

Transforming Work, Reimagining Education

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The need to reorganise work can be justified both in social and ecological terms. Yet, such reorganisation wouldn't be complete without questioning work's dominance over other areas of life. Education is a key element of this reorganisation, but it must be viewed as something that helps people develop and thrive throughout their lives, rather than merely adapting them to the constraints of a neoliberal job market. Transforming our conceptions of education and work in this way can reduce health inequalities, improve individual wellbeing, and mitigate the environmental impacts of a workaholic system.

Work remains one of capitalism's most unhealthy obsessions. Rather than considering it a means to an end, working – and especially working hard – has become an end in itself. Working weeks of 40 hours or more remain a norm despite improvements in productivity and precarious wages keep workers absorbed by their jobs and unable to nourish other areas of their lives. Work's dominance over other spheres of life has relegated education to the role of a fragile assistant. Educational programmes are mostly chosen based on the career paths they might open, and opportunities to go back to formal education after entering the workforce are limited, despite the social and health benefits that lifelong education provides.

A reorganisation of work should therefore not be limited to a revision of working hours and wages, as urgent as both these measures are. Work must be reshaped in a manner that overturns its long-standing dominance over education. Instead, policies for lifelong learning can create a positive interaction between work, leisure, and education. The basis for this proposal was sketched almost 40 years ago by sociologist Chris Phillipson in *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age*. At a time when neoliberal policies have exacerbated precariousness, alienation, burnout, and chronic unemployment, rethinking work and education in tandem is more relevant than ever. The opportunity to transform work and reinvent the role that it plays in our lives is, at last, at hand. While work – care work, essential work – will never cease to exist, whether its presence will be suffocating or purposeful depends upon us.

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Harmful for humans and the planet

Work holds a privileged position in our society and our lives: our worth is often calculated

based on the amount of work we can perform, and our identities have become intertwined with the job we hold or aspire to. Having a job with social value has turned into a privilege, while useless corporate positions offer better conditions than essential jobs. In a 2015 [YouGov survey](#), 37 per cent of British workers indicated that their job made no meaningful contribution to the world. However, less than half of those respondents were looking for another one. The survey was based on a [famous article](#) by the anthropologist David Graeber, where he coined the term “bullshit jobs”: jobs so pointless, or even damaging, that even the people doing them believe that they should not exist.

And indeed, why do they exist? Not because they need to. Technological improvements and increases in productivity would allow for a [significant reduction](#) in the working week. Yet the 40-hour week has remained a reality in most European countries since the early 20th century. Why do we work virtually the same hours that an average British worker did almost 100 years ago? In Graeber’s words, “It’s as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working.” The insidiousness of the [work ethic](#) and a system that relies on a precarious and overworked working class has led to the current situation. A situation where work, our way of satisfying our and others’ unmet needs and of contributing to the community, has turned into a socially pernicious reality.

If anything, the pandemic has exposed the unnecessary nature of much work and ways of working, revealing a system overflowing with redundant and unnecessary jobs. While this statement might be unpleasant to some, a natural reaction given how pervasive work has been in determining our identity and self-worth, realising that much of the work we perform is not essential is a finding that should be celebrated, recognising the new possibilities that reorganising work would open. The argument is not against non-essential activities that might still be valuable for society, such as artists, but against the obsession with keeping individuals occupied eight hours a day throughout their adult life regardless of the usefulness of what they are doing. The present situation, while disastrous in many ways, has allowed us to envision new ways of living and working, and these [should not be forgotten](#) once the pandemic subsides.

Reorganising work is thus an urgent matter if we want a more socially sustainable and just system, but also if we want a system that is not as ecologically damaging. According to a [report](#) published in 2019, reducing working hours would decrease carbon emissions and air pollution, and would thus be a crucial step in the path towards a carbon-neutral economy. Several proposals have already emerged to make such reduction a reality: the degrowth movement has included work-sharing and a 32-hour week as part of their [policy proposals](#), and current debates focus on whether a shorter working day or a shorter working week would be more beneficial, taking ecofeminist arguments into account.

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The present proposal suggests including lifelong education into this reorganisation, promoting a system where education and work would have complementary functions

throughout a person's life. Importantly, the idea would not be to redirect all of the time freed from work into formal education. This liberated time could be spent in many ways, from social reproduction to leisure, encouraging bouts of idleness and enjoyment that our rigid work paradigm has for so long repressed. This new system would then promote a positive interaction between three crucial elements: education, work, and leisure.

Why lifelong education?

The first, maybe naïve but essential reason for promoting lifelong learning involves the fostering of human capacities and aspirations of human flourishing. The central aim of continuing education should not be staying up to date with the most recent developments or gaining profitable skills to be more competitive on the job market. The most fundamental ambition should be to allow people to cultivate their interests, acquiring understanding, experience, and skills in disciplines and areas that excite and intrigue them. A world where education was valued for its own sake would expand human capacities and possibilities, allowing people to lean into their curiosity without having to ponder the market value of their interests.

Concern over the limited possibilities that a commodified education system offers should be a sufficient reason to promote a reorganisation of education, but there are many others. A central argument in favour of the promotion of lifelong learning concerns the social determinants of health: that is, the consequences that the economic and social contexts of an individual's life have on their health. While the predominant biomedical model of health asserts that a person's level of health depends mostly on their genetics and lifestyle, many social variables have a significant impact. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that such non-medical factors can explain most health inequalities. These social variables include, amongst others, gender, housing, salary, neighbourhood of residence, parents' social class, and most importantly for the present argument, level or years of education. Different studies have revealed the lasting impact of education over an individual's lifespan, influencing variables such as morbidity, healthy life expectancy, and mortality. In more specific terms, this means that a person in the lowest education category, either in terms of years or level, is twice as likely to develop a long-term disability, between 10 and 15 per cent more likely to develop a limiting illness, and has a risk of developing dementia almost threefold that of someone in the highest category. Advocating for a system where education would play a more prominent role is thus not just an issue concerning ideals or aspirations, but a matter of commitment towards a more equal society.

To tackle both these issues, it is essential to promote lifelong education, not merely to strengthen the educational model as it is now. This current model dictates that formal learning is mostly reserved for young people, which is problematic in at least two ways. First, not everyone can afford to pursue an educational degree when they are young: educational attainment is highly influenced by the socioeconomic status of the family, with children born in less privileged families encountering many barriers to attend post-secondary education. Even when they do, their study choice might have more to do with job prospects than with personal interests. Second, even for those who have the opportunity to study at a young age, restricting formal education to such a limited time span fails to acknowledge the way humans evolve throughout their life, developing a wide array of interests that might not have been present when the person was considered young

enough to study. A model that supports lifelong education is thus better suited to the way individuals evolve throughout their lives, and its promotion is essential, not only as a way of expanding human capacities but also as an attempt to curtail health inequalities.

Lifelong education: narrow view, limited impact

The concept of lifelong education is hardly a new idea. Both the political sphere and the corporate world recognise its importance and promote it through incentives and policy packages. The EU itself is involved in supporting lifelong learning: the European Council adopted the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning in 2011 and the EU is committed to goals such as increasing the quality of and enhancing creativity and innovation at all levels of training.

This education agenda highlights the need to increase adult participation in both formal and non-formal education and sets out a number of strategies to achieve its objectives. The document acknowledges lifelong learning's relevance for social cohesion and participation and some of the strategies outlined pursue laudable goals, like encouraging higher education institutions to embrace adult learners and developing learning provision for seniors. However, the overarching conception of lifelong learning remains within a neoliberal framing linked to competitiveness and employability, mostly focusing on the development of job-specific skills and the up-skilling of those affected by unemployment. The aim of restructuring education in a market-oriented manner is apparent in the intention to "develop mechanisms for ensuring that educational provision better reflects labour market needs". This approach thus works against aspirations of human flourishing and the fostering of human capacities, considering education merely as a gear to oil in order to perfect the machinery of the market.

Framing aside, one can also cast doubt on the effectiveness of adult education policy in the EU. The EU committed to increasing adult participation in education from 10 per cent to 15 per cent between 2014 and 2020; however, by 2019 the rate had only reached 10.8 per cent. A potential reason for these poor results could be a limited diagnosis of the difficulties that individuals face when trying to pursue education during their adult life. Even though the document acknowledges some obstacles, such as an alleged lack of motivation, it remains mostly silent on other pressing constraints such as long working hours, prohibitive fees, and precarious wages, dynamics that keep workers hooked on their jobs, with no real opportunity to cultivate learning without sacrificing leisure in the process.

Blurring the boundaries between education and work

How to then reorganise work in a way that would overcome the flaws in the current system while at the same time strengthening access to education? This is where Phillipson's idea becomes relevant: he envisions a situation where people would be able to enter and re-enter the workforce at different times in their career, alternating between periods of employment and periods of education and training. This situation would be facilitated by a variety of measures such as offering paid educational leave, facilities for sabbaticals, keeping educational fees at a minimum, encouraging the enrolment of adults in educational programmes, including childcare in educational facilities, and promoting more flexible work schedules. Education in this sense would not refer only to formal university education, but to all programmes of learning, including vocational training and non-formal education.

Maintaining a miserable workforce for the sake of economic growth is a goal we should drop in the transition towards a sustainable society.

Financing such an expansion of education would clearly need to sit alongside a broad rethinking of taxation and work, in line with other [degrowth proposals](#). The setting of a maximum income would leave companies with a certain surplus benefit that they would not be able to distribute among the top management positions or shareholders: such wealth could be invested in lifelong education schemes for their employees instead. A universal basic income would allow adults to pursue educational programmes while still being able to pay the bills. A genuinely public education system would facilitate the reduction of fees, paving the way to a fairer and more inclusive access to education. Finally, policies of work-sharing could be complemented with the option to take educational leave or dedicate some of the liberated work hours to the pursuit of study programmes. In this way, employment levels could increase while average working hours would decrease to more socially sustainable levels.

Importantly, individuals would be encouraged to choose which skills and knowledge they would like to develop based on their personal interests, not necessarily on their current jobs. An accountant's passion might be jewellery design; a baker could be a philosophy enthusiast; a homemaker might want to delve into audiovisual production; and an IT worker could have a vibrant interest in marine biology. Limiting the array of educational possibilities available to an individual based on the kind of job they perform would be a hindrance to ideals of human flourishing, maintaining a system where work functions as an all-encompassing force that prevails over other aspects of life. Moreover, maintaining such rigid boundaries would not be coherent with the reality of career fluctuation: in a [2019 survey](#) around career change, half of the respondents reported having made a dramatic career shift. Among those who had not, 65 per cent declared having considered it either in the past or the present. When asked for the reasons behind their decision, most career changers (81 per cent) put it down to being unhappy in their previous job or sector. Maintaining a miserable workforce for the sake of economic growth is a goal we should drop in the transition towards a sustainable society. Encouraging individuals to cultivate their interests independently of whether it would make them more productive could be a first step towards it.

Phillipson's proposal might be hard to picture, and may even be branded as a delusional aspiration by some; however, some of his ideas have already been implemented. Belgium provides one example: in 1985, it introduced regulations on paid educational leave. This law allows employees in the private sector to take paid leave in order to pursue a study programme of their choice. The legislation was celebrated for promoting the cultural right of workers, who can choose from a set of eligible courses, including philosophy, midwifery, and social work, without their decision having to be based on the programme's suitability to their current job. Despite this law still presenting some limitations, such as the virtual exclusion of part-time workers, its existence serves as an inspiration and a reminder that work's domination over other areas of life is not, and should not be, the norm. A proper reorganisation should be based on this understanding of work as just one of several realms

of life; a life brimming with moments of connection, rest, labour, contemplation, education, and idleness.



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