

# XLII Colloquy of the American Weil Society

## The Politics and Ethics of Labour

April 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup>, 2024 - Université de Montréal

### SCHEDULE AND LIST OF PANELS

#### Day 1—Friday, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Room C-3061 (Carrefour des Arts et des Sciences)  
Pavillon Lionel-Groulx, 3150, rue Jean-Brillant, Montréal

#### *Words of Welcome (8:45)*

#### **PANEL 1 - WEIL AND THE MARXIST TRADITION(S) (9:00-10:30)**

Eric Springsted (Santa Fe): “What Is the Point of ‘Is There a Marxist Doctrine’?”

Samuel O'Connor Perks (University of Manchester): “Simone Weil, the Catholic Worker Movement, and contested readings of Marx”

Kenneth Novis (University of Oxford): “The Factory Journals as Worker’s Inquiry”

#### *Break (10:30-10:45)*

#### **PANEL 2 - TOWARDS A THEORY OF LABOUR? (10:45-12:15)**

Inese Radzins (California State University, Stanislaus): “Method (rather than a theory) for Considering the Politics of Labour”

Alexandre Crépeau (University of Ottawa): “Impactful and Dignified: Simone Weil and David Graeber’s Shared Ideal of Work”

Joanna Winterø (Københavns Universitet): “How much against your will?”

#### *Lunch (12:15-2:15)*

#### **PANEL 3 - LABOUR IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PRACTICE: EDUCATION, CARE, COMMUNITY (2:15-3:45)**

Alexandre Martins (Marquette University): “Insights from Weil for the Challenge of Moral Distress in Health Care”

Sarah Dunford (Catholic University of America): “Neither Left nor Right: Intertwining Community and Labour”

Ryan Poll (Northeastern Illinois University): “The Education Crisis and the Sanctity of Labor in Simone Weil’s Political Theory”

***Break (3:45-4:00)***

**PANEL 4 - *LABOUR AND SPIRITUALITY* (4:00-5:30)**

Connor Williams (Union Theological Seminary): “Labour (justice) as spiritual exercise in Weil and Process and Womanist theologians”

Rachel Matheson (McMaster University): “A Little Pile of Inert Matter: Flesh and Body in Simone Weil’s Spirituality of Work”

Noemi Faustini (Pontificia Università Gregoriana): “Simone Weil’s Concept of Slavery and Jewish Mysticism”



## Day 2—Saturday, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Room C-3061 (Carrefour des Arts et des Sciences)  
Pavillon Lionel-Groulx, 3150, rue Jean-Brillant, Montréal

### **PANEL 5 - WEIL IN CONVERSATION: HEIDEGGER, ARENDT, BATAILLE (9:00-10:30)**

Jacob Wilson (Carleton University): “Weil and Bataille on Political Community”

Robert Reed (Boston College): “Decreative Phenomenology and the Problem of Unjust Labour”

Peli Meir (University of Haifa): “The Power of Speech and Silence in Weil and Arendt”

### ***Break (10:30-10:45)***

### **PANEL 6 - CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS OF WEIL'S THOUGHT (10:45-12:15)**

Manuel Ruelas (Ind. Scholar): “Where are we standing?”

Alejandra Novoa Echaurren (Universidad de los Andes): “Simone Weil and prerequisite to dignity of labour in the actual neoliberal society”

Julia Morrow (Wheaton College): “Analyzing 21<sup>st</sup> century understandings of labour and gender through a Weillien lens”

### ***Lunch (12:15-2:15)***

### **PANEL ON SIMONE WEIL'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: FIELD NOTES FROM THE MARGINS (BENJAMIN P. DAVIS) (2:15-3:45)**

**Discussants:** Scott B. Ritner (University of Colorado Boulder)  
Sophie Bourgault (University of Ottawa)  
Mac Loftin (Harvard University)

### ***Break (3:45-4:00)***

### **AMERICAN WEIL SOCIETY BUSINESS MEETING (4:00-5:30)**

## ABSTRACTS

### **Eric Springsted: “What Is the Point of ‘Is There a Marxist Doctrine?’”**

For readers of *Oppression and Liberty*, whether in French or in English, the essay “Is There a Marxist Doctrine?” makes its appearance quite naturally, as it seems to be simply the last of a series of essays and reflections by Weil on topics for which Marxism is central. What cannot be easily discerned, however, either by reading the introduction, or because the dates of most of the essays are not given, is that six years separate the penultimate essay, “On the Contradictions of Marxism” (1937) and “Is There a Marxist Doctrine?” (1943). A lot had transpired during those years. World War II had broken out, and as a result Weil herself had undergone a peregrination from Paris to Marseille to New York to London. Most important in her case was that she had undergone a significant conversion experience in 1938. It was an experience so significant that it marks a bright, dividing line between her early works and her later works. Noting this then makes us realize that almost all of her writings on Marx were from her early period; “Is There a Marxist Doctrine?” alone is from her later period. Between 1937 and 1943 she had used virtually no ink talking about Marx or Marxism. The English translation of the *Notebooks* has only three references to him. So, it seems that she was settled in her thinking about Marx and Marxism by 1937 and had nothing more to say. She knew what his internal contradictions were; she had brushed aside Marxist thinking about revolution. But then, suddenly, amidst the flurry of activity in which she was engaged in the last six or seven months of her life, the activity that produced not only *The Need for Roots*, but the several essays related to that project, and a number of significant ones that were not, she returns to Marx in the essay “Is There a Marxist Doctrine?” What is going on? Why? What is the point of this essay? My essay intends to examine these questions. I will argue, as has Robert Chenavier, that, in one sense, it is a philosopher’s return to an earlier topic. But it is also very much a product of her late thinking, informed by the many essays from Marseilles, and with explicit references to concerns of other essays from London, such as “A War of Religions” and her “Study for a Declaration of Duties towards the Human Being” as well as “What is Sacred in Every Human Being?” At points it talks about Plato as much as it does about Marx. She insists here on the importance of the supernatural, and the distance between the necessary and the good. Weil, in the end, does not revise her opinion of Marx’s “contradictions.” But she does extol him for trying to think through a consistent materialism. His one chief mistake, was in not recognizing the role that the supernatural played as making an “infinitely small” but completely determinative difference in thinking about that materialism. And in that she marks out how she thinks about a central point in her late thought: a thoroughgoing materialism which is balanced on the fulcrum of the supernatural.

### **Samuel O'Connor Perks: “Simone Weil, the Catholic Worker Movement, and contested readings of Marx”**

In the inter-war years, several figures traversed the religious-secular threshold in the context of labour activism in North America and Europe. Faced with the experience of dislocation, work precarity, exile and social deprivation in the aftermath of World War I, there was a perceived necessity to adopt radical solutions, which placed the worker at the centre of overcoming social problems wrought by late industrial capitalism. In both secular and religious contexts, one can observe interesting points of comparison. For instance, we can compare the life trajectories of figures such as William Z Foster, whose early life experience of precarious labour led him to adopt syndicalist theories, and would eventually go on to become one of the leading party activists of the Communist Party, with that of Peter Maurin, who would face similar travails in being charged with vagrancy while searching for work during the 1920s, before adopting a very different political standpoint when founding



the Catholic Worker movement in 1933 along with Dorothy Day. While figures such as Foster, who had no explicit relation to religion, would drop syndicalism at the expense of the vanguard model of top-down party structures, activists such as Dorothy Day would praise the Industrial Workers of the World as akin to the figure of Christ as the worker. Among other things, in the United States, the 1920s and 1930s point to a fruitful interaction between religiously inspired ideas about the dignity of labour and more syndicalist-orientated approaches to social transformation. Despite the fact that Simone Weil had no concrete connection to the American horizon, the mobilisation of worker-orientated theories of labour, particularly in the context of her clashes with the Communist-dominated *Confédération générale du travail unitaire* in 1933 resonate with elements of the Catholic Worker critique of the Communist Party in the United States at the same time. And while Weil had not yet turned towards Catholicism, her early embrace of a union solution over a party-based one, and the initiative to develop a worker-based epistemology (e.g. in her thesis on Descartes (1929-1930) and her 1934 *Factory Journal*) resonate with similar attempts across the Atlantic. Yet, Simone Weil also developed a more sustained and nuanced reading of Marx than those in the Catholic Worker movement, evidenced in texts contained in posthumously published collections such as *Oppression and Liberty* (1958) and *Lectures on Philosophy* (1978). In this paper, I will initially offer a comparative reading of the arguments in favour of syndicalism in the Catholic Worker movement with Simone Weil's early articles and lectures, before offering a comparison of their respective critiques of Marx in the context of the 1930s.

### **Kenneth Novis: “The Factory Journals as Worker’s Inquiry”**

During her life, Simone Weil was in many ways an untimely figure. Her ability to identify and engage with political issues which her contemporaries sometimes became aware of only decades later speaks to her incredible foresight. It is therefore unsurprising that her work would become a topic of attention in various settings up to the present day. Assessing the complete political afterlife of Weil's ideas presents a near-impossible task and requires some discernment in choosing between the various relevant case studies. The political tradition of operaismo, born out of the labour struggles in 1960-70s Italy is one of the most interesting political traditions for researchers today, known for its radical commitment to workers' struggles in a way that uniquely privileges workers and their views. Simone Weil is not usually recognised as a precursor to this tradition, or as having anything to contribute to contemporary analyses of it. However, as I show in this paper, this view is mistaken. Firstly, it is possible to historically situate Weil's ideas in the network of resources drawn upon by the operaistas, through Antonio Negri, Mario Tronti, Paolo Virno, and Franco Fortini. In this context, Fortini's translations of her various works were disseminated throughout the Italian radical Marxist political milieu. Secondly, the presence of Weil's ideas in this milieu occasions discussion of the internal heterogeneity of operaismo, divided between the two main conceptualisations of workers' inquiry: Panzieri's and Alquati's. Although on the surface Weil's factory work essay and journals appear to place her in the Panzierian tradition, closer examination of her writings shows the vagueness of the distinction between these approaches to workers' inquiry. Thirdly, her writings provide resources which are useful for contemporary researchers of operaismo, through the prominent theme of the separation between intellectuals and workers, epitomised in the Autonomous Committee of Porto Marghera's declaration that “Workers don't enter the factory to make an enquiry, but because they are forced to.”

### **Inese Radzins: “Method (rather than a theory) for Considering the Politics of Labour”**

My paper will address a topic posed in the CFP: the nature of Weil's theory/theories of labor. I will argue that Weil problematizes the notion of theory, favoring, rather, a method. Her opting for a method suggests not only a rethinking of how one approaches a politics of labor but also allows for attending to the very real material

needs of workers. I will begin by discussing Weil's emphasis on method and her rejection of the category of theory. The problem with theorizing is that ignores both how one knows and the condition in which one is placed. Theory favors constructing ways of understanding the world—ideas, like idealism and materialism, for example. These theories generalize and ignore what really matters to Weil: the condition of any individual worker. She is clear that political theory too often ignores this very material dimension of life. At the heart of the paper is my contention that Weil “tries out” Marx's materialist method, which she claims is “untried” (even by Marx himself). “Marx's truly great idea is that in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations.” This entails a consideration of how one labors: or, in Marx's words, how one “obeys material necessities in supplying his own needs.” In other words, Weil's method calls for attention to the consideration of how one works. The difference with theory becomes clear here: method attends, whereas theory prescribes. I then suggest that Weil's “trying out” of Marx's method allows for a consideration of what theory excluded: how one knows (labor) and ascertaining material conditions. As such, it attends to politics by considering individual labor first. And that is what differentiates her from many other political theorists. For Weil, theory neutralizes the most human and most spiritual of activities, labor. In this regard, what Marx says of dead labor could equally apply to her analysis of theory: “it alienates one's “spiritual nature, his human essence, from his own body and likewise from nature outside him.” Weil's method attends to and finds space for this spiritual nature. This is evident in her radical revision of the notion of revolution, which will no longer be concerned with implementing a new movement, program, or plan. Rather, revolution would “restore to the thinking subject his proper relationship to matter by giving him back the control which it is his function to exercise over it.” In other words, true revolution would attend to the individual needs of any given laborer to live and work freely and creatively. My paper finishes by discussing what his kind of revolution might entail: a spiritual shift in our understanding of labor.

### **Alexandre Crépeau: “Impactful and Dignified: Simone Weil and David Graeber's Shared Ideal of Work”**

This paper seeks to establish links between the ideals of work present in the thought of Simone Weil (1909–1943) and of American anthropologist David Graeber (1961–2020). Although an important social, cultural, and temporal distance separates their writings, their respective descriptions of alienated labour's devastating impact similarly emphasize the importance of impactful and dignified work. By drawing this connection between the two thinkers, we wish to highlight the continued contemporary relevance of Weil's reflections on work. In *La condition ouvrière* (1951), Weil describes the terrible conditions factory workers endure in 1930s' France. Precariousness is rampant, and the organizational and temporal circumstances render almost impossible what Weil calls “methodical thought”. The factory worker is treated as less than human, as a mere means to an end—and as such, the worker loses their sense of worth (Weil 1941). From these conditions flows great psychological and social suffering, which Weil refers to as uprootedness (*déracinement*) (Weil 1940/1941; 1949). In addition to her critique of modern factory life, Weil also puts forward a positive conception of work, describing it as an activity that can enable meaningful participation in a milieu and as a force for rootedness (*enracinement*). To be so, work must be performed under specific conditions. Firstly, it must be useful. Secondly, it must enable attention, which Weil identifies as the criterion for dignity (Gabellieri 2017, 56). In *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), David Graeber describes the phenomenon of “bullshitization” of the economy, which refers to the increase of time and energy spent on needless tasks at work, as well as to the increase of useless jobs (termed “bullshit jobs”). Inseparable from the neoliberal bureaucratization of all branches of life, as well as from the cultural obsession with work, bullshit jobs lead to alienation, boredom and stress-related physical pain (Graeber 2015; 2018). Moreover, bullshit workers are prevented from feeling that they have a significant impact on their community;

they are, in the words of Simone Weil, uprooted (*déraciné*). What Graeber also emphasizes is the way in which the most useful workers—e.g. care workers—are largely devalued and must work under tedious conditions. Graeber’s *Bullshit Jobs* thus argues that work must not only be socially useful but also be performed under dignified conditions to be a vector of personal fulfillment. What the paper proposes, then, is that Simone Weil and David Graeber share a common ideal of work as an activity that must be performed under dignified conditions, and that must be useful for the community. The paper also draws out the contemporary implications of this shared commitment to meaningful work.

### Joanna Winterø: “How much against your will?”

The heading of Weil’s personal factory journal is a quote from Homer’s *Iliad* in Greek: “πόλλ’ ἀεκαζομένη, κρατερὴ δ’ ἐπικείσεται ἀνάγκη”. Translated to English it says “Much against your will, under pressure of a harsh necessity.” The quote is Hector’s prophetic speech to his wife Andromache, who sadly, as we know from the *Iliadic* narrative, together with their newborn, will face slavery after Hector’s death. Putting it in her journal suggests that Weil somewhat identified with the destiny of Andromache, her encounter with force and necessity, and her role as a slave. However, it is unclear whether Weil wrote the quote from the *Iliad* as a heading of her diary at the beginning of her work in the factory as an ideological or enthralling mantra, or as an addendum to the experience at the end. Was it an inspirational quote, which was to have a disciplinary spirit, with which she embarked on the journey into factory life? Or was it a quote retrospectively summarizing the devastating character of her experience? Throughout her writings, Weil oscillated between describing hard and strenuous work on the one hand as being ultimately fruitful and ethically good and on the other as devastating and lacerating the soul. This paper seeks to understand if there is a balance to be found, or if harshness in work is a necessary remedy to human abasement “which is the door of all wisdom?”, and if so, then how much “against your will” is enough or too much.

### Alexandre Martins: “Insights from Weil for the Challenge of Moral Distress in Health Care”

When one reads Weil’s *Front-Line Nurses Proposal*, it is easy to understand why leaders of French resistance in England during the WWII thought it was an insane project, much closer to fantasy than the reality of war. However, if you make the exercise to read this proposal as part of Weil broader thinking, you may interpret it differently; perhaps not enough to support sending nurses in the battlefield to care for soldiers from both sides of the war, but enough to understand that she was not offering an insane fantasy. In this paper, I will read this proposal from Weil’s perspective on the spirituality of labor, as developed in her work written after the *Front-Line Nurses Proposal*, *The Needs of Roots*. Weil suggested that her age had a “mission, or vocation—the creation of a civilization founded upon the spiritual nature of work.” She proposed a spirituality of labor in which each person fulfills his or her existence by working, as an activity sustained by “the very strongest possible roots in the wide universe,” in which the manual labor is united to the mental reflection, in an existence illuminated by the supernatural. If one considers her *Front-line Nurses Proposal* as the realization of professional labor from the perspective of her spirituality of labor, what firstly seems insane for every reader begins to make sense because this activity and the enormous distress related to it would be sustained by the supernatural. This plan was not a suicide plan, nor a desire for martyrdom, but rather a part of Weil’s moral conscience and imagination of a broader understanding of the working vocation of the human being. In this paper, I will argue that Weil’s moral conscience and imagination offer insights to understand and care for professionals who work under conditions of great distress, where the fragility of life and the presence of death are daily challenging them. Hence, I will consider the experience of healthcare providers, particularly nurses, who are exercising their profession, caring for the sick and welcoming death, under conditions far from ideal, in contexts of scarcity,



external pressure, and constant moral dilemmas. This professional reality leads to what the healthcare literature names moral distress, a consequence of decisions that must be made under conditions that prevent the pursuit of the best (and often the right) course of action to care for the sick. I will argue that a spirituality of labor as proposed by Weil offers an opportunity for the development of a perspective of care and a meaningful realization of the vocation of being a healthcare provider under extreme conditions to care for the sick.

### **Sarah Dunford: “Neither Left nor Right: Intertwining Community and Labour”**

In considering the applications of Simone Weil’s political thought, it can be tempting to interpret her proposals along the lines of contemporary ideologies. Considering *L'Enracinement*, we can discern both conservative and progressive elements. The community necessary for roots seems something like Burkean conservatism. On the other side of the political spectrum, Weil’s emphasis on labor and the experiences of workers aligns with the political left. As many have already argued, Weil unfailingly defies ideological labels, especially the form we find in our polarized society. Rather than falling into one of the ideological camps we expect today, Weil instead intertwines community and labor into the central element of her proposal: “a civilization based on the spirituality of work would give to Man the very strongest possible roots in the wide universe.” How does a spirituality of work produce the strongest possible roots? I argue it primarily does so through connecting us with reality and orienting our purposes toward the common good. Physical labor takes the world as it is, the material elements, and shapes it into something else. This trains us in how to encounter the world as a whole. Despite the many problems and perversions within the material world, we operate within it. But we are not subsumed by material force because the world is not merely material. Labor undertaken as consent to the world enables contemplation, an orientation by which we can see the transcendent. In this way, labor is a bridge between the immanent and transcendent, a reminder of the metaxy humankind finds itself in. Additionally, labor connects us with others. It is one step towards cultivating a sense of belonging to the community. We see this in Weil’s prescription that factory workers should see how their work contributes to community, allowing them to not only know what they are doing, but why they are doing it. By seeing the whole of how the final product enters the world and is used by other humans, workers discover a connection between themselves and others. How then, does a spirituality of work provide roots? Labor is a touchstone to reality that resists the perverting characteristics of collectivities that undermine individual thought. It helps individuals encounter reality. Yet it does not leave them in that place but leads them to labor to produce what the community needs, thus directing them to a common good and cultivating a sense of belonging to others. In a society plagued by rootlessness, the spirituality of work enables the growth of communities necessary for roots to take place.

### **Ryan Poll: “The Education Crisis and the Sanctity of Labor in Simone Weil’s Political Theory”**

At the conclusion of *The Need for Roots* (1943), Simone Weil reinforces that physical labor should be seen as brimming with “spiritual significance” (298). This insight, of course, contrasts a capitalist political economy in which physical labor is degraded and devalued at every turn. Capitalism’s devaluation of labor is manifest on multiple levels, including human labor being abstracted into “labor power”; physical labor posited as exchangeable and fungible; and physical labor culturally cast as “unskilled labor” that merits low pay, nugatory benefits, and minimal (to zero) respect. In contrast to capitalist culture, *The Need for Roots* theorizes a new political economy that could learn and break from the totalitarian regimes, death camps, and capitalist violences constitutive of modernity. In this new political economy, physical labor, Weil claims, should be at the “spiritual core” and recognized as a sacred activity. In this paper, I analyze Weil’s theory of education developed both in *The Need for Roots* and in “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God”



(1942). As I detail, Weil argues that education should not be centralized and standardized. Rather, education must assume local forms respondent to local ecologies and local economies. Whereas localized education is a foundational tenant of contemporary Right-wing politics, Weil offers a Left-wing politics rooted in localized education that is sensitive and attuned to local working-class concerns and culture.

### **Connor Williams: “Labour (justice) as spiritual exercise in Weil and Process and Womanist theologians”**

In this paper, I propose a theological framework that envisions labour and labour justice as a spiritual exercise by utilizing the works of Simone Weil and Process and Womanist theologians alongside my experiences working in various industrial settings. My paper is influenced by the work of Grassroot Christian Communities—churches, lay organizations, and academic institutions—in the United States that have been grappling with labour and labour justice as a spiritual exercise since the 1970s onwards. I begin by examining how churches, national denominational organizations, and academic institutions have responded to our current climate of worsening work and economic conditions in the United States. From there, I draw upon the works of contemporary womanist, process, and labour theologians in addition to Weil’s *The Need for Roots* and *Gravity and Grace*. I am particularly interested in drawing upon Weil’s hesitance towards a grand revolution and Monica Coleman’s conception of “Making a way out of No Way” inspired by Dolores Williams. In examining Coleman’s and Weil’s resistance to a grand revolution, I aim to propose a more grounded vision of labour and labour justice. In formulating a theological framework of labour and justice as an exercise rooted in a dialogue with Weil contemporary scholarship, I intend to conceptualize a spiritual exercise that takes seriously the contemporary grassroots organizing done by labourers in their community for the purpose of creating a more equitable world. At the end of this paper, I imagine how this scholarship might translate outside of the academy by utilizing my experiences as a factory worker, scholar, and emerging pastor.

### **Rachel Matheson: “A Little Pile of Inert Matter: Flesh and Body in Simone Weil’s Spirituality of Work”**

In the final lines of *The Need for Roots*, Simone Weil writes that physical labour must be the “spiritual core” of a well-ordered social life (NR, 298). Indeed, throughout the final pages of the text, she refers specifically to the work of the hands and the body as a cornerstone in the reconstruction of France. This emphasis on physical labour, specifically, reflects her own personal experiences as a factory worker and agricultural labourer during the grape harvest in the south of France. In her writings from this time, she contemplates the body’s relationship to industrial machinery, the pain and fatigue associated with physical labour, but also its moments of joy and insight. What was it about the bodily aspects of manual labour that she later found so crucial to social and political life? More specifically, given Weil’s deep ambivalence toward the body, why is it given such a prominent place in her final vision of labour? Scattered throughout her notebooks, she describes the body as a “prison” and a “tomb” (FLN, 230), but also as an “indispensable intermediary” (FLN, 288) and a “lever for salvation” (FLN, 330). How are we to understand these apparently contradictory accounts of the flesh? In this paper, I will examine Weil’s view of the body through her writings on manual labour, attending especially to the religious dimensions of these questions. Rather than turning away from flesh and matter, I argue that Weil’s turn to mystical Christianity inspired a new assessment of the body through her focused attention on the Incarnation. This paper will consider Weil’s idea of a spirituality of work as a means of clarifying the role of the body in her later thought.

### Noemi Faustini: “Simone Weil’s Concept of Slavery and Jewish Mysticism”

Simone Weil's *Œuvre*, much like her personality, encompasses an array of theories, subtleties, and paradoxes. This writing style of Weil emphasizes the deep humanity of an author who consistently embraced the inherent contradictions of the philosophical being. The theme of labor is not excluded in this extreme symphony of colors and nuances. Her experience as a factory worker laid the groundwork for yet another multifaceted and involved theory. Her idea of labor reveals a holistic understanding that integrates the physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of the human condition. ‘Esclave inutile,’ writes Simone Weil, after working in factories, ‘ce qui force le maître à se faire l’esclave de son esclave, à l’aimer. The paper will examine the concept of slavery as both a social and internal prototype within the decreative process. Inherent to the worker, slavery is identified as an oppressive condition within the labor system. Simultaneously, it is seen to mirror a divine dynamic, constituting the very purpose of human existence. This self-emptying process within slavery is contained in Simone Weil's frequent citation of the *Philippians’ Hymn* by Saint Paul. Despite the well-documented influence of Saint Paul and Meister Eckhart's mysticism on Weil's philosophy, less attention has been given to the possible impact of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah on the idea of withdrawal between God and man. However, what does the concept of self-emptying consist of? Is the decreative condition of the slave authentically compatible with Jewish mysticism? And how was she exposed to this spiritual current? This paper will explore these questions to understand better the complex idea that slavery’s nothingness constitutes the fundamental condition for the most genuine connection with the essence of God. Therefore, before the well-known comparison with the concept of Tzimtzum (צמצום) (of Lurianic tradition, as previously discussed in Wladimir Rabi’s thesis (1978), I argue that a more substantial connection appears in the Kabbalistic ontology. The interplay of being and non-being shapes the world in a symbology that is mirrored in the human structure, enabling it to embrace nothingness within the being. This notion has been relatively continuous in the history of the Kabbalah, evolving over time within different mystical circles through the interconnected influences of esotericism, the gnostic movement, and Kabbalah in France. Hence, the initial part of this paper will present the interrelation of Simone Weil's concepts of decreation, self-emptying process, and slavery. The second section of the paper will delve into the historical evidence substantiating this potential correlation, examining how Jewish ideas reached her and the extent to which she embraced kabbalistic concepts. The final part of the paper will delineate similarities and distinctions between these kabbalistic being and Weil's concept of self-emptying slavery. This examination of various frameworks surrounding Weil's concept of slavery will contribute to the reorientation of discussions concerning the Weilian philosophy of religion.

### Jacob Wilson: “Weil and Bataille on Political Community”

The foundations of Marxist thought are challenged by a widespread disillusionment with the feasibility of revolution, which can lead us to question the purpose of critical theory. Simone Weil and Georges Bataille were two thinkers that confronted the inadequacy of Marxist revolutionary teleology and developed their own unique theories of political community in response. Weil and Bataille were 20th century French intellectuals that lived through the rise and temporary triumph of fascism, and understood the mission of theory as being in large part the protection of individual freedom against authoritarianism. While they considered Marxism inadequate to the task, they were equally critical of both liberalism and conservatism and so created eccentric models of community and social change to fill the gap they saw in contemporary social theory. Their unique approaches centred on political mobilizations of the sacred, an ephemeral category of inner (“spiritual”) and social life which leaves room for the unknown, thereby encouraging the autonomy of the individual as member of a healthy community. This article reconstructs and analyzes the political and philosophical thought of Simone Weil and Georges Bataille with a focus on their criticism of Marxist revolution in favour of the application of the sacred

into community life. The purpose of comparing these two is to study the same elusive subject from contradictory viewpoints (Weilianism 101) while making up for each other's weaknesses. Weil was often rational to the point of rigidity, while Bataille was often lost in irrational poetic impulse. Despite their differences both had similar goals and concerns; they feared authoritarianism yet saw the inadequacy of socialist revolutionary thought as it currently stood and wanted to reintroduce to the forefront the elements of human experience they thought were being ignored or suppressed by contemporary society. A full elaboration of their thought is not possible in the space of this article. Instead, its purpose will be to establish the possibility of an anti-authoritarian political theory aside from Marxism, liberalism, and conservatism and remind present-day readers of the steps these understudied thinkers took in that direction. Their thought is relevant to our time as we witness a revival of far-right elements and generally possess a similar skepticism in regards to the potential and desirability of revolution. What Weil and Bataille have to offer us is hope that we can think creatively in the face of authoritarianism.

### **Robert Reed: “Decreative Phenomenology and the Problem of Unjust Labour”**

In a late essay, Simone Weil writes that even for the laborer whose labor, at the end of a day, “almost entirely paralyzes the faculties,” labor can be “transformed into poetry” in a “way that leads to intuitive [decreative?] attention” (LPW 140). But what can it mean to transform into poetry the labor of one of the millions who are exploited, even enslaved, by a globalized economy? Expanding on Weil, I approach this question from a perspective that includes not only the laborer but also the present-day consumer who benefits from that labor, not least when it is exploitative and unjust. For Weil, a poetics of labor is also a poetics of justice. Showing how this is so, however, will require two supplements to Weil's position. What Weil means by the poetic transformation of labor seems to be the laborer's awareness of the “connection” between, on one side, the laborer and her labor, and on the other, what Weil calls the “order of the universe.” Noting that Weil's notion of an ordered universe may be a little archaic for our purposes and thus in need of revision, I argue that her “connection” can be made more robust through Heidegger's idea of relationality, which in fact he applies to the very problem of how labor can be “lived poetically.” For Heidegger, living poetically means “taking the measure” of the relations a being has to all other beings without exception, a relationality that suffices to determine any thing as the particular thing it is apart from human interests. Thus the first supplement to Weil will be an ethics of things (e.g., consumer products) that reveals their relationality through Weil's disinterested practice of attention. The fact that Heidegger is not concerned with human ethics leads to a second important supplement to Weil's poetics of labor. I point out that Weil's frequent claims for the effectiveness of attention as contact with “reality” require phenomenological backing. Since contact with the reality of the human Other as other is the point of Levinas's phenomenological reduction, I propose a modification of his reduction that incorporates Weil's practice of attention in a way that provides such a backing and at the same time makes the reduction easier to apply in cases where contact with reality involves attention to things as well as to people. I show how this refinement (1) is “poetic” in Heidegger's sense of the word, (2) frees the consumer product to become the thing it really is, independent of human interests, (3) frees the consumer from dependence on the product, and thereby (4) comprises a necessary first step toward freeing the laborer from his or her unjust labor. I end by suggesting more generally how decreative phenomenology, my refinement of Levinas's reduction via Weil, might have far-reaching implications for applying Levinas not only to the problem of unjust labor, but to postcolonial studies and environmental ethics.



### **Peli Meirs: “The Power of Speech and Silence in Weil and Arendt”**

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt cites Simone Weil claiming that “It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that Simone Weil's *La condition ouvrière* (1951) is the only book in the huge literature on the labor question which deals with the problem without prejudice and sentimentality.” This citation is meant to authorize Arendt's claim that labor and politics are two separate categories of human activity because labor corresponds to the principle of necessity while politics corresponds to the principle of freedom. It seems this separation of labor and politics also prompted Arendt to differentiate force from power: force is ruled by the necessity and limitations of materiality, while power enables freedom by using language and narrative in associating, organizing, and mobilizing action in concert, an activity which is not so limited by material factors of necessity. Power is potential, actualized only when people use language and narration to enact a concerted action, so that it can never be gathered or monopolized as weapons or technical secrets of labor can. However, it might seem a bit odd to cite Weil in support of this separation because Weil's concept of power offers a criticism of Arendt's attempt to separate force from power. Power, while separate from force, is nonetheless strongly conditioned by it: natural forces of necessity are precisely what prompts human beings to organize to survive harsh natural conditions. Hierarchies are organized to enable the efficient use of human resources against nature's threats, so force and the rigid laws of nature always affect power-as-organization. Weil's experience of affliction within the factory is an example of how force and necessity are abused in social organization to exclude workers from power by creating a condition that erodes their capacity for thinking and narrating. In my talk, I will argue that one of affliction's effects is the significant erosion of the worker's capacity to access power. By producing speechlessness and thoughtlessness, affliction significantly reduces the worker's incentive of self-narration and reflection, which is the capacity that enables concerted narrative together with others. Attention, which is meant to restore this very capacity by recognizing the afflicted as such, is then revealed as having a relationship with power: by asking “what are you going through?” one might open a window to reflection as self-narration that is the crucial first step of creating a concerted narrative for organization and power. This seems to suggest that in political theory we should think about silence and listening as much as we think about narrative and speech.

### **Manuel Ruelas: “Where are we standing?”**

In 1987, Franco Berardi Bifo wrote about the alienated labor of the soul. Just as a century earlier the submission of the bodies of workers had been established, under a domination that devalued the human world by making the value of the world of things grow, in the last 40 years we have witnessed the alienation of intellectual labor: intelligence has been subsumed into capitalist production, remodeled accordingly. This supposes in principle an unprecedented anthropological dimension. In 1934, in her *Lessons of Philosophy*, Simone Weil defined oppression in anthropological terms. By denying the Kantian principle—which affirms that man is an end in himself and not a means for the benefit of another man—oppression is the activity in which one man appropriates the time of another man, insofar as the activity that we call work transforms nature with the aim of being expropriated, alienated, and bent to the domination of man over man. In this sense, Weil affirmed that the oppressive mechanism of work takes possession of the life, body, and soul of the workers. In our time, we are witnesses to how creative, managerial, intellectual, and scientific activities have been homogenized into the general category of abstract labor. Although the division between manual and intellectual labor persists—we do not equate the exhausting pain of those who only possess the value of their bodily effort—the alienation of mental activity has transformed these workers into means that only possess the value of a handful of intellectual operations. The advent of a mass of mind workers equally subjected to the demands of capitalist production confirms the tragic tone in which Weil ended up in her last writings. If Simone Weil's hope in the workers' movements and the revolution was dismantled by the cold brutality of the war; our time—which, as Ivan Illich

affirmed—is an “era of systems” that has made man a mere provider of alienated intelligence to the “higher ends” of health, transportation, education, and so many others that extend beyond our atmosphere. Echoing Weil, Bifo, and Illich, we would have to think that, above a smart economy, a smart war system is distributed throughout the world. A war fueled by intelligence that is at the service of force, that which Weil glimpsed in the walls of Troy. What emancipatory or resistant role can Weil's reading propose in the face of the state of affairs? Weil assumed precise laws for intellectual labor, if so, what lessons can we draw in the midst of an era that celebrates artificial intelligence without taking a look at the low-intensity war that is under the curtain? In short, how to make intelligence the means of combat against the smart war system? We will say, like Weil, that it is worth asking it as we witness the catastrophe of the Earth.

### **Alejandra Novoa Echaurren: “Simone Weil and prerequisite to dignity of labour in the actual neoliberal society”**

The International Labour Organization states that decent work: “implies generating enough jobs to meet the demands of the population, but it is also an indispensable requirement that they be productive and quality jobs, and that workers occupy them in conditions of freedom, equality, security, and human dignity” (ILO, 2024). Conditions external to the subject are necessary, but more is needed to ensure less qualified workers' freedom and their consequent dignity. How can one be free if, due to a deficient education, I have neither knowledge nor virtuous habits that allow me to choose the good? How can one choose freely if one does not know what free will is and how it operates? Simone Weil recognized and advocated, already as a student, for workers' education since she knew that this was the only way for workers to assume work as a means of free and hopeful development of the human being. The French author permanently chooses experience as a starting point to rise toward theory. It is not enough to analyze social phenomena theoretically; it is necessary to put oneself in the place of the other, not only intellectually but materially, to be able to look as the other looks, to consider reality as the other lives and consider it. In this sense, even though *The Working Condition* focuses on factory work, a phenomenon of the late nineteenth century and almost the entire twentieth century, in which she participated as a worker, her theory of work is still fully valid today and, according to our judgment, is extensible to all types of work, especially the less skilled. Considering the Weillian theory would make it possible to define decent work conditions better. That is work that allows the exercise of the freedom of human beings. Without freedom, there can be no love, the sine qua non of human fulfillment. In the following exposition, we will show the need to include in the training of less qualified workers the human formation in the recognition of the good and the formation of virtues so that they can effectively be free and truly exercise their freedom at work, as a means to recreate the world and to recreate themselves.

### **Julia Morrow: “Analyzing 21<sup>st</sup> century understandings of labour and gender through a Weillien lens”**

In this paper, I am interested in examining the relationship between Weil's exploration of living labour and the contemporary discussion regarding women's labour and leisure in the private and domestic sphere. Drawing from texts such as “The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and Women's Work” by Kathleen Norris, “Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change” by Angela Garbes, and “Feminism Against Progress” by Mary Harrington, I intend to enter into the sphere of contemporary gender discourse, analyzing 21<sup>st</sup> century understandings of labour and gender through a Weillien lens. Given Weil's examination of monotony, capital's reduction of labor, and the ethical life, how best do we engage with mothering in a time of hyper-individuality and late-stage capitalism? What is one to make of the discussion around women's unpaid labour, and the hidden

cost of caregiving and homemaking, in light of Weil's examination of "dead labour"? Is demanding that unpaid work be redistributed a necessity of feminist thought, or is it missing the mark as Weil would see it, failing to properly engage with the spiritual plane of labour? In this paper, I claim that contemporary reductions of mothering and homemaking to their production value serve as another contribution to a post-religious inability to engage with labour as the spiritual, ethical center of both the individual and society at large. Labour degrades our spiritual life when the worker in question becomes altogether removed from their work, forming a transactional relationship between the worker and the work. Fresh engagement with Weil's work on labour proposes a thoughtful, attentive vision of the union between spirituality and women's labour in the background of 21<sup>st</sup> century America.



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