

In Defense of Shirking in Capitalist Firms: Worker Resistance vs. Managerial Power

Political Theory

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Abstract

Shirking, the act of avoiding the demands of one's job, is generally seen as unethical. Drawing on empirical evidence from the sociology of work, I develop a normative conception of shirking as a form of worker resistance against illegitimate managerial power. In doing so, I present a new approach to the political theory of the firm, which is more adversarial and agent-centered than available alternatives. It is more adversarial as it recognizes the political value of counterproductive and disruptive behavior in capitalist firms. It is more agent-centered because it theorizes the firm from the perspective of workers, asking what *pro tanto* reasons they have to shirk. I show that shirking under the structural domination of capitalism has *diagnostic*, *agential*, and *epistemic* values. The paper contributes to the wider methodological ambition to tailor political theorizing to the positionality of social actors by shifting attention from the institutional design of the firm to the methods of worker resistance.

Keywords

firm, worker resistance, capitalism, shirking, normative political economy

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Introduction

In the third episode of the second season of the American TV series *The Office*, Michael Scott, the branch manager of the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company, leaves the office for a couple of hours and orders his employees to finalize their expense reports by the end of the day. Instead, the employees creatively find another way to spend their time during which they are contractually obligated to work. They invented the Office Olympics, a series of competitive games where office supplies are repurposed for made-up sports contests such as Flonkerton—a game in which you race with boxes of A4 papers tied to your feet (Feig 2005). From an economic theory perspective, the employees of Dunder Mifflin are shirkers despite all the fun; they disregard their occupational duties, steal time from their employers, and cause efficiency losses in the workplace.

Shirking, the act of avoiding the demands of one's job, is generally seen as unethical. At best, some think that it can be permissible if one's work is alienating or overly exploitative. Although the sociologists of work present considerable evidence that avoiding your job tasks is sometimes a form of resistance, the political potential of such counterproductive behavior is not widely acknowledged in our folk morality.¹ In this paper, I aim to develop a normative conception of shirking as a form of worker resistance against illegitimate managerial power. In doing so, I present a new approach to the political theory of the firm, which is more adversarial and agent-centered than available alternatives. It is more adversarial as it recognizes the political value of counterproductive and disruptive behavior. It is more agent-centered because it theorizes the firm from the perspective of workers, asking what *pro tanto* reasons they have for shirking.

Not everyone is as receptive to the political dimension of shirking as the sociologists of work. Economists generally explain the existence of firms by appealing to their efficiency gains and condemning counterproductive behavior (Hart 1989; Williamson 1984). Shirking is typically deemed undesirable among economists as it sacrifices efficiency for selfish interests. For some, the minimization of shirking is the firm's *raison d'être* because such organizations are uniquely effective in monitoring free-riding in team production (Alchian and Demsetz 1972; Blair and Stout 1999). Although political theorists are more open to the idea that efficiency gains can be justifiably sacrificed to realize other values such as freedom, justice, and democracy, they either remain silent about the question of shirking or agree with economists that it is undesirable (Ciepley 2013; Claassen 2022; Heath 2014; Malleon 2014; Singer 2019a).

1. See Hodson 1995; Johansson and Vinthagen 2016; Roscigno and Hodson 2004.

I contend that dominant approaches in the political theory of the firm are not able to recognize the potential value of shirking for two reasons. First, some unjustifiably reject the role of adversarial agency within the firm and hence categorically criticize shirking as it undermines cooperative norms in economic organizations (Heath 2014; Singer 2019b). Second, other political theorists do not pay much attention to shirking as an act of worker resistance because they primarily focus on questions about institutional models that articulate and justify how the legal structure of the firm should be designed (Claassen 2022; Ferreras 2017; Malleson 2014; Stehr 2023).

As an alternative, I propose an adversarial and agent-centered understanding of the firm. Under the circumstances of actually existing capitalism, I argue that there is a legitimate role for workers' adversarial agency within the firm, and political theorists should develop the forms of evaluations appropriate to such agency. This requires political theorists to conceptualize the firm from the perspective of workers rather than the implicit standpoint of a policymaker who focuses on how the firm should be designed. Following this perspectival shift, I argue that counterproductive behavior, such as shirking, can be politically valuable as an act of resistance against illegitimate managerial power under the conditions of structural domination. First, shirking has *diagnostic value* to the extent that its disruption of productivity forces decision-makers and society at large to reflect on what is wrong with how we organize our economic lives. Second, it has *agency value* because it is one of the few ways structurally dominated workers can affirm their agency and shape their working conditions. Third, it has *epistemic value*: when workers shirk collectively in an environment of solidarity, it enables them to challenge ideological discourses about employee obligations in the workplace. These three values give workers strong *pro tanto* reasons to shirk in capitalist firms.

Why does the normative status of shirking matter for political theorists? One key pay-off of my normative conceptualization of shirking is to expand the repertoire of legitimate worker resistance under capitalism. I provide a normative foundation for a mode of action that has been widely observed in the social scientific descriptions of capitalist firms. While doing so, I show that the normative structure of workers' everyday practices is much more complicated and multilayered than the assumptions of folk morality. The paper will hopefully generate further discussion on how to uncover the latent political functions of everyday practices in social and economic institutions. In this way, the argument advances the political realist ambition to center normative theorizing around real-world actors' actions and interests (Bagg 2022; Burelli and Destri 2022; Cross 2022; Kreutz and Rossi 2022; Raekstad 2022).

More specifically, the paper makes a number of contributions to the literature: first, the paper contributes to the political theory of the firm by decentering the legal category of the business corporation (Claassen 2023; Robé 2011). Instead, it shows why and how the organizational reality of the firm gives rise to a variety of legitimate worker resistance in everyday practices beyond the language of legal rights and obligations. This also puts the paper into dialogue with the literature on repertoires of resistance, including strikes, slowdowns, and (un)civil disobedience (Delmas 2016; Gourevitch 2018; Pineda 2021; Raekstad and Rossi 2022). My argument shows that shirking as resistance is analogous to uncivil disobedience in some respects due to its covert and evasive character. It is also a distinct but complementary type of political action empowering workers' agency in addition to strikes and union organizations. Second, drawing on the sociological literature on work and everyday resistance, I develop a criticism of economic conceptions of shirking that are influential in the political theory of the firm (Alchian and Demsetz 1972; Blair and Stout 1999; Scott 1985; Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). I show that shirking can be a politically valuable and implicitly collective form of resistance against managerial power. This is at odds with the economic conception that presents shirking as individualist and antisocial behavior. Lastly, the paper contributes to the expanding literature on the philosophy of work, presenting an argument that workers have strong reasons to engage in counterproductive behavior under the conditions of structural domination (Herzog and Schmode 2022; Yeoman 2014).

The paper proceeds as follows: I first provide a brief overview of economic arguments about how shirking is inimical to efficiency gains and discuss political theorists' reception of these ideas. Then I argue that dominant approaches in the political theory of the firm are either biased toward the status quo or incomplete due to their lack of an adversarial and agent-centered view of the firm. Drawing on the empirical literature, I show that workers' shirking and other counterproductive behaviors are sometimes a valuable practice of resistance against illegitimate managerial power. I further elaborate why structurally dominated workers have *pro tanto* reasons to shirk by articulating its three distinct values.

Efficiency Gains, Team Production, and Shirking

The explicit or implicit disapproval of shirking has been widely expressed among economists and frequently operationalized in the empirical studies about intrafirm production (Berti and Pitelis 2022; Vandegrift and Yavas 2011). Most explicitly, the negative evaluation of counterproductive behavior, such as shirking, is articulated in the team production theory of the firm. Alchian and

Demsetz (1972, 778) start with the assumption that what distinguishes the firm from market exchanges is the “*team* use of inputs and a centralized position of some party in the contractual arrangements of all other inputs.” There are certain goods and services that can be efficiently produced only through a close collaboration among team members, and firms typically coordinate these activities with one of the actors in a central administrative position. The latter requirement stems from what Alchian and Demsetz call the metering problem: as it is extremely difficult to find out what each individual contributes to the production process, team production can suffer from the problem of shirking (ibid., 780). When punishing free-riding is costly and one can reasonably expect to get away with it, each individual has an incentive to shirk (ibid., 780). This gives rise to the need for a central monitor whose incentive not to shirk is created by their receipt of any residual product (ibid., 782). Regardless of one’s position in the firm hierarchy, the elimination of shirking is assumed to improve everyone’s situation by minimizing waste (ibid., 791).

Blair and Stout (1999) are a more recent representative of the team production theory. Their point of departure is the question of what makes team production more efficient than the aggregation of individual productive activities. Their main answer is that horizontal, rather than vertical, interactions lead to productivity-boosting collaboration in the firm (ibid., 271). More importantly, they distinguish such valuable forms of horizontal interactions from undesirable interactions among peers such as “the problems of collusion, side agreements, and rent-seeking” (ibid., 271). Team productivity thrives on reciprocal cooperation and is undermined by selfish free-riding. The emergence of intrafirm hierarchies results from team members’ self-understanding of their own interests: “it will be difficult to convince others to invest firm-specific resources in team production if shirking and rent-seeking go uncontrolled” (ibid., 274). In other words, intrafirm hierarchies ensure that a party is authorized to monitor and discipline team members for the common good (ibid. 274). Similar to Alchian and Demsetz, their negative evaluation of shirking suggests that it is against the interests of each and every team member as it reduces team productivity.

What can we say about political theorists’ reception of these ideas about efficiency and shirking? Some map their conception of the firm onto these economic accounts quite explicitly. For instance, Heath (2014, 93–94) argues that business ethics should have a dual structure for transactions that are inside and outside the firm: the demands of adversarial ethics apply to market competition, whereas the internal organization of the firm should rely on a more cooperative set of norms. Once the firm is distinguished from the market by conceptualizing it as a space of cooperation with little or no room for

legitimate adversarial interactions, it is difficult to arrive at a conclusion other than the undesirability of shirking. Indeed, this is corroborated by the fact that shirking is deemed inimical to cooperative norms and one of the key problems clever institutional design should solve (*ibid.*, 235–44).

Singer (2017, 2019b) has developed a more sophisticated conception of the firm as an institutional space of collaboration. He explains the efficiency gains of the firm by focusing on the limitations of adversarial market norms in coordinating activities that require complex and sustained division of labor (Singer 2019b, 138). As large-scale projects necessitate team production, and free-riding increases together with economies of scale, only organizations that can cultivate cooperative norms are able to efficiently manage these projects (Singer 2019b, 125). The firm and its legal structuring under the category of the business corporation “enables individuals to establish their own law-like norms within organizations” (Singer 2017, 342). If opportunistic behavior, shirking, and free-riding stand in the way of individuals investing in relationship-specific skills, organizations are needed to cultivate relationships of mutual trust and reciprocal effort (Singer 2019b, 132). The firm is then an organizational technology that creates and fosters certain norms and social relationships necessary for efficient team production. Singer (2019b, 136) acknowledges and criticizes that sometimes immoral and/or unjust norms are cultivated within economic organizations. However, this does not mean infinite freedom to make economic organizations responsive to the demands of morality. Ultimately, any reform in the organization of the firm should cultivate another set of cooperative norms that can support efficient team production, which is an economic constraint (*ibid.*, 138). Shirking is then undesirable as it is an antisocial anomaly that disrupts the cultivation of cooperative norms.

Lastly, a large group of political theorists who defend a democratic and egalitarian model of the firm do not pay much attention to the evaluation of shirking and other forms of counterproductive behavior (Anderson 2017; Ciepley 2013; Claassen 2022; Frega, Herzog, and Neuhäuser 2019). Instead, these authors primarily focus on institutional models. By a focus on institutional models, I mean that their primary aim is to articulate and defend a particular design of the firm with specific configurations of legal rights and obligations among different actors. This takes various forms. Some claim that the legal category of the corporation should not be given too much autonomy due to its governmental provenance (Ciepley 2013). Others offer a defense of a more comprehensive understanding of fiduciary duties that should normatively regulate how corporate boards run their organizations (Claassen 2022). Even more explicitly proworker proposals mainly lay out desirable changes in institutional design, empowering employees through

voice and rights protection (Anderson 2017). When democratic approaches to the firm explicitly discuss shirking as an economic behavior, it is still seen in a negative light. For instance, Malleson (2014, 71) talks about shirking only as an obstacle to “pure reliance on” moral motivation in economic collaboration. In the next section, I discuss why merely criticizing or neglecting shirking induces important limitations in the political theory of the firm.

The Limitations of Existing Approaches in the Political Theory of the Firm

I argue that there are two main limitations of existing approaches in the political theory of the firm. First, ruling out adversarial interactions in a normative conception of the firm is likely to generate a status quo bias (Heath 2014; Singer 2017, 2019b). Conceptualizing the firm through the lens of cooperative norms forecloses the possibility of desirable counterproductive behavior or at least makes it more difficult to envisage. The problem is that a variety of adversarial and disruptive behaviors is needed to challenge dominating relationships in the workplace, including strike action, picketing, boycotts, blockades, and occupations (Gourevitch 2018; Raekstad and Rossi 2022). Workers are a structurally dominated group under contemporary capitalism: the background rules, social norms, and institutions put them into a position of collective vulnerability vis-à-vis employers (Cicerchia 2022; Gädeke 2020, 205; Gourevitch 2013, 602). Further, hegemonic conceptions of cooperation often reflect the prevalent power asymmetries in actually existing capitalist societies (Aytac 2022). Hence, adversarial, disruptive, and counterproductive behavior might be needed to improve the balance of power between the two groups.²

One might object that my criticism relies on an uncharitable reading of these authors. Clearly, their normative conception of the firm is different from its actually existing counterparts. Organizing the firm around genuinely cooperative norms would require ending abusive treatment of workers as well (Heath 2014, 94). Similarly, Singer (2017) explicitly draws a distinction between good and bad cooperative norms on the basis of their moral qualities. He would suggest that we should strive toward more just forms of cooperation in the workplace. Indeed, I acknowledge that these authors distance

2. There are varieties of actually existing capitalism with different labor regimes, and this might have implications for the extent to which shirking can be justified as a form of resistance (Hall and Soskice 2001).

themselves from the status quo in terms of the normative demands they make. However, my worry is that their conceptual apparatuses are still likely to generate an unintended status quo bias, especially if they are not supplemented with certain normative categories needed to make sense of workers' political agency in the firm.

The problem with the objection is that it overestimates the role of prescriptions in political theory. The status quo bias is generated due to the core features of the conceptual framework these authors advocate. Even when they advance normative claims about how the firm should be organized in a less dominating and abusive manner, the default assumption that adversarial and counterproductive agency is not suitable within the firm seems to remain intact. Such a conceptual map makes it difficult for workers to even deliberate whether they sometimes have good reasons to disrupt the norms of cooperation. The key question is not whether workers have reasons to desire an alternative set of cooperative norms but whether they have reasons to temporarily abandon cooperative norms and switch to an adversarial form of agency in the firm, which Singer's and Heath's conceptual frameworks tend to obscure. As I will discuss, there are cases in which shirking can be understood as an act of resistance to illegitimate managerial power and reclaiming one's autonomous agency. However, we can only appreciate the normative significance of these counterproductive behaviors if we conceptualize the firm as an adversarial space where disruptive and counterproductive behavior can be politically valuable.

Consider an example from democratic theory: if one endorses a conception of the public sphere where public opinion is formed through reasoned and civil debate, it is hard to reject its desirability in an ideal polity. The domain of public communication would primarily be cooperative rather than conflictual in this conception. However, as many democratic theorists have emphasized, actual societies are marked by widespread status and power asymmetries. The weak and marginalized can be further excluded from the political process when powerful groups determine what counts as reasonable and civil discourse (Fraser 1990, 64). Further, marginalized groups might have to appeal to various forms of antideliberative protests in order to eradicate barriers to equal participation and be heard in the first place (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 18). To expand the range of legitimate contestation in deeply unequal societies, it would be more plausible to understand the public sphere as a domain of adversarial contestations (Mouffe 2002; Westphal 2023). In a way, this point is analogous to my criticism. By conceptualizing the firm as an adversarial space, it is possible to envisage a wider range of acceptable behavior to resist illegitimate power structures. The lens of cooperative norms reinforces a categorical rejection of shirking and other forms of

seemingly antisocial behavior in the firm and therefore obscures the potential desirability of such behavior.

The second limitation is about egalitarian political theorists' disproportionate focus on the issues of institutional design. To be clear, I believe these works are illuminating, and I agree with much of their content. My critical remarks only aim to point out what is absent in these approaches and speculate in which directions they can be extended. First of all, egalitarian theorists of the firm offer a more adversarial conceptualization of the firm: Anderson's (2017) characterization is colored by conflictual power relations between managers and workers. However, much of the intellectual energy in both republican and liberal egalitarian circles has been spent on exploring different proposals to improve the institutional design of the firm and the broader economic system. Some examples include Malleson's (2014) defense of economic democracy, Ferreras's (2017) proposal of self-governing firms through bicameral organizations, Ciepley's (2013) invitation to rethink the legal status of the business corporation, and Claassen's (2022) reconceptualization of corporate fiduciary duties.

Despite all the variety in these works, one common feature is that they are realization-oriented theories. Raekstad (2022, 103) distinguishes between realization-oriented and agent-centered theories. The former approach either explicitly or implicitly focuses on identifying and justifying a set of institutions as a normatively desirable state of affairs. By contrast, the latter's task is to pay closer attention to relevant social actors that can push for and achieve change. This also involves the evaluation of courses of action available to such actors and theorizing a normative outlook tailored to their particular social position. To the extent that the previously mentioned theories of the firm primarily concentrate on different institutional models, be it a workplace democracy or redefining the distribution of legal rights and privileges in economic organizations, they are realization-oriented theories.

Although these contributions are a significant element of a complete political theory of the firm, disproportionate focus on institutional remedies has inevitable limitations. Realization-oriented theories tend to prioritize the implicit perspective of policy-making authorities. Who can be the relevant addressee of an institutional reform proposal in the firm? The most immediate addressee seems to be policymakers with the authority to change laws. Citizens can be addressees in the sense that they can be invited to revise what they demand from policymakers when they vote or join a protest movement. However, this again ultimately boils down to the perspective of policymakers. I believe there are good reasons to think that such a perspective should not be overrepresented in political theory. Otherwise, essential normative questions about other forms of political agency can be easily crowded out.

For instance, questions about when direct action is appropriate are not very visible in the political theory of the firm. One such question is “what types of direct action should structurally dominated actors engage in?” To contribute to the development of a more complete political theory of the firm, I center the inquiry of the paper around this question. Focusing on the normative assessment of workers’ possible courses of action in capitalist firms, I show why workers might have strong reasons to shirk due to three distinct values. But firstly, in the next section, I discuss the normative implications of the empirical literature on shirking as an act of resistance.

A Reality Check: Shirking as an Act of Resistance

The notion of shirking as an act of resistance was first developed outside workplace studies. Scott’s (1985, 29) *Weapons of the Weak* redefined the field of peasant studies by conceptualizing the idea of *everyday resistance*: “the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them.” The strategies of everyday resistance “avoid any direct symbolic confrontation” with power holders and aim to achieve gains through practices such as “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage . . .” (ibid., 29). Two key features of these strategies are that they do not require an advanced degree of concerted collective action, and that they are low-risk options, especially when open contestation attracts hostile retaliation from the powerful (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013, 4–6).

These ideas have been increasingly utilized within the context of the modern workplace in the sociology of work. Roscigno and Hodson (2004, 14) identified several “individualized forms of worker resistance (i.e., social sabotage, work avoidance, and absenteeism)”. Note that shirking in theories of the firm is a particularly narrow category and can only be associated with some of these strategies. While counterproductive behaviors like theft and sabotage are relevant to the broader discussion of worker resistance, I am only interested in the strategies workers employ to avoid or minimize the performance of their contractual obligations, such as playing dumb, being absent, or using office hours for private affairs (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016, 428). By shirking, I mean a set of daily practices (or lack thereof) workers covertly engage in to evade or minimize the performance of their workplace tasks or compliance with managerial orders.

Let me briefly reflect on where shirking stands within the broader repertoires of resistance, including various types of collective action such as strikes, slowdowns, and (un)civil disobedience. Shirking differs from strikes and trade unionism due to its informal and covert characteristics. A more

analogous case is forms of resistance such as slowdowns and work-to-rule actions aiming “to obtain improvements of working conditions and pay” (Gary-Bobo and Jaaidane 2014, 90). Slowdowns might similarly be covert and informal (Hammett, Seidman, and London 1957, 126). However, the aims of slowdowns typically pertain to the strategic demands from employers. In contrast, shirking seems to be a broader category, including the ways in which workers directly access certain goods—for example, more leisure through time theft or avoiding alienating tasks. Second, if slowdowns and work-to-rule actions are understood as functional equivalents of strikes (Gary-Bobo and Jaaidane 2014), it is reasonable to conceptualize them as discrete, periodic events organized around campaigns, whereas shirking is more continuous, mundane, and embedded within the organization’s everyday culture (Johnson 2011). Following from the second point, one can also say that shirking, when it is collective, requires a much less advanced level of conscious coordination as the organizational culture and social norms can go a long way in aligning workers’ beliefs and expectations about how much to work. In contrast, discrete events like slowdowns and strikes need a greater degree of conscious efforts for the coordination of beliefs and expectations.³

Having clarified our notion of shirking, I will now discuss the normative implications of the sociological literature on shirking. I believe the sociology of work literature offers three important lessons about shirking, which can be instrumental in correcting the unrealistic depiction of this practice in economic theory. First, understanding the motivation behind shirking as a mere effect of adverse incentives does not do justice to the phenomenology of workers’ experiences. In their empirical analysis, Roscigno and Hodson (2004, 30–32) show that “lack of collective mobilization history combined with poor organization” of the labor process amplify the likelihood of various forms of shirking in the workplace. More strikingly, another empirical analysis demonstrates that “the purposeful failure to perform job tasks effectively” is strongly associated with “interpersonal conflicts and organizational constraints” such as a lack of proper training, low-quality equipment, or conflictual behavior in the workplace (Spector et al. 2006, 449). Further, shirking is negatively correlated with workers’ sense of distributive and procedural justice (*ibid.*, 454–450). Paulsen (2015, 363) also presents evidence

3. In some respects, shirking is analogous to what Delmas (2016, 685) calls uncivil disobedience: both action types can be covert as opposed to the publicity requirement in civil disobedience. They are not committed to expressing respect towards their adversaries. Further, they are not motivated by the prospects of achieving a policy change. However, unlike Delmas’s conception, shirking does not always rely on principled motivations.

that workers usually shirk the aspects of their jobs that are “experienced as meaningless”. The conclusions of these studies are relatively tentative about the exact reasons why workers shirk. However, they present evidence that shirking might be a response to legitimate grievances in the workplace. Unlike economists’ depictions, in which workers shirk out of purely selfish motivations, the sociology of work literature highlights the possibility that shirking can be an integral part of how workers exercise their normative agency in the firm, responding to the problematic features of their organizations.

Consider how Peter Gibbons, the protagonist of the 90s cult comedy *Office Space*, slacks off at Initech (Judge 1999). Under the influence of hypnosis that completely disabled his filters, Peter candidly mentions how he shirks on a daily basis at a meeting with consultants intended to measure his performance. He is frequently late for work, uses the side door to bypass his managers, and pretends to work for hours while sitting in his cubicle (ibid). Then he explains: “. . . it’s not that I’m lazy. It’s that I just don’t care. . . . It’s a problem of motivation, all right? Now, if I work my ass off and Initech ships a few extra units, I don’t see another dime. So where is the motivation? And here’s something else, Bob. I have eight different bosses right now. . . . So that means that when I make a mistake, I have eight different people coming by to tell me about it. That’s my only real motivation is not to be hassled. That and the fear of losing my job, but you know, Bob, it will only make someone work hard enough not to get fired” (ibid.).

This artistic portrayal of shirking brilliantly illustrates how workers slack off in response to the poor organizational quality of their workplaces. Peter is frustrated by the scheme of compensation that is not responsive to his level of productivity as well as the chaotic structure of authority where he answers to eight different people. For Peter, shirking is rightfully resisting managerial efforts to extract as much as possible from him and normatively reacting to what he deems an unjust workplace.

The second lesson we can derive from the sociology of work is that shirking is often far from being antisocial behavior, although critics of this practice claim otherwise. There is extensive ethnographic evidence articulating how workers collectively organize around informal rules of shirking by implicitly agreeing to reduce “the amount and intensity of work” as a team (Hodson 1995, 89–91). Some types of shirking, such as avoidance and absenteeism, “are most likely to occur when there is also some solidarity in the form of union presence” (Roscigno and Hodson 2004, 32). In such cases, the required degree of coordination is less than confrontational and open forms of resistance such as strike action. Nonetheless, this does not mean that shirking is necessarily an antisocial attitude toward one’s coworkers.

Instead, it can be a social practice to collectively improve working conditions when more confrontational methods are too difficult or costly to implement. A vivid example of solidaristic shirking can be found in Campbell's (2016, 266) interview with Daw Lay, a migrant worker from Mae Sot's garment industry in Thailand:

The supervisor would call me over and ask, "Has the worker gone to the toilet? Has the worker returned to the dormitory?" If the worker hadn't yet returned, I'd say that the worker had gone to the toilet and had only been gone for two minutes. Or I'd say that the worker had gone to get a spindle of thread. I've given many kinds of excuses. If I didn't say that the worker had gone to the toilet, then I'd say she'd gone to get thread, or that she'd gone to deliver some garment. But if the supervisor came around a second time and didn't see the worker again, there would be a problem, and I wouldn't be able to resolve it. So if the supervisor was going to come around again, I'd pretend to be fixing the sewing machine, as though it had broken down.

Daw Lay explains how she facilitates shirking in an authoritarian workplace by concealing coworkers' absence from the site of production. This is rather different from the economic conception of shirking depicted as selfish free-riding. What is perhaps most striking is that a worker can even shirk herself to protect a fellow worker from managers' retaliation—that is, by pretending to fix a broken machine. Such behavior can even be seen as altruistic shirking.

Lastly, the combination of these two lessons offers a third insight: there is no trade-off between conceptualizing the firm as an adversarial space and acknowledging its social nature. Economic theories' rejection of shirking partly stems from the following idea: adversarial interactions are always fueled by selfish individualism that is detrimental to the common good of a production team. Heath's and Singer's conceptions of the firm seem to presuppose the same. They present counterproductive behavior as the opposite of a normative conception of the firm where desirable social relationships flourish. However, the link between an adversarial conception of the firm and antisocial individualism is not necessary. In many cases, the target of shirking is either the impersonal, abstract identity of the firm or its managerial elites. This introduces a relational dimension to the phenomenology of shirking where workers are likely to define themselves in a conflictual relationship with dominating structures or actors. Also, given that shirking can reflect some degree of coordination and common understanding among low-rank workers, its adversarial nature has a social dimension, governed by the norms of solidarity among the dominated. Further empirical research is needed to identify how much of shirking is a socialized form of worker resistance as

opposed to antisocial, individualized free-riding. One particular methodological complication is that it is very difficult to isolate legitimate acts of resistance from selfish free-riding. This is because shirking tends to be covert even when there is some implicit consensus among workers, which can make it look antisocial. Still, we have reasons to believe that shirking as a form of socialized worker resistance is substantial enough and should not be overlooked.

Despite these insights on everyday resistance in the workplace, the normative foundations of shirking and its political potential are not fully clear. In the next section, I defend the view that workers have strong *pro tanto* reasons to shirk under the dominating circumstances of capitalist firms if they consider three distinct values of this practice.

Three Values of Shirking

Diagnostic Value

In a capitalist firm, shareholders, corporate boards, and managers typically have an interest in increasing productivity levels. That is the primary way shareholders can secure lucrative returns on their investment. Corporate boards and managers are incentivized to achieve high productivity levels in the firm, as they are disciplined by shareholders, the stock market, and the risk of hostile takeover (Fama and Jensen 1983). Further, the governments of capitalist economies systematically implement growth-oriented policies in which improving average productivity of labor is of paramount importance (Wright 2010, 44). Given the link between economic performance and public support for political institutions, such governmental policies seem to be necessary to secure legitimacy for today's deeply unequal capitalist social formations (Polavieja 2013). In short, the most powerful actors of corporate capitalism have significant interests in maintaining high productivity levels.

Shirking disrupts productivity in the firm, especially when it is normalized by large groups. By disrupting a key aspect of capitalist economies, which these powerful actors cannot ignore, it forces a variety of stakeholders to reflect on the ways we organize economic activities. Insofar as one is strongly incentivized to improve productivity levels, one has to think about and respond to disruptions of productivity. Such a process has an important *diagnostic* function as it generates a pressure to not take for granted the ways firms and the broader institutional landscape in the economy are organized. It shifts the attention to the shortcomings in the organizational features of firms and provides an opportunity for public deliberation and bargaining both in

the firm and society at large. This is diagnostic in the sense that it opens up the possibility of publicizing grievances and identifying them as issues that need to be addressed. So, when workers are deprived of proper voice mechanisms and work under alienating and exploitative conditions, shirking can be a powerful signal that diagnoses the problems in ways powerful groups have to pay attention to. For example, as previously discussed, workers tend to shirk the tasks they find meaningless. This is also supported by the evidence that meaningful work boosts productivity (Allan 2017). Once the disruption of productivity opens up the possibility of reforming organizations, workers might be in a better position to justify new arrangements that create more room for meaningful tasks or demand productivity-enhancing compensation when meaningless tasks are inevitable.

To the extent that workers have an interest in inducing change in the organizational features of firms, they can instrumentalize shirking as a way of signaling these demands and diagnosing the problems in the eyes of powerful actors. They have a *pro tanto* reason to shirk as a means of shifting decision-making authorities' attention to underlying problems behind low productivity. However, the strength of this *pro tanto* reason will depend on a given context. For instance, when job tasks are harder to monitor with new technologies, when employers cannot afford such technologies, or when workers have relevant skills that enable them to bypass new disciplinary techniques, they will have stronger *pro tanto* reasons to shirk. Additionally, the diagnostic function of shirking can be fulfilled to the extent that it is collective and has substantial magnitude (Hodson 1995).

Lastly, the diagnostic function of shirking does not guarantee an improvement in the organization of the firm. It is possible that shirking will invite more authoritarian or technologically advanced techniques to discipline labor. However, this is not a reason to reject shirking as a useful tool of resistance. Most political strategies can create backlash when they are applied in the wrong context: organizing strike action despite indicators that the rate of participation will be low can be suicidal. This is not a good reason to think that strike action is a useless tool of resistance. Similarly, the diagnostic function of shirking is worth realizing depending on the context. Although it may cause a backlash in certain contexts, it is often rational for employers to take the diagnostic signals of shirking seriously. For instance, the extant literature on the positive relationship between certain types of employee voice and labor productivity would explain why employers sometimes have an interest in responding to shirking by improving working conditions and organizational structure rather than trying to suppress it with costly disciplinary measures (Cotton et al. 1988; Kim, MacDuffie, and Pil 2010).

Agency Value

The second reason why workers might have *pro tanto* reasons to shirk is their agency value. Under the authoritarian power of managers, shirking can be an important way workers exercise their capacity to make choices in line with their own values and needs and also partially determine their working conditions. Agency value can be realized directly and indirectly. Direct agency benefits include avoiding alienating tasks or those for which they are insufficiently compensated. Consider the cases in which workers collectively slack off by reducing the amount of output they produce in various ways (Hodson 1995, 90). By shirking and turning a blind eye to coworkers doing the same, workers make choices that reduce the intensity of their exploitation and moderate their labor-leisure ratio (Campbell 2016, 266). In contemporary capitalism, where the power balance between employers and employees is immensely asymmetric due to the “unequal structure of control over productive assets,” we can say that the current rate of compensation and the duration of work do not reflect the outcome of a free agreement (Gourevitch 2013, 602). To the extent that shirking entails choices that make workers better off in terms of workload, time poverty, and de facto compensation rates, it implies an expanded choice menu and agency opportunities against dominating managerial powers. Indirectly speaking, shirking can also generate less choice-centric but equally important agency benefits for workers, including symbolically rejecting their domination, affirming their own sense of agency and self-respect by adversarially relating to their dominators (Boxill 2010, 10; Hay 2011). For example, a shirking worker can preserve their self-respect by refusing to comply with certain managerial demands, attaining a sense of control with the symbolic meaning that they are more than passive recipients of orders. This is also related to the psychological aspects of shirking, which I discuss later.

One might ask if agency value implies that workers who shirk enjoy freedom as nondomination—which would be hard to square with my previous claims about their social condition. I do not think so, and I have deliberately used the term *agency value* instead of *freedom*. Workers might enjoy individual or collective capacities to resist against powerful actors despite the broader institutional context that systematically gives the latter power over the former. Gädeke’s (2020) distinction between episodic power and structural domination might help us better understand this: a clever slave might occasionally deceive their master to avoid certain unpleasant tasks and hard labor. However, given that the master’s power over the slave is institutionalized through a system of social norms, expectations, and legal rules, the structural relation of domination between them remains intact (Gädeke 2020, 210). Workers are similarly situated given the background conditions that determine the relatively stable

power asymmetry in a capitalist firm. Further, even when it is possible that worker resistance exceeds episodes and becomes stable, there is still a qualitative difference between shirking and achieving freedom as nondomination. When a worker shirks as a means to fulfill their interests, it primarily takes the form of reacting to and bypassing an already existing system of control. If shirking amounted to freedom, workers would be able to transform or abolish such mechanisms of control that reflect others' arbitrary will.

Although shirking does not imply freedom, its agency value can be understood in terms of what Abizadeh (2023, 4–5) calls *power-despite*. Workers' counter-hegemonic struggles within capitalist firms are a form of power-despite-domination. This suggests that workers make choices and achieve outcomes through such activities despite the challenge of hegemonic power relations rendering them structurally unfree.⁴ It is important to note that power-despite is coupled with *power-with* insofar as workers' shirking takes more collective forms and has greater magnitude as a result.

Consequently, the agency value of shirking gives workers *pro tanto* reasons to slack off in the workplace. They have an interest in shaping their working conditions in line with their values and needs. Shirking is one pervasive way workers do this, especially when they have good reasons to be risk-averse about more overt forms of confrontation. In the absence of better, realistic alternatives, shirking creates a breathing space for structurally dominated workers. Additionally, workers' reasons to affirm their agency through shirking are related to psychological aspects of their work. A lack

4. Understanding shirking as resistance is a crucial step to address the gap between large-scale institutional proposals to dismantle structural domination and the forms of political agency required to fight domination. Calls for worker empowerment and the broader democratic transformation of the economy are common among radical Republicans and socialists—that is, public ownership and control of productive assets, democratized financial system, and worker management (Muldoon 2022; O'Shea 2020; Vrousalis 2019). However, the stark contrast between the ambition of these demands and the status quo requires one to reflect more on the available forms of agency that can resist domination and demand change. Addressing this gap, Gourevitch (2020, 105) defends strikes on the grounds that they are “an essential way of both winning and exercising” the freedoms that workers are deprived of. I believe shirking as resistance can be understood as the first step in this spectrum of sociopolitical transformations from resistance to institutional change—that is, the spectrum can be understood in both chronological and conceptual senses. Under (more nonideal) circumstances where explicitly confrontational and concerted forms of collective action are not attainable, shirking provides the bare minimum for workers to exercise their agential capacities and possibly form bonds of solidarity with fellow workers.

of meaningful work is commonly associated with poor life satisfaction and general health (Allan et al. 2019). If one agrees that workers have a psychological need to express their agency in their work and reduce the gap between their sense of self and the demands of their jobs, then we can say that they have strong *pro tanto* reasons to shirk such alienating aspects of their jobs. Paulsen's (2015) finding that workers selectively shirk the tasks they deem meaningless seems to confirm this line of reasoning.

Despite my argument's focus on structural domination, the agency value of shirking is not bound to presuppose a specific conception of unfreedom. For instance, if one subscribes to a conception of negative freedom, shirking might still make normative sense, depending on our broader assessment of whether the distribution of negative freedom is legitimate or just. Take Cohen's (1995, 38–60) argument that capitalist institutions curb our negative freedom, unlike what libertarian philosophers claim: private property prevents nonowners from using resources as they wish, narrowing their choice menu. The structures of authority in capitalist firms coupled with the private property of the means of production similarly narrow workers' choice menu, especially since workers as a class cannot realistically escape their social position (Cohen 1983). Shirking can then be seen as a means of reclaiming some of these choice opportunities and resisting unfreedom understood through the lens of negative liberty. I am not able to work out the full implications of this idea due to space limitations. Still, it is important to acknowledge the alternative ways shirking can be justified as a means of resistance to unfreedom.

Epistemic Value

Structurally dominated workers can also benefit from the *epistemic value* of shirking. Managers often resort to narratives about corporate culture, preexisting communal identities, and moral obligations in the workplace “in order to shape the preferences and beliefs of their employees” (Durak 2013; Herzog 2020, 205). This typically rationalizes exploitative working conditions that prioritize productivity over workers' well-being and autonomy. For instance, dominant discourses that frame one's sector as uniquely different in terms of its demandingness legitimize deteriorating work-life balance (McDonald, Townsend, and Wharton 2013, 212). Similarly, managers sometimes instrumentalize religious or ethnic identities they share with workers to cultivate a false sense of solidarity and to legitimize higher rates of exploitation (Chan, Ramírez, and Stefoni 2019, 1460; Durak 2013). Legitimizing discourses can take a more general form as well: using the discourse of workers' occupational and contractual obligations in order to extract as much effort as possible (Herzog and Schmode 2022, 9).

Shirking can counterbalance the distorting effects of managers' ideological discourses in the firm. Remember that workers often shirk at a collective level, both in terms of turning a blind eye to each other's shirking and slacking off as a group (Campbell 2016). When it is a social practice, shirking might curb managers' ideological powers in two ways. First, when workers exchange ideas and reasons about why and how to shirk, they are likely to dismantle ideological discourses and discover their disciplinary effects. This is mainly because shirking as a collective effort is very difficult to sustain if such legitimizing narratives stay widely internalized. It should be coupled with a reflective process of ideology critique to remain effective, which incentivizes shirking workers to operate as critical thinkers. It would be surprising if an initial group of shirking workers were not pressured to engage in a practice of justification and critique in order to legitimize their unorthodox position, especially when their shirking can be concealed from managers but not from coworkers. As pragmatic sociologists put it, the core feature of non-violent social practices is the act of providing justification for one's actions, and I believe this imperative is particularly pronounced when actions are against dominant norms (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 37).

Second, shirking in an environment of worker socialization can create a cognitive dissonance and help externalize ideological conceptions of work ethic that prioritize productivity over workers' well-being. Consider a worker who is under the undue influence of such legitimizing narratives. On the one hand, they sustain social relationships with shirking coworkers. On the other hand, they endorse a capitalist work ethic that fetishizes productivity and managerial authority. The psychological discomfort caused by this tension is an instance of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). Changing one's behavior or revising one's beliefs are the main ways to reduce such dissonance (McGrath 2017). As shirking is normalized, and the social cost of holding the ideological conceptions of workplace obligations increase, the worker will be incentivized to revise such beliefs and attitudes, potentially leading to a reduction in managers' ideological power. Dissonance can also be reduced by changing one's behavior—for example, by cutting social ties with shirking coworkers. But this also gives a critical worker an additional reason to support shirking to ensure that there will be sufficiently large, epistemically beneficial peer pressure to make cutting social ties too costly. This would make revising ideological beliefs the only option for those who suffer dissonance.

One might ask why we should think that the epistemic effects of shirking will generally be positive. After all, it is not incomprehensible to imagine a firm where employers and managers only demand a reasonable amount of effort from workers and sincerely try to establish a healthy, nonabusive work environment. My reply is two-fold. As I clarified at the beginning, my

argument applies to capitalism as it is now. The more a particular variety of actually existing capitalism deepens its structural domination and other normative deficits, the more it applies (Hall and Soskice 2001). I am interested in the value of shirking under a sociopolitical order marked by extreme economic and political inequalities, precarity, and a lack of work-life balance.

Second, under these circumstances, I believe it is reasonable to hold that the epistemic effects of shirking will generally be positive. Even if there are nice employers and managers who do not utilize many of the problematic ideological discourses highlighted previously, at a minimum they have to unduly moralize workers' contractual and occupational obligations. As Singer (2017, 2019b) explained in detail, social relationships of trust and collaboration are necessary to achieve efficiency gains in the firm, and it is hardly possible to cultivate such relationships under contemporary capitalism without moralizing contractual relationships. Employers and managers cannot achieve their objectives while publicly admitting that their workers are structurally coerced into their current position. Such a premise is fundamentally at odds with the idea that workers' contracts and positions in the firm give rise to genuine moral obligations vis-à-vis their employers and managers. In a way, they are structurally pressured to disseminate and operationalize narratives that help them reproduce economic hierarchies. Further, when disseminated by the powerful, such narratives are heavily distorted due to motivated reasoning—a phenomenon that ideology critics term the self-justification of power (Aytac and Rossi 2022). Insofar as shirking picks out and undermines the narratives of the powerful in highly stratified institutions of contemporary capitalism, we have good reasons to think that its epistemic effects are generally desirable.

Still, I should note that certain background conditions are necessary to realize the epistemic value of shirking. Shirking can be anywhere on the spectrum between individualist free-riding and socialized worker resistance to managers. The former case, when an individual worker shifts their burden to fellow workers, would be inimical to the bonds of trust and solidarity and undermine class consciousness. For shirking to realize its epistemic benefits, the norm of reciprocity among workers and a culture of discursive accountability should be cultivated, steering the practice of shirking in a collectivist direction.

Workers have *pro tanto* reasons to shirk due to its epistemic effects. It is not particularly controversial to claim that they have an interest in participating in a practice that can help them and their coworkers achieve a less distorted view of their social condition. Unlike economists' mechanical depiction of shirking, it can be a transformative experience with positive outcomes. This is mainly because it is hard and painful to sustain practices incompatible

with the beliefs and attitudes that we internalize. When there are good reasons to think that those beliefs and attitudes are ideologically distorted, dissonance-inducing practice is a desirable course of action.

Practical Implications

Let me flesh out some practical implications of my argument. First, shirking as a form of worker resistance should not be seen as a substitute for more organized forms of collective struggle such as trade unionism, strike action, or grassroots activism. As it relies on a less advanced level of coordination among workers and does not aim to transform the distribution of legal rights and obligations, shirking is less effective than, for example, a trade union campaign that calls for a labor law reform. However, organized and overt forms of collective action are not always feasible. Sometimes, authoritarian governments suppress trade unions, or employers find new ways of organizing production to isolate workers from each other. When the circumstances are not particularly conducive to overt collective action, shirking and other types of everyday resistance should be seen as a stepping stone. There is some empirical evidence that peasants can quickly transition from everyday resistance to open popular mobilization when there is a window of opportunity to challenge authoritarian power structures (Adnan 2007, 185). Everyday resistance practices can be the preparatory step in building organized collective power. For instance, shirking can help workers reproduce their adversarial subjectivity until the time is ripe for more advanced forms of collective action.

When shirking is a team effort against managers, it cultivates bonds of trust and solidarity among workers. Workers are prepared to risk covering for late coworkers if there is mutual trust and cooperation (Campbell 2016, 266). As a result, the social dimension of shirking and other types of everyday resistance can lay the groundwork for more organized collective action. Further, the agency value of shirking might be the first step when workers suffer from dehumanization and time poverty that can even keep them from reflecting on what to do with their lives. By affirming their agency through small acts of resistance, and stealing time from their employers, workers might have access to the proper conditions in which they can develop a greater awareness of their needs and interests as agents. This process is further supported by the epistemic function of shirking. As a practice that helps workers externalize the widespread ideological conceptions of workplace obligations, shirking can be a stepping stone in developing class consciousness. Debunking capitalist myths about workers' moral obligations does not automatically lead to a politically fruitful class consciousness. But it means that one key obstacle on the way to achieving this consciousness is eliminated.

There is another reason why we should take shirking seriously as an act of resistance. While they are much less effective than organized collective action, shirking and other forms of everyday resistance are much more pervasive. The success of strike actions or political campaigns depends on many external factors that usually generate a narrow window of opportunity. That is why we do not witness a large, successful social movement every year. Further, they are considerably resource-intensive, as successful collective actions often take years of movement-building efforts. In contrast, everyday resistance practices such as shirking can be used much more abundantly, and they are not resource-intensive. As it is hard to monitor and punish shirking, and it rests on a much lower level of coordination among workers, one can shirk at almost any moment. As I stated previously, this does not mean that shirking is preferable to organized collective action. However, the pervasiveness of everyday resistance should be acknowledged. Otherwise, one might underestimate the desirable effects of shirking.

When we consider the practical implications of shirking, we should also address an important worry about the economic viability of this practice. One might argue that counterproductive behavior should not be accepted as a legitimate form of worker resistance as it ignores the significance of efficiency constraints in real economic life. The basic idea is that the firm as a means of coordinating economic activities exists insofar as it is more efficient than market coordination. If we allowed counterproductive behavior to play a role in economic organizations, its disruption of efficiency would undermine the whole point of having firms in the first place. That seems to be the reason why Singer (2017, 136–37) believes that bad norms of cooperation should be replaced with good norms of cooperation rather than the norms of adversarial agency. As the firm's efficiency is determined by "norm-governed productivity", the spirit of cooperation should always be the defining feature of the firm (Singer 2019b).

One limitation of this objection is that it overlooks the possibility that workers can make nuanced judgments about when and how much to shirk. They clearly have an interest in not overshirking, as this would jeopardize their jobs. The evidence from the sociology of work I discussed previously shows that shirking is compatible with relatively stable firms. This illustrates how workers can achieve a level of shirking that still enables the firm to perform more efficiently than the market. Further, shirking as an act of resistance is not a firm-specific phenomenon. To the extent that it is a form of everyday resistance across different firms and sectors, shirking might also coexist with particular firms' survival vis-à-vis others. One might say that differential capacities to monitor and punish shirking would create

competitive advantages for some firms. However, in that case, workers can already adjust their level of shirking in order to protect their jobs. Hence, if we accept that workers can rationally calculate how much they should shirk, efficiency constraints are not a reason to deem this practice illegitimate. It is one thing to cause inefficiency but another to render firms less efficient than competitors or the market. Lastly, the objection seems to presuppose perfect labor markets where small efficiency losses would push real wages above the market-clearing level and undermine the competitiveness of the firm. However, real labor markets are often marked by inelastic labor supply due to monopsony, enabling employers to pay workers less in the first place (Dube et al. 2020; Manning 2021).⁵

Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended an adversarial and agent-centered approach to the political theory of the firm and applied this framework to the case of shirking in capitalist firms. Having identified the limitations of existing approaches, I showed how empirical insights from the sociology of work and everyday resistance provide an alternative reading of shirking. Specifically, I argued that a sociological approach to shirking, as opposed to economic conceptions, enables us to see it as a practice of resistance that is socialized, normative, and adversarial. Then I elaborated on the normative foundations of shirking. My argument identified three distinct values of shirking that are related to resisting structural domination in capitalist firms: diagnostic, agential, and epistemic. These values show how shirking can advance workers' interests and give them *pro tanto* reasons to shirk. The diagnostic value of shirking implies workers' opportunity to disrupt productivity and send decision-makers signals of dissatisfaction about the quality of economic organizations. The agency value of shirking delivers both direct and indirect benefits, such as access to leisure, informally shaping the working conditions in line with workers' needs and maintaining their sense of autonomous agency and self-respect. The epistemic value of shirking pertains to how such social practices affect the sustainability of ideological discourses in the capitalist workplace. This is mainly because shirking incentivizes workers to reflect on such discourses critically and reduce any arising cognitive dissonance by reformulating their normative beliefs about workplace obligations.

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