I Quit! Between Resignation and Refusal

Keith Bloomfield
Embodied Audience
Cecilia Ghidotti
Craig Gent

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00:00 **CRAIG GENT**

Hello and welcome to CDI-TV.

00:03 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**

Welcome everyone.

00:05 **CRAIG GENT**

Welcome everyone. We're beaming in to you today. Unfortunately, Carolina [Bandinelli] has broken her ankle. We're sending our thoughts to Carolina. Michael [Dieter] is otherwise engaged, so I've taken this opportunity to hack into the CDI-TV system, tactical-media-like, and bring you this unsanctioned broadcast. My name is Craig Gent, you might have seen me on the Cyberboss stream or in the comments section below before, and I'm joined today by Cecilia Ghidotti.

Cecilia Ghidotti 00.35

Good afternoon everyone. This is, I think, my first time on this side of the camera, officially.

00:40 **CRAIG GENT**

For sure. How you finding it so far?

00:42 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**

Slightly intimidating, but I'm sure it's going to be fine by the end of it.

00:46 **CRAIG GENT**

I think we'll be fine. Today, we're talking about refusal, quitting, resistance, resignation, all of the good things. And to celebrate we have our Prosecco. Cheers! How do you say cheers in Italian?

01:02 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**
Salute!

1:03 **CRAIG GENT**
Salute. Cheers to our in-person audience, and cheers to the billions beaming in.

01:09 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**
Thank you to the in-person audience for staying here on this summer afternoon and not just leaving ourselves alone to talk to each other - and to the people on the streaming, which are there I suppose.

01:20 **CRAIG GENT**
Well actually that's a great place to start, because this conversation that we're having here... I should explain. We're letting people in on a conversation that's actually been a long-running conversation between Cecilia and I, which began - we were just discussing before, off air - we think maybe with a previous episode of CDI.

01:38 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**
Yeah.

01:38 **CRAIG GENT**

Yeah? So this was the episode with [Alessandro] Gandini, if people remember, on digital disruption, and Cecilia asked a question about neo-Luddism and refusal and these sorts of frameworks, and I went back then to look through Cecilia's work and found that she had done a research seminar in the CMPS here at Warwick sometime before on quitting in the creative industries. And this led to a conversation between us and a few Zoom calls about the ideas.

02:12 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, and then we decided to expand this conversation in this mixed digital and in-person forum, just to set up another conversational event outside the setting of the Teams meeting that may feel a little bit impersonal sometimes.

02:31 CRAIG GENT

Yeah, exactly. And I think this is an extension of the work we've been doing in CDI more broadly, to try to use livestreaming as a research format. So today we're not presenting some piece of work we've prepared to talk about, like a research seminar. This is very much an ongoing conversation between us that I'm sure will continue off-camera as well. But today we want to let you in on it.

02:54 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, we are kind of taking the liberty of having a dialogue, an open dialogue, without having a very strict presentation, like something to deliver, perhaps because the topic we are engaging with is somehow sympathetic to this type of more loose presentation. But yeah, this is an attempt to make this space perhaps a little bit more spontaneous, a little bit less rigid. Let's see how it goes.

03:19 CRAIG GENT

It's a strategy of refusal in action. We'll get there. Cecilia, the first thing I want to ask, and maybe we can ask each other, is we talked a bit before when we were discussing this idea that as well as having an intellectual engagement with quitting, with refusal, with resignation, with resistance, we each have a sort of personal history with these ideas, not necessarily because we're quitters or refusers, but these we've gravitated towards these ideas somehow over a period of time. Maybe because of some political sympathies or also some observations. Do you want to go first? Let me hear about how you came to quitting.

CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, absolutely, because when we started thinking and designing this, I went back and thought how I have been, let's say, receptive to the topic of quitting. And I had to recognise that it doesn't come from a theoretical lineage, but from like a few specific experiences which have to do with my biography. And I think that as academics sometimes we don't have the opportunity to connect some moments of our biographies to our intellectual interests, so I wanted to take the space of this forum today to open up a little bit on that, even if there is an element, for me, of vulnerability to go on camera and telling you a bit of my intellectual biography, but I hope it's not too boring or too meaningless.

Basically, my connection with quitting traces back to one experience when I was a student at the University of Bologna around 2007-08, and that was the moment of one of the many university reforms brought about by the Italian government in a very neoliberal sense, the change of the recruitment for researchers and so on. At the same time we were, as students, into a module which was all about studying some American writers, and among them it was the case of [Herman] Melville and the history of Bartleby, the Scrivener. So somehow the protest against this reform of the university merged with this ideal type of character. This Scrivener in Melville's story is a character who is committed to a continuous act of refusal. He

keeps saying "I would prefer not to" to any type of task which is assigned to him, and this leads to a downward spiral which has not, let's say, a very positive outcome. However, as a part of the student movement, we took that character, which then became the name of an occupied space. It became the name of a place of resistance, because it was actually an occupied space in our university building. And, on a level, we used the figures of Bartleby and his resistance as a space of negative resistance to build something oppositional and positive. We hosted concerts, lectures, and this type of thing.

So I think that my idea that quitting - it's not necessarily giving up, it's not necessarily a space of negativity, it's not a space of not being able to do anything, but actually a space of opposition that can lead to something - traces back to that experience in my university year in Bologna. Obviously, that space doesn't exist anymore because the university took it back because they wanted to do some sort of residence for the students. The space is actually still very much empty, and very much taking up the example of someone who said no, they ended up building something, and then in the end, those who were institutionally in charge of building something into the space didn't. So, yeah, that was perhaps my original interest in quitting, and then there's all the lineage of being in Bologna and the connection with what was left of all the autonomist tradition, but we can talk about that later. What about you?

08:04 CRAIG GENT

For me, interestingly, a similar experience. Maybe a few years after you I went to university. Well, I went to university in 2008, I dropped out, I worked for a couple of years, I lost my job, I decided to go back into higher education. So from 2010 I was a student in higher education, and at this point in time, there was a growing awareness of what the cuts proposed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition [government] were going to mean for civil society and for education. Like many students, I participated in quite ordinary demonstrations and things that were happening around that time.

But it was an interesting political movement because we started off with demonstrations and then we moved into occupations also, and this was a real space where you're surrounded by fellow activists 24/7 and you're exchanging ideas with them. And we were very much waiting for the labour movement to catch up with us. They did in 2011, in the March of that year, with a big demonstration organised by the Trades Union Congress, and the framing of the march was a big disappointment to a lot of students because it was all around marching for jobs and this kind of thing, and at the time we were beginning to encounter ideas around anti-work politics, or the autonomist tradition in Italy, which many Italians I speak to find it amusing that autonomous Marxism...

09:58 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

The type of reception... Yes, yes.

10:02 CRAIG GENT

[Laughs] ...has had such a life in the imaginations of so many British leftists. But we had begun to say, "we're not marching for more work; we're marching for a liberation from work." We were trying to imagine a different kind of society which would be the polar opposite of austerity cuts, but nor would it rely on a certain kind of social democratic settlement that clearly had, particularly by the time of the global financial crisis in 2008, had crumbled and seemed never to return. And so around that time, I ended up meeting a lot of activists from previous generations of a longer political struggle who were broadly leftwing libertarians, many of whom had been involved with activism in Italy in particular. This is going to be a recurring theme. It was an archivist and militant called Seth Wheeler, who has documented many critical moments of political upheaval in this country, who introduced me to the ideas of autonomia. Autonomia was a political movement really beginning with operaismo or workerism in the late 50s and 60s in Italy, and by the 70s had become a street movement with a big student presence, and - as was happening across all shades of the

political spectrum in Italy at the time - also [had] a sort of paramilitary faction to it as well. All these different factions were sort of fighting for the soul of Italian society in one way or another. Through becoming exposed to these ideas, they shook up for me, as was the intention back in the 70s, a certain orthodoxy around what, for example, trade unions are for, or what left wing parties are for, or what kind of world we want to exist. And these were very much dissenting from an orthodox Marxist perspective. Instead of saying we want to valorize our role as workers within a working class, they said if we want to abolish class society, that also means abolishing ourselves as workers and disengaging from these categories instead of romanticising them, which was obviously a very radical thing to do at the time. And I won't say there were enormous numbers of people doing it in the 2010s but there were a few people giving it a good shake. Shortly afterwards, I became involved with a project that was founded right out of that movement called Novara Media. People often ask where it gets its name. When I speak to Italians, they say this is like calling a cool leftwing media project 'Dagenham Media' or something, because Novara is an industrial town in northern Italy, in the Piedmont region. But it was the location and setting of a film that was very, very influential for us called Lulu the Tool in the US, or The Working Class Goes to Heaven - La classe operaia va in paradiso. How did I do?

13:24 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**

Very well!

13:25 **CRAIG GENT**

Very well(!) Okay, so this is a film about a worker with a strongly Stakhanovite ethos who goes about his work as if it's his whole entire being. And we see through the film how even his libido has been attuned to the rhythms of his work when he's working on his lathe. One day he loses a finger, and it completely upturns his worldview when he realises that the management, that the union, that no one cares about the fact that he's lost his finger in this role

where he's been giving his life. And outside every day, there are these autonomist students who, rather provocatively, are often arguing with the trade unions. They're saying to the workers, "You go into this factory when it is dark, and you come out when it's dark - the sun will not shine for you." And, you know, is this the world we want to live in? Now, of course, this is a very romantic notion, but within this is the idea of refusal. I suppose we can get into the ways that we've engaged with these ideas so far, but that was it for me.

14:25 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

We are taking our time to share our genealogies, but also I want to acknowledge that there are people in this room, so in case you want to intervene, you want to ask questions, you want to make your contribution, we don't necessarily need to wait until the end for that moment of silence where we ask for questions and there are no questions, and someone then builds up the courage to say something. So please, if you want to add something, feel free to and we'll share them with great pleasure. I wanted to respond to you. You clearly traced a genealogy which has to do with the social movement of the 70s, and with a sort of setting-up of work which was very different from nowadays. The way in which I engaged with this topic of not wanting to work, disengaging with the idea of work, or the ideology of work, for me was a very marginal interest, because there was nothing really happening out there at a societal level. And then boom, it's 2020, we are in the aftermath of the first Covid wave. Then, all of a sudden - at least from my perspective - quitting work, refusal, 'the great resignation'. It's up in the newspaper. It's up on the media. And it seems that the relationship with work as it has been built during the 80s, the 90s, and until 2019-20, has undergone a seismic shift and is not there anymore. People are starting to say, "Oh, I don't want to do this anymore." And there are waves of resignation, especially in the US, but also in China, in Italy. And despite those people not having any better alternative open, and absolutely not evolving into our existing

sociopolitical movement, they are quitting anyway. So I was like, "Okay, there's there's something there yet." Those ideas around strategic refusal and saying no to a certain type of embodiment of the ideology of work, there's something there that is now resonating again, so I went back to this constellation of interests of mine, and then I focused on aspiring creative workers giving up their idea of becoming workers. But that's a different strand. So, I was taken by surprise around 2020 around this wave of quitting. Was this the same for you? Were you more prepared? And what do you think about the present circumstances?

17:49 CRAIG GENT

I suppose one of the things that happened with the pandemic was that it clearly made a lot of people realise that life is certainly short and limited, and obviously sadly a lot of people were directly affected by the enormous death count, but it also made people focus on either their work because they were an essential worker and they had to go out to work, or their work because they were forced to work from home, and suddenly they had to reorganise their home space around work and be hyper-aware of whether they're connected, or able to disconnect or not. Or, of course, people were - in this country - on furlough, and I'm sure that there were similar parallels in other countries as well, that gave people access to what is outside of work, which I think, particularly for many people who had maybe over-identified with their work, was quite liberatory. But I suppose this gets into an area that I know is important in your work, where people begin to - I'm going to use the word 'resist' again, for want of a better one - but [resist] almost the categories of certain types of worker, particularly in certain types of industries. Because I think what we saw with the 'great resignation' was a few different things. Some people are choosing to, essentially, quit one job in order to bargain for a better market position within what is actually a very similar job, but also people choosing to adopt a different career direction entirely and to jettison the connections they had made, or the identity in life that

they had made for themselves with a particular type of work, in favour of something that was more favourable to them. I wonder how this maps onto your work [in which] you've looked at workers in the creative industries who have almost rejected a certain kind of idealised model or character of, for example, 'the writer'. And I wonder what that has meant to them too?

CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah. I mean, I didn't look directly at workers, it was always aspiring workers. There is a level of disconnection between, let's say, people who are actually employed and paid for doing a job and those who are still in the process of trying to make it, so perhaps it's different from what you've seen in your research, where you were looking more at actions of sabotage. So perhaps this idea of not still being a worker opens up different pathways for them. But in general, what I've noticed is that in the scholarship on media and creative industries, there is a lot of research on the subjectivities of cultural workers, the working conditions, these ideal types of intellectual worker who have to comply to a series of unwritten rules which have to do with being flexible, being ready to accept any type of condition in the name of desire or desired identity as a 'creative worker'. Since the early 2000s onwards, research has shown how tech workers are flexible, how TV workers accept [exploitative working] conditions in the name of their creative identities. What I found interesting was that I've encountered some people who said, "Okay, I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this anymore" even while they were still in-the-making, when they were still trying to do something, they stepped out of this game, and for various reasons - because they didn't want to adhere to [being] either type of creative worker, quoting the matrix of running across projects, and somehow their refusal was related to "I have a different attachment to my idea of culture." So these people, they were saying, "I want to take pleasure in reading books. I want to take pleasure in writing. I don't find that the type of jobs that are

available to me are giving me that." It's a very privileged position. And in the end, they didn't end up succeeding in a traditional sense, because some of them, they could do this because they were from the upper-middle class, so they had other means, others just gave up their more creative identities, and according to some studies just the idea of enrolling in a creative degree is proof of the intention of developing a creative identity. However, I still find deserving of attention these type of acts. They are not immediately productive. They are not like ingrained into any political or union-type form of activism. But I think by the very fact of existing, they remind us that there are spaces of resistance, even if, in the end, as Bartleby ends up in the graveyard (metaphorically) part of these end up being a little bit destructive. There is a book called *The Queer Art of Failure* that says there is a value in 'unbecoming', in making mistakes, in poking holes in the toxic positivity of everyday life. [1] And this is what I resonate with. So I'm not saying we should all go out and just quit everything, because I know that's not likely, but paying attention to this phenomenon as well as other phenomena, I think is something that should find space in the intellectual discussion, in academia, just to open up and remind ourselves that there is a way out, even if we are all deeply ingrained in late capitalism's structures - we are all witnessing as passive testimonies what's happening in Gaza; I mean, I'm just opening up a little bit because this has to do with cultivating spaces of resistance and recognising where resistance is happening. I don't know if this makes sense at all for you, or for anyone in the room, or for anyone in the streaming. Also we are not monitoring the chat of the streaming. Keith, is there is anyone in the chat asking things. Please let us know in case.

25:05 **CRAIG GENT**

Yeah, begin putting your questions in the chat and then we can also get to them as well. What you're saying at the beginning there is interesting because it really resonates. And also bring it back to

Bartleby, the Scrivener, it makes me think of my experience of coming to these ideas for the first time, particularly as a student activist, when a very popular refrain or idea at the time was the idea of the 'graduate without a future', and the idea that essentially the graduate jobs promised to a whole generation of students were evaporating before our eyes. And of course, it's not that there were no jobs as such, but they were very precarious jobs. Our totemic figure, for many of us, was actually from Italy, again, which was the figure of San Precario, the invented patron saint of precarious workers.

26:00 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**

Yeah, I think that comes from the EuroMayday Parade in the early 2000s when fashion workers in Milan, I think they came up originally with this San Precario figure, and it was also given out during the demonstrations.

26:16 **CRAIG GENT**

Yeah, I have one of the original badges. We were also taking this on our demonstrations into the streets of London, there was the Precarious Workers Brigade who would carry through the streets an enormous paper mache carrot to symbolise the carrot that was constantly being dangled in front of artists and other aspiring creatives. I also think the latter part of what you're talking about there makes me think maybe I can explain a little of what Tronti was speaking about with this idea of refusal. Mario Tronti in the in the 60s becomes this very influential figure within operaismo and autonomism, and is most influential in this country for essentially two essays, because for years and years, until *Workers and Capital* was translated just a couple of years ago, [2] they were the only pieces of his writing that were actually translated into English. So they were 'Lenin in England' and 'The Strategy of Refusal'. [3] And in 'The Strategy of Refusal' - well, in both these essays - essentially he's inverting what was the Marxist orthodoxy, theorising the development of capitalism, which basically said that capitalists

decide how they want to innovate, and then it's up to trade unions or Labour parties or workers' parties to catch up and try to mediate the worst excesses of this system, and this is how capitalism develops. He inverts this. It's called the Trontian inversion, or occasionally the Copernican inversion within Tronti's thought, which is to say that it's the working class itself and working-class struggle and refusal that creates crisis, a crisis of accumulation within capital, then capitalists are forced to innovate and to develop, and so on. Now, clearly, this just creates a cycle of never-ending capitalist development, and the idea behind the strategy of refusal is to try to find a way to create forms of life outside of capitalist work and to somehow break this, but he says that it begins with workers expressing, even at the individual level, their active dissatisfaction, through which maybe - and this is the real leap of faith, of course - through which maybe they can begin to collectivize this dissatisfaction and refuse en masse which, in his essay, demonstrates, visibilizes the dependency of labour on which all of capital relies. But more than that, this idea was taken up - particularly in the 70s - to mean not only refusing necessarily capitalist work itself, but also the temporalities, the rhythms, the colonisation of the minds that happens when subjected to forms of capitalist work. In this sort of lineage of thinking, to say "I would prefer not to" becomes something that's a radically political act rather than merely a selfish one.

29:35 CECILIA GHIDOTTI
Yeah, absolutely. When you said that Tronti's writings have been translated only recently, you seemed to imply that, for instance, there is a lineage of an Italian reception which was more efficient at keeping those ideas alive, but I probably would say that's not the case. Also, the microphones are quitting something, even technology is not with us anymore.

30:14 CRAIG GENT
[Laughs]

30:14 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

No, that's what I just wanted to add. That heritage, that lineage of ideas was not really something that was kept alive in Italy, because all these efforts of the late 70s were obviously very disruptive for society, and somehow they ended up being absorbed into the not even competing two forces of heroin by one side, and also the armed formation and terrorism [on the other]. A lot of these ideas were somehow dismantled by these two forces. And what was potentially revolutionary or disruptive of this idea that the working class is somehow taking the lead in the opposition against capitalism was very much something that by the end of the 70s, the early 80s, was not there anymore. So the late reception of these line of thoughts in the British sphere is even more curious from the Italian perspective because the general narrative in Italy is that those social movements ended up being destroyed [by] drugs, heroin, or being put in jail because [of the] perceived association with the 'red terrorism', pretty much.

31:55 CRAIG GENT

Maybe I can say something on that, which is it's important to say the grave irony of all this is that Tronti went on to become a leading and not particularly leftwing social democrat, and when it was his turn in government, was actually advocating for austerity and all sorts of things. It's a sort of bitter irony. But I think I can say something about how those ideas entered into the British context, which is that there was, since the 70s, a movement of initially - if you can imagine such a thing - dissident Trotskyists, particularly around the groups like Big Flame, who had been organising within workplaces and began to have a serious engagement with feminist praxis that led them to critique the more productivist and masculinist forms of organising that were happening around British Trotskyism at the time, and led them to thinking seriously about the realm of social reproduction. They then begin to engage with ideas

of the social worker, or the socialised worker, within the thought of people like Antonio Negri. This begins to die out until the 90s, when it's reignited by a growing movement around the Anti-Roads Movement in Britain and then the Alter-Globalisation Movement and its British contingent here. Then, of course, we get Antonio Negri and Michael Hart's book *Empire*, which becomes a very, very unlikely bestseller in the year 2000 and then it seems to snowball from there. But I think it's important to say that although many of the activists involved in Italy at the time did, because of political repression, end up in very bad situations, in prison or on drugs, many of them also ended up in the academy.

This is maybe a good point at which to segue into our final section before we open up, which is to say that what was happening in Britain in the 90s, at the time when these ideas were being retaken up, was that many people who saw themselves as refusing a capitalist mode of work were signing onto the dole. And they were signing onto the dole because it was just about liveable, and they could pursue both political activism and artistic creation through doing so. Clearly, as we go into the 21st century, the conditions living on unemployment benefit are no longer able to support that, and many of them at this point in time are pleased to find out that the higher education sector is rapidly expanding, and so many of them become PhD students and academics, and they join higher education as a means to pursue their intellectual pursuits in a relatively shielded environment. I should say that Novara Media began and was viable in the very first case not because of any sort of seed funding, but because a number of the core members, myself included, had PhD funding that allowed us to essentially work on an alternative media project more or less full time until our final years. Obviously, the circumstances of academia now seem somewhat different to how they [were] for many of my older comrades and colleagues who were joining academia in the 90s and 2000s, but maybe this is a good point at which to turn the lens back onto ourselves.

35:50 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah. We were thinking about if academia still offers space to cultivate dissent and space for thinking about quitting, because our line of analysis around quitting also comes via the analysis of academics, especially in the US, which at some point decided to quit and produce a variety of autobiographical essays, around the year 2015, about not being able to put up anymore with the neoliberal condition of contemporary academia, the need to write grants, the 'publish or perish' system, all the bureaucracy involved into academia. At some point when we were having this conversation about quitting, I was saying, "And what about us? What about us as people who are involved in processes of critical thinking who are not particularly happy about how academia is at the moment? Is there any space for this type of action of subterfuge, quiet refusal? What type of shape this action could take? Should we - I don't know - sabotage some type of institutional demands? Is there a way out there?" And so we thought that this could be a question that was happening for us, but also for someone in the streaming or for someone in the room.

37:35 **CRAIG GENT**

I'm imagining a global cabal of pissed-off academics going to find MS Teams servers and giving it a good jiggle inside, and saying, "Stop robbing me of hours of my life."

37:51 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**

Yeah, you know what happened with the Waymo cars in San Francisco or in Seattle? Somewhere in the US. LA, sorry. People went out and physically destroyed those self-driving cars. So, yeah, something of the like.

38:12 **CRAIG GENT**

In fact, they were calling the Waymo cars to their location en masse, so then you would have 10 Waymo cars turn up to one place.

38:22 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

And then they proceeded to sabotage them. Let's put sabotage into brackets. Unfortunately, we cannot call Teams up physically here to do something and to act on that, despite [that] it would be probably a great act of a smaller sabotage. Basically this was what we ended up thinking [about]. Also this initial idea of neo-Luddism has to be an interrogation about quitting. Does it need to be productive, or is it enough just to open the conversation in the room? Should we do something more on top of this? Or just naming the names, a certain someone said that naming was a creation act, so it was enough. There was also a matter [that] I think stemmed from another seminar that you led: What's the point in sabotaging, refusing? What's the point if it doesn't evolve into something else? Is it enough just to open the conversation? Or should we do something else as individuals, as academics? So, this is where we are coming from and where we are opening our questions.

39:44 CRAIG GENT

Precisely. Well, with that, we can go to any questions we may have in the room or online, Keith?

39:51 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Comments also.

39:51 KEITH BLOOMFIELD

No questions online just at the moment, so I'll hand the microphone out into the audience.

39:56 CRAIG GENT

All right, any questions from the audience? This is an interesting question while the mic is going around Cecilia, because I think that in the 60s and 70s, it was enough to advocate for trying to find the exit, I think, and then certain propositional ways of living outside of the system were maybe attractive to a minority of people, but primarily it was about trying to expose, trying to use quitting or refusal to demonstrate something about the way that work is organised in society. Clearly, a certain amount of work will always be needed for society to keep going. That's never in question. But the way it's organised within capitalism is in question, and for those thinkers this was a way that they could achieve that. I myself never quite know, and particularly at the moment when we're living in a sort of renaissance of neo-Luddism, as unlikely as that might seem to some people initially, I wonder whether the tendency to want to propose something - well what is the alternative? - is coming from a place of political desire and efficacy and that's the right instinct to have, or whether that is simply imposed onto the conversation as a condition for having the opinion dissenting from the thing in the first place.

41:27 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I wish I had an answer for this...

41:29 CRAIG GENT

Me too...

41:30 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

...but I don't think there is one.

CRAIG GENT

...but David may have an answer.

EMBODIED AUDIENCE

I most certainly don't have an answer to that. This was a really fascinating discussion. And thank you for laying out actually some quite complicated theoretical ideas in a really accessible way. I felt that was really helpful. I'm conscious I might be about to out myself on the internet as a dangerous moderate, but I'm going to do it anyway. I'm just wondering about actually pushing you on these things that you were talking about towards the end about what do you do after you quit? What are you quitting from and to? And is quitting, in this instance, really just an evaluation between different types of work for different kinds of purpose, in a context in which we need to work to survive, right? I mean, there's a basic kind of flaw attached to that. I think these ideas are really attractive and really good to think with, but I'm also conscious that not everyone feels that way about their work. It is entirely possible, as much as we might be sniffy about it, or as much as it might be possible for Marxist theorists to be disappointed by it, it's entirely possible for people to like their work and, indeed, to use work as a source of dignity in the world. And I'm just wondering what we do with that sense that work itself might be a source for the distribution of a certain kind of justice.

42:27 **CRAIG GENT**

Thank you, David. Cecilia?

CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Thank you, David. I think it's super interesting. I wanted to start by answering the first bit, but now I want to start from the end. What we do with people who enjoy their work and they find a moment of self-fulfilment or partial self-fulfilment? I think it's great. I don't think that any of these strands of reflections is saying let's just focus on that. It's a matter of having different discourses opened at the same time. When I say that, for instance, in the creative industries, the focus is on those who are doing the work - you've done a lot of work on that - I don't think the two things exclude each other. They can coexist at the same time. And thinking about time, you said, what do we do with quitting now? I'm not summing up your question and [doing] it justice, but what I'm trying to point out is temporality.

When we discuss about quitting, the way in which I think about it is that it is not a definite condition. It is not a final condition. To me, talking about quitting, refusal, resignation, this type of constellation, has to do with flexible temporalities. We increasingly live lives which are no longer ordered in that fashion: study, work, permanent job, marriage, etc. My approach to quitting has to do with that porosity of the condition, with the reversibility of that. So it's not that quitting is once and for all. It can be back and forth. If you think about life's temporal lines, it can be a portion of time of someone's biography, and then it can be something else. A notable example is Simone Biles, the Olympic athlete - I make an example which is an excellence - but she's notably an example of someone who very visibly quit citing her mental health, whatever, but then she came back. The way in which I approach quitting is very much flexible and very, very much related to the, let's say, precariousness of contemporary working life arrangements. I also recognise that there is a class dimension in quitting which we didn't engage with. There is an intersectional dimension of quitting. Also you can quit from work, but what about non-paid work in everyday life. There is

all the lineage of feminist thought about quitting domestic work. There's also that. What about people not living in the North of the world? What about people living in - I'm saying this very badly - in the Global South; they don't have the same type of ingrainment with the job, and they don't have the same approach to quitting. However, there are studies about, for instance, like migrant workers quitting despite their precarious life conditions. So there's a lot to do to unpack this notion, to open it up to different temporalities, different geographies, different subjectivities. We are very much at the beginning of quitting here.

CRAIG GENT

[Laughs] I had a flashback to my childhood then, which is [that] I feel like my whole childhood, my mum - who was a single parent - organised her entire life really around the refusal of work and doing as little work as possible so that she could focus on socially useful things, such as volunteering and raising children. I suppose there's an historical answer to what many of these activists - particularly in the 70s - did, which is that for many of them they did try to explore alternative forms of living on the conviction that capitalism itself - this way of living - depends on people doing stuff. Right now, we have to do it for a wage. But we can imagine a world in which we can still do the stuff, but it doesn't work within capitalist social relations. Obviously, you know [Mark] Fisher quoting [Slavoj] Zizek, quoting [Frederic] Jameson, etc., etc. say it's easier now to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Which is not a conviction that they think needs to stop there. People always get them wrong on this. The world and the social relations we have now already depend on our labour, but the organisation of labour under capitalism is not within our control. I think it's a really pertinent point Cecilia makes to say that maybe this is not about a strategy of exiting capitalism as such, but actually one about a certain form of leverage. Not with any particular employer, but in terms of regaining a sense of control over one's own life and the ability to exit conditions that are not favourable to us. The question, of

course, is when that happens, what is the support in place to do that?

I would think that is where, for a lot of autonomists, they would say, "Well, this is why we organise politically in addition to whatever we're doing. This is why, during the Covid pandemic, we do run mutual aid groups, and things like that, so we actually organise at a social level." And this is many intellectual traditions, right? You know, the Black Panther Party people like to refer to their breakfast scheme for kids and so on, which was self-organised, rather than some sort of benefactor giving them money to do that. The other thing I would say, maybe in response to the point about not everyone feeling this way about their work, and maybe feeling a sense of dignity in it. With Cecilia, I don't see a problem with this. But I suppose, in the spirit of making visible the social relations of work and of capitalism, maybe part of the idea that's underpinning these is about making visible the fact that work won't love you back. That is a title of a great book by my friend and in a different part of life, my co-host on a podcast I run, Sarah Jaffe. [4] In her book - she's a labour journalist - she spoke to many different types of workers, creative workers and non-creatives, but all in forms of work that almost typify the idea that "if you can do something you love, then you won't work a day in your life." And of course the reality of that is really complicated, including for people working in the academy as well. But it is the truth, and I do believe this, that work won't love you back. And we can probably all think of people in our lives who have absolutely committed themselves to work only to find at some crucial moment - a redundancy or something else - that actually they are dispensable. They're fundamentally dispensable, which is a very crushing experience. So I suppose there's a point in here about making that social relation visible so that we can have a certain - I wouldn't say necessarily a class consciousness - but a certain consciousness towards the social relations of work.

51:15 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**

I don't have anything to add to this, except how much of this is related to the work of Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back*. Also, there is another book which was really influential for me, which is Francesca Coin, *The Great Resignation*, which was out in Italy a couple of years ago and I think it's going to be published in October in the English translation. [5] There is a set of books that are working on this topic.

51:46 CRAIG GENT

Great, I haven't read that one.

51:48 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I think we can try to host her for one of our meetings next year. Jonathan?

51:57 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Fascinating discussion, which is bringing back some memories. I've got a half-baked comment/question, and it goes back to an essay I read years ago, as a student probably, by Adorno, called 'Resignation'. [6] He wrote it in the late 20s, because at the height of the student movement in Germany, he was becoming pilloried as the representative of the Frankfurt School who students thought were becoming bourgeois in their old age, old scholars sitting in offices when they should be on the streets at the barricades, actually changing things. Adorno became a target, but he was locked into his Hegelian theory of history, where he did believe that there was a time when collective action could have brought about the collapse of capitalism back in the 20s, but that time had passed, and that he accused the student movements of collective action of exhibiting all the social behaviours of the kind of Nazi and fascist groups that he had witnessed 15 years

before. And so there was this huge row, this huge public debate over 'what are the conditions for freedom?' This is the interesting question about quitting. It's a kind of an emancipatory call, isn't it? It's another call for freedom. And he would say that the material conditions for freedom no longer exist, which is why you attempt any collective action, you will simply mimic forms of power and domination that are endemic to any kind of mass politics. Populism is as common on the right as it is on the left. So his response in the essay 'Resignation' was to say, look, all we have left is the centre of modern subjectivity, which is the critical reflexivity of the intellect. So the lone intellectual becomes the last gasp of collective politics. But he does work it out with this essay, which is all about the relation between theory and practice, praxis, you know, and what's the role of the intellectual? Is there a role for professors and academics and intellectuals? Not on the streets, but in the universities, sitting in their offices, writing. He would say that because the material conditions for collective action no longer exist, they will only re-emerge as intellectual forms, so the materiality of intellectual production can provide those conditions. But not yet. It's going to take a lot more work on behalf of intellectuals and thinkers and artists to construct those.

Now, that train of thought, to me, is kind of inflected by a lot of cries for quitting on behalf of American YouTubers in the so-called productivity genre of 'quiet quitting' and - how would you put it? - my favourite phenomenon in this is the 'slow professor movement' [laughs], and that is, "let's go slow, everyone". Which was an old factory/union technique, but there's a lot of versions of so-called 'quiet quitting' and 'slow production'. And I'm wondering whether you think

those are just, as Adorno would think, kinds of therapeutic imaginaries of effectively pretending we can make capitalism humane, and yet it can't be. The flipside to Adorno's critical autonomy of the intellect is all the people who don't engage in intellectual production, which is probably 98% of people, all they have left is just trying to make their lives more comfortable and endure everyday work by making their life humane, using the resources they have, by going slower. You mentioned temporality, subverting the temporalities of capitalism, or subverting the aesthetics of capitalism, because that's all we can do. Sorry, jumble of thoughts.

57:52   CECILIA GHIDOTTI

No, no. Thank you for this. I don't know if I have anything very meaningful to contribute to this because I think this part of the conversation was to build a space where we can have a dialogue about this. I think that the 'quiet quitting' bit - this is something obviously that I've looked at, but also what I've noticed is that people who are into quitting somehow, they tend to love very much their work or [are] not loving it. The 'quiet quitter' side seems to call for a sort of detachment from the work, which is perhaps not really possible for those who are quitting from a position of love for the work, because they don't feel represented in it anymore, because it requires a lot of constrainment just doing the barely necessary. There was a song from the 70s in Italy called 'Lavorare con lentezza', 'Working Really Slowly', [which] went on saying, "Without making any effort, who works faster injures themselves. They end up in the hospital." But to do that, you really don't have to have that attachment to work or to the ideal of work that somehow, for me, is behind the decision of breaking up directly with work. It's not an answer to your comment, but this is what it made me think, so yeah.

59:42 CRAIG GENT

Well, I suppose the first thing to say is that we're all about the half-baked. We are indeed baking. This is, this is the baking. In CDI-TV, we don't want to present the final idea. We're always already in the process of baking.

59:48 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Let's hope we are in the oven and we are not the snails in the pot who don't notice how the water is getting warmer and warmer, because that would be a problem.

1:00:13 CRAIG GENT

My actual first thing is that I think Adorno should have joined his students in the street, and that didn't preclude him ever being in the office either. You can do both. Other theorists we can think of have done both. Foucault did both. Franco Piperno did both. I think that the point about whether or not... Tronti would say that - and I say "Tronti would say" not because I think he's the authority, but because this is an essential idea that underpins a whole kind of intellectual tradition - but that tradition would say that capitalist development never gives us freedom. It's not about a point in time at which we missed the opportunity for freedom or not. There's definitely an assertion of agency over this idea of a Hegelian structure to historical development.

But more than that - and we haven't really said the word very much - an identification of autonomy, a fundamental autonomy. This means two different things within autonomia. The first is a recognition of the working class's ability - and by working class these guys mean all of us; people who have to work for a living, and who aren't able to make money because they own property or because they employ workers - [to] act directly, without representation from trade unions or from workers' parties or Labour

parties, and doesn't need to wait for them. They have a complicated relationship to those things; they're not completely independent - people like Tronti, etc, were in their respective socialist, or at that time communist, parties. The Communist Party of Italy, which was anti-Stalinist but had a million members, it was the largest Communist Party in Western Europe, and a real social force. So they would have it the other way around: that the working class is able to act already. But more than that, they also think that in terms of the Labour relation, that workers' autonomy - inherent autonomy - is fundamental to the possibility of freedom. Because labour does retain a fundamental autonomy. That is also, I should say, recognised by labour process theorists, who - alongside the operaista Raniero Panzari - refer to the 'unplannable element' of capitalist organisation. So when putting together the enterprise, certain means of production need to be acquired, certain commodities, etc. And one commodity is labour-power. Labour-power is a commodity unlike other commodities in that it is a potential and needs to be actualized in the process of work, and therefore it's a fundamentally unplannable element, and that's why we have bureaucracies within work as a means to try to tame and ensure what the labour process theorists call 'certainty of result'. I think on the role of the intellectual... I mean, I think there's always a role for the intellectual, but I don't believe the only intellectuals in society are those who are professors. I don't know if this is a popular opinion or an unpopular one, but I think that Professor, etc, these are fundamentally job titles that describe a certain amount of, primarily, administrative responsibility within universities, and don't necessarily speak to the weight of intellect behind the person. We know that from the people who have been running Dundee University, for example, who are all professors. Shout out to everyone who's been fighting for their jobs at Dundee University. But many of these thinkers themselves were intellectuals too. They were worker-intellectuals conducting co-research and workers inquiries in not just heavily industrial factories, but also downstream manufacturing plants, they were working in creative industries and so on. They were artists and dropouts and all sorts. So I think there's a role for intellectualism, and I certainly decry the

anti-intellectualism of - as they were - decrying the anti-intellectualism of the orthodox Marxist parties, who would say, "You don't really need to be able to think for yourselves about the kind of life you want, because the Central Committee is going to sort that out for you." From the left, they were dissenting from precisely that kind of mentality that was like an anti-intellectual tradition in favour of a much more liberatory decolonization of the mind from the kind of constraints of capitalism. I think we have time for one more question maybe, because we're running against time. João, please.

1:05:28 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Apologies if I'm slower and more incoherent than usual because of a bad episode of insomnia last night. To be honest, what always fascinated me in Marx wasn't his materialist writing which Engels, I think, in the third preface to either the Communist Manifesto or The German Ideology, says that...

1:05:51 CRAIG GENT

We're being tested now [laughs].

1:05:52 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

...it was an over-determination by Marx to be so materialist, because it was a reaction against the Idealism which was prevalent at the time. What really attracted me was always the thing in his Eighteenth Brumaire, like "the ideologies of generations past haunt the..." you know, that kind of writing really riveted me. So my question is perhaps a little bit provocative, and I think it puts us a little bit in a tangent. Because my question isn't really about changes in the job market, or really about post-Fordism and how that affects the capitalist dynamic,

etc. I think that many times what is lost in leftwing discourse is - I'm sorry, this is such a cliche: I'm a man and I'm 19 years old, and I'm talking here about Nietzsche, but - what Nietzsche called a spiritual crisis, right? Which is a very important dynamic in not only [the] Western side, but throughout the globe you see all that. There's a technological dynamic which is affecting all of us, which is progressing no matter what the Luddites do. There's, of course, capitalism, so a more economic dimension, and then there's a social-cultural dimension as well. In the beginning, you mentioned resistance and there were some references to that. Cecilia and Craig, you probably mentioned resistance in a more leftwing way, but I am actually perhaps more familiar with resistance which is more conservative or even reactionary. Every Sunday, I speak with people in my parish who have a tremendous desire of resistance and you can call something else but resistance against the modern world, and against this spiritual crisis, or this social-cultural dynamic, whatever you want to call it. I think that this phenomenon of 'the great resignation', etc, etc - everything that you mentioned - abstracting it from all the categories - David was saying like, "Oh, I'm quitting this job to maybe find another job or another type of job." - I mean, it's a bit deeper than that, and I'm sorry that I'm really taking this into a very idealist dimension, but I think it's important to share this more epistemic outlook sometimes, which is important. And I think it's missed out a lot in leftwing discourse. It's something that really sometimes annoys me. So I want to have both your opinions on that. To what extent is this phenomenon of 'great resignation' and these changes in the capitalist structure affecting, you know, the spiritual lives of people. How does that affect people raising families, for example? How does post-Fordism, or whatever you want to call it, affect

the creation of families, our lives? You know, how we lead our youth? That's been changing a lot in the last decades. Whatever you can think of. But more in that dimension, and not just sometimes in a very materialist way that... It's really what attracts me in Marxism.

1:10:03 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Wow. I am always fascinated by the level of depth that you manage to add to the conversations, because - I mean, yeah, you are 19 years, idealistic, something - but we've seen you over these seminars contributing with this kind of depth, which is, I think it's a gift, having the possibility of talking at this level.

1:10:29 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Not on camera [laughs].

1:10:31 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Not on camera, okay, we'll delete that, right Keith?

1:10:37 KEITH BLOOMFIELD

It's out there now!

1:10:41 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I don't know if I'm able to give an answer at this level of complexity, but I think what came to my mind while you were talking was that the processes that we were describing about the more recent 'great resignation', or doubts related to the way in which lives are organised in post-capitalist society, they mostly are not framed under a theoretical framework which is specifically leftist, I would say. Perhaps that's more our framework, our approach to these phenomenon. But even in

the books - the Sarah Jaffe books that we mentioned, Francesca Coin books that we mentioned - those processes, I think, are happening at a more let's call it spiritual, let's call it personal level. Then let's say politically informed level, because - quoting again Francesca Coin's book, because it's the one I read more recently - she framed the process of breaking up with work as like a broken marriage, so a relationship that doesn't work anymore, and it's not specifically seen under a political lens. I don't know if your question comes from place of slight discomfort related to your political positioning in these processes, but I would say that there is space for your sensibility, for your perspective in the analysis of this phenomena, even if you don't feel that you are necessarily aligned with, let's say, a more or less orthodox leftist position. Because I think that in reading the process of quitting or sabotage, you don't need to pledge faith to a certain type of political direction. If you have the sensitivity, if you have the eyes to see those phenomena and they interest you, there is space for you to interpret and understand that, even without necessarily adhering to a certain theoretical framework. I don't know if it has to do with your question, but this is what hit me from your question. This would be my answer. I know it's not completely an answer, but this is what I can intellectually produce this afternoon in June [laughs].

1:13:41 CRAIG GENT

I have a few things I want to say. One is this. I suppose there's a point here which is the political point. I think particularly because Marxists - and I am a Marxist, sorry to everyone, sorry to my parents, I am a Marxist, I haven't grown out of that and I'm 35 years old, nor will I, in fact I will probably harden as I get older, who knows - but I'm also a big fan of Socrates, and so I think in the spirit of our Socratic elenchus here, I feel like my politics got better, more interesting, more receptive and more engaged with other people's ideas when I began (and for me it took quite a long time - you're 19, I think I took until about 28) to admit that I didn't basically know

about everything. And for many people, they never learn that skill. But I think, fundamentally, that is where wisdom lies. I think it's also important to say that the language deployed by Marxism - because it is a conflict theory - often sounds like struggle that must be won at all costs. It seems like a set of theories that have strife at their heart and are sort of bellicose or whatever, and sometimes the language can seem that way. However, what these ideas are about, for me certainly, is about making life better for everybody. This is why the horseshoe theory of politics is bullshit. Because I do think that fundamentally the ideas of the Italian autonomists, for example, are about making life better for everyone. Now, I don't believe that it's purely the case that only the people from radical, heterodox Marxism who call themselves autonomists are the only people who want to make life better for everyone. Far from it. There are a lot of people, across the political spectrum -maybe not at that very far end, but quite often people across the political spectrum - who fundamentally want to make life better for everyone. So I certainly wouldn't dismiss the ideas of anyone who was thinking in very different categories. One of my closest interlocutors about precisely these issues is my most elderly friend, who is a Catholic priest who was imprisoned under the KGB. He's very interesting man. We'll talk about another time on another stream.

1:16:24 **CECILIA GHIDOTTI**
We should invite him.

1:16:25 **CRAIG GENT**
We should invite him, yeah. But in terms of the ideas you're talking about there and the role of epistemologies within this, I want to point you to a really great book. And this actually brings us back to what we were talking about in terms of our very first engagement with these ideas. When I was involved with student occupations, we were engaging with the ideas of Autonomia, but we were also devouring the online lectures of the geographer David Harvey

talking about Capital: Volume One. He goes through it chapter by chapter, and you read it with him and he riffs off it. He turned this into a book, I think it's just called *Reading Marx's Capital*, and he's done three volumes. [7] I suggest the first one, really. It's not that David Harvey is interested at all in telling you what to think, and certainly - as a geographer - he has a really interesting perspective on a lot of these ideas, but he's just riffing on them and kind of improvising around it. It's this almost a jazz interpretation of what Marx is talking about that goes in lots of different dimensions and brings in questions of temporality or spatiality and so on. But he gets to this bit where he draws our attention - and this sounds like the most wanky Marxist conference thing to say, but it is worthwhile in the book - he draws us to this footnote in one of the chapters of Marx's Capital: Volume One. He dedicates basically a whole chapter to this one footnote and explains why he thinks it's important. What he says is [Marx is] basically talking about the various factors that work together to dynamically generate momentum within society, to provide avenues that might close down and open up new paths forward. What David Harvey talks about within this is six things that Marx lists very quickly, and then he adds a seventh of his own. I've tried to write down the seven things on my notepad here, and I've managed five of them. So you'll have to go and look up the book, and everyone at home will as well. But some of those factors in this dynamic that are working together are our relationship to technology, our relationship to nature, the forces of production, the conditions of social reproduction. And one of them that always sticks in my mind is mental conceptions of the world. David Harvey says that these work together in a dynamic assemblage, which is different to a Hegelian Marxist dialectic that's either purely Idealistic, in the capital-I German Idealism sense of the word, or rigidly materialistic. And of course, Tronti is guilty of this too. He reverses the dialectic, but it's still fundamentally a very heavily structural dialect for him and his thinking. I think what Harvey does here is introduces a kind of sensitivity to different [mental] conceptions of the world and different forms of life that is both inclusive of a broader range of

ideas than we might find within traditional Marxist thought, but also actually more politically interesting and productive for it.

1:20:18 CECILIA GHIDOTTI
Alright.

1:20:19 CRAIG GENT
Alright. We're at time.

1:20:20 CECILIA GHIDOTTI
I think it's time to wrap up.

1:20:22 CRAIG GENT
It's time. We're gonna to get back on the prosecco. We've both run dry.

1:20:26 CECILIA GHIDOTTI
Thank you for those who were online and to those who were in the room with us, chatting and listening. See you, I suppose, in the autumn.

1:20:37 CRAIG GENT
I guess is the end of season one!

1:20:39 CECILIA GHIDOTTI
This is the end of season one! Thank you everyone. Thank you Keith!

1:20:43 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

1:20:43 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Keith, please come on this side of the green screen. Okay, thank you so much. Thank you and see you soon. Bye. Have a great summer of quitting and refusal!

FOOTNOTES

1. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. ↑

2. Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*. Translated by David Broder. London: Verso, 2019. ↑

3. See Mario Troni, 'Lenin In England' [1964] https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/it/tronti.htm; Mario Troni, 'The Strategy of Refusal' [1965], https://libcom.org/book/export/html/439 ↑

4. Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*. Bold Type Books, 2021. ↑

5. Coin, Francesca. 2025. *The Great Resignation: The New Refusal of Work*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. ↑

6. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Resignation,' in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism. Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 289-294. ↑

7. David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital: The Complete Edition*. London: Verso, 2018. ↑