



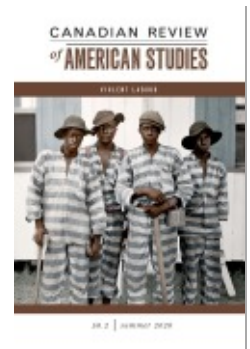
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“It’s Still Real to Me”: Contemporary Professional Wrestling, Neo-Liberalism, and the Problems of Performed/Real Violence

Brian Jansen

Abstract: Beginning from the premise (*vis-à-vis* wrestler-turned-scholar Laurence de Garis) that professional wrestling scholarship has historically overlooked the embodied, physical dimension of the form in favour of its *drama*, and reflecting on a series of professional wrestling story-lines that have blurred the lines between staged performance (“kayfabe”) and reality, this article suggests that the business of professional wrestling offers a vivid case study for the rise and dissemination of what political theorist Wendy Brown calls neo-liberal rationality: the dissemination of the market model to every aspect and activity of human life. Drawing on Brown’s work, the language of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) contracts, and professional wrestling’s territorial history, this article argues that contemporary story-lines in professional wrestling rationalize, economize, and trivialize the form’s very real violent labour, even rendering audiences complicit in said violence—while serving also as a potent vehicle for understanding the metaphorical (and sometimes literal) violence of neo-liberal rationality more broadly.

Keywords: professional wrestling, WWE, neo-liberalism, Wendy Brown, staged violence, violent labour, responsabilization

Résumé : En commençant par la prémisse (en lien avec le lutteur devenu chercheur Laurence de Garis) que les études sur la lutte professionnelle ont, historiquement, ignoré la dimension physique de la forme pour y préférer le *drame*, et en réfléchissant sur une série de scénarios qui ont rendu floues les frontières entre la performance théâtrale (« kayfabe ») et la réalité, cet article suggère que la lutte professionnelle offre une étude de cas pour l’essor et la diffusion de ce que la théoricienne politique Wendy Brown

nomme la rationalité néolibérale : la diffusion du modèle de marché à tous les aspects et activités humaines. En se basant sur le travail de Brown, le langage des contrats du World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) et l'histoire territoriale de la lutte professionnelle, cet article soutient que les scénarios contemporains en lutte professionnelle rationalisent, économise et banalise le travail violent très réel de la forme, rendant même l'auditoire complice de cette violence — tout en étant un véhicule puissant pour comprendre la violence métaphorique (et parfois littérale) de la rationalité néolibérale.

Mots clés : lutte professionnelle, WWE, néolibéralisme, Wendy Brown, violence théâtrale, travail violent, responsabilisation

Introduction: The Evening's Main Event

On a 28 October 1999 episode of the weekly World Championship Wrestling (WCW) television series *Thunder*, viewers witnessed something unusual—unusual even for the cartoonish world of professional wrestling: a back-stage segment where two of the promotion's competitors appeared to be openly discussing the predetermined outcome of their upcoming match: "You're pinning me? One, two, three?" asks one of them, the performer Buff Bagwell (real name Marcus Bagwell). "That's the finish they gave me!" his opponent Scotty Riggs (real name Scott Antol) replies (qtd. in Reynolds and Alvarez 252).

Professional wrestling is, of course, a staged performance, its outcomes predetermined by a committee of writers, bookers, promoters, and the wrestlers themselves. But professional wrestling has long worked to obfuscate its theatrical nature: as a rule, its story-lines and matches maintain the pretence of legitimate athletic contests—an illusion referred to within the industry as "kayfabe" (Shoemaker, *Squared* 90). And professional wrestling promoters have historically gone to great lengths to maintain this illusion: "faces" (good guys) and "heels" (villains), for example, generally never travelled together between events; wrestlers (particularly champions) were usually expected to possess legitimate grappling skills in case an opponent were to attempt to "shoot" on them (i.e., turn the exhibition into a genuine contest); and media inquiries about the form's alleged fakery often ended in violent irruptions so as to reassert its realness, as when performer Dave "Dr. Death" Schultz famously slapped NBC correspondent John Stossel back stage at a World Wrestling Federation (WWF) event—with Schultz asking the prone Stossel afterward, "Is that fake? Does that feel fake, boy?" (qtd. in

Wirtz 60). Despite oblique reminders (e.g., the persistence of “corporate” or “authority” story-lines), the illusion of wrestling’s legitimacy persisted, at least in terms of the on-screen product, long after WWF (now WWE, World Wrestling Entertainment) owner Vince McMahon admitted before the New Jersey State Senate in 1989 that wrestling was staged (Hoy-Browne; Gordon). So why would WCW air this kayfabe-violating conversation between Bagwell and Riggs on a pre-recorded television broadcast?

The Bagwell-Riggs exchange was in fact all part of the show: in their account of the rise and fall of WCW, R.D. Reynolds and Bryan Alvarez describe the in-ring encounter that followed: “During the match, Bagwell rolled [Riggs] up with a small package [a pinning combination] and ‘refused to let him go.’ The ref counted two, paused, then grudgingly counted three. Bagwell ran off laughing, having supposedly put one over on those evil writers” (253). The announcers declared that Bagwell wasn’t “laying down for anybody,” that he was “refusing to cooperate with the powers that be” (253).

The sequence was a “worked shoot,” the term for an occurrence in wrestling that is scripted to *appear* unscripted (Shoemaker, *Squared* 272), but the problem with the Bagwell-Riggs feud for many wrestling fans was its total disregard for kayfabe: in seeking to legitimize this particular conflict, WCW bookers tacitly acknowledged *all* wrestling’s fakery and thereby undercut the stakes and seriousness of every other story-line, as well as the seriousness of the physical labour performed by professional wrestlers. The Bagwell-Riggs story was not the first occasion that WCW went to this creative well, nor would it be the last.¹ Reynolds and Alvarez, in fact, posit that WCW head booker Vince Russo’s predilection for “insider” story-lines such as these hastened the decline of the once enormously successful promotion (251–2, 253, 317).²

As wrestler-turned-scholar Laurence de Garis has argued, too often, scholarly writing about professional wrestling has often focused on its drama rather than its *wrestling* (193–4), stripping the form of its embodied dimension—a trend that Russo’s story-lines would seem to tacitly endorse. Lost in these analyses and story-lines, however, is the labour of professional wrestling, particularly its violence. If boxing is, as novelist Joyce Carol Oates once wrote, “a stylized mimicry of a fight to the death,” we might read professional wrestling as a mimicry of that mimicry, a kind of second-order simulation. But as

in boxing, so too in professional wrestling, for, as Oates continues, “its mimesis is an uncertain convention.” Wrestlers, just as boxers, “do sometimes die in the ring, or as a consequence of a bout; their lives are sometimes, perhaps always, shortened by the stress and punishment of their careers (in training camps no less than in official fights).” For the majority of wrestlers, as boxers, “life in the ring is nasty, brutish, and short—and not even that remunerative.” It is not for nothing that professional wrestlers’ mortality rate is many orders higher than actuarial tables would suggest is probable or even possible—and higher even than those for people involved in other ostensibly violent competitive sports, such as professional football (see Morris, “Are Pro Wrestlers,” “Comparing”; Cowley 146). Any account of professional wrestling, then, is incomplete without considering the real violent labour involved in performing staged violence, even as trends in the medium and the broader culture that will be discussed in this article seek to elide that labour. Vince Russo, after all, despite not even being a regular in-ring performer, *still* suffered multiple concussions over the course of his WCW career (Reynolds and Alvarez 281).

Reynolds and Alvarez theorize that Russo’s affection for kayfabe-violating worked-shoot story-lines stemmed from his belief that fans were “scour[ing] the internet for insider wrestling news” (251); however, they go on to point out that most fans *weren’t* (253)—and so, responding to Russo’s booking, “insider fans considered [them] stupid fake angle[s], and casual fans had no idea what was happening” (252). Yet Russo was not totally incorrect about the significance of the Internet to professional wrestling: he may only have been too early to arrive at that conclusion. As wrestling blogger Len Archibald explains, “Before the internet, we were able to examine the company (and other promotions) at an arm’s length only because that is what the promotion allowed.” But today, social media increasingly provides glimpses into the mechanics of the wrestling industry and the lives of wrestlers, and ten years after WCW folded, the worked shoot as wrestling trope made its triumphant return, setting off what WWE came to term the “reality era” of professional wrestling. On a June 2011 broadcast of the weekly WWE television series *Raw*, wrestler CM Punk, whose real-life contract was expiring in days, delivered a scathing promo in which he attacked not his in-ring opponent but, instead, WWE ownership itself. Punk named rival wrestling promotions and performers; he referenced back-stage events, and he suggested that he was less

interested in being champion than he was in the status *afforded* a champion. As he explained it,

[N]o matter how many times I prove it, I'm not on your lovely little collector cups. I'm not on the cover of the program. I'm barely promoted. I don't get to be in movies. I'm certainly not on any crappy show on the USA Network. I'm not on the poster of WrestleMania . . . I'm not on Conan O'Brian. I'm not on Jimmy Fallon . . . This isn't sour grapes. But the fact that [actor/part-time wrestler] Dwayne ["The Rock" Johnson] is in the main event at WrestleMania next year and I'm not makes me sick! ("2011 Raw Roulette")

For wrestling journalist David Shoemaker, Punk's promo inaugurated a shift whereby behind-the-scenes "meta" story-lines began to bleed more openly into on-screen story-lines (*Squared* 272; "Cheap Heat"), and the contemporary moment in professional wrestling has been marked by a curious relationship with the real, with audiences' rooting interests aligned less to on-screen characters and their arcs than to audiences' sense of the performers behind those characters, their sense of back-stage politics, and glimpses of corporate intrigue (as reported to them by "dirt-sheets" [insider newsletters] and the IWC [the Internet wrestling community]).

This phenomenon is no doubt connected to the rise of reality television and 24-7 celebrity culture (indeed, WWE now produces several reality television series, as will be discussed briefly), but the carnival atmosphere of professional wrestling adds a particular wrinkle, for with wrestling, Internet rumours and back-stage gossip have, rather than getting fans *closer* to being behind the scenes, actually offered WWE a new avenue by which to manipulate audiences; WWE is, after all, aware of reality era rhetoric,³ and, as Scott Beekman notes, "the carnivalesque perception of paying customers as dupes to be financially swindled" still lies at the heart of pro wrestling (39–40). In its blend of truth and fiction, and in the possibility that pulling back the veil on lies leads only to more lies, many commentators have registered parallels between contemporary professional wrestling and the broader contemporary political climate (see Gordon; Klein 52–3; Mazer, "Donald"; Rogers; Jansen, "Yes!").⁴

I have argued elsewhere that wrestling fans' response to this problem of palimpsestic untruths has typically been to *disbelieve everything* (following philosopher Jean Baudrillard's call to "not be

duped" [qtd. in Hammond 119]) and that this reflex, too, has similarly seeped into the broader world (Jansen, "Yes!"); in "Yes! No! . . . Maybe? Reading the Real in Professional Wrestling's Unreality," I suggest that this attitude, however, tends to confuse *scepticism* with *cynicism*, and that the latter response is no healthy answer to the very real social, political, and environmental consequences of "post-truth" Trumpian governmental policy. Rather than continue that specific line of thinking here, however, what I want to do is pull on a different (but related) thread by exploring the reality era of professional wrestling as a manifestation of another specific cultural shift, toward what Wendy Brown calls a "neoliberal rationality [that] disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities" (31; original emphasis). Drawing on Brown's incisive critique of neo-liberal rationality, as well as the language of WWE contracts, the comments of professional wrestlers themselves, and professional wrestling's territorial history in the United States (particularly its links with blue-collar work and discourses), I explore pro wrestling as a case study of what Brown characterizes as the shift that elides labour in favour of human capital. In doing so, I argue that the language of the reality era in wrestling has had a curious twofold effect: on the one hand, it rationalizes, economizes, and trivializes its very real violent labour while, on the other hand, it also serves as a potent vehicle for understanding the metaphorical (and sometimes literal) violence of neo-liberal rationality more broadly. In performing staged violence, the labour of professional wrestling is subject to tremendous real violence, offering audiences a glimpse into the financialization of (and audience complicity in) physical suffering.

"Wink a Little More" and Make a Lot More Money

Shoemaker notes that in the contemporary moment of professional wrestling, it becomes necessary to "wink a little more" (*Squared* 272), and it is worth noting what that sort of winking looks like. Some of the expressions of the reality era attitude are manifest simply in the way that WWE performers have used social media—puncturing kayfabe even on officially WWE-sanctioned accounts. The performer Braun Strowman, for example, uses his real name (Adam Scherr) on his Instagram account,⁵ declaring in his bio that "[t]his is my real life page it doesn't depict my TV character [*sic*]"—despite the fact that the account is verified and contains content related to his on-screen persona. Elsewhere, performers have taken to Twitter to comment on their matches and story-lines in a way that similarly

undermines their on-screen personas. When the African American performer Ettore Ewen debuted in WWE as a silent enforcer named Big E Langston, for example, fans used racially charged nicknames to compare him unfavourably to similar wrestlers. Langston, abandoning kayfabe, took to Twitter and joked: "People, 'RyBlack' is unimaginative & dull. On the other hand, 'Choc Lesnar' made me audibly laugh" (@ShinigameE). Much later, when the Russo-Bulgarian "foreign menace" character Rusev debuted by defeating a series of black wrestlers in quick succession, Ewen used his Twitter platform to call, jokingly, for the return of the Nation of Domination—a black-power-themed faction from the mid-1990s (Beary).

These glimpses behind the curtain may seem trivial, though they become important later in light of my larger argument about the illusion of freedom. More interesting perhaps is WWE's own willingness to puncture the illusion of wrestling's legitimacy: the E! Network reality television series *Total Divas* and *Total Bellas*, for example, follow the supposedly private lives of the promotion's women wrestlers—a premise that requires both shows to acknowledge professional wrestling's fakery.

308 But the reality era, as I have discussed elsewhere ("Yes!" 638–40), likely reached its zenith in the rise of the undersized, pale, bearded, and politically progressive technical wrestler Daniel Bryan (real name Bryan Danielson), an unexpected fan favourite who became WWE World Champion over the (on-screen, in-story-line) objections of a WWE management team that had decided Bryan was not "best for business." That on-screen assessment, as it turns out, was in fact a reflection of real-life, off-screen WWE ownership's actual feelings for Bryan, who had been repeatedly relegated to lower-tier status on WWE programming until fans stepped in and essentially refused to accept said relegation—cheering for him even as he played a villain, chanting his name even as he was off-screen, and booing the performers whom they viewed as unfairly taking Bryan's rightful place.

These last two examples—*Total Divas* and the Daniel Bryan story—are crucial for what they reveal about WWE's motivations. It is worth noting that before it became the reality era, Shoemaker actually referred to this moment in professional wrestling as the "worked-shoot era," a term that more or less indicates the opposite of "reality" ("Introducing"). And it is worth noting, not unrelatedly,

that the reality era has proven to be tremendously profitable to WWE, a publicly traded company whose revenues have increased every year since 2009.⁶

Because the WWE has used reality rhetoric to harness fan resentment toward its product in the service of profits, any notion of “reality” in professional wrestling must therefore be qualified. The situation recalls Marxist critic Mark Fisher’s claim that “the ideology of capitalism is now ‘anti-capitalist.’ The villain in Hollywood films is routinely the ‘evil multinational corporation.’” But, Fisher notes, “it is capital which is the great ironist, easily able to metabolise anti-corporate rhetoric by selling it back to an audience as entertainment.”⁷ Archibald is only one of a number of wrestling bloggers to wonder, for instance, whether the Daniel Bryan plot was in fact just “one of the greatest worked-shoot storylines in history.”

Wrestling with Neo-Liberalism

What has been left out in WWE’s metabolization of anti-corporate sentiment, however, are WWE performers themselves, who arguably have not seen the benefits of record revenues, and whose precarious employment status has been laid bare by the back-stage access that social media allows.⁸ WWE’s performers have long been legally classified as “independent contractors,” but this status merits closer scrutiny at a time when precarious work is increasingly the norm in the United States. As geographer Andrew Herod points out, some 21 million independent contractors make up a significant portion of the 53 million freelancers currently working in the US—a total number that also includes 14 million “moonlighters,” 9 million “diversified workers,” and just over 3 million “on-demand” workers (i.e., workers in the gig economy, such as Uber drivers)—a number that is expected to increase to 7.6 million by 2020 (Herod 100). For Herod, the preponderance of precarious work is a consequence of neo-liberal policy, by which “labour market and workplace protections for workers have been reduced so that labour markets can operate more ‘freely’” under the guiding philosophy that “‘the market’ decides what is best for society” (84–5). Herod notes that precarious work articulates a belief that workers should be “‘self-sufficient’ in the labour market” (107), but he points out the danger of this attitude: “if internalized,” he writes, this mentality “leads [us] to have no political or economic expectations that firms do things for the benefit of broader society”

(107). Indeed, though the popular belief is that neo-liberalism necessitates the state receding into the background to allow market forces to work, Herod points out that neo-liberal policies are really only possible because governments have pursued them (85). Or, as political theorist Wendy Brown puts it, “Neoliberalism is not about the state leaving the economy alone. Rather, neoliberalism activates the state on behalf of the economy, *not* to undertake economic functions or to intervene in economic *effects*, but rather to facilitate economic competition and growth and to economize the social” (62; original emphasis). Put more simply, the state governs *for* the market (see Foucault 121).⁹ Brown and Herod gesture toward the idea that neo-liberal economic policy privatizes profits while socializing losses—as when, for instance, low-wage Walmart employees receive \$6.2 billion in public assistance while the company generates many more billions in profit (O’Connor),¹⁰ or when WWE benefits financially from the genuine violence its performers enact on their bodies in the act of performing “fake” violence while disavowing responsibility for long-term health consequences of that violence. As a publicly traded company worth billions of dollars and boasting relatively deep ties to neo-liberal politicians and policy makers—owner Vince McMahon’s wife Linda was a repeat Republican candidate for the US Senate in Connecticut, headed the US Small Business Administration under Donald Trump, and is currently the chair of the pro-Trump political action committee America First Action (see Horsley); WWE itself was reported in 2017 to be the single largest donor to the Trump Foundation (see McGrath); and former US Republican Senator Rick Santorum served as the company’s counsel in Pennsylvania court cases in the late 1980s (see Murphy)—it is worth exploring how WWE feeds into and benefits from the economization of everything, though to do so we must also address the effects on the body politic of this same economizing impulse.

Brown explores the neo-liberal climate deeply in *Undoing the Demos*, arguing that neo-liberal rationality, “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms” (17), is effectively undermining democracy. She explains: “The institutions and principles aimed at securing democracy, the cultures required to nourish it, the energies needed to animate it, and the citizens practicing, caring for or desiring it—all of these are challenged by neo-liberalism’s ‘economization’ of political life and of other heretofore noneconomic spheres and activities” (17).

In teasing apart Michel Foucault's 1978–9 lectures on neo-liberal reason (50–9), Brown enumerates the departures and inversions from (neo)classical economic liberalism by which Foucault saw neo-liberalism “regulat[ing] society by the market” (qtd. in Brown 62). Among these modifications—the conception of competition as non-natural, the economization of state and social policy, the responsabilizing of the state, and the economization of the law (62–70), among others—I want to focus here on one particularly salient shift that Brown (via Foucault) notes: that human capital has come to replace labour. Value is no longer defined by classical economists' labour theory of value, nor by neoclassical economists' valuation as what someone is willing to pay for it (see Herod 7–9). Rather, Brown writes, “When competition becomes the market's root principle, all market actors are rendered as capitals, rather than producers, sellers, workers, clients, or consumers. As capitals, every subject is rendered as entrepreneurial, no matter how small, impoverished, or without resources, and every aspect of human existence is produced as an entrepreneurial one” (65). For Foucault, the neo-liberal man is “for himself his own capital, his own producer, the source of his earnings” (qtd. in Brown 80). Brown slightly tweaks Foucault's formulation by positing that the figure of enterprise in early neo-liberalism has been superseded by the investment portfolio model, in which the appreciation of human capital replaces production (66). Nevertheless, she notes, the transition from labour to capital (whether enterprise or investment) “eliminates the basis for alienation and exploitation as Marx conceived them. And it vanquishes the rationale for unions, consumer groups, or other forms of economic solidarity” (65).

What Brown describes at great length in *Undoing the Demos* is the eradication of *homo politicus* by *homo oeconomicus*—the dismantling of political states and public institutions, arriving at a view of the world, an abiding rationality “where there are only capitals and competition among them” (72). State and citizen, Brown writes, are converted “to figures of financialized firms” (109); labour law and protections are dismantled, their foundations in the public good rendered illegible. Brown notes, for example, the increasing opposition to pensions, employment security, and paid holidays, as well as the lack of sympathy engendered by austerity measures (38–9): “For firms and states alike,” she explains, “competitive positioning and stock or credit rating are primary; other ends—from sustainable

production practices to worker justice—are pursued only insofar as they contribute to this end” (27).

It may seem overblown to inject a discussion of professional wrestling into a discussion about the erasure of public institutions, but as journalist Malcolm Harris has pointed out in his analysis of how the millennial generation has been shaped by the rise of human capital, sport (in our case, what WWE calls “sports entertainment”) “makes human capital accumulation especially visible [because] we are supposed to watch,” thereby giving audiences “special insight into the process” (133). Harris’s fear is that “[a]s capital advances, all workers become more like athletes” (133). For my purposes, however, Brown’s claims about the shift from labour to capital—and Herod’s fear that workers might internalize the belief that their employers owe nothing to the broader culture—are revealing in light of a central tension in professional wrestling between, on the one hand, performers subordinating themselves to this “self-as-capital” orientation and, on the other hand, a long tradition of deep ties to labour and (particularly) working-class discourses. That tension is in turn magnified by the economic power of the WWE corporate machine.

Labour versus Capital, or: “Son of a Plumber” Dusty Rhodes versus “Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase

There is no doubt that the language of WWE contracts and WWE performers’ status as “independent contractors” tacitly embrace the sort of neo-liberal rationality that Brown discusses. As *Forbes* reporter Chris Smith points out in his detailed review of publicly available WWE contracts, even the preamble of these documents is premised on the claim that the promotion is giving its wrestlers the opportunity to perform and gain “exposure.” At the same time, the contracts go on to assert a tremendous amount of control that might prevent performers from taking advantage of that exposure outside of the context of their employment with WWE: the contracts universally stipulate that the promotion owns the rights derived from any programming or live events, including “incidents, dialogue, characters, actions, routines, ideas, gags, costumes” (qtd. in Smith). The promotion owns, too, “a wrestler’s ring name, likeness, personality, character, caricatures, costumes, gestures,” and even sometimes a performer’s legal name (Smith). Smith also points out that the “Wrestler’s Obligations” portion of WWE contracts is about three

times the length of its preceding section, “Promotor’s Obligations.” In particular, WWE contracts specify that

wrestlers are responsible for their own training and conditioning, as well as for providing their own costumes, wardrobes, props and makeup . . . Talent must also cover all costs associated with food, lodging and travel between events . . . [W]restlers are also responsible for paying income, social security, FICA and FUTA taxes, as well as insurance coverage (general liability, worker’s comp, professional liability, etc). (qtd. in Smith)

Contracts indemnify WWE from liability due to injury, even injury or death resulting from the promoter’s negligence; often feature a non-compete clause; and typically entitle the promotion to pause or terminate a contract in the case of an in-ring injury. Smith notes that these clauses are particularly chilling in light of WWE performer Owen Hart’s in-ring death—the result of a risky stunt undertaken, his family argued, because of promoter negligence. It is also worth noting the shocking mortality rates for professional wrestlers: roughly seven times greater than the general US population (Cowley 146). Thus, WWE demonstrates an awareness of the violence inherent in the labour of its contractors—that is, that the violence of staged combat necessarily entails (or may even require) real violence. The performer Diamond Dallas Page (real name Dallas Page, born Page Joseph Falkinburg), for example, describes the experience of breaking his back in the ring, rupturing his L4 and L5 vertebrae after receiving a move called a powerbomb: the move was delivered correctly, and Page received it correctly. Nothing went wrong, nor was the injury a fluke—it was simply “the straw that broke the camel’s back” (qtd. in Dilbert), the logical consequence of years of receiving the same impact over and over again. As *Bleacher Report* wrestling journalist Ryan Dilbert writes, “Wrestlers tear up their knees, need stitches to close up gashes, break bones and drive their bodies into the ground. As much as opponents look to protect each other and control the violence in the ring, the physical toll of the art is inescapable.” Yet at the same time, WWE disavows its responsibility for this reality, and Smith’s article ultimately focuses in particular on one of their strategies for doing so—fixating on the WWE contract’s penultimate section, which specifies the following in its entirety:

Nothing contained in this agreement shall be construed to constitute wrestler as an employee, partner or joint venturer of promoter, nor shall wrestler have any authority to bind promoter in any respect.

Wrestler is an independent contractor and wrestler shall execute and hereby irrevocably appoints promoter attorney-in-fact to execute, if wrestler refuses to do so, any instruments necessary and consistent herewith to accomplish or confirm the foregoing or any and all of the rights granted to promoter herein. Promoter shall provide to wrestler copies of all documents so executed. (qtd. in Smith)

The independent contractor status of WWE performers directs profits upward to the company while downloading costs (training, costumes, travel, food, hair, and make-up) to the wrestlers themselves—and this in spite of the fact that, as David Cowley has pointed out in the *University of Louisville Law Review*, WWE roundly fails the twenty-point standard used by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to determine whether a worker qualifies as an independent contractor: fully sixteen of the twenty factors point to wrestlers being employees (170). And this misclassification is, for Cowley, significant:

Employees are protected by a number of federal laws that offer no such protection to independent contractors, including the National Labour Relations Act (NLRA) . . . The range of protections and benefits afforded by these laws are countless, and include employer contributions to employees' family health insurance plans, Social Security and Medicare contributions, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation benefits, protection from discrimination, and protection from wages below the statutory minimum. (170)

For its part, WWE disputes this characterization, claiming on its corporate "Setting the Record Straight" web page that its performers are classified as independent contractors because they are no different than "actors or actresses on television dramas, soaps or comedies." Such an assertion ignores the violent dimension of wrestling's labour; it also overlooks, *at the very least*, the existence of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA): the union representing some 160,000 film and TV actors, broadcasters, and media professionals (including, significantly, television and film stunt performers, who might offer a closer parallel to wrestling labour than actors and actresses).¹¹

No such union exists for professional wrestlers,¹² and generally, few calls have been made for the formation of one, outside of Jesse "The Body" Ventura's agitation for a professional wrestling union in the mid-1980s—a drive that failed, Ventura recounts, after his organizing

attempts were reported to management by the promotion's superstar, Hulk Hogan (Windsor).¹³ Why wrestlers have never pursued unionization is a matter for debate. Some (see Heiberg) have speculated that it is a matter of performers accepting the status quo or registering that working conditions have improved in professional wrestling. An alternate reason might be that professional wrestlers have never unionized for the same reason that white-collar workers have historically resisted unionization: that, as Nikil Saval explains in his history of the white-collar workplace, these figures saw themselves as "possessed of a particular skill . . . that made [them] professionally mobile." He continues of these workers: "They wanted organizations that responded to the claims of talent: what they were seeking was *meritocracy*" (194; original emphasis). As professional wrestler Cody Rhodes has put it, performers "value the opportunity over the compensation," presumably because they believe the opportunity will help demonstrate their *merit* and allow them to climb higher (they are building their human capital, in other words) (@CodyRhodes). It is worth noting, ironically, that the relatively recent (1958) coinage of the very ancient-sounding word "*meritocracy*" was pejorative, made in the service of sociologist Michael Young's anxiety about who gets left out in a culture ruled by aptitude alone.

Nevertheless, wrestlers' potential alignment with this white-collar ethos of *merit* is particularly noteworthy (and perhaps contradictory) in light of a history that finds professional wrestling on the side of labour and particularly closely tied up with discourses of blue-collar labour. Indeed, as Laurence de Garis has pointed out, the preferred nomenclature for professional wrestlers is not "wrestlers"—or "sports entertainers" or "superstars" (both WWE coinages)—but "workers" (199; see also Sammond, "Introduction" 5–6). De Garis goes on:

"Working" is used to refer to employment and labour, manipulation and deceit, or cooperation or collusion. Probably the most common way that "work" is used is in its everyday meaning of employment and labour . . . The term also emphasizes the focus on labour and money, both as a motivation to get in the ring and as the ultimate by product. "Work" as a proletarian term also reinforces awareness of labour relations . . . and reflects professional wrestling's blue-collar roots. (199)

Even the most successful wrestlers, de Garis continues, must "show up for work and do what the boss says" (199). They must do the *job*, he says—another term that seeps from labour into professional wrestling, with the phrase "doing the job" in particular referring to

taking a loss by pinfall or submission (200). A wrestler who loses frequently is said to be a “jobber,” and the main aim of becoming a professional wrestler is being considered a “good worker” among peers (200). This attitude and the insider language that accompanies it, de Garis speculates, stem from the fact that most professional wrestlers are part-timers working additional jobs, often in blue-collar union positions, as (for example) truck drivers or warehouse employees (199–200).¹⁴ It is further interesting to note that wrestling has historically been—like many blue-collar industries—a family business: to be a second- or third-generation wrestler is a major selling point (current WWE headliner Roman Reigns is a cousin to Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, who is himself the son of wrestler Rocky Johnson and grandson of wrestler Peter Maivia). But the connection to labour goes beyond the language that wrestlers speak, for it is also a reflection of the audience’s roots,¹⁵ and, perhaps related to audience demographics, it is also embodied in the kinds of stories that get told on-screen. Emissaries of blue-collar work are among wrestling’s most legendary characters: Terry Funk; Mick Foley; “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, who played the part of the beer-swilling working man; and the “Son of a Plumber” Dusty Rhodes (father of Cody Rhodes, mentioned above), who stylized himself as the “American Dream” and whose most famous promo angrily declared that his ostentatiously wealthy opponent Ric Flair didn’t know the definition of “hard times”:

Hard times are when the textile workers around this country are out of work and got four, five kids, and can’t pay their wages, can’t buy their food. Hard times are when the auto workers are out of work and they tell them “Go home!” And hard times are when a man has worked at a job thirty years—thirty years!—they give him a watch, kick him in the butt and say “Hey, a computer took your place, daddy!” That’s hard times! (Rhodes)¹⁶

On the flip side, wrestling’s most hated villains have represented lavish wealth, unfairly accumulated: the Million Dollar Man Ted DiBiase, who paid others to fight on his behalf; the wealthy Texas investor John Bradshaw Layfield; and even WWE owner Vince McMahon, whose on-screen persona Vincent Kennedy McMahon was very much the evil billionaire personified.

These characters and this language of work might well be connected to what Mark Fisher above described as capital’s ability to metabolize anti-corporate rhetoric; they might, relatedly, be signs of what

political theorist Jodi Dean has called the “victory by defeat” (18) of labour and the political left, whereby the “enemy speaks our language,” thus robbing labour of the ability to say what it really wants or needs (18; see also p. 7). More central to my point, however, is the following claim: that it is not so much (as per the tentative theory floated above) that professional wrestlers are curiously echoing a white-collar attitude toward “merit” that does not make sense in terms of wrestling’s blue-collar ethos, but that *both* wrestlers and white-collar workers (and blue-collar workers) are increasingly subject to what Wendy Brown describes as neo-liberal rationality’s orientation toward what she calls, after sociologist Ronen Shamir, “responsibilization” and “sacrifice.”

The Tag Team of Responsibilization and Sacrifice

Responsibilization, Brown explains, “is the moral burdening of the entity at the end of the pipeline” (132). As she articulates it, responsibilization offloads onto workers, consumers, students, and the poor the *total* responsibility for making “correct” decisions with regard to self-investment and entrepreneurship so that they might survive and thrive (132–3); responsibilization “solicits the individual as the only relevant and wholly accountable actor” (133), and in this light, it is easy to understand the sustained decline of collective labour action in the United States—for who needs collective bargaining if we are each in charge of our own selves? It is easy, too, to see this logic embedded in the language of WWE contracts that offload training, costume, and character development to performers while accruing in perpetuity the wealth that those “investments” make for the company itself. As Nicholas Sammond has pointed out, wrestlers “simultaneously reveal the production of their personae, their embodiment of characters of their own making, and their ultimate lack of control over the conditions of that making” (“Introduction” 5).

The following gives a concrete example of what this trade-off looks like: wrestlers are responsible for “getting over” with fans—that is, evoking audience reactions, whether positive or negative—but that responsibility presents challenges when a performer, for example, is given less screen time, is provided less opportunity for character development, or is booked as a frequent “jobber.” WWE wrestlers are invited to grab the “brass ring” of success (an expression allegedly widely used by WWE owner Vince McMahon; CM Punk

actually uses the phrase in his famous promo discussed above), but in the fashion of responsabilization, it is never made precisely clear what “grabbing the brass ring” entails (see J. Fisher). The WWE performer Zack Ryder (real name Matthew Cardona) sought to navigate this bind by way of a self-produced *YouTube* series (*Z! True Long Island Story*) that existed outside of WWE story-lines or continuity. When the series (and Ryder’s social media presence more broadly) succeeded in generating a dedicated following for the wrestler—Ryder awarded himself the “Internet Championship”—and earned him a devoted fandom at live events, WWE asserted its right of ownership over the Zack Ryder character and took creative control over the web series, which Ryder has since come to view with indifference. And after a brief headlining run, Ryder was returned to his status near the bottom of the “fight card” (i.e., to lower-tier status).

That Ryder, as of this writing, remains with the company speaks to the connected notion of “sacrifice” (particularly shared sacrifice) discussed by Brown. If human capital bears for itself “the responsibility of enhancing and securing its future” and “is expected to self-invest wisely” (211), such responsibility is nevertheless no guarantee of survival or success in neo-liberal rationality. Brown argues that notions of sacrifice have been relocated from political or military registers to an economic register that justifies lay-offs and reduced wages and benefits. And this notion of sacrifice, for Brown, lays clear the incoherence of the neo-liberal project, for “while neo-liberalism formally promises to liberate the citizen from the state, from politics, and even from concern with the social, practically, it integrates both state and citizenship into serving the economy” (212). It operates in the name of freedom—“free markets, free countries, free men” (108)—at the very same time that it tears up that freedom to subordinate all to the market. Neo-liberalism fuses, she goes on to say, an exaggerated sense of self-reliance with a simultaneous preparedness to be sacrificed in the name of economic progress. Brown writes that

[t]he neoliberal citizen need not stoically risk death on the battlefield, only bear up uncomplainingly in the face of unemployment, underemployment, or employment unto death . . . This citizen also accepts neoliberalism’s intensification of inequalities as basic to capitalism’s health . . . This citizen releases state, law, and economy from responsibility for and responsiveness to its own condition and predicaments. (218–9)

This contradiction is further complicated if we accept the premise of professional wrestling as a kind of performance art (see Sammond, "Introduction" 1–3), for, as sociologist Andrew Ross points out, artists are often "trained" in "sacrificial labour," predisposing them to "accept nonmonetary rewards—the gratification of producing art—as partial compensation for their work, thereby discounting the cash price of their labour" (142). It is particularly fascinating that this situation persists in the case of professional wrestling, which is arguably one of the last genuinely profitable live American performance art forms.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the crucial problem for professional wrestlers that I want to focus on is that this sacrifice is not purely economic: the wrestler may not risk death on the battlefield, but he or she certainly risks serious injury night after night in the squared circle. Active WWE performers wrestle in excess of two hundred nights per calendar year (Cowley 144). The shift to a model of human capital, in other words, obfuscates but cannot erase the reality of the wrestler's labour.

Again, the performance of violence cannot be easily separated from its violent consequences; violence is imbricated in the very labour that wrestlers perform: as one wrestler has eloquently observed, "You can't fake gravity . . . This fake stuff hurts like hell" (qtd. in Dilbert). It is not only the case that professional wrestling is merely dangerous, though Cowley offers an effective overview of the risks associated with wrestling, including early death and drug addiction (144–7). Cowley points out that many of the painkiller and alcohol addiction problems endemic to wrestling stem from the fear performers have of losing their status—what he describes as "the pressure on wrestlers to be ironmen, ready to perform night in and night out, regardless of their physical condition" (144). After all, what incentive does the company have in pushing wrestlers if they are frequently hurt? And where else can a performer go, given that WWE holds a virtual monopoly on nationally televised wrestling in the United States? One might charitably argue that the increased access granted by social media allows performers to grow their brand as *performers* rather than as their WWE characters so that audiences might ultimately follow them between wrestling promotions. But the fact that WWE maintains (for the time being) a virtual monopoly on mainstream professional wrestling in the US offers a cogent example of the kind of unfree freedom offered in neoliberal rationality: performers are *free* to take their talents elsewhere, the only problem being that there is nowhere else to go (and, by

the way, they may not take their name, likeness, or character with them, though they *will* be accompanied by the physical handicaps wrought by their time as in-ring WWE performers).¹⁸

But the core problem, rather, may be that the pain—real pain, not staged pain—of professional wrestlers is increasingly part of the point of the performance, an expectation, and that audiences must grapple with their complicity in professional wrestling's financialization of physical suffering. As scholar Sharon Mazer has pointed out, devoted wrestling fans are "obsessed with reading . . . performances for the signs of the real" ("Real" 79)—particularly real violence. For performance studies scholars Broderick Chow and Eero Laine, the sweat, blood, and bodily exhaustion of wrestling are crucial to the form's purpose, and these authors mount a defence of wrestling as violent labour, framing it in tension with Marx's description of the relationship between a singer and the entrepreneur who books her to perform (Chow and Laine 44; Marx). Unlike the singer, whose physical exertion is incidental to her art, in wrestling, the exertion is the point. Chow and Laine write that "[w]hen a wrestler collapses, sweating profusely and bleeding in the ring, the wrestler is performing labour itself" (44). Yet that performance of labour itself (perhaps contradictorily) elides the conditions of its production—performers fake certain pains while disguising other—real—pains, just for instance. More crucially, it has increasingly become the case that fans *want* to see genuine pain: Chow and Laine note, for example, the popularity of hardcore wrestling, which they argue is less interested in the performance of pain than in "real pain and blood" (49). Audiences will chant for wrestlers to introduce foreign objects into a match: tables, ladders, and chairs (in fact, an annual WWE-branded pay-per-view, *TLC*, is built around the gimmick that all three of the aforementioned items are legal to use against one's opponent in the ring—co-opting blue-collar tools for the purposes of ritual performed violence). Audiences will cheer for blood. Lost in the enthusiasm for particularly brutal "spots" (as individual preplanned in-ring sequences are called), however, is the long-term toll: as scholar Gerald Early notes, "Real blood generously displayed reduces the ability to be awed by the sight of blood" (179); and Dilbert describes one retired wrestler who, due to chronic pain, cannot tie his own shoelaces, often cannot get out of bed, and struggles with concussion-related memory issues. As Joyce Carol Oates once wrote of boxing, so too in wrestling: "it consumes the very excellence it displays—its drama is this very consumption" (qtd. in Early 175–6).

Thus, as in-ring stunts become ever more brutal (as Dilbert observes, “The physicality of the business has increased . . . Today’s wrestlers are better athletes. They take bigger risks on a daily basis. There was a time when bruisers rarely left their feet. Now the suicide dive is as commonplace as a wristlock”), we see the extent to which even pain and violence can be subsumed by the governing rationality of neo-liberalism. Yet it is also worth pointing out that the problem of professional wrestling in this regard—of physical suffering subsumed beneath (or becoming even central to) abiding neo-liberal rationality—is only a more extreme case of a broader cultural concern. Journalist Jill Andresky Fraser has noted, for instance, the negative effect of employment precarity on American health care outcomes (18–20, 36–7); more recent studies have seen links between precarity and suicidal ideation (Milner et al.); entire volumes have been dedicated to exploring the effects of neo-liberalism on quality of life and health (see, most notably, Navarro), and in this sense, we might view professional wrestling as a potent metaphor for a broader social concern.

Conclusion: Your Winner, and Still Champion

I have argued in this article that the professional wrestling business offers a pointed case study for the rise of neo-liberal rationality, particularly in terms of how we think about labour and capital. The logic of neo-liberalism is so powerful, I have suggested, that it attempts even to synthesize that which ought to exceed it: pain, suffering, violence. But what I have also aimed to capture in this work is a certain tension that arises from “reality-based” discourses in contemporary professional wrestling.

In the same way that Mazer observed fans who simultaneously wanted to be “smart” and “marks”¹⁹ (“‘Real’” 79–80)—that is, to somehow be *both* in-the-know *and* fooled by the illusion—I see a similar contradiction resulting from the so-called reality era’s glimpse behind the curtain. On the one hand, social media and the rise of wrestling journalism have ostensibly provided viewers a greater sense of what goes on “behind the scenes,”²⁰ including the physical and psychological toll of professional wrestling on the performers who practise it—the real violence of the labour that goes into producing staged violence. At the same time, WWE, by pulling the strings of these back-stage glimpses to tell more “meta” stories, risks provoking cynicism that may ultimately inoculate audiences

from believing *anything* they have seen or heard; it may also involve wrestlers going to greater, more dangerous lengths to suspend audience disbelief—to evoke the experience of the mark.

The argument I have made here presents problems in constructing any kind of alternate, positive vision, any way out of this governing neo-liberal rationality. When even progressive causes must hang their hats on economic logic, it seems sure that neo-liberal rationality has won. Brown, for her part, wonders what the “refusal . . . to sacrifice might productively reveal” (218), and yet even she has no concrete solutions for how to rescue a non-economic sphere. Malcolm Harris is similarly sceptical, characterizing the possible avenues for social change as like playing the 1990s Hasbro toy “Bop It”—“the instructions keep changing” (210–6).²¹ Diagnosing the crisis is, of course, important, even in the absence of a set of suggested solutions. Rather than conclude on a down note, however, by conceding that absence (aware of the fact that, as Jodi Dean has argued, “[t]he sense that *there is no alternative* is a component of neoliberal ideology” [49; original emphasis]), I want to instead highlight what I view as a small glimpse of resistance against this totalizing logic.

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Several years ago, a video began circulating on the Internet (“It’s Still Real”). At what appears to be a wrestler meet-and-greet/Q&A in a high school gymnasium, a low-resolution camera points at a spectacled, middle-aged man who holds a microphone and attempts to articulate a question for a panel of professional wrestlers. After many stops and starts and some stammering, the questioner (later identified as Dave Willis) chokes back a few tears and poses a question that is not really a question at all. He shouts, “It’s still real to me, damn it!”

The video went viral (at the time of this writing, it has over three million views on *YouTube*), and Willis was roundly mocked on the Internet and on television: undeservedly so, from my perspective, for Willis was no naïve fan—no *mark* (though it is telling even that we might view naïveté so negatively). He was, rather, expressing his awareness of what WWE has sought to erase. Willis’s words cannot be taken literally, or at least not *only* literally: the sentence Willis utters is actually quite slippery. Willis both knows that wrestling is staged and yet understands the real suffering beyond what audiences are expected to see. Yet the sentence also suggests a measure of respect for the illusion itself—he is willingly pre-emptively suspending disbelief—declaring *in advance* that he will

treat what he sees as real. Willis is thanking these performers, too, taking what Claire Warden, Broderick Chow, and Eero Laine describe as “pleasure and meaning” in the “collaborative labour of the ‘show’” (207), and Willis’s tears, his affect, I like to believe, did some work on however small a scale to rescue the physicality, the pain, and the performance of professional wrestling from the purely “rational” domain of the neo-liberal.

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Notes

- 1 See also the 2000 pay-per-view event *Bash at the Beach*, where performer Jeff Jarrett literally lay down to be pinned in the middle of the ring by Hulk Hogan before storming back stage, prompting booker Russo to deliver a promo about Hulk Hogan’s abuse of the “creative control” clause in his contract (Reynolds and Alvarez 316–7).
- 2 Mismanagement led to WCW’s closure and sale to rival promotion WWE in 2001, positioning WWE as the lone remaining major wrestling promotion in the United States.
- 3 In surveys distributed to WWE Network subscribers, the company acknowledged the reality era as taking place from 2014 to 2016.
- 4 It is no mere coincidence, as I and others have previously suggested, that Donald Trump is a member of the WWE Hall of Fame (see “Donald Trump”; Mazer, “Donald”; Jansen, “Yes!” 645–6).
- 5 See @adamscherr99 on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/adamscherr99/?hl=en>.
- 6 Operating profits have been somewhat more erratic than revenues in the past ten years, but this inconsistency is owed primarily to a number of one-time expenses (such as start-up costs for the hugely successful WWE Network, WWE’s subscription-based streaming service).
- 7 As Douglas Battema and Philip Sewell have argued, the prevalence of market discourses has also served to shield WWE from criticism with regard to its historical problems of racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia. They write that WWE’s efforts to sell to its target audience—young, male, white—has justified problematic content (this offensive content is what that audience wants to see, after all) while simultaneously employing a reflexive, ironic style that allows the

promotion plausible deniability: WWE's "ironic humor allowed regressive, recidivist masculinity to emerge relatively unscathed from ongoing cultural struggles" (281). The authors note that consumers "could choose either to take the text as is or to unveil its various conceits" (282)—the key being that, either way, these consumers *remained consumers*.

- 8 In particular, a number of WWE contracts have become publicly available over the years, owing largely to lawsuits filed by retired wrestlers contesting their status as independent contractors; others come from WWE's filings with the United States Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) (see Smith).
- 9 See also Jodi Dean's work on communicative capitalism. Dean notes that "neoliberalism depends on the organized political occupation and direction of governments, on the use of the bureaucratic, legal, and security apparatuses of the state in ways that benefit corporate and financial interests" (49). Though Dean is critical of Brown's focus on "de-democratization" (assuming as it does a prior functioning democracy), both authors' work is nevertheless deeply invested in making sense of the neo-liberalization of American culture discussed in this article.
- 10 Brown, however, might bristle at the characterization of citizens as *tax payers* first, given that she is critical of the way progressive policies are often couched in economic terms; she views this as capitulation to neo-liberal rationality (26–7).
- 11 At least one performer has described professional wrestling as "like being in a live-action movie and you're doing your own stunts" (qtd. in Dilbert).
- 12 However, professional wrestlers will often play bit parts in cinema or on TV so as to qualify for SAG-AFTRA membership.
- 13 Recent news of a television broadcast deal with the Fox Network potentially worth in excess of \$2 billion has led to some renewed calls for unionization, though these tellingly come from those who report on the industry rather than insiders themselves (see Konuwa).
- 14 There is, of course, a tension in the very word "professional" in the term "professional wrestling." The adjective ostensibly serves to distinguish the staged performance from amateur (i.e., legitimate) wrestling, but it also seems to represent a professional domain at odds with much of the blue-collar attitudes that pervade wrestling—as though wrestling might be the one field where an otherwise working-class performer might demonstrate his or her professional bona fides.
- 15 In 2013, Scarborough Sports Marketing reported that pro wrestling's biggest audience consisted of those making less than \$35,000 annually; wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer has broken down those numbers further and suggested the biggest audience for wrestling lacks any college education and makes less than \$25,000 per year (qtd. in "So Who Makes Up").

- 16 That the “stylin’, profilin’, limousine riding, jet flying, kiss-stealing, wheelin’ n’ dealin’” Flair came ultimately to be one of professional wrestling’s most beloved icons (embraced in particular by the hip-hop community; see A. Banks; McDuffie) may be indicative of the cultural shifts discussed in this article.
- 17 For more on the culture industry’s embrace of neo-liberal rationality, see M. Banks (92–3); Jansen, “Fiction” (37–8).
- 18 In the last several months, a potential rival to WWE *has* actually emerged, in the form of All Elite Wrestling (AEW)—an independent promotion funded by billionaire football executive Tony Khan, and the brainchild of former WWE star Cody Rhodes (mentioned above). However, whether this organization will, as Rhodes claims, “change the wrestling economy” (qtd. in Pratt) remains to be seen. Though both Rhodes and fellow AEW executives (and wrestling tag team) the Young Bucks have in the past advocated for wrestler health benefits on social media, for example, initial reports that AEW would provide its performers with health care turned out to be misleading; the organization later clarified that it would offer health care, but only to its executives and full-time (i.e., office) staff. At least for the time being, wrestlers will remain independent contractors, subject to the same injury policies as in WWE (see Pratt).
- 19 “Mark” is the term used to describe a fan who believes wrestling is a legitimate contest or who has bought into a particular story-line/fight/promo as being “true.”
- 20 Or “in the gorilla position” (the staging area immediately behind the curtain at a WWE show), to use a more industry-appropriate term.
- 21 In *The Death and Life of American Labor*, Stanley Aronowitz offers the possibility that a revived labour movement must work for a similar sort of totalizing effort—which is to say that labour must fight neo-liberal fire with fire. For too long, Aronowitz suggests, American labour unions have limited their sphere to the workplace itself, particularly in terms of compensation. A more effective labour movement, Aronowitz contends, would care for its members’ families and communities, would field independent political candidates, and would advocate for causes outside of that narrow sphere of work.

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