

# Chapter 31

## Work and Needs in a Finite Planet: Reflections from Ecological Economics



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### 31.1 Ecological Economics and Concrete Utopias

Utopia, Olin Wright (2010) notes, evokes fantasy, aspirations for a better world unconstrained by realistic considerations of human psychology and social feasibility. Political realism rejects such fantasies, arguing for accommodation to practical realities and pragmatic improvement of institutions. The ideas of ‘real’ and ‘concrete utopias’ address this tension between practice and dreams, by paying attention to feasibility and constraint while emphasizing that notions of the possible are themselves shaped by our ability to envision alternative futures (Wright, 2010: 5–6; Archer, 2019).

Drawing on the work of Joan Martínez Alier (1992; Martínez Alier & Schulpmann, 1987), this chapter draws attention to the contribution of ecological economics to the envisioning of concrete utopias (see also Ingebrigtsen & Jakobsen, 2012; Kallis & March, 2015; Gomez-Baggethun, 2020; Mair et al., 2020). To Martínez Alier (1992), concrete utopias represent radical visions to the future, but not impossible ones. They are utopian because they assume radical political change without explaining how it would come about, but they are plausible because they are elaborate and concrete, and because they acknowledge the constraints of social and ecological realities, hence having a chance of coming into being.

Specifically, this chapter explores alternative pathways to the transformation of work in the context of environmental limits to growth, a theme that has inspired ecological economists for more than a century (Popper-Lynkeus, 1912; Mair et al., 2020). It is organized in four main parts. First, I call attention to cultural, economic,

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technological and environmental changes that are destabilizing established conceptions of work. Second, I review alternative visions on the future of work, with an emphasis on the case for a Universal Basic Income. Next, I discuss common criticisms addressed to these visions. Finally, drawing on early ecological economics texts rescued from oblivion by Martínez Alier (1992; Martínez Alier & Schulpmann, 1987), I discuss the case for a Universal Civil Service, a variant of basic income premised in the egalitarian distribution of the volume of work required for the reproduction of society, with attention to ecological and resource limits. I call for expanding traditional emphasis in basic income debates on individual freedoms towards considerations of collective justice, and I make a case for a future of work organized around the principle of fair distribution of minimal necessary work.

## 31.2 The End of Work as We Know It?

Today's common understanding of work as 'paid labour' is a product of industrial capitalism that bears little in common with those that prevailed in other times and cultures (Gorz, 1988). It was introduced in the eighteenth century by the time economics took form as a discipline, and it consolidated a century later through legal codification (Komlosy, 2018). Paid labour has become not only the main means by which humans fulfil their needs but also a major pathway to social integration and a key marker of status and identity (Ackerman et al., 1998, Ehmer & Lis, 2009).

In recent decades, however, traditional understandings of work in industrialized countries are being destabilized by the compounding effects of accelerated cultural, economic, technological and environmental change (Gomez-Baggethun & Naredo, 2020). First, the relocation of industry in developing countries and the reorganization of global commodity chains with economic globalization has brought a deregulation and flexibilization of labour in the old industrialized countries. These changes have in turn changed attitudes towards work and, more generally, into ideas about work and life. For a growing amount of people in the developed countries, especially among the employed in low paid and unskilled labour, work is no longer the focus of their life, neither the main marker of their identity (Meda, 2010).

Second, digital capitalism and automation have drastically reduced the need for work (Rifkin, 1995) and are loosening the relationship between value, work and wages (Mason, 2016). This has turned much working force dispensable, raising fears of massive unemployment (Ford, 2017, OECD, 2019). Third, as current patterns of production and consumption prove incompatible with global sustainability targets (Wiedmann et al., 2020), the sustainability sciences call for reduced working hours as a key policy measure for a low carbon future (Schor, 2005; Kallis et al., 2013; Knight et al., 2013).

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has revolutionized worker expectations on flexibility, bringing transformations to work expected to endure beyond the pandemic (Liang, 2020).

An emerging consensus is gradually building around the notion that the current organization of work is not fit to meet the challenges emerging with current ecological and economic realities. In the face of these challenges, the literatures on ecological economics and degrowth are debating transformations pathways towards economies where the basic needs of all are met within just and safe planetary boundaries (Daly, 1996; Jackson, 2017; Raworth, 2017; Gómez-Baggethun 2022). A central question for these debates concerns the volume of work required to meet basic needs for all in a finite planet, and how work is to be organized and distributed in a post-growth future (Mair et al., 2020).

### 31.3 Reducing Work in the Name of Freedom

The notion that freedom starts where necessity ends and the aspiration of reducing work to enable more time for creative leisure, contemplation, self-realization and public life has been a constant in humanity from Plato to our times (Arendt, 1998; Komlosy, 2018).

Aristotle (350 B.C.E./1998) fantasized with an age where machines dispensed humans from work and slavery.<sup>1</sup> Marx (1894/1991: 958–959) famously wrote that the realm of freedom begins only where labour determined by necessity ends. Lafargue (2012) attacked the glorification of work by priests, economists and moralists, encouraging the working class to shift the focus of their demands from work to leisure. Keynes (2010) envisioned a future of leisure, predicting 15-h workweeks for his grandchildren. Arendt (1998) made the case for *vita activa*, a life of action where liberation from the toil of labour would enable time for broader involvement in politics and common causes. Following her steps, Gorz (1988) advocated work reduction to expand people's freedom and ability to pursue self-realization and involvement of social, community and political life.

The locus in the case for work-time reduction is that gains in work productivity from technological developments should be used to expand leisure, not consumption (Coote et al., 2010). Proposals to reduce the standard 40-h workweek and 1500–2000-h work year in developed economies range from the 6-h workday and the 32-h workweek advocated by many labour unions and green political parties, to more radical propositions like the 2–3 h workday (Lafargue, 2012; Ellul, 1954) and the 15-h workweek (Bregman, 2017; Stronge et al., 2019).

The literature on reduced working time often advocates a 'life course approach', demanding rights to flexibly reduce working time at different periods of the working life, with or without associated reductions in income (Pullinger, 2014). Gorz (1988) advocated limiting lifespan work to 20,000–30,000 h, allowing people to distribute workload over time according to need and preference. This could be

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<sup>1</sup> 'If every tool [...] could do the work that befits it [...], if the weavers' shuttles were to weave of themselves, then there would be no need either of apprentices for the master workers, or of slaves for the lords' (Aristotle, Politics, I.4 1253 b33-1254a1).

achieved by a combination of measures, including regulations of maximum working hours and increases in minimum holiday entitlements and other statutory paid leaves (Hayden, 1999). In its maximalist strands, advocates of work reduction aspire to a post-work society, in which all tedious work is fully automated (Rifkin, 1995; Frayne, 2015).

A related body of literature shifts focus from quantitative to qualitative work transformations, envisioning futures where unpleasant, monotonous and tedious work is turned into more attractive (Fourier, 1901) and meaningful activities (Schwartz, 1982), or into some kind of pleasurable tasks where the lines between work and leisure get blurred (Black, 1985).

Proposals to increase freedom from work have long pointed to loosening or breaking the links between wages and labour (Gorz, 1988; Parijs, 1997). Most prominent among these proposals is the case for a Universal Basic Income (hereafter UBI), defined as a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement (Bregman, 2017). Once a marginal vision of radical thinkers, the case for a UBI is gaining traction across the ideological spectrum, becoming one of the most influential proposal to modernize welfare states and reform capitalism (Downes & Lansley, 2018). In a juncture without precedent, financiers, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Nobel laureates in economics and anti-capitalists alike converge in the case for a basic income (Mason, 2016; Ford, 2017). Pilot schemes are being tested across the world, and countries such as Brazil and Spain are currently experimenting with temporary variants of basic income policies in response to threats of massive poverty and unemployment triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Fariza, 2020).

### 31.4 Work Utopias and Their Limits

Post-work futures and the case for a basic income have been criticized on the basis of various technological, psychological, economic, political and ecological considerations.

First, a long-standing line of criticism (see, e.g. Ellul, 1954) concerns an alleged excess of idealism, tacit in the assumption that time gained to work would primarily go into meaningful and laudable activities, such as arts and creative leisure or involvement in public life. Critique to UBI along these lines often revolve around fears that much free time gained from work would go to activities of no or dubious social value. This line of criticism raises some troubling questions. Is Hanna Arendt's *vita activa* a more plausible outcome from work-time reductions than a *vita pasiva*? Isn't passive life increasingly favoured by a massively expanded industry of digital entertainment (e.g. social media) and by technological gadgets that exploit human propensity to comfort (Wu, 2018)? Whether or not these fears came true, should the content of leisure be judged and administered? Who would decide what is 'good' and 'bad' leisure? In doing so, would the prevailing 'work ethic' be replaced by an equally moralizing 'leisure ethic'?

A second line of criticism concerns a long-standing reluctance to decouple work from income. Two main concerns are raised in this regard. First, the fear that doing so would erode incentives to work. Second, the widely held belief that income should bear some relation with contribution and effort. While this argument is often associated to liberal discourses on meritocracy, the idea of justice underlying this argument has footing across the ideological spectrum. In fact, this consideration lays at the basis of Marx's theory of exploitation, and in his critique of the capitalist appropriation of the surplus value produced by workers,<sup>2</sup> as well as in the feminist case for the paid compensation of household work (Federici, 1975).

A third line of criticism concerns an alleged excess of optimism regarding the scope for work-saving technology. As noted by Black (1985), historical records are in fact not encouraging. Despite sustained gains in productivity, industrialism's promise of work liberation through technological progress never came about. Historians and anthropologists contend that human toil increased from hunting-gathering to agrarian societies (Harari, 2014), and the industrial revolution brought the longest working weeks known to human history (Schor, 2008). Technological achievements of the digital revolution seem equally discouraging. Smartphones and other communication technologies have facilitated work's encroachment on leisure (Wajcman, 2015), de facto extending working hours in many economic sectors (Derks & Bakker, 2014). Second, digitalization has brought a new tide of 'shadow work' (Illich, 1981), shifting upon us many unpaid tasks (e.g. check-out in supermarkets, assemblage of furniture and online bookings) that were previously paid for and now parasite our time (Lambert, 2015).

The obvious but often unrecognized problem is that technology will not liberate us on its own. Left to the dictates of capital, productivity dividends will keep serving economic expansion over the contraction of work in many parts of the world. Productivity gains will be largely absorbed by robotization, while capitalist economies will keep compensating for the labour-displacing effects of productivity gains by expanding existing industries and creating new ones (Manyika et al., 2017), often of dubious social utility (Graeber, 2013). Work-time reductions through technology seem only likely if combined with concomitant changes in the institutions steering the allocation of the productivity dividends.<sup>3</sup> The great reductions of working time achieved in the early decades of the twentieth century did not stem from technological productivity gains alone, but from their combination with sustained pressure from organized labour.

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<sup>2</sup> Sen (2009) notes that this notion of merit-based justice co-exists in Marx's work with a conflicting notion of egalitarian justice, expressed in the famous motto of *The critique of Gotha program*: 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (Marx, 1875).

<sup>3</sup> This view is criticized by Ellul (1954), who rejects the view that technological developments can be harnessed by extracting technology from the dictates of a capitalist economy and re-embedding into a planned economy. To Ellul, the direction and outcomes of technological change respond primarily to autonomous mechanisms of the technological system rather than to the political institutions in which it is embedded.

Critiques extend to the anti-work and post-work visions that assume that most work can be either automated or turned into pleasurable activities. First, the idea of turning work into pleasure has in fact a long history of co-option for the purpose of increasing working time and effort (Friedmann, 1963). As an example, today's tech giants in Silicon Valley such as Google and Facebook fill workplaces with amenities, persuading their employees that round-the-clock work is fun. Furthermore, they convert the leisure time tech-users spend on their screens into unpaid 'digital labour' monetized as targeted advertising (Fuchs, 2015). The work-day of digital labourers starts as we pick up our phone and begin generating data (Arrieta Ibarra et al., 2018). Second, in a low carbon economy with decreased use of fossil fuels, productivity gains can be much harder to achieve, with some projections pointing in the opposite direction (Mair et al., 2020).

Finally, and central to our discussion, there is the question of distributive justice. In her critique of UBI, Mestrum (2018: 97) notes that 'individual freedom is extremely important, but can never be dissociated from collective responsibility'. In effect, some prominent work utopias tend to downplay the fact that there will always be a share of *necessary* work that hardly can be mechanized (e.g. emotional care) or turned pleasant (e.g. sewage cleansing). The less some people do of this job, the more others will have to take up their share. If we accept this premise, a fundamental question concerns the problem of fair distribution of socially necessary work.

### 31.5 The Case for Sharing Minimal Necessary Work

The case for the equitable distribution of socially necessary work has a long-standing tradition of thought. We find it in the work of John Stuart Mill (1850)<sup>4</sup> and Bertrand Russell (1935), and it has a long footing in the feminist (Waring, 1988) and work sharing literatures (Hayden, 1999). To the reach of my knowledge, one of the most elaborated proposals along these lines is the case for a Universal Civil Service (UCS) by early ecological economist Joseph Popper-Lynkeus (1912), whose writings have been rescued from oblivion by Martínez-Alier (1992).

In the *Universal Civil Service as a Solution of a Social Problem* (1912), Popper-Lynkeus wrote about how an ecologically viable economy could cover the basic needs of all individuals based on a drastically reduced and evenly distributed *necessary* working time. Popper-Lynkeus grounded his vision on detailed accounts of available resources, with the double objective of calculating the human work required to guarantee basic needs and to investigate how consumption of exhaustible resources could be reduced. Rather than the end of work, the focus of his utopia was on how to define, distribute and organize the work required to meet basic needs

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<sup>4</sup>Mill writes: 'To reduce very greatly the quantity of work required to carry on existence is as needful as to distribute it more equally' [...] 'There is a portion of work rendered necessary by the fact of each person's existence: no one could exist unless work, to a certain amount, were done either by or for him. Of this each person is bound, in justice, to perform his share'.

for all. This involved providing all individuals with goods and services of prime necessity such as food, clothes, housing, public health care, upbringing and education, a vision that is consistent with modern theories on basic needs (see, e.g. Chiappero-Martinetti, 2014).

The economic system he proposed consisted of two parts. The first part would be a collectivized economy governed by public authorities oriented to secure basic needs for all individuals. This would be achieved by means of a civil (instead of military) conscription that he calculated at a 12-year service for men and seven for women, with a 35-h week. Dividing equally by gender, this amounts to a working lifespan of less than 10 years and less than 20,000 h to all healthy members of society.<sup>5</sup> This civil service would entitle everyone to the right to cover necessities for their entire life course free of charge (i.e. to a basic income). After completion of the UCS, working would be an option, but no longer a necessity for survival. The second part of the economy would be market-driven, governed by supply and demand. After completing the UCS, those who wish could continue working in economic activities of the public or private sectors, either as hired employees or as free entrepreneurs. Importantly, he foresaw that with productivity increase from technological change, the duration of the UCS would gradually decrease, while the scope of the concept goods and services of primary necessity would expand.

Like any other work utopias, the case for Universal Civil Service is prone to criticism from across the ideological spectrum. Liberal and conservative status quo proponents shall dismiss it as too radical and unrealistic (as they already did in times Popper-Lynkeus), but elements of this vision can be found in the New Deal and in the universal services of Nordic welfare states. Socialists shall contend that the market-driven segment of the economy would lead to inequalities of income, wealth and power. This is true, but additional measures could be put in place to secure further redistribution of wealth, including progressive taxes on income, wealth and profits, and the enforcement of maximum–minimum income ratios (Alexander, 2014). Conspicuous consumption could be disincentivized with green taxation, while further public income could be raised from taxes on capital (including robots) and from Tech giants as social dividends for ‘digital labour’ (Arrieta-Ibarra et al., 2018), which could be then redistributed in the form of public goods and services. Anarchists shall contend that an army of bureaucrats would be needed to enforce and police the Universal Civil Service. This may again be true, but it is already the case in current versions of welfare states that not only rely on excessive work, resources and waste but that also fail to cover basic needs for all. A variant could be to make the public service voluntary, allowing individuals to object the service and give up the corresponding basic income. Furthermore, the case for work time reduction and the fair distribution of social necessary work (not organized by states but through free association of worker organizations) is also to be found in the anarchist literature (e.g. Kropotkin, 1892/2015).

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<sup>5</sup>Consider by comparison to today’s 80,000–90,000 h of work in developed countries, assuming the average 1734 annual work hours in OECD countries and a standard 50-year active working life.



Like other work utopias the UCS is no panacea, yet it could help addressing some recurrent criticisms to the UBI. First, the collectivized and planned sector of the economy could give larger for room of manoeuvre to steer the direction of technological developments, allocating productivity dividends away from growth and towards reduced working time and resource use. Second, concerns about ‘inappropriate’ use of leisure time would relax; upon completion of the UCS, people would have *earned* their UBI. Like today’s pensioners, people could choose an active or passive life free of judgement from others. Unlike them, they would be making this choice after working, say 10 years instead of 50 in order to secure a decent living. Most importantly for our discussion, concerns about fair distribution of work would be addressed, as every healthy person would contribute a share to cover societal needs.

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