	