

## Global Issues

### Human Being, Working Body, Working Day: An Introduction to Simone Weil's "Rationalisation"

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How we would like to be able to leave our soul behind with our punch card on entering the factory, and to pick it up intact at the exit!

– Simone Weil<sup>1</sup>

The text that I have translated here as "Rationalisation" is, to my knowledge, the first English version of a presentation given by Simone Weil in February 1937 and included in her complete works under the French title "*Rationalisation*." The French text is a typed manuscript based on stenographic notes taken, it seems, by one of the auditors of her talk. Those who read French will find versions of the text in Weil's *Œuvres Complètes* and in *La Condition Ouvrière*.<sup>2</sup> The variations between these texts are minor.

That "*Rationalisation*" was presented as a live event, and not published as a written text, is important both stylistically and substantively. I have tried to preserve the informal, oral character of Weil's reflections wherever this was possible without sacrificing clarity. This oral tone leads us directly into the heart of this work, which is an engaged intervention by an engaged philosopher. It is a work to be *used* by workers, and was produced by a philosopher who knew firsthand the hardships of the working life.

Not that Weil was a working-class academic; on the contrary, she came from a bourgeois family and was educated in the finest schools in France, before herself becoming a high school (*lycée*) professor. But already in her youth, Simone Weil supplemented her revolutionary reading with direct involvement in the workers' struggle. In 1928, at the age of 19, Weil contributed to the efforts of a popular university intended for young workers, and throughout her period as a professor of philosophy she remained in close contact with a number of revolutionary workers' groups. Most important for our purposes, however, is Weil's famous "factory year". From 4 December, 1934, to 22 August, 1935 – with several interruptions due to various illnesses, layoffs, and workplace accidents – Simone Weil worked as a jigsaw operator at Alsthom, as a packer with J.J. Carnaud et Forges de Basse-Indre, and finally as a milling machine operator with Renault.

On first encounter with Weil's factory year, readers may be tempted to see in her a kind of "misery tourist," entering into – and then, when it suited her, leaving – the factory milieu as a privileged outsider. We might indeed find something absurd about this factory foray if it weren't for Weil's own clear-headed thematisation of her role as an intellectual. As Weil makes clear in

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<sup>1</sup> Weil, 2017: 335.

<sup>2</sup> See Weil (1991; 2017). Weil's works are in the public domain in Canada, and *La Condition Ouvrière* is accessible online at [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/weil\\_simone/condition\\_ouvriere/condition\\_ouvriere.html](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/weil_simone/condition_ouvriere/condition_ouvriere.html) (posted February 2, 2005).

“Rationalisation,” there is a structural paradox in the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of theorising the very particular form of injustice produced by Taylorism. Rationalised labour is a kind of violence that makes it near-impossible for workers – those most directly affected by and hence most able to understand their labour conditions – to *think*. It exhausts, it overwhelms, it hyper-stimulates, it injures. Rationalisation forces workers to index their movements to those of the machine, prevents them from imposing their own rhythm onto their work, generates cadences too rapid and too mechanical to leave time for reflection and thought, and requires an exertion for which death alone may stand as a limit. (Any labourer who is not dead could have worked more: *if you have time to lean, you have time to clean*). There is nothing inherently “unthinking” about those whom society has forced into the factory; the factory employs a crushing rationality-coercion to *train* the capacity for critical thought out of its workers. Of course, it might never succeed entirely, and we have no shortage of evidence of the tenacity of self-educated workers.<sup>3</sup> Yet it would be about as absurd to claim that workers are unphilosophical as it would be unfair not to recognise that a deprivation of modes of training conducive to contemplation is simply part of what constitutes that distinctive violence to the human being known as industrial labour.

Weil herself admits that she remained nearly vegetative after a long day of work, re-entering the life of the mind only with difficulty on Sundays. Robert Linhart, a philosopher who would work on a Citroën assembly line some thirty years later, speaks of the impossibility of shutting off the factory after a day’s work – images of the assembly line, the noise of the tools, the bodily pain (Linhart, 1978).<sup>4</sup> Conversely, those whose training and relative leisure would leave them most able to theorise labour as such – for example, Marxist philosophers – do not have sufficient contact with the factory experience to produce a clear idea of its violence. An experience of this thought-destroying violence would be the condition of possibility for thinking about the destructive powers of this very violence – but cogs are not permitted to think, and non-cogs are not able to understand. Weil’s factory stint, then, is less a “tourism” than the precise stance required by the problem at hand. Leaving the factory was as much a precondition for her labour theory as was entering it in the first place.

And Weil did leave the factory, collected her reflections, elaborated them, and shared her conclusions. One such set of reflections is “Rationalisation.” When Weil delivered this presentation in 1937, the timing was propitious for a critical reflection on Taylorism and for a radical rethinking of the conditions of labour. Taylor’s seminal *Principles of Scientific Management* was released in 1911 in English and translated in 1912 into French as *Principes d’organisation scientifique des usines*.<sup>5</sup> Soon after, it was being debated by French scientists, administrators, engineers and psychologists (Taylor, 1990).<sup>6</sup> The term *taylorisme* began circulating in France in the 1920s, and the system that it designated had taken on a significant role in French factories by the time Weil was working in them.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, shortly after Weil’s factory year and shortly before she presented her critique of

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<sup>3</sup> For numerous examples from the industrial period in England, see Jonathan Rose’s (2021) *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*.

<sup>4</sup> While it is not easily accessible, there does exist an English translation: Robert Linhart (1981) *The Assembly Line*, translated by Margaret Crosland.

<sup>5</sup> For a French version which is still relatively accessible, see Frederick Winslow Taylor (1957) *La direction scientifique des entreprises*. On the publishing history of Taylor’s works in France, see Taylor (1990).

<sup>6</sup> For a good overview of these debates, see Vatin’s edition of *Organisation du travail et économie des entreprises* (Taylor, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> For more nuanced accounts of the success (and failures) of Taylorism in France in the first decades of the

Taylorism, a major political event had given her reason to be hopeful about the future of labour relations in France. In May of 1936, the *Front Populaire* – a coalition of several political parties of the French left – won a majority of seats in the French legislative elections. Their rise to power was attended by strikes and factory occupations across the country and in nearly all domains of labour. Weil believed that at least some progress had been gained via these strikes in what she calls the “moral atmosphere” – that is, the human conditions and the human experience of the working milieu – in the factories, not least because workers had won for themselves a renewed sense of their power and dignity. This was a time, then, when a maximally precise analysis of the true “moral atmosphere” of Taylorism might directly contribute to the momentum of this “extraordinary dynamism of the working classes”.<sup>8</sup>

In Weil’s analysis, Taylorism is a means of scientifically organising human beings in just the way that the industrial revolution had already been organising material things: to make them as “productive” as possible. It is a means of measuring and manipulating human gestures to maximise their efficiency. As such, human beings are, for Taylor, objects rather than subjects, which is just another way of saying that Taylorism is a managerial science concerned with the “well-being” of production rather than a moral or human science concerned with the well-being of those who produce.

While it may seem obvious to us now, Weil was among the first generation of critics of rationalisation in France to point out that this system, which presented itself as a means of reconciling the interests of capital and labour, was really just one more system of domination. In proto-Foucauldian terms, she sees that it is a power-knowledge: a studious manipulation of the working milieu to enable a scientific evaluation which, in turn, enables further and more precise manipulation. And, like Marx before her, Weil knew very well that one cannot start out an analysis of this system from the self-representation of the *patronat* – that her analysis, to refuse complacency, must be grounded in a study of the real effects of this power-knowledge on workers as living, embodied beings. As she wrote in an early draft of her talk: “If we situate ourselves in the point of view of [the workers], of their material and moral interests – as I have done – the problem appears quite differently” (Weil, 1991: 578).

Weil reverses the common tendency to think of the economy in terms of *what it can produce*, interrogating it rather from the perspective of *those who produce*. From now on, the most important question ought to be: What is it like to be a producer in these conditions of production? What do the conditions of production do to the producer producing within them?

The Marxist tradition already had an answer to this question: capitalist production alienates the worker from the surplus value created by their labour. In a word, capitalist production exploits. Weil does not deny this, but she does deny that it is a sufficient diagnosis of the ills of industrial labour. It is tempting to ask questions about profit, since they are amenable to clear calculations – a worker may make ten dollars an hour while producing a value of twenty dollars for their company, and something seems obvious about this injustice. For Weil, what is both more important and more difficult to treat is the quality of experience of the working day itself. Even if the workers were to own the factory in which they worked, even if they were to be paid a fair wage, rationalised labour

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20<sup>th</sup> century than it is possible to offer here, see, in addition to the text edited by Vatin, George G. Humphreys (1984), Francesca Tesi (2008) and Aimee Moutet (1975).

<sup>8</sup> This is a citation from an alternative draft of the conclusion of “*Rationalisation*” presented in *Écrits historiques et politiques* and translated in footnote 8 of my translation.

would remain destructive of the human person. It is a treacherous coercion-logic that could in principle outlive even a transition to socialism and prevent true liberation even under worker-owned means of production.

Perhaps Weil's greatest contribution, then, is her insistence on the actual effects of a specific organisation of labour on the human body, on the human mind, on their abilities and limits—and her insistence that human well-being should become central to socialist programs. In this connection, Weil's insistence on the “regime” of factory life is crucial.<sup>9</sup> Like a government regime, the factory is an organisation of power and domination; and like a dietary regime, it influences the quality of the bodies and minds that we have at our disposition as acting subjects in all spheres in which we do or might act. It is, in other words, largely constitutive of what we can call our agential capacities.

Weil offers us a dietetics of labour, and shows us that while the current diet of factory life makes efficient workers, it also makes miserable human beings. As Marx's 1844 Manuscripts already put it: “the current economic regime ... *perfects the worker and degrades the human*” (Marx, 2017: 17; Marx's own emphasis)<sup>10</sup>. In Weil's terms, the current organisation of factories has absolutely nothing to do with what the human being, *qua* human being, might need to flourish. It establishes the needs of production – which, in the last analysis, are *inhuman* needs – as the measure of all things, placing them above the requirements that would be revealed by any sober reflection on human bodies, human minds, human lives.

Such a perspective reveals the great irony of rationalisation: it is entirely irrational. Capitalism has promised us well-being, but has produced it, if it has produced it at all, only by sacrificing well-being itself. Weil teaches us to be on the lookout for this absurdity that constitutes the very core of our labouring activity. Her text seeks a compromise between production and happiness; I will leave open whether this is an adequate project. What seems clear, in any case, is this: a truly human rationalisation would dictate a completely different form of labour, with a completely different teleology; perhaps it would dictate that, whatever else we produce, we produce our own flourishing.

In her final texts, Simone Weil would come to suggest that labour ought to be “the spiritual core” of society.<sup>11</sup> English-speaking readers who are as yet unfamiliar with “*Rationalisation*” and similar texts from Weil's factory period might find it hard to reconcile the biting critique of factory work we have just explored with this famous spiritualisation of labour, which seems to exalt labour exactly as much as her works on the factory excoriate it. But the two ideas need not be in conflict. If we are to make labour a “spiritual” core of our society, it is clear that not just any form of labour will do. And certainly, any form of nourishing labour – one that produces, rather than destroys meaning; that emancipates, rather than enslaves our minds; that enhances, rather than limits our agential capacities – cannot look anything like Taylor's “scientific” system of surveillance, punishment and extraction. What Weil's positive image of labour is, we cannot explore here. What we can say is that already in this text, in 1937, Weil draws our attention to the fact that *we become what we frequently do*. The gestures we repeat, our stimulus-milieu, the orders we follow or give ourselves – in a word, our “regime” – determine what we are and what we are able to do. As the Marxist tradition has long pointed out, workers forced to work at the cadence of machines become like the machines to which they are enslaved. Since we spend more of our life working than in

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<sup>9</sup> The French *régime* can refer to a (governmental) regime or to a diet. It is worth keeping this in mind while reading Weil's text.

<sup>10</sup> Marx is for his part citing Buret's *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France*.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Weil's (2002a) *The Need for Roots*, and the passages on labour in Weil's (2002b) *Gravity and Grace*.

nearly any other activity, we have every reason to elevate the *quality* of our labouring activity to a central political stake, alongside more straightforwardly material demands. The “spiritualisation of labour” entails a social critique and a political program.

Have we overcome the need for such reflections in the age of the “flexible” labour regime, in the era of the “home office,” in a world in which no longer the assembly-line worker but the entrepreneur serves as the image of work as such? If I have bothered with this translation, it is because my answer is no. I will thus conclude with a note on the contemporaneity of this nearly hundred-year-old text. Since we might pride ourselves today on having surpassed Taylorism, it would be helpful to call to mind the extent to which the imperative to rationalise conduct for maximal production has been absorbed into the neoliberal logic – and not only in more obvious cases such as the brutal hyper-“rationalisation” of Amazon centres, but even in the much celebrated self-optimising entrepreneur itself.

One of the contentions of human capital theory is that to overcome the alienation diagnosed by Marx, it would suffice to see every worker not as a labourer but as the owner of an enterprise that they themselves are. Whether or not we take this thesis seriously on its own terms, it says nothing about the quality of the working day that Weil separated from alienation as a distinct problem. Indeed, the logic of human capital may well have succeeded precisely in setting the Taylorist spirit free of its factory walls and allowing it to colonise everyday human conduct. We are no longer at liberty to undertake – except at our own expense – activities that are un conducive to human capital maximisation, and hence to our competitiveness in the market economy. Conversely, the activities that we do undertake are nearly ineluctably subsumed into the teleology of productivity. The result is that “successful” neoliberal subjects seem to be about as miserable as they are capable.<sup>12</sup>

If everything we consume and everything we do – from our daily jog to our nightly meditation to our occasional vacations – either increases or decreases our human capital; if activities once conceived under the rubric of self-fulfilment are now reduced to investments in one’s own rentability; if we meticulously measure our every performance with our own smartphones, bought from the pecuniary results of our own performative personhood; and if wellness activities have shifted in function from being tools for transcending the capitalist drive for productivity to being precisely means of preventing burnout and maintaining an exploitable workforce; if, in short, we have become entrepreneurs of the self, then we have Taylorised human life as such. What Weil called the “moral” effects of Taylorism have become nearly coterminous with moral life in all of its breadth. At the risk of hyperbole: the human body itself has become a factory. And as Weil points out, being the owner of this factory is not enough to set us free.

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<sup>12</sup> For more on this paradox, and what we might do about it, see the chapter “The Ascetic Imperative: On Self-Entrepreneurship in the Market Economy”, in Tilleczeck (2022). Consider also the extensive literature on meritocracy, including Michael J. Sandel (2020) and Daniel Markovits (2019).

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