**Critical Theory and the post-work imaginary**

**Abstract**

Advances in production systems and technology, particularly around automation and robotics, have been accompanied in recent years by a resurgence of debate about the future of work. Many contemporary accounts inhabit a utopian space where radical change is desired and envisioned (see for example Frayne 2015; Mason 2015; Srnicek and Williams 2016; Bastani 2019). They point to profound, possibly revolutionary change in the nature of work – perhaps the end of work as we know it. They place work at the centre, or make it a key determinant of, social life as presently known, and in so-doing tend to offer up a critique of capitalist society *in toto*. During the twentieth century, Western economies grappled with the issue of automation, at the same time finding themselves oscillating between consumer-fuelled expansion and economic crisis. This produced an intellectual engagement with automation and post-work which has much in common with that of today’s ‘postindustrial utopians’ (Frankel 1987). Even stretching back into antiquity, utopian thinkers imagined a world without toil, and so the notion of ‘post work’, or the ‘end of work’ exists in the context of a long and distinctive intellectual heritage. This chapter presents an analysis of this intellectual heritage and seeks to illustrate continuity and disjuncture in the dynamics of what could be termed ‘post work imaginaries’ (Srnicek and Williams 2016: 107-127, Weeks 2011).

**Introduction**

Critical Theory is a practice of analysing society dialectically. In so doing it seeks to highlight the irrationalities of contemporary capitalism (Granter 2014). That is, to reveal the ideological status of various concepts, understandings, and experiences. This is known specifically as *negative dialectics* (See Clegg and Pina e Cunha 2019: 12; Neimark and Tinker 1987). Language, politics, the media, everyday life – all contain traces and echoes of the dominant ideologies which sustain and legitimate the capitalist system of domination. These traces represent the ‘universal in the particular’ (Granter 2019: 233) and serve as evidence of the formatting of life as an after-image of capital. Everything exists as part of a totality and so culture, society and ideology must be seen as mutually reinforcing the domination of capital – until such time as people become conscious of its hidden hand in all aspects of life. This would constitute a revolutionary breakthrough - the end of capitalism - this is what Critical Theory works towards.

Later the Critical Theor*ists* will be introduced but as a statement of purpose, the overall aim of the chapter is to explore the idea that the end of work can form, amongst others, an important conceptual lens through which to conduct Critical Theory. The end of work as an idea contains many of the concepts which are central to Critical Theory: freedom, authenticity, reason and importantly, contradiction. Perhaps the greatest contradiction of all is that the technical, social and organizational means to transform the way we work, to end work as toil and compulsion, to use our time autonomously and to make society fairer and more decent, already exist. It is capitalism itself which has created this possibility, and yet it is capitalism itself which seems to prevent it being realised. What can account for this, if not a coalescence of ideological, cultural, political and social factors which work against the possibility of freedom from work? Critical Theory attempts to reveal how these elements of the totality fit together to obscure the possibility of freedom, and this process of revealing carries the utopian impulse of liberation. Critical Theory need not be the preserve of one group of writers, it is a way of thinking, a method (Horkheimer 2002) which can be employed by others who share an interest in a fairer society.

In the first part of this chapter, the early cultural and intellectual trajectory of the end of work is traced since it is important to understand it as an idea which has developed in relation to other social and cultural developments. Marx – Critical Theorist *avant la lettre -* is introduced as the key figure in modern understandings of the end of work and from here we introduce the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, focusing on Herbert Marcuse. An account of André Gorz’s contribution to the Critical Theory of work is then given, including his notion of ‘living dead capitalism.’ Following ideas of the end of work to the present day, the chapter sketches some outlines of the current ‘wave’ of post-industrial utopianism, alongside a discussion of *why* the end of work seems to emerge in the intellectual and public consciousness at certain historical junctures. In conclusion, Critical Theories of the end of work are positioned as a form of utopian thinking which is useful and relevant to a critique of contemporary work and society.

**A brief history of (the end of) work**

Work in pre-industrial or ‘pretechnological’ (McLean and Hurd 2015: 50) societies was radically different to work as it is understood under late capitalism (Sahlins 1972). If contemporary work is compulsory - regulated and disciplined through economic, temporal, social and ideological frameworks - work in pre-capitalism was characterised by compulsion only in the sense that survival necessitated the provision of the community’s more-or-less immediate needs (Granter 2009: 13). Hunting, gathering, cooking, repairing etc. for 21-35 hours a week (Sahlins 1972: 34-5) is hardly fully automated luxury (Bastani 2019); however, work remained an activity, and a concept, without the ontological and ideological dominance with which it is imbued today.

In the more socially stratified context of the ancient civilizations, fantasies of a world without work were in some ways unnecessary if one belonged to the slaveholding elite. If one reverses Weiner’s argument that ‘the automatic machine… is the precise economic equivalent of slave labour’ (Weiner 1950, cited in in Rifkin 1995: 78) then one could characterize classical Greece as the prototypical fully automated economy. For the intellectual elite, the ideal was a life of ‘music and contemplation...philosophy’ (Applebaum 1992: 64), an existence free from the compulsion to work. Exempt from toil, Greek citizens could take an active part in political life, own land and manage its cultivation, and wage war on neighbouring proto-states. In a sense then, a highly polarized version of the end of work, has already existed. Even so, the notion of a scarcity and toil free life did make an appearance in the popular culture of the time. The *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus provides an insight into the comic poets’ utopian take on work: 'The central idea in them all, carried to heights of hyperbole typical of Old Comedy, is to portray circumstances in which things happen of their own accord, *without* involving human toil’ (Baldry 1953: 50); self-opening gates, self-frying fish, self-kneading dough, etc. (Baldry 1953). Baldry’s parting word on these accounts conjures up the notion that writing on the end of work has been part of a critique of wider society all along: ‘Whether the comic poets described the remote past or conjured up a fantastic future, the faults and foibles of their fellow-citizens were their main concern’ (1953: 60).

Turning to medieval Europe, it is interesting to note that scholars have drawn parallels between contemporary end of work debates, and those taking place at the university of Paris in the 1250s; Robertson and Uebel argue that work was one of the ‘determinant factors of social identity in late medieval Europe’ (2004: 3), indicating that the rise of work to the social centrality associated with the industrial revolution, did not occur *ex nihilo.* Schor, in her popular book *The Overworked American*, citing a number of sources (1993: 45), argued that some peasant families in 14th century England may have worked only 1620 hours per year, over 150 days – although she concedes that these figures relate to a period of ‘unusually high wages’ (Schor 1993: 47). A characterization of medieval life as one of carnivalesque leisure (Clark and Van Der Werf 1998: 830) is open to dispute and indeed, one of Schor’s sources observes elsewhere that ‘even before 1750 some [rural] workers were putting in work years of nearly 300 days’ and that these days were ‘long and hard’ (1998: 836). By these calculations, workers ‘seemingly did as much per day in medieval England as in England at the end of the Industrial Revolution’ (Clark and Van Der Werf 1998: 836).

Whatever the specifics of working life in the West before industrialism, Sir Thomas More (1478 – 1535) felt that it was enough of an issue to make a 6 hour day an element of his *Utopia* (Mavor 2016). Although at the same time, idleness was not to be countenanced; life beyond work was to be purposeful and worthwhile. With More we see a connection established between work and consumption in that more durable goods and houses would mean less work invested in replacement and repair. As industrialization took hold, other ‘utopian’ writers such as Charles Fourier (1772 – 1837) began to place work and production at the centre of their critiques of nascent industrial modernity. Fourier was a notably eccentric figure and his proposal of using ‘Vestals – female virgins age[d] between fifteen and a half and twenty’ (Granter 2009: 37) as, arguably, some sort of ‘‘bait’ for industrial armies’ (Spiers n.d.:7) appear inappropriate from today’s perspective. He does hold an important place in the history of the end of work however, as one of the first writers to place the notion within a critique of work under industrialism:

the systems of industrialism…serve to enrich finance, big business and the great property owners, and leave the people nothing but hunger and nakedness as the wages of slave labour which is often performed in workshops where men are locked up for eighteen hours a day (Fourier 1972: 122).

Despite the fact that by the 19th century the cultural and ideological cachet of work was well established, it was rejected by Fourier who described work for the majority as ‘profitless boredom’ (1972: 148). Fourier’s solution was a thoroughgoing reorganization of society based on the ‘laws of Attraction’. Work is to be allocated according to individuals’ ‘passions’ and made varied and pleasurable. Work, for Fourier, is to be transformed into something ‘akin to play’ (the phrase is taken from Bastani 2019: 55).

**Capitalist modernity and the end of work**

As with much of modern social theory, when it comes to the end of work, we can credit Marx with producing the conceptual frameworks which are of most enduring resonance. Drawing on an array of influences, from Aristotle, to German philosophers such as Schiller and Novalis to Fourier and beyond, Marx established the ideal of work as an autonomously chosen activity associated with experiential plurality and creativity (Marx 1975). Productive activity is an important part, perhaps *the* most important part, of what makes us truly human and so for humankind to realise its full potential, it should produce according to this ideal.

Almost by definition, this ideal represents, ‘as in a *camera obscura*’ (Marx 1845), the inverse of what work under capitalism seemed to Marx to be like. Marx provides a critique of work under capitalism that emphasises its brutal compulsion, its physical costs, its ontological costs, its tendency to be experienced as something external, imposed, *alien* (Marx 1975: 329). Marx was no technological determinist but he did highlight the role played by technology, under specific relations of production, in shaping the experience, and the potentialities, of work. Mechanised factory production reduced the worker to a ‘mere appendage’ of the machine (Marx 1974: 451), yes, but at the same time, this nascent form of automation held the possibility of two more positive, interconnected corollaries. First, Marx highlighted the potential of technology and advanced production systems to reduce the burden of necessary work (Marx 1977: 820). Second, he pointed to the tendency for work under capitalism to become a truly social, interconnected, cooperative process, where people play a mediated, rather than a direct role, in production (1993: 705; 1977: 820). Under such circumstances, it should be possible to reduce working time for all who desire it, and to move to a new definition of worth or wealth based more on individual freedom to use one’s time autonomously, rather than on the ‘theft of alien labour time’ (Marx 1993: 705). For Marx, work as we know it – that is, work as a matter of necessity was not something to be idealised for its own sake; rather it was something which could be, and should be transformed into a truly human practice and reduced in temporal terms, in order to expand the ‘realm of freedom’ (Booth 1991: 9) in which people can define their own destinies and that of the social collective.

**Critical Theorists and the end of work**

The Critical Theorists were a group of Marxist academics who became known also as the Frankfurt School (for an intellectual biography of the group see Jay 1996, for an introduction to their work see Kellner 1989 and for an outline of their relevance to the sociology of work and organization see Granter 2014, 2019). At its centre were Theodor Adorno (1903-1969); Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) who, as Jewish Marxists, were forced to escape fascism and leave Germany in the 1930s to continue their work from the USA. Adorno and Horkheimer returned to academic posts in Frankfurt in the 1950s. They developed Critical Theory as an adaptive current of Marxism, carrying forward the understanding of productive activity as central to human being. Although Adorno is also relevant to the end of work debate (Gunderson 2018), it is in the writings of Marcuse that we find the end of work advocated and explored in the most significant way.

Marx is the most important influence on Marcuse and like his predecessor, he placed work at the centre of what it means to be human (1973: 29). Once again following Marx, he argued that work under capitalism tended to be toilsome and alienating – a matter of compulsion rather than autonomy. By the time Marcuse published *Eros and Civilization* in 1955, the potential of automated systems to reduce the burden of work was even clearer than Marx 100 years previous. These systems should be used, according to Marcuse, to reduce work in the ‘realm of necessity’ (Marcuse 1987: 105) to a minimum. In an ironic rhetorical use of the concept of alienation, he suggests that: ‘The more complete the alienation of labour, the greater potential of freedom: total automation would be the optimum’ (Marcuse 1987: 156). In fact alienation as a *state of experience for the worker* was to be all but eliminated in Marcuse’s vision of an automated utopia. The notion that automation could *reduce* alienation is in keeping with Marx’s conception of workers as, increasingly, coordinators of complex systems, and indeed, Blauner’s work on alienation seemed to bear out the potential for high levels of automation, under certain conditions, to lead to lower levels of alienation (Blauner 1964).

If automation could reduce necessary work to a minimum, or facilitate the transformation of work into something ‘akin to play’ – positions Marcuse appeared to hold at various points, why did toil and heteronomous work persist? Why did work continue to take up so much time? First, the Marcuse of *Eros and Civilization* pointed to ‘surplus repression’ (Marcuse 1987: 35), a concept developed as part of a Freudian influenced exploration of the more instinctual elements of work and social control. While the pre-automation age demanded a repression of people’s sexual and playful instincts so that they could muster the discipline and self-denial necessary to wrestle a means of survival from nature, modern advanced technological systems made this repression unnecessary; they made possible ‘the abolition of labour and the affirmation of the libido and play in social relations’ (Musto 2010: 84). In short, contemporary workers were operating advanced production systems under the aegis of a work ethic more suited to early industrial society. Second, Marcuse draws attention to the role of consumption, or more accurately, consumerism, in perpetuating work, needlessly. The concept of ‘false needs’ is operationalised; ‘Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs’ (Marcuse 1986: 5). Along with the planned obsolescence of consumer goods, this system of false needs keeps people trapped in a destructive dialectic of work/consume. What should they be doing instead? Developing their ‘human faculties’, deploying their ‘individual and collective desires’, rebuilding ‘the natural and built environment’ (Rachlis 1978: 81), ‘creative experimentation with the productive forces’ (Marcuse 1970: 66).

The shift to a society based on creative experimentation and the desires of the collective would be revolutionary – this would be a socialist society (Zilbersheid 2008: 405). Since the ‘end of work’ (Marcuse 2005: 111) would require a revolution, it would also require a revolutionary consciousness or a ‘new sensibility.’ The events of May-June 1968 in France and the counterculture more generally, gave Marcuse hope that a new sensibility was emerging, but ultimately this ‘exhilarating, joyous festival’ (Poster 1975: 373) failed to lead to truly revolutionary change. The problem for Marcuse and other post work utopians is that in order for a new sensibility to emerge, the current ideology of production, consumption and capitalist systematization must be transcended, but in order for it to be transcended, a new sensibility must first emerge (Marcuse 1970: 80). From the perspective of the current system of domination, in Marcuse’s work, as elsewhere, there is a sense that the system of work and consumption must be maintained, even artificially, in order to keep such revolutionary possibilities in check.

**André Gorz: Living dead capitalism**

This artificial maintenance of alienated labour in the face of utopian possibilities was something which André Gorz; a ‘French Marcuseite’ (Anonymous 1969: 10) and ‘well grounded in Critical Theory’ (Brown 1991) characterised as ‘living dead capitalism’ (1985: 37-39). If one subscribes to Gorz’s theory, and indeed those of later writers, it is the period in which we now live. This central contradiction, and the way it is sustained and structured through politics and ideology, continues to represent one of the most theoretically fertile areas in terms of using post-work imaginaries to critique the present organization of society. It is a concept that lends itself particularly well to analysis using Critical Theory, since it highlights the ideological nature of capitalism – in contrast to the more rational ways of being which lie beyond it.

Gorz is a highly significant figure in the intellectual history of the end of work, although in the latest wave of the debate, he tends to be under-acknowledged, if he is mentioned at all (with some exceptions, see for example Frayne 2015, Mason 2016. It is hard to say when this recent wave began, but Frayne’s 2015 book *The Refusal of Work* did much to bring the post-work imaginary into the academic and public consciousness). Rising to what passes for prominence in European neo-Marxist terms, in the 1980s with his book *Farewell to the Working Class* (1980, English translation 1982)*,* Gorz’s analysis mirrors that of Marcuse in that it is a totalizing critique of capitalism. He makes clear that the end of work is a key element in the transition to communism, and one that can only succeed if capitalism is overcome (Gorz 1967: 10). In the discussion which follows, Gorz’s work is situated in historical and intellectual context; in particular, we examine the possible social formations related to the end of work, the possibilities for a positive post-work future, and the reasons why these possibilities remain unfulfilled – even as capitalism takes on increasingly irrational features.

The 1980s was a period of economic restructuring along neoliberal lines and in many Western societies, rising unemployment. At the same time, computerization began to mature as a central part of productive life and represented another dimension in the conceptual career of automation. Little wonder, perhaps, that this period produced an outpouring of anxiety over the future of work, much of it centred on the concern that there already was not, and in the future certainly would not, be enough of it to go around. This is in contrast to the period in which Marcuse was writing in that the 1960s was for many a more optimistic time where automation was still often seen as signifying the possibility of increased leisure, rather than leading to socially disruptive levels of unemployment. And so the period witnessed a slew of books on the future of work or the end of work which extended, in the USA in particular, into the 1990s (Jenkins and Sherman 1979; Handy 1984, Bleakley 1985; Robertson 1985; Rifkin 1995; Aronowitz and DiFazio 1994).

What is particularly interesting in the work of Gorz and this wider discourse is the way visions of the future of work tended to posit ‘imaginaries’ which are both positive and negative in characterization (Westwood 2000). As Aroles et al. (2019) point out, there is a long-term and continuing tendency in future of work literature to posit both utopian and dystopian futures (2019: 293-4). In one conceptualization, automation allows for increased leisure and free time, whilst promoting a generalized increase in skill and education levels. Society is able to overcome the problem of technological unemployment by radically re-engineering its material, social, cultural and political systems. One element of this might be a guaranteed income which is separated from the need to work. People are able to pursue their interests and self-development in an era of post-scarcity; an utopian future. In the other, automation leads to widespread unemployment and social dislocation. Although some benefit from new ways of working with advanced technology, automation renders many people surplus to requirements. Unless perhaps one belongs to the capitalist superclass (Rothkopf 2008), this is a dystopia.

This summary skates over a variety of differentiation, thematically and politically. Looking at the future of work is not the same as envisioning, and prescribing a post work utopia, as Gorz does. For Gorz, there were various possible scenarios, and these are interwoven with accounts of the artificial perpetuation of the work based economy, and its abolition. In one scenario, permanently employed workers become a ‘narrow stratum, alongside vast numbers of unemployed’ (Gorz 1985: 31). This polarization thesis is reminiscent of Beck’s ‘Brazilianization of the West’ idea (2000) and sees the privileged elite co-exist substantively, if not experientially, alongside ‘a dispossessed social majority: slum dwellers in the shadow of skyscrapers precariously existing on crime and the underground economy’ (Gorz 1985: 31).

Something that is noted more or less in passing in much critical writing on the end of work is the often racialized character of marginalization. One exception to this is Rifkin’s analysis of the African American experience (1996: 69 – 80). He shows how black Americans were ‘caught between technologies’ 9 (Rifkin 1996: 73); having been de jure liberated from slavery (which has its own significance in the conceptual history of the end of work, as we have seen) many African Americans remained in the Southern states, working in agriculture. When cotton picking was mechanized in the 1940s, black Americans found themselves ‘invented out of a job’ (Bix 2000) – victims of technological unemployment. This, amongst other developments, played a part in the great migration of Southern black workers to the industrial cities of the north – Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia. Steered (in part by limitations imposed by structural racism) into significant concentrations in unskilled manufacturing jobs, African Americans were then hit harder than most when *these* jobs were in turn automated from the 1950s on (Rifkin 1996). This line of analysis brings Rifkin on to considering automation’s role in the creation of the urban underclass (1996: 77). If one accepts that such a concept can in fact be operationalized, Black Americans make up a significant part of this group and find it harder to escape from it, since they have been denied the educational opportunities needed in order to become part of the rising knowledge class. The concept of ‘structural violence’ (Ralph 2014: 199) captures both the causes of black Americans’ marginalization, and its consequences. Eliminated from the world of work, the most marginalized ‘turn to the ruthless business of drug trafficking, thereby mimicking the entrepreneurial spirit of capitalism. Like their legal counterparts, they kill, maim and destroy people’s lives in the process of making a profit’ ([Ransby](file:///C:\Users\grantejz\Downloads\030639689603800201.pdf) 1996 : 6) Others such as Venkatesh (2008), Bourgois ([1995](http://philippebourgois.net/www.philippebourgois.com/Nation%2095.pdf)), Farber (2019) and others have pursued this line of analysis, the former two in ethnographic detail. The drug economy is seen as a (perhaps *the*) only viable career option in socially, racially and economically segregated areas where de-industrialization has seen decently paid work, perhaps any work, ‘disappear’ (Wilson 1996). One corollary of this growth of an alternative narco-economy has been the high levels of criminalisation and incarceration of African American men (Rifkin 1996: 77). Through this system of mass incarceration, these workless, ‘surplus’ people can be (more or less) safely contained. In a sense then, there are many communities in which work *as conventionally known* has already ended, although it is notable that this fact is rarely mentioned in mainstream accounts of the ‘possible’ social costs of automation and the end of work. Although space precludes a detailed discussion of this issue here, the same could be said for worklessness (or wagelessness) in the global South (Denning 2010). More generally, the point has been made that research on the future of work has tended to be ‘Western-centric’ (Aroles et al. 2019 - they also note exceptions such as Graham et al. 2017, and Wood et al. 2018).

Some of those denied access to the privileges of full time labour *do* still work in the ‘legitimate’ economy, as part of a servant class (Meagher 2003: 146), some of whom ‘are forced into desperate, frenetic competition to sell domestic or sexual services to the narrow stratum of well-paid workers and employers’ (Gorz 1985: 31) Elsewhere Gorz points to young people, members of the new class of *précaires* (Gorz 2003: 98) ‘who deliver their hot croissants, newspapers and pizzas’ and do ‘odd jobs’ as another element of this servant class, a social category which was thought to have been made obsolete during the early twentieth century (Gorz 1989: 6). This scenario is certainly familiar to scholars who have charted the rise of non-standard or precarious work, and more recently the gig-economy (Edgell and Granter 2019: 193-224). As economic rationality (Gorz 1989) spreads ever more deeply into everyday life, those who are cash rich but time poor rely on these contingent workers to put up their furniture, walk their dogs, and organize the contents of their refrigerators (Rodrigues 2020).

This set-up is functional for the perpetuation of the society of work. It is the organization of capitalism in ‘*ways which hide its reality’* (Gorz 1985: 34). The core of relatively privileged, full time workers remain committed to the ideology of work which for them continues to deliver the goods, and the precariat have no choice but to cling to the notion of work, *any work*, or be cast into a stigmatised, marginalised underclass of the full time unemployed. This further notion of work as intertwined with social control is perhaps under-theorized in Gorz and beyond, but offers a potentially interesting dimension of the end of work concept. Frayne highlights the disciplinary potential of splitting the population into a binary relation of working/not working (2015: 99). In this moral economy, the non-working are demonized (see also Graeber 2018: 243). Even in areas where there simply are not enough jobs for the unemployed to do, they are constructed as failed individuals; condemned to a life of poverty, yes, but undeserving of help since this is a problem of their own making (Frayne 2015: 100). This view of unemployment remains a politically legitimized cultural trope and if a moment of levity can be permitted, is summed up as follows:

‘The idea they're trying to get across is that unemployment is caused by the unemployed not wanting to work. Maybe this is true. In which case, in the 1920s everyone was full of beans, but in around 1931 three million people decided they couldn't be bothered for a few years, though they perked up again around 1938 which was handy as it was just in time for the war’ (Steel: 2012).

This ideological and cultural formation is similar to other forms of control in that it appears to exist in a self-reinforcing pattern; it operationalises elements of precisely *its own ideological and cultural formation* as signifiers, in a way in which possibilities of alternatives are obfuscated. It is, to use the term in the Marcusean sense, *one dimensional.*

Work as a form of social control can operate in a number of ways. As Gorz would have it, and echoing Marcuse’s analysis, work and consumption exist primarily as ‘instruments of control in the hands of a ruling class whose power no longer rests on property but on controlling the system of control’ (1985: 39). Work is perpetuated ‘“to keep people occupied’” (Gorz 1982: 72). Graeber (2018: 284), in a similar vein, implies that work plays a role in occupying people’s time so that they have little of it left in which to politically organize and actively change the status quo: ‘As Orwell noted, a population busy working, even at the most useless occupations, doesn’t have time to do much else. At the very least, this is further incentive not to do anything about the situation.’ The role of work in maintaining social control, or discipline, in the Foucauldian sense is explored by Macherey. Through a combinatory reading of Marx and Foucault, he highlights the centrality of production relations in establishing a society of norms. Once capitalist control over the labour process (work) is established, this form of discipline becomes generative of a more generalized system:

‘In a society of norms everything is programmed or can be programmed. The behavior of each individual compelled to take his place in a process that is molded in such a way loses the character of individual actions possessing an intrinsic value. It is listed, catalogued, formatted according to functional criteria that are not up for discussion and impose themselves by claiming to be self-evident’ (Macherey 2015)

In an analysis which also draws on the work of Foucault, Guizzo and Stronge (2018) make a similar point, noting that work: ‘performs a larger social role: not only does it determine the provision of food, shelter and other needs, but also influences the ways individuals think and act.’ The end of work, by these accounts, would threaten the system of domination as it presently exists. Put even more simply, to end work would involve, as discussed previously, a revolutionary transformation of politics, culture and society.

We do find in the work of Gorz a set of more positive post-work scenarios. For example, he raises the possibility of a new social subject, a ‘non class of non-workers’ (1982: 67). These are the precarious workers encountered above, for whom work has become increasingly meaningless, who drift ‘from one temporary “McJob” to another, always retaining enough time as possible to follow the favoured activities of their tribe’ (Gorz 1999: 61). It is not entirely clear at present that precarious, gig economy workers (the group perhaps most accurately matching Gorz’s neoproletariat) have truly developed a new sensibility which favours a wholesale re-evaluation of work, or in fact seek an escape from temporary work by re-entering the traditional model of full time, secure work through a process of regularization (Edgell and Granter 2019: 205) Given the ideological and cultural persistence of work as a source of economic and personal value (not to mention as the means to survive), it seems that for many, ‘[u]nder capitalism, the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited’ (Denning 2010: 79). From the perspective of capital, the reserve army of the precariously employed serves its own disciplinary functions. In a society where secure, well paid jobs are in short supply, work ‘put[s] on airs, as rare goods do’ (Basso 2003: 197).

Supposing that an escape from the work based society *was* achieved, in a way in which social catastrophe could be avoided, what would people do with their time? Gorz, in a section of *Paths to Paradise* entitled ‘the politics of time’, envisions an era defined by ‘the pleasure of creating, giving, learning, establishing with others non-market, non-hierarchic, practical and effective relationships’ (1985: 107). In practical terms, Gorz, like many other post-work utopians, advocates a form of universal basic income. Even more practically, he calls for the establishment of collective facilities which can provide people with a space for autonomous work. Community centres with facilities for reading, music, DIY and so on (Gorz 1985: 103). In addition, a collective, cooperative sector of non-market service and exchange should be established. In the sphere of necessary work which still exists, activity and relationships should be redefined through negotiation over elements such as technological change, nature of jobs and staffing levels, and work-time (Gorz 1985: 104). Others have sketched out a similar meaningful future ‘beyond employment’ (Pym 1990: 137 – 155), in some cases literally, with books featuring drawings depicting collectivised gardens and community media centres (Harper and Ward 1990: 149-154). Lang, nearly 40 years later, finds the DIY (Do It Yourself) ethic alive and well in post-industrial Cheetham Hill, a significantly deprived, multicultural area of Greater Manchester in the United Kingdom. Lang found that at the Welcome [community] Centre, people marginalized by the mainstream economy of work found fulfilment in affective labour; teaching and learning English, creating hair salons, ‘a beauty parlour, a clothes exchange point, a bike repair container, a furniture repair space, and a circuit of translators on request’ (Lang 2020: 163-164). Although Lang observes that work retained its social and cultural value for the community centring on the Welcome Centre, she also notes that the participants were operating on an ‘alternative logic’ of ‘trust and reciprocity’ (Lang 2020: 160).

**The end of work 4.0**

The end of work is once again a ‘hot topic’ in academia and the public sphere, with a plethora of books appearing in recent years (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Fleming 2015; Frayne 2015; Srnicek and Williams 2015; Mason 2016; Graeber 2018; Bastani 2019; Susskind 2020, *inter alia*). Clearly this is the latest in a number of iterations of the end of work thesis and we have seen in this chapter that visions of a post-work world are nothing new. It should however be noted that it is possible to *imagine* a world without work, independently of whether one accurately predicts that this will actually come to pass. It is not entirely clear why this (or any other) surge of interest in the end of work appear in the collective consciousness, but some patterns are discernible.

In the 1950s and 1960s, relatively low levels of unemployment and high levels of consumer spending created the conditions for a so called ‘revolt against work’, or at least the perception of one (Reeve 1976). This was coupled with the development of a counterculture which (temporarily) appeared to reject conventional notions of work and career. At the same time, automated technology continued to develop in manufacturing and, increasingly, in corporate administration. In the 1980s, as already noted, economic restructuring and rising unemployment played a role, and in the 1990s, corporate restructuring and, once again automation, this time facilitated by advances in computing is relevant.

Automation is a recurrent theme and the most recent set of debates comes at a time of new developments around not only roboticization, but artificial intelligence (AI) and artificial neural networks are argued to threaten to eliminate potentially catastrophic numbers of jobs. Frey and Osborne’s article on the susceptibility of jobs to automation is particularly influential, with their prediction of 47% of American jobs at risk of elimination (2013: 47). Notably, there is a sense that this time around, service and ‘white collar’ professional jobs are at significant risk of automation (Frey and Osborne 2013). Since a very large proportion of the population are now employed in these sectors, interest in the threat of technological unemployment has risen, just as it did in previous eras when manufacturing workers, then a key occupational group, were threatened by automation and the economic restructuring. Management consultancies and think-tanks have seized the moment (Sturdy and Morgan 2018) suggesting the possibility that a ‘cultural circuit of capital’ (Thrift 2001) has emerged to shape the ‘future work’ agenda. Groups of scholars have coalesced around ideas of a crisis of work, and the liberatory politics necessary for overcoming it. See for example https://autonomy.work/ and https://futuresofwork.co.uk/. A number of researchers associated with the latter grouping have been critical of many of the assumptions underlying dreams of a workless world (Pitts and Dinerstein 2017), whilst not abandoning the possibilities for radical change in and beyond a society dominated by capitalism models of work and production.

Scepticism aside, attention now turns to sketching the content of the current crop of post-work imaginaries. Bell (1973: 456) noted that the ‘elimination of scarcity, as the condition for abolishing all competitiveness and strife, has been the axial principal of all utopian thinking’ and whilst technology can eliminate jobs, it is seen by some as having the potential to lead to ‘new vistas of abundance’ (Bastani 2019: 11). In an account which shares many thematic similarities with the (much) earlier work of Etzler (1842), Bastani (94-116) highlights the significance of renewable energy in facilitating ‘fully automated luxury communism’. Tending also to foresee a world beyond scarcity (or at least its technical possibility), most of the contemporary visionaries of the end of work (Bastani, Frayne, Srnicek and Williams, Mason, Graeber, Susskind), as Gorz and many others have done, posit that some form of decoupling of income from work will be needed in order to move beyond the wage based economy. This would allow, for instance, the expansion of freely chosen, autonomous activity along the lines of Marx’s vision of hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, criticizing after dinner (Srnicek and Willians 2015: 121). And once again echoing Gorz, a more co-operative form of economic exchange, beyond the wage and the market, is suggested (Mason 2016: 275-277, Bastani 2019: 210). Dystopic visions linger, however, just as they always have done. Even accounts which don’t appear to advocate a revolutionary supersession of capitalism, point to the tendency for automation to increase social inequalities (Susskind 2020, Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). Others echo the dystopic visions of the 1980s, witness some of Srnicek and William’s predictions of automation’s effects, *should it proceed subject to the current tendencies of capitalism* (2015: 104):

‘Slum populations will continue to grow due to the automation of low-skilled service work… Urban marginality in the developed economies will grow in size as low-skilled, low wage jobs are automated… The challenges to workfare, immigration controls and mass incarceration will deepen as those without jobs are increasingly subjected to coercive controls and survival economies’

Many of the defining features of the post work imaginary then, remain surprisingly consistent. Or perhaps not so surprisingly, since many of them, particularly the most radical (Srnicek and Williams 2015, Mason 2016, Bastani 2019, Frayne 2015) function as a critique of capitalism, as did those of Marx, Marcuse and Gorz. There is an new world of work where the pathologies, injustices and irrationalities of capitalism continue, even in the face of potential freedom and material abundance, and there is new world beyond work where these potentials are fully realised; a future beyond capitalism.

**Conclusion: The end of work as critical social theory**

The most radical post-work imaginaries function as a form of critical social theory because they situate work as part of a ‘pathological organization of society’ (Granter 2009: 2). They show how this rests on an irrationality that can only be explained, in turn, through an analysis of prevailing systems of domination. The central irrationality is the fact that the means exist to eliminate poverty, toil, needless consumption and alienation, but that these means are not utilised. To enact this elimination would entail a re-evaluation or more accurately, revolution, in the understanding of the role of work. Though much critical social theory of the end of work owes a great debt to Marx, it also tends to follow the established school of Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School) in prioritizing the need for theoretical and analytical adaptation, and so each iteration offers new avenues of critique.

Work at present is defined in ontological, political and ideological terms as a mediating function between the system of capitalism and the experience and consciousness of the majority of the population. Since the domination of capital depends on the continued centrality of capitalist relations of work and production in this mediating function, these relations must be sustained through an array of measures. These measures continually evolve, albeit sometimes as ‘variations on a theme.’ They range from the promotion of the ideological and cultural centrality of work, the ramping-up of consumerism, to the structuring of work in ways which polarize the working population into masters and servants, to the marginalization and repression of groups who are considered surplus to the requirements of the productivist society. One of the central functions of the post-work imaginary lies less in its vision of the future, and more in its analysis of why this future has failed to materialize – or been prevented from so doing.

At the same time, like Marx (though he may not have agreed with this characterization) the Critical Theorists and many later advocates of a workless future carry the impulse of utopianism. Weeks characterizes the vision of a life ‘no longer subordinate to work’ as one which can open up ‘new theoretical vistas and terrains of struggle. The point is that these utopian demands can serve to generate political effects that exceed the specific reform’ (2011: 221). As Segal argues, ‘to be effective as social criticism, a utopian vision should be concrete enough to be applicable to the real world; and it should be detached enough to be truly critical (1985: 157). Radical theories of the end of work fit with this notion of a utopian demand because they are based on analyses of social reality, of ‘actually existing tendencies’ (Weeks 2011: 211). If utopian demands are based on social reality, their descriptions of what life in a world without work would be like, posit an alternative, possible reality, one based on co-operation, community, autonomy and freedom – truly new ways of working, beyond the conventions within which society currently operates.

Astra Taylor (2018) recalls Sylvia Federici proclaiming: “Don’t let them make you think that you are disposable.” Taylor’s point is that the work of social reproduction is often excluded from mainstream predictions of technological unemployment; given the fact that this is the work done predominantly by women, perhaps this is no accident. Broadening the concept of social reproduction somewhat, this leads to the possibility that paradoxically, one possible utopia might in fact be based on a continuation of work, rather than its abolition. Whilst automation, computerization, robotization and artificial intelligence can render the production worker, the service worker, even the legal or architectural professional redundant, what of the work that is required to create a more just, fair, peaceful society? We have seen the role of ‘affective labour’ in the interstices of a decaying postindustrial capitalism in Lang’s recent research (Lang 2020), but what if this form of labour could become the new defining model of ‘work’ beyond capitalism? Any transition to a more socially just world would entail remedying the problems which beset the society of capitalist work. The psychological and cultural costs of generations of poverty and social dysfunction, crime and deprivation, inequalities in education, racial, gender and other forms of discrimination, poor healthcare, environmental degradation… For Rifkin, the ‘postmarket era is handing us an opportunity to rebuild communities, schools, public infrastructure, broken families, and displaced lives’ (Leicht 1998: 40). In short, fixing the damage done by the structural violence of capitalism may require a great deal of work, although in a scenario where work is as fulfilling as it is useful, there is no reason for it to resemble the alienated, heteronomous, often unnecessary activity that work represents for many at present. Of course, in a future round of debate over the end of work – and there will surely be many – the question of whether artificially intelligent robots are capable of this re-engineering of society may arise. But seen from the perspective of today, such a revolution is unlikely to be automated.

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