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To be a productive worker is not luck but misfortune

Katie Bales, Frederick Harry Pitts and Huw Thomas

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Is the society of work in crisis? It is certainly dogged by job insecurity and growing precariousness. Long past are the days of the late nineties and early noughties that saw, in the UK at least, New Labour contrive a response to this crisis via a bold appeal to the apparently fulfilling forms of work afforded by the creative economy. Two decades on, Blairite lost promise, double-dip recession and enveloping Tory perma-rule have put paid to any potential offered. Accordingly, the social democratic project of a socially mobile creative labour market has degraded into a pervasive gig economy of precarious self-employment, highlighted most recently in the government's contentious [Taylor Review](#).

After years spent outsourcing the future to financial dynamism, centre-left politics of work lapsed from a concern with better labour. It now searches instead for its escape by means of a utopian vision uniting new technology with basic income. The rhetoric of the fulfilling creative economy has now turned into that of a jobless digital economy. The irreducible human subject which formerly sat front-and-centre now sits idly by to superintend increasingly self-replicating automated processes that, we are told, wield the capacity to reduce human input to nil. At first sight, the two visions and politics of work proposed by Tony Blair and Jeremy Corbyn could not seem more contrary, yet each arise from the interstitial space between the Labour mainstream and its leftist margins – adopting a Marxisant analysis of contemporary social and economic changes which extrapolates a struggle-free and optimistic future of work from our present conditions.

At stake in these siren calls is not the relations or conditions under which we labour, but work itself. At one point during [Capital](#), Marx writes that 'to be a productive worker is not a piece of luck, but a misfortune'. For Marx, what is specific about capitalism are the social relations that undergird this productive activity and the commodified forms it subsequently takes in the market. Capitalism centres on structures of value and productiveness that impose themselves upon work and those who perform it and consequently grants work its exploitative character. This imposition upon human creative activity was, for Marx, what made being a productive worker such a misfortune.

Today, however, proselytisers for a post-work society revolt against Marx's misfortune by means of an assault on work *tout court*. The problem is perceived as that of work itself rather than that of being productive. In other words, having one's work organised in line with the rule of value. As such, rather than the criteria of productiveness that makes it miserable and uninspiring, work itself is jettisoned. But should we throw the baby out with the bathwater? In vistas of a post-work future, too often the capitalist logic to which work is subject is left untouched. What's left intact is the state of affairs utopian imaginaries purport to overturn. Meanwhile, any introspection on what work is, and can be, under a different state of affairs is dispensed with in favour of elaboration of opportunities for greater leisure.

‘More Arthur C. Clarke than Karl Marx,’ as Labour MP Jon Cruddas [puts it](#), adherents of the post-work prospectus are concerned with the movement from work to leisure. The basic income, for instance, rests on a logic of providing more space for those activities considered more valuable. This is a mentality exemplified, albeit worded through an auspiciously ‘anti-work’ standpoint, in [David Graeber](#)’s much-hyped theory of ‘bullshit jobs’. This says: not all jobs are bullshit, just some. In this developing body of post- and anti-work thought there is still some conception of time well spent accompanying the workless world but such conceptions bear a formal similarity to the criteria of productiveness to which work and leisure are already subject in the world as it stands.

Advocates of a post-work society implicitly or explicitly base their argument on the idea there is a better and more productive use of our time. However, this idea of ‘productiveness’ is completely internal to the logic of the very capitalist society they seek to escape. There is no other way to think about our time than the one we have to hand, and yet these advocates pose the better use of it as a decisive break with the present. This weakens the intended critique of the work society, falling into a valorisation of certain kinds of work that is not oppositional to capitalist society but engrained within its very structures.

There are arguments regarding new and better ways of organising work that do not rest on productivity or try to escape work on the basis of a vilification of unproductive ‘bullshit jobs’ and the celebration of creative labour. What is needed is something like what Angela McRobbie identifies in her book [Be Creative](#) as an ‘intergenerational’ politics of labour that looks back as well as forward, as a means to reflect on persistent conditions that make work both what it was and what it is. Situating concrete policy and practice in the social relations and social forms allows us to sift through what is worth saving and what is not from the legacy of labour and its alternatives. And, in new ‘New Times’ characterised as much by continuing precariousness as the potential of any incipient post-work society, it may help define new debates over what work should be like that go beyond fashionable optimisms past and present.

Part of the context for the centre-left response to these new ‘New Times’ has been the crisis of doubt afflicting the foundations of social democracy and organised labour. Indeed, this partly owes to the seemingly novel circumstances of precariousness in the new world of work. Therefore, maybe, rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water, what we require is all the reassurance of the old religion at a time where faith in it is at an all-time low. McRobbie suggests that reinstilling a concept of craft lifts labour from its ‘pedestal’ as heroically productive and creative, and brings it within the orbit of ‘ordinary jobs and occupations’ continuous with the same conditions of insecurity. This induces a pessimism that, by seeing limits to the ‘life-enhancing qualities’ of so-called creative work and ‘downgrading the spectacular aspirations’ attached to that work, supports the development of a politics of work different from that which is popular today. By making creativity ordinary, in precisely such a way as Marx conceived of creativity as an everyday part of a human essence, this cosmopolitan and humanistic ‘repoliticisation’ of work calls into question its position within a wider political economy of precariousness, as McRobbie points out.

By constructing a coalition around the shared human experience of work at its best and worst, the idea of ‘work for its own sake’ arises that dispassionately liberates us from both the persistence of, or escape from, work. ‘Seeds of a counter-capitalistic

ethos' consist in the clear-eyed notion of 'socially useful' activity in which, following [Richard Sennett](#), 'monotonous or mundane' work skirts the 'high expectations of 'careers'' and the equally high expectation of their escape. This mundane work of slow and careful craft is not an end in itself, positively or negatively, but rather merely a fixed point in time and space around which to harbour the 'creation and exchange of narratives' and a wider spirit of 'sociality and mutuality'. McRobbie suggests that the state in particular has a role in legislating towards the creation of this future.

There is one big state policy that purports to free people to explore new ways of organising work and leisure, and that is the basic income. But as [Anton Jager and Daniel Zamora](#) discuss in this issue, currently available visions of the basic income leave much to be desired. The Marxist-feminist scholar Kathi Weeks, whose modern-day classic [The Problem with Work](#) is covered here in contributions by [Claudia Strauss](#) and [Kendra Briken](#), suggests one possible perspective on the basic income that circumvents the 'productivist mandates' she identifies. Rather than a reward, recompense or redistributive measure based upon the creation of value, the basic income and the lifestyle of greater freedom that it engenders should be viewed as a *right*. Conceiving as 'payment for our participation in the production of value above and beyond what wages can measure and reward', may offer a politically expedient argument from a strategic perspective but serves to draw upon and reinforce 'productivist mandates' that gauge entitlement based on contribution. Against such 'productivist mandates', Weeks poses an alternative. Here, what is *supported* (rather than remunerated) is the better organisation of *life* instead of *work*. The principle of 'life' at the heart of this approach may include productive activity but, importantly, is not reducible to it.

Basing the provision of a basic income on the remuneration of some kind of productive activity establishes an ongoing conditionality that offers no break with the status quo. Weeks's presentation of the basic income as a right indicates a potential way out. In this sense, it is not up to the workers to responsibly contribute 'productively' to 'the community'. The channelling of activities into new forms of work resonates with the perspective of basic income as a 'directional demand' towards a new world in which the tasks of social reproduction can be more equally shared. But the model of a basic income as it appears in the hands of many of those proposing it today – like much of what passes as 'post-work' utopianism – has the potential to see these hopes die hard. Indeed, it may be with the proposal for a four-day week, made here by [Kate Bell](#) of the Trades Union Congress, that our aspirations for a better world of work are placed. This retains the link with the social and collective fabric of good work whilst arguably keeping open the time and space for the incubation of alternatives in, against and beyond it.

But where and in what kinds of institutions might we expect to find such alternatives incubated? According to [Martin Parker](#), interviewed in the latest *Futures of Work* podcast, what is required is the remodelling of business schools as 'schools for organising'. This points towards the need for new institutions to bring radical change into concrete reality. Replacing the inculcation of market managerialism with the organisation of alternatives, the School for Organising could someday form the backbone of a collective reimagination of work.