POST-WORK

THE RADICAL IDEA OF A WORLD WITHOUT JOBS

ARTICLE BY
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Work has ruled our lives for centuries, and it does so today more than ever. But a new generation of thinkers insists there is an alternative. Faced with the breakdown of previous certainties around the world of work, 'post-work' promises the freedom of a world without it.

Work is the master of the modern world. It dominates and pervades everyday life – especially in Britain and the US – more completely than at any time in recent history. An obsession with employability runs through education. Even severely disabled welfare claimants are required to be work-seekers. Corporate superstars show off their epic work schedules. 'Hard-working families' are idealised by politicians. Friends pitch each other business ideas. Tech companies persuade their employees that round-the-clock work is play. Gig economy companies claim that round-the-clock work is freedom. Workers commute further, strike less, retire later. Digital technology lets work invade leisure.

In all these mutually reinforcing ways, work increasingly forms our routines and psyches, and squeezes out other influences. As Joanna Biggs put it in her quietly disturbing 2015 book *All Day Long: A Portrait of Britain at Work*, "Work is … how we give our lives meaning when religion, party politics and community fall away."

And yet work is not working, for ever more people, in ever more ways. We resist acknowledging these as more than isolated problems – such is work's centrality to our belief systems – but the evidence of its failures is all around us.

As a source of subsistence, let alone prosperity, work is now insufficient for whole social classes. In the UK, almost two thirds of those in

This is an edited version of an article that was first published in *The Guardian* in January 2018.

poverty – around 8 million people – are in working households. In the US, the average wage has stagnated for half a century.

As a source of social mobility and self-worth, work increasingly fails even the most educated people. In 2017, half of recent UK graduates were officially classified as "working in a non-graduate role". In the US, "belief in work is crumbling among people in their 20s and 30s", says Benjamin Hunnicutt, a leading historian of work. "They are not looking to their job for satisfaction or social advancement."

Work is increasingly precarious: more zero-hours or short-term contracts; more self-employed people with erratic incomes; more corporate 'restructurings' for those still with actual jobs. As a source of sustainable consumer booms and mass home-ownership – for much of the 20th century, the main successes of mainstream Western economic policy – work is discredited daily by our ongoing debt and housing crises. For many people, not just the very wealthy, work has become less important financially than inheriting money or owning a home.

Whether you look at a screen all day, or sell other underpaid people goods they can't afford, more and more work feels pointless or even socially damaging – what the American anthropologist David Graeber called "bullshit jobs" in a famous 2013 article. His argument seemed subjective and crude, but economic data increasingly supports it. The growth of productivity is slowing across the rich world – despite the constant measurement of employee performance and intensification of work routines that makes many jobs barely tolerable.

Unsurprisingly, work is increasingly regarded as bad for your health: "Stress … an overwhelming 'to-do' list … [and] long hours sitting at a desk," the Cass Business School professor Peter Fleming notes in his book, *The Death of Homo Economicus*, are beginning to be seen by medical authorities as akin to smoking.

Work is badly distributed. People have too much, or too little, or both in the same month. Away from our unpredictable, all-consuming workplaces, vital human activities are increasingly neglected. Workers lack the time or energy to raise children attentively, or to look after elderly relations. "The crisis of work is also a crisis of home," declared the social theorists Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek in a paper last year.

Beyond all these dysfunctions, loom the most discussed, most existential threats to work as we know it: automation, and the state of the environment. Some recent estimates suggest that between a third and a half of all jobs could be taken over by artificial intelligence in the next two decades. Other forecasters doubt whether work can be sustained in its current, toxic form on a warming planet.

REKINDLING LOST DREAMS OF LEISURE

Our culture of work strains to cover its flaws by claiming to be unavoidable and natural. "Mankind is hardwired to work," as the Conservative Member of Parliament Nick Boles puts it in a new book, *Square Deal*. It is an argument most of us have long internalised.

But not quite all. The idea of a world freed from work, wholly or in part, has been intermittently expressed – and mocked and suppressed – for as long as modern capitalism has existed. In 1845, Karl Marx wrote that in a communist society workers would be freed from the monotony of a single draining job to "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner." In 1884, the socialist William Morris proposed that in "beautiful" factories of the future, surrounded by gardens for relaxation, employees should work only "four hours a day."

In 1930, the economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by the early 21st century, advances in technology would lead to an "age of leisure and abundance", in which people might work 15 hours a week. In 1980, as robots began to depopulate factories, the French social and economic theorist André Gorz declared: "The abolition of work is a process already underway … The manner in which [it] is to be managed … constitutes the central political issue of the coming decades."

Since the early 2010s, as the crisis of work has become increasingly unavoidable in the US and the UK, these heretical ideas have been rediscovered and developed further. A new anti-work movement has taken shape. Graeber, Hester, Srnicek, Hunnicutt, Fleming and others are members of a loose, transatlantic network of thinkers who advocate a profoundly different future for Western economies and societies, and also for poorer countries, where the crises of work and the threat posed by robots and climate change are even greater. They call this future 'post-work'.

For some, this future must include a universal basic income, paid by the state to every working-age person, so that they can survive when the great automation comes. For others, the debate about universal basic income is a distraction from even bigger issues.

Post-work may be a rather grey and academic-sounding phrase, but it offers enormous, alluring promises: that life with much less work, or no work at all, would be calmer, more equal, more communal, more pleasurable, more thoughtful, more politically engaged, more fulfilled – in short, that much of human experience would be transformed.

To many, this will sound outlandish, foolishly optimistic – and quite possibly immoral. But the post-workists insist they are the realists

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now. "Either automation or the environment, or both, will force the way society thinks about work to change," says David Frayne, a radical young Welsh academic.

WORK AS WE KNOW IT

One of post-work's best arguments is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the work ideology is neither natural nor very old. "Work as we know it is a recent construct," says Hunnicutt. Like most historians, he identifies the main building blocks of our work culture as 16th-century Protestantism, which saw effortful labour as leading to a good afterlife; 19th-century industrial capitalism, which required disciplined workers and driven entrepreneurs; and the 20th-century desires for consumer goods and self-fulfillment.

Before the emergence of the modern work ethic, Hunnicutt says, "All cultures thought of work as a means to an end, not an end in itself." From urban ancient Greece to agrarian societies, work was either something to be outsourced to others – often slaves – or something to be done as quickly as possible so that the rest of life could happen.

Even once the new work ethic was established, working patterns continued to shift and be challenged. Between 1800 and the 1970s, the average working week in the West shrank from about 80 hours to about 40 hours. Trade union pressure, technological change, enlightened employers, and government legislation all progressively eroded the dominance of work.

Sometimes, economic shocks accelerated the process. In Britain in 1974, Edward Heath's Conservative government, faced with a chronic energy shortage caused by an international oil crisis and a miners' strike, imposed a national three-day working week. For the two months it lasted, people's non-work lives expanded. Golf courses were busier, and fishing-tackle shops reported large sales increases.

The economic consequences were mixed. Most people's earnings fell. Working days became longer. Yet a national survey of companies found that productivity improved by about 5 per cent: a huge increase by Britain's usual sluggish standards. "Thinking was stimulated" inside government and business, the consultants noted, "on the possibility of arranging a permanent four-day week." Nothing came of it. But during the 1960s and 1970s, ideas about redefining work, or escaping it altogether, were commonplace in Europe – from corporate retreats to the counterculture to academia, where a new discipline was established: leisure studies, the study of recreations such as sport and travel.

CONTRARY TO CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, WORK IDEOLOGY IS NEITHER NATURAL NOR VERY OLD

By the end of the 1970s, it was possible to believe that the supremacy of work might be coming to an end in the more comfortable parts of the West. Labour-saving computer technologies were becoming widely available for the first time. Frequent strikes provided highly public examples of work routines being interrupted and challenged. Crucially, wages were high enough, for most people, to make working less a practical possibility.

Instead, work ideology was reimposed. During the 1980s, the aggressively pro-business governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan strengthened the power of employers, and used welfare cuts and moralistic rhetoric to create a much harsher environment for people without jobs. David Graeber argues that these policies were motivated by a desire for social control. After the political turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, he says, "Conservatives freaked out at the prospect of everyone becoming hippies and abandoning work. They thought: 'What will become of the social order?'"

Outside the intense working cultures of Britain and the US, the reduction of work has long been a mainstream notion. In France in 2000, Lionel Jospin's left-wing coalition government introduced a maximum 35-hour week for all employees, partly to reduce unemployment and promote gender equality, under the slogan, "Work less – live more." The law was not absolute (some overtime was permitted) and has been weakened since, but many employers have opted to keep a 35-hour week. In Germany, the largest trade union, IG Metall, which represents electrical and metal workers, has recently won its members the right to opt for a 28-hour week.

Defenders of the work culture such as business leaders and mainstream politicians habitually

question whether pent-up modern workers have the ability to enjoy, or even survive, the open vistas of time and freedom that post-work thinkers envisage for them. In 1989, two University of Chicago psychologists, Judith LeFevre and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, conducted an experiment that seemed to support this view. They recruited 78 people with jobs at local companies and gave them electronic pagers. For a week, at frequent but random intervals, these employees were contacted and asked to fill in questionnaires about what they were doing and how they were feeling.

The experiment found that people reported "many more positive feelings at work than in leisure." At work, they were regularly in a state the psychologists called "flow" – "enjoying the moment" by using their knowledge and abilities to the full, while also "learning new skills and increasing self-esteem." Away from work, "flow" rarely occurred. The employees mainly chose "to watch TV, try to sleep, [and] in general vegetate, even though they [did] not enjoy doing these things." US workers, the psychologists concluded, had an "inability to organise [their] psychic energy in unstructured free time."

To the post-workists, such findings are simply a sign of how unhealthy the work culture has become. Our ability to do anything else, only exercised in short bursts, is like a muscle that has atrophied.

A FUTURE CLOSER THAN WE THINK

Will today's post-workists succeed where all their other predecessors did not? In Britain, possibly the sharpest critic of the movement is Frederick Harry Pitts, a lecturer at Bristol University. Pitts used to be a post-workist himself. He is young and left-wing, and before academia he worked in call centres: he knows how awful a lot of modern work is. Yet Pitts is suspicious of how closely the life post-workists envisage – creative, collaborative, high-minded – resembles the life they already live. "There is little wonder the uptake for post-work thinking has been so strong among journalists and academics", he wrote in a paper co-authored last year with Ana Dinerstein of Bath University, "since for these groups the alternatives [to traditional work] require little adaptation."

Pitts argues that post-work's optimistic visions can be a way of avoiding questions about power. "A post-work society is meant to resolve conflicts between different economic interest groups – that's part of its appeal," he told me. Tired of the never-ending task of making work better, some socialists have latched on to post-work, he argues, in the naive hope that exploitation can be ended by getting rid of work altogether.

Hunnicutt, the historian of work, sees the US as more resistant than other countries to

post-work ideas. When he argued in 2014 for shorter working hours, he received "personal attacks by email and telephone – that I was some sort of communist and devil-worshipper." Yet he senses weakness behind such strenuous efforts to shut the work conversation down. "The role of work has changed profoundly before. It's going to change again. The millennial generation know that the Prince Charming job, that will meet all your needs, has gone."

As Frayne points out, "in some ways, we're already in a post-work society. But it's a dystopic one." Office employees constantly interrupting their long days with online distractions; gig-economy workers whose labour plays no part in their identity; and all the people in depressed, post-industrial places who have quietly given up trying to earn – the spectre of post-work runs through the hard, shiny culture of modern work like hidden rust.

In October 2017, research conducted by Sheffield Hallam University revealed that UK unemployment is three times higher than the official count of those claiming the dole. When Frayne is not talking and writing about post-work, he sometimes makes a living collecting social data for the Welsh government in former mining towns. "There is lots of worklessness," he says, "but with no social policies to dignify it."

Creating a more benign post-work world will be more difficult now than it would have been in the 1970s. In today's lower-wage economy, suggesting people do less work for less pay is a hard sell. As with free-market capitalism in general, the worse work gets, the harder it is to imagine actually escaping it, so enormous are the steps required.

But for those who think work will just carry on as it is, there is a warning from history. On May 1, 1979, one of the greatest champions of the modern work culture, Margaret Thatcher, made her final campaign speech before being elected prime minister. She reflected on the nature of change in politics and society. "The heresies of one period," she said, always become "the orthodoxies of the next". The end of work as we know it will seem unthinkable – until it has happened.

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