Anson Rabinbach
The Eclipse of the Utopias of Labor
The Eclipse of the Utopias of Labor
The Eclipse of the Utopias of Labor

Anson Rabinbach

Fordham University Press
New York 2018
# Contents

*Preface*  
1. From Mimetic Machines to Digital Organisms  
2. Social Energeticism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe  
3. Social Knowledge and the Politics of Industrial Accidents  
4. Neurasthenia and Modernity  
5. Psychotechnics and Politics in Weimar Germany  
6. The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich  
7. Metaphors of the Machine in the Post-Fordist Era  

*Notes*  
*Index*
My 1990 book, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books), revolves around the distinction between machines and motors as metaphors of the body at work. Modern productivism, I argue, presupposes that human society and nature are linked by the primacy and ultimate interchangeability of productive activity of the body, technology, or nature. The social imaginary of productivism is characterized by an understanding of the conversion of force or energy, an idea which first appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the premodern Newtonian universe, diverse forces (gravity, wind, water, or horses, for example) push, pull, or turn machines, generating motion. In the Helmholtzian universe, which had matured by the 1850s, force or Kraft is converted into work by motors—whether human or human-made. Unlike the metaphor of the machine, the metaphor of the motor is productivist because it rests on an industrial model of a calculable channeling of energy, converted from nature to society. Comparing the human body to a motor rather than a machine meant making it something altogether other than a conduit of force: it was a converter of energy identical to the action performed by technology or nature.

My investigation of the human motor as a figure of nineteenth-century transcendental materialism was also an attempt to elaborate on the distinction between the image of the motor and earlier representations of the working body. In that book’s conclusion, I anticipated a further study of the ways in which the metaphor of the motor lost much of its compelling power in the second half of the twentieth century, in large part because of the emergence of a different set of metaphors designed to articulate the experience
of the digital workplace and its concomitant impact on the figure of working bodies. This book takes up that challenge, but it does so indirectly because it looks at a more complex theater of operations. In essence, I now divide the history of the relationship between bodies and machines into three eras: mimetic, transcendental, and digital. At the same time, I attempt to map the metaphors of the body proper to each era onto the social utopias of labor developed in the second and undermined in the third of each of these eras. I argue that these utopias of labor were the fundamental representations that mediated between the perception and rationalization of the working body and the goals of the welfare state.

The first, mimetic relationship, is characteristic of the eighteenth century and is exemplified by the wondrous clockwork automata (androids in today’s parlance) that were capable of imitating human movements and functions with extraordinary verisimilitude. From the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, a second relationship developed: the metaphor of the motor exercised enormous explanatory and social power, regarding the body as productive in the sense that it is capable of converting energy into work. Energy became a transcendental principle, equally omnipresent in nature and society, the driving force of labor power and all other manifestations of work. Central to this development was “social energeticism,” the doctrine that saw human beings and workers in particular as creatures that are driven by energy, that drive the economy and production through energy, and that threaten the social order through fatigue. This conception was linked to a variety of utopian projects for rationalizing the worker’s body, engineering both a more perfect workplace and, through it, a more perfect society. For example, the leading Marxists of the Russian Revolution, Lenin and Trotsky, were ardent admirers of American industrial capitalism’s program of scientific management—of Taylorism and its European offshoots. Europeans were preoccupied with psychotechnics and industrial psychology as methods of reducing fatigue, not only to raise efficiency but also to reduce industrial accidents. During the interwar period, the dominant Taylorist, Soviet, and National Socialist models for the workplace became the foundations of social models linking work to both the human body and society. Convinced of the crisis in industrial productivity, the Nazis blended modernism and the cult of productivity and efficiency together with an aestheticized workplace in their Beauty of Labor program.
The metaphor of the motor reached its zenith after World War II and by the 1980s began a steep decline as the digital relationship of man to machine developed with the advent of the post-Fordist era. The growing pace of computerization after the 1960s led to a third era. In it, the metaphor of the machine ceased to be transcendental and became allegorical in Walter Benjamin’s sense that the primacy of bodily functions was now replaced by the manipulation of signs. Computerization began, as we shall see, with the attempt to effect Alan Turing’s thesis that any mathematical operation can be reproduced mechanically by algorithmic, symbolic encoding—a principle that led not only to the Taylorization of mental activity but also to the principle of simulation, since such machines could mimic the operation of any other machine, and vice versa. Debates on work and leisure became more central but by the 1980s, it had become commonplace to anticipate that computer-driven technologies would dramatically change how we work, where we work and what we really produce. Moreover, if the long nineteenth century was at bottom an era of disciplinarity, it was precisely this rigid, uniform, and authoritarian dimension of the workplace that by the year 2000 was most often accused of inhibiting productivity and lacking the necessary qualities—flexibility, autonomy, and judgment—that workers supposedly needed to succeed in the digital workplace governed by computers rather than industrial manufacturing.

The book weaves the history of representations of the body to intellectual history, the history of labor, and the history of the welfare state. It reprises and elaborates on themes addressed in *The Human Motor* by extending the time frame backward to the eighteenth century while focusing on the twentieth century up to the present. It investigates some of the most important signposts in the emergence and decline of the great utopias of labor, including Marx’s productivism, Taylorism, Communism, the Nazi Beauty of Labor program, and the discourses of the digital workplace in the later twentieth century. It asks in far greater detail how the worker was placed into a context leading from automata to digitization and was seen at once as exemplary of the human being and central to any understanding of man’s mechanized behavior and quality. Last, the book’s attention to labor itself as a figure for creating human hopes is at the core of my argument: the eclipse of work-centered utopias.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the three ages of machine metaphors—mimetic, transcendental, and digital. One focus of this chapter is Marx’s
adoption of the notion of labor-power and the accompanying change in his understanding of freedom as existing outside of and through the reduction of energy expenditure. I argue that Marx became a productivist when he imagined the utopia of labor in terms of an ever-decreasing labor-time. A similar preoccupation with determining the optimal, quantifiable, and ultimately practicable output of energy characterized the European physiologists and ergonomists who brought their innovative methods and technologies into the industrial workplace.

Chapter 2 centers on how progressive European scientists and entrepreneurs—most prominently the wealthy chemist and industrialist Ernest Solvay, the sociologist Émile Waxweiler, and two German scientists, the chemist Wilhelm Ostwald and the physiologist Max Rubner—developed the principles of “social energeticism.” They insisted that a social policy grounded in the irrefutable advances of science could stand above the interests of social classes and political imperatives. The mediating role played by social energeticism and productivism in the social imaginary of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains underappreciated throughout the history of communism and the social history of labor in the West. Indeed, social energeticism—built as it was on productivism—offered ways of directing the metaphor of the body into a transcendental representation.

Chapter 3 focuses on the battleground of the new energeticism: the industrial accident. Industrial accidents were in the forefront of state social policies that sought to compensate for the “modernity of risk.” Given the belief that responsibility for the dangers of industrial labor fell to the state, these risks could be ascertained by a proliferation of social knowledge—statistical surveys, parliamentary investigations, medical records—giving rise to new professions (such as social medicine and social hygiene) and new specializations (such as labor law, insurance law) that emerged in tandem with social reform legislation in the earliest phase of European state social policy.

Chapter 4 turns to the fragility of the human motor, most evident in the intense debates about neurasthenia which was not only identified as the chief disability of the industrial age but also charted the limits of the energy expenditure of the working body. As pathological fatigue, neurasthenia became at once a disorder and a diagnosis, and ultimately an incentive to strengthen the resistance of the will against the vicissitudes of modernity.
Chapter 5 investigates some of the professional, intellectual, and political controversies that surrounded the establishment of industrial psychology as a discipline in the Weimar Republic. The arrival of the American system of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s “scientific management” challenged European methods of production by promising higher wages and greater profits through more effective deployment of labor power. The result split the European sciences of work between those who regarded the new psychophysic as an adjunct to Taylorist disciplinary methods and those who, like Otto Lipmann, tried to mitigate the profit-driven system with a more rational and humane industrial psychology. Lipmann’s sad fate, discussed in this chapter, underscored the consequences of the Nazification of industrial policy and psychology in the 1930s.

Chapter 6 details the Beauty of Labor program developed by Hitler’s architect Albert Speer to provide Nazi productivism with an industry-centered utopianism. Increasing output would be based on aesthetics and an appeal to joy in work, without forgoing discipline or obedience. Specifically, aesthetic motifs would be woven into work in an effort to outdo a simple all-too-mechanical technocracy and the limitations of recent industrial ideas and compromises. Beauty of Labor represented the utopian side of Nazi industrial policy, choreographing the destruction of trade unions and intensification of work discipline with the ideological patina of beautified workplaces.

Chapter 7 offers some thoughts on the eclipse of the great utopias of labor and the crisis in the metaphor of the human motor brought about by widespread automation and the emergence of the digital workplace. The so-called Fordist system, introduced after World War I, guaranteed higher income, relatively secure employment, and expanding consumption levels in exchange for enduring hierarchical, rule-bound, and routinized labor. By the 1960s, however, the affluent society that was being promised to what Herbert Marcuse called the “one-dimensional man” began to develop serious liabilities. Especially in the United States, it became evident during the 1980s that the Fordist system had become dysfunctional, lacking in precisely the flexibility, judgment, and communicative skills demanded by the new digital workplace. Discipline did not disappear, but disciplinarity no longer made sense as both blue- and white-collar workers inhabited fast and furious workstations governed by computer-driven imperatives. Parallel to the
problematization of disciplinarity came the discourse of computerization, which completed the digitization and allegorization of the “body as machine” metaphor. With the eclipse of the great utopias of labor, both totalitarian and liberal democratic, the work-centered society is undergoing a major transvaluation.

This book evolved over a long period of time and was thoroughly revised in 2016. Chapter 6, “The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich,” was the earliest and in many respects the prelude to my understanding of productivism as having a history long before its adoption by the Nazis. During the 1970s I conducted a series of interviews with Albert Speer, who, perhaps inadvertently, provided me with a number of clues to trace that pre-history into the nineteenth century. I first outlined chapters 2 and 3 around the time that I was writing The Human Motor; chapters 4 and 5 were written somewhat later. Chapters 1 and 6 profited greatly from a considerable body of recent literature. An earlier version of chapter 1 was published in A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Empire, ed. Michael Sappol and Stephen R. Rice, 237–260 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing 2012). Chapter 3 was previously published in States, Social Knowledge, and the Origins of Modern Social Policies, ed. Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) 48–89. Chapter 4 was first published in Incorporations, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, 178–189 (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 1992). Chapter 6 was originally published in The Journal of Contemporary History 11, no. 4 (1976): 43–74. Chapters are reproduced by permission of the respective publishers.

This book owes its existence to the indefatigable Stefanos Geroulanos, always up for new ideas and for testing the limits of the old ones. And special thanks to Kenny Chumbley for his meticulous work on the manuscript and permissions.
The Eclipse of the Utopias of Labor