

Questioning the Centrality of Work with André Gorz

Article by Françoise Gollain

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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.

As 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.

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.

Making work less central

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 of a global unemployment rate that has stood at between 5.5 and 6 per cent for over a decade cannot be ignored^[1], 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.”

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inescapable as daily life is rationalised along its logic*

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

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.

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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 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, 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 further 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, ecologists have a clear mission: to set out pioneering proposals that break with the consensus.

Footnotes

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



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