

# QUESTIONING THE CENTRALITY OF WORK WITH ANDRÉ GORZ

ARTICLE BY  
FRANÇOISE GOLLAIN

André Gorz, a key thinker of political ecology, owes his popularity in part to his radical critique of work. His exhortation to “exit from work”, though undoubtedly utopian, provides us with the opportunity to reflect on what we mean by ‘work’ and on the dominant place we afford it.

**A**s we have always had to engage with our environment to produce what we need to survive, work is often understood as the essence of humanity, something that has existed throughout time and all around the world. However, to grasp the current transformations of work and envisage its future, it is better to understand work in its modern sense, as Gorz invited us to do.



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## INTERROGER LA CENTRALITÉ DU TRAVAIL AVEC ANDRÉ GORZ

André Gorz a été un des pionniers de l'écologie politique et de l'analyse du travail dans nos sociétés occidentales. Sa pensée est d'une portée politique et sociale très actuelle.

## THE INVENTION OF WORK AND THE DOMINATION OF ECONOMIC RATIONALITY

In the scheme of human history, our Western societies have been based on work for a relatively short span of time. Our primary needs were previously met by self-sufficient production in the context of the family and the village community, which was not assigned economic value, nor was it exchanged. In the seminal *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber argues that, up until the end of the 19th century, the work that went into material production largely continued to follow the customs of the domestic economy. Work was not simply a way to earn a living but rather an inseparable part of a full-fledged way of life governed by traditions that defied economic rationality. The peasant of pre-capitalist cultures, the artisan, the domestic worker – all those who ensured their own subsistence with their own means of production were in a position to regulate the intensity and duration of their work in accordance with their needs. Yet, with the development of capitalism, the

direct link between production and consumption has been eroded. We have lost control over both and have become waged worker-consumers. Exposed to the powerful advertising strategies that fuel our never-ending spiral of needs and desires, we – the majority of us at least – depend fundamentally on our wages.

As market production and consumption gained importance, tasks carried out in the public space came to be increasingly regarded as services that could be measured and remunerated, since they had acquired an exchange value. This marked the birth of work in general, or of what Marx described as “abstract labour”. Capitalism thus ‘invented’ work in the modern sense of ‘employment’ by separating it from the sphere of life in which human activities and relations are subject neither to productivist values nor to the rules of commercial exchange. This waged work (wage labour) must be distinguished from work in the anthropological or philosophical sense, the kind ‘done’ in an almost infinite variety of different forms and professions and which involves toil and/or creating. Waged work – the same work that that has suffered, to varying degrees among European countries, a so-called ‘unemployment crisis’ for over 40 years – is well and truly a social construction. It is not the nature of a task that makes it work, or a “heteronomous” activity as Gorz would describe it, but its inclusion in the commercial sphere. Whether the activity of cooking, for instance, is work or not hinges on

whether it is performed in return for payment. With the extension of market rationality, an ever-increasing number of occupations has become considered as work.

## **NOT EVERYTHING IS WORK**

Gorz did not neglect the question of working conditions. On the contrary, he believed that working conditions should be improved to establish a better equilibrium between work and leisure or, more precisely, between employment and work not for economic ends, in order to allow each of us greater space for self-determination.

People everywhere experience the need to make their mark on the world surrounding them and to realise themselves within it. Nevertheless, while this anthropological dimension of work is never totally absent from employment, it remains subordinate to the irreducible ‘heteronomy’ that Gorz understood to be the economic imperative of profit for the employer, and wages for the employee. Personal gratifications such as interest or pleasure, which the worker might derive from their activity, are merely secondary; the primary goal is to earn a living. Above all, any autonomy in work must not be confused with a broader, ‘existential’ autonomy, the defence of which has constituted the fundamental driving force of Gorz’s political ecology for the past 50 years. The promotion of a genuine

autonomy implies calling into question the alarming expansion of the commercial sphere to the detriment of the non-commercial sphere. Gorz observed how the rising efficiency of production creates savings in working time on a society-wide scale. From the outset, this efficiency was unfortunately considered an opportunity for greater production of commercial wealth due to a growth mantra that pushes the expansion of economic rationality into areas which should not be subject to it.

For example, in our industrialised societies, all that remains of domestic production are the activities necessary for the maintenance of everyday life. As a result of the mass outsourcing of domestic tasks, the rest are now regarded as commercial and industrial activities. Sustaining this movement involves absorbing greater and greater amounts of people and time into commercial services in degraded forms of employment. Our era's reduction in the volume of work is thus 'managed' with the tacit acceptance of a sharpening of inequalities in status and standards of living. The numerous fast-food delivery drivers, cleaning and home-help staff, and so on, form a mass of underpaid service providers, often at the disposal of those overwhelmed by better-paid work. Yet this outsourcing would only make sense if it freed up time on a society-wide scale. An economy based on the extreme development of the mutual exchange of services would be completely irrational.

This terrifying trend of transforming into employment, and thereby monetising, activities that were previously cost-free and autonomous is precisely what spurred Gorz to write the *Critique of Economic Reason* in 1989. In his view, the staggering expansion in personal services undermines our capacity to take care of ourselves, weakening our existential autonomy, along with the social fabric that sustains us. This model actually runs counter to the deeply-rooted needs of individuals to assert control over their own bodies and spaces, in the form of 'work for oneself' (childcare, cooking, walking the dog, cleaning, etc.), just as over the familiar, informal, and common space of the village or neighbourhood. In terms of people's many real and neglected needs, such as care for dependants, these should be systematically covered either by services financed from public funds (rather than by commercial services), or taken care of by people themselves, according to various arrangements for mutual assistance. Gorz thus advocated a system based on two pillars working together, one consisting of institutionalised systems and the other of self-organised cooperative and voluntary systems.

## **A SOCIETY OF PHANTOM WORK**

Let us return to wage labour in general. With the globalisation and the intensified division of labour that it entails, work in the form of employment is incontestably becoming increasingly prevalent across the globe. It applies to rising numbers of human activities

and is compulsory activity for most people to survive. However, the rise in the number of paid jobs, along with the ascent of a middle class in emerging economies, should not lead us to overlook the trauma experienced by large portions of populations affected first by deruralisation and, subsequently, proletarianisation accompanied by degraded forms of urbanisation. The structural character

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of a global unemployment rate that has stood at between 5.5 and 6 per cent for over a decade cannot be ignored<sup>1</sup>, nor can the significant proportion of jobs described euphemistically as ‘vulnerable’. Even while controversy rages over the impact of digital technology on work, there is good reason to question the employment model as a form of social organisation.

For European workers, work is also becoming ever more inescapable as daily life is rationalised along its logic. Paradoxically, as jobs require greater personal investment while paid working time falls, time spent actually working often increases. Digital technology, for example, allows one to be consulted and to work outside of the office. Moreover, work remains a provider of rights and of status, as well as a source of identity and integration.

We continue to live in a culture of work. However, employment is gradually losing its statutory protections and is marked by precariousness and increasing discontinuity,

to such an extent that its position as the point around which to anchor one’s existence is declining rapidly. Employment fulfils with ever-greater difficulty its structural functions, identified by a renowned study dating from 1930 on

the unemployed of Marienthal in Austria by the team of sociologist Marie Jahoda. These include a shared experience and objective, structured time, and a regular activity. Gorz expressed this lyrically in *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society* (1999): “Work now retains merely a phantom centrality: phantom in the sense of a phantom limb from which an amputee might continue to feel pain. We are a society of phantom work, spectrally surviving the extinction of that work by virtue of the obsessive, reactive invocations of those who continue to see work-based society as the only possible society and who can imagine no other future than a return to the past.”

Current trends – both global and European – show how exhausted this employment model has become and call for a paradigm shift.

1 ILO (January 2018). Unemployment and Decent Work Deficits to Remain High in 2018. [bit.ly/2GN4Y1h](http://bit.ly/2GN4Y1h)

As such, it not only must but can be transcended. Let us insist further on this last point: the greatest source of social identity today remains paid employment, rather than work in the anthropological meaning. In other words, social integration is not contingent upon paid employment, which currently fulfils this function as it is the historically determined form of integration in our society. Let us not fool ourselves that it is the inevitable bearer

of these functions of individual and collective identification and expression. At present, the central place of work in our lives functions as a strategy of domination: the injunction to treat oneself as a commodity in search of a buyer. In this context, it would be logical to facilitate identification and expression in alternative, less prescribed, activities of daily life.

Criticising the growth mantra, questioning employment as a model of social organisation, promoting the flourishing of individuals through the development of self-determined activities, demanding a reduction in time spent on heteronomous work – all of these imperatives are inextricably linked. While the atomised individuals of modern cities, short on time, space, and other resources, are increasingly supported by the State and the market – and

often request such support themselves – ‘civil society’, understood as the social fabric of relations of cooperation and mutual assistance voluntarily established independently of institutional mediation, breaks down. Yet autonomy is not only a private need but also a collective goal: that of producing communities in which the social relations are not predominantly commercial in nature.

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### FOR A REAL POLITICS OF TIME

Against this phantom-like centrality of work, Gorz's response, advocated first and foremost at a European level, to the need to establish limits to the commercialisation of the world, consisted of a three-fold demand: a guaranteed income for all, decoupled from employment or, in Gorz's terms, an ‘income for living’; deliberate policies to reduce working time; and measures to extend and expand spaces for autonomous, non-commercial activities. Today's resurgence of debates on the introduction of a guaranteed income is welcome, but approaching it in isolation from other policies – social, urban, educational – does not guarantee by any means that it represents an emancipatory solution. While the proposals for the creation of ‘green jobs’ (restoring nature and social cohesion and

responding to needs rather than commercial imperatives) are evidently to be hailed, there remains the need for a genuine politics of time that does not confine itself to reducing unemployment. Most importantly, the at-all-costs defence of the ideology of employment for employment's sake and of the work ethic is the result of an eminently political choice. Politics, however, should go beyond the politics of jobs and employment.

In the wake of May 1968, attempts were made to 'change life' with the support of a trade union movement liberated from its total identification with the world of work, as the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) union was in the 1970s – an impulse subsequently crushed by 40 years of neoliberalism and 'crisis'. At a time when work weighs increasingly heavily on existence, the writings of Gorz remain precious. They urge us to think differently about the function and meaning of work and, more broadly, to 'de-economise' the way we think. This will present a considerable challenge as the labour movement has undertaken a critique of capitalism from the perspective of work, its intellectuals and activists having been largely absorbed by the cult of production and of work. Gorz, on the other hand, invited us to promote a society of liberated time, a '*Kulturgesellschaft*' ('society of culture') as

it was called by the German Left, highly advanced on these questions in the 1990s, in opposition to our 'society of work' or '*Arbeitsgesellschaft*'.

Today, however, with some young British academics taking up the watchword autonomy and, more generally with the post-work debate,<sup>2</sup> we are witnessing the stirrings of a critical discussion that aims to rouse the Left from its slumber on the work issue. If this process of questioning has managed to take hold in the United Kingdom and across the Atlantic (where economic and social policies are not renowned for their progressive character), then there is no reason to despair of the rest of Europe. In this context, Greens have a clear mission: to set out pioneering proposals that break with the consensus.



**FRANÇOISE GOLLAIN**

has a PhD in Sociology and is an associate lecturer at the Open University in the United Kingdom. She has recently published *André Gorz, une Philosophie de l'Émancipation* (L'Harmattan, 2018).

2 See Beckett, p. 44