

## **To Save the Planet, We Must Liberate Time**

**An interview with Céline Marty, Dirk Holemans**

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The capitalist emphasis on working hard as the key to success comfortably ignores an ugly reality: that the workforce faces worsening conditions and increasing precarity, while extractivism has brought the planet to the verge of ecological collapse. From the teachings of André Gorz to Gen Z's quest for work-life balance, liberating time is at the centre of endeavours to achieve a better life – not just to consume freely as individuals, but to come together as a community.

**Dirk Holemans: For older progressives, André Gorz has been a major source of inspiration, but even more interesting is what he could offer to new generations.**

**Céline Marty:** Gorz deserves to be rediscovered because he's someone who, even back in the 1970s, was linking critiques of work culture to environmental issues, a perspective which is sorely missing from contemporary discussions. Fifty years later, we still have to think about work and environmentalism in tandem; otherwise we risk reducing environmentalism either to spheres of individual influence or to infrastructure changes that ultimately take place beyond the confines of our work and professional lives.

Gorz's efforts to unite labour and environmental and social movements still constitute a relevant political action today, but his way of understanding degrowth is also making a comeback in public debates. When I first read his texts on political ecology, I found them to be a radical, clear, and frank critique of capitalism. His is a unique form of ecology that won't settle for sustainable development or small gestures. This makes it much more radical, and also much clearer in the strategies and solutions it proposes.

When I read *Métamorphoses du travail* ("Metamorphosis of Work"), I found a text that was wholly relevant to our society. Its critique of the ideology of work is still pertinent today. In France, Sarkozy's mantra of "work more to earn more" firmly entrenched this mindset. It was this ideology of work that was debated in the 1980s, and which led to discussions about reducing working hours. Today, all of Gorz's criticisms of the ideology of work are still valid, and his view of the service industry – the fact that we are trying at all costs to create jobs, even ones like dog walkers, sushi delivery drivers, and so on – is completely applicable to modern society.

**We could also say that today, there is too much emphasis on purchasing power. It plays a central role, while other challenges are talked about less. But how much money you need to live depends on the cost of housing, food, utilities, etc.**

Ultimately, we can approach this demand for purchasing power by exploring how wealth is redistributed. It's actually very interesting. In European public discourse, we have all these debates around [French economist Gabriel] Zucman that highlight the enormous increase in the wealth of the ultra-rich. This naturally points to the issue of redistribution, and thus to social and fiscal justice. But there is also a more qualitative issue: defending public services and showing that the strength of the French system compared to the American system is that, despite lower salaries, much of the cost of living in France is

socialised. We don't pay for school, and we pay next to nothing for university. Moreover, we don't pay the full cost of public transport, health insurance, or a significant part of our social welfare.

So, ultimately, one qualitative response to this demand for purchasing power is to defend public services. It's also an opportunity to say that these are not just economic or material demands, but demands for a better life.

So, this is not just an issue of wages. It goes hand in hand with things like taxation and investing in the future, particularly environmental investments.

**Another idea that is very important in Gorz's work is grassroots autonomy. This distances him from the belief in centralised government that has dominated much of the Left. But are social justice and the green transition possible without the state?**

I propose a reinterpretation of Gorz's entire philosophy by examining the concept of alienation – and his response to it – through the concept of self-management. He notes that life is self-managed on an ecological level and then relates this to the self-management of one's own time, for which he advocates reducing working hours and implementing a universal basic income.

Regarding the role of the state, particularly in implementing social justice, one of its primary responsibilities is to collect taxes, and that may actually be its most needed role: to do so in a fairer way than we currently do. That's the current focus of public discourse as well, with Macron having given many fiscal gifts to the country's richest people. The question is also how we redistribute wealth and how we can, at different geographic levels, be financially autonomous enough to manage our own local projects. This is also a debate about how to handle taxes on a local level.

Without this autonomy, people are forced to beg the state for funding for their local initiatives. Gorz criticised the fact that mayors are forced to go begging to the government in Paris for money to finance their projects. So, we clearly need the state to relinquish some of its power. In a way, this was what Gorz said to the socialists in response to [socialist president François] Mitterrand's 1980 slogan, "We are going to change life itself". In his weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* Gorz replied: "We don't want you to change our lives for us."

**But society is divided among different generations. For instance, Generation Z are very focused on finding a balance between their personal and professional lives. Can we understand this as a contemporary interpretation of Gorz's philosophy?**

Some sociologists who study work culture say that young people want the same things as other generations and that, for them, work still matters. Personally, I think that we can explain generational differences through different life experiences.

We have historically told people that social mobility depends on rising through the executive ranks, which itself requires a university degree. But today we see that the conditions for working people and students have declined. This means young people are realising that, even after completing a master's degree or two, they can't find a job that interests them and also offers good working conditions. I also think that if you're 25 today, you've watched your parents' working conditions get worse and worse. This undermines the idea that if you play the capitalist game right, getting the right degrees and experience, everything will work out. In fact, you might see it as a bit misleading, because even 50-year-old senior professionals are now working under poor conditions.

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### **So, has capitalism changed form?**

In shareholder capitalism, workers, including senior managers, can be quickly dismissed, but under the more paternalistic capitalist model, people were looked after more closely until the end. This fact has profoundly changed how people relate to work. I still believe, for example, that the children of the France Télécom employees who committed suicide have a different relationship with work than their parents did. When you see that work can kill your loved ones, when you see how much working conditions can cause people to suffer, it creates a different relationship with work. Moreover, I think that witnessing their parents being mistreated at work ultimately leads children to become quite rebellious, because it creates a critical distance. Seeing that living by the rules of capitalism doesn't necessarily get you anywhere can be very disheartening.

And so, I believe that when we quit, criticise, or are reluctant to commit to a job, or when we change jobs all the time, this is in fact the result of a great loss of faith in contemporary capitalism. It also signals a rupture in the idea that you *need* to have a career and that you can count on your job in the long term. I think that, in fact, we are well aware that we are disposable, and that there is no contract of trust in either the private or public sector. Restructurings and staff cuts lead to a situation of critical distance.

This isn't a strictly generational phenomenon either – it plays out according to social class and employability. When you are sure of your own employability and have a good experience in your first job, you can allow yourself to imagine that there might be something else better out there. But when your primary concern is just finding stable employment instead of precarious work, you obviously do not have the same ambitions.

**One of Gorz's key ideas is the distinction between free time and "liberated time". The latter of these can be used autonomously, free of the demands of capitalism.**

In France, where we have this idea of collective "liberated time", we maintain a tradition of volunteering. Statistics show that around a quarter of the population is involved in some kind of volunteering or community work, and this culture of community involvement can start at a very young age, through sporting or cultural activities. I would say that this kind of involvement even increases during one's university years, and it's only really when you enter working life that you start to feel that work takes up all your time. It becomes difficult to find time to do other things, and to be confident enough in one's job to be able to say, "I'm leaving early, I've got other stuff to do."

It's also important to have collective institutions that allow us to spend this free time outside of capitalist logic. Because, of course, we know full well – especially with the online economy – that the goal is to occupy our free time and our "available brain time" and make us consume more through online advertising. On this point, I think it is interesting to look back at what happened in the 1980s, when there were discussions on reducing working hours, of a cultural society, and of "changing life". During that time, many cultural policies were put in place to build things like libraries, swimming pools, sports grounds, theatres, and so on.

Talking about reducing working hours also meant proposing shared infrastructure and places where we could spend that time. The Popular Front did this in the 1930s by developing sports and holiday infrastructure. Subsequently, these policies were undermined by budget cuts to culture, sports, and associations, weakening the structures that enabled people to spend their free time collectively and reflectively.

Culture and sports also enable us to exist outside of our productive capitalist role. When you participate in a sport, theatre, or dance group, you exist outside your job; if we weaken all these structures outside the job market and the economy, our free time will be dedicated to consumption and consumption alone. That's why I think it is extremely important to go against the grain and defend a culture of leisure through public services.

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**What do you think is the most central and necessary element for the ecological transition?**

For me, criticising the ideology of work is a deliberate strategy to convince people that the only way forward is to take degrowth seriously. Working less to live better, doing things better with less. It's therefore vitally important to remind people that degrowth is the horizon we're working towards. The environmental crisis is a crisis of overproduction, of too much work, of too much extraction, of wasteful production on many different levels.

The environmental crisis is also caused by the lifestyles of the wealthiest. They are the ones who must be urged to consume less, and this means it is also a question of social justice. I believe that the ideal of working less is appealing to everyone whose working conditions cause them suffering on a daily basis.

If we can put forward serious environmental projects that assert that the environmentally friendly way forward is working less, then that's a very attractive idea. I think this idea of "work austerity" is one of the most appealing proposals that can be made as part of the ecological transition. It feels good when you take a break from work or work less, and that's something we need to stand by.



Céline Marty is a professor and researcher in philosophy. She pursued her PhD in labour philosophy, focusing on the thought of André Gorz. She is the author of "Travailler moins pour vivre mieux", published by *Dunod*.



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