

Resolving the ‘jobs vs. environment dilemma’?

The ecological promise of a postwork society

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In the debates on social-ecological transformation, the role of work is a central subject of dispute. Usually, the discussion revolves around notions of ‘sustainable work’ (UNDP 2015), ‘green jobs’, and ecological improvements through digitised and automated labour, or, in more critical circles, work-time reduction and a guaranteed basic income (e.g., Antal 2014; Jackson & Victor 2011; Kallis et al. 2013). However, as work constitutes the central social relation of modern societies and is structurally linked to ecologically harmful production and consumption, it is crucial to discuss its role in a social-ecological future transformation more fundamentally.

In recent years, a new discourse under the term ‘postwork’ (Weeks 2011) has emerged in social science research and popular culture, inspired by a long tradition of marxist, anarchist, and feminist theory (Seyferth 2017; Weeks 2011). Postwork as a concept is based on a profound critique of wage labour and the centrality of abstract work (as gainful employment) in modern societies. One main argument put forward by postwork scholars is that wage labour as central social relation is not a natural given, but a social construction unique to industrial societies and their mode of production, very closely linked to the imperative of growth. Although technological change could allow for much shorter working hours, these productivity gains mostly result in unemployment, or are reabsorbed into economic growth via the creation of more work. In a society where abstract work serves as the main mechanism for the distribution of income and social inclusion (Frayne 2015), people are moreover often forced to accept inhumane working conditions or outright meaningless jobs, just to ‘earn a living’ (Graeber 2018). In fact, work is the “institution around which our most oppressive power structures” are built (Paulsen 2013); it is characterised by levels of unfreedom that would appear unacceptable if exercised in the political realm. However, it is not only economic necessity that urges people to work, but also a strong work ethic. In industrial culture, work is commonly conceived as an end in itself and a moral obligation, constituting an important source of social recognition and identity construction (Weber 2005[1920]; Frayne 2015). In this sense, postwork criticises the glorification of work and productivism as such, not only wage labour in its problematic societal functions.

Building on its radical critique of the work-centred society, the postwork discourse offers alternatives and imaginations of a variety of desirable futures without work. These political visions of a postwork society are based on ideals of autonomy, equality, human flourishing, and environmental sustainability; they promise economic democracy, emancipation and a richer, more varied life no longer subordinated to work. The most prominent political demands include an unconditional basic income, a fundamental reduction of paid work, as well as the according strengthening of social bonds beyond the wage relation, i.e. autonomous, non-commodified social organisation (Weeks 2011; Frayne 2015; Srnicek & Williams 2015).

Thus, the postwork debate offers a very promising perspective for social emancipation that is moreover conducive to environmental sustainability. Critical social science has always seen with concern the commodification of more and more areas of life, the biosphere and social relationships, just to respond to

structural pressures of growth and employment. In this context, it is important to note that ‘free’, unproductive time in which people neither produce nor consume commercial wealth is useless to growth (Gorz 1989). A radical shift away from work-centred societies is also in line with emancipatory thinking as it is in fact work that deprives citizens of autonomy, time, and skills to satisfy their needs otherwise than by means of resource-intensive consumption (paid for by money earned through employment fuelling the growth machine). Finally, to make the practices and imaginaries of work compatible with the necessary drastic reduction of resource throughputs and carbon emissions (in line with the Paris climate agreement), the postwork endeavour of radically questioning work, industry and productive attitudes offers a promising approach. There is, however, a strand in the postwork literature that might be in conflict with ecological concerns. Authors such as Srnicek and Williams (2015) envision a “world without work” in which essentially machines take over most human labour. This techno-optimistic approach fails to factor in the material and energetic inputs required for work based on full automation. Nevertheless, similar perspectives are regularly voiced in debates on the future of work, and therefore require critical attention.

In this contribution, we want to discuss the difficulties associated with modern-day work, and investigate potential ‘postwork’ alternatives. Drawing on a rich empirical and theoretical tradition of criticising work, we want to put our emphasis on ecological and emancipatory dimensions of ‘postwork’, raising questions such as:

- What could be gained if work were de-normalised, politicised and no longer taken as self-evident part of human nature?
- What kind of work is meaningful and to be enhanced, and what kind of work is (socially and ecologically) destructive and to be ended? How should working time be equitably reduced and shared?
- How could a different social organisation of work, production, and provision on more local and regional levels look like, according to principles of sustainability, commons and commoning (Helfrich & Bollier, 2015) and in line with substantial economic democracy (Johanisova & Wolf, 2012) that goes clearly beyond the usual narrow, firm-based conception?
- How could the de-commodification of the “fictitious commodity” labour (Polanyi, 2001) be accomplished, and what are the consequences (e.g., questioning labour markets as such, gaining and organising social control over the means and ends of work, production and time use, assessing production according to its value to society, not to the market, re-embedding economic activity in social life and ecological relationships, establishing new social relations and networks...)?
- How could trade unions play a helpful role here? And which support and infrastructure is needed from the state?
- From a feminist perspective, how could an orientation towards care and task-orientation beyond work help promoting genuine feminist demands?
- Which attitudes towards time, efficiency and laziness have dominated our work culture? What would we do if more time was liberated from work?

Overall we wish to debate new ways of overcoming the modern, clearly unsustainable and no longer desirable “work-and-consume” way of life in favour of the great variety of ways of organising societies and securing livelihoods that are possible and would enhance social-ecological sustainability.

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