

Time to Grieve, Time to Act

written by Sean K. Isaacs | August 11, 2025



Capital is an abstract, impersonal form of power. It is the subsumption of living, concrete labor to dead labor, to the abstraction of capitalist labor time. Under capitalism, our creative activity is directed toward the production of value rather than the development of a flourishing human community. Quantitative accumulation takes priority over qualitative acts and our labor becomes a means to make profits for our bosses.

But the violence that capitalism enacts on the world is not abstract, it isn't impersonal. It is felt in the most personal and horrifying ways: in the grief of the mothers who have lost children to the ongoing genocide in Palestine, of the families and friends of those murdered by the police, of the workers who have lost jobs to factory closures. So, while it is necessary to theorize and understand the abstract logic of capital, it is just as necessary to confront the all-too-real ways we experience the devastation it brings.

In *From the Ashes*, Sarah Jaffe centers these experiences as a way of countering "the violence of abstraction" and of making space for grief and mourning in a world that does not give us the time to feel. We don't have time to mourn because we have to keep working to survive and we aren't given the space to grieve because we are often told that personal loss and mourning are secondary to political struggle. In one of the reflections on the death of her father that break up the book's chapters, Jaffe describes grief as a "fog," a temporal and spatial disconnection from the world. *From the Ashes* highlights the relationship between the structural logic of capital and the subjective experience of grief. And while grief mourns the past, Jaffe highlights its relationship to the future, pointing to the possibility of using grief as the starting point for political struggle. Grief, for Jaffe, is something that exceeds the logic of capital, of productivity, and of work. While this, at times, makes the relationship between grief and labor—particularly social reproductive labor—somewhat unclear, *From the Ashes* shows the importance of making space for grief as a way of healing from, and fighting against, the forms of violence that we experience under capitalism.

Jaffe consistently highlights the ways in which the structural, abstract logic of capital and the subjective experiences of grief and mourning are related. Drawing on Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Jaffe shows how emotional labor—grief, love, and care—are commodified and appear to be results of capitalist exchange. This is exemplified in a service called "Dove Actually," where one is able to pay to have a dove released "in memory of a loved one." This alienates the act of mourning and the feeling of grief from the one experiencing loss; these feelings are only valid if they are mediated by the market, if they are experienced through things. Yet, at the same time, this commodity is dependent on real human emotions. Just as Marx shows that the production of value under capitalism relies on concrete human labor, Jaffe shows how capital increasingly profits from grief and care through the financialization of life insurance and other sites of social reproduction. This contradiction between human life and capital is at the heart of capitalism: "it needs us but it

kills us" (18).

It is in this contradiction between life and capital that Jaffe identifies the possibilities for revolutionary transformation that might arise from grief. Drawing on the "specter of communism" from the *Communist Manifesto*, *From the Ashes* uses the term "haunting" to describe the persistence of humanity despite capital's desire to subsume everything to the law of value. While we are haunted in our grief by the violence of capital, capital is haunted by its need for human activity. These "cracks in the structure are where the ghosts hide, and they can help us figure out how to bring the thing down" (17).

These fissures represent the persistence of multiple and differential temporalities, potential sites of rupture with the linear time of capitalist progress. This "sudden, abrupt, even violent break from the status quo" (5) is opposed to the time of capitalist production and contains the possibility for revolution. Revolution, like grief, is a sharp and violent break with the norm. For Jaffe, grief, love, and rage are all excessive of the productivist, work-oriented logic of capital, and it is for this reason that she links them with revolutionary rupture.

But grief also requires healing, and this requires a slower form of time. *From the Ashes* contrasts both the sharp, violent time of revolution and the abstract, clock-oriented time of capital with the patient, deliberate time of grief and care. Hannah Proctor's recent book *Burnout* similarly emphasizes the need for "patient urgency" in our political organizing. While the need for change is undeniably pressing, Proctor insists that healing from the trauma of capitalist violence and past political defeats takes time, and a single-minded focus on revolutionary change ignores the need for care work within left-wing organizations. *From the Ashes* likewise affirms the need for collective care and healing by reclaiming time from capitalist work and directing it toward human life. Like Proctor, Jaffe shows the importance of social reproductive labor to political struggle and the relationship between collective forms of healing and revolutionary change. But unlike *Burnout*, *From the Ashes* explicitly connects grief to revolutionary politics by emphasizing the slow *and* quick nature of grief time.

This relationship between grief and struggle is developed in *From the Ashes* through an examination of "deindustrialization." This process, which has closed factories in the global North and replaced workers with machines, is described as a type of haunting, both because it is part of capital's effort to replace living labor with dead labor and because, despite these efforts, capital still depends on workers to produce value. Thus, deindustrialization has not eliminated the contradiction between capital and workers, but it has transformed the working class, creating new possibilities and challenges for working-class organizations.

From the Ashes examines these developments through the stories of workers who have seen their factories close and their jobs disappear. Jaffe documents the 2022 Miners' Gala in Durham, England, a "festival of labor" in which community members celebrate their working-class culture and mourn the loss of their jobs. While an element of nostalgia can be found here, the Miners' Gala is primarily an example of how *current* working-class movements are materially built on the struggles of the past. It is an example of the commitment to building a new future without forgetting past defeats. As Walter Benjamin—a central figure for Jaffe—saw it, revolution is a redemption of the past, a realization of past struggles through the creation of a different future. This "critical nostalgia" is exemplified by events like the Miners' Gala and in the stories of the British mineworkers who Jaffe interviews. These workers mourn the loss of community that was built around these jobs, not the actual job itself. This form of nostalgia, which Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre identify in *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* as part of the revolutionary current of Romanticism, does not desire a wholesale return to the past. Rather, it is an attempt to selectively recover elements of the past and use them to build a different future. These "relationships that were built on the backs of

necessity and struggle" (166) can be the building blocks for organizing in the present.

But, as Jaffe rightly points out, grief is not only revolutionary, and nostalgic appeals to the past can also take reactionary forms, the desire for a return to an idealized version of the past, ignoring the uneven power relations that allowed the so-called golden age of industry to exist in the first place. Jaffe highlights the heteronormative and patriarchal relations that were central to the "traditional" nuclear family while also pointing out that this version of the family is very much a modern creation, tied to the rise of capitalism. Likewise, nostalgic appeals to an idealized period of workers' struggle are often constructed around the white masculine worker, ignoring relations of colonialism and white supremacy that these false views of the working class are rooted in. This reactionary form of nostalgia reifies the past and takes the form of resentment for all those who do not fit this idealized vision. Alberto Toscano has made similar points in the book *Late Fascism*, in which he shows that fascism appeals to feelings of discontent that exist within those who have been negatively impacted by capitalist development. This has been expressed as the desire for what Toscano calls a "racial-national rebirth," the repetition of a past that was not fully realized, a past built on colonization, racism, and the oppression of women.

Opposed to this purely nostalgic and reactionary view, Jaffe seeks to "re-enchant" the past by making the time to heal from grief and recommitting ourselves to revolutionary struggle. This, for Jaffe, requires going beyond a politics of labor because grief is at least partially non-agential—it is beyond our direct, conscious control. But rather than ignoring labor, Jaffe's interviews with workers highlight the ongoing centrality of the working class to capital's reproduction, even as capitalism increasingly tries to make these workers expendable and replaceable through the flattening and homogenization of labor. This tension between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of workers has been highlighted by Marxist social reproduction theory (SRT). But while Jaffe often points to the limits of labor and the need for a politics beyond work, SRT proposes a revolution *through* labor, by reclaiming the time in which we work and directing it toward individual and collective fulfillment, rather than the production of value and profit. Jaffe similarly insists on the need to reclaim the time in which we live our lives when she states that "[g]rief doesn't happen on the clock of capitalism" (211). Capital seeks to direct all labor—including the labor of care—toward its own reproduction. But the reproduction of capital requires the reproduction of human beings; capitalism needs workers to create value, and the less time we spend producing for capital, the more time we have for ourselves. As Jaffe puts it, "[i]n the seizing back time from capital, there is time for everything else that has been denied us" (264).

But what would we do with this time? Jaffe asks workers what they would like to do with their time and is given answers such as "being a fishing guide, running a small business, winning the lottery and buying the plant themselves" (167) and concludes that these desires are best expressed as demands for "free time, the right to be human, to enjoy life off the job" (168). But as Marx shows in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, what makes us human is precisely our ability to consciously and creatively act on the world—in other words, our ability to labor. While reclaiming free time would certainly be opposed to time spent working for our bosses, it is not opposed to labor as such. A struggle over free time represents an attempt to regain control over our labor, our ability to create and produce for ourselves and our communities, to fulfill our social needs at the same time as we fulfill our essentially human capacity to create. As Marx states in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, labor would become "not only a means of life but life's prime desire and necessity."

By explicitly developing the relationship between grief and revolutionary politics, *From the Ashes* highlights the need to include grief, love, and rage in our analysis of capitalism. While these feelings cannot be quantified or calculated, they can, and do, act as the basis for revolutionary struggle seeking to reclaim the time in which we spend our lives. And while this struggle is over the present, it is also an effort to redeem past movements, to realize their revolutionary aims through the

creation of a different future.