Work has always been central to modern industrial capitalism, but, at least in the “advanced” regions of the Global North, it has been radically transformed during the last forty years. Although work is, in many respects (especially in the service sector), still subject to classical forms of labour despotism, we are also witnessing such dramatic changes as: the “offshoring” of millions of jobs to the developing world; rapid automation in a variety of services and industries, which will mean the near-future technological redundancy of hundreds of millions of workers, especially in the overdeveloped societies; an epochal shift from “Fordism” to “post-Fordism,” wherein labour and its products have become increasingly “immaterial,” inasmuch as both the physical and conceptual sides of production are being taken over by computerized systems; the omnipresence of neoliberal mechanisms of financialization and marketization, algorithmically reorganizing societal relations along the lines of finely-tuned and hyper-enhanced profitability, itself reliant on now inescapable “big data” analytics; and the sequestration and capture of all aspects of the collective worker’s affective, desiring and cognitive capabilities by the overarching process of capitalist valorization, as located in the “social factory” (that is, society in general, rather than a sharply-delineated realm of “work” per se, as found in earlier social formations). In practice, what this entails is the relentless intensification of work and its instantiation with respect to virtually all types of subjectivity and social activities, from online browser use to self-branding via social media and the modulation of affect in daily life. The ubiquity of such immaterial forms of labour, and the largely invisible role they play with respect to capital accumulation, means they are mostly unheeded and, oftentimes, unremunerated. Exploitation, like alienation, is now so pervasive as to be effectively unrecognized as such, because coterminous with the everyday itself. There is, in short, no longer any domain of thought or practice “outside” the social factory.

On a more cultural and subjective level, it is universally acknowledged that work has become central to conceptions of self-worth and social status, and constitutes the primary site for the libidinal investment of affective energies in late-modern capitalism. This is, arguably, responsible for the upsurge of mass psychopathologies in recent years (epidemic rates of depression, anxiety, and panic, itself linked to widespread licit and illicit drug use – half the population is now reliant on anti-depressants; the growth of interpersonal aggression and the general coarsening of social life, including high levels of suicide amongst economically-marginalized groups; the infusion of sacrosanct principles of “competition” and “entrepreneurialism” into everyday life, as demanded by neoliberal logic; and so on). Yet, simultaneously, work itself is facing a deeply uncertain future. In response to recurrent capitalist crises of overproduction and falling profits, culminating in the 2008 financial crisis and its reverberations (which are far from over), techno-economic transformations introduced in the wake of successive business downturns has meant that the labour force is increasingly vulnerable to precarity, ever shorter-term indentureships (such as now commonplace unpaid internships), and casualization (eg. Uber drivers, AirBnB hosts). This entails lengthening hours devoted to work, fewer benefits and reduced leisure time, all part and parcel of the growing
amplification of productivity; and the geographical displacement and fragmentation of work, including the “fractalization” of experiential time itself (e.g. so-called “zero-hour” contracts systematized through smart phone apps or other platforms, as reflected in the growing legions of proletarianized digital labourers engaged in virtual piece-work scattered across far-flung physical locations). Even more ominously, a growing segment of the population is becoming “surplus to requirements” – that is, effectively excluded from the digitally-organized economy that has consolidated rapidly in the 21st-century vis-à-vis the production and distribution of essential goods and services. This ever-larger group of marginals, outcasts, and “inefficient consumers” constitutes what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has labelled “social waste,” a “new dangerous class” that must be ruthlessly categorized, monitored and corralled (especially by the prison-industrial complex), and ultimately disposed of (such as the de facto denial of health care to millions of dispossessed persons).

Paradoxically, however, such deep-rooted transformations in global capitalism also nurture socioeconomic trends and potentialities that point in the direction of a very different post-capitalist society, one that could be marked by dramatically-reduced labour time (or even the end of “work” as currently understood); a baseline measure of material abundance for all; and the radically democratic organization of both polis and economy. A recent politico-theoretical orientation known as “accelerationism,” for instance, sees the escalation of certain tendencies in late capitalist society as a way to escape its gravitational orbit, “repurposing” the very material infrastructure of capitalism itself to universally emancipatory ends, transitioning ultimately to what has been dubbed “fully automated luxury communism.” As an interim measure responding to the manifest failure of the capitalist economy to give the broad populace access to meaningful work with commensurate levels of remuneration that allow for both viable patterns of social reproduction and straightforward access to valued goods and services, accelerationists call for the establishment of a “universal basic income” (or UBI). A properly instituted UBI would give us respite from increasingly merciless market forces, and ultimately enable us to refuse the poisoned chalice of what anthropologist David Graeber labels “bullshit jobs,” so-called because they are of questionable utility in terms of the fulfilment of genuine human needs - which is to say, virtually all jobs to be found in late-capitalist society, ranging from professional dog-walkers and “human resource” managers to investment bankers.

To summarize, this course will be dedicated to historically-situated debates around work and post-work, and related topics such as how gender relates to these processes, boredom, idleness and leisure, workplace resistance, utopianism, and so forth. Professor Tracey Adams already teaches a graduate course called “The Sociology of Work” (9153) in the Sociology department at UWO, but the proposed new course would have a completely different orientation, albeit one that could nicely complement 9153. This proposed course would look at the above-mentioned phenomena primarily through the lens of Autonomist and Post-Autonomist theory, including its various precursors, offshoots, and mutations (accelerationism, speculative realism, xenofeminism, et al.), but also parallel theorizations by the Frankfurt School, Situationism, critical phenomenology, and poststructuralism.
Sources will likely include such titles as:


