

The most famous hand in the history of economic ideas can't be seen. This is because it's invisible. It is invisible because it doesn't exist. This hand is the economist and philosopher Adam Smith's image of the mythic invisible hand of the self-regulating market. A metaphor turned economic dictum that stubbornly persists no matter how many times its flat-out inaccuracy has been picked apart. The line held sacred by conservatives, libertarians and right leaning economic apostles appears in the second chapter of Book II of Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, or simply *The Wealth of Nations*. The invisible one aside, the word hand appears over one hundred and fifty other times in capitalism's bible. The first time the hand enters the stage is in the very first chapter of Book One "Of the Division of Labor."<sup>1</sup> There Smith describes the sheer number of hands working together, yet separately on each individuated task required to produce just one pin. Smith, like the other great classical economists, wanted to understand the seemingly alchemical process whereby the organization of work created economic value. To do this he simply counted the hands, on the hunt for what economists today call *productivity*. The technical definition being the rate of output per unit of input, what likely seems like common sense today: the ratio between what a business produces to sell and the costs of materials and labor that make production happen. The actual protagonist of Adam Smith's revelatory labor theory of value was a very visible hand for all to see.

#### "Severed Hands"

By the end of capitalism's second industrial revolution at the turn of the century, the American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor had turned Smith's division of labor into a new science of labor management: Taylorism. Capturing value meant not just counting hands, but making sure that each one wasted no time and effort. Productivity, often used interchangeably with efficiency, was and remains the name of the game: how to get the most amount of work from the least amount of hands. Taylor wasn't alone in this new science of management. Somewhat lesser known were his once colleagues and later rivals, Lilian and Frank Gilbreth. The Gilbreth's hunt for productivity was lens-based. using photography, the husband-and-wife team created elaborate motion studies of physical work so that the worker's task could be studied, tweaked and modified in minute detail. Of their many techniques, one involved attaching a small light to a worker's finger and using long exposure photography to capture the trace of the hand through a particular task. The longer the path in the image, the longer the task took, which meant time wasted. A squiggly line of too many twists and turns revealed inefficiency. The goal was to create the shortest working path for the hand, to ensure faster worker output and thus higher productivity. Where Adam Smith had followed the number of hands in search of how workers created value, the Gilbreth's followed the path of the worker's hand in search of where value might be lost. Allan Sekula describes the Gilbreth's images as capturing the severance of the worker's body (and capabilities) as an abstracted "thing apart from itself."<sup>2</sup> As Alberto Toscano puts it: the disembodied hand reveals the supervisory gaze of capital overseeing exploitation.

The question naturally arises: when will the science of labor management finally streamline the fallible human hand out completely? The coveted aspiration of "lights-out" production where a job site requires no humans.<sup>3</sup> Over the last decade the business pages have increasingly described an inevitable coming world without work brought about by the advances of AI and automation through an army of robot hands both literal and metaphorical. And yet Amazon, now the world's largest retailer still remains heavily reliant on "living labor" or human beings. Many of these workers are required to wear digital wristbands designed and patented by the company that digitally tracks their hand movements to monitor fulfillment quotas.<sup>4</sup> Rather than robot hands coming in to do the work, a robot eye instead surveils and guides it. So far, using robots to replace human thinking but still keeping the human hand remains more productive

and profitable than automating them out of the process altogether. The Gilbreth's Panopticon realized.

### Hands into Fists

But the hand also has a history as a symbol of political resistance to these disciplines of labor management, notably in the imagery of worker strikes that ratcheted up in North America at nearly the same time as the Gilbreth's motion studies. The most famous was the iconic image of the hand in the form of a raised clenched fist, most commonly associated with the IWW. A defiant gesture that refuses to hold the tools that make profit for someone else tightened into a fist of solidarity. In Europe during the 1930s the gesture of the fist served as both pledge and greeting among the Popular Front throughout Western Europe – an illustration of how the struggles against racism and fascism are historically intertwined.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the gesture was picked back up as a symbol of the radical global liberation politics of the late 1960s and 70s: the moment of Third World revolutionary struggle, radical student movements and calls within liberal democracies for greater civil and political rights. But despite the raised fist's ubiquity, its legacy within the US popular imagination is likely associated most with the Black Power movements of the 60s and 70s under the banner: "all power to the people." This proclamation linked Black Americans' economic and civil rights within the national context of the US to the anti-imperialist international struggles for decolonization and liberation across the once called Third World. Historian, Robin D.G. Kelley draws a straight path from the effects of Black radical labor militancy in Alabama at the beginning of the twentieth century to Stokely Carmichael's demand for Black Power by the 1960s civil rights moment, and to those on the street today under the banner: "no justice no peace." The point for Kelley is that contained in the histories of the Black radicalism lies the forgotten links between labor power understood as people power.<sup>6</sup>

Art historians mostly agree that the hand as a raised fist likely made its first appearance in modern politics in Honoré Daumier's depiction of the 1848 Paris barricades, *L'Émeute (The Uprising)*. Image search "social justice" and you will surely find a multitude of fists if not hands. Drop the "social" and leave only "justice" and you get the iconic scales of justice held by the hands of the mythical Lady Justice, a Baroque invention of 17th Century European elites who re-appropriated Greek and Roman art to make their ruling power appear an inevitable historical outcome of liberal progress. The challenge to just what the image of justice looks like is central to the history of apartheid resistance in South Africa that artist Hank Willis Thomas summons in his 2014 sculpture, *Amandla*. Meaning power in South African Bantu languages, the word sharply became a political slogan of call and response chants and fists at anti-apartheid rallies. Thomas's sculptural *Amandla* confronts the viewer with a realistic looking disembodied black fist and arm appearing out of a heavy yellow industrial door, all elements from an actual image of an anti-apartheid activist being arrested that the artist saw. The anonymity of Thomas's depicted fist makes for a fitting counter image to the Gilbreth's disembodied hand under the gaze of labor management. As Toscano and Sekula remind us, the Gilbreth's severed hand is alienated from both the mind it is attached to, but equally to the other laboring hands and minds atomized from one another on the shop floor. Thomas's image of a raised fist marks not just a strike against its exploitation but also alienation in its gesture towards a new collective action. A choice that turns away from producing one thing alone in isolation and a move towards building something else with others. This is the risk of solidarity: what do I gain and what do I lose between going it alone or going with others? These are questions of power and strategy as much as they are about individualism, collectivity and identity.

In Thomas's *Amandla* the omission of the arm's identity, as well as those making the arrest and any specifics to the arrest, all work to make for a broader symbolic portrait of the political. The disembodied fist points to what is beyond the frame lines; not just who the person attached to the fist might be, but what they may go on to do, who they might even become. In other words, Thomas's image points to a second image left for the viewer's mind to consider what might happen next? But where *Amandla* contains a horizon, the Gilbreth's hand has none. It too has been stripped of its identity, but all that matters is what remains confined within frame lines. There is no out of field in the Gilbreth's image, no other world to build. There is no horizon. The viewer's focus remains confined inside the image along with the hand reduced to interchangeable tool on the assembly line. This hand remains caught in a frozen moment of emulsion with no past or future so that it can be studied in an endless loop of production. This is happening now, and now is all there is.

## “Fragile Hands”

Of course, what happened next after Thomas’s *Amandla* was the formal dismantling of South Africa’s Apartheid System. That means that ultimately the defiant fist had to unclench to join hands with others. Legal scholar Mahmood Mamdani describes this as “the South African moment”<sup>7</sup> in which he credits the multi-racial, multi-class collations built between students and workers, both unorganized migrant and formal unions who came together to shut the country down in a wave of strikes against “apartheid economics.”<sup>8</sup>

Mamdani is not alone in languishing for an image of students and workers joining hands. Chris Marker places it close to the center of his four-hour eulogy of the new left, *Le Fond de Rouge (A Grin Without a Cat)* in all its romantic naivety and structural necessity. In a sweeping portrait of the ‘68 moment the globe-trotting filmmaker follows the movements and linkages between Third World revolutionaries, student radicals of the new left and general agitators which ultimately dissolved in the following decade. Marker divides his historical mapping into two halves. Part 1, “Fragile Hands,” sketches out the political air of the time, filled with wildcat strikes and student anti-Vietnam War protests vis-a-vis US and European imperialism. Part 2, “Severed Hands” moves to the failure of these disparate social forces to successfully form into a cohesive bloc. In other words, how students failed to establish a durable common cause with workers, particularly at a moment that seemed ripe for it – and in Marker’s home country of France in particular. Towards the end of part 1 Marker’s voiceover describes a “new breed” of young radical. They all looked alike. They would immediately recognize each other. They seemed to possess a silent and absolute knowledge of certain issues, but to be totally ignorant about others. Their hands were unbelievably skillful at pasting up posters, handling paving stones, spraying short and cryptic messages which stuck in the memory. All the while calling for more hands to pass on the message they’d received but not completely deciphered. Those fragile hands have left us the mark of their fragility. Once they even wrote it on a banner: *workers will take the flag of struggle from the fragile hands of the students*. But that was the following year.<sup>9</sup>

Where Adam Smith had counted the movement of worker’s hands inside a factory to find the source of economic value (labor power), Marker counted the activist’s hands outside it in search of political value (people power). So how was it that the worker’s hands ultimately didn’t join the hands of the students, despite momentarily bringing the French Government to a grinding halt in May of 68? How was it that labor power and all-out people power could not entirely meet? This is a question that vexes many on the left to this very day. Some observers of capitalism tell us the answer, or perhaps the question, begins in the 1970s in a crisis of profitability.

### EoAT and useless hands

Cue the robot hands that are supposed to take it from here. Either by working for us or strangling us, depending on who you ask. In her photo series “The Unposed (EoAT)” Danish Artist Michala Paludan captures the uncanniness that lies within both the competing narratives over AI and automation. Economic anxiety or techno optimism? Paludan’s series of photos consists of straight forward portraits of robot “hands” cropped in rather uniform framing. The series title EoAT, takes its name from the acronym commonly used in the robotics industry, End of Arm Tools. The camera focuses in on just the robot’s appendage, or its EoAT. A particular task needs a particular end of arm tool: gripping, lifting, pounding, screwing, cuddling, and so on. Paludan provides no other information beyond what can be visually discerned through the image, the environment and therefore the context of precisely what work is being done is cropped out. The viewer is left to put the pieces together. Is this a factory, laboratory, sex shop? But the subject here is the machine doing the work, not the work being done. By doing this, Paludan emphasizes the hand viewed as a tool or interface, the machine’s anthropomorphic like quality and thus the human absence. In Marxist lingo the images make for portraits of fixed capital that summon the vacancy of variable capital. But these photographic images are just that, portraits albeit in the disposition of reportage, but they are not images intended as instrumentalized motion studies like the Gilbreth’s.

Side-by-side, Paludan’s images of robot appendages in shallow depth of field and soft light make for flattering pictures. To contemporary eyes the Gilbreth motion studies carry their own aesthetic pleasure as well – despite their original purpose – recalling

the playful light studies by Man Ray, more than any cold mechanized gaze of labor discipline. The aesthetics of aged media defangs the image of its instrumental rationality and renders it one of sublime nostalgia. To paraphrase Sekula, the photograph contains a split relationship between what he calls bourgeois science and bourgeois art; the latter apologizes for the atrocities of the former.<sup>10</sup> With all their disciplinary utility emptied long ago, the Gilbreth images are free to just be art. Their visual pleasures today attempt to apologize for their historical exploits from yesterday.

How to reconcile the threat and the promise of the machine? Paludan's portraits present the irreconcilable anxieties that the technical object brings to an uncertain future. Pitting the drive towards creativity, problem solving and autonomy against the seemingly endless drive to further mechanize the division of labor. Out of this emerges an anxiety that greets the robot's hand with a mix of techno evangelism and technophobia from across the ideological spectrum: from the utopic image of a fully automated luxury communism, to a deterministic technocratic hand-wringing over the inevitability of "the left behinds," or the spasms of an increasingly conspiratorial fascistic right.<sup>11</sup> What unites them all is a hazy yet immutable productivist vision for what human life requires, and a shared conviction that people invent things but people are not things. When the technical object takes on anthropomorphic qualities, a fear of this going in reverse crystallizes: that things could replace people and that people are treated like things.

Another way to think of this subject object reversal is what Gyorgy Lukács called *reification*, by way of Marx, in which the commodity form extends into every aspect of human life. In other words, how relations between people appear ever more as relations between things. We can of course thank Marx for seeing the story of capitalism as also one of technology and automation. This is the other side of the productivity game, where workers must be vigilant while bosses search for ever new labor displacing technologies.<sup>12</sup> From this standpoint, anxiety over the robot hand isn't so much unwarranted, as it is a misplaced recognition that the robot's waving hand actually signals how the structures of our economies don't really need most of us, our minds or our bodies. In this sense the image of the robot's hand is more an image of labor management technology than anything else. It doesn't really matter if it delivers on its promises or not, it's the threat that does the real work, disciplining the human worker's hand to take whatever it can get and make no demand. As Jonathan Crary bluntly puts it "whether the AI-driven robotic Internet of Things is ever partially realized is less important now than how its disclosure of human expendability contributes to demoralization and the crushing of hope."<sup>13</sup> The image of the robot hand is meant to counter the image of your raised fist. Astra Taylor calls this disciplining sleight of hand *fauxtimation*<sup>14</sup>, economic historian Aaron Benanav flatly calls it a discourse. For Benanav this automation discourse is as old as the history of capitalism, and it emerges out of contingent factors whenever capitalism hits a structural limit. What's the limit right now? Labor-productivity, no matter by machine or human, has actually been declining for decades along with overall global economic growth.<sup>15</sup> Citing decades of public austerity and private overaccumulation Benanav asks us to look past the glimmering image of the robot's hand to the one of crumbling infrastructure, underpaid and indebted workers and an overleveraged financial system of boom-and-bust speculative bubbles. If there is a 21st century economic myth equivalent to the invisible hand, it's the one about the robot's hand that's going to fix this picture of a world wracked by overlapping crises.

### Take My Hand

If Paludan and Benanav question the anxious desires projected onto to the robot's hand, can we then do the same for Marker's "fragile" (student) and "severed" (worker) hands in *Le Fonde Rouge*? Though he might have beaten us to it. When his camera finds the adolescent hands of the new left, the word-choice *adolescent* is stressed in the film's narration over *student*. The off-screen voice tells us this as the zoomed in camera pans across a multitude of young hands busy in the work of imagining, posterizing, scribing, agitating, blockading and even bearing arms. While we see images of young revolutionary hands we hear the thoughts of a filmmaker documenting them from behind the camera disguised as the inner thoughts of those in front. Out of this sly disjuncture between image and sound, subject and documenter, emerges a tension shared on both sides of the camera: the uncertainty of what will happen next. The result is the disorientating exhilaration of not knowing what to look for, despite knowing that you are witnessing history. Mark Sinker points to a line heard elsewhere in the film narration that encapsulates this mantra to Marker's cinema: "you never know what you're filming."<sup>16</sup> The line's salience only

deepens in counterpoint to another moment documenting the violence of The Prague Spring, in which the narration attributes a technical camera issue that caused the film image to flutter as a sign that the image itself understood the significance of what was occurring before the filmmaker did, stating: “this is when images begin to tremble.”

Today images don't tremble so much as mutate. They go viral and spread across the networked digital infrastructures of the internet in an economy of appearances. By internet standards a tried-and-true veteran of this ecosystem is the meme: the Epic Handshake. This image was born from the 1987 blockbuster film *Predator*, a first generation of what Hito Steyerl has deemed the poor image, “liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance.”<sup>17</sup> The image of the Epic Handshake is a still frame from the film showing the arm of Arnold Schwarzenegger in all his iconic action hero prime, exchanging a muscular arm wrestle style handshake with equally buff co-star Carl Weathers. In the movie's plot the moment of this masculine embrace is intended to introduce the two character's deeper relationship as one of male comradery, virility and competition in all-out 80s camp. Like any popular meme, its relation to its original context slides farther away each time it's reproduced and reappropriated. The Epic Shake pops up in one dislocated context to the next in the flurry of online discourse, just another floating signifier in the lexicon of internet speak. Yet, in most if not all cases, the image is deployed to snarkily call-out by way of image macro, the presumed bad politics of a union between two seemingly opposing group interests who have somehow found common cause; what in old fashioned political language might be called forming a coalition or bloc around a shared end. But the cynicism that afflicts online discourse cannot help but creep in further: that what is in fact being ridiculed is not just hypocritical or contradictory interests aligning but rather the belief that making any common cause across difference is ever a good idea, let alone possible. Any genuine yearning for connection or something as old fashioned as solidarity is yet another bit of nostalgic and aesthetic kitsch; big ideological ideas are flattened into an equivalence with all the seriousness of an 80s Hollywood action movie. A good internet lulz, like any good joke must contain a modicum of some truth.

The most straightforward and possibly oldest way to connect is simply to join hands. The handshake's relation to the antagonisms between labor and capital is ambivalent at best, a symbol of relations entirely dependent upon context: a deal struck between titans of industry, the choice (or coercion) of a labor contract between workers and bosses, or the agreement within organized or unorganized labor contra capital. Even the last image of workers joining hands against capital contains its own ambiguity: is this a coming together under an anti-capitalist image of taking the means of production? Or is it a joining of hands between workers to negotiate a better deal for selling their labor? This is the difference that Leo Panitch points out, between a capitalist class struggle and a socialist one. Where in the former, workers demand for better terms to sell their labor power on the labor market as a type of commodity, so that they in turn have greater ability to go out and buy other commodities themselves. While the latter is the struggle to decommodify not just one's own labor, but all of society's activities counted and not counted as work, and by doing so fundamentally transform the social order. As Panitch poetically puts it: “taking capital away from capital”<sup>18</sup> – in other words, to democratize the economy.

Despite recent union drive successes of Amazon and Starbucks workers in the US and rising labor unrest of public sector workers in the UK, it's still far too early to say if a renewed labor militancy across the Anglosphere will transform into a greater shift in the balances of power of global capitalism (recent political victories of left parties throughout Latin America, in Chile, Peru and Columbia also put this further into question). Two years into the Covid-19 global pandemic and its lurch into endemic, the clapping hands for who and what is essential have quieted, while the raised fists for lives that don't seem to matter have been pushed back into the margins by the invasion of Ukraine, inflation, a global energy crisis expanding into a global food crisis and the all-out reminder of accelerating ecological collapse – to name just some of the elephants that must be collectively grasped. These crises are of course inter-connected, and in fact can and do exacerbate each other. A dynamic that Adam Tooze has taken to describing as the polycrisis.<sup>19</sup> But at the center where these different crises converge sits a fundamental challenge that every civilization must confront: to decide what is valuable. This is the challenge of a renewed social question for the twenty-first century. We would do well to pay attention to the collective and dividuated hand gestures who might be signaling how well this question is and is not being met.

1. See, Adam Smith *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pg. 15
2. Allan Sekula, "Photography Between Labour and Capital" in *Mining Photographs and the Other Pictures* ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Robert Walkie (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983) pg. 247
3. See as example, Mckinsey Quarterly Issue "Lights out: Are factories and warehouses operating in the dark? They might be soon" September 2017 <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/operations/our-insights/five-fifty-lights-out>
4. See as example Stephen Mihm, "Amazon's Labor-Tracking Wristband Has a History" Bloomberg Online (February 23, 2018) <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-23/amazon-s-labor-tracking-wristband-has-a-rich-history-behind-it?sref=apOkUyd1>
5. For more on the history of the fist see, James Stout "The History of the Raised Fist, a Global Symbol of Fighting Oppression" National Geographic July 31, 2020 see online <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/history-of-raised-fist-global-symbol-fighting-oppression>
6. see, Robin D.G. Kelley *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2015)
7. See, Mahmood Mamdani *Neither Settler nor Native* (Cambridge MA; Harvard Press, 2020)
8. Another way to describe this is racial capitalism, a term most closely associated with Cedric Robinson from his tome *Black Marxism* which looked to bridge economic and cultural dynamics within the struggles of class and white supremacy. Ignored when it came out in 1983, today Robinson's conceptual framing has become a fundamental cornerstone for understanding the dynamics of race and class. In the April 2022, issue of the *London Review of Books* Vol. 44 No. 7 Kevin Okoth points out in his article "Resistance from Elsewhere" that the term "racial capitalism" can actually be traced to a 1976 pamphlet by two South African historians Martin Legassick and David Hemson written several years before Robinson's coinage titled "Foreign Investment and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism in South Africa". When apartheid did formally end in 1994 the new South African Government included Robinson's book in the official South African State University curriculum.
9. Chris Marker, *A Grin Without a Cat* 1977 (Paris Dovidis)
10. See, Allan Sekula, "The Traffic of Photographs" *Art Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, (Spring, 1981), pp. 15-25
11. See as examples, Shannon Schumacher, Mara Mordecai, Shannon Greenwood, Micheal Keegan "In the US and UK, Globalization Leaves Some Feeling 'Left Behind or 'Swept Up'" Pew Research Center Laura Silver, Oct, 2020, Julian Jacobs "Automation and the Radicalization of America" Brookings Institute November 22, 2021, Aaron Bastani *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (New York; Verso Books, 2018)
12. Leo Panitch reminds that Marx saw this as a positive development, pointing out that in the *Grundrisse* he writes how labor displacing or labor saving technologies as well as economic crises in capitalism both serve as opportunities for worker emancipation. There he envisioned a societal distribution of labor where one worked less not more from the benefit of labor saving technologies as both productivity and growth increased. This is encapsulated in the famous line of hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon and criticizing at dinner.
13. Jonathan Crary *Scorched Earth* (New York: Verso Books, 2022) pg. 68-9
14. See, Astra Taylor "The Automation Charade" *Logic Magazine* Issue 5, August 1, 2018
15. See, Aaron Benanav *Automation and the Future of Work* (New York: Verso Books, 2020)
16. See, Mark Sinker "Catcalling" *Film Quarterly* Winter 2009-10, Vol. 63, No. 2
17. Hito Steyerl "In Defense of the Poor Image" *e-flux Journal* Issue #10 November 2009
18. Leo Panitch, Sam Gindin and Stephen Maher *Class Politics, Socialist Policies, Capitalist Constraints*
19. see, Adam Tooze "Defining polycrisis - from crisis pictures to the crisis matrix" *Chartbook #130* June 24 2022 <https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-130-defining-polycrisis>

Michala Paludan  
*Open Shut Them*

Opening Thursday October 6th (4–9 PM)  
October 7th – November 3rd, 2022  
Open by appointment

C.C.C  
Haderslevgade 43, 1671 Copenhagen V  
[www.cccgallery.net](http://www.cccgallery.net)  
[info@cccgallery.net](mailto:info@cccgallery.net)