

The Meaning of Work in a Sustainable Society

Fie upon this quiet life. I want work.

William Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part 1, Act 11, Scene IV

John Bellamy Foster

The nature and meaning of work, as it pertains to a future society, has deeply divided ecological, socialist, utopian, and Romantic thinkers since the Industrial Revolution.¹ Some radical theorists have seen a more just society as merely requiring the rationalisation of present-day work relations, accompanied by increased leisure time and more equitable distribution. Others have focused on the need to transcend the entire system of alienated labour and make the development of creative work relations the central element of a new revolutionary society. In what appears to be an effort to circumvent this enduring conflict, current visions of sustainable prosperity, while not denying the necessity of work, often push it into the background, placing their emphasis instead on an enormous expansion of leisure hours.² Increased non-work time seems an unalloyed good, and is easily imaginable in the context of a no-growth society. In contrast, the very question of work is fraught with inherent difficulties, since it goes to the roots of the current socioeconomic system, its division of labour, and its class relations. Yet it remains the case that no coherent ecological mapping of a sustainable future is conceivable without addressing the issue of homo faber, i.e., the creative, constructive, historical role in the transformation of nature, and hence the social relation to nature, that distinguishes humanity as a species.



¹ This essay is dedicated to Harry Magdoff, and was inspired by his article "[The Meaning of Work](#)," *Monthly Review* 34, no. 5 (October 1982): 1–15.

² For an important book on ecological-economic sustainability that nevertheless devotes only a small portion of its analysis to the subject of work, see Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth* (London:Earthscan, 2011).

Within late nineteenth-century socialist-utopian literatures, it is possible to distinguish two broad tendencies regarding the future of work, represented on one side by Edward Bellamy, author of *Looking Backward*, on the other by William Morris, author of *News from Nowhere*. Bellamy, standing for a view familiar to us today, saw enhanced mechanisation, together with comprehensive technocratic organisation, as the basis for increased leisure time, considered the ultimate good. In contrast, Morris, whose analysis derived from Charles Fourier, John Ruskin, and Karl Marx, emphasised the centrality of useful, enjoyable work, requiring the abolition of the capitalist division of labour. Today the mechanistic

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view of Bellamy more closely resembles popular conceptions of a sustainable economy, than does Morris's more radical outlook. Thus the notion of "liberation from work" as the foundation of sustainable prosperity has been strongly advanced in the writings of first-stage ecosocialist and degrowth thinkers like André Gorz and Serge Latouche.³

I contend here that the idea of near-total liberation from work, in its one-sidedness and incompleteness, is ultimately incompatible with a genuinely sustainable society. After first examining the hegemonic view of work in the history of

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Western thought, going back to the ancient Greeks, I turn to a consideration of the opposing ideas of Marx and Adam Smith. This leads to the issue of how socialist and utopian thinkers have themselves diverged on the question of work, focusing on the contrast between Bellamy and Morris. All of this points to the conclusion that the real potential for any future sustainable society rests not so much on its expansion of leisure time, but rather on its capacity to generate a new world of creative and collective work, controlled by the associated producers.

The Hegemonic Ideology of Work and Leisure

The narrative found today in every neoclassical economics textbook portrays work in purely negative terms, as a disutility or sacrifice. Sociologists and economists often present this as a transhistorical phenomenon, extending from the classical Greeks to the present. Thus Italian cultural theorist Adriano Tilgher famously declared in 1929: "To the Greeks work was a curse and nothing else," supporting his claim with quotations from Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Cicero, and other figures, together representing the aristocratic perspective in antiquity.⁴

With the rise of capitalism, work was seen as a necessary evil requiring coercion. Thus in 1776, at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* defined labour as a sacrifice, which required the expenditure of "toil and trouble...of our own body." The worker must "always lay down...his ease, his liberty, and his happiness."⁵ A few years earlier, in 1770, an anonymous treatise entitled an *Essay on Trade and Commerce* appeared, written by a figure (later thought to be J. Cunningham) whom Marx described as "the most fanatical representative of the

³ See André Gorz, *Paths to Paradise* (London: Pluto, 1985); Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009). First-stage ecosocialist thinkers like Gorz tried to combine Green analysis and socialist theory, with the former often preempting the latter. In contrast, second-stage ecosocialists or ecological Marxists have sought to build on the ecological foundations of classical historical materialism. On this distinction, see John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 1–11.

⁴ Adriano Tilgher, *Homo Faber* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 3–10; Aristotle, *The Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁵ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 30–33.

eighteenth-century bourgeoisie.” It advanced the proposition that to break the spirit of independence and idleness of English labourers, ideal “work-houses” should be established imprisoning the poor, turning these into “houses of terror, where they should work fourteen hours a day in such fashion that when meal time was deducted there should remain twelve hours of work full and complete.” Similar views were promoted in subsequent decades by Thomas Robert Malthus, leading to the New Poor Law of 1834.⁶

Neoclassical economic ideology today treats the question of work as a trade-off between leisure and labour, downplaying its own more general designation of work as a disutility in order to present it as a personal financial choice, and not the result of coercion.⁷ Yet it remains true, as German economist Steffen Rätzel observed in 2009, that at bottom “work,” in neoclassical theory, “is seen as a *bad* necessary to create income for consumption” (italics added).⁸

This conception of work, which derives much of its power from the alienation that characterises capitalist society, has of course been challenged again and again by radical thinkers. Such outlooks are neither universal nor eternal, nor is work to be regarded simply as a disutility—though the conditions of contemporary society tend to make it one, and thus necessitate coercion.⁹

Indeed, the myth that the ancient Greek thinkers in general were anti-work, representing a historical continuity with today’s dominant ideology, was refuted by the Marxian classicist and philosopher of science Benjamin Farrington in his 1947 study *Head and Hand in Ancient Greece*. Farrington showed that such views, though common enough among the aristocratic factions represented by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were opposed by the pre-Socratic philosophers, and contradicted by the larger historical context of Greek philosophy, science, and medicine, which had originated in traditions of hands-on craft knowledge. “The central illumination of the Milesians,” the fountainhead of Greek philosophy, Farrington wrote, “was the notion that the whole of the universe works in the same way as the little bits of it that are under man’s control.” Thus “every human technique” developed in the work process, such as those of cooks, potters, smiths, and farmers, was evaluated not simply in terms of its practical ends, but also for what it had to say about the nature of things. In Hellenistic times the Epicureans, and later Lucretius, carried forward this materialist view, theorising the realm of nature based on experience derived from human craft work. All of this is evidence of the enormous respect accorded work, and artisanal labour in particular.¹⁰

Materialists in antiquity thus built their ideas around an intimate knowledge of work and respect for the insights it gave into the world—in sharp contrast to the idealists, who, representing the aristocratic disdain for manual labour, promoted celestial myths and anti-work ideals. This vision could be seen in a statement attributed to Socrates by Xenophon:

What are called the mechanical arts carry a social stigma and are rightly dishonoured in our cities (Oec. 4.2). Nothing could be further from the worldview of the Greek materialists, who saw work as the embodiment of the organic, dialectical relations between nature and society.¹¹

⁶ Anonymous author quoted in Paul Lafargue, “The Right to Be Lazy” (1883), chapter 2, available at <http://marxists.org>; Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 685, 789, 897.

⁷ David A. Spencer, *The Political Economy of Work* (London: Routledge, 2009), 70.

⁸ Steffen Rätzel, “Revisiting the NeoClassical Theory of Labor Supply—Disutility of Labor, Working Hours, and Happiness,” Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg, Faculty of Economics and Management Paper No. 5, 2, <http://unimagdeburg.de>.

⁹ Rätzel, in the study cited above, demonstrates that even under current conditions, work is not simply a disutility but a basis for human happiness. It seems obvious that this would be even more the case in non-alienated work environments.

¹⁰ Benjamin Farrington, *Head and Hand in Ancient Greece* (London: Watts, 1947), 1–9, 28–29. See also Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Peasant-Citizen and Slave* (London: Verso, 1998), 134–45.

¹¹ See Foster and Burkett, *Marx and the Earth*, 65. The views of Greek society on work were deeply affected by the existence of slavery. However, this had a greater impact on the aristocracy, which was heavily dependent on slave labour, than the demos, with its bases in free citizens, consisting mainly of artisans and peasants. These class distinctions within the polis was reflected in the divisions between idealist and materialist views. See Ellen Meiksins Wood and Neal Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Smith's possessive-individualist conception of work, representing the later bourgeois view, was likewise sharply interrogated by socialist thinkers. Writing in 1857–58, Marx declared,

In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou labour! was Jehovah's curse on Adam. And this is labour for Smith, a curse. "Tranquility" appears as the adequate state, as identical with "freedom" and "happiness." It seems quite far from Smith's mind that the individual, "in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill, facility," also needs a normal portion of work, and of suspension of tranquility.... He is right, of course, that in its historic forms as slave-labour, serf-labour, and wage-labour, labour always appears as repulsive, always as external forced labour; and not-labour, by contrast, as "freedom, and happiness."... [In such social formations] labour...has not yet created the subjective and objective conditions for itself...in which labour becomes attractive work, the individual's self-realisation.... A. Smith, by the way, has only the slaves of capital in mind.¹²



Here Marx argued that Smith's idea of freedom as "not-labour," far from being an immutable truth, was the product of specific historical conditions, associated with exploited wage labour. "Labour becomes attractive work," for Marx, only under unalienated circumstances, when it is no longer a commodity. This requires new, higher forms of social production under the control of the associated producers. All of this has its roots of course in Marx's powerful early critique of alienated labour in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.¹³ For Marx, human beings were fundamentally corporeal beings. To remove humanity from its material, relations, by radically separating mental and manual labour was to guarantee human alienation.¹⁴

Socialist Utopianism: Bellamy and Morris

Yet if socialists could be expected to reject the hegemonic view of work relations associated with capitalism, the extent to which this translated into fundamentally different views of work relations from that of the status quo varied within socialist literature itself. While little read today, Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, published in 1888, was the most popular book of its time after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*, selling millions of copies and translated into more than twenty languages. Erich Fromm noted that in 1935, "three outstanding personalities, Charles Beard, John Dewey, and Edward Weeks," each separately ranked Bellamy's novel second only to Marx's *Capital* among the most influential books of the preceding half-century.¹⁵

¹² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), 611–12. Marx was here referring to the same passage from Smith quoted above.

¹³ Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1974), 322–34.

¹⁴ Joseph Fracchia, "Organisms and Objectifications: A Historical-Materialist Inquiry Into the 'Human and Animal'," *Monthly Review* 68, no. 10 (March 2017): 1–16.

¹⁵ Erich Fromm, "Introduction," in Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (New York: New American Library, 1960), v. The first volume of *Capital* was only translated into English in 1886 and so was treated as a work of the previous half-century.

Bellamy's utopian novel appeared in a period of rapid economic expansion, industrialisation, and concentration of capital in the United States. The protagonist, Julian West, wakes up in Boston in the year 2000 to discover a society entirely transformed along socialist lines.¹⁶ The trust-building tendencies of the Gilded Age had led to the creation of one giant monopolistic firm, which was then nationalised, bringing the economy under total control by the state. The result was a highly organised, egalitarian society. All individuals were required to join the army of workers at twenty-one, spend three years working as a common labourer, and then advance to some skilled occupation, with compulsory labour ending at age forty-five. Every citizen over the course of his or her life could expect to be turned into a man or woman of leisure. In Bellamy's view, work was still conceived as a pain not a pleasure, and the point was ultimately to transcend it.

Morris, then the principal force behind the London-based Socialist League, wrote a highly critical review of Bellamy's book, focusing on its descriptions of work and leisure. He followed this in 1890 with his own socialist utopian novel, *News from Nowhere*, which presented a sharply contrasting view of work in a higher society. Morris, in E. P. Thompson's words, "was a Communist Utopian, with the full force of the transformed Romantic tradition behind him."¹⁷ The principal influences on his understanding of the role of work in society were Fourier, Ruskin, and Marx, all of whom had criticised, albeit from sharply distinct political perspectives, the division of labour and the distorted, alienated work relations under capitalism. From Fourier, Morris took the idea that work could be so structured as to be enjoyable.¹⁸ From Ruskin, he adopted the idea that decorative arts and architecture of the late medieval era pointed to the different conditions in which artisans had then lived and worked, allowing them freely to channel their spontaneous thoughts, beliefs, and aesthetics into all that they made. As Thompson wrote, "Ruskin...was the first to declare that men's 'pleasure in their work by which they make their bread' lay at the very foundations of society, and to relate this to his whole criticism of the arts."¹⁹ From Marx, Morris took the historical-materialist critique of the exploitation of labour which lay at the root of the cash nexus of capitalist class society.



The primary goal of society should be the maximisation of pleasure in work, in the process of fulfilling genuine human needs. It was "the lack of this pleasure in daily work" under capitalism, Morris observed, "which has made our towns and habitations sordid and hideous insults to the beauty of the earth which they disfigure, and all the accessories of life mean, trivial, ugly."

The resulting synthesis led to Morris's famous proposition that "Art is man's expression of his joy in labour." Creative work, he argued, was essential to human beings, who must "either be making something or making believe to make it." Looking at the historical connection between art and labour in

¹⁶ Bellamy, *Looking Backward*; Magdoff, "The Meaning of Work," 1–2.

¹⁷ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 792. For an excellent study of Morris's conception of work see Phil Katz, *Thinking Hands: The Power of Labour in William Morris* (London: Heatherington, 2005).

¹⁸ William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 79; William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London: Sonnenschein, 1893), 215; Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 274–96.

¹⁹ Thompson, *William Morris*, 35–37; John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2 (New York: Collier, 1900), 163–65.

preindustrial times, Morris contended that “all men that have left any signs of their existence behind them have practiced art.” There was always a “definite sensuous pleasure” in labour insofar as it was art, and in art insofar as it was unalienated labour; and this pleasure increased “in proportion to the freedom and individuality of the work.” The primary goal of society should be the maximisation of pleasure in work, in the process of fulfilling genuine human needs. It was “the lack of this pleasure in daily work” under capitalism, Morris observed, “which has made our towns and habitations sordid and hideous insults to the beauty of the earth which they disfigure, and all the accessories of life mean, trivial, ugly.”²⁰

Morris decried the wasted labour devoted to turning out endless amounts of useless commodities, such as “barbed wire, 100 ton guns and advertising boards for the disfigurement of the green fields along the railways and so on.” He also criticised “adulterated wares” seeing these as nothing but the waste of human lives, and the accompanying pollution of the natural and social environment.²¹

Morris’s examples were well chosen. “Barbed wire” and “100 ton guns” were metonyms for British imperial warfare and weapons production. (Today the United States spends over a trillion dollars a year in actual—as opposed to acknowledged—military spending.)²² By “advertising boards” he meant the whole phenomenon of marketing. (Today more than a trillion dollars a year is spent on marketing in the United States.)²³ With his reference to “adulterated wares” he was underscoring the whole problem of adulteration of foods, or the development of additives primarily for sales and cost-cutting purposes, as well as the production of various shoddy goods, characterised by what is now called planned obsolescence. (Today the penetration of the sales effort into production affects almost all commodities.)²⁴

In Morris’s view, the production of socially non-reproductive and harmful goods was at the same time a waste of human labour.²⁵ He wrote: “But think, I beseech you, of the product of England, the workshop of the world, and will you not be bewildered, as I am, at the thought of the mass of things which no sane man could desire, but which our useless toil makes—and sells?”²⁶

In criticising such production for its waste, lack of aesthetic value, and labour alienation, Morris was not attacking machine production itself, but rather insisting that production should be organised in such a way that the human being was not reduced, as Marx had said, to an “appendage of a machine.” As Morris himself put it, the worker was degraded in industrial capitalist society to “not even a machine, but an average portion of that great and almost miraculous machine...the factory.”²⁷

²⁰ William Morris, *Collected Works*, vol. 23 (New York: Longmans, Green, 1910), 173; *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs* (London: Penguin, 1962), 140–43; *Signs of Change* (London: Longmans, Green, 1896), 119

²¹ May Morris, ed., *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 478–79; William Morris, *Signs of Change*, 17.

²² Mark Strauss, “[Ten Inventions that Inadvertently Transformed Warfare](#),” *Smithsonian*, September 18, 2010, <http://smithsonianmag.com>; John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Robert W. McChesney, “[The U.S. Imperial Triangle and Military Spending](#),” *Monthly Review* 60, no. 5 (October 2008): 1–19.

²³ Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, [What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 46–53.

²⁴ On Marx’s analysis of food adulteration in nineteenth-century England, which undoubtedly influenced Morris, see John Bellamy Foster, “[Marx as a Food Theorist](#),” *Monthly Review* 68, no. 7 (December 2016): 2–8.

²⁵ The critique of economic and ecological waste and its theorisation in terms of the social reproduction have long been central to Marxian political economy, including concepts of specifically capitalist use value and negative use value. See for example Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, [Monopoly Capital](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966); Michael Kidron, *Capitalism and Theory* (London: Pluto, 1974); John Bellamy Foster, “[The Ecology of Marxian Political Economy](#),” *Monthly Review* 63, no. 4 (September 2011): 1–16. These analyses frame waste not in ethical but rather in economic and ecological terms, as criteria of social reproduction. A nuclear weapon, for example, is a dead end, with no direct contribution to social reproduction.

²⁶ Morris, *Signs of Change*, 148–49.

²⁷ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 799; William Morris, “Art and its Producers,” in *Art and its Producers and The Arts and Crafts Today* (London: Longmans, 1901), 9–10.

work has become “employment,” that is, merely the opportunity of earning a livelihood at the will of someone else. Whatever interest still clings to the production of wares under this system has wholly left the ordinary workman, and attaches only to the organisers of his labour; and that interest commonly has little do with the production of wares, as things to be handled, looked at...used, in short, but simply as counters in the great game of the world market.²⁸

For Morris, Bellamy’s vision was “the unmixed modern one, unhistoric and unartistic.” It presented the ideal of the “middle-class professional,” which, in the utopian Boston of *Looking Backward*, became available to everyone after a few years of ordinary labour. “The impression which he [Bellamy] produces is that of a huge standing army, tightly drilled, compelled by some mysterious fate to unceasing anxiety for the production of wares to satisfy every caprice, however wasteful and absurd, that may cast up among them.”

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In sharp contrast, Morris declared that “the ideal of the future does not point to the lessening of man’s energy by the reduction of labour to a minimum, but rather the reduction of pain in labour to a minimum, so small that it will cease to be pain.” There was no barrier to labour being creative and artistic, provided that production was not determined by a narrow concept of productivity geared to capitalist profits. Bellamy’s utopia, with its deadening “economical semi-fatalism” was concerned “unnecessarily” with finding “some incentive to labour to replace the fear of starvation, which is at present our only one, whereas it cannot be too often repeated that the true incentive to useful and happy labour must be pleasure in the work itself.”²⁹



News from Nowhere presented Morris’s own utopian vision. A man named William—called William Guest by those he meets—awakes from a dream (though it is left intentionally ambiguous whether he is still dreaming throughout) to find himself in London in the early twenty-second century, around a century and half after a revolutionary outbreak in the 1950s that led to the creation of a communal socialist society.³⁰ In the utopia of Nowhere, technology is used to reduce tedious labour, but not to decenter work in general. Production is instead aimed at genuine needs and artistic production. New, less destructive forms of energy exist, and pollution has been eradicated. Workers, following the Great Change, remained tied at first to the mechanistic view of work, but eventually, “under the guise of pleasure that was not supposed to be work, work that was pleasure

²⁸ Morris, “Art and its Producers,” 9–10. The ellipses are Morris’s own, meant to indicate a pause

²⁹ William Morris, *Political Writings* (Bristol: Thoemmes 1994), 419–25.

³⁰ The dates provided in the text leave matters somewhat uncertain. Morris changed some of the dates in the serialised version in *Commonweal*, pushing events further into the future. For example, the bridge, mentioned in chapter 2, is said to have been built in 1971 in the *Commonweal* version, while in the book it dates to 2003. Following here the dates in the 1891 edition, the Great Change occurs during the early 1950s. The civil war begins in 1952, and appears to be over by the time of the “clearing of houses” in 1955. William Guest is informed early in the text that the bridge built in 2003 was “not very old” by historical standards. Hammond later refers to the new epoch as having lasted for around 150 years, which would presumably place it in the early 2100s. A more oblique reference to “two hundred years ago” would seem to have refer to the time since the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth century. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 8, 14, 46, 69, 94, 184.

began to push out the mechanical toil.... Machines could not produce works of art, and...works of art were more and more called for." Art and science were shown to be "inexhaustible," as were the possibilities of human creativity through meaningful work, thereby displacing the earlier capitalist production of "a vast quantity of useless things."³¹

Today Morris's vision will no doubt strike some as a quaint and moralising "artistic critique" of capitalism. Thinkers like Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello see the defeat of such a critique, represented by figures as various as Morris and Charles Baudelaire, as one of the main results of late-twentieth-century post-Fordist flexibility and innovation. The "new spirit of capitalism," they argue, entails pervasive integration of artistic forms into capitalist production.

The weakness of Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis lies precisely in its conflation of surface appearances with the root character of the system. They thus fall prey to commodity fetishism in its newest, most fashionable forms, failing to recognise the full extent to which the "artistic critique" and the "social critique" are inextricably connected and insurmountable within the capitalist system. After the 2008–09 crisis of global capitalism, the classical social and artistic critiques of alienation and exploitation represented by Marx and Morris seem more relevant than ever.³²

A particular strength of Morris's vision of labour in *News from Nowhere* lies in his depiction of relative gender equality in the workplace. In a chapter entitled "The Obstinate Refusers," which provides the only instance of a master craftsman actually at work in Morris's utopian romance, that position is occupied by a woman, Mistress Philippa, a stone carver or mason. Although the foreman is male, it is Philippa who determines when and in what form the work takes place. Her daughter is also a stone carver, while a young man serves the meal. Work in the society of *Nowhere* is thus no longer strictly gendered (though Morris built contradictions into his analysis in this respect, depicting a world still in the process of change).³³

Like Marx, Morris united his analysis of the possibility of creative, unalienated labour with ecological issues, recognising that the degradation of human work relations and of nature were inseparably connected. For Marx, the ownership of the land was akin to and just as irrational as the ownership of human beings, leading to the enslavement and exploitation of both. Likewise, for Morris, in capitalist society—as Clara voices it in *News from Nowhere*—people sought "to make 'nature' their slave, since they thought 'nature' was something outside them."³⁴ Morris argued already in his day that coal production should be halved, both because of the human-wasting and health-destroying labour it required, and the massive pollution it generated. A more rational society, he argued, could allow for deep cuts in coal production while going further in fulfilling human needs, allowing for new realms of human advancement.³⁵

³¹ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 40, 78–85, 140, 153–55.

³² Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005), 38, 466–67, 535–36. On the historical contradictions of Fordist and post-Fordist thought, see John Bellamy Foster, "The Fetish of Fordism," *Monthly Review* 39, no. 10 (March 1988), 1–13.

³³ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 148–51. Morris's feminist intent here is evident in the name Philippa, a clear tribute to his contemporary Philippa Fawcett, an extremely gifted mathematician and advocate for women's equality, whom Morris much admired. William Morris, *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1895–96* (Reading, UK: Spire, 2005), 93–95. As a complex mimetic work of art, Morris's utopian romance depicts a society that has undergone a great change and is still changing—a mimesis that reflects not only on the prehistory of capitalism but also the past, present, and future potential of *Nowhere*. This is clearest in Morris's treatment of gender.

³⁴ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 154; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 911.

³⁵ See Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 59; John Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (London: Longmans, Green, 1921), 76, 81–82.

The Critique of the Division of Labour

Marx and Morris both argued that the repulsion toward work in bourgeois society was a product of the alienated organisation of labour, a view that combined the aesthetic and political-economic critiques of capitalism. From the earliest human civilisations, and even before, divisions of labour had developed between the genders, between town and country, and between mental and manual labour. Capitalism had extended and deepened this unequal division, giving it an even more alienated form by divorcing workers from the means of production and imposing a rigidly hierarchical labour regime that not only divided workers in the tasks they performed, but also fragmented the individual. This detailed division of labour was the basis of the whole class order of capital. Hence, overthrowing the regime of capital meant first and foremost transcending the estrangement of work, and creating a deeply egalitarian society based on the collective organisation of labour by the associated producers.

The critique of the division of labour under capitalism was not a minor element for Morris, any more than it was for Marx. In a free translation from the French edition of Marx's *Capital*, Morris wrote: "It is not only the labour that is divided, subdivided, and portioned out betwixt divers men: it is the man himself who is cut up, and metamorphosed into the automatic spring of an exclusive operation.' Karl Marx."³⁶ Morris, who complained of the "degradation of the operative into a machine," saw this as the essence of the socialist (and Romantic) critique of the capitalist labour process.³⁷

These issues were brought to the fore once again in the late twentieth century in Harry Braverman's 1974 *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Braverman documented how the rise of scientific management under monopoly capitalism, as exhibited in the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*, had made the formal subsumption of labour to capital into a real material process.³⁸ The centralisation of knowledge and control of the labour process within management allowed for an enormous extension of the detailed division of labour, and thus enhanced profits for capital. What Braverman called the general "degradation of work under monopoly capitalism" captured the material basis of the growing alienation and deskilling of working life for the vast majority of the population.

Nevertheless, the evolution of technology and human capacities pointed toward new revolutionary possibilities that were more in tune with Marx than Smith. As Braverman wrote:

Modern technology in fact has a powerful tendency to break down ancient divisions of labour by re-unifying production processes.... The re-unified process in which the execution of all the steps [for example, in Smith's pin-making case] is built into the working mechanism of a single machine would seem now to render it suitable for a collective of associated producers, none of whom need spend all of their lives at any single function and all of whom can participate in the engineering, design, improvement, repair, and operation of these ever more productive machines. Such a system would entail no loss of production, and it would represent the re-unification of the craft in a body of workers far superior to the old craft workers. Workers can now become masters of the technology of their process on an engineering level and can apportion

³⁶ Thompson, William Morris, 37–38; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 481.

³⁷ Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2, 163; Thompson, William Morris, 37–38.

³⁸ Harry Braverman, [Labor and Monopoly Capital](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

*among themselves in an equitable way the various tasks connected with this form of production that has become so effortless and automatic.*³⁹

For Braverman, therefore, the development of technology and human knowledge and capacities, together with automation, allowed for a fuller, more creative relation to the work process in the future, breaking with the extreme detailed division of labour that characterised a capitalist system geared only to profitability. New openings existed for non-alienated work and artistry on the job, reclaiming at a higher level what had been lost with the demise of the craft worker. But this required radical social change.

A key aspect of Braverman's argument was criticism of Marxism itself, in the form it had developed in the Soviet Union, where degraded work environments similar to those of capitalism had arisen, but without the coercion of unemployment, resulting in chronic problems of productivity. V. I. Lenin, he pointed out, had advocated the adoption of aspects of Taylor's scientific management in Soviet industry, claiming that it combined "the refined brutality of bourgeois exploitation and a number of the greatest scientific achievements in the field." Subsequent Soviet planners disregarded the more critical elements of Lenin's argument and implemented unmodified Taylorism, in a direct mirroring of the crudest methods of capitalist labour management.

In the USSR and on the left in general, Marx's (and Morris's) critique of the capitalist labour process was thus largely forgotten, and the horizon of progress reduced to relatively minor improvements in work conditions, some degree of "workers' control," and centralised planning. "The similarity of Soviet and traditional capitalist practice," Braverman wrote, "strongly encourages the conclusion that there is no other way in which modern industry can be organised"—a conclusion, however, that went against the real potential for the development of human capacities and needs embedded in modern technology.⁴⁰ Alienation and the degradation of work were not inherent in modern work relations, but were enforced by priorities of profit and growth that had been partly replicated in the Soviet Union, undermining the original liberatory promise of Soviet society.

Visions of a post-capitalist future that pivot on the expansion of leisure time and general prosperity, without addressing the need for meaningful work, are bound to fail.

A World of Creative Work

The foregoing suggests that the essence of a future sustainable socialist society must be located in the labour process—in Marx's terms, the metabolism of society and nature. Visions of a post-capitalist future that pivot on the expansion of leisure time and general prosperity, without addressing the need for meaningful work, are bound to fail.

Yet today most depictions of a future sustainable society take work and production as economically and technologically determined, or as simply displaced by automation, and focus instead on maximising leisure as society's highest aim, often coupled with basic income guarantees.⁴¹ This can be seen in the works of theorists such as Latouche and Gorz. The

³⁹ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 320.

⁴⁰ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 8–11. Beginning in the 1930s, human relations psychology was introduced into management, ostensibly to make labour more pleasurable and less alienating, though this did not involve a fundamental shift away from the objective degradation of work itself. Braverman addresses this in a chapter titled "The Habituation of the Worker to the Capitalist Mode of Production."

⁴¹ Many progressive visions of the future substitute a kind of technological determinism for human agency. See for example the arguments in Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism* (London: Penguin, 2015).

former defines “degrowth,” of which he is a principal proponent, as a social formation “beyond the work-based society.” Dismissing left arguments for the development of a society in which work takes on a more creative role as “pro-work propaganda,” Latouche instead argues for a society in which “leisure and play are as highly valued as work.”⁴²

Gorz’s early ecosocialist analysis adopts a similar stance. In his 1983 *Paths to Paradise*, subtitled *On the Liberation from Work*, he returns to Aristotle’s aristocratic notion that life is most rewarding outside the mundane realm of labour. Gorz envisions a vast reduction in working time—“the end of the society of work”—with employees working only a thousand hours annually over the course of twenty years of employment. Gorz’s idea of the reduction of formal work, made inevitable in a future society, is in effect that of a society in which everyone is petty bourgeois—a gift of the “micro-electronic revolution” and automation.

Standard work relations, as conceived in *Paths to Paradise*, would be dominated by automation, and the resulting reduction in working hours would allow the most enjoyable, professional jobs to be shared out among more people. Yet

the kinds of total automation and robotisation now projected for advanced capitalist society, which are frequently treated as representing inevitable, teleological tendencies—prompting discussions of “a world without work”—do not sit well with a conception of a steady-state economy and society, where human beings would be neither appendages to machines nor their servants.

all of this takes second place to the promise of a vast increase in free time, enabling individuals to engage in all sorts of autonomous activities, portrayed as individual leisure pursuits and home-based production and not in terms of associated labour. The normal capitalist workplace is left essentially to Taylorist scientific management, while the more complex questions surrounding automation and the degradation of work are scarcely examined. Freedom is seen as not-work in the form of pure leisure, or as home-based or informal production. The alternative socialist view,

which centres on the transformation of work itself in a future society, is flatly dismissed as a dogma of “the disciples of the religion of work.”⁴³

Yet the kinds of total automation and robotisation now projected for advanced capitalist society, which are frequently treated as representing inevitable, teleological tendencies—prompting discussions of “a world without work”—do not sit well with a conception of a steady-state economy and society, where human beings would be neither appendages to machines nor their servants.⁴⁴ Nor is today’s dominant fatalism sufficiently grounded in a critique of contemporary capitalist contradictions. In today’s political economy, it can be argued, productivity is not too low but too high. Mere quantitative development—measured in output or GDP growth—is therefore no longer the key challenge in meeting social needs. In a more rational society based on abundance, as Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols argue in *People Get Ready*, the qualitative aspects of working conditions would be emphasised.⁴⁵ Work relations would be seen as a basis of equality and sociability, rather than inequality and asociality. Repetitive, deskilled jobs would be replaced by forms of active employment that emphasise all-around human development. The joint stock of knowledge of society

⁴² Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*, 81–88.

⁴³ Gorz, *Paths to Paradise*, 29–40, 53, 67, 117; Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 561–65. It might be argued that Gorz’s analysis of work in his later *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* is more nuanced. But in his later work Gorz adopts the notion that the classical conception of work is one of “pain, annoyance and fatigue,” and that the notion of work as part of the creative process was a nineteenth-century invention of the workers’ movement. He states: “The ideology of work, which argues that ‘work is life’ and demands that it be taken seriously and treated as a vocation, and the attendant utopia of a society ruled by the associated producers [Marx’s conception], play right into the hands of the employers, consolidate capitalist relations of production and domination, and legitimate the privileges of a work elite.” *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* (London: Verso, 1994), 53, 56.

⁴⁴ Derek Thompson, “[A World Without Work](#),” *Atlantic*, July–August 2015.

⁴⁵ Robert W. McChesney, and John Nichols, *People Get Ready* (New York: Nation, 2016), 96–114.

that constitutes technology would be used for the promotion of sustainable social progress, rather than for the profits and accumulation of a very few.

Not only do human beings need creative labour in their roles as individuals, they also need it in their social roles, since work is constitutive of society itself. A world in which most people are removed from work activities, as pictured in Kurt Vonnegut's futuristic novel *Player Piano*, would be little more than a dystopia.⁴⁶ The wholesale cessation of labour, as represented in many post-work schemes, could only lead to a kind of absolute alienation: the estrangement from the core of "life activity," which requires that human beings be transformative agents interacting with nature. To abolish work would constitute a break with objective existence in its most meaningful, active, and creative form—a break with human species-being itself.⁴⁷

The failure in some visions of a sustainable prosperity to confront the full potential of freely associated human labour

In a prospective socialist society characterised by sustainable prosperity that recognises material limits as its essential principle, it is crucial to envision entirely new socially and ecologically reproductive work relations.

only serves to undermine the often courageous critiques of economic growth that characterise today's radical ecological visions. The unfortunate consequence is that many of the arguments for a prosperous no-growth society have more in common with Bellamy than with Morris (or Marx), since they focus almost exclusively on the expansion of leisure as not-work, while downplaying humanity's productive

and creative possibilities. In truth, it is impossible to imagine a viable future that does not focus on the metamorphosis of work itself. For Morris, as we have seen, art and science were the two "inexhaustible" realms of human creativity that all people could participate in actively within the context of associated human labour.

In a prospective socialist society characterised by sustainable prosperity that recognises material limits as its essential principle—in accord with Epicurus's notion that "wealth, if limits are not set for it, is great poverty"—it is crucial to envision entirely new socially and ecologically reproductive work relations.⁴⁸ The received notion that the maximisation of leisure, luxury, and consumption is the primary goal of human progress, and that people will refuse to produce if not subject to coercion and driven by greed, loses much of its force in light of the deepening contradictions of our over-productive, over-consumptive society. The prevailing view goes against what we know anthropologically with respect to many pre-capitalist cultures, and falls short of a realistic conception of variable human nature, one that takes into account the historical evolution of human beings as social animals. The motivation to create and to contribute in one's life to the social reproduction of humanity as a whole, coupled with the higher norms enforced by collective labour, provide powerful stimuli for continuing free human development. The universal crisis that marks our time necessitates an epoch of uncompromising revolutionary change; one aimed at harnessing human energy for creative and socially productive work within a world of ecological sustainability and substantive equality. In the end, there is no other way in which to conceive a truly sustainable prosperity.

⁴⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Player Piano* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).

⁴⁷ Marx, *Early Writings*, 327–29.

⁴⁸ Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, eds., *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 37.

Useful links:

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- [Basic Income as a fundamental Human Right in the People and Planet paradigm](#)
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❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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