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Weekend as community, consumption and colonization: struggles over liminal time in *Two Days, One Night*

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With this major shift in the location and working lives of the population came significant changes in lifestyle and consumption—the rise of a new way of life. Days and weeks were more clearly delineated into work time and home time…This was, perhaps, the birth of the hallowed "weekend." (Florida, 2010:31)

Work in contemporary society is hidden. Work's products accumulate and fill the spaces of leisure with traces and memories of past labour. Yet work, and workers, are both necessary for this accumulation and impossible to imagine through its artefacts. The memory of workers' efforts haunts consumer products like a premonition or a limit. This invisibility of work, like the modern subject itself, seems to exist outside of time, inhabiting another kind of time than the linear progression of objects that constitute its past. Symbolically positioned as the antechamber of subjectivity itself, the body and spirit of the worker are produced and repaired over the weekend.

The weekend is a liminal, paradoxical space, an ending and a beginning of production, a place where subjects are free to be themselves, yet are faced with the anxiety of empty time to fill and are alienated by the weakening of personal ties. Bereft of strong social relations, consumer goods, atomized tokens of individualized work processes, fill the gaps left behind. These objects act as talismans against the social void they obscure, sparing us the trauma of directly facing our lack of solidarity. When the demand to help those near us confronts us in the form of a plea, an accusation, or merely the questioning gaze of a work colleague, we realize we are unprepared to meet this demand.

A growing discussion is emerging around the relationality of individuals in work contexts, the relational subject, the *people* of organizations. But what about the *time* of organizations? If the work week is the space of mundane ethics, the ethics of codes, rules and norms, of responsibilities, then the weekend has its own ethics, the messianic, liminal ethics of the sabbatical, where individuals ritualistically invoke the love behind the law. In the mythical space of work/leisure, if the work week serves for the production of goods, the weekend serves for the reproduction of society. If the work week works on standardized, linear time, the weekend comes to symbolize unstructured spontaneity. These two spheres co-constitute each other, the weekend giving meaning to the work week, which frames and nourishes the weekend. Opposed, the two times exist in a tenuous balance.

I reflect on the timing of work and leisure in response to a certain uneasiness I felt when watching the film *Two Days, One Night* by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, one Saturday afternoon, with the goal of relating the film to contemporary understandings of work and organizations. The prima facie relation was obvious — a film about a firing, a burnout, the roller coaster of contingent work, the theatre of workplace democracy faced with the brutal reality of self-interest. I combed through the many work-related themes, from the personal to the societal, from anxiety to alienation, searching for the hermeneutic key that would reveal to me the complexities of modern work as portrayed in the film. Yet a lingering question remained with me: Where is the work in this film?

I was struck, then, by the ironic fact that the film, a tour de force about working life, takes place almost entirely on the weekend. It was right there in the

title — *Two Days, One Night*. The movie begins just as the boss is leaving work, drawing us inexorably through a Saturday and Sunday that seem both endless and exhausting and yet all too quick, and ends at the beginning of the workweek. I was left with the lingering question of why a movie whose focal point is labour relations would so obviously situate the action outside of the temporality of work, even taking the title of those few moments outside of the working week.

Despite the volumes that have been written about the intensification of work and the erosion of leisure, a quick search revealed that the weekend is a largely untheorized domain, perhaps representing an off-limits area where work is considered taboo, or at best a protected space the social status of which has been won through historical struggle and the subsequent erosion of which is a source of nostalgic lamentation. Perhaps scholars of work have better things to do on a Saturday than write about the weekend. Watching a film, however, seemed a legitimate weekend activity, and I felt thus justified in using this film to enter into an exploration of the uses of leisure. Whether the film presents a welcome catharsis from the work week, or a Trojan Horse bringing workplace issues into the leisure sphere, *Two Days, One Night* seemed to offer an experiment in cinematic representation that was worth exploring.

It must be said, however, that watching this particular film is far from a leisure activity; a hard film to sit through, it enacts, through its pace, the slow but urgent ticking away toward a moment of confrontation — with one's own demons, with one's boss, and most of all with one's colleagues. Each shuffle-step of Marion Cotillard's hesitant moments of encounter presents us with the dread of a woman who must face the judgment of her peers, as she demands the reinstatement of a social bond that has long been forgotten. Should she be expected to disrupt her colleagues' hobbies, their shopping and drinking, their moments with their families, to stir up the injustice that they all face? Are her demands unfair, or just? As her colleagues ask her over the telephone or as she rings their doorbell – couldn't this wait until Monday?

A BRIEF INTERLUDE ON THE WEEKEND: TIMES AND DIVISIONS

The weekend is a modern concept, born out of the struggles of nineteenth-century British workers (Walton, 2014). The establishment of the weekend as a limitation of work hours formed part of a larger shaping of work and leisure time that became a distinctive mark of modern society. The "spatio-temporal" ordering of modern life into work and leisure spheres included negotiations about the shape of the weekend and the "disciplining" of labour time (Ebrey & Cruz, 2014). This division, according to Habermas (1981), became an important way of seeing modern life, as reflected in the separate spheres of an economic-productive "system" on the one hand, and a phenomenal "lifeworld" of intersubjective meaning on the other. The former became marked by an ever-increasing demarcation and control of time, as instituted by the imposition and regulation of clocks, whistles and other time-structuring devices, leading to a linear and "rational" approach to time. Yet, the cyclical time of "wakes and feasts" (Thompson, 1967: 76) was retained on the Sabbath, but was also seen as characteristic of archaic tradition, as well as non-western, "pre-industrial" societies (Evans-Pritchard, 1969).

The division of time into the linear time of clocks and labour, and the cyclical time of events and festivals, was itself subject to a paradox. Labour time was to be increasingly structured and disciplined, while festive time was to be unstructured and based on pleasure and enjoyment. Yet the distinction between the two itself rested on a fundamental structuring which constituted both categories. What could unstructured time consist of if it was bound to the structured whole within which it functioned as a catharsis? How can a weekend be leisure if we count down the moments until it is over? No sooner had the

division between system and lifeworld, between production and meaning, been instituted, than this division began to break down, a process described by Habermas (1981) in his discussion of the "colonization of the lifeworld".

The paradox of a period of unstructured time existing within a structured work-life system could be explained as an ideological move to mask the nature of leisure as a support for the productive system, by clothing it in a guise of personal and social freedom. If, as Laclau (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) states, hegemony is the state in which a part of a system masquerades as the whole, then ideology might be characterized by the illusion that a part of the system floats free from, sets limits to, or stands in opposition to the whole. The weekend was a time dedicated to replenishing personal energy, rebuilding family and social bonds, and preparing for the coming week. In other words, if the work week was dedicated to production, the weekend was meant for social reproduction.

The institution of the weekend allowed workers to "let off steam", largely through spending the disposable income accumulated through the week on consumption. Peggy (2001: 200) describes the alienation of working immigrants, "On the weekends, they go to the mall, where they can choose from a range of products so vast it is almost unimaginable. But work consumes them." Leisure time, far from providing a way to find one's freedom and enjoy the fruits of one's labour, becomes an integral part of the work system, supporting increased performance and keeping workers satisfied enough to remain accommodated to their working conditions:

They are either getting ready to work… working... or recuperating from work (from exhausted weekends and too short vacations to retirement). Instead of the divorce of family life and leisure consumption from work we find that most such time is still shaped by work or geared to the reproduction of labor power (Cleaver, 2005: 122)

The culture of weekend consumerism, far from a countercultural movement, positioned itself as a respite from and not a critique of workplace culture. Popular cultural movements progressively relaxed their oppositional stances to emphasize enjoyment and positive experience. As Goulding, Shankar and Elliot (2002) describe the transformation of oppositional cultures in music, "Punks, for example, adopted a highly visible and distinct code of dress and ideology which permeated everyday life. In contrast to this, rave, for the majority, is a 'weekend' culture of hedonism, sensation and escape."

In short, the "right" to the weekend was the right to a world made increasingly meaningless by its inability to locate itself in the production of common values. Personal liberty and enjoyment stood in as consolations for the lack of communal and political solidarities, consolations guarded jealously as the traces of an illusory respite from an alienation that became thereby more entrenched. Such spaces, soon seen as hedonistic "entitlements", drained the social and political legitimacy of workers' movements, which came to be seen as no longer standing for social solidarity but for self-interest. Such a situation was ripe for "reform", and the slow erosion of weekends and other spaces of personal time, half expected, drew systematic protest only from the most stalwart of activist circles.

Contemporary workers often work on weekends. Online, on their phones, from home, the barriers between system and Habermas's lifeworld, are becoming increasingly fluid. This reunification has been asymmetrical; work has invaded "life" more than the reverse, despite the proliferation of plush, colourful furniture and casual Fridays in many workplaces. Yet scholars have noticed that workers are often relaxed and enthusiastic about this reunification, and have taken to their new "entrepreneurial" roles with surprising zeal. Perhaps a growing sense of fatalism, a willingness to embrace the new "realities" of the workplace with a pragmatic spirit? Perhaps, a case of ideological capture, where discourses of dignity and equality have become eclipsed by messages exalting the free market

and individual choice? Or, perhaps, as suggested above, the division between work and leisure was always wrought by a certain persistent contradiction, a feeling of bad faith in the value of the mini-freedoms recycled and anxiously guarded each weekend, not knowing what to do until freedom magically disappears two days, one night later. If that is the fate of weekends, then perhaps working over the weekend is not such a bad idea … perhaps. But is another kind of work possible?

OUT OF TIME, OUT OF JOINT

Faced with being rejected by her colleagues, after a divisive and unfair vote set up by her manager, Sandra approaches her boss at the last moment on Friday, just in time to secure a second vote on Monday. Reticent to come in, her physical presence is nevertheless necessary, because "once he saw you, it would be impossible to refuse a second vote." Similarly, Sandra spends the weekend first telephoning, then physically appearing to face each of her colleagues, one by one, with the proposition/demand/plea that she be "reintegrated" into the social group.

The small universe Sandra traverses feels in the film like an odyssey through different islands of isolated, personal mini-worlds. Apartment complexes, corner stores, large, isolated suburban houses, the multicultural, ideologically diverse, class-divided social fabric within which Sandra is seeking reintegration seems anything but integrated. As Sandra approaches each household, neither she nor the viewer have any idea what may await. She is filled with dread at each encounter, a symptom of the lack of community between the workers.

Sandra has no arguments. She wields no institutional levers, coercive power, legitimate reasons or economic incentives. Everything seems to work against her. She simply repeats — will you vote for me? As an interruption of the system of rationality, the weekend would seem a good time in which to make such an irrational demand. Largely, however, the weekend has been filled with alternative logics.

First, some colleagues avoid her encounter, asking her to call back during the week. She struggles with spouses, who seem reluctant to cede yet another moment to a work-related activity. In the first house she visits, a man absorbedly works on his woodwork, too involved and busy, and too cash-strapped to help. After all, they have to pay university fees and cannot forgo the bonus. Similarly, a colleague quickly entering her apartment with hands full of shopping bags, dismisses Sandra off hand, saying that having left her husband she is forced to purchase all new appliances, television, washing machine, etc. … "everything". Her first sign of support comes from Timour, who is coaching a sports team. Coming off the field, Timour seems relieved to have the chance to change his decision. Perhaps not all hobbies are created equal.

Yet, by and large, those who support Sandra are those who seem themselves to be wrapped in household conflicts. Domestic violence and generational conflict mar the bread and circuses of the weekend, and flare up as Sandra appears. As she solicits an older worker washing his car with his son, the man is attacked by the latter as he tries to listen to Sandra. Injured, with Sandra wracked with guilt, he pledges his solidarity. Later, Ann, an isolated wife in a surreally elevated suburban home, invites her in, but Sandra pauses saying "I'd like to but, I have work, uh, I mean, work", referring to her continued weekend solicitations. Ann, wanting to help, fears her husband, who wants to use the money to build onto the terrace. She has to check with him, as he tears her away from the conversation. Ultimately, Ann breaks free to show her backing for Sandra. Rather than an inconvenience, these two latter individuals seem themselves to need support and respite from their home lives, and together they build the beginnings of solidarity.

Such a basis, however, is insufficient to provide Sandra with the final vote. Tellingly, the last vote she needs involves a precarious worker, of African origin, who is on a temporary contract. Differently than the home life struggles of the other, this conflict centres on work life itself, its temporariness and instability, and the struggle to demonstrate solidarity in the face of one's own precarity. Solidarity for the others had involved supporting a colleague as a respite from home life; for Alphonse, the choice is to demonstrate solidarity in sacrifice of one's own work. Yet Alphone affirms that he will support her. This decision seems decisive, because ultimately Sandra herself is faced with the choice of sacrificing Alphonse in order to keep her own job, and it is this that most immediately precipitates her leaving the organization.

The sequence of encounters Sandra passes through leads her through different visions of the weekend: from a time of shopping and hobbies, through an anguished time of domestic strife, and finally to the intersectional shared suffering of workers more marginalized than herself. Each of these encounters constitutes an interruption of the normal course of the weekend, as she interrupts the everyday with a question, escaping timidly from her lips but with the ethical force of a demand for a right. Some attempt to escape her demand: burdened with their own problems, they plead clemency; drunk and in denial, they become aggressive towards her; too busy to speak, they ask her to come back during the week. But, it seems that those also in a position of suffering are willing to meet her in this moment of disjointed time, to try to set things right.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida (1994) uses the theme of disjointed time to interrogate whether it is not exactly in such times of irregularity, of disjointedness, that the search for new forms of society could take place. The break from homogeneous linear time has a mystical quality, one that can be used to ideologically cover the stark reality of material exploitation, and can thus serve powerful interests through a strategic reversal. Yet, this break can also open a space of insulation, where the meanings of work, solidarity and collegiality can be remade. Rather than "setting time right", facing the impossibility of the present is a step toward rethinking a just society. Just as the performative break of fiction or performance, and the liminal space of the movie theatre can present a circus-show that makes us forget about our travails, or, rather, can confront us with them in a moment when our defences are down, inviting us to recreate our society out of this liminal space. As Sandra tries to patch together a social bond between the workers, phone call by agonizing phone call, the Dardenne brothers drag us, scene by scene, through the modern wasteland of the non-work world and ask us to whom we will give our solidarity on Monday morning.

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