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The coming shortage of work in the future, and the opportunity this provides for rethinking the nature of work

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Academics need to rethink the nature of work. In this piece I offer a preliminary contribution toward this rethinking.

To begin, journalists, policymakers and many academics have failed to consider the possibility that the future will bring fewer and fewer jobs, even when such a situation is glaringly evident in academia itself. The idea naturalized is that paid work will always be sufficiently available, an idea antecedent to the belief that work can and should be the main way that people worldwide are entitled to the basics of subsistence. The work-as-subsistence idea has at least a patina of Cold War attitudes to it, since the idea elides the possibility of providing people the basics of subsistence if they cannot find work, or if they refuse the drudgery that is available. Also overlooked is the notion that unpaid work, such as care for children or the elderly, should count as true work—as well as the undervaluing and underpaying of care work by paid workers (see Lane 2017). Above all, contemporary notions of work fail to sufficiently question the hierarchy of the contemporary workplace, where a person with money and/or power must decide to hire someone needing money, before we deem the latter's actions to be valuable, true "work." If someone engages in activity for which there is no pay, we call it a "hobby," even though their activity—say performances by an amateur musician—may be just as pleasing to an audience as those of a paid performer. Even worse, we give all power to the consumers' pleasures and overlook the performer's, the worker's, pleasure. This is a huge mistake. Why shouldn't the pleasure of the worker be important? By not considering the worker's intrinsic happiness from work, we unwittingly endorse the puritanical view that work must entail sacrifice for the worker, rather than pleasure, and we only deem the worker as worthy if s/he is suffering on the job.

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A broader view begins by considering the possibility that the world may encounter increased joblessness in the near future. With the unemployment rate pre-Covid so low, it is hard to imagine a future with high unemployment. But the unemployment rate cited by the government, U3, does not take into consideration those who are underemployed—for example, those working only part-time but who want or need full-time work. As more and more work is done by contractors on fixed-term contracts, with no benefits, the insufficiency of pay and the lack of guaranteed ongoing employment should be a major concern. The replacement of tenure-track and tenured faculty by fixed-term and adjunct professors could not be more obvious to those of us in academia. In fields such as anthropology, the adjunctification of the academy threatens our field and raises the possibility that most of our friends and students will not be employed as anthropologists in the near future. Given the severity of the problem in academia, where our classmates and colleagues are sometimes even facing problems of hunger (SEIU 2017), the silence about this problem by the media, and even by most full-time professors, seems baffling.

Professors also know how hard it can be for many of our students to secure reasonable work after graduating from college. Where I teach, many students graduate after four years of college only to become servers in restaurants, baristas at Starbucks, and the like. They have a job, but not necessarily one that is consonant with their training and desires. Once again, it is important to point out the failure to consider worker satisfaction, in this case whether our graduates really are happy as long-term baristas. When we neglect worker happiness, we naturalize the idea that the economy serves the happiness of the consumer only.

And then there is the unemployment caused by the increasing mechanization of so many jobs. Self-driving trucks could easily replace the millions of people working as truckers. This would continue an ongoing process by which machines have replaced much human labor, in agriculture and in industry. A study by Frey and Osborne suggests that 47% of current jobs in the US could be automated in the future (see Frey and Osborne 2017 and Osborne and Frey 2018.)

One common response to the above predictions is “More jobs will be created as others are eliminated, so automation is not a problem.” I find this response puzzling for multiple reasons. First, the goal of automation and of capitalism is to reduce costs, in this case labor costs. (Saying so does not prevent our critiques of capitalism, of course.) It certainly is possible that some automation is less efficient than work done with human labor, but it is highly unlikely such a situation would be tolerated by the owners of capital for too long. Automation is meant to replace human labor, and it is doing this. While many economists point out that automation has not historically led to widespread unemployment, Susskind (2020) argues that the automation upon us now is different because human workers will not easily move into other areas of

work, as they did in the past, when agricultural sector workers became factory workers. The automation today and in the near future is so widespread that it closes off alternative sectors into which humans can move when their current work is automated because those alternative employment sectors are automating too (see Susskind 2020, especially chapter seven).

Second, there is an assumption that more obligatory work is better than less work, even when automation replaces tedious and tiring work. Why are alternatives to this situation not considered, the obvious one being that if all work were automated, none of us would have to work? (See Srnicek and Williams 2016, chapter six for a discussion of the possibilities opened up by automation. The authors advocate post-work as a strategy to mobilize the left.) Again, Cold War attitudes interfere with thinking about “work” in a new way. Today if we lack paid work, we must struggle for the basics of subsistence. But if more of what we need and want is available despite less and less work being done by human laborers—which is a reality that became obvious to me as a child growing up in automating Detroit—then we need to think about distributing the goods produced to all humans even if they don’t have a “job.” Of course, there is another alternative, which is to let produced goods pile up while more people are deprived of the basics of subsistence, and of a reasonable living, something that definitely happens when factories “overproduce.” But this latter alternative, carried to extremes, leads to destitution among plenty, a clearly unacceptable situation.

Thinking of distributing the basics of subsistence to everyone leads us to consider re-configuring the nature of work itself. When society can produce most of what we need with very little labor, then having a job to earn money to buy what we need to subsist is no longer necessary. (Yes, some small number of hours of work will need to be done to produce our subsistence—food e.g. It seems to me the only fair way to do this would be to require a small amount of work from each person to produce the subsistence guarantee for everyone.) This makes work no longer obligatory, no longer coerced by subsistence needs. And if work is done not because we have to do it, but because want to do it, this is a major and desirable change in how we work and, in fact, how we can live. Work can and will become much more pleasurable when it is not obligatory. The aim of our creative endeavors will be the self-fulfillment and happiness of all of us, through work that we **choose** to do. The huge number of managers, whose job is to coerce work from their subordinates, can disappear.

I know there are those who will object to the emphasis on worker pleasure in my formulation. Some will see it as a negative in its purported hedonistic tendencies. I lack the room here to fully challenge these views. I direct the reader to my recent book, *Work, Love, and Learning in Utopia: Equality Reimagined*, for a full challenge to the various objections to the idea that work in the future can be pleasurable and freely chosen. It is also important to say that what I am describing here is both what can happen and also what will happen. The

coming future joblessness is not just the stuff of science fiction.

If the goal of work becomes pleasure, then thinking more robustly about the way that creation engenders pleasure becomes a necessary goal of the economy. Part of pleasure derives from changing work from an obligation—something we must do to survive—to the worker/creator's choice to create (or “work”). One of my own students put it well when she said she loves reading history books unless such reading is required by the teacher. Students all get my point when I assign them the task of going to the beach on a warm weekend: Required work, just like forced sex, is unpleasurable in part because of coercion itself, something we recognize with sex by deeming coerced sex to be rape but which we fail to recognize with coerced work.

Pleasure also derives from having our creations attended to, since such attention is a key component of the creative process. Anyone who has written a novel or composed a large composition will know how much more satisfying the process can be if there is someone to read or listen to one's work, and someone whose reaction to our work is as direct and immediate as possible—something we can witness face-to-face. Our image of the genius scientist, alone at work in a lab, makes it harder to recognize that the “hard sciences” require a good audience too. A good friend of mine and well-known biologist says that he needs others to hear him talk through his scientific ideas. I am sure this is true of most “work”: We do it better if there is an appreciative audience.

This means that society must produce more venues for the display of people's work and, above all, more encouragement for people to attend to each other's creations. How to do this requires, again, more space than is available to me here but to those skeptical about feasibility I would point out that an economy freed of tedious make-work, especially of the millions of hours of supervision of workers—such an economy will surely provide the time and resources for people to attend to each other's creations.

Implicit in the analysis above is the idea that more social scientists should not only describe what is, but what will be, and even more importantly describe what should be, based upon our research. I am aware of the many dangers of prescriptive writing and of the importance of objective research free of political or personal bias. But, at the same time, when prescription is left only to the economists, as is the case today, we are accepting a way of thinking that privileges the economists' ways of valuing the world—based on GDP, efficiency, and so on. To accept the economists' values with silence, and to be reluctant to carefully voice alternative values, is far more problematic, to my mind, than carefully wading into the waters of prescription. We know work will change. We should describe this change and the different choices it might present to society. Doing so can make a large contribution to the creation of more robust dialogue about how society can and should be fashioned.

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