“Is This Not The Kind of Fasting I Have Chosen?” Simone Weil's Life and Labor

Johanna Selles-Roney

In a photograph taken of her class at the Lycee Henri IV in 1926, Simone Weil is distinguished from her male classmates by an intensity of gaze and an air of somewhat amused detachment. Weil, who graduated from the prestigious “Ecole Normale” in 1931, spent her brief thirty-four years engaged in a passionate search for truth. In many ways, she began this quest from a privileged position—the comfort of a middle-class home, parents who placed a high value on superior education, and the advantage of the best schools and teachers. She struggled with limited success to free herself from these advantages and place herself in a position to understand life from the point of view of the humblest laborer.

Weil's fascination with labor was a consistent theme in her life and consequently offers a key to understanding her thought. Her reflections on the subject are marked by the application of a philosophical method which was rooted in the nineteenth-century voluntarist, spiritueliste line of French philosophy. Labor was more than a central theoretical concern; her life demonstrated a practical fascination with the existence of an ordinary laborer, whether in industry, agriculture, or other work. She demonstrated an early interest in this theme; as a student at the Ecole Normale she wrote two published pieces on the subject. Her perseverance in understanding and experiencing manual labor overcame both physical limitations and the scepticism of those who were offended by her lack of regard for the social norms which, had she observed them, might have restricted her quest.

Theoretical Explorations, 1931-34

In the early thirties Weil developed a rudimentary theoretical framework which conditioned the direction of her later work on labor. During these years she taught at three different lycées for girls in Le Puy, Auxerre, and Roanne and also participated in the labor movement, which at that time was struggling with the question of unity. At this point she still supported a revolution which would be executed by the trade unions. This “real” revolution required workers who had appropriated knowledge and had
thereby abolished the division of labor into intellectual and manual work, which Marx had originally described. The first step towards removing this distinction was to give the workers the ability to handle language, especially written language. The workers should not have contempt for intellectual culture but should appropriate it for themselves. The true revolution implied taking possession of language, which would free workers from domination by intellectuals. According to Weil, the abolition of the degrading division between intellectual and manual work was a viable goal; to this end, she gave classes to miners on weekends in French and political economy.

During the early thirties, however, Weil became disillusioned with both the trade union movement and with party politics. In the article “Prospects” (1933), she proposed that the individual worker, as opposed to the collectivity, was the supreme value. The work of the individual could gain greater value by opposing specialization and by helping the laborer to understand “his” work. Neither the “right” nor the “left” had properly addressed the issue; the focus needed to be shifted to the worker:

Weil’s pessimistic view of the possibilities of revolution to usher in a new and just social order was based on her understanding of the failure of the Russian revolution, the defeat of the German working-class movement, and her experience with the French working-class movement. Both the American and the Russian systems had generated productive systems characterized by an oppressive bureaucracy. Marx had recognized the power of bureaucracy to oppress, particularly in the form of the bureaucratic and military machine of the state. Marx had, however, located the problem of the separation of spiritual forces of labor from manual labor in the operation of capitalist economy. By contrast, she believed that in any economic system the existence of a managerial class or a bureaucratic caste guaranteed the existence of an oppressive system, and furthermore, once a social stratum recognized that it had this kind of power, it did everything possible to preserve “that monopoly until the very foundations on which it rests have been undermined by the historical process.”Previous regimes such as feudalism, capitalism, or the Greek system, even though oppressive, seemed to be free and happy in contrast to the new form of oppression brought about by the power of war, which would give the state a role in production and consequently increase bureaucracy. The oppressive power of bureaucracy had an innate tendency to reproduce itself and to maintain its hold on society. The social order was seen as a collective structure which allowed little room for individual voluntary agency. In the face of this consuming bureaucracy, Weil claimed that our goal should be to focus on the individual as the supreme value, to oppose increasing specialization, and to give manual labor dignity. She was unclear, however, about how this change in focus could occur, given the power of the collectivity to suppress individual action. Her
understanding of the process of social change and the actions of the individual underwent further

revision after her factory experience and conversion, but the framework of her thought, namely the focus on the dignity of the individual's labor, would remain consistent throughout her life.  

An important document which emerged from this period was her “Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression” (1934). This essay was not published until after her death, but Weil and others realized the importance of what she jokingly called her “Testament.” The article “Reflections” comprised her final critique before she undertook a complete immersion in the life of a laborer. Her position, previously characterized as a rejection of immanence, included a continued grappling with the thought of Marx, which partly demonstrated the extent of his influence on her thinking, but also gave her a point of contact from which to express dissatisfaction with Marxism. 

According to Weil, Marx had failed to observe that modern techniques oppressed laborers. She accused Marx of holding to a “religious” faith in the power of technique to free humans from the curse of work. But this faith only gave employers the means to crush workers, by making them subject to historical progress. Rather than blindly believing in the power of productive forces to liberate workers from oppression, she called for a critical examination of unlimited increase in production and technical progress.

Marx's materialist method whereby “social existence is determined by the relations between man and nature established by production” was the only sound basis for historical investigation. She differed with Marx, however, in her belief that neither technical progress nor the abolition of private property would relieve oppression since “the abolition of private property would be far from sufficient in itself to prevent work in the mines and in the factories from continuing to weigh as a servitude on those who are subjected to it.” Her understanding of Marx's materialist method led her to accuse him of a failure to question how the machinery oppressed the workers, independent of the direct ownership relations and power relations in the workplace. The failure of the application of the materialist method was, therefore, situated in the absence of inquiry about the relationship between social oppression and the system of production. Marxists were correct in finding that the economic organization of social life was at the root of social oppression. However “they have failed to inquire into exactly which aspects of economic organization are
central to this connection and which are not." According to Weil, the organization of work in the form of the power relations within the workplace is distinct from the social relations of production and is a more important factor than the latter in determining the oppression of the worker.

Weil's criticism of the notions of progress and unlimited growth was directed at the optimism which was a legacy of both scientific and Enlightenment thought. Weil restated the problem by analyzing the factors which affected technical progress: the utilization of natural resources; the rationalization of labor; the coordination of effort in time; mechanization; and automation. Despite the generally held belief that progress would improve the conditions of labor, Weil cautioned that "no technique will ever relieve men of the necessity of continually adapting by the sweat of their brow, the mechanical equipment they use.

The speed of technical progress in the 1930s produced a frenzy which brought about the notion that work "might one day become unnecessary." And in the social sphere, Marx's view that the "higher stage of communism" reflected the final stage of social evolution was in fact utopian thinking. Yet revolutionaries died in pursuit of this utopian vision or the "equally utopian belief that the present system of labor could be placed by mere decree at the service of a society of free and equal men." The term revolution was meaningless, unless it would abolish social oppression. Weil believed that Marx had not carried his analysis far enough to see that the system of production in the form of large industry reduced the worker to being a "mere instrument" in the hands of employers. It was useless to hope that technical progress would alleviate the individual burden by obliterating "the double burden imposed on man by nature and society."

The relations between "man" and nature established by production had to be considered in terms of the problem of power. Once society was divided into those who commanded and those who executed, all of social life became governed by the struggle for power. Marx rested his analysis on a struggle for subsistence which Weil saw as only one factor in the larger struggle for power. To reinforce this conclusion, Weil re-read history from "primitive" cultures to "advanced" cultures and claimed that technical progress only transferred the cause of human servitude from the forces of nature to the caprices of those in power.

Despite the evidence of slavery everywhere, humans continued to dream of liberty; Marx's communism was one variation on that theme. Having a perfect ideal in mind helped one to hope for and eventually to realize a less perfect liberty. Liberty as an
ideal did not presume the abolition of necessity, since the presence of necessity in the world was tied to the need to work. For Weil the struggle against necessity gives our lives meaning and allows us to attempt to attain liberty.  

Central to her idea of free society was the use of individual mind. The definition of a free society depended on the congruence between thought and action wherein the most fully human civilization would have manual labor as its pivot, providing the individual with a feeling of worth. The relationship between thought and action would be tested during her factory experience, and cause to her re-evaluate the sources of liberty and human dignity.

In her depiction of an ideal society, work was organized in such a way that bonds between the workers were formed. The heroic model of a fisherman battling the elements and the craftsmen of the Middle Ages more closely approximated her ideal than the modern factory worker. Despite the weaknesses of the essay, she had accurately questioned the harmful effects of technology on the worker and the dangers of dependence on a belief in progress. Using Marx's materialism to focus on the problem of labor, she

Simone Weil's Life and Labor attempted to analyze the relationship between the organization of the workplace and the workers' ability to achieve a congruence between thought and action. Her spiritual path would lead her to take this initial concept of oppression and liberty and transform it by her understanding of the depths of affliction and the possibility of divine grace.

The Factory Experience, 1934-35
Weil requested a leave from teaching in 1934 to fulfill her desire to work in a factory. The problem, as she understood it, was how to reconcile the organization of industrial society with the conditions of work and life suitable to a free proletariat. Perhaps the actual experience of working conditions would suggest a solution to the problem of organization. She informed the ministry of education that she intended to study the relationship of technology to culture; a relationship that was marked by the oppression of “man by man” and “man by machine.”

She kept detailed notes of the factory experience in a journal. The most astonishing thing about the humiliation generated by the factory system was the fact that it passed largely unchallenged. By the end of her experience in the factory, her attitude had changed from submission to acceptance. This acceptance of suffering as necessary would become transformed into a spiritual exercise in the latter phase of her thought, and prepare her for the experience of being “between two realities.”

In 1941 she wrote an article entitled “Factory Work” based on her experience of factory life during 1934-35, demonstrating that the memory of the work had not faded in the intervening years. The details of factory oppression which had filled her journal in the form of quotas and hours worked were replaced by prose which reflected Weil's
spiritual phase. She had begun to analyze social life in the light of her personal belief in two distinct realities, namely an earthly and a transcendent one, and she attempted to relate the existing world to a transcendent vision.

Instead of the alienation generated by the modern workplace, a factory should “be a place where, for all the inevitability of physical and spiritual travail, working people can taste joy and nourish

themselves on it.”

In 1934 she had observed that liberty did not mean the absence of necessity, because necessity in the case of labor helped a person to exercise self-discipline and self-conquest. By 1941 she continued to believe that labor was inevitable; however, the purpose of that labor, in her new vision, was not only an inevitable aspect of necessity, but it gave the worker access to spiritual joy and nourishment.

The factory needed reform and reorganization to allow the worker to benefit from the spiritual possibilities offered by labor, without in the process being completely crushed by the factory system. Individual thought and action, an important feature of her conception of liberty in her early thought, remained a consistent theme in her writing.

**Metaxu: Between Two Realities, 1936-43**

Weil travelled to Spain to observe the Spanish Civil War but an unfortunate accident prematurely ended her stay. During 1936-37, she took another leave from teaching and used her time to reflect on the workers’ problems. Travel in Italy led to the second mystical experience where “something stronger than I compelled me for the first time to go down on my knees.”

Her writings of this period refer to Christ's suffering as the model for human suffering. This growing sense of spiritual reality did not cause her withdrawal from social and political concerns. She was, however, disappointed in the union movement and in politics; by 1938 her writing focused on subjects such as colonialism and pacifism.

While attending services at Solesmes, she had the third mystical experience, even though she had been stricken at the time with devastating headaches. The experience helped her to perceive a connection between love and affliction: “This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of divine love in the midst of affliction.”

Being broken but not crushed by the external world implied a submission to purposeful suffering. Where could the individual find purpose in the suffering of factory life? This question, which challenged Weil's new metaphysical understanding, demanded an answer which would address the daily experience of a worker.

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The last years of her life represent the final stage of the development of Weil's theology of labor characterized by necessity and affliction, but mediated by creation, beauty, and love. She wrote to a friend that she felt “an ever increasing sense of devastation, both in my intellect and in the centre of my heart, at my inability to think with truth at the same time about the affliction of men, the perfection of God, and the link between the two.”
Earthly reality, as she interpreted it, was ruled by necessity which is evidence of the absence of God. Individuals must experience a process of “decreation” which destroys the ego. By consenting to suffer one brings about the absence of God (expiatory suffering). The bringing about of the fullness of the absence of God (redemptive suffering) occurs when an innocent soul suffers affliction and submits to it. Daily life and labor on earth remained crucial to the salvific process. Throughout the last years of Weil's writing, she attempted to connect her spiritual vision with concern for the lives of ordinary laborers and the culture which surrounded them.

The acceptance of two distinct realities, immanent and transcendent, altered Weil's original belief in work as cruel slavery resulting from the fall. Work, in her later view, was imbued with dignity by means of a spiritual root—not because work was redeemed by Christ, but because work allowed the operation of grace through affliction. Work offered the opportunity to direct oneself to the good, but the organization of the workplace and the effects of management and technology could still destroy the sacred in the individual. The afflicted cried out and asked why they had to suffer, but only God could deliver the eternal part of the soul, which is that part which consents to love in the absence of God. The rest of the soul is at the mercy of other persons. An individual injured or destroyed through the actions of another can no longer aspire to the good, a situation which is a sacrilege to the sacred in a person. She believed that the workplace, as well as society, needed to recognize its obligation to remedy every ill which could potentially destroy the soul and body of any human.

In *The Need for Roots* she described work as the point of contact between this world and the world beyond. Both the agricultural and the industrial worker had access to the intermediary nature of work.

She wrote: “Consequently labor and death, if man undergoes them in a spirit of willingness, constitute a transference back into the current of supreme good, which is obedience to God.” The experience of work, carried out in an atmosphere of joy and freedom, allows the mind to develop higher forms of thought which reveal truth. Thus, Weil envisioned a civilization founded upon the spiritual nature of work. This ideal civilization would give “the very strongest possible roots in the wide universe” as opposed to a state of almost total uprootedness.

Rather than eliminate the suffering inherent in the world, Weil placed it within a model of obedience provided by antiquity. The passivity of inert matter showed perfect obedience to God, and the beauty of the world also projected “the radiance of this perfect Obedience.” In the beauty of the world, “harsh necessity becomes an object of love” leading the individual to a more perfect understanding of God. Through joy, the beauty of the world penetrates the soul, and through suffering it penetrates the body; both are required to know God. An individual must team to appreciate the “obedience of the universe to God.” A more direct and daily opportunity to suffer and practice obedience, to decreate, and allow for the descent of grace, was available to every worker through the experience of physical labor which is, in itself, a daily death.
Conclusion
The object of social reform was not the abolition of work, but rather the integration of work into a framework which offered the worker the experience of necessity and affliction. Consenting to necessity in the daily experience of work is a means of loving God and also of recognizing the universality of human suffering\textsuperscript{67} which in turn leads to love and compassion for one's neighbor and a recognition of the sacred in all humans.\textsuperscript{68}

Weil's reading of Plato underlies her understanding of divine justice and divine love. The judgment of God, which is human salvation, is revealed through human suffering. The action of supernatural grace is presupposed by the presence of love in the soul, awakened by the beauty of the world. Joan O'Donovan notes that, for Weil, “salvation by the beauty of the world is the heart of the

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Greek understanding of divine providence as we have inherited it in the thought of Plato, the Pythagoreans, and the Greek Stoics.”\textsuperscript{69} The consent to necessity and the love of God is also a recognition of the universality of human suffering.\textsuperscript{70} Although the experience of work with its supernatural locus directs one's attention to the other world, Weil integrates the power of this world, and of human community to meditate between the two. Liberty, in this sense, is not a flight from harsh necessity, but an opening of the human to the truth, which is a descent of grace. The quality of attention required for the descent of grace stands in stark contrast to the image of modern persons making their own reality, exercising their will. This contrast, based as it is on a synthesis of Platonic thought and elements of Christianity are what drew George Grant to the writings of Simone Weil, as a basis for a critique of modernity.\textsuperscript{71}

Weil's understanding of the centrality of suffering and the necessity of affliction directly affected her view of the workplace. Her vision was not anti-technological,\textsuperscript{72} but called for a responsible development of technology, in such a way that the worker could understand the process, as opposed to being a blind operator. She did not believe in infinite progress or unlimited development, and called for a critical understanding of social change.\textsuperscript{73}

Furthermore, her vision calls others to not only try to hear the cry of the afflicted, but to enter into suffering at the foot of the cross. The centrality of the theme of suffering and the image of Christ crucified places compassion at the forefront of Weil's social vision. As Simone de Beauvoir remarked, “I envied her for having a heart that could beat right across the world.”\textsuperscript{74} The type of work which offered opportunity for the experience of affliction, inverts the hierarchy of valued work, giving the assembly line worker a greater opportunity to experience divine grace than the bureaucrat, or factory owner. The absence of God from creation does, however, limit Weil's view of the possibility of redemption of all work, whether waged or otherwise. The model of Christ on the cross acts as an example of how one suffers, but offers little consolation or assurance. The gnostic basis of this vision directly countered any notions of divine
providence. There is a tension as well between the balance of a perfectly passive subject, open to the descent of grace but not exercising the will. The subject must want, yet not will, must choose but not order, and in this waiting, carry out the laboring process.

Weil called all those who labor to create a workplace and a society which valued labor as rooted in a spiritual process. The application of her vision is a return to “a consciousness of principles,” and a development of conditions necessary for the disclosure of our society which challenges “self-validating progress.” The conditions of labor can effect such a complete destruction of the soul that there is no possibility of redemption. The damage can not be limited to the hours spent in the factory, but can destroy all possibility of future redemption. Although Weil's predominant image for dispossessed labor was that of the factory worker, one might well ask whether soul-destroying labor can only be understood in relation to the modern industrial organization of labor, or whether it could also be extended to all work in oppressive conditions, ranging from the production of knowledge in academe, to the migrant worker of western societies. By undervaluing certain kinds of work, by focusing change on wage reform alone, or by underestimating the damage done when one works in conflict with one's values or conscience, the conditions of work continue to oppress the individual. But only in those who are able to be fully human can the necessary decreation take place and therefore the workplace or a society which dehumanizes people removes from them the possibility of experiencing necessity, affliction and the love of God.

The need to analyse and to reform the way a society labors is directly related to the individual's ability to be both fully human and to reach spiritual understanding. The integration of politics, society, the family, education, and work reflected how Weil connected work to the rootedness of a culture. This recognition, written as a plan for post-war reconstruction in France, was intended to rebuild society with a renewed sense of the value of manual labor. Yet both the diagnosis and the prescription for change were applicable to the other modern industrialized societies, which had lost both the potential for humanity and spirituality in the frenzy of production and "progress." Weil stood alone from the intellectual currents of her time in projecting this challenge. Her critique of Marxism enabled her to question some fundamental notions at the heart of Western culture, such as faith in science and progress, which in turn inspired an examination of the real causes of oppression. At the time, few recognized the profound nature of her analysis. Weil's own quest for transcendence shaped the nature of her inquiry and led to a vision for modern civilization that, although idealistic and flawed, attempted to restore wholeness to those broken by oppression, and dignity to those chained by injustice.
Notes

1. Isaiah 58:6. I gratefully acknowledge the comments and suggestions by Richelle Wiseman on earlier drafts.

2. Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, (New York: Schocken, 1976). Weil was one of a handful of women students at the Ecole, since the school had only allowed women to enter in 1924.

3. In this paper I use “work” and “labor” interchangeably, since Weil did not follow the distinction that Hannah Arendt explored in *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 131.

4. There is such a close link between Simone Weil's life and her theoretical development that in this article, the two will be presented together. This approach is rooted in the attempt by feminist history to recover life stories and restore the wholeness between life and theory. This approach integrates the individuals' journals, diaries, and letters as well as their formal writings.

5. See *Formative Writings 1929-1941: Simone Weil*, Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness, eds. and trans., (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 6-7. Weil was taught this line of thought by her teacher Alain, who had been influenced by Jules Lagneau, who in turn was influenced directly by Descartes, but through the revisions of Maine de Biran. Weil constantly revised her thought and this tendency, in addition to the absence of a mature body of thought, should caution the reader from making too strict an interpretation of her meaning. See also, David McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil* (New York: Posiedon Press, 1990), especially chapter 2.

6. Weil, “Concerning Perception, or the Adventure of Proteus,” and “Concerning Time,” in Libres Propos, New Series, No. 5 (1929): 237-41; and No. 8 (1929): 387-92. See Pétrement, Simone Weil, 61. Weil's interest in labor was more than theoretical; she actively sought first-hand experience of labor, digging potatoes and accompanying fishing expeditions. She was unsuited to physical labor, however, by a lack of physical dexterity and a tendency to suffer severe headaches.


8. There were two main bodies, the Confederation Generale du Travail (C. G. T.), Confederation Generale du Travail Unitaire (C.G.T.U.). Pétrement summarizes the differences between the two main unions by explaining that the C. G. T. advocated separation between political parties and trade unions, whereas the C. G. T. U., favored affiliation between the trade unions and political parties and especially the communist party. See Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, 83

Weil's activities on behalf of the unemployed townspeople at Le Puy did nothing to endear her to the school authorities. Experiences such as these and, for example, her visit to a mine during which she used an air hammer, led to a lifelong preoccupation with the impact of technology on the worker's life.


Note that Wilhelmina Van Ness observes in the preface to *Formative Writings 1929-1941* that Weil's style adheres to conventions that are now regarded as hopelessly sexist, but that in her writings “mankind” and “man” stand for all humanity. Weil refused to divide the human race along sex lines, or to extend privileges to any one except the oppressed. See Preface, xiii.


Weil, “Prospects. Are We Heading For The Proletarian Revolution?” in *Oppression and Liberty*, 14. Weil's reading of social change deserves more attention in terms of its relationship to the social thought of Durkheim and Weber, as well as Marx.


The article provoked anger from readers who were offended by her pessimism. One of those readers was Leon Trotsky who reacted sharply to Weil's criticism. Pêtrement observes, however, that there was a sharp change in Trotskyist policy in the summer of 1933 and attributes this shift to Weil's influence, see Pêtrement, *Simone Weil*, 176.


Pêtrement, *Simone Weil*, 204. In this same year Weil decided to withdraw from political action to search for a deeper analysis of oppression which would draw her to a source outside of the immanent polarities of modern France to a supernatural source. Weil's “Testament” is divided into four parts, entitled “Critique of Marxism,” “Analysis of Oppression,” “Theoretical Picture of a Free Society,” and “Sketch of Contemporary Social Life.” The first two parts are characterized by criticism and analysis and the last two sections outline Weil's ideal against which she measures the state of contemporary social life.

The Marxism which Weil criticizes is the Marxism of the European Communist parties in the 1920s and 1930s, especially that of the French Communist Party. This Marxism is called “orthodox Marxism” by Blum and Seidler, a view which was dominant during the Second International, and filtered for Weil through the canon of orthodox Marxism, such as *Capital*, *German Ideology*, *Communist Manifesto*. See Lawrence A. Blum and Victor Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 30. It should be noted that Weil's engagement with Marx is based on a reading which is selective and interpretive, a reading which Weil also applied in her understanding of history, and of the Bible, resulting in her rejection of the Old Testament and her total disdain for the Roman empire.

23 “Reflections,” 46.

24 Blum and Seidler, A Truer Liberty, 39-40.

25 Ibid., 38.


28 Ibid., 54. One could argue that Weil is creating a polemic here which is not based on an accurate reading of Marx. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx examines the situation of alienated labor, not the end of labor itself. See, The Marx-Engels Reader, Robert Tucker, ed., (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1978), 80. McLellan notes, however, that Oppression and Liberty was published before Molitor published the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. In Utopian Pessimist, McLellan observes that “the radical mind/matter dualism that she inherited from Descartes through Alain meant that any neo-Hegelian reading of Marx was unacceptable to her.” (79).

29 “Reflections,” 54.

30 Ibid., 55.

31 Ibid., 56. According to Blum and Seidler, A Truer Liberty, 49, the real difference between Marx and Weil on this point is that Marx believes that “free” labor can only take place outside of the realm of necessity, whereas for Weil, it is only when work directly faces necessity that it is free. McLellan, Utopian Pessimist, notes that the linking of Marx's materialist method with the myth of progress led her to over-simplifications. For example, she glossed over the distinction between a mode of production and a technique of production, adopted uncritically Rousseau's view of a pre-industrial golden age, and appeared “downright absurd on some of the reasons she gives for the impossibility of capitalist expansion.” 78.

32 Ibid., 56.

33 Ibid., 83. There are similarities in the way both Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt “read” human history, studying the relationship between nature, humanity, and labor from ancient to modern times. The similarities and differences between the two interpretations of history merit further research.

34 See Blum and Seidler, A Truer Liberty, 84-97. The conception of liberty which Weil developed here is rooted in a Kantian framework, in which liberty is tied to an inner quality. She appropriated Kant's sense “of moral capacity” as a source of human dignity in order to criticize what she understood as Marxism's conception of freedom. Weil's reading of liberty at this stage tried to combine Marx's view of oppression with a Kantian ethical system, a reading which Blum and Seidler attribute to her misunderstanding of the weight of dialectic in Marx and its dependence on Hegel's critique of Kant.

35 When a person works, he or she as a thinking being is in direct confrontation with nature. See Peter Winch, Simone Weil “The Just Balance”, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 101. For a description of how Weil took the Kantian notion that we must exercise freedom in our thoughts and actions and used this idea to challenge both the liberal and utilitarian traditions in Western thought, see Blum and Seidler, A Truer Liberty, 109.

36 Ibid., 106. The question remains how different Weil's view of labor is from that of Marx, since for her labor gives rise to self worth, and for Marx, labor is process of objectification of the species life wherein “man duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created.” See Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, 74.
This model was influenced by the intellectualism and independence of thought which was a legacy of her academic training. See Hellman, *Simone Weil*, 32. The tone of her utopian vision has been attributed to a combination of her extreme individualism with her extreme intellectualism. Further, McLellan traces the points of similarity with Rousseau concerning her idea of an individual sharing a pact with the universe, the contrast of slavery and freedom, the centrality of manual labor, and the role of education. She had, however, no social theory of political change, and neglected political factors such as “different state forms and the impact of, for example, electoral practices,” McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, 91.

See Hellman, *Simone Weil*, 32. Weil failed to link the mode of appropriation of surplus and the development of bureaucratic oppression; in her terminology she mixed bureaucratic class and social caste, technology and bureaucracy, and she made technocracy a new mode of production. The result is a “phenomenological account” strong in description but weak in “analysis and explanation.” McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, 82.


Pétrrement, *Simone Weil*, 204

Ibid., 205. She rented a room near the factory and began work as a power press operator. During the year she was laid off and worked in three different factories, was injured and experienced hunger, illness and exhaustion. The humiliation endured during Weil's factory experience marked her forever with the feeling of being a slave. This perception coincided with the realization that slavery was a consequence of the material conditions and machinery of work.


One day while riding on a bus, Weil realized that she felt she had no right to be there and that she felt like a slave. The depersonalization effected by the workplace had almost completely deprived her of a sense of self; see “Factory Journal,” 211. She noted that “You kill yourself with nothing at all to show for it, either a subjective result (wages) or an objective one (work accomplished), that corresponds to the effort you've put out. In that situation you really feel you are a slave, humiliated to the very depths of your being.” “Factory Journal,” 194.

After the factory experience, Weil travelled to Portugal and there had the first mystical experience on her path to Christianity. While watching a village festival Weil suddenly realized that Christianity was “pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.” See Weil, *Waiting on God*, Emma Craufurd, trans., (New York: Putnam, 1951), 66-67.


Ibid., 66.

Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 84.

See also, Little, *Simone Weil Waiting on Truth*, 1, 18. Joy is a sign that manual labor is made for us; and lowering the status of manual work in the way that a modern factory does is a sacrilege.

The most important part of the problem of work was time and rhythm. She did not advocate the elimination of monotony since tedium characterized earthly reality. Humans had been thrown out of eternity; our journey required...
this painful travel through time. Yet our vocation was to master time, and this had to be “kept inviolate” in every human. There is a parallel between uniformity and variety as it is manifest in days and seasons or in its hold on the peasant's labor. The factory removes one from this natural rhythm and leaves the worker isolated from either past or future by the ticking of a clock, which has no relationship to eternity. See Weil, “Factory Work,” 69-70.

50 See also Winch, *Simone Weil*. Blum and Seidler (*A Truer Liberty*, 179) observe that Weil's recognition through the factory experience that oppression does not necessarily lead to revolt, was a break with Hegelian tradition, which assumed the necessity of struggle against oppression as the core of historical process.

51 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 68.

52 Ibid., 68.

53 The invasion of France forced the Weil family to flee to Vichy and then to Marseille. Weil wrote constantly during this period and also fulfilled a dream to work as an agricultural laborer. The family sailed to New York in 1942, where Weil was desperately unhappy until she was able to sail to England to join the war effort. She worked for the Free French in London and wrote *The Need for Roots*. Weil became ill with tuberculosis, was hospitalized in April, and died in August of the same year. Her death is discussed elsewhere by Coles, *Simone Weil*, chapter 2, and Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 163.


58 Ibid., 221.

59 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, Arthur Wills, trans., (New York: Harper, 1971), 300. According to Blum and Seidler (*A Truer Liberty*, 192), the problem, as she saw it after her factory experience, was how to progress from total subordination to a mixture of subordination and cooperation.

60 Weil, *Need for Roots*, 300.

61 Ibid., 96.

62 Ibid., 98.

63 Ibid., 301.


65 Ibid., 449.


Ibid., 85.

Ibid., 81. See also, McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, chapter 9.

Ibid., 85.


Technological changes in the workplace have changed the conditions of labor in a way that Weil could hardly have imagined in the 1940s. Yet she did anticipate that technology's ability to free the worker was matched by its power to enslave. For an exploration of the connections between Marxism and computers, see David Lyon, “Modes of Production and Information: Does Computer Technology Challenge Marxist Analysis?” *Christian Scholars Review* 18, 3 (March 1989): 238-45.


The gnostic basis of her understanding of Christianity is explored by McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, 195-200.
