

A dream of ease

Granter, Edward

DOI:

[10.1016/j.futures.2008.07.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2008.07.012)

License:

None: All rights reserved

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Granter, E 2008, 'A dream of ease: Situating the future of work and leisure', *Futures*, vol. 40, no. 9, pp. 803-811.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2008.07.012>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

This is the accepted author manuscript. The final published version is available here: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2008.07.012>

Please only cite the published version.

A dream of ease: situating the future of work and leisure

Edward Granter, University of Birmingham, UK.

Abstract

This paper represents something of a history of the future. It seeks to examine, in the context of the USA and Britain, debates over the future of work that have taken place during the twentieth century, and have continued into the twenty first. Such debates, often classics of the futurological genre, might be caricatured as fantastic predictions of a leisured utopia, but are often in fact both more sober, and more nuanced, than such a depiction would suggest. The present paper will explore the common themes that structure future of work debates, and discourses of the future of work will be placed in social and historical context. Most importantly, the paper will uncover commonalities in understandings of what it means to be creative and free in modern society, understandings that are central to the future of work, and indeed the future in general. The paper will, in conclusion, address the possible reasons for a decline in predictions of a leisured future, and a growing awareness amongst commentators that work is very much here to stay.

1. Falling hours and the birth of consumer society

From Adam Smith and JS Mill to the Luddites and the followers of ‘Captain Swing’, commentators on work in industrial society have noted the tendency for machinery to replace and displace human labour. This dynamic, in fact, was at the centre of Marx’s vision of the transition to a communist society. As industrial societies developed increasingly efficient production techniques during the first quarter of the twentieth century, commentators began to suggest that continuing rises in productivity would lead to reduced working hours and expanded leisure time. In terms of empirical and historical reality, social historian Benjamin Hunnicutt has provided an account of how American workers did indeed achieve reductions in working hours during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the first two decades of the twentieth [1]. This trend of falling hours coincided, and was probably not entirely unconnected with, a growing interest in the concept of the end of scarcity [1, p. 33]. By the 1920’s, particularly in North America – the most technically advanced of the industrialised nations – these changes began to be discussed in both the management press, and in the public sphere more generally. The debate over the future of work, and the apparently ascendant concept of leisure, was given extra impetus by developments in worker efficiency (and control) such as those introduced by Gilbreth, Taylor, and Ford, by advances in mechanisation, and by increasing concerns over technological unemployment.

Some observers appeared to take the Depression of the 1930’s as indication that technology was at the stage where people were being permanently eliminated from the production process. In both the USA and Britain, predictions of a leisured future were made; worrying for some, but for others replete with a certain promise.

Across the Atlantic, John Maynard Keynes, writing in 1932, viewed the prospect of the end of work with mild trepidation;

the *economic problem* may be solved, or at least be within sight of solution, within a hundred years...thus for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem-how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him...Three-hour shifts or a fifteen hour week may put off the problem for a great while. For three hours a day is quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us! [4, p. 366-369].

We won't know for another 25 years whether Keynes's prediction of the future of work was accurate, but he at least restrained himself from suggesting that the end of labour, and the rise of the leisure society was actually imminent.

Hunnicut's detailed historical account of what are in effect early twentieth century debates over the end of work is difficult to improve on, and interested readers are directed to this material. Of particular interest in the present context is the quote with which Hunnicutt chose to end his book; it relates, appropriately, to his thesis on why the fight for shorter hours was abandoned. Hunnicutt quotes Herbert Marcuse, the Critical Theorist and influential social philosopher. An extract from Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* mirrors Hunnicutt's own findings, that while some social commentators worried that the growing free time of the masses might be diverted into marketised consumerism, industrial and commercial elites worried that they might *not* be.

automation threatens to render possible the reversal of the relation between free time and working time: the possibility of working time becoming

marginal and free time becoming full time. The result would be a radical transvaluation of values, and a mode of existence incompatible with the traditional culture. Advanced industrial society is in permanent mobilization against this possibility [1, p. 315].

According to Hunnicutt, this ‘mobilization’ was conceived of fairly explicitly by capital, and found its ideological manifestation in the expansion of consumerism, largely through the intensification and extension of advertising. “The new ‘gospel of consumption’ was designed specifically to ensure industrial advance and save work” [1, p. 50]. As the choice of quote from Marcuse illustrates, Hunnicutt did not pluck this account from a theoretical void. The use of *detailed* historical evidence to support the assertion that work has been deliberately maintained through the engineering of the expansion of consumerism *is*, however, fairly original.

One might wonder whether those in charge of kick-starting modern consumer society as a response to the decline in the objective necessity of work during the pre WWII period were influenced primarily by their own observations of social, industrial and technological change, or whether they were reacting to commentaries on the future of work. It would be rather ironic, would it not, if the latter were the case? On Hunnicutt’s account, however, it appears that business leaders were acting on more concrete observations; those concerning the bottom line, with the wider issue of economic growth adding to their anxiety.

If basic needs were being met by industry, and if workers chose to devote less and less time to their work, then extended periods of general unemployment would not be necessary to halt progress. Free time in the form of leisure could

create the same conditions as free time in the form of unemployment: reduced production and consumption, idle productive capacity, limited investment opportunities, and even a mature and stable economy [1, p. 39].

The relationship between the consumerist nature of contemporary society and the maintenance of toil was observed by various writers during the twentieth century, including Lewis Mumford, JK Galbraith, Marcuse, and more recently, André Gorz. As we will see in the present paper, debates over the future of work often centre on an essential dialectic, between some kind of ‘higher’ existence, of free expression, enlightenment, and self development - which tends to be associated with the end of work - and an existence based on consumption and commodification, in which real autonomy is limited, both by the perpetuation of toil, and what appears to be the chief means of this perpetuation, the ideological dominance of consumerism, fuelling a growth based economy. In forecasts and predictions of the future of work, the *end* of work, and the rise of leisure, is often a central element. The concept of the end of work seems to provide a wide range of commentators with a means of highlighting the supposed irrationalities in the way contemporary western society is organised, in terms both of consciousness and empirical social conditions. It offers the promise of a more fulfilling and authentic existence, whilst simultaneously compelling us to wonder why the routes to this existence remain blocked.

2. Automation, the affluent society and the future of work

The onset of The Second World War, not surprisingly, meant that “The entire context for talking about workplace technological change had shifted” [5, p. 233].

Discussions about the future of work, technology and leisure, while no doubt extant in the interim, only came to the fore once again in the late 1950's, particularly in the USA. This time it was not worker activism, unemployment and recession that stimulated debate, but economic success and unprecedented material abundance. At the same time, advances in workplace technology continued, having themselves been stimulated by war.¹ Words like 'cybernation' 'robot' and 'computer' began to appear in reports and commentaries on work.

In 1956, Daniel Bell (who was later to distinguish himself by introducing the theory of post-industrial society to a wide sociological audience), suggested that "The themes of play, of recreation, of amusement are the dominant ones in our culture today" [7, p. 36]. This super-structural development was a reflection of the fact that "The vast development of automatic controls and the continuous flow creates the possibility of eliminating the workers from production completely" [7, p. 45]. Looking back to the utopias of the past, Bell suggested that industrial civilisation had reached a stage where bygone hopes could actually be realised.

By 1958, when a group of well known American sociologists published the volume *Mass Leisure* [8], churches and academics alike were worrying about people having too much leisure time. According to some, a three day week was "imminent" [9, p. 346]. Once again, the role of technology was emphasised, and if a thinker as sophisticated as Daniel Bell could submit to what appeared to be technological determinism, it is no surprise that others followed suit, with Russel Lynes declaring that reduced labour time was less the result of labour's activism, than of the telos of technology; "Machines not men have created the three day weekend" [9, p. 346].

¹ "The first all-electronic computer was built at the university of Pennsylvania, to solve problems in ballistics and aeronautics for the I.S. Army" [6, p. 8]. ENIAC, as the computer was known, entered service in 1946.

For these critics, as for those of thirty years previous, the issues of consumption and needs were central; and once again, some accounts struck an ostensibly conservative tone. Riesman, for example, seemed worried by the prospect of the uneducated masses falling victim to the temptations of abundant leisure time:

For many people today, the sudden onrush of leisure is a version of technological unemployment: their education has not prepared them for it and the creation of new wants at their expense moves faster than their ability to order and assimilate these wants [10, p. 363].

However, it is not the classical, enlightened model of leisure that such writers were critical of. Rather, their concern continued to be with both the nature of consumer society, and the values underpinning it. Whatever the misgivings of liberal commentators during this period, the future was widely perceived as one characterised by decreased working time, and the increasing dominance of leisure, for the masses at least. It was even suggested that work might become the privilege of a ruling elite [10, p. 374].

By 1962, it seemed to some that, for Americans at least, the land of Cockaigne was theirs for the taking. Sebastian De Grazia, however, offered a classic account of the paradoxical relationship between leisure and abundance in industrial society [11]. Although De Grazia is not seen as writing from a radical standpoint, his analysis has some parallels with that of one of the key theorists of the so-called New Left, Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse suggested that 'false needs' were being created by capitalist society in order to keep workers in a state of permanent dissatisfaction, and therefore willing to continue lives of toil. He agreed with many more mainstream figures that

technology, particularly automation, held the key to a workless world, and even at the level of the 1960's, was capable of vastly reducing labour time. The capitalist system prevented this from happening however, presumably afraid that the masses, faced with expanded free time, might choose to expand their consciousness as well, something that could threaten the status quo. In this analysis, humanity appears trapped in an ontological circle – for work to be abolished, people's attitudes, to consumption, economics, and politics must change, but for attitudes to change, people must be free from the cycle of work and spend that characterises life in late industrial society. So the abolition of work remained part of a future utopia. In the analysis of Marcuse, the fact that the social system prevents the future of work becoming the present was used as part of a global critique of capitalist society [12].

De Grazia, like Marcuse sought to comprehensively explode the myth both of a leisured present and a leisured future. In a sense, of course, one's present was somebody else's future, and De Grazia drew attention to the fact that predictions of the decline of work were nothing new:

Every half century from the time of the industrial revolution on, we have men of wisdom and vision predicting more time to come. One of the things that bids us be cautious about accepting glowing prophecies of the future of free time that up to now they have all been wrong about it [11, p. 285].

Despite a growing plethora of labour saving devices, and advances in technology and communications, the worker of 1960's America was little better off than his or her counterpart of a century before. Not only did the increased dominance of clock time and the use of machinery mean that working days were more regulated and

intense than in the past, according to De Grazia, domestic appliances, radios, wristwatches and automobiles merely added to the diurnal clutter of life in high modernity: “Wherever timesaving appliances, communications, and transport abound, time – harried faces appear at every turn” [11, p. 315]. Work remains dominant, and consumerism is once again the main culprit, with the good life characterised by “whatever industry produces, advertisers sell, and government orders” [11, p. 279]. For the individual, the central dilemma of consumer society is the fact that the more one spends on prestigious goods, both to save time and to ensure one’s status, the more one must work, and the less time one has to enjoy them, and indeed life itself. Just as in Marcuse’s analysis, the false needs of the consumer are never satisfied, and the road of abundance leads only to more toil.

Like many other writers on the cultural position of work, De Grazia has a critical understanding of its antithesis, leisure. His is the utopian, the developmentalist view of time that should be truly free, and yet remains merely a commodified restorative for further work. “[C]reativeness, truth, and freedom...discovery and creation” [11, p. 395], are the qualities associated with authentic leisure. This is the ideal with which the reality of passive consumerism is contrasted. Under such a system, the future holds out the promise not of less work and more truly free time, but of “patriotism and work, war and fighting...”² [11, p. 279].

Both writers were sure that the issues of work and free time were political ones, since they ultimately beg the question “what to do with one’s life here and now” [11, p. 392]. The future of work is posed as a question of essence, something at the core of what it means, should, and could mean, to be truly human. In the same way that Marcuse saw humanity trapped in a kind of double hermeneutic, with radical change

² As of 2007, such a prediction seems to have been reasonably accurate.

and a transformation of values almost fatally interdependent, De Grazia saw the dialectic of exhausting toil and tranquilising leisure as preventing any meaningful discussion of their own legitimacy: “With work dominant, free time raises no such question: work takes care of the answers” [11, p. 392]. De Grazia, like Marcuse, does detect changing values amongst certain sections of the population, but does not specify who, and his prediction of how this situation may develop is far from revolutionary. It seems the best we can hope for is that the future of work and time will come under ever increasing scrutiny.

One key difference between De Grazia and Marcuse’s often similar accounts is, of course, the fact that the latter is much more closely associated with Marxism. Marcuse was fairly explicit in his analysis that for time to be truly free, and truly free of work, capitalism must come to an end. De Grazia makes no such assertion, and although he is certainly aware of the relevance of Marx [11, p. 333], is never quite able to propose that it is the domination of capital that prevents consciousness of the possibility of a world free from capitalist work, from ever emerging in depth.

3. Futurology and revolution; towards the year 2000

America’s fascination with the brave new world of automation, and the social changes supposedly associated with it, continued through the 1960’s. Accounts began to appear suggesting that work was reducing itself, or rather, that the new technologies of ‘cybernation’ were doing so. Kahn’s *The Year 2000* (1967) [13] is typical of non Marxist commentary on the future of work during this period. Kahn’s account is seen by some as archetypal of the futurology that proliferated during the 1960’s; funded by Rand or the Hudson institute, spurred on by an increased state

commitment to social planning, and the growing prominence of science and technocracy during the era of space travel [14, p. 186]. Although it is possible to see accounts by writers such as Kahn as merely apolitical relics of the era of “hyperexpansionism” [15, p. 5], these non Marxist analyses are not without their insights, and are less outlandish in their claims than is sometimes supposed.

Kahn is, like De Grazia (whom he references) initially sober in his assessment of the so called age of leisure, both in terms of the present and the future. Noting that work time had not dramatically decreased in the post-war period, Kahn’s future scenario is far from extravagant, with annual hours seen declining from 2000 to 1700-1900 by the year 2000: Hardly the end of work. However, elsewhere, Kahn predicts a declining dominance of the cultural significance of work.

Let us assume, then, with the expanded Gross National Product, greatly increased per capita income, the work week drastically reduced, retirement earlier (but active life span longer), and vacations longer, that leisure time and recreation and the values surrounding these acquire a new emphasis. Some substantial percentage of the population is not working at all [13, p. 194].

This non working class (or non working non class) [16] are to be supported by an increased commitment to welfare, although Kahn does not explicitly propose a guaranteed minimum income. Unlike some other writers of the period, Kahn says little about the possibility of social polarisation in the future.

Like the other commentators examined herein, Kahn has much to say on changing values, and like most other analyses of this phenomenon, particularly of this period, his statements are pure speculation. While Marx, Marcuse et al looked to a change of

values in the direction of an increased emphasis on self realisation, Kahn depicts this as a rise in the number of “sophists, epicureans, cynics, primitive or humanist sensualists, other materialists, and various kinds of dropouts...” [13, p. 125]. He remains ambivalent however, and fights shy of any prediction of an end to the work ethic, pointing out that there will always be people for whom the idea of extra work for extra pay, and the luxuries it can buy, is attractive.

Kahn is at his most insightful when discussing the difficulties of making predictions regarding the future social and cultural position of work. While it is possible, as he notes, that a decline in working hours may lead to a decline in the cultural importance of work, it is equally possible that the opposite could prove to be the case. Work could in fact grow in importance. The ideology of work has the potential to either wax or wane, or do both simultaneously, but amongst different sectors of the population.

One of the greatest problems...of sociological speculation has to do with the dialectical quality of the processes involved...For example, if work will occupy fewer hours of the average person's life, it is plausible to speculate that for this reason work will become less important. On the other hand, it is at least equally plausible that the change in the role of work may cause work as an issue to come to new prominence [13, p. 194].

If further evidence were needed to confirm that the future of work was a major concern in the public sphere during the 1960's, particularly in the USA, we might briefly examine the letter sent by the 'Ad Hoc Committee on the Triple Revolution' [17] to President Lyndon B. Johnson in March 1964. As Bix notes, this report had

“overtly socialist implications” [5, p. 269], the most radical being, perhaps, that a guaranteed minimum income was necessary to prevent social polarization and breakdown. The report is a classic statement of the problem of technological unemployment:

The cybernation revolution has been brought about by the combination of the computer and the automated self-regulating machine. This results in a system of almost unlimited productive capacity which requires progressively less human labor. Cybernation is already reorganizing the economic and social system to meet its own needs [17].

The labour that tends to be eliminated first, according to the letter’s signatories, is low skilled. Unlike *The Year 2000*, the *Triple Revolution* letter paints a picture of growing social polarization; “The confluence of surging population and driving technology is splitting the American labor force into tens of millions of 'have's' and millions of 'have-nots'” [17]. Arguing that “wealth produced by machines rather than by men is still wealth,” the committee “urge, therefore, that society, through its appropriate legal and governmental institutions, undertake an unqualified commitment to provide every individual and every family with an adequate income as a matter of right” [17]. The idea of a guaranteed minimum income, conceptually, seems straightforward enough, despite the possible practical complexities of its implementation, but the apparently equally straightforward idea that wealth produced by machines is still wealth, is a contentious one, and goes to the heart of the idea of the end of work. Most theories of the end of work share this idea, but rarely is it made clear quite how opposed this notion is to the economics of capitalism. That the

proposals of the *Triple Revolution* report were rejected by the government of the day is no surprise, since the capitalist system depends on a definition of wealth that involves the extraction of surplus value from human labour, not mechanical.

The authors were, in effect, calling for a transition to the prioritization of use value over exchange value. The *Triple Revolution* report at least acknowledges that production for people, rather than profit, is not the current *raison d'être* of the American state; “national policy has hitherto been aimed far more at the welfare of the productive process than at the welfare of people. The era of cybernation can reverse this emphasis” [17]. The latter part of this statement appears highly technologically determinist, as do other statements within the report. However, the fact that the authors make recommendations of policies to ameliorate the unemployment and poverty that cybernation has caused, shows that they understand the key factor in social change to be human decision making, rather than technology; that is, human agency and social forms are *prior to* technology. It is possible to *choose* to use technology differently, or for different social aims. Whether capitalism is characterised by the absence of control over technology, a decision not to exercise control, or indeed depends precisely on such control, is thus far a moot point.

What is missing from the *Triple Revolution* report, as from the other accounts examined in the present paper, is an understanding of the radicality of their own proposals. Unlike Marx and Marcuse, few of the future of work writers of the 1960's felt it necessary to argue for a complete transformation of society, although the *Triple Revolution* group came close. While for Kahn, work was likely to decline naturally, and without causing massive social problems, under capitalism, the *Triple Revolution* committee members seem unaware that their prescription for a future of declining

work would entail American capitalism, arguably the most powerful and stable social system the modern world has known, abolishing itself.

4. The future of work in post-industrial society

The period 1968-1973 can be seen both as the ‘peak’ of an era of economic growth, and also the climax of protest movements apparently oriented around demands in the university and the workplace [18]. In the realm of sociological theory, the 1970’s also saw the rise to prominence of the idea of post-industrial society, due in no small part to the publication of Daniel Bell’s *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* in 1973 [19].

Bell’s *Postindustrial Society*, it should be noted at the outset, is not a book that diagnoses or predicts the end of work. Nor are many of its ideas radically different from those that we have already come across whilst discussing books from around the period it was being written. The two most significant trends discussed in *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* were, arguably, the shift in emphasis from the production of goods to the delivering of services, and the growing importance of knowledge as a key factor in ordering late twentieth century economy and society in the West.

As is typical of future of work literature, the role of technology is central. However, Bell has revised downwards, by 1973, the claims he had made for automation in 1958 [7], and suggests that predictions such as those made in the *Triple Revolution* letter were merely “one more instance of the penchant for overdramatizing a momentary innovation” [19, p. 463], in this case cybernation.³ Bell, whilst agreeing with the analysis of American society as having gone beyond the realm of necessity,

³ “The combination of the computer and the automated self-regulating machine” [19, p.463].

does not see productivity as having risen enough to liberate humanity from work.

Time, rather than being liberated entirely from the fetters of labour, has itself become “an economic calculus” [19, p. 466].

Also of interest is Bell’s view that consumerism had led to a hedonistic way of life and a destruction of the protestant work ethic. Capitalism, in this reading, has undermined one of the founding principles of its existence. The post scarcity society has allowed a class to develop for whom the bourgeois attitudes of high capitalism are increasingly irrelevant, and who instead increasingly inhabit a realm of “prodigality and display,” of “*carpe diem*” [19, p.478]. This, strangely, appears to be sustainable without an equally prodigious amount of work, although Bell at least acknowledges that the *world of work* is still dominated by the values of industriousness and self control, bringing it into ontological conflict with an increasingly post-bourgeois cultural sphere. The fact that consumerism has emerged as, essentially, the replacement for the protestant work ethic in that it obliges people to work more, rather than less, is not picked up by Bell at this point. A close reading, however, reveals that this analysis anyway refers only to the rising knowledge class, while the working class continue to covet “ever expanding goods and production” [19, p. 479]. Bell sees the new modernists, the ascendant knowledge manipulators, as being the key meaning bearing group of the future, and suggests that they dominate the media and culture. He seems to have underestimated the extent to which apparently anti-bourgeois attitudes can coexist with a willingness to promote consumerism to a surprisingly numerous working class, which is essentially the role of the media and ‘culture’. Alternatively, Bell has underestimated the allure that consumerism or “expanding goods”, holds for the new knowledge elite, as well as the working class, whilst overemphasising the so called anti bourgeois attitudes of the former. Like many others writing during the

early 1970's, in the wake of 1968 in France, the campus disturbances in the USA, the anti Vietnam struggle, and the civil rights movement, it is likely that Bell was guilty of what he had criticised in others, over-dramatizing a momentary innovation, in this case, the anti bourgeois affectations of the youthful demimonde.

5. The revolt against the work ethic, and the revenge of work

Diagnoses of a declining work ethic were common currency in the 'peak' period of 1968-1973: Indeed by the early 70's they were reaching something of a feverish pitch, particularly in the pages of American newspapers and magazines. It seemed to many that in terms of work's future – it simply didn't have one. In 1973 a special government task force was established to try and gauge the levels of 'blue collar (and indeed white collar) blues' amongst the American population, and this resulted in a book entitled *Work in America* [20]. The following articles represent merely a sample of those appearing in wide circulation print media during 1972 and early 1973: 'To hell with work', Harper's, June, 1972; Life magazine's, 'bored on the job, industry contends with apathy and anger on the assembly line', September 1, 1972, and 'who wants to work?' in the March 26, 1973 Newsweek [21]. However, the *Work in America* report concluded, contrary to sensationalist media accounts, that there was no great weight of evidence supporting claims of a "new 'anti work ethic'" [20, p. 43]. Research by Yankelovitch was cited which suggested that 79% of young people still believed a career is a meaningful part of one's life [20, p. 43]. Leaving to one side the reliability and ultimate usefulness of such attitudinal research in itself, we can at least see that not all commentators were taken in by the media's portrayal of revolting workers.

It could be argued that rising absenteeism and high turnover were primarily related to the fact that wages were relatively high, and unemployment low, during this period, and in the sector of industry that tended to come under the scrutiny of commentators; automobile production. In simple terms, workers could walk off the job (and onto another) without fear of unemployment and destitution, and were paid well enough that they could afford to be absent. Should economic conditions worsen, one would expect to see the position of workers become more precarious, and their latitude for disruptive behaviour narrower.

As the Oil Crisis of 1973 took effect, this is precisely what happened. Some have suggested, in fact, that the supposed economic woes of the mid to late 1970's were in fact a reaction by capital to a worryingly restless working class. Claiming that the Yom Kippur war was "financed on both sides by the same capital", Montano, writing in 1975, suggests that the crisis was not a temporary recession to cure inflation but "the imposition of a *long term austerity for the purpose of enforcing work* with the maximum feasible violence" [22, p. 115].

Whether the recession was orchestrated, or a genuine result of imbalances and conflict in the international economic system, the result was the same; a future without the work ethic, with falling working hours, rising wages, increased leisure, and a guaranteed minimum income, began to look like a work of science fiction. The 1980's saw American society combine austerity with economic expansion and a renewed commitment to accumulation and acquisition. There was little room for discussions of the end of work in the America of yuppies and Reagan.

6. Unemployment and utopia; the 1980's and the future of work

In Britain, the picture was rather different, and there was a veritable flood of books on the future of work during the 1980's. From the late 1970's books began to appear that predicted a workless future. Aside from the American socioeconomic (and ideological) context, two further factors may help explain why the focus of debates about the future of work shifted from America to Europe. Firstly, Britain in particular had begun to experience what some considered catastrophic levels of unemployment. Many presumed that this was to be a permanent situation, and in fact unemployment would continue to rise almost ad infinitum. Charles Handy, for example, suggested that "there are not going to be enough conventional jobs to go around... That much seems certain" [23, p. 1-2]. Secondly, computers had entered the national consciousness, and were seen by many commentators as not only responsible for existing unemployment, to some extent, but having the potential to eliminate ever greater proportions of the population from productive work.

Books such as Charles Handy's *The future of work* [23], James Robertson's *Future work* [24], Barry Jones's *Sleeper's wake; technology and the future of work* [25], and Jenkins and Sherman's *The collapse of work* [26], appear to share many of the same certainties. It was clear to all that, in the words of Handy, "Britain is no longer primarily an industrial nation" [23, p. 24]. Bell's prediction of a post-industrial society, it seemed, had been accurate. Commentaries such as these tended to follow a similar pattern. After asserting that automation and computerisation will continue to eliminate jobs in the 'traditional' manufacturing sector, they suggest that although the expanding service industries will absorb some of the surplus, these too will become increasingly computerised, and may themselves decline as a source of employment. Many of these writers offer a range of future scenarios, all of which emphasise the decline of work, certainly in quantitative terms, and often with a concomitant

qualitative or ontological reduction in importance. For those still in employment, Handy suggests lifetime working hours will halve, from 100,000 to 50,000 [23]. Many, however, are likely to be unemployed. Surveying the range of scenarios posited, the nomenclature for which includes terms such as “hyperexpansionist” or “Sane, Humane, Ecological” [24, p. 5], we can summarise by suggesting that society is seen to face two basic alternative futures. In the first, a small elite retain employment in highly productive, high technology and knowledge based sectors, while the remainder languish, stigmatised, impoverished and restless, with only insecure menial work, or crime, as options. Robertson describes it thus:

Full employment will not be restored. All necessary work will be done by a skilled elite of professionals and experts, backed by automation, other capital intensive technology, and specialist know how. Others will not work. They will merely consume the goods and services provided by the working minority – including leisure, information, and education services. Society will be split into workers and drones [24, p. 5].

This vision of a society polarised around the fulcrum of work is a common one. Therborn, for instance, terms it the “Brazilianisation of advanced capitalism” [27]. James Bellini painted a similar picture with his book (and TV series) *Rule Britannia* [28], but with more emphasis on the criminal element taking hold amongst a superfluous rabble. Some noted the striking thematic, although not temporal, convergence between the predictions of social scientists and those of science fiction. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* (1952) is cited by Suedfeld and Ward as a text that

foresees “overwork for a minority with a lack of meaningful work for the majority” [29, p. 22].

As counterpoint to this prediction of a polarised society, future of work writers in the 1980’s often attempted to supply something of a blueprint for a better future. This tended to involve the acceptance of computerisation and automation, since there is no objection to the reduction of work in itself, indeed, it is to be welcomed. Alongside this, however, there must be a shift in consciousness. In the polarised society discussed above, the ideology of work is maintained as a central feature, the most salient aspect of this ideology being the fact that work is used to distinguish the elite from the marginalised. In that it perpetuates many of the negative aspects of conventional capitalism – social inequality, alienation, ecological degradation, this ideology of work is seen as a dysfunctional remnant of industrial, employment based society. In the more favourable future scenario of writers such as Robertson, Jones, Jenkins and Sherman, society must undergo what Marcuse, back in the late 1960’s, had called a “transvaluation of values” [30]. Handy predicts that, “The job will no longer be the whole measure of one’s identity, one status, one’s finances, or one’s purpose in life” [23, p. 11].

A common theme is that the progressive elimination of work as traditionally conceived is accompanied by some kind of escape from economic imperatives. Jones writes; “we ought to reject the idea that only things which generate economic profit are worthwhile” [25, p. 97]. Gershuny conceptualises this as a kind of dialectic between qualitative and quantitative values, with the latter associated with conventional market society, and the former with utopian, or at least enlightened visions of the good life [31, p. 16]. He notes that the ideal of a ‘good life’ beyond

scarcity (naturally or artificially produced) and toil, “descended to us from third century BC Athens” [31, p. 19].

Writers such as Marx and Marcuse, like the ancient Greeks, understood true human existence as beginning where economic imperatives end. Work, in the futures literature, as in Marx et al, is seen as the ontological and ideological, indeed the essential link between the individual and the economy. In the society of work – contemporary capitalist society, it is the irrationality-of-economic-rationality that prevents work from being transformed. In a future where work has become patently irrelevant, our futurologists can see no reason why this irrelevance should not reveal to all the dysfunctional nature of work based capitalism. Crucially, they fail to take into account capital’s desire for survival, and in doing so perhaps underestimate its dependence on human labour power as a source of value. The future of work writers present what may be an alternative, more rational and enlightened social alternative. Once again, however, the ability of capital to adapt and survive, even in the face of seemingly inexorable technological and economic logic, is not taken into account.

In practical and infrastructural terms, since society will be unable to supply everyone with work as conventionally understood, work in the formal economic sector should no longer be the precondition for an income, according to many work futurists writing in the 1980’s. A Guaranteed Minimum Income scheme is to support the population as they discover new and self enhancing forms of activity beyond the realms of traditional work. Indeed, such activity is hardly to be considered work at all. This new form of quasi work typically involves horticulture, crafts, research, sport, and DIY activities. More often than not, there is to be a community element to this new sector, which is seemingly beyond capitalist economic rationality; in many accounts [see for example, 24, p. 42], each community is to have communal

workshops, equipped with the latest technology, with which the citizens can manufacture goods to satisfy many of their needs.⁴ Although the role of consumerism as the counterpart to work is not covered in great detail by many of the 1980's commentators, the idea of voluntary simplicity, or at least a move away from waste and obsolescence, is very much in evidence. These blueprints for a future without work, let us call them utopias, very much represent the *practical* manifestation of our progression beyond economic rationality.

7. From dreams of the future to the nightmare of the present

From the perspective of 2007, predictions of a future of leisure, or the abolition of work and its ethic, appear almost quaint. By the 1990's, even commentators such as Jeremy Rifkin – author of *The End of Work* [33] - were detecting a possible tightening of work's hold on society, even if, objectively, this appeared irrational in the face of growing productivity. Rifkin and others on the American scene continued to at least countenance the possibility of a future without work however. Lerner, for example, provides an analysis which draws on the work of Gorz to propose that national governments give more consideration to supposedly “‘far out’” ideas such as a guaranteed annual income [34, p 191]. Interestingly, Lerner's article represents something of a reversal of the situation discussed at the end of section 5 above, and Lerner even refers to the UK as *setting a trend* towards underemployment and contingent employment [34, p 185]. By 1994, when the article was written, the issue of ‘jobless growth’ was gaining in prominence in North American debates.

⁴ Some went as far as sketching these out. See, the illustrations in *Why Work* [32, p. 149-154].

Currently, in both Britain and America, unemployment, while still higher than official figures suggest, has not reached ‘catastrophic levels’, although being unemployed remains a catastrophe for the individual. An increasing proportion of the population as a whole are part of the workforce, people are working longer hours, are working harder [35] and will need to retire later. The tendency for working hours to increase, even in the face of increased productivity, was seen by Rosenberg as a trend characterising the 1980’s [36]. Rosenberg predicted, on the basis of a continued ‘employer driven’ scenario (labour surplus, weak unions), that paid time off would not increase, and that the labour market would continue to be increasingly polarised into a core of overworked employees, and a group in more precarious employment.

To remain employed today one must show ever more extreme levels of commitment, to one’s ‘team mates’, to competitiveness, to satisfying the client, to adding value. Or, one may be out of work, marginalised and stigmatised, or working in an expanding sector of menial, precarious, and almost equally marginal low paid jobs, both in the so called service sector, and in a manufacturing sector that refuses to disappear in a puff of silicon tinged smoke. There has been, in the words of Juliet Schor, an “unexpected decline of leisure” [37]. Since technology has continued to advance, and productivity increase, our present situation is indeed unexpected; why has there been no significant reduction in work, let alone its elimination?

One explanation, proposed by some Marxists, relates to the labour theory of value, and can be seen as part of an explanation of why the optimistic predictions of our 1980’s futurists have not come to pass. Since the only source of profit for capitalists is unpaid labour, that is, the proportion of labour performed by workers after they have done enough to pay their wages, capitalist society would indeed be abolishing itself if it were to abolish work. Having invested in labour saving

technologies, the capitalist, paradoxically, needs workers to operate that technology as intensively and extensively as possible, requiring harder work and longer hours. At the same time, unemployment is kept high, and wages low, whilst consumerism, in ideological terms particularly is cranked up to ever more dizzying levels. There has been a revamped commitment to promoting the work ethic through social policy and welfare reforms. Under such circumstances, the work ethic is unlikely to decline. The apparent paradox, and apparent irrationality of rising productivity alongside the extension of work might lead some to the conclusion that work is today less an economic phenomenon, and more a strategy of political control [38, p. 171].

And what of developing 'third sectors' beyond the rationality of profit, sectors that have the potential to slowly eclipse the world of conventional work in the money economy? Far from economic rationality declining, it searches out more spheres to colonise, thus we are faced with the phenomenon of cash (or work) rich, time poor couples employing what amount to new servants (time rich, but cash poor) to care for their children, home, shopping, pets, garden, etc. etc. [39]. The sphere of work then, expands. Time is to be filled with work virtually to the last second, as evidenced by the 'Slivers of Time' scheme, initiated by the British government in 2005:

Slivers-of-Time Working is for anyone who can only be available for work around other commitments in their life (e.g. childcare, studying, existing part-time work, caring for a dependant adult, medical commitments, hunting for an ideal job or starting their own enterprise.) These people typically have a few

hours when they could work each day but only know *which* hours, if any, on a day-to-day basis [40].⁵

On the question of discourses that explicitly engage with the future of work, one might suggest that much of it has used the fact that work is a central element of both base and superstructure in modern society to allow a wider social critique, often with a utopian bent. In Britain at least, the future of work is little discussed at present, and there is a faint sense of embarrassment surrounding previous wild predictions of thinking machines, robot workers, and dreams of ease. A 2005 report for The Work Foundation, a British think tank, noted the absence of debates on work and its futures at the level of national politics in particular;

despite its recognised importance, the quality of work as experienced by the majority has not featured on the political agenda for some considerable time. This is a genuine surprise, not least because a political party that can speak directly to the experience of most workers might expect to be rewarded with a substantial electoral dividend [42].

Debate at the level of policy, with the exception of occasional, brief discussions of the ‘work life balance’, has indeed been surprisingly lacking, in the British context at least, during the twenty first century so far. Certainly, policy makers appear not to be positively attracted to predictions of a decline in work, although they are likely to be aware, at some level, of some of the more mainstream commentaries such as those of Robertson or Rifkin. They are still less interested in changes that would

⁵ The slivers of time scheme was brought to my attention at the Cardiff Futures Conference 2006 by

fundamentally threaten existing political and social structures. Rather, policy continues to focus on attaining and maintaining full employment. Citizens are to be endowed with skills and attitudes that will ensure national competitiveness in the global capitalist economy, and key to this, clearly, is the ideological and ontological dominance of work. Whether or not it is desirable that work and life remain separate entities to be balanced, rather than combined, remains a question that few stakeholders seem willing to discuss.

References

- [1] B.K. Hunnicutt, *Work without end: abandoning shorter hours for the right to work*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1988.
- [2]
- [3] L.W. Nicholson, *Work is Becoming Obsolete*, *The Northwest Technocrat*, 1st quarter No. 342 (1996), accessed on-line at <http://www.technocracy.org/Archives/Work%20Is%20Becoming%20Obsolete-r.htm>, 02/06/2007.
- [4] J.M. Keynes, *Essays in persuasion*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1932.
- [5] A.S. Bix, *Inventing ourselves out of jobs? America's debate over technological unemployment, 1929-1981*, Johns Hopkins University Press, London, 2000.
- [6] T.F. Fry, *Computer appreciation*, Newnes-Butterworth, London, 1975.
- [7] D. Bell, *Work and its discontents*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1956.

- [8] E. Larrabee, R. Meyersohn (Eds.), *Mass leisure*. Free Press, Glencoe, Ill, 1958.
- [9] R. Lynes, *Time on our hands*, in: E. Larrabee, R. Meyersohn (Eds.), *Mass leisure*. Free Press, Glencoe, Ill, 1958.
- [10] D. Riesman, *Leisure and work in post-industrial society*, in: E. Larrabee, R. Meyersohn (Eds.), *Mass leisure*. Free Press, Glencoe, Ill, 1958.
- [11] S. De Grazia, *Of time, work, and leisure*, Anchor, Garden City (N.Y.), 1964.
- [12] H. Marcuse, *One dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964.
- [13] H. Kahn, and A.J. Wiener, *The year 2000: a framework for speculation on the next thirty-three years*, Macmillan, New York, 1967.
- [14] K. Kumar, *Prophecy and progress: the sociology of industrial and post-industrial society*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978.
- [15] J. Robertson, *Future work: jobs, self-employment and leisure after the industrial age*, London, Gower/Maurice Temple Smith, 1985.
- [16] A. Gorz, *Farewell to the working class: an essay on post-industrial socialism*, Pluto, London, 1983.
- [17] D. Agger et al. *Triple revolution* (letter), 1964, accessed on-line at http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/C_CC2a_TripleRevolution.htm, 14/11/2006.
- [18] M. Rose, *Re-working the work ethic: economic values and socio-cultural politics*, Batsford, London, 1985.
- [19] D. Bell, *The coming of post-industrial society: a venture in social forecasting*, Heinemann Educational, London, 1974.

- [20] U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *Work in America: report of a Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare*, M.I.T. Press, London, 1973.
- [21] J. Zerzan, *Organized labor versus "the revolt against work"*, (1974).
Accessed on-line at
<http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/organisedlabour.htm>, 14/11/2006
- [22] M. Montano, *Notes on the international crisis*, in: *Midnight Notes Collective* (Eds.), *Midnight oil: work, energy, war, 1973-1992*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, 1992.
- [23] C. Handy, *The future of work: a guide to a changing society*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1984.
- [24] J. Robertson, *Future work: jobs, self-employment and leisure after the industrial age*. Gower/Maurice Temple Smith, London, 1985.
- [25] B. Jones, *Sleepers, wake!: technology and the future of work*, Oxford University Press, New York, Melbourne, 1982.
- [26] C. Jenkins, B. Sherman, *The collapse of work*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1979.
- [27] G. Therborn, *Why some people are more unemployed than others*, Verso, London, 1986.
- [28] J. Bellini, *Rule Britannia: a progress report for Domesday 1986*, Abacus, London, 1982.
- [29] P. Suedfeld, L. M. Ward, *Dark trends: Psychology, science fiction, and the ominous consensus*
Futures 8:1 (1976) 22-39.

- [30] H. Marcuse, *Aggressiveness in advanced industrial society* (1967), in: H. Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in critical theory*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1968.
- [31] J. Gershuny, *After industrial society?: the emerging self-service economy*, Macmillan, London, 1978.
- [32] B. Russel, *Why Work? Arguments for the leisure society*, Freedom Press, London, 1983.
- [33] J. Rifkin, *The end of work: the decline of the global work- force and the dawn of the post-market era*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1995.
- [34] S. Lerner, *The future of work in North America: Good jobs, bad jobs, beyond jobs*, *Futures* 26:2 (1994) 185-196.
- [35] F. Green, *It's been a hard day's night: The concentration and intensification of work in late twentieth century Britain*, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. 39:1 (2001) 53-80.
- [36] S. Rosenberg, *More work for some, less work for others: Working hours in the USA*, *Futures* 25: 5 (1993) 551-560.
- [37] J. Schor *The overworked American: the unexpected decline of leisure*, Basic Books, New York, 1993.
- [38] F. Bowring, *Post-Fordism and the end of work*, *Futures* 34 (2002) 159-172.
- [39] A. Gorz, *Critique of economic rationality*, Verso, London, 1989.
- [40] Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *Introduction to Slivers of Time*, 2005, available online at: <http://www.sliversoftime.com/>, accessed 14/11/2006.

[41] 'Today Second Life, Tomorrow the World', Guardian (newspaper), May 17, 2007.

[42] Coats, D. An agenda for work: The Work Foundation's challenge to policy makers, Provocation Paper, Series 1 Number 2, 2005, available online at:
<http://www.theworkfoundation.com/products/publications/azpublications/anagendaforworktheworkfoundationschallengetopolicymakers.aspx>, accessed 05/07/07.