Elizabeth Anderson, Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 384 pp., 9781009275439. US $29.95 (Hb).

In this book, Elizabeth Anderson outlines two versions of the work ethic: the conservative version and the progressive version. She argues that understanding the history of the work ethic can help us see the flaws in the conservative version and the promise in the progressive version. The book’s methodology is ideology critique via genealogy: by “revealing neoliberalism as the ideological descendant of the conservative work ethic,” we can “unpack its inherent contradictions” (p. xvi). The history she elucidates is also meant to be “liberating,” as it helps “demonstrate the profound contingency of how we think and act” and shines a light on resources that everyone, especially economists, can use to “enlarge their normative vision, both in terms of the richness of normative standards they use to evaluate institutions and to imagine bolder remedies for our economic ills” (p. xvii). The progressive work ethic provides the building blocks for this enlarged normative vision, she claims.

The specifics of the account begin with the Protestant work ethic as elucidated by thinkers like Richard Baxter, William Perkins, and Robert Sanderson (pp. 6-16). Important features of this work ethic were the view that everyone had a particular calling (p. 8) and therefore all laborers are exalted and deserving of dignity in virtue of doing God’s work (p. 11); that work and its fruits should serve the poor rather than drive luxury consumption (pp. 9-10); that all should work and that the idle rich are vicious (p. 12); and that exploitation via means like sharp trading practices or charging high rents to tenants are not legitimate forms of work (pp. 12-3). These are salutatory features, in Anderson’s view, and they form the basis of the progressive work ethic. But the Protestant work ethic also makes sloth the primary sin (p. 14) and glorifies the ascetic properties of work (p. 9), setting the stage for harsh views of those who don’t work hard enough, a key component of the conservative work ethic.

Anderson elaborates on the progressive work ethic by describing its development in Locke (pp. 20-62). In doing so she claims that libertarians misread Locke on six key points. They think Locke based his political philosophy on negative liberties, but in fact it is based on an affirmative duty to protect and support others (pp. 25-7). Libertarians can’t explain the three limits Locke puts on just appropriation in the state of nature, whereas the positive duty to support others via work explains these limits (pp. 27-33). Libertarians ignore the implications of Locke’s theory for cases in which there is not as much and as good left for others (pp. 32-4) and they think the state can only enforce our existing negative rights, but in fact our state-given rights are narrower than our rights in the state of nature (pp. 35-8). They also ignore how Locke’s theory implies an expanded franchise and other aspects of the Leveller political agenda, and the ways in which his theory justifies state redistribution of wealth (pp. 38-44). Although Locke’s understanding of the work ethic was broadly progressive, such that he condemned the idle rich and usury (pp. 44-8), feudal property rights (pp. 48-50), and slavery (pp. 50-2), his denigration of the idle eventually stretched to condemning the idle poor too, a product of his suspicion that their idleness was due to vice (pp. 57-62). This line of thinking culminates in the view that poor toddlers should be sent to workhouses so as to become “inured” to work and so as to allow their mothers to work instead of taking care of children (pp. 60-1).

Drawing on these worst tendencies of Locke, the work ethic was “hijacked” by conservatives and turned against workers. The prototypical examples of the conservative work ethic come from Joseph Priestly (pp. 68-73), Jeremy Bentham (pp. 73-81), Thomas Malthus (pp. 81-7), William Paley (pp. 87-90), Edmund Burke (pp. 91-5), and Richard Whately (pp. 95-9). These understandings of the work ethic viewed the poor with suspicion. They must be kept poor so as to encourage them to work, and those who will not work are for this reason vicious (and their resulting poverty is evidence of and caused by their viciousness). In addition to encouraging sloth, charity that was not contingent on work would encourage the poor to have more children than they could support, resulting in starvation and other ills. The conservative work ethic in some forms is so harsh as to view starvation as less of an ill than a natural correction to the poor who unwisely procreate beyond their means.

Anderson is concerned not just with the philosophical underpinnings of the conservative work ethic but also its practical results. Thus she describes the results of the implementation of the conservative work ethic in the form of English Welfare Reform, the Poor Law, and famine policy in Ireland. To make a long story short, the results were terrible, both by any reasonable analysis and even to some degree by the lights of the conservatives themselves, although in the grips of their ideology they failed to realize this (pp. 100-19). The disastrous results of the conservative work ethic stem from its moral bankruptcy and its empirical inadequacy, both of which are functions of its status as an ideology (pp. 119-26): it believes that “the market gives people what they deserve. Never mind that the rich rigged the rules of property and wage contracts to suppress market wages” (p. 122).

Subsequent to the conservative hijacking, the work ethic was taken back by being elucidated in more progressive forms by Adam Smith (pp. 130-55), David Ricardo (pp. 155-61), and Ricardo’s followers, including (among others) John Stuart Mill (pp. 168-202), François-Noël Babeuf (pp. 213-24), and Karl Marx (pp. 203-24). These approaches prioritized the rights and the welfare of workers, sympathized with rather than demonized the poor, and criticized landlords. The most promising development of these efforts, according to Anderson, was social democracy, as advocated by people like the Marquis de Condorcet (pp. 227-8), Thomas Paine (pp. 229-34), and Eduard Bernstein (pp. 234-43). Social democracy is presented as “a culmination and transcendence of the progressive work ethic” (p. 242). It effected a “profound shift of normative perspective” according to which the work ethic’s vision of class warfare was replaced by a democratic vision encompassing everyone, even the bourgeoisie (p. 243).

Once again, though, the work ethic was hijacked by conservatives, this time in the form of neoliberalism (pp. 254-83). Benefits for the poor in the United States were slashed, saddled with means-testing, and oriented towards forcing the poor to work (pp. 259-64). Government functions like prisons and health care were privatized and poverty was criminalized so that the imprisoned poor could be exploited as labor in privatized prisons (pp. 264-72). Business regulations were weakened and businesses began to focus on profit to the exclusion of all else (pp. 272-82).

Anderson’s solution to this second hijacking is to return once again to the progressive form of the work ethic, especially in economics, where the progressive work ethic can help economists realize that the structure of work has an effect on the well-being of workers (p. 287) and that “*by far the most important product of our economic system is ourselves*” (p. 288). We should thus aim to arrange work such that it enhances our capabilities and virtues, and encourages “trust, sympathy, and cooperation” (p. 288).

The book focuses on a topic which is as timely now as it was centuries ago, and Anderson’s summaries of the various thinkers are clear and illuminating, as is her weaving of empirical evidence with philosophical exegesis. However, the more philosophically weighty components of the book are under-explored. Specifically, the book does not do a great job delineating its central concepts, or of making the normative import of its historical exegesis clear.

First, although the book comprises an extensive discussion of the work ethic, its picture is rather under-developed with respect to key conceptual issues. We are not given a clear description (much less a precise definition) of what a work ethic is, such that it is not clear why we ought to think all of the things the book describes are in fact work ethics (or are elaborations of one single work ethic). It is not clear how many work ethics there are: is there a single work ethic, which the progressives and conservatives have been arguing about all along? Or are there multiple work ethics, competing for the space of the most compelling (if indeed there can only be one most compelling work ethic)? Anderson’s discussion is limited to the Western tradition, primarily in Britain and the United States; would work ethics from other times and places count as work ethics, or as elaborations of the single worth ethic, in the sense that Anderson is using the term ‘work ethic?’

This unclarity means it is hard to know whether Anderson is correct to describe “the” work ethic as having been seized (twice) by conservatives, as if it is a ball that two teams are fighting to possess. The conservatives certainly do not all agree on what “the” work ethic is, nor is it even clear that any (let alone all) of them conceived of themselves as elucidating “the” (or “a”) work ethic. Malthus, for instance, believes that it is important for the poor to labor so the rich can enjoy leisure, because their leisure gives them time for “all the noblest exertions of human genius… for every thing, indeed, that distinguishes the civilized, from the savage state” (pp. 85-6), and Whately agrees (p. 98). Other conservatives, however, instead exalt the “industrious” rich, who concern themselves with making money rather than leisure (p. 120). Anderson characterizes things like these an internal incoherences in a single conservative conception of the work ethic, but if these are different views advanced by different people, it may not be fair to charge them all as sharing an incoherent view. Rather, they might all have different, coherent views.

Similarly, it is unclear what even counts as *work* according to Anderson, so it is hard to begin to circumscribe what might count as a work ethic by, say, focusing only on one’s views about work. What little she says on the topic is by way of adjudicating a debate about whether an ideal life would include work. She briefly endorses Marx’s view that work is a way to realize human freedom, versus John Maynard Keynes’s argument that an ideal society is one in which all engage in leisure and not in work. Her argument is that the astronauts in *Star Trek* are “clearly all working,” and this work is (clearly?) part of a good (and presumably thus also of an ideal?) life (p. 292). They are clearly working because “their activity has an external and significant freely chosen goal,” and because “their pursuit of this goal is systematic, highly organized, and disciplined,” such that “its achievement requires a complex division of labor” (p. 292). But surely leisure can include external and significant freely chosen goals, like if I wish to become the world’s best amateur tennis player, and leisure can also involve a systematic, organized, disciplined pursuit of the goal requiring a complex division of labor, like if myself and some of my friends wish to become the world’s best amateur basketball team. She also argues that the *Star Trek* astronauts “draw a clear distinction between work and leisure” such that “when they are at leisure, they play on the holodeck,” but it is not obvious that work and leisure are the jointly exhaustive categories for human activity or that we can’t draw distinctions between some kinds of leisure and others (p. 292).

Beyond this brief discussion Anderson does not attempt to outline what sets work apart from leisure, let alone explain work thoroughly enough for friends or skeptics of her approach to evaluate its underpinnings. She notes, but does not respond to, potential disagreement on this topic from Thomas Hurka and John Tasioulas (p. 350). There is practically no other engagement with the substantial contemporary philosophical literature on work, for an overview of which see (e.g.) the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on “Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labor” by Michael Cholbi (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/work-labor/>).

Second, there is not much explicit discussion of what we are meant to take from the story about the work ethic’s evolution over time. Besides a rather brief discussion of ideology critique (pp. 123-6) and of the ways in which attention to the partially-forgotten progressive understandings of the work ethic can widen our imaginations, especially insofar as we are economists (pp. 284-90), it is somewhat unclear what the story in the book is meant to accomplish. It is also unclear how it takes itself to have accomplished this. For instance, when we learn that some thinker did or did not endorse the progressive work ethic, does this tell us whether we ought to endorse the progressive work ethic? Does it matter who is on Anderson’s side? Why is it important that we read Locke as getting it mostly right, as opposed to mostly wrong? Or perhaps it is not important, except insofar as we wish to understand what Locke was saying. But if the goal is to enlarge our thinking, especially insofar as we are economists, why is it important what Locke or anyone else thought?

Anderson says the point of the book is to help us imagine richer normative standards and bolder remedies. But some of us (Anderson included) have all along had rich enough normative standards and remedies sufficiently bold: there is nothing she advocates for in this book that hasn’t already been defended by social democrats and fellow travelers (including Anderson herself in previous work). For someone who disagrees with Anderson’s normative recommendations, it is not clear how the book’s historical account will get them to jump ship, expect insofar as they are conservatives who somehow see the light when they read for the hundredth time (or perhaps the first time) that forcing toddlers into workhouses to be fed a little warm water-gruel in the winters is both immoral and ineffective (p. 60).

The book also features a somewhat under-developed argument with respect to its favorite approach, social democracy, as versus the various opponents one might imagine, especially opponents more compelling than the conservatives. Against those like Rosa Luxembourg who reject social democracy’s gradual, anti-revolutionary stance and instead endorse revolutionary means to bring power to the workers, Anderson points out that “these attempts were rapidly crushed wherever they appeared” and on this basis she ignores them (p. 213). It is not clear why having been crushed by the forces of capital amounts to any kind of reason to dismiss a view. One might think the opposite: capital has elected to crush revolutionary views because these stand some chance of effecting real change, while capital deigns to allow social democracy’s gradualism to persist because it knows for every step forward made by the social democrat, capital pushes us two steps back. If this is how it works then we should pay the most attention, rather than no attention, to views that have been rapidly crushed wherever they appeared.

Although I have suggested the book has gaps, there is still much of value in it. Its discussion of Bentham’s “massively implausible” utilitarian arguments for treating the poor in horrific ways is a good reminder of utilitarianism’s liability to reach corrupt conclusions when employed in the throes of ideology (p. 78). To the extent Anderson is correct to claim there is such thing as “the” work ethic and to claim that the conservatives have some sort of coherent view about it, she makes an effective case that this conservative view is morally contemptible and empirically suspect, and that this has been the case throughout its history. And no matter whether one agrees or disagrees that social democracy is the solution and that an ideal society would still involve work, Anderson is surely correct to note that recent democratic backsliding and political polarization, extreme global inequality, and anthropogenic climate change all make it the case that at least for now, “the prospect of a leisure society is well out of sight even if it were desirable. We need to roll up our sleeves and get working” (p. 298).