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Crisis and Utopia: André Gorz and the end of work

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Abstract

In this paper, we are concerned with the role of André Gorz in the development of the concept of the end of work. We draw from Gorz's stance on automation, utopia, capitalism and labour to reflect on the directions of the end of work debate, leaning towards Gorz's invitation to repoliticize the end of work. While Gorz's writings predate the rise of the gig economy, he presaged many of the developments we are currently witnessing. Even if the end of work is not in sight, we argue that it remains nonetheless a useful concept to help us cultivate possibilities and a sense of difference. Finally, it is our intention to highlight that while Gorz's work received less attention than other scholars broadly associated with critical examinations of capitalism, his scholarship holds the potential to reinvigorate, or rejuvenate, debates pertaining to the end of work as well as the future of work.

Keywords

Automation, capitalism, Fordism, Future of work, Gorz, postindustrial, Utopia

Introduction

In this paper, we explore Gorz's role in the development of the concepts of 'the end of work', the 'future of work' and 'post-work' (quotation marks omitted hereafter). In recent years, writing on automation and the future of work has proliferated (see e.g. Bastani, 2019; Benanav, 2020; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Fleming, 2015; Ford, 2015; Frayne, 2015; Mason, 2016; Smith, 2020; Srnicek and Williams, 2015; Susskind,

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2020; Yang, 2019), as have critical reflections on the ideological, social, cultural and philosophical place of work in modern society (Horgan, 2021; Pfannebecker and Smith, 2020; Susik, 2021). And yet, while critical thinking on work and its futures seems to be at a highwater mark, one could argue that 'Gorz remains something of a mystery in the English-speaking world' (Berry and Kenny, 2008: 464). To provide readers with a 'whistle stop' guide to Gorz's theories on the end of work, we here seek to highlight Gorz's influence on conceptualisations of work, capitalism and automation – notably his remarkable ability to prefigure the shape of current theorising. So doing will allow us to enhance our awareness of the intellectual journey of the end of work narrative (for want of a better term) and to observe continuities and divergence within that context. We also have an opportunity to explore contemporary accounts in and of themselves, including those that offer divergent perspectives on the social and economic dynamics of the end of work. Our goal, in short, is to bring Gorz back into debates on the end of work.

Our argument will unfold as we situate Gorz in terms of relevant intellectual influence(s) and map out his observations on the contradictions of capitalism in transition from the 20th to the 21st century. One of the most central of these contradictions, for Gorz, is the fact that advances in technologies and systems of production, as well as changes in social structures and consciousness, open-up the possibility of radical and emancipatory changes to how we work and organise our time (Gorz, 1982, 1985). The fabric of work is, for Gorz, malleable and thus resistant to determinism. However, the social and ideological modalities of late capitalism shape and indeed tend to neutralise such potentialities, seemingly producing or performing 'more of the same'. They mitigate against the realisation of a 'postindustrial utopia' (Frankel, 1987).

There is nothing fundamentally unrealistic or conceptually flawed about utopia providing that it is understood as an analytical tool, rather than a concrete statement of what will come to pass. Utopias are useful inasmuch as they seek to puncture our ideology-riven, manufactured 'reality': '[i]n a world that really is falsified, the utopian is the false figure of the true' (Wark, 2014). In grappling with the contradiction(s) between potentiality and reality, Gorz's analysis is undeniably utopian in that it looks towards and advocates for transformative and positive social change. Simultaneously, it recognises and accounts for the social realities which pertain; the constraints operating at a given time. Gorz also discusses potential 'non-utopian', if not actually dystopian, futures. The analysis we find in Gorz could tentatively be framed as a form of 'utopian realism' (Wark, 2014) in the sense of using utopian thought to call attention to the possibility for a different reality, and in doing so, highlighting the contradictions within the reality of the present.

The end of alienation: Post-War existentialism

Gollain (2016: 129) argues that an 'existentialist reading of Marx is the ultimate source of Gorz's efforts to conceive what might lie beyond both capitalism and socialism founded on the religion of work' and certainly we find in his oeuvre a preoccupation with what it truly means to be human, to be free, yet part of a scientifically advanced, complex society. As well as being influenced by Sartre's work (Gollain, 2016: 128), Gorz's career as it developed during the 1960s was also part of the rise of so-called humanist or existential Marxism (Mercer, 2021), with the links between existential Marxism (and by

extension Gorz's work) and phenomenological sensibilities yet to be systematically explored (see De Vaujany et al., 2023).

Gorz's views on work under capitalism were influenced not only by Marx (Granter, 2009: 113–133, see also Brooks, 2010: 306) but by thinkers such as Marcuse, Habermas and Illich (Engler and Engler, 2021; Van Trier, 2021: 189). Referred to as 'the French Marcuse' (Lodziak and Tatman, 1997: 1), Gorz was strongly influenced by the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School who, like him, sought to apply Marxist analyses in the light of contemporary social dynamics. Thus, Gorz can be seen as part of a tradition of radical thinking about work and freedom in the pseudo-market society; a tradition that can be called Critical Theory. Within this current, the concept of alienation was of key importance (Harris et al., 2023) and alienation 'became the rallying point for the critics of traditional Marxism. What is wrong with capitalism, they argued, is that it alienated the individual from one's authentic being' (Hirsch, 1982: 17).

The late 1960s and early 1970s find Gorz discussing the possibilities for the reduction of alienation *at work*. This was still the Fordist era of factory production as a dominant modality in the West, with the factory worker depicted as both archetype and vanguard of radical change at work. In *Capitalism in Crisis and Everyday Life*, Gorz writes of factory work that in the future, '[o]bviously repetitive and fragmented tasks will be eliminated, and the techniques and methods of production reformed radically in consequence' (Bosquet [André Gorz], 1977: 90). In *Strategy for Labour*, a book recently presented as a milestone in socialist thought (Engler and Engler, 2021), we find Gorz (1968) noting that: 'I have been paraphrasing Marx' on alienation' (p. 71). Specifically, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* which he extracts from a book by Frankfurt-USA transplant Fromm (1961).

Capitalism and automation

Although alienation remains a key concept in the sociology of work and post-work (Soffia et al., 2022), by the 1980s, Gorz's perspective had begun to shift, from focusing on the possibilities for eliminating alienation in work, to reducing work time to the fullest possible extent. Gorz had already raised the notion of capitalism in crisis in the eponymous book and once again, his words have a distinct contemporary applicability: 'monetary disorder, world inflation, worker insubordination, declining profit levels' (Bosquet, 1977: 161). The same can be said of his interest in environmentalism, with Gorz coining the term 'degrowth' in 1972 (Asara et al., 2015: 376).

All of this is certainly in keeping with wider concerns amongst social commentators in the 1980s. Computerisation was not fantastically novel, but by the 1980s it had begun to mature to the extent that its effects could be observed more readily and broadly. Relatedly, de-industrialisation accelerated throughout the decade in America, some continental European societies and, most notably, Great Britain. Automation anxiety, so called (Kessler, 2019), was nothing new either, but by the time Gorz produced his best-known essay, *Farewell to the Working Class*, the stage was set for a period of reflection on the future of work, across the public sphere. Characteristically, Gorz was ahead of his time, with *Farewell* published in French in 1980, and its 'sequel' *Paths to Paradise* in 1983:

"As early as 1980, he was arguing that technological change was making it 'absolutely impossible to restore full employment by quantitative economic growth. The alternative rather lies in a different way of managing the abolition of work: instead of a society based on mass unemployment, a society can be built in which time has been freed. . .The manner in which the abolition of work is to be managed and socially implemented constitutes the central political issue of the coming decades'" (Gorz, 1982 [French ed. 1980], 3–4 Cited in Gollain, 2016: 131).

As Brooks (2010: 313) has noted, Gorz made 'heavy use of statistics' to evidence his analysis of the elimination of work due to automation (see e.g. Gorz, 1999: 81). As one would expect, perhaps, this is also the case for more contemporary accounts (see e.g. Roth, 2021 discussing Smith, 2020). Frey and Osborne (2013) as well as Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2013) have been particularly influential. The former duo, for example, predicted that 47% of jobs in America could disappear over the coming period. As Spencer (2022) notes, however, such figures tend to be 'heavily caveated' (p. 112), and indeed, the tendency for automation to eliminate jobs, and the wider role of technology *vis-à-vis* the world of work remains hotly debated, with one question being whether automation leads to job loss or job displacement.

Theoretically, Gorz by the 1980s had begun an encounter with other, less 'existential' themes in Marx which would shape his thinking on the potentials of technology. These included most notably elements of the *Grundrisse* (Gorz, 1985: 113-114, *inter alia*, see also Federici, 2021: 73n; Van Trier, 2021). Marx's analysis of the relevance of (production) technology under (and beyond) capitalism continues to be influential. Rare is the critical treatment of work under capitalism that does not cite Marx's work on technology, and even more-mainstream accounts have been known to draw on his writings in this regard - see for example Rifkin's (1995) influential book *The End of Work*.

Although Gorz, in concert with most writers on the end of work, pointed to the role of technology in reducing the amount of necessary labour and by extension, under present conditions, the number of available jobs, he cannot truly be considered a technological determinist. For him, technology was a facilitating force in the liberation of life from the diktat of work and production, *but not the one and only cause*:

"It is important to underline that for Gorz, no technological change can ever bring Freedom: individual and collective flourishing must depend on the political, social and ethical project that determines how technology is deployed" (Gollain, 2016: 135 and for more on Gorz and technology see Kang, 2023).

The understanding that the role of technology is socially constructed in a manner which serves the interests of the capitalist *status quo* continues to be central to current writing on automation and the future of work. At the same time however, there is an argument that technological advance is an uneven process – both chronologically and across sectors – which causes a myriad of imbalances, particularly visible in the labour market. Benanav (2020) and Smith (2020) are notable in this regard for viewing the process of automation as highly variegated – that is, automation in one sector may lead to workers being displaced to another. In turn, wages in the sector of destination are depressed by competition (for work) to such an extent that automation is not an economically rational

investment: 'The excess of labour that prevents the mechanisation or automation of one particular sector is itself the result of an "excess" of automation in another sector' (Smith, 2020: 131). Coupled with the fact that automation itself is a term that has been stretched, disingenuously, to include rideshare apps and smartphones – hardly the *deus ex machina* of labour reduction (Smith, 2020: 144) – the argument arises that techno-dystopians *and* techno-utopians 'are both wrong' (Smith, 2020). As with Gorz, for the more sophisticated of contemporary researchers on automation, it is not technology *per se* which is of central concern, but rather the uses to which it is put (in simple terms) and more complexly, its tendency to serve ideology and capital simultaneously. If in these most sophisticated, critical interpretations of automation and the future of work, there is a diversity of views on the interconnection between the two, most agree that the social impacts of the contradictions of capitalism are uneven and inevitably polarising.

In the shadows of skyscrapers: Automation and social division

Writing in the early 1980s, Gorz (1982) pointed to the emergence of a 'non-class of non-workers' (p. 67). At the time, the concept was certainly original in its formulation and expression: 'The majority of the population now belong to the post-industrial neo-proletariat which, with no job security or definite class identity, fills the area of probationary, contracted, casual, temporary and part-time employment' (Gorz, 1982: 69). In the language of 21st century sociology, what Gorz is suggesting is that the majority of the (non) work-force, in 1980, were consigned to non-standard work (Edgell and Granter, 2020: 193–224), as regards their activities and contractual status. In terms of their position, or potential position as a social group, social subject, or class, we can look to the term 'precariat' (Standing, 2011: 7, see also Gorz (2003: 98) on '*précaires*') as a now more familiar descriptor. By 1989, Gorz had walked back 'the majority' somewhat and was quoting figures of 50% (1989: 67) which is not far off contemporary estimates of those in non-standard work in European economies (Edgell and Granter, 2020: 219). Interestingly then, Gorz presaged the emergence of the so-called gig economy, a point to which we shall return.

The extent of precarious work, like its conceptualisation, has been a matter of some debate (see Fevre, 2007; Jonna and Foster, 2016; *inter alia*) and certainly, there may have been previous historical periods in which highly insecure, discontinuous, temporary, or part-time work has been prevalent (Quinlan, 2012). However, under the Fordist system of production and social organisation, particularly between 1950 and 1974, there was a cultural assumption, based on economic expansion and reinforced by mass media representations and the ideological state apparatus (Willis, 1977), that workers could expect secure, full-time and working-life-long contracts. This could be in manufacturing or natural resources, education, state security, or the vast bureaucracies supporting public and private sector management. Such a conception became paradigmatic for countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Australia, Canada and the USA. By 1980, Gorz claimed that this system had, effectively, collapsed. Once again, one could question the veracity of this assertion beyond the scope of impressionistic observation. Even at the

level of historical experience however, scholars of a certain vintage will know that in Britain for example, traditional models of Fordist industrial employment entered freefall in the late 1970s, and have been plummeting ever since.

Soon, Gorz (1982) argued, even precarious work will become hard to obtain: 'in the not too distant future, jobs such as these will be largely eliminated by automation' (p. 69). At the time, such a viewpoint was not uncommon, with government reports and popular texts alike projecting dire consequences in terms of mass unemployment (see e.g. Laurie, 1980: 259–262 and for a review Granter, 2009: 93–109). Such dire predictions, it should be noted, continue to haunt the public imagination, with artificial intelligence (AI) serving as the current villain of the piece (Kan, 2023). In a society without adequate and equitable distribution of work, and where the majority of people still depend on wage labour to acquire the resources for survival, there are a variety of different possibilities for how this will turn out – both within capitalism (Gorz, 1985: 31–32) and beyond. Perhaps the most resonant and, sadly, prophetic prediction is that under capitalism, society may descend deeper into barbarism (Gorz, 2010a) with those excluded from the 'core' of the working economy 'forced into desperate, frenetic competition to sell domestic or sexual services to the narrow stratum of well-paid workers and employers' (Gorz, 1985: 31). Under such conditions, we are:

> "left with the sort of economy now prevalent in parts of North and South America (New York, Brazil, Mexico, etc. where pauperism and overabundance of commodity goods and services go hand in hand, where organised society marginalises and represses a dispossessed social majority: slum dwellers in the shadows of skyscrapers precariously surviving on crime and the underground economy" (Gorz, 1985: 31).

Such visions of an outsider class, underclass, or lumpenproletariat were clearly not derived by Gorz from a tabula rasa. For example, according to Johnson, Gorz (and indeed other writers on the end of work such as Rifkin, and Aronowitz and DeFazio) were influenced by the work of Boggs (1963) including his 1963 piece *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook* (Johnson, 2011: 305). Gorz had in fact discussed the racialised nature of precarious work in his coverage of the plight of 'Mustafa', in 1972 (Bosquet, 1977). In *Farewell to the Working Class*, he includes in his analysis of the non-working non-class, a discussion of the Black Panthers and notes that 'The notion of a post-industrial economy and proletariat was widely adopted among Marxist revolutionaries in North and South America in the late 1960s' (Gorz, 1982: 68). Although he cites Dowbor (Brazil), rather than the American Boggs, it seems highly likely that the latter was also an influence.

In the current crop of post-work literature, the same recurrent theme emerges: Susskind, Brynjollfson and McAfee and others all talk about unemployment. The dystopian angle is somewhat sharpened in Srnicek and Williams (2015) who, like Gorz, emphasise the polarisation and ineluctable poverty arising from worklessness, but also delve into the issue of racial discrimination that not only fuels unemployment, but also contributes to (further) marginalising certain communities. Worklessness is once again associated with a slow spiral towards 'global south' levels of deprivation, and by extension, is redolent of lives curtailed. In the words of Yang (2019), 'To me, without dramatic

change, the best case scenario is a hyper-stratified society like something out of The Hunger Games or Guatemala with an occasional mass shooting' (p. 154). In an even more specific thematic and theoretical eddy, Boggs is mentioned by both Benanav (2020) and Smith (2020) respectively, with the African American revolutionary serving as an important interlocutor for the latter.

In *Paths to Paradise* (1985: 32 and 36), Gorz did suggest one other possible scenario which involves paying people to consume, as a means of shoring up social control; providing people with 'something to do' which can be contained and organised through the power vertical of capital. Certainly, the relationship between consumerism and political acquiescence is a key theme in Critical Theory, and possibly in 1980s France, with its relatively generous welfare provision, the notion of a market economy avoiding polarisation through 'paid consumption' had some credence. From the perspective of 2023 however, the first projection (increasing inequality and poverty) seems more accurate. In societies where university teachers – recall the once ascendant knowledge-class – are forced through precarity and poverty to live in tents (Fazackerley, 2021), and where Russell Group (British Ivy League) universities provide a 'community pantry' to help hungry staff and students alike (authors' personal communication), one might contend that being paid to work, let alone paid to consume, is challenge enough. It seems unlikely that Gorz and fellow Continental visionaries such as Jacques Attali, had dried pasta and tinned peas in mind. If life's necessities are in short supply even for working people in what was once a secure and privileged sector, what hope do the human marginalia, sloughed off by disorganised capitalism (Offe, 1985), really have?

New servants in the gig economy: The next logical step

The question of worklessness and unemployment is thus central, in particular in a context where supposedly secure forms of work are further shrinking. The narrative(s) of success, empowerment and entrepreneurship of the self at the core of what we now call the gig economy reframe the notion of secure employment – 'secure' is no longer understood as institutionalised through unions and organisations but rather the outcome of individual performativity and resourcefulness. Ineluctably then, risk is transferred to the individual – flexibility and precarity are two sides of the same coin.

This would not be surprising to Gorz – as previously mentioned, Gorz prefigured concepts which have become central not only to debates on the future of work, but to wider discussions about work and society. One illustrative example is the notion of a workforce polarised between a core of more secure and relatively well-paid workers and a periphery of insecure and precarious workers. In Brooks (2010) words: '. . .the "caste" of full-time workers shrank as society moved toward a bifurcation of the elite whose experience of work matched the dominant ideology and the actual majority who scrounged for whatever part-time and temporary positions they could find' (p. 313). Gorz (1985) conceived of this as 'dualistic stratification' (p. 36). Those excluded from the promised land of professional stability, a group at once peripheral and numerically expanding – the non-class of non-workers – move from one job to another; 'learning trades they will never regularly practice, they go on to work in the post office during the summer, to pick grapes in the autumn, to join a department-store staff for Christmas, and

to start work as a labourer in the spring. . .' (Gorz, 1982: 70). A distinctly European, even recognisably French characterisation perhaps, but the contemporary parallels sharpen further when Gorz includes activities such as takeaway food delivery – indeed, food delivery facilitated by networked digital communications (Gorz, 1989: 154). This is the Deliveroo and DoorDash era *avant la lettre*; that is, a foreshadowing of today's ever expanding gig economy.

According to Gorz, writing in the 1980s and increasingly as the 1990s unfolded, the dynamic at play sees 'cash rich time poor' working professionals in the most privileged sectors (and today we might include those least difficult to dispense with – e.g. education and health) outsourcing their needs – effectively the work of social reproduction, to a growing precariat of, in contemporary parlance, gig workers. With neither a contract nor a permanent place of work, the purchasing and selling of labour are intermediated, profitably, by digital platform companies.

In respect of social structure (and with its own cultural implications), this process leads to the creation of what Gorz conceptualised as a new servant class. The 'old' servant class which had been so numerous in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, had carried out many of the same tasks, including delivering shopping, cooking, childcare, and so on. One positive effect of the rise of Fordism (for the working class) was that after World War I and certainly in the years of stability and growth after World War II, industrial, commercial and public service employment was increasingly available and attractive to those previously 'in service' and their families. At the same time, in the era of high Fordism before the Oil Crisis of 1973 (Clarke, 1990: 44) working people in the global north might expect to have time to walk their own dogs, buy and cook their own food and look after their own children; partly due to falling working hours, and partly due to what became known as the family wage (Edgell and Granter, 2020: 311). As Fordist compromises collapsed, Gorz pointed to the rise of a 'tertiary anti-economy' (Gorz, 1989: 155) whereupon this situation was reversed. Capitalism's answer to the possibility of a radical decline in the qualitative/ideological and quantitative significance of work was not to reduce work for all, but to resuscitate anachronistic forms of social relations to keep 'living dead capitalism' staggering along without fundamentally undermining its systems of economic and cultural legitimation.

As the first decade of the 21st century progressed, Gorz's vision of work's contemporary indeterminacy grew to encompass an ever more predominant section of the population. A recognition perhaps that even the notion of a stable core of privileged work has become outdated. Thus he evokes the:

> "insecurity, discontinuity and randomness that now hangs over all work – over salaried employment as much as so-called freelance work. . .freelance workers are actually dependent on one, or a small number of, big corporations who subject them to alternating periods of hyperactivity and unemployment" (Gorz, 2010b: 24).

With experience of work now arrayed across a spectrum of precarity, gig workers, freelancers and professionals alike find themselves in 'an anomic world of constant organizational restructuring, short term contracts, and uncertainty. . .they are never too far away from the next crash; from redundancy, foreclosure, indignity' (Granter, 2009:

176). And yet, while Gorz bid an ironic 'farewell to the working class' in the early 1980s, he also saw potential for the forming of new social subjectivities in the era of neoliberal capitalism and beyond.

New social subjects, new solidarities

Although he was mindful not to overplay the possibility, Gorz (1985) saw the non-working non-class of neo-proletarians as a possible social subject (p. 35). That is, with the traditional working class neutralised by disorganisation and/or integration into the seemingly indissoluble nucleus of the work/consume dialectic, the role of catalyst for social change may fall to those who are now outside the ambit of the ideology of work. Rather than focusing on the traditional Fordist modalities of cohesion such as unions and workplaces, this potential new quasi-collective subject looks for meaning in non-work subjectivities; in the 'autonomous' sphere outside of work.

Today, phrases such as 'the great resignation' (Chugh, 2021) and the 'rise of antiwork' (Kaplan and Kiersz, 2021) suggest that an 'antiproductivist cultural mutation' (Gorz, 2003: 92, author's translation) or a 'new sensibility' (Granter, 2009: 118–120) is in the ascendant. In connection with research in the sociology of work, it is possible to find serious analyses of those who seek exit strategies from the domination of work. For example: 'Much of Frayne's (2015) *The Refusal of Work* is given to a series of case studies of people in Britain who have tried to escape their hectic and unhappy work lives by doing as little paid work as possible' (Pfannebecker and Smith, 2020: 21). And yet a wholesale transition, even a meaningful and significant shift, to a 'new' attitude towards work and non-work does not seem to have taken place. That is, not on a scale significant enough to cause concomitant shifts in the dominant practices and understandings associated with work and life. People quit one job and move to another, assuming that they have the in-demand skills, and the contacts, to do so. People absent themselves from the workforce when and if they can afford to do so, re-presenting themselves when this is no-longer the case.

The notion of a revolt against work, particularly amongst 'the young people' has haunted predictions of the postindustrial future for generations. As Frayne himself notes, although his may be the first truly sociological and ethnographic account, it is not the first book to examine the lives of those who have 'dropped out' from the world of work. Lefkowitz's (1979) *Breaktime* is a credible contender for that title, with the author encountering a range of American individuals who are 'living without work in a nine-to-five world'. A journalistic account, Lefkowitz (1979) nevertheless had a deeper pool of academic literature on which to draw (pp. 405–432), including Bell's (1956), *Work and its Discontents*. Citing Berger et al. (1974), Lefkowitz (1979) positions the individual of the postindustrial era as leading a nomadic existence, in ontological terms (p. 280). Forever searching for home and 'wholeness', they certainly do not find it in work, which 'is the opposite of integration and wholeness, just more empty, airless rooms, anonymous bureaucracies that lead to other bureaucracies where it is a crime to open the windows' (Lefkowitz, 1979: 280). Such characterisations reflect the tenor of the times – increasingly affluent societies where alienation, not deprivation, occupied the attentions of the media and intelligentsia. The citation of Yankelovitch (1974) is telling, with his

psychological surveys of recent graduates pointing to a 'reduced fear of economic insecurity' (Lefkowitz, 1979: 411).

It hardly needs pointing out that the period since 1979 has barely featured a period of economic security that wasn't simulated through financial innovation and unsustainable borrowing, and which wasn't followed by economic chaos in due course. In the era of austerity in many European nations that followed the financial crisis of 2007–2008, and which continues to evolve into ever more gothic forms, earning a living – that is, work – comes ever more sharply into focus, even as the possibility of doing so in a secure and dignified way, recedes. As Basso (2003) has it: 'work takes on airs, as scarce goods do. . .' (p. 197), even as it drifts further into the choppy waters of the gig economy. At the same time, the ever more numerous non-working non-class of the zero-security servant economy, have started to indicate that they may in fact have potential as a progressive social subject, after all. Rather than a rejection of work as a value or an ideology, it seems to be the case that people are calling for more dignity and security with a continuing emphasis on working life.

With reference to institutionalised class conflict, recent accounts of the service class or 'servant sector' (Smith, 2020: 147), particularly its lower paid sub-sectors, highlight the difficulties in achieving cohesion and momentum amongst workers who are, by definition, lacking an organisational community (in the sense of the factory, the office, the professional association etc.). In this low wage, low productivity service economy which constitutes a considerable fraction of the neo-proletariat, workers are atomised, demoralised and hard to organise (Smith, 2020: 138–139). That is not to say that greater organisation and worker solidary is impossible. Chun and Agarwala (2015), for example, point to alternative forms of labour organising for precarious and informal workers (those at the extreme end of 'precarious' such as migrant workers). They note, (pace Silver, 2003) that over time labour movements;

> "have continually reinvented themselves to accommodate attempts by the state and capital to evade labour power. Therefore, we should expect contemporary labour to launch alternative struggles that can fight capital's recent attempts to avoid twentieth-century labour regulations through informal and precarious employment relations." (Chun and Agarwala, 2015: 638).

And so it is that observers point to a 'surge in labour activism' (Vallas and Johnston, 2023). Aside from the ongoing waves of strikes in the USA and Europe involving the tattered fabric of the core labour force (educators, transport workers, healthcare workers, lawyers), we find Starbucks coffee servers fighting to unionise (Vallas and Johnston, 2023), and food delivery workers around the world forging new bonds of solidarity (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020) whilst engaging in more-or-less familiar types of labour activism (see for instance Bansal, 2023; Butler and Jolly, 2021 for recent examples).

As the digital era downloaded, Gorz (2010b [2003]) discussed those working in the 'immaterial' economy – the programmers, web-designers, online creators, and so on – as a possible vector for escape from the work dominated society. As Kang relates, Gorz's views on the potential subversive potential of hackers in the context of the internet as a 'horizontally equal peer-to-peer network of connectivity' (see Kang, 2023) seem

somewhat optimistic, given the increasingly closed and corporatized nature of the 'web'. However, the notion of 'the cognitive multitude or cognitariat' – a group sharing common ground with the wider neo-proletariat as well as the activist intelligentsia, has distinct contemporary resonance. Once again however, Gorz's vision of a transcendence of productivist institutions (in this case the state and trade unions) has been outflanked by an apparent sentiment, even amongst the digital vanguard, that such institutions are their best hope of attaining and maintaining security and dignity at work and by extension, in life. It appears that union solidarity and organising, not dropping out, is the 'hip thing to do' (Weiss, 2017: 122). When workers at platforms such as KickStarter, Vice, or BandCamp – at the very hippest end of the digital economy – form a union (see Kelly, 2023), one may conclude that more traditional social and political formations retain their relevance to a degree that Gorz might not have anticipated. The neo-proletariat, as social subject, appears to be brand new, and retro, all at once (Choonara, 2015).

Gorz and the postwork imaginary

Thus far we have explored the contours of Gorz's analysis of work and its future under capitalism. Largely through a process of juxtaposition, we have also observed the resonance of his ideas in the evolution of post-work scholarship and observations in the public sphere, up to the present day. As we move towards the end of this exposition, the question remains: what if we could materialise a post-work, post-*capitalist* society? What would people do in a postcapitalist utopia?

Structurally, Gorz proposes a model of a 'dual society'. In this concept, the two elements are effectively existential or ontological rather than, for example, representing different groups within the social structure (recall his concept of dualistic stratification, discussed above). By the early 1980s, Gorz was proposing that the realms of *heteronomy* and *autonomy* would be key to organising life in a post-capitalist future (Gorz, 1982: 94–104; see also Granter, 2009: 113–133). Gorz recognised that in a society of advanced scientific/technical production, with a highly differentiated division of labour (let alone one digitally networked, globally and in real time) there would still be some necessity for some work to be externally organised – that is, organised by a system outside the control of individual workers. Gorz proposed that this realm of heteronomy be accepted as necessary, albeit with a mind to humanising it as much as possible. If some conventionally unpleasant or toilsome work is still to exist, it should be shared out across the working population, as equitably as possible. Similarly, more intrinsically rewarding, skilled work is to be shared out in the same way (Vrasti, 2017).

In the realm of autonomy, greatly expanded through (i) a more equitable sharing out of work and (ii) advanced automation technology, properly applied – people will be able to pursue freely chosen activities beyond the ambit of even a highly evolved notion of productivism. What type of activities? We hope the reader will forgive our use of longer quotes as we allow Gorz to outline some of them:

> "cultural and aesthetic activities whose aim is to give and create pleasure and enhance and 'cultivate' our immediate environment; assistance, caring and mutual-aid activities which create a network of social relations and forms of solidarity throughout the neighborhood or

locality; the development of friendships and affective relationships" (Gorz, 1989: 233, cited in Vrasti, 2017).

Gorz, from the early 1980s to the twilight of 2007, conceived of these activities as centring around, if one were to summarise, *convivial tools in convivial settings* (as noted earlier, the influence of Illich (1973), author of *Tools for Conviviality*, is acknowledged by Gorz himself – see Economic Rationality 165–166 *inter alia* and for an intellectual biography sketch see Merryfield, 2015). As the technologies of global interconnection have matured and in some sense, become more accessible beyond the level of the corporation, the scope for production itself to take place in the realm of autonomy is opened up further:

> "a future in which it will be possible to produce practically all that is necessary and desirable in cooperative or communal workshops; in which it will be possible to combine productive activities with learning and teaching, with experimentation and research, with the creation of new tastes, flavors and materials, and with the invention of new forms and techniques of agriculture, building, and medicine, etc. Communal self-providing workshops will be globally interconnected, will be able to exchange or share their experiences, inventions, ideas, and discoveries. Work will be a producer of culture, and self-providing will be a way to self-fulfillment". (Gorz, 2010a [2007]; for further comparison with earlier work see Gorz, 1985: 102–3 and 1982: 87)

One can observe that for Gorz, the transcendence of capitalism involves a multidimensional process of change. This is, effectively, a revolutionary shift in how people relate to each other, organise themselves, create and produce, and relate to technology at local and global levels. Van Trier is surely correct when he characterises Gorz's vision as 'nothing less than the start of a project for a new civilization' (Van Trier, 2021: 186). Cooperation, conviviality and alternative ways of organising (Parker et al., 2007) are of course not unknown, even under the penumbra of capitalism. Aside from cooperative enterprises and alternative communities (Firth, 2019), one can also observe 'makerspaces', 'hackerspaces', 'fablabs' and coworking spaces (De Vaujany and Aroles, 2019), with organisational arrangements and individual identities arrayed across a spectrum from the more corporate to the more radical. One can also observe community centres organised as a response to austerity, allowing postindustrialism's survivors a communal foothold for conviviality and self-direction, amidst the dereliction of postindustrial urban decay (Lang, 2020). Contemporary post-work writers, particularly those with an openness to utopianism as part of a radical critique of capitalism, echo many of Gorz's themes. Benanav, for example, discusses possible activities in the realm of freedom such as 'painting murals, learning languages, building waterslides – or discovering new ways to do common tasks to make them less time consuming'. Illustrating the utility in deploying the term 'imaginary', Benanav (2020) moves on to suggest that the end of scarcity could allow people to join 'federations for building spaceships' (p. 91).

Such parallels are perhaps not surprising, given that debates around the politics of time, the nature of work, and the balance between the realms of freedom (autonomy) and necessity (heteronomy) are part of a tradition tracking back to the 'original theorists of

post-scarcity such as Karl Marx, Thomas More, Étienne Cabet, and Peter Kropotkin' (Benanav, 2020: 83). One could also include Fourier, Morris and Marcuse as key intellectual steppingstones in the mapping of post-work narratives – the latter in particular offering an important political and thematic backdrop to the utopian, yet sociologically grounded writing of Gorz and others.

One can also find Gorz's footprints clearly visible across more popular accounts. For example, while his characterisation of the main thesis of *Farewell to the Working Class* seems at first superficial (2016: 177), Mason's bestselling account *Postcapitalism* (2016) offers an ultimately sympathetic view of Gorz, and appropriate acknowledgement of his place in the post work story. Mason anoints him a 'beautiful troublemaker' who had 'glimpsed the future' (Mason, 2016: 201) and so it is hardly surprising that Mason's goals for a society of the future are heavily reminiscent of the earlier French prophet of postindustrialism. Witness Goal 4:

> "Gear technology towards the reduction of necessary work to promote the rapid transition towards an automated economy. Eventually, work becomes voluntary, basic commodities and public services are free, and economic management becomes primarily an issue of energy and resources, not capital and labour". (2016: 270).

Conclusion: André Gorz – the spectre haunting the future of work

A somehow harrowing question is why the end of work, in conditions of a post-scarcity society does not materialise. Why does the postindustrial utopia remain beyond our grasp? Surely, technological advancements have given us the means to bring to fruition such scenarios (see Gorz, 1999; Granter, 2009). For Gorz, the explanation lies in the fact that in and across the multifarious realms of capitalism; its practices, its taken for granted understandings, its cultural scaffolding, its hidden abodes (Bonefeld, 2012: 128), work acts as an anchor point around which capitalism continues to be organised.

As Critical Theory as a tradition of social thought tends to assert, that which is apparent is rarely that which is true (Bonefeld, 2012). And so, the notion of capitalism as a form of rational, competitive, market based, even 'natural' system is falsified. Commenting on Gorz's take on the intricate relation between work and control, Brooks (2010: 314) argues that 'in a striking argument, Gorz claimed that this was not capitalism, it was a facade of capitalism put in place to maintain the existing social and political order'. Work is thus a convenient instrument of control that structures and disciplines society, and 'renders populations at once productive and governable' (Weeks, 2011: 54; Gorz, 1982; Lafargue, 2014 [1883] Cited in Hoffmann and Paulsen, 2020: 346, see also the discussion in Granter 2021). The question of a post-work society then becomes one of post-capitalism, and capitalism, as a system, remains remarkably resilient. It is both highly unstable, and yet able to contain its internal contradictions through a process of continual mutation (see Gorz, 1994: 1 cited in Mason, 2016: 234).

In lieu of the peroration of our paper (and in line with this special issue), we would like to briefly reflect on the relative absence of Gorz's work in current debates and discussions on the future of work with the view of revalorising his work. Gorz prefigured

much of today's work-related discourses and concepts, with his writing providing valuable analytical tools through which to navigate the labyrinthine realms of work under capitalism, including the experiences of workers and citizens themselves. His work helps us to understand how we live now, and how we got here. For example, Gorz's conceptualisation of the rise of precarity, as Western economies shifted from industrial to digital, resonates strongly with the latest manifestations of work and the gig economy. Gorz wrote about trends in the 1980s and 1990s that are only now coming fully to maturity and his ability to anticipate future realities, our future reality, based on a sociological observation of his present, is striking.

Beyond the concepts of utopia, social subject and class consciousness, Gorz's work invites us to repoliticize the end of work; an invitation that seems particularly fitting in a context of wage stagnation and waves of labour strikes and pension protests, where food banks have come to symbolise the metastasis of poverty across the postindustrial corpus *socialis*. If the end of work seems too remote because it presupposes changes so radical that work as we know it will cease to exist, it might nonetheless operate as an indispensable conceptual device to help us cultivate alternative possibilities and a sense of difference. Utopias, in that context, find their utility, their necessary place in sociological analysis. In the words of Gorz (1999), 'It is the function of utopias. . . to provide us with the distance from the existing state of affairs which allows us to judge what we are doing in the light of what we could or should do' (p. 113). Or, in the words of Eduardo Galeano, 'Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed 10 steps forward, it swiftly slips 10 steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance'.

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