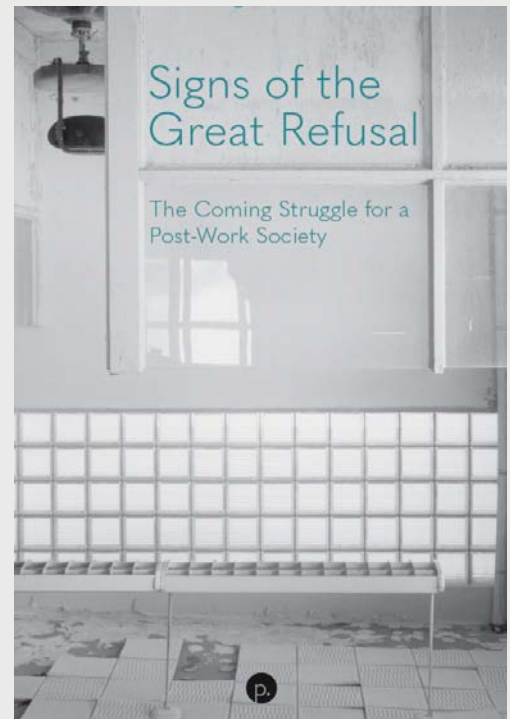


Signs of the Great Refusal

Can 'the impossibility' at the heart of contemporary capitalism be politically activated to oppose and escape work-as-we-know-it?

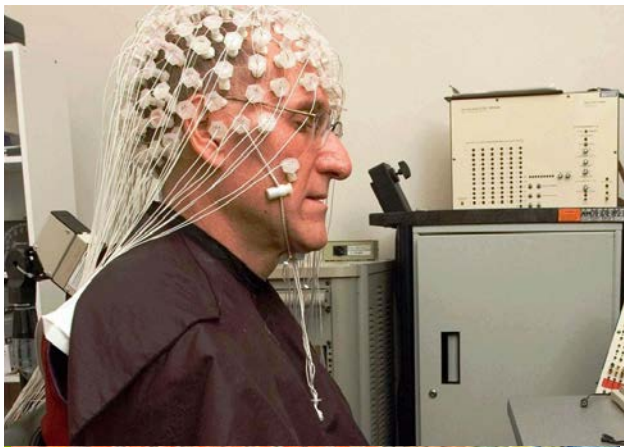
In recent years, developed countries have witnessed the rise of a popular literature and social media discussion having to do with 'the problem with work today.' Much of this literature presents what amounts to an unacceptable either/or: workers are encouraged either to 'lean-in,' and become better 'human capitals,' or else they are being offered palliative care for these same 'neoliberal selves,' by means of admonitions to undertake personal projects of self-optimization, recovery, and wellness.

In *Signs of the Great Refusal*, Tedd Siegel challenges the assumptions supporting this set of highly constrained possibilities, asking instead about what it might take to de-privatize and re-politicize work itself under contemporary conditions, in order to make a broad-based politics of refusal potentially viable.



Feel free to reach out to me with any other questions you might have using the contact details below.

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Quick Facts

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Overview

In *Signs of the Great Refusal*, I explore the idea that it might actually make sense for all of us (collectively) to begin to refuse the conditions of 'work-as-we-know-it.' It's a rather outrageous idea, especially since I'm not talking about petitions for better pay and improved working conditions on the part of the organized industrial labor force. I have in mind something much more expansive and fundamental, something that necessarily concerns all wage laborers including not just the service industry and FIRE sector's contributors, but also tech workers, middle managers, and even members of the professions.

What then are the conditions which so extravagantly call forth such a non-traditional form of solidarity on the part of a heretofore non-existent collective subject? They aren't hard to come by. Think post-Fordist precarity; think financialization of everything; think the bullshitification of jobs; think neo-rentier debt peonage; think increasingly authoritarian employment contracts; think the erasure of the barrier between work and private life, and the enlistment of everyone's life energy on behalf of the company; think exhaustion, stress and anxiety, depression, and despair.

Signs of the Great Refusal should be understood as aligned with present international debates and explorations found under the headings of post-work theory, the anti-work movement, and de-growth economics. But where others strive to envision the particulars of this world-to-come, elaborating an array of specific post-work imaginaries, or emphasizing generative policies to bring about transitional forms, I have chosen to remain focused upon prospects for active resistance or refusal. In my view, it's important to try to think about post-work as a political struggle, even if the chances of this materializing must be rated as being rather dim.

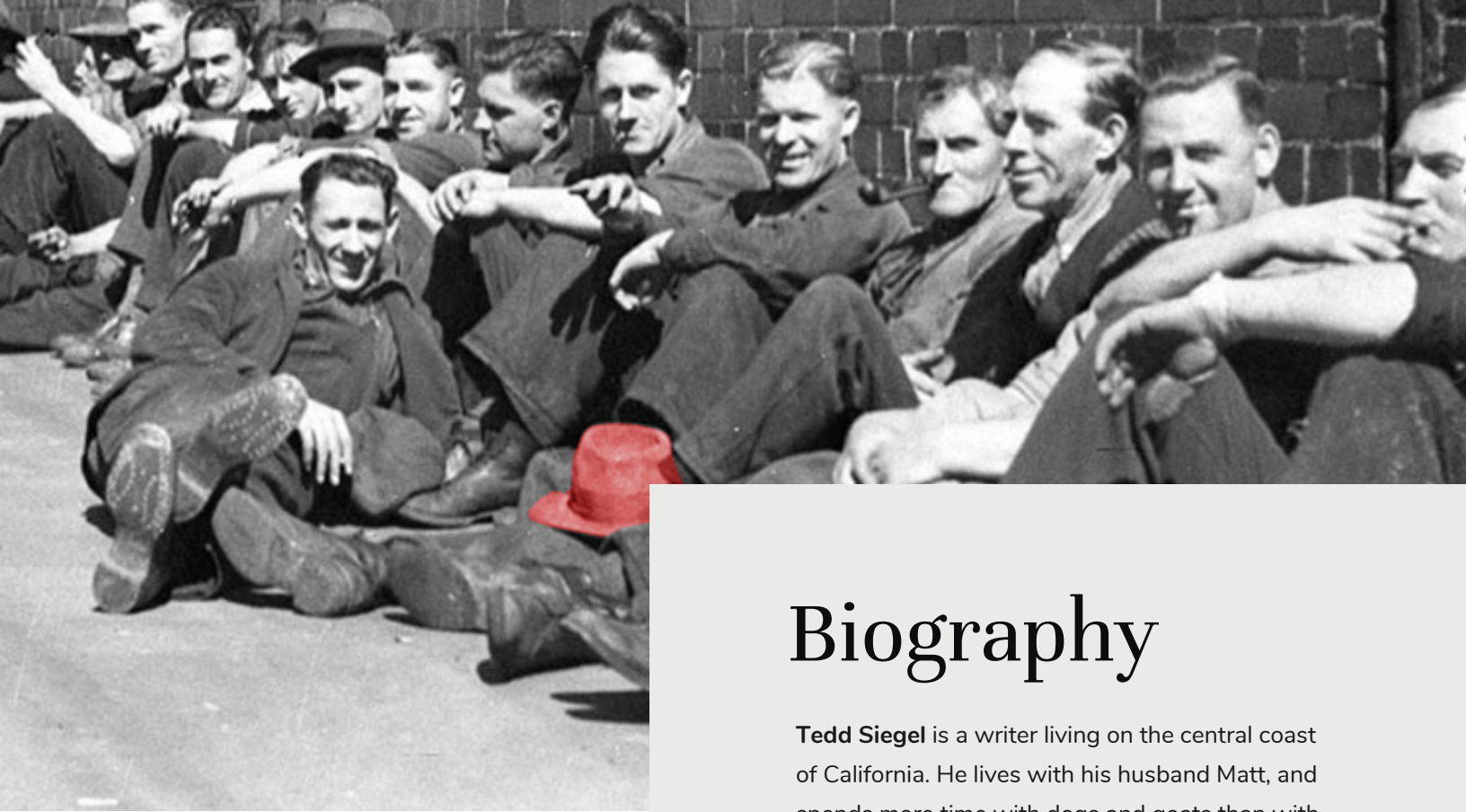
Signs of the Great Refusal is divided in to three major parts, which represent three different (but closely related) narrative arcs. Taken together, the three arcs, which are written in somewhat different registers, are meant to capture all the major elements which I have been able to identify as being essential for the constitution of the post-work **political** imaginary, something necessary for the establishment of a viable politics of refusal of work-as-we-know-it.



■ Arturo Giraldez

Professor, University of the Pacific

"Tedd Siegel's book is an extended reflection on the nature of work in our times and the refusal of new generations to embrace its exhausting ethos and precarious conditions. After a serious dialogue with a number of past theoretical perspectives, the author urges collective action to generate a new life regime in which labor is harmoniously part of it. Siegel's proposal is not a new utopia, but a profound examination of current labor conditions and a call to re-direct processes from private solutions and profit appropriation to social distribution."



■
Tyrus Miller

Professor and Dean for Humanities, UC Irvine

"Signs of the Great Refusal... [is]...in many respects...manifestly a work of theory and critique. Yet it is also an unconventional journey across an archipelago of discourses that are not necessarily themselves in direct communication...traversing left critiques of neoliberal ideology, Marx's value theory, arguments from and with Hannah Arendt, questions of mental health and illness, criticisms of mindfulness and neuroscience, conceptions of the public sphere and its deformation or decline, and Italian autonomist, post-Fordist theories about technoscience, immaterial labor, and virtuosity..."

Biography

Tedd Siegel is a writer living on the central coast of California. He lives with his husband Matt, and spends more time with dogs and goats than with people. Tedd is the co-founder and co-editor of indarktimes.com, a blog site dedicated to overcoming liberal post-politics, and to developing and disseminating new, anti-capitalist critiques tailored to the post-Fordist, neoliberal digital age. Previously, Mr. Siegel worked in the Silicon Valley for 20 years in marketing and program management roles related to the enterprise software, semiconductor, and optical telecom industries. He also served as a senior manager of Silicon Valley partnerships for the University of California, involved with major R&D contracts and initiatives between academia, government agencies, and private companies. Tedd holds an M.A. in philosophy from the New School for Social Research, where he attended the Ph.D. program, focusing on moral and political philosophy. Undertaking a dissertation on the normative and utopian foundations of modernity, he realized that he couldn't finish the last section on Hope, because he didn't have any. Prior to living in NYC, Tedd spent time as a street activist in San Francisco in the 1980s.

Book Excerpt

If work today has really 'got you down,' you are not alone. In the U.S., lots of boomers, well-past working age, chase seasonal retail, and wonder how they could have worked so hard, and still have so little to show. Much of generation X's professional-managerial class is already suffering from serious burnout, and will be exiting, voluntarily or not, long before the age of sixty-five. Among millennials, who invested heavily in college, there is a strong feeling of having been shafted by the disappearing 'social contract' of American capitalism.

As for generation Z, the bulk of whom are now approaching college age, there is a lot of uncertainty; nobody really knows what the landscape of post-pandemic higher ed looks like, much less what sort of economy they will be entering. I have been probing the possibility (however dim it may be) that the conditions of work-as-we-know-it today might be challenged by forms of collective action, something that implies the thorny prerequisite of increased solidarity across traditional social divisions.

The logic went something like this: if we come to recognize the pervasive 'exodus of capital' from its own, work-based society, and see the abandonment of things like full employment, social benefits, and public goods as a defining characteristic of late capitalism, then we also must recognize the need for an updated concept of political struggle. Given the increasing imposition of a post-Fordist, neoliberal capitalist 'non-society,' the updated concept of struggle thus involves the liberation of work itself from what John Holloway has called the "gelatinous suction of the capitalist social synthesis."

The struggle today is not so much about winning concessions from capital, as in traditional trade unionism, but rather turns out to be a struggle against the continued pre-eminence of wage labor per se, under post-Fordist conditions, where it is in fact steadily disappearing. The need to break with the overarching logic of capital in order to escape the fabric of capitalist social domination thus calls forth what one might refer to as a politics of refusal.

- Signs of the Great Refusal



Sample Interview Questions

1. What do you mean by the terms ‘The Great Refusal,’ and/or the politics of refusal?

Well, the term The Great Refusal actually has quite the fascinating history. Apparently, it originates in Dante, who calls out a particular ‘shade’ that he sees in hell as the one “who through cowardice, made the great refusal” (che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto). Some scholars think he is referring to Pope Celestine who stepped down from the papacy; others think it refers to Pilate, who, through his order to crucify, came to represent the paradigmatic refusal of the gospel of Christ. Regardless, the sense behind it is the medieval sin of ‘recusatio tensionis,’ the unworthy refusal to perform a task that is within one’s power.

The Great Refusal only receives its first positive spin in Alfred North Whitehead, who saw a kind of heroism in certain acts of refusal, a stubborn insistence on the ideal over the real. The famed medieval historical Jacques Le Goff then gives it an additional twist, referring to it as a permanent possibility of social character that can emerge in “precise historical junctures” (presumably times of crisis). Rosa Luxemburg’s ideas on spontaneity of struggle are also implicated here.

Its this sense of The Great Refusal, as an ideal-type that manifests in various forms, and then gets made real through various collective actions, that became part of the parlance of the American New Left, by way of Herbert Marcuse. In Marcuse, The Great Refusal, so understood, becomes a way to refer to aggregated social movements of resistance against capitalist forms of domination that operate in the absence of any discernable revolutionary working-class consciousness.

In Signs of the Great Refusal, my point of departure is Marcuse’s remark that “The Great Refusal takes a variety of forms,” because I want to make the case for a politics of refusal oriented around the refusal of work-as-we-know-it, in the post-Fordist and neoliberal digital age. An effective resistance to domination has to take the fight directly to the process of capitalist accumulation. This is why the politics of refusal of work-as-we-know-it is a necessary complement to the intersectional politics of identity, which has often proved to be too easily appropriated and co-opted by the dominant corporate culture, turning it into simply a gradualist search for equity under existing conditions.

2. What kind of a book is this exactly, and who is it for?

Signs of the Great Refusal is intended, first and foremost, to be a work of Left-activist political theory. It's semi-scholarly, in that it engages in explicit advocacy, and also because it weaves together current events, philosophy, political theory and social science, and personal narrative. The purpose of Signs of the Great Refusal is to challenge the privatization/depoliticization of work today, to promote the development of a post-work political imaginary, and to encourage a cross-class politics of refusal of work-as-we-know-it.

The central premise of the first part of the book is this: if there is a chance that something like 'the Great Resignation' could turn out to be a form of The Great Refusal, it is necessary to overcome various capitalist realist dogmas about work. The second part seeks to recognize and to understand the dismaying trajectory of wage-based society in the post-Fordist and neoliberal digital age.

Beyond that, in both the second and third part, the book aims to introduce a series of notions derived from autonomist Marxism to the younger generations of the professional-managerial class, among others. The goal is to help to stimulate an understanding of class composition in advanced, technological society, and to thereby also begin the work of 'class recomposition.'

This book is therefore intended to be of interest to leftist activists, those interested in continental social and political philosophy, and younger members of the increasingly dissatisfied professional-managerial class. It is oriented to US and UK readers, and to the extent that it deals with a globalized experience of work, and leverages the writing of a number of European critics, it is also intended to be of interest in Europe, Japan, and India.

3. How did you come to write this book, and why did you write it?

I began writing the book while I was on a leave of absence from a career management position, some months before taking early retirement due to extreme burnout, stress, and PTSD/anxiety. Initially, I was just writing for myself, trying to understand how I had ended up feeling this way. Beyond the specifics of my own experience, however, I wanted to understand what it was about work itself that had become so untenable.

I knew that I was far from alone in feeling forced to 'tap out' early, despite a whole raft of potential implications and consequences. Thinking about all of this also made me want to situate this experience of work, as well as myself, in a much more precise way. I wanted to achieve a clearer understanding of despair over work as a sort of a generational happening, as something unique to this moment in American history and technological enterprise, and I especially wanted to try to understand it properly as a specific sort of a class position, one replete with both blinders and action potentials in relation to the future of work.

4. Your background is in philosophy. Is there a philosophical backbone to the book?

Yes, I'd like to think so. In terms of various types of post-Marxism, the book traverses a course backward, regressing from Capital to Grundrisse, in a way that I think is demanded practically by our present circumstances. Some might say that these two theoretical moments ultimately represent disparate understandings of value and class. But in my view, a critique of capital adequate to a politics of refusal today requires accounts of both horizontal and vertical domination, of commodity fetishism as both something constitutive of social existence, and commodity fetishism as a ruling class ideology.

A broad-based politics of refusal across traditional markers of class and identity requires that masses of working people begin to free themselves from their post-political, 'capitalist realism,' and come to recognize it, in its various elements, as the hegemonic ideology of neoliberal capitalism. To this end, the first and second part of the book leverages various ideas derived from Marx's understanding of "horizontal" forms of domination in capitalism society (as found in Mark Fisher, and Moishe Postone's reading of Capital respectively).

In the third part, after a stage-setting traverse through Jürgen Habermas on the collapsing occupational public sphere, and Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's notion of establishing counter-publics as a form of counter-hegemonic practice, the focus shifts to confronting vertical forms of domination and ruling class ideology as found in Operaismo and Autonomia theorists such as Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno.

5. Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition figures very prominently throughout Signs of the Great Refusal. What exactly is your relationship to Arendt here?

For sure, there is a sustained critique of Arendt that runs throughout the book. One of the ways to look at Signs of the Great Refusal is as a rather unorthodox – and sometimes subterranean -- engagement with Arendt's take on labor, work, and action (the *vita activa*) in the pre-modern public realm and in the modern world. This should make sense, if you recognize that these things end up being deeply implicated in any attempt to reformulate political action today as a politics of refusal.

My reading of Arendt starts in the second part of the book, with a preliminary consideration of Arendt on labor and work in antiquity, the middle ages, and modern society, as a way to get to an answer to the question "what is the meaning of work in the modern age?" Beginning with the age of industrial production, the answer to this question is provided for us by capitalism – at the level of society as such, work is univocally defined as waged labor. Marx and Arendt agree upon this, but disagree about what it says about modern times, and what the prospects are for human emancipation under this set of general conditions. So I explore the implications of that, drawing it into the problem of work in the digital age.

Next, in the final part of the book, I take up the problem of what Jurgen Habermas calls the public sphere (and what Arendt calls the public realm). Here I juxtapose Habermas's account of the bourgeois public sphere as something undergoing dialectic and dissolution, with Arendt's assertion that there really isn't, and never has been, a properly public realm in the modern age at all. In this argument, I side with Habermas, and use his insights to develop a notion of establishing counter-publics as a form of anti-hegemonic practice.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I focalize a disagreement about the nature of modern political action that is played out between Arendt and Paolo Virno, over how to think about the relationship between action, work, and intellect in the technological age.

6. Can you tell us what you mean by the term “post-work society?”

Well, I certainly don't mean a society where nobody expects (or is expected) to do any work, although, to be completely honest, I'd like to see a society where people work quite a bit less work than they do now. So post-work society refers to the sort of society in which people are encouraged to spend a lot more time being useful to themselves and to others in ways that are not mediated by money.

You could think of it as the production of a social dividend. We all create value that we share around, rather than focusing all our time on earning (and making profit for others) in order to buy everything that we need and want. In the first instance, post-work society refers to the ostensible end of the “society of the wage” -- as a reality, as a kind of a social contract, and as an aspiration (i.e., the goal of full employment). It means a revolution in what is considered productive and unproductive. It means a muscular recovery of use-values in relation to exchange values.

Post-work society is the society we would like to see, now that capitalism is decisively abandoning the very form of society that it created, because the overhead has become too high, and it no longer wants to pay social benefits, and because it wants to monetize all common goods. It is the political project that begins with a revolutionary proposal: maybe we should meet the exodus of capital with an exodus from work-based society, and seek to establish autonomous, counter-publics that could serve as an alternative to our presently collapsing, occupational pseudo-public sphere.

7. What about the meaning of your phrase, “the post-work political imaginary?”

The post-work political imaginary comprises the minimal set of things that are the necessary condition for a politics of refusal of work-as-we-know-it. The use of the term “imaginary” here comes from Cornelius Castoriadis' *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975), where the author describes how social realities get constructed at the level of culture. Castoriadis' “social imaginaries” have been taken up by theorists of degrowth economics, who describe what they call “degrowth imaginaries.”

An element of this has been the development of “post-work imaginaries,” which describe in utopian fashion, or else concretely, what the world of work could or would look like if we were actually to make radical changes. My use of the phrase, “the post-work political imaginary” is meant to be a radicalization of the idea of “post-work imaginaries;” By adding the word “political” to post-work imaginary, my intention is to focalize attention on the kind of politics or struggle it would take to actually bring about this alternative reality.

In *Signs of the Great Refusal*, the elements of the post-work political imaginary that I describe include things like explicit resistance to conditions of precarity, arbitrary/purposeless jobs, authoritarian workplaces, and the harvesting of personal biopower. It further includes the social decolonization of key capitalist-realist notions that are important to the functioning of wage-based society.

For example, challenges to capitalist dogmas concerning usefulness, idleness and leisure, productivity and cycles of rest, and debt forgiveness, among other things (e.g., the degree to which wage-based society continues to be structured by gendered notions of productivity and the division of labor).

The post-work political imaginary also must include an understanding of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordist patterns of work in the digital age, replete with new opportunities for both subjection and subjectification, and thus for the de-commodification of labor.

Finally, the post-work political imaginary and the politics of refusal also include the elaboration of approaches to an exodus -- to the establishment of an autonomous, counter-public that could serve as an alternative to our presently collapsing, occupational pseudo-public sphere.