Does work have a future? The need for new meanings and new valuings of work

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Abstract

This introduction to the special section "Does Work Have a Future?" begins by reviewing the main ways work stands at the crossroads today. We identify three core disputes with the potential to disrupt the future of work but which also harbor resources for affirmative futures of work: the precariousness of work and lives under existing economic arrangements; the emergence of care work as a source of social and environmental value; and technological change. We then consider the demands for new meanings and new valuings that the manifold disputed status of work formulates. Finally, we highlight the contributions the four pieces making up this special section give to that momentous question of whether work has a future.

Keywords

Debates about the future of work have reached something of a crescendo over recent years (Breen and Deranty, 2021). Whether it be increased employment precariousness, technological automation, wage stagnation or attacks on organized labor, there is a consensus that we are at a particular

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moment in history where the way human labor is conducted and organized is changing. This sense of impending tectonic shifts in social and economic organization became even more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic, which laid bare and exacerbated critical vulnerabilities in individual societies and across the globe. Even though the health emergency is now officially over, the fragility of lifeworlds and their economic backbones continue to show. At the heart of these structural vulnerabilities stands the disputed status of work.

The place work has in our lives is contentious due to tensions between the unavoidable necessity to work and our desire for freedom from burdensome, tedious or dangerous work. We hope that, even if we cannot be released from the social and economic compulsion to work, work can become more expressive of our humanity. However, many think that the pathologies of modern work are just too significant and too many for the hope of redemption through work to be maintained, that it is time to move to a "post-work" model of social organization (Cohen, 2019; Frayne, 2015; Weeks, 2011), enabled by machines which, by increasing productivity sufficient to provide a citizen's income or individual source of capital would, at last, deliver the leisure for all that some socialists dreamed of (Bastani, 2018, Lafargue (2012 [1883]), and Veal (2018)). That said, even as late capitalism renders paid employment both necessary and insecure, there is a long history of seeing work as an intrinsically human need (Marx, 2000), one that is connected to all kinds of "goods" (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016): autonomy (Breen et al., 2019; Roessler, 2012; Schwartz, 1982), knowledge and competence, personal identity, collective pride, community, and, ultimately, a meaningful life (Veltman, 2016; Yeoman, 2014; 2020). This steadfast valuing of the importance of work transpires alongside the often whimsical fantasies that yield confident predictions about how work is changing intrinsically. Is a future without work, then, something we should pursue actively, as post-work theorists engage us to do? Or are there underappreciated dangers in a society of idle hands? Would we forsake too much in abandoning work? We propose that public debate around these and other provocative questions can yield a diversity of affirmative futures of work, potential prefigurations of work (Schiller-Merkens, 2022), rooted in ethically viable and environmentally sustainable human action.

In this introduction to a special section answering the question "Does Work Have a Future?," we begin by reviewing the main ways work stands at the crossroads. We then consider the demands for new meanings and new valuings that the manifold disputed status of work formulates. Finally, we highlight the contributions the four pieces making up this special section give to that momentous question of whether work has a future.

Work at the crossroads: The disputed status of work

What work means to us and what activities we recognize as work (and therefore will pay for via employment or public support) is culturally and historically fluid. Marginalized work, such as care work and provisioning work, has come into public view and despite continuing to be precarious and poorly paid, has acquired status and meaning. Economic systems throw up novel forms of work, such as "shadow work," or the labors we perform that were once undertaken by companies and public services, which then become subject to scholarly debate, and eventually public scrutiny (Lambert, 2016). Work that fails tests of fairness and justice by not providing each person with the means to live a decent and meaningful life becomes the target of opposition movements and proposals for social reform. We identify three core disputes with the potential to disrupt the future of work but which also have lively resources for co-creating affirmative futures of work: firstly, the precariousness of work and lives under existing economic arrangements, secondly, the emergence of care work as a source of social and environmental value, and thirdly, technological change that may shut down whole realms of work but also generate powerful new competencies rooted in human-machine interactions.

During the brutal shutdown of entire sectors of the economy during the covid crisis, the public spotlight fell upon the work necessary to sustain our health and well-being. This illuminated the disconnection between the right of every citizen to decent living standards and the demands of the current economic system, in which income and livelihood is dependent on employment for most. In many countries in the West, governments were suddenly prepared to extend financial support to populations they had hitherto condemned to below subsistence levels of social security payments and the demeaning strictures of workfare schemes. This has highlighted the extent of precariousness, both financial and in working conditions, that large sectors of the working population were already under (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018; Standing, 2011), especially in countries where workers are not covered by social security protections. As those programs were rolled back, precariousness followed suit again. With risks accumulating from technological shifts, climate heating and new pandemics, those burdened with precarious work and in countries with no welfare safety nets lack resilience and the ability to adapt to change. The equity of current labor markets and the distribution of wealth tracks the political and ethical status of work: how come work continues to be the privileged vector of social integration, and yet increasingly the wages it brings and the conditions in which it is performed do not procure financial and existential security? *How far* can this contradiction be stretched?

The pandemic also made us acutely aware that the most important work for humanity is not done by the high-flying entrepreneur or the cashed-up CEO. Rather, the people who ultra-modern societies rely on are those who give the human labor of caring, healing, educating, providing services and transport. Today, the crisis of care that predated the pandemic and upon which the pandemic shone a dramatic light is even more acute. Thus, whilst the pandemic crisis accelerated suspicion toward the centrality of work as a preeminent form of social integration, it highlighted equally that socially useful labor is more necessary than ever, even as inequality everywhere fails to reward it appropriately (Mezzadri, 2022; Tridico, 2017) and it continues to harbor structural gender inequalities (Cataldi and Tomatis, 2022). The second flashpoint around work, then, is about the work of social reproduction: given how central it is to individual and collective well-being, *how come* it is so poorly organized and rewarded?

A third dispute about the status of work in our present concerns the fundamental empirical possibility of it having a future at all or not. Technological change is central to this disquiet, as increasingly complex and efficient machines, robots, automated analytics and forms of artificial intelligence become able to perform tasks once the unique domain of humans. Headlines herald the "end of work" as we know it, as dastardly robots appear ready to displace and replace human workers, and "intelligent" algorithms appear able to mimic the symbolic abilities of even the most articulate and skillful humans. Existential anxieties that the future belongs to the machines feed into dystopian visions of the honest working person stripped of any agency over their own fate. Countering this narrative are studies examining the expressive potential of human-machine learning for enhanced human capabilities (Bakhshi et al., 2018), which suggest that future work will require people to have the social skills for co-creating culture and meanings to steer complex coordination. While contemporary responses to changes to work might seem unique to our position in history, what is happening is far from unprecedented. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, stories of machines and other technologies rendering human labor redundant have returned at regular intervals (see, e.g. Gorz, 1985; Keynes, 2010 [1930]; Marx, 1973 [1857]; Morris, 1993 [1890]; Paus, 2018; Srnicek and Williams, 2015; Rifkin, 1995; Wiener, 1988 [1950]). Even though industrial shifts have often been painful to generations of workers (Frey and Osborne, 2013), human labor has never been rendered a thing of the past. Sober analyzes question this alleged inevitability (Arntz et al., 2016; Fleming, 2019; Fleming et al., 2019) while warning us of how artificial intelligence and technological changes risk

heightened unemployment and wealth inequality (Makridakis, 2017). The question is then: what is the evidence *so far* for mass job displacement? Are the new algorithms really *that* clever, can they really fulfill *all* of human needs? Does human work, all human work, really have no future?

The need for new meanings and valuings of work

Framing all the anxieties just discussed are the tensions between economic globalization/deglobalization (geopolitical shifts prompting the turn to autarky), growth/degrowth (sustainability adaptations may not be enough in the face of ecological tipping points), and rising inequalities/cost of living leaving already poorly positioned people and economies behind. The crisis of care and the environmental crisis, the crisis in social reproduction, suggest that at least much human work will remain necessary for a long time. Yet all this work of care (care of humans and non-human beings, including the environment) does not fit with mainstream economic thinking and established economic organizations. There is urgency in canvassing new ways of defining what counts as economic contribution, efficiency and social usefulness.

The causes of despair are not inevitable and more affirmative possibilities remain possible and are in fact actively pursued. We need to pose questions for public debate on diverse work futures, subjecting these to evaluation, and resisting both working and non-working futures that make us party to our disempowerment. As Keat (2009) argues, a neglected but critical question for any political community is not "who we are and who do we want to be?" but "what kinds of lives can be lived in our society and are there better possibilities?"

As suggested already, realistic and valuable possibilities emerge out of a much longer history that has valued work as a uniquely human capacity central to the possibility of life's meaning (Cockshott, 2020). Similarly, maintaining decent living conditions in the face of accelerating environmental degradation will demand new imaginaries of work and its place in social organization. Life in the Anthropocene requires new visions of the activities and values of maintenance, care and reproduction that can sustain individuals and communities (Fraser, 2016). A positive imagining of the future of work can invigorate aspirations to repair, rehabilitate, and heal experiences of alienation in our present relationship with work. Positive technologically-driven future of work narratives are hopeful that a synthesis of human-machine capabilities will enable human beings to experience more freedom, autonomy and dignity in their work and that long-held aspirations of meaningful work for all can be realized.

Discussing the future of work need not be a matter of fatalistic descriptions of possible futures. Signification questions emerge not just about what the future will be, but what futures are desired. What do we value? What meaning will be attached to the future(s) of work? What range of lives will be shaped by work futures in the new sustainable economies we must create if humanity is to survive and flourish? These questions call for the need to articulate the economic values upon which future(s) of work will emerge and shape real-world work design. Frege and Godard (2014) argue that economic regimes should be organized to achieve desirable civic principles in work, such as dignity and justice, and that this establishes not only the quality of work but also the "quality of a society" (p. 943). Future ecological societies may draw upon care ethics and earth stewardship in the design of work and the meaning content of work (Yeoman, 2023). Such aspirations for the purpose of work connect to concerns for democratic futures that are resilient when confronted with authoritarian threats (Rhodes, 2021). In his recent Walter-Benjamin Lectures, Honneth (2023) argues that the value of work lies in its contribution to democratic will formation. In other words whether we can co-create affirmative futures of work is tied to the future of democracy as a way of life.

Does work have a future? Four answers

The four papers each respond to the question "Does Work have a Future?," by articulating, each in its own way, a creative rendering of the possible meanings of the future of work. We make no claim that this collection of papers is either comprehensive or definitive; indeed, it would be neither desirable nor possible for it to be either. As the guest editors of this special section, it is instead our hope that these papers might provoke an expansion of the possibilities of how we might think about the future of work. Drawing on varied disciplinary and intellectual possibilities, the papers examine some specific dimensions of work and its future, teasing out both its affirmative and dystopian horizons. By our reading, the result falls short of both the fleeting joy of naïve optimism and the cold comfort of paralyzing pessimism.

The first paper is Konstantin Hondros's, Benjamin Schiemer, and Lukas Vogelgsang's "Beyond personal safe spaces: Creating and maintaining collective environments for meaning and identity on digital platforms." The authors use the paper to identify the role of worker agency in the making of meanings underpinning work futures. Using an autoethnographic methodology, they show how transient structures and organizational forms, such as digital platforms, enable and disable workers' capacities for positive meaning-making and hence identity formation. The future of work, they argue, will involve workers in taking care of the collective spaces that facilitate their joint meaning-making—a task fraught with tensions and challenges in the context of increasing organizational impermanence.

Hondros et al. use Hannah Arendt's concept of the space of appearances to examine how workers form and maintain shared discursive spaces for revealing themselves to one another through their work, and so develop supportive environments for reducing anxiety, creating meaning, and stabilizing identities (compare with Barros, 2018). They describe these spaces as "pre-political" in that they provide the social and relational contexts for building up the "potential for action," observing how participants in digital collective spaces where creative work was shared were able to establish a sense of personal value and belonging. This experience motivated efforts to maintain the space as a digital community. This foreshadowed the possibility that such spaces could enable workers to develop the capabilities for Arendtian action, stimulating new ideas, concepts and practical openings—the new beginnings needed to bring forth work futures into the world. Despite such possibilities, the authors found that tasks conducted in isolation inhibited the opportunities for workers to show themselves to others as distinctive individuals. Hondros et al. show how organizations, whether transient or permanent, can arrange work to stifle spaces of collective meaning-making, thus eliminating pre-political materials for action. The story does not end there, however, and on the other hand, they illustrate how workers are likely to need to turn to a different level of organizing, to resistance, trade unions, worker participation, and worker democracy, to find value in their labor. Through worker self-organization, we can conclude that meaningful and affirmative work futures might be found.

In "Does platform cooperativism represent a future for work? The case of a French cooperative of bike couriers," Stéphane Le Lay and Fabien Lemozy continue the consideration of the meaning and value of work. They report on their interviews with workers of a bicycle delivery company organized as a cooperative in a large city in France. For their analytical framework, the authors mobilize Christophe Dejours' psychodynamics of work. Dejours' ideas provide a sophisticated model to understand how work is a decisive factor in individuals' psychic life, showing a direct correlation between the organization of work tasks and the scope given to workers to participate in deliberations over the organization of the work process (Dashtipour and Vidaillet, 2017; Dejours, 2007; Dejours and Deranty, 2010).

Le Lay and Lemozy focus on the transformation of the experience of work in the company they studied when it evolved from being a privately owned entity to becoming a cooperative in which the workers took an active part in the financial and day-to-day organization. They document the positive health effects of work in the cooperative setting and the renewed meaning professional riders can find once more in a professional activity, which for most of them, is also a passion. The authors show that this positive evolution of the experience of work stems in particular from the involvement of the cooperative's employees in collectively setting the terms of the activities in a way that includes extra-economic considerations such as environmental and ethical ones, in the choice of customers or goods they accept to deliver.

Le Lay and Lemozy's study demonstrates the viability of a promising, alternative model of organization for some types of platform work. This model counteracts the alienation extensively documented in the literature on platform work, as shown by Hondros et al. (2023). In conclusion, Le Lay and Lemozy argue that the example of this small cooperative opens a small yet promising window into an affirmative possible future for work: a future where a more horizontal, open and democratic organization of platforms allows workers to invest subjectively, in a meaningful and beneficial way for them, in their work activity and the work collective (equally, see Papadimitropoulos, 2023 on digital commons cooperativism).

The next paper, "Needs, Creativity and Care: Adorno and the Future of Work" by Craig Reeves and Matthew Sinnicks, continues the consideration of what might make possible an affirmative future of work. To do so, they tackle the issue of the possible futures of work by exploring the notions of "true and false needs" and of "genuine activity" as drawn from the writings of Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno. As they show, Adorno provides illuminating resources to think more precisely about possible, non-alienated futures of work, through the conceptual and critical methods he invents and the refined set of categories he offers.

On a critical level, Adorno's negativist methodology lets social demands emerge as those features of subjective life that an unjust and "pathological" social-economic organization represses. The negative symptoms that this repression produces then indirectly point to genuine demands from socialized individuals. This method makes it possible to identify real needs requiring work for their fulfilment, as opposed to needs arising from the functional requirements of the economic system. Equally, it is a method that focuses on the "pathologies" created at the micro- and macro-levels of a particular organization of work. Applying his negativist method to contemporary work, Adorno highlights three forms of pathological experience: powerlessness, boredom at work, and the feeling of being superfluous. Adorno's critical analysis provides the paper not just with analytical categories to name the range of negative affects created by working conditions under contemporary capitalism. As his analyzes are grounded in an implicit theory of needs, they also point to the adaptive processes by which individuals internalize demands stemming from the prevailing economic system, allowing that system to achieve its goals (constant valorization) and remain in place. In turn, this allows an insight into the depth at which those negative experiences reach into psyches and bodies.

Reeves and Sinnicks' analysis points to a kind of meta-, or second-order form of need pathology: the inability to respond to others' and even one's own, genuine needs. More concretely, Adorno's analyzes provide insight into the formation of pathological attitudes specific to the world of work, such as role identification and technological fetishism. Yet the negativist method also helps identify needs to which genuine forms of activity can respond, even if these are partially distorted and instrumentalized under capitalist imperatives. These needs include the need for acting in creative ways, the need to care for others, and the need to make a genuine contribution to others' lives. Crucially, when viewed negatively, the distinction between true and false needs does not grant a privileged epistemological point from which to judge other people's preferences but rather

demarcates a space of intrinsic vulnerability to the pressures of social life, a vulnerability from which the need for care and the need to care arises, but also the space in which sensitivity to adaptive pressures is particularly acute. By providing a philosophical insight into the genuine need for caring and creative activities, Sinnicks and Reeves' use Adorno's philosophical writings to bring important theoretical insights to a picture of the human work that will remain necessary.

In the final paper, "The future of work guaranteed: assembling NEETs in the apparatus of the welfare state," Tom Boland and Ray Griffin focuses on the complex constellation of theories, administrative and academic discourses, institutional arrangements and practices which in increasingly prescriptive ways under the neoliberal regime, have endeavored to enforce the participation of populations in formal work, notably through the organization of the welfare state. The paper focuses specifically on the recruitment of young people into a life of work. This is done by undertaking a detailed and critical genealogy of the administrative, statistical category of NEET, "Not in Employment, Educating or Training."

Griffin retraces NEET's original creation in reports on youth unemployment in Wales in the early 1990s, its expansion and detachment from ground experience as it moved to London and became a central category in the United Kingdom's New Labor flagship policy "Bridging the Gap" (1999), and from this point on, how it became a key yet wholly disembodied sociological and policy category taken up by numerous jurisdictions beyond the UK into the 2000s, all the way into the language used by the International Labor Office. For its theoretical framework, Griffin's genealogy relies on prominent continental theorists Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben and their analytical categories of dispositive, apparatus and assemblage. These categories are deployed to help describe the haphazard ways in which ideas and practices crystallize into concrete modes of governmental organizing. The Foucauldian assumption behind the paper is that the production of knowledge and discourses by state agencies is not just in response to new problems in the organization of the collective but also, as Griffin writes, "how the state categorizes subjects in order to then discipline their conduct in specific ways."

Whilst the theoretical references are markedly distinct from the Frankfurt School critical theory of the previous paper, major thematic overlaps exist, as the subjective commitment to work is analyzed as a compulsion resulting from systemic imperatives that the welfare state manages on behalf of the capitalist economy. The larger purpose of the study is to show with this concrete example of prescriptive, disciplining interventions in young people's lives, how governmental interventions might ward off the very possibility of a post-work future. The study seeks to highlight the heavy institutional investment, underpinned by an unquestioned ideology of work, whose aim is to prepare people for participation in formal labor markets without questioning the social, environmental and indeed personal value of this. As such, the study provides a critical counterpart to the other three studies, which provide more positive possibilities, work-friendly insights into potential avenues for meaningful futures of work.

The four papers in this special section address the future of work in independent but interconnected ways, highlighting many of the complexities and ambiguities in play when we consider how the past and the present might lead to a different future regarding work. What they share, however, is a common belief in how work forms an important part of human social identity, and how that can be shaped in alignment with various competing interests, most notably those connected to governmental power, financial might, and the meaning and identify of workers themselves. It is this latter group—those who actually engage in the labor of work—who, we aver, must remain central in any consideration of the future of work. The very fact of work's meaningfulness, that work matters to humans because of what it takes to do it (work involves the entire person) and for what it delivers (individual and collective needs are fulfilled by work), is likely to remain true well into the future (Deranty, 2022), while the character and organization of work will impact the value and values that

become attached to it. The structure of what makes work meaningful may remain the same because fundamental human needs for autonomy, freedom and dignity are enduring. But the meaning sources people use to craft affirmative and meaningful working futures may undergo profound shifts, to include meanings shaped by care, concern, relationality, inter-dependence, shared autonomy. In other words, from the sovereign individual to the individual in community with other people and other living beings and things.

The future, to qualify as such, is necessarily unknown and the desire to predict it reflect an anxiety of the ambiguity of life itself. Amidst this ambiguity, both dystopian and utopian possibilities can be realistically imagined, reimagining not just the dignity of work but also the dignity of workers. It seems that work does have a future, and we glean from the papers in this special section that the character of that future is neither inevitable nor necessarily dystopian. Realizing an affirmative future is not to be left to an assumedly impersonal force of history, but instead in the desires, subjectivities and actions of the very people who do the work.

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