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The Discreet Wearing out of Souls at Work: Simone Weil on Speed, Humiliation and Affliction

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Abstract. This paper seeks to show the relevance of Simone Weil's writings on work for contemporary political and social theory. More specifically, by drawing on Weil's factory writings, I argue that Weil's analysis of speed, humiliation and affliction is highly pertinent for reflecting upon the consequences of the increasingly ubiquitous recourse to digital tracking and monitoring tools by today's employers. The paper also proposes to read Weil's account of suffering and affliction in light of recent scholarship on "slow violence". Inspired by Rob Nixon's work, this scholarship is interested in forms of harm that are slow-paced, attritional, 'out of sight' and intimately tied to our (distracted) attention regimes. As I argue, Weil very lucidly described the paradox at the heart of many types of modern work: namely, that its *fast* pace causes the *slow* death of workers' souls and bodies. The paper draws out the importance of Weil's account of affliction for understanding the harms caused by new forms of digital domination in the twenty-first century workplace.
Keywords: Simone Weil; work; affliction; time; speed; suffering; humiliation; slow violence.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Of Speed and Numbers. Or How to Wear down Workers with the Time-clock. 3. Orders, Fear and the Loss of Dignity. 4. The Ordinariness and Slow Pace of Affliction; Bibliographic references.

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies that track employees' productivity and location have existed for a while now, but since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, the popularity of these tools has soared.[2] As the lockdowns forced many employees into remote work, compagnies felt an increased pressure to track performance with AI-metrics, as well as to monitor workers' attention and behaviour with internet tracking tools, webcams and keyboard monitoring.[3] Some surveilled social workers in the USA have been reprimanded (i.e. denied pay) for time spent on conversations with unusually distressed patients (this was considered "idle" time since there was no typing on their laptop keyboards).[4] In some hospitals, nurses are asked to wear wrist bands that track their footsteps and time use, which AI then analyses to 'optimize' performance.[5] (Needless to say, if Ms. Jane in room 213 is particularly depressed today after her chemo treatment, AI will not consider it 'good care performance' the extra time spent in that room or that 843 'wasted' steps taken by the nurse to go to the cafeteria to get Ms. Jane ice cream.) Cashiers' scanning speed in large box stores is also being closely monitored with digital tools, and as the sociologist Madison Van Oort has shown in her illuminating study of fast-fashion chains like H&M, algorithms are ubiquitous in that industry, for the hiring, tracking and automated scheduling of low-paid and precarious workers.[6]

One of the goals of these tracking devices is fairly obvious–namely, to boost productivity, which some regard as achievable by increasing pressures for speed and by decreasing distraction.[7] Some employers are convinced that they might significantly improve workers' attention by having recourse, for instance, to "distraction blockers" and to facial recognition software that track a worker's eyes and facial muscular movement–on the basis of which the software can assess whether a worker is *genuinely and constantly paying attention* (instead of watching a soccer game or purchasing shoes). Now, the effects of all these devices have not been studied closely for long, but research indicates that one of the overall *societal* effects of AI has been to heighten inequalities and oppression at work instead of decreasing them.[8] Some psychologists and social scientists have shown that ubiquitous digital technologies at work can cause a significant increase in stress,

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2 I wish to thank Julie Daigle, Sophie Cloutier, Alexandre Crépeau, the anonymous reviewers solicited by this journal, and all the participants at the UK conference "Simone Weil for our Times" for their responses and critical engagement with my work.

3 In the USA, 8 out of 10 of the main (private) employers "track the productivity metrics of individual workers", most in real time (J. Kantor and A. Sundaram: "The Rise of the Worker Productivity Score", *New York Times,* Aug.14, 2022). On employees' health/mood monitoring: A. Zenonos *et al*.: "Healthy Office: Mood recognition at work using smartphones and wearable sensors", *IEE* (2016).

4 Kantor and Sundaram: "Productivity Score".

5 Masoodi *et al*.: "Workplace Surveillance and Remote Work", *Cybersecure Policy Exchange,* 2021.

6 Low-skill and racialized workers have been for years the groups most monitored, with relatively few scholars showing great concern (apart from momentary media hype over the story of Amazon warehouse workers). Unsurprisingly, now that white collar workers are increasingly subjected to surveillance, interest in the issue has increased.

7 Massoudi *et al*., "Workplace Surveillance", p. 25, p. 30.

8 Aloisi, A., and V. De Stefano: *Your Boss Is an Algorithm: Artificial Intelligence*, *Platform Work and Labour*, Hart Publishing, 2022, p.5. Much of the tracking done by compagnies is something few workers and relatively few policy makers are aware of. Bernhardt, A. *et al.*: "Algorithms at work. The Case for Worker Technology Rights", UC Berkeley Labor Center, Nov.2021.

anxiety, employee absenteeism, burnout and distrust. Several workers who are the object of surveillance have also reported having experienced "demoralization", deep "humiliation", cognitive "numbness" and intense "performance fatigue".[9]

If French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943) were alive today, she would not have been surprised by any of these trends in workplace management, nor by their impact on employees. And she would surely scoff at the absurd determination of employers to increase speed in employees while *simultaneously* trying to increase their attention with surveillance gadgets that can only compromise the latter. In 1934, Weil took a leave of absence from her teaching job in order to work in factories, hoping to get a first-hand grasp of the character of work oppression and the possible ways to diminish it. In the diary she kept during those months (and various essays and letters written shortly after), Weil described with remarkable lucidity the devastating impact of the pressure for speed and of certain technologies on individuals' attention. Also extremely insightful, as we will see, is her account of humiliation, which she saw as closely tied to fear, to social invisibility, to workers' constant subjection to the loud arbitrary orders of foremen, and, most importantly, to a work environment in which workers are prevented from exercising their own mental faculties.

The chief objective of my paper is to show that, while Weil's factory writings were based on the realities of 1930s France, they are highly relevant for reflecting on contemporary digital technologies and the type of suffering and injustices these are creating at work. The flesh-and-blood factory foremen described by Weil, who harm workers' dignity with abusive and brash orders might be slightly less prevalent today (in some factories in the Global North at least), but they have only been replaced by tracking wristbands, by more discreet, imperceptible but perhaps more injurious digital versions of themselves. Indeed, workers can now *wear* on their wrist the digital incarnation of their superiors, taking them along with them everywhere, including in workplace bathrooms and changerooms. Weil wrote a great deal about changerooms; while she often lamented the shoddy conditions of these factory spaces, she nonetheless considered them to be precious sites of 'escape' and solidarity-building.[10]

My second objective is to read Weil's account of oppression at work through the lenses of the concept of "slow violence"[11]. Inspired by Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, the research on slow violence concerns itself with forms of harm that fall below the radar largely because of their slow pace and imperceptible character. They are types of violence that occur "gradually and out of sight […] violence of delayed destruction".[12] While Nixon himself focused chiefly on the destruction of ecosystems, scholars have taken up his concept to think about the discreet harm caused by lifelong domestic violence, systemic racism or that tied to housing dispossession.[13] The harm caused by digital monitoring and surveillance at work can, I argue, be fruitfully characterized in terms of a slow violence–or, to

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9 Zickhur, K.: "Workplace Surveillance"; Kantor and Sundaram, "Productivity Score"; Manley, A. and S. Williams: "'We're not run on Numbers, We're People, We're Emotional People'", *Organization* 29.4, 2022, pp.692-713.

10 Weil, S.: "Journal d'usine", p. 97 & "Lettre à Boris Souvarine", p.74, in *Condition ouvrière.*

11 Nixon, R.: *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor,* Harvard University Press, 2011.

12 *Ibid.*, p.2.

13 Pain, R. and C. Cahill: "Critical political geographies of slow violence and resistance", *Environment and Planning,* 40:2, 2022.

put it in Weilian terms, as what I will call *slow affliction.* Along with indicating the resonances between Weil's and Nixon's writings, I also briefly point out what Weil adds to contemporary research on slow violence: namely, a thick moral account of *why* this 'ordinary' harm in question should concern us, and concrete, insightful prescriptions regarding how to mitigate oppression at work. The paper is organized as follows. The first section considers what Weil had to say on the horrors of speed and the quantification of performance, while the following section discusses the impact of various types of humiliation on workers. The last section of the paper brings all of this together, placing Weil's reflections on speed and humiliation (two crucial causes of affliction at work, I argue) in conversation with Nixon's theorization of slow violence. The paper ends with a brief consideration of 'Weilian' proposals for how to decrease the harm done to workers in a digital age.

2. Of Speed and Numbers. Or How to Wear down Workers with the Time-clock

"time was an unbearable weight"
Simone Weil[14]

Weil's *Journal d'usine* and several essays written shortly after her experience in factories are filled with insightful reflections on a slow-paced and 'discreet' kind of brutality she thought was responsible for transforming human beings into non-humans.[15] Weil thought (small) factories could be a source of joy, intellectual stimulation and camaraderie; she lamented the fact that they were the very opposite: she described factories as "gloomy places […] where people only obey orders, and have all their humanity broken down, and become degraded lower than the machines."[16] Line-work where unskilled workers only have to follow orders at great speed, Weil regarded as a discreet kind of chipping away at workers' dignity (as if with thousands of little "pin-pricks" and "little annoyances").[17] It was, in her view, a wearing down of workers' bodies surely, but more importantly, an intellectual numbing and degradation she considered akin to slavery.

In a letter to her friend Albertine Thévenon, Weil explained that this slavery was the result of two things: first, the need to constantly work with great rapidity, and, second, the fact of being subjected to the unpredictable and *arbitrary* orders of superiors. She wrote: "in order to 'make the grade' one has to repeat movement after movement faster than one can think, so that not only reflection but even daydreaming

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[14] Weil, S.: "Journal d'usine", in *Condition ouvrière,* p.170. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from *La Condition ouvrière* are mine. But please note that for Weil's 'Expérience d'usine' (translated as "Factory Work"), I have used the translation already available in *The Simone Weil Reader* (hereafter *SWR*), edited by George A. Panichas.

[15] Or into 'things', as she would put it later in her essay on the *Illiad,* where Weil attends to the 'slow' brutality exerted upon individuals in terms of force. There is no space to enter into a detailed discussion of force–readers should consult the thoughtful treatment of E. Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

[16] Weil, S.: *Seventy Letters*, translated and arranged by Richard Rees, with foreword by E. Springsted, Eugene, Wipf & Stock, 1965, p.20.

[17] Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p.55.

is impossible. In front of his machine, the worker has to annihilate his soul, his thought, his feelings." And a few lines down, regarding the bosses' commands, Weil added: "from the time [the worker] clocks in to the time he clocks out, he may *at any moment* receive *any order*; and he must always obey without a word. […] In this situation, thought shrivels up and withdraws".[18] Let me emphasize here that what Weil considered excruciating is not chiefly having to follow directions from above (this can be part of non-servile work). The chief harm is rather that tied to the perceived arbitrariness and *unpredictability* of these orders, the *manner* in which one is subjected to them.[19] Indeed, there is something particularly horrific for Weil about the irregular and unpredictable scrutiny and interference by bosses[20] (Weil would likely have been horrified by current employer's recourse to *random* screenshots to check on employees). I have underscored this because, as we will see below, arbitrariness is crucial for Weil's account of humiliation and of affliction, which we will discuss in the following two sections. But for now, let us take a closer look at the issue of speed and numbers.

In her factory journal and in an open letter written around 1936, Weil described the consequences that the constant pressure for speed has on workers:[21] first, it forecloses the possibility of stopping in order to appreciate any of what he/she has done, which makes work satisfaction difficult (a difficulty compounded by the division of labor). Secondly, the imperative for constant high speed compromises our desire and ability to enter into relationships with coworkers, which in turn undermines workers' solidarity. (Solidarity is undermined not only because workers are too rushed to socialize, but also because they are forced to compete with one another for the most reliable machines.) Moreover, speed tends to shrink our minds temporally; Weil thought that when the pressure of the chronometer is intolerable, the mind is unable to project itself into the future; the resulting "perpetual recoil upon the present"[22] wears down the soul. When time pressures are maintained for an extensive period *and* are mixed with social degradation and fear, the result is a 'lethargic' mindlessness. "This tick-tock, the barren monotony of which is scarcely bearable to human ears over any length of time, workingmen are obliged to reproduce with their bodies. So uninterrupted a succession tends to plunge one into a kind of sleep, yet it must be borne without falling asleep."[23] One cannot fall asleep partially because there is indeed a task to be done to feed oneself, but also because many workers do face the risk of serious bodily injuries.

Nevertheless, while Weil was concerned by bodily injury (her factory journal is filled with indignant observations about severed limbs and the "completely destroyed health"[24] of workers), she was *most* indignant about speed's impact on workers' ability to *think* and exercise their attention. Attention is, after all, the human faculty Weil considered most critical for justice, for a decent socio-ethical life, and for dignified

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18 Weil, S.: *Seventy Letters*, p.22; my emphasis.

19 Weil, S.: "La rationalisation", *Condition ouvrière,* p.306; "Factory Work", in *SWR*, p.55.

20 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p.57.

21 *Ibid.,* p.61-65.

22 *Ibid*., p.57.

23 *Ibid*, p.61. My emphasis. Note here that monotony *in itself* (a certain boring repetitiveness) is not incompatible with dignified work according to Weil. (*Ibid,* p.69) But it becomes a problem when it is mixed with such things as fear, the risk of injury, the constant subordination to someone's orders, etc.

24 E.g. Weil, S. : 'Lettre à Boris Souvarine', *Condition ouvrière,* p.75.

work.[25] In her factory writings, we learn that high-speed line-work *necessarily* kills the possibility of exercising the higher type of attention Weil considered essential to meaningful and well-done work. This is a thesis todays' employers should heed, instead of trying to enhance workers' attention with software with Orwellian names like "Controlio" or "Freedom" while at the same time subjecting workers to speed/performance metrics and taking random screenshots of them every few minutes. The incongruity of these managerial strategies would have been most evident to Weil, who so often underscored that attention simply cannot be forced and that it cannot be assessed on the basis of the contraction of particular facial muscles (contrary to what some surveillance apps designers claim).[26] For Weil, attention can only be cultivated and exercised *slowly*, and in appropriate material and spiritual conditions.

It is because she attached such significance to attention that Weil considered the impact of speed the "gravest crime against the human soul".[27] To be unable to use one's reason and initiative at work, and to be unable to *attend* to the principles and mechanisms behind one's work, Weil regarded not only as dreary, but as a humiliating injury that wears us down. One cannot slow down in front of machines because doing so would compromise one's earnings (and thus the ability to feed oneself), which would in turn decrease one's productivity: "one shouldn't get caught in this vicious circle. It leads to exhaustion, to sickness, to death. […] when we can no longer produce fast enough, [we lose] the right to live."[28] Weil thought that past a certain point, the push for speed backfires with a counter-productive–and morally objectionable–exhaustion (a counter-productivity also indicated by recent research on the negative effects of digital "work intensification").[29] *Plus ça change*….

Weil perceptively saw that despite the speed at which workers were forced to work, they paradoxically had no sense of "advancing on the plane of time";[30] time had slowed down to an unbearably sluggish pace. *Fast* pace causes workers' *slow* death. For eight or ten hours a day, the worker puts aside her dignity and thoughts; and similarly to many closely monitored workers today[31], she runs around, rushing constantly and avoiding (bathroom) breaks. And yet, the worker has the odd sense of not moving at all. Weil explains: "the effort [the worker] is called upon to make […] leads him nowhere […] and since our working day gives rise to another, no

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[25] The literature on Weil and attention is extremely vast. I can only mention a few sources: e.g. Janiaud, J.: *L'attention et l'action,* PUF, 2002; Chenavier, R.: *Simone Weil : L'attention au réel,* Michalon, 2009; Rozelle-Stone, R. : "*Le Déracinement* of attention : Simone Weil on the Institutionalization of Distractedness", *Philosophy Today,* vol.53, issue 1, Spring 2009; Thomas, C.: "Simone Weil: The Ethics of Affliction and the Aesthetics of Attention." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies: IJPS*, 28:2, 2020, pp. 145–67. On Weil, attention and work, the following are illuminating: Chenavier, R.: *Simone Weil, une philosophie du travail*. Cerf, 2000; Sparling, R.: "Theory and Praxis: Simone Weil and Marx on the Dignity of Labor." *The Review of Politics*, vol.74, no. 1, 2012, pp. 87–107; Bea, E. and C. Basili: "Vers une civilisation du travail. Action et contemplation dans la pensée de Simone Weil", in Chenavier, R. and T.G. Pavel: *Simone Weil, réception et transposition*, Garnier, 2019, pp. 123-134.

[26] See e.g. Weil, S.: "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God", *SWR,* pp. 44-52.

[27] Weil, S.: "Condition première d'un travail non servile", in *Condition Ouvrière,* p. 433.

[28] Weil, S.: "La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallos", in *Condition Ouvrière,* p. 271.

[29] Bailey, D.E.: "Emerging Technologies at Work", *ILR Review* 75(3), May 2022, pp. 537-539; Masoodi *et al*.: "Workplace Surveillance".

[30] Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p. 70.

[31] The skipping of bathroom breaks (or of most breaks) in some North American workplaces with intense tracking/surveillance is common. e.g. Kantor and Sundaram, "The Worker Productivity Score".

more than that, the achieved end in question is *nothing less than a form of death*".[32] This 'near-death' state is tied to speed because the latter is linked to a fear of being fired/reprimanded and because a hurried tempo empties the mind of everything that is not speed-related or quantifiable–and numbers, indeed, become an obsession for the worker.

The quantification of performance and the 'tyranny of numbers' was certainly another grave concern of Weil's. She was indignant that so many employers were "interested only in *what* has been accomplished, never in the *ways* and *means* leading up to that accomplishment".[33] That management should care more about "clear-cut and measurable" things and quantifiable 'output' was not surprising in her view: it is much easier to *count* concrete and quantifiable *things* rather than what she refers to as "obscure, impalpable, inexpressible" outcomes and affective-cognitive states workers experience *while* working.[34] These "impalpable" and "inexpressible" results and aspects of work are precisely those that evade the performance assessment of nurses' wristbands and of social workers' laptop keystrokes (much research very clearly indicates that decent care cannot be assessed by counting steps or minutes).

Weil did not live long enough to witness wearable, AI powered, speed and productivity- tracking technologies, but the warnings she offered about the potential costs of attaching excessive (or even exclusive) significance to quantifiable productivity indicators speak perfectly to our world in which such techniques have become ubiquitous. While it is true that countless other philosophers and critics have warned us about these costs in the last century, Weil did so in a distinctive manner–partially because she analyzed these effects in terms of our faculty to *attend* (to our work, but also to other human beings), and in terms of the harm done to what is most *sacred* in us. Hers, indeed, is a thick *moral* account of work oppression, as we will see shortly.

3. Orders, Fear and the Loss of Dignity

"Here, you are nothing. You simply do not count."
Simone Weil

As we saw in the letter to Albertine Thévenon cited above, Weil saw a painful servitude both in speed, and in the fact of being constantly at the mercy of someone's orders and will. Several passages in her *Journal d'usine* recount vividly this "perpetual and humiliating subordination" tied to bosses' directives and to the lack of autonomy over one's time use. In a pithy statement that comes shortly after this mention of the 'perpetual humiliation' of low-skill workers, she observes unequivocally: "the most crucial fact is not suffering, but humiliation".[35] As such, it is unsurprising that Weil should have devoted so much energy throughout her life to finding ways to "alleviate

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[32] Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR*, p. 70. My emphasis.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 59. My emphasis.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 56.
[35] Weil, S.: "Journal d'usine", in *Condition ouvrière,* p. 171.

a bit the weight of humiliations imposed daily on workers"[36].

While there are fluctuations in her use of the term, Weil typically conceived of 'humiliation' as a significant loss in dignity and as a painful experience of "social degradation". She describes it, in a later essay titled 'The love of God and affliction', as a "violent condition of the whole physical being, which wants to rise up against [an] outrage but is forced, by impotence or fear, to hold itself in check."[37] In her factory writings, she characterizes humiliation as a throbbing, constant awareness of social inferiority or of one's 'invisibility' and disposability; it is, she observed, as if someone was constantly whispering in your ear that "you are nothing", that "you simply do not count".[38]

Throughout her *oeuvre*, Weil discussed different (and often overlapping) sources of humiliation in the workplace:[39] one of them, mentioned briefly above, is the fear of reprimand or job loss, if one fails to keep up with the employer's productivity targets (a fear particularly high for those at the bottom of the social rung, needless to say). While her legendary clumsiness might have led Weil to receive an atypical number of reprimands (and thus to have overstated that fear), passages from her factory journal suggest that hers was a widely shared experience. Another source of humiliation that gets repeatedly mentioned in her *Journal* is the powerlessness that unskilled workers experience in front of technology they do not understand.[40] This incomprehension can harm an individual's dignity in two ways:[41] first, when her machine breaks down, the unskilled worker is forced to wait for someone else to fix it (a degrading and consequential dependency, especially for someone paid by piecework). But more importantly, Weil considered the impenetrability of some machines humiliating because she was of the view that workers *want* to use their minds and understand what they are doing; much work satisfaction is tied precisely to this–an important Weilian insight for us, as we increasingly fill our workplaces with extraordinarily complex and opaque technologies (some of which even managers and our tech support teams do not understand).[42]

Another source of social degradation and pain with which Weil was deeply preoccupied was the lack of control over one's time and schedule. She considered it degrading to work with the constant possibility of having a superior suddenly barge in to check on your performance or to order you to switch tasks;[43] she also characterized as humiliating the unpredictability flowing from not knowing what you will be doing in a few days. A worker should "know more or less what will be expected of him a week or a fortnight in advance".[44] As she would note in *The Need for Roots,* it matters that employers minimize the unpredictability tied to *what*

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36 Weil, S.: "Lettres à Victor Bernard", in *Condition ouvrière,* p. 213.

37 Weil, S.: "The love of God and affliction", in *SWR,* p. 440.

38 Weil, S.: 'Factory Work', in *SWR,* p.56. See also *Condition ouvrière,* e.g. "Lettres à Victor Bernard", pp. 214; and 220-223; "La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallos", p. 272.

39 One of most extreme type of humiliation I do not have the space to consider here is that of sex work. See Weil: *First and Last Notebooks*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock, 1970, p. 327.

40 E.g. Weil, S.: "Journal d'usine", in *Condition ouvrière,* p.179-181; 203-204.

41 E.g. Weil, S.: "Factory work", in *SWR,* p. 63.

42 Weil, S.: "Journal d'usine", in *Condition ouvrière,* pp.179-181; also pp. 203-204. "l'ignorance totale de ce à quoi on travaille est excessivement démoralisante. On n'a pas le sentiment qu'un produit résulte des efforts qu'on fournit."

43 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p. 57.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

workers will be asked to do in the not-so-distant future, but also that tied to *how much* they will earn (for the later, the unpredictability will obviously be by far more dreadful if one is at the bottom of the salary scale). Part of what Weil had in mind here is captured in Madison Van Oort's *Worn Out,* which describes in vivid terms the impact of automated scheduling software on workers: unpredictable schedules, anxiety, humiliation, and financial insecurity.[45] Based on firsthand observations in the cheap clothing retail industry (e.g. H&M, Zara), Van Oort offers a sobering warning about the impact of resorting to algorithmic scheduling, and the despondency created by digital surveillance. Weil might in fact have considered today's H&M workers, in *some* small respects at least, as worse off than the factory workers subjected to the arbitrariness mentioned above.[46] I suggest this in part because things are now more insidious and invisible, but also, because today's employers serve up workers, upon hire, a deceitful gospel of "flexibility" and freedom. But what Van Oort shows quite well, the concrete *effects* of the automated scheduling and the digital surveillance apps are, in fact, the very opposite of freedom. What *Worn Out* argues is that the only cheap crumb of autonomy these precarious workers are left with–and bitterly compete for–is control over the stockroom's playlist ("soundtrack autonomy")[47].

A fourth important source of humiliation discussed by Weil is that which flows from workers' conviction that if they tried to complain about abuse or inadequate pay, what would likely follow are screams or indifference (Weil regarded both as highly degrading).[48] That unskilled workers might think that complaining will only *reinforce* their humiliation is not odd, given that they tend to take for granted that they do not count at all. This brings us to a closely connected, additional source of humiliation: namely, social invisibility. For Weil, this form of humiliation manifests itself in a "thousand little ways," and so gradually that few are aware of it. Paradoxically, for many low-skilled or racialized[49] workers, this social invisibility and "disposability" (i.e. one's life is considered insignificant or easily replaceable) is accompanied by a type of *hypervisibility*–or a 'hyper-surveillance', to use the term used in the research that shows how low-skilled and racialized workers tend to be at once the most invisible yet most observed (e.g. with webcams, geolocation gadgets).[50] Weil would have urged us to be much more cognizant of the consequences of this hyper-visibility: to be surveilled and to have one's time use tracked constantly is to have one's integrity questioned–it is "toxic", "humiliating" and "demoralizing" as the workers concerned put it.[51] Some of these words are also those used by a Canadian female school janitor who was suddenly fired in 2021, when she refused

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45 Van Oort: *Worn Out,* p.73. At times similarly to Weil, Van Oort denounces the humiliating pain caused by precarity, fear of job loss, and constant "unpredictability, speed and physical strain" (p.89)

46 That being said, Weil would also have acknowledged some of the concrete and significant gains made by workers since the 1930s in terms of health and safety at work, labor law, etc. I do not wish to belittle some of the qualitative differences (and victories) made by workers' movements since the 1930s, but I do see some value in taking the time to ask ourselves whether the digitalisation of the workplace might not create some unprecedented types of mental distress about which Weil would have been deeply concerned.

47 *Ibid,* p.89.

48 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", p. 56; "La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallos", in *Condition ouvrière,* p. 269.

49 While Weil did not write extensively on racism at work, she noted in *The Need for Roots* and in her essays on colonialism that the affliction experienced by immigrant/migrant workers in Parisian factories and by 'the colonized' in the *outre-mer* was a lot worse and far more likely to be ignored or dismissed (more on this below). See Weil, S. : *Simone Weil On Colonialism. An Ethic of the Other.*

50 Massoudi *et al*.: "Workplace Surveillance"; Van Oort, M.: *Worn out, op.cit.*.

51 Kantor and Sundaram: "Worker Productivity"; Bailey: "Emerging Technologies".

her employer's demand that she download on her phone a geolocation app that would have monitored her time. During an interview that followed her dismissal, she bitterly underscored the humiliation experienced: "We're not thieves"[52].

Some employers who have witnessed pushbacks against these tracking tools have scoffed at the suggestion that these apps are degrading. If many managers understand the concern over privacy, few seem to appreciate the depth of the harm done to worker's dignity and morale (both of which end up, it ought to be stressed here, *decreasing* rather than improving productivity).[53] Why, some managers might ask, should trivial and innocuous things like geolocation apps be so bad? Weil invites us to take these unspectacular forms of harm ("details trivial in themselves"[54]) *as* consequential; as they accumulate, they come to reinforce in workers the sense that they are *not* at home at work, and that they are *not* trusted. Indeed, "each show of lack of respect […] each humiliation, *however trivial*, [is] a friendly reminder of [the worker's] alien status."[55] To illustrate her claim, Weil recounts something she witnessed in front of a factory, which evidently shocked her (as we can gather from the numerous times she mentions this story).[56] The case in question is that of female workers standing outside a factory in the rain, waiting for the exact time at which they are allowed to come in. These women may not enter early, yet they are *forced* to show up early. ("Never mind the reasons"[57] would be their bosses' reaction if there were tardiness–dismissed, indeed, would be a medical urgency or transportation delay, which can and do happen).

Weil seems to have considered the situation of these women as humiliating not chiefly because of the rain and the *differential* treatment they received (male workers of a higher rank could come in at will). She was perhaps most indignant about the lack of trust that lead to the policy: in one mention of this story, she notes that it is a fear of theft that informed management's decision.[58] And it is also this type of degrading mistrust that she saw in the insistent (and in appearance 'trivial') request to show identification cards at work.[59] In cases like these, not a single worker was physically, overtly or brutally harmed by a manager, but Weil considered of utmost significance the cumulative impact of these quotidian, discreet gestures.

4. The Ordinariness and Slow Pace of Affliction

In the previous sections, we have considered several facets of the exhaustion and suffering caused by speed, quantified performance and by various kinds of humiliations. In 'La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallos', Weil made the following remark about this exhaustion: "An overwhelming, bitter fatigue, painful to the point that one wishes for death […] for this kind of fatigue, we would need a unique

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52 CBC News, April 12th, 2021. https://www.cbc.ca/news/gopublic/tattleware-privacy-employment-1.5978337
53 See e.g. De Stefano and Worthers: "AI and digital tools", p. 15.
54 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p. 65.
55 *Ibid*.: p. 63.
56 For a helpful summary of these mentions see Weil: *Condition ouvrière,* p. 498.
57 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p. 55.
58 Weil, S.: "Journal d'usine", in *Condition ouvrière,* p.138.
59 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", p. 65.

name."[60] A few years after writing this down, Weil did in fact come up with a term: namely, affliction (*'malheur'*). Affliction is a specific Weilian term of art (one that is "impossible to compare with anything else"),[61] and it is made of three specific elements: physical pain, considerable psychological suffering, and "social degradation *or the fear of it*".[62] What is crucial to note is that physiological suffering is not enough for there to be affliction. In fact, Weil will always insist that work–even in its most dignified form–will necessarily be accompanied by some pain, which can be a legitimate source of pride.[63]

What distinguishes affliction from 'ordinary' suffering is not only the duration of the bodily pain (affliction's is typically "prolonged and frequent" [64]), but most significantly, it is the presence of mental distress and of considerable humiliation. Moreover, it is affliction–rather than mere suffering–that provokes that cry of the soul Weil considered to be tied to what is sacred in us: namely, an expectation of good. As she explains in 'Human Personality', Weil believed that there is, in all humans, a 'natural' anticipation that good (rather than evil) will be done to us. When this expectation is crushed–and it *will* be crushed, with variable frequency and intensity depending on our circumstances–the soul will protest with the (silent) interrogation, "why am I getting hurt?"[65] It is this sacredness upon which Weil grounds her account of *why* we all ought to be filled with indignation at the affliction of coworkers and fellow citizens, as we will see shortly.

That physiological pain is not the most crucial aspect of affliction makes it possible and fruitful to "transpose" (if imperfectly) some 1930s Weilian insights to the plight of workers today–including that of white collar employees who do not extensively use their bodies.[66] For while the negative physiological effects of digital surveillance and tracking are real (e.g. cardiovascular problems, insomnia, injuries, etc.), they may not be what should preoccupy us the most. As Weil lucidly observed, there might be a greater danger in the way technology and management tools are turning us into *things* and are destroying the very conditions necessary to have meaningful work, workplace belonging and to exercise our highest faculty (i.e. attention).[67]

That affliction and 'out of sight' humiliations at work should be rarely the object of great concern was not surprising to Weil: they were, after all, unspectacular and defined by a "quiet ordinariness" (to use Nixon's formulation). We can pass by someone struggling with affliction for two or five decades, Weil observes, without ever noticing the harm done to this individual. Affliction is an ordinary and discreet type of harm that does not make for eye-catching news stories (especially, she notes, if the afflicted workers are immigrants, women and children, and perhaps even more so if they live far away,[68] in the French colonies). As she observes in an article she

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60 Weil, S.: "La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallos", in *Condition ouvrière,* p.271.

61 Weil, S.: "Love of God and Affliction", p. 439.

62 *Ibid*.: p.441.

63 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", p. 55. For an insightful treatment of pain and fatigue in Weil, see Rozelle-Stone, R.: "Simone Weil and the Problem of Fatigue", in *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy,* Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

64 Weil, S.: "The love of God and affliction", in *SWR,* p. 440.

65 Weil, S.: "Human Personality", *SWR,* p. 315.

66 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", p. 61.

67 *Ibid.,* S.: p.55

68 She notes with bitter irony the impact of distance on our concern for affliction: "Everyone knows that the magnitude of problems and people, the seriousness of injustices, the intensity of suffering all diminish in

wrote in response to a workers' strike in Tunisia which turned bloody and which, as a result, caught media's attention:

> Shootings, massacres are things that speak to the imagination, that are sensational and make an impact. But tears shed in silence, mute despair, revolt suppressed under the pressure of constraint, hopeless resignation, exhaustion, *slow death–does all that count?* Kids killed by bombs in Madrid provoke a shudder of indignation and pity. But we have never given a thought to all those ten and twelve-year-olds, starving and overworked, who have perished from exhaustion in the mines in Indochina, even though our country has direct responsibility for them. They died without shedding blood. Such deaths don't count; they aren't real deaths.[69]

Whether in Tunisia, Indochina or France, Weil thought that the slow *affliction* experienced by unskilled and highly precarious workers had the effect of propelling them (albeit to *radically* varying degrees) into this state of 'slow death' or 'half-living'–an odd state *between* life and death. (Here I really do not wish to minimize the extremely significant differences between a child working in a mine in 1937, a machine operator working in a unheated factory in 1930s France, a worker sewing clothes in Indonesia in 2023, and a twenty year-old student working at H&M in New York in 2023. While fleshing out these differences certainly would be a valuable and important task, this would call for another paper.)

Weil explicitly characterized *malheur* as an "uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death."[70] And as we saw above, this uprooting of workers' life could be the result of a "steady accumulation of […] resentments", of barely perceptible attacks against one's dignity, and of employers' doubting their workers' integrity or their ability to use their capacity to think independently. I would like to suggest that Weil's reflections on affliction at work could be regarded, in part, as an early formulation of what scholar Lauren Berlant has named "slow death". In her piece on late capitalism's impact on low-wage workers in the USA, Berlant describes "slow death" as a "condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life,"[71] and as the structurally induced attrition of particular groups. Rather than a bloody, sudden or brutal harm, slow death is the result of state inaction, and more importantly, of an implicit and generalized acceptance of capitalism's wearing down of some bodies a lot more than others (differences that manifest themselves not only *within* our communities, but also across the globe). In this condition of slow death, workers *do* live of course (as do Weil's afflicted), but just "not very well".[72] Also like Weil, Berlant believes that we simply cannot address this slow violence

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proportion to their distance. The injustice done to a man in Indochina who endures beatings, exhausted with hunger… is less acute than that experienced by a Javel steelworker who doesn't get his fifteen percent increase. […] In addition, all those people–Asiatics, blacks, 'wogs'–are not of the same species as we are. They're not made like us. They are used to suffering and submitting […] They've been starving to death and deprived of all rights for so long that they're used to it." Weil, *Simone Weil on Colonialism. An Ethic of the Other,* p.42. For an illuminating discussion of Weil's account of colonialism and its contemporary relevance, see Benjamin P. Davis, "The Colonial Frame: Judith Butler and Simone Weil on Force and Grief", in Bourgault, S. and J. Daigle (eds.), *Simone Weil, Beyond Ideology?* Palgrave MacMillan, 2020.

69 *Ibid*.. My emphasis.

70 Weil, S.: "The love of God and affliction", in *SWR,* p. 440.

71 Berlant: "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)", *Critical Inquiry,* 33: 4, 2007, p. 759.

72 *Ibid*., p. 780.

without "talking about the *temporality* of the workday". Nonetheless, contrary to the French philosopher, Berlant does not offer any reflections on what this might mean concretely, nor about workplace reforms that might mitigate, even if modestly, this slow death (we will consider briefly below Weil's thoughts on this).

For Berlant and Nixon, as much as for Weil, the reason why we do not "see" these forms of slow harm is, once again, tied to their unspectacular nature, but other factors are also at play–e.g. our (distracted) attention regime, our "turbo-capitalism"[73], our fast-paced, spectacle-driven media, and our dominant frameworks of intelligibility (i.e. which voices/bodies are "heard" and "counted" vs. which ones aren't). But if one finds in Nixon, Berlant and Weil a similar analysis of the reasons *why* we are so poor at acknowledging slow violence/affliction, there is something distinctive about Weil's account: first, she foregrounds the view that humans do not *want* to see affliction, that our minds 'naturally' wish to fly away from affliction, often with a fair amount of disgust or revolt. More significantly, Weil ties the harm done to the impersonal and sacred element in our soul. She attaches to her account of affliction (and why it *should* fill us with indignation) an ambitious and metaphysically grounded theory of political obligation. We all have a universal duty to *respond* to the soul's cry of protest ('why am I getting hurt?') and to minimize the likelihood of this cry's occurrence in those human beings for whom we are directly responsible for reasons of power or privilege (hers, indeed, is a differentiated model of ethical and political responsibility).[74]

In some of her most melodramatic formulations, Weil observed that seeing and attending to affliction is simply "impossible", that "affliction is by its nature inarticulate"[75] and that putting oneself into the shoes of the afflicted would be "more difficult than suicide would be for a happy child".[76] But we ought to look past Weil's striking statement here: clearly *some* things can be grasped, said and done about affliction: her factory writings and her entire life are a clear testimony to that. As Simone Pétrement and many Weil scholars have noted, Weil relentlessly sought to better understand oppression and to put herself in the shoes of the afflicted.

Besides, if Weil often remarked upon workers' hesitation to denounce inadequate working conditions (as seen above, she thought most workers feared being fired or simply ignored),[77] she nevertheless never gave up on possibility that indignant complaints and the recounting of stories of harm might change something. In a 1935 text she hoped would be published in a factory newspaper,[78] Weil sought to convince the workers of that factory to share their stories and to use their newspaper as a vehicle of resistance and social transformation. Urging these workers to be "utterly frank" and promising them that she would protect their identity if they sent something in,[79] Weil tells them that their stories might be a source of comfort and solidarity among workers, and a useful way to counter their superiors' ignorance.[80] But complaints and

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73 Nixon, R.: *Slow Violence,* p. 8.

74 Weil, S.: "Déclaration des obligations", *Écrits de Londres,* op.cit., p.84.

75 Weil, S.: "Human Personality", in *SWR,* p.327.

76 After all, "Thought revolts from contemplating affliction, to the same degree that living flesh recoils from death." Weil, S.: "Human Personality", in *SWR,* p.327. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that repeated humiliations create "forbidden zones where thought may not venture". See Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p.64.

77 E.g. Weil, S.: "Journal d'usine", in *Condition ouvrière,* p.86.

78 The text was refused.

79 Weil, S.: "Un appel aux ouvriers de Rosières", in *Condition ouvrière,* p.207.

80 *Ibid.,* p.209. In her *Journal d'usine* and correspondence, she also underscores the desirability of having

suggestion boxes were obviously not what Weil thought most crucial for changing work. What she called for was a radical upheaval of workers' relationships to time, to technology, to orders, and to attention.

What we saw in this paper is that the amount of humiliation and suffering she witnessed in afflicted workers deeply worried Weil. She was convinced that this slow harming of workers' souls had not only a dramatic impact on their *individual* health and wellbeing, but also on social solidarity, rootedness and political stability in the long term. In 'Expérience d'usine', she observed: "No society can be stable in which a whole stratum of the population labors daily with a heart-felt loathing."[81] In the same text, she also offered readers a succinct overview of what was needed to counter workers' discreet, but considerable daily suffering: "It is necessary to transform [work] incentives, to reduce or abolish what makes for disgust with one's work, to transform the relation of worker to factory, of worker to machine, and to make possible a radically changed awareness of the passing of time while working."[82] In the limited space remaining, I will very briefly consider a few of these Weilian proposals.

The importance of time. Or why workers should want more than "soundtrack autonomy".[83] Above, we have seen that Weil denounced the excessive speed at which workers were asked to work not only because this was exhausting and counter to solidarity-building, but most importantly, because it made genuine attention impossible. Weil called for a deceleration of speed at work, and she thought we ought to follow the "rhythm of human life" rather than the artificial, gruelling (and often counter-productive) rushed "cadence imposed by the chronometer"[84] or the arbitrary temporality determined by management. One cannot overstate the significance given by Weil to temporality, as passages like the following make clear: "time and rhythm constitute the most important factor of the whole problem of work".[85]

For Weil, time matters for well-being not only in terms of the pace at which one works, but also in terms of autonomy over the organization of one's time, the ordering of one's tasks and one's ability to project oneself into the future. For this reason, she noted in 'Human Personality' that "for every person there should be […] enough freedom to plan the use of one's time [and] the opportunity to reach ever higher levels of attention."[86] What is perhaps most untimely about Weil is the fact that hers is a view of the future and of well-being that does not call for the "end of work" or for most of our time spent in leisure as a way to *attend* to the world.[87] Indeed, unlike contemporary post Marxists who call for the "postwork society", Weil wants to put work at the very center of our lives. But for that to happen, the material

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suggestion boxes in workplaces (she suggested that these boxes might help diminish workers' perceptions that they don't "count", which could help shake them out of their docility.) *Ibid.,* p.223.

81 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p.71.

82 *Ibid*., p. 67.

83 Van Oort, *Worn Out,* p.89.

84 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", in *SWR,* p. 69.

85 *Ibid.*

86 Weil, S.: "Human Personality", in *SWR,* p. 321.

87 In her *Journal d'usine,* she notes: "Ce qui compte dans une vie humaine […] c'est la manière dont s'enchaîne une minute à la suivante, et ce qu'il en coûte à chacun dans son corps, dans son cœur, dans son âme–et par-dessus tout dans l'exercice de sa faculté d'attention – pour effectuer minute par minute cet enchaînement", *Condition ouvrière,* pp.186-187.

and temporal conditions necessary for attention need to be present in the workplace, for it is only with genuine attention (not achievable with digital surveillance) that something akin to freedom or autonomy might be found.

Beware of automation and of complex technology few understand and control.

As we know from her factory journal*,* Weil spent considerable energy thinking about machines, and how they are related to the division of labor, to workers' minds and, more generally, to the loss of dignity. While she chastised Marxists for their naïve view that automation would necessarily bring about more freedom, she nevertheless never gave up on technology. Simone Weil was no luddite–something we might do well to remind ourselves of, since accelerated technological development might make us long nostalgically for a pre-technological era. Weil never suggested casting aside technology, but insisted that humans imperatively had to be in charge of machines (rather than the opposite). She also thought that some ('automatic') machines should be used to take care of the most repetitive, boring and unfulfilling tasks[88]. Today, in some industries at least, we seem to be heading the other way: machines are increasingly doing the "thinking" and humans are increasingly transformed into *things* that execute mindless tasks, or that implement what AI tells them. As Madison Van Oort's work indicates:

> The labor of interactive service work has almost disappeared, ostensibly because companies think their algorithms can know and serve customers better than human workers. […] Similar trends have been noted at Amazon Warehouses: it's humans, not robots, who perform the mind-numbing and physically exhausting labor of constantly picking and sorting items. Technology has certainly not freed us from work, and it hasn't even left workers to focus on what is supposedly 'uniquely human' about us: our ability to connect with, empathize with, and engage with other living beings.[89]

Simone Weil herself may not always have been the most sociable of people (and readers might recall her view that attention and reflection were best cultivated in solitude), but she did think that working with mind-numbing technology one does not understand compromises workers' dignity *and* their ability to build workplace collegiality, in part by destroying the sacred part of their souls, on which rests their ability to love and connect with others.

Find another route to attention and performance than surveillance; cultivate trust.

Weil would perhaps also have counselled today's policymakers and employers to be much more cognizant of the consequences surveillance and tracking technologies have on trust, mental health and decent work. She would likely have joined the chorus of contemporary researchers who argue that controlling the attention and 'focus' of workers with surveillance tools not only *kills* their capacity to attend, but also leads to a (counter-productive) demotivation, resentment and distrust. As Kathryn Zickhur has shown, workers are most productive when they consider that they are trusted and

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88 Weil, S.: "Factory Work", p.68. Other machines could be devised to be more flexible and used *thoughtfully,* creatively.

89 Van Oort, M.: *Worn Out,* p.183.

have some privacy–when they are *not* being watched.[90]

Weil regarded "morbid distrust"[91] (*méfiance maladive)* between management and workers as one of the greatest obstacles to the radical transformation of work. As such, she would probably have warned us that if digital tools are used ubiquitously and without transparent communication, the breach of trust might be so profound as to only make work less and not more productive. Under such conditions, employee absenteeism and burnout might soar, and any future improvement of workplaces and institutions become arduous. Earlier, I briefly appealed to the story of the Canadian janitor who was fired for refusing to download a surveillance app: we saw that she regarded the app[92] as deeply humiliating. She refused it–and ended up, eventually, finding another job. What some 'optimistic' observers of digital monitoring might conclude from this story is that there *are* possibilities for workers to resist–namely, by walking away or finding something else. Needless to say, many employers also find this type of narrative ("if you don't like it, leave it") quite appealing.

But this is, obviously, a dubious logic, and an ethically irresponsible one, Weil would insist. For instance, as her factory journal entries indicate, the possibilities for resisting individually one's bosses without starving or without furthering the harm already done by slow affliction are quite limited, and the power to resist in this way is quite *unequally distributed among us*. As such, an adequate ethico-political response to surveillance capitalism and workplace tracking cannot be to leave it up to workers' individualized defiance. It has to take collective form. But for this to be (remotely) possible, there first has to be an awareness on the public's part that there *is* indeed an issue, that digital surveillance and constant pressures for speed *are* continuing problems for our well-being. And if the discreet affliction Weil witnessed in 1930s factories was somewhat hard to see (to much of the bourgeoisie, that is), the distress caused by today's surveillance capitalism is in some respects even more unspectacular and 'out of sight'. The challenge is thus considerable.

The contemporary world of artificial intelligence, electronic tracking and virtual management *appears* to be unprecedented, but in many ways, it is but a continuation of technological forces that Weil considered corrupting of the workplace well before the advent of the microchip. With every technological advance, it appears that we are devising new ways of turning workers into *things*. These techniques come with the promise of increasing freedom, flexibility and attention, yet they serve the purpose of locking workers into ever new cages in which avenues for true attention seem to be systematically blocked off. Speed is the order of the day–a speed which slows down time to this sluggish, painful pace Weil so indignantly decried.

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90 Zickuhr, K.: "Workplace surveillance", p.15.

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