

The Work Ethic: Its Origins, Legacy, and Future



Photo Credit: David Paterson

Dr. Elizabeth Anderson

Friday 2/21

3:30–5pm

Beering 1245

Reception to Follow at the 1869 Taproom in the PMU

The work ethic was invented by Puritan ministers in the 17th century. At the turn of the 20th century, sociologist Max Weber argued that it trapped workers in an “iron cage” of meaningless drudgery for the sake of interminable wealth accumulation. In the 21st century, anarchist anthropologist David Graeber has condemned it for consigning workers to “bullshit jobs.” They are only half right. At its origins, the work ethic contained principles that could be, and were, developed in both pro-worker and reactionary directions. This talk highlights the forgotten pro-worker history of the work ethic and considers its promise for today. Puritan principles offer a surprisingly astute critique of contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

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