The Meaning of Work in a Sustainable Society: A Marxian View.

by John Bellamy Foster | March 2017
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The nature and meaning of work, as it pertains to a future society, has deeply divided ecological, socialist, utopian, and Romantic thinkers since the Industrial Revolution. Some radical thinkers have seen a more just society as merely requiring the rationalization of present-day work relations, accompanied by increased leisure time, and more equitable distribution. Others have focused on the need to transcend the entire system of alienated labour and make the development of creative work relations the central element of the new revolutionary society. In what appears to be an effort to circumvent this enduring conflict, current visions of sustainable prosperity, though not denying the necessity of work, often push it into the background, placing their emphasis instead on an enormous expansion of leisure hours. Increased non-work time seems an unalloyed good and is easily imaginable in the context of a no-growth society. In contrast, the very question of work is fraught with inherent difficulties, since it goes to the roots of the current socio-economic system, its division of labour, and its class relations. Yet it remains the case that no coherent ecological mapping of a sustainable future is conceivable without addressing the issue of homo faber, i.e., the creative, constructive role that distinguishes homo sapiens as a creative species.

Within late nineteenth-century socialist-utopian literatures it is possible to distinguish two broad tendencies with respect to the future of work, represented by Edward Bellamy, the author of *Looking Backward*, on the one hand, and William Morris, the author of *News from Nowhere*, on the other. Bellamy, standing for a view familiar to us today, saw

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*Fie upon this quiet life. I want work.*

increased mechanization, together with radical technocratic organization, as providing the basis for increased leisure time as the ultimate good. In contrast, Morris, whose analysis in this respect was derived from Charles Fourier, John Ruskin, and Karl Marx, emphasized the centrality of useful, attractive work, requiring the abolition of the capitalist division of labour.

Ironically, the mechanistic view of Bellamy more closely resembles today’s popular conceptions of a sustainable economy, than is the case for the more revolutionary view of Morris. The notion of “liberation from work,” as constituting the basis for a sustainable prosperity, is strongly advanced in the writings of first-stage ecosocialist and degrowth thinkers like André Gorz and Serge Latouche.3

I will argue here that the idea of the liberation from work, in its one-sidedness and incompleteness, goes against the possibility of a genuine sustainable society. The argument will begin by examining the hegemonic view of work as it pertains to Western thought, going back to the ancient Greeks. It will then turn to a consideration of the opposing ideas of Adam Smith and Karl Marx in this respect. This will lead to the issue of how socialist and utopian thinkers have themselves divided on the question of work, focusing, on the contrast between Bellamy and Morris. All of this will point to the conclusion that the real potential for any future sustainable society rests not so much on its expansion of leisure time, but rather on its capacity to generate a new world of creative and collective work controlled by the associated producers.

No coherent ecological mapping of a sustainable future is conceivable without addressing the issue of homo faber, i.e., the creative, constructive role that distinguishes homo sapiens as a creative species.«

The Hegemonic Ideology of Work and Leisure

In the hegemonic view of work, to be found today in every neoclassical economics textbook, work is portrayed in negative terms, as a disutility or sacrifice. Sociologists and economists frequently present this as a transhistorical phenomenon — extending from the classical Greeks to the present. Thus, Italian cultural theorist Adriano Tilgher, famously declared in 1929: “To the Greeks work was a curse and nothing else.” Tilgher supported this with quotations from Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Cicero, and other figures, representing the aristocratic standpoint in antiquity.4

With the rise of capitalism work was seen as a necessary evil requiring coercion. Thus, Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations in 1776 at the onset of the Industrial Revolution defined work (or labour) as a sacrifice, which required the expenditure of “toil and trouble…of our own body.” The worker must “always lay down…his ease, his liberty, and his happiness.”5 In 1770, only a few years before Smith’s book came out, an anonymous treatise appeared, entitled an Essay on Trade and Commerce, written by the figure (later thought to be J. Cunningham) whom Marx described as “the most fanatical representative of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie.” It advanced the proposition that in order to break the spirit of independence and natural idleness of English labourers, ideal “work-houses” should be established imprisoning the poor, turning these into “houses of terror, where they should work fourteen hours a day in such fashion that when meal time was deducted there should remain twelve hours of work full and complete.” Not long after similar views were promoted by Thomas Robert Malthus, and led to the New
Neoclassical economic ideology today treats the question of work as a tradeoff between leisure and work, downplaying its own more general designation of work as a disutility, in order to present it as a choice and not the result of direct coercion. Yet it remains true, as German economist Steffen Rätzel critically observed in 2009, that at bottom “work,” in neoclassical theory, “is seen as a bad necessary to create income for consumption” (italics added).

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

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

Materialists in antiquity thus built their ideas around an intimate knowledge of work and respect for the insights it gave into the world—in sharp contrast to the idealists, who, representing the aristocratic cause, promoted celestial myths and anti-work ideals. The aristocratic vision could be seen in Socrates’s statement (attributed to him by Xenophon) that, “What are called the mechanical arts carry a social stigma and are rightly dishonored in our cities.” Nothing could be further from the Greek materialist who saw work as the embodiment of the organic, dialectical relations between nature and society.

Smith’s later possessive-individualist conception of work on the brink of the Industrial Revolution was likewise to be sharply questioned by socialist thinkers. Writing in 1857-1858 in *The Grundrisse*, Marx declared,

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

Here Marx argued that Smith’s idea of freedom as “not-labour” was the product of specific historical conditions, associated with exploited wage labour. “Labour becomes attractive work,” for Marx, only under unalienated conditions, when it is not a commodity. This requires new, higher forms of social production under the control of the associated producers. All of this has its roots of course in Marx’s powerful early critique of alienated labour in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.13 For Marx, human beings were fundamentally corporeal beings. To remove humanity from its material, corporeal relations, and radically separate mental and manual labour, was to guarantee human alienation.14

Socialist Utopianism and the Future of Work: Bellamy and Morris

Yet, if socialists could be expected to reject the hegemonic view of work relations associated with capitalism, the extent to which this translated into fundamentally different views of work relations from that of the status quo varied within socialist literature itself. Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward: 2000-1887, published in 1888, was the most popular book of its day after Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Ben-Hur, selling millions of copies and translated into more than twenty languages. Erich Fromm refers to how “three outstanding personalities, Charles Beard, John Dewey, and Edward Weeks,” each in 1935 separately made “a list of the twenty-five most influential books published since 1885, [and] all put Bellamy’s work in the second place, Karl Marx’s Das Kapital [first translated into English in this period] being in the first.”15

Bellamy’s utopian novel appeared in a period of rapid economic expansion, industrialization, and concentration of economic power in the United States. The protagonist, Julian West, wakes up in Boston in the year 2000 to discover society entirely transformed along socialist lines.16 The trust-building character of the epoch had resulted in the creation of one giant monopolistic firm, which was then nationalized, with the shift of all control to the state. The result was a highly organized, egalitarian society. All individuals were required to join the army of workers at twenty-one, spend three years working as a common labourer, and then move on to some skilled occupation, with compulsory labour ending at 45. Everyone over the course of their lives could expect to be turned into men and women of leisure. In Bellamy’s view, work was still conceived as a pain not a pleasure, and the point was to avoid it.

Morris, then the principal force behind the London-based Socialist League, wrote a highly critical review of Bellamy’s book, focusing on the latter’s descriptions of work and leisure in his utopia. This was followed in 1890 by Morris’s own socialist utopian novel, News from Nowhere, which presented a sharply contrasting view of work in a higher society.

Morris, in E.P. Thompson’s words, “was a Communist Utopian, with the full force of the transformed Romantic tradition behind him.”17 His principal sources of inspiration in his understanding of the role of work in society were Fourier, Ruskin and Marx. All three had criticized the detailed division of labour and the distorted, alienated work relations under capitalism. From Fourier, Morris took the idea that work could be so structured as to
be enjoyable. From Ruskin, he adopted the idea that the decorative arts and architecture from medieval times pointed to the different conditions in which artisans had then lived and worked, demonstrating that they had freely put their spontaneous thoughts, their beliefs, and their aesthetics into all that they made. As Thompson wrote, “Ruskin...was the first to declare that men’s ‘pleasure in their work by which they make their bread’ lay at the very foundations of society, and to relate this to his whole criticism of the arts.” From Marx, Morris took the historical-materialist critique of the exploitation of labour which lay at the root of the cash nexus of capitalist class society.

The resulting synthesis led to Morris’s famous proposition that, “Art is man’s expression of his joy in labour.” Creative work, he argued, was essential to human beings, who must “either be making something or making believe to make it.” Looking historically at the connection between art and labour in preindustrial times he contended that “all men that have left any signs of their existence behind them have practiced art.” There was always a “definite sensuous pleasure” in labour insofar as it was art, and in art insofar as it was unalienated labour; and this pleasure increased “in proportion to the freedom and individuality of the work.” The primary goal of society should be the maximization of pleasure in work in the process of fulfilling genuine human needs. It was “the lack of this pleasure in daily work” under capitalism, Morris observed, “which has made our towns and habitations sordid and hideous insults to the beauty of the earth which they disfigure, and all the accessories of life mean, trivial, ugly.”

Morris decried useless labour directed at turning out endless amounts of useless wares such as barbed wire, advertising boards, and adulterated wares, seeing this as nothing but the waste of human lives and the accompanying pollution of the natural and social environment. Morris’s examples of useless commodities, which wasted human labour, were well chosen. By barbed wire he referred to military products (it was playing a major role in warfare in this period). Today the United States spends over a trillion dollars a year in actual (as opposed to acknowledged) military spending. By “advertising boards” (or billboards) he was referring to the whole phenomenon of marketing with the growth of monopoly capital, of which he was acutely aware. Today more than a trillion dollars a year is expended in the United States on marketing. By adulterated wares he was underscoring the whole problem of adulteration of foods, or the development of additives primarily for sales and cost reduction purposes, as well as the production of various shoddy, makeshift goods, characterized by what is now called product obsolescence. In this way, Morris was referring to some of the major forms of ecological waste appearing in his day,

»The production of wasteful (socially non-reproductive) and harmful goods was at the same time a waste of human labour.«
“appendage of a machine.” As Morris himself put it, the worker was degraded in industrial-capitalist society to “not even a machine, but an average portion of that great and almost miraculous machine…the factory.”

In words that draw to mind Marx’s discussion of alienated labour in his 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Morris declared in his 1888 lecture “Art and Its Producers”: “the interest of” the factory worker’s “life is divorced from the subject-matter of his labour”; the proletarian’s “work has become ‘employment,’ that is, merely the opportunity of earning a livelihood at the will of someone else. Whatever interest still clings to the production of wares under this system has wholly left the ordinary workman, and attaches only to the organisers of his labour; and that interest commonly has little do with the production of wares, as things to be handled, looked at…used, in short, but simply as counters in the great game of the world market.”

For Morris, Bellamy’s vision in *Looking Backward* was “the unmixed modern one, unhistoric and unartistic.” It presented the ideal of the “middle-class professional,” which, in the utopian Boston of *Looking Backward*, became available to everyone after a few years of ordinary labour. “The impression which he [Bellamy] produces is that of a huge standing army, tightly drilled, compelled by some mysterious fate to unceasing anxiety for the production of wares to satisfy every caprice, however wasteful and absurd, that may cast up among them.” In sharp contrast, Morris declared: “I believe the ideal of the future does not point to the lessening of man’s energy by the reduction of labour to a minimum, but rather the reduction of pain in labour to a minimum, so small that it will cease to be pain.” There was no barrier to labour being creative and artistic, provided that that production was not determined by a narrow concept of productivity geared to capitalist profits. Bellamy’s utopia, with its deadening “economical semi-fatalism” was concerned, Morris contended, “unnecessarily” with finding “some incentive to labour to replace the fear of starvation, which is at present our only one, whereas it cannot be too often repeated that the true incentive to useful and happy labour must be pleasure in the work itself.”

*News from Nowhere* presented Morris’s own utopian vision. A man named William—called William Guest by those he meets—wakes up early in the nineteenth century from a dream (though it is left purposely ambiguous in the novel over whether he is still dreaming throughout) to find himself in London in the early twenty-first century more than half a century after a revolutionary outbreak in the 1950s that had led to the creation of a socialist-communal society. In the new society of Nowhere technology is utilized to reduce irksome work but not to decenter work in general. Production is aimed at genuine needs and artistic production. New, less harmful forms of energy exist, and pollution is no longer present. Workers had discovered that, “under the guise of pleasure that was not supposed to be work, work that was pleasure began to push out the mechanical toil….Machines could not produce works of art, and…works of art were more and more called for.” Art and science are shown to be “inexhaustible,” and so is the possibility of human creativity though meaningful work, thereby displacing the earlier capitalist production of “a vast quantity of useless things.”

Today Morris’s vision will no doubt be viewed by some as quaint and falling prey to the general undermining of the “artistic critique” of capitalism. Post-Fordist thinkers like Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello see this defeat of the artistic critique represented by figures as various as Morris and the French poet Charles Baudelaire as one of the main results of late-twentieth-century post-Fordist flexibility.
and innovation. The “new spirit of capitalism,” they argue, entails considerable integration of artistic forms into capitalist production. However, the weaknesses of Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis lies precisely in its conflation of surface appearances with the root character of the system. As a result, Boltanksi and Chiapello fail to recognize the full extent to which the “artistic critique” and the “social critique” are substantively connected under capitalism, and insurmountable within the system. In the post-2008 period, the classical social and artistic critiques of capitalist alienation and exploitation represented by Marx and Morris seem more relevant than ever.31

A particular strength of Morris vision of work can be seen in his depiction of gender equality in the workplace. His chapter in News from Nowhere on “The Obstinate Refusers” provides the only instance of a master craftsman actually at work in Morris’s utopian novel. The position is occupied by a woman, Mistress Philippa, a stone carver or mason. Although the foreman was a man, it is Philippa who calls the shots. Her daughter is also a sculptor, while a young man serves the meal.32 Work in the society of Nowhere is no longer gendered.

As in the case of Marx, Morris united his analysis of the possibility of creative, unalienated labour with ecological issues, recognizing that the degradation of nature and the degradation of the environment were inseparably connected. For Marx, the ownership of the land (nature) was akin to, and just as irrational, as the ownership of human beings: leading to the enslavement and robbing of both. Likewise, for Morris, in capitalist society—as Clara critically voiced it in News from Nowhere —people sought “to make ‘nature’ their slave, since they thought ‘nature’ was something outside them.”33 Morris argued, already in his day, that coal production should be halved both because of the human-wasting and health-destroying labour it required, and the pollution it generated. A more rational society, he argued, could allow for deep cuts in coal production while going further in fulfilling human needs, allowing for new realms of human advancement.34

The Critique of the Division of Labour

Marx and Morris, as we have seen, both argued that the view of work as repulsive in bourgeois society was a product of the alienated organization of labour, representing combined aesthetic and political-economic critiques of capitalism. From the earliest human civilizations, and even earlier, a social division of labour had developed between the genders, between town and country, and between mental and manual labour. Capitalism had extended this unequal division of labour, giving it an even more alienated form by separating the workers from the means of production and imposing an extreme, detailed division of labour, which not only divided workers in the tasks they performed, but fragmented the individual. The detailed division of labour was the basis of the whole class order of capital. Hence, overthrowing the regime of capital meant first and foremost transcending the alienation of work, and creating a deeply egalitarian society based on the collective organization of work by the associated producers.

The critique of the division of labour under
capitalism was not therefore a minor element, or secondary factor, for Morris (any more than Marx). In a free translation from Marx’s Capital (the French edition) he wrote: “'It is not only the labour that is divided, subdivided, and portioned out betwixt divers men: it is the man himself who is cut up, and metamorphosised into the automatic spring of an exclusive operation.' Karl Marx.”

Morris, who complained of the “degradation of the operative into a machine,” saw this as the essence of the socialist (and Romantic) critique of the capitalist labour process.

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

Nevertheless, the evolution of technology and of human capacities pointed to the opening up of new revolutionary possibilities that were more in tune with Marx than Smith. As Braverman wrote: "Modern technology in fact has a powerful tendency to break down ancient divisions of labor by re-unifying production processes....The re-unified process in which the execution of all the steps [for example, in Smith’s pin-making case] is built into the working mechanism of a single machine would seem now to render it suitable for a collective of associated producers, none of whom need spend all of their lives at any single function and all of whom can participate in the engineering, design, improvement, repair, and operation of these ever more productive machines."

Such a system would entail no loss of production, and it would represent the re-unification of the craft in a body of workers far superior to the old craftworkers. Workers can now become masters of the technology of their process on an engineering level and can apportion among themselves in an equitable way the various tasks connected with this form of production that has become so effortless and automatic.

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

A key aspect of Braverman’s argument was the criticism of Marxism itself in the form that it had developed in the Soviet Union, where similar degraded work environments to those of capitalism had arisen, yet without the levels of coercion via unemployment, resulting in chronic problems of productivity. Lenin, he pointed out, had strongly advocated the adoption of Taylor’s scientific management...
for use in Soviet industry, claiming that it combined “the refined brutality of bourgeois exploitation and a number of the greatest scientific achievements in the field.” Subsequent Soviet planning disregarded the critical aspect of Lenin’s argument and implemented Taylorism in a direct mirroring of capitalist methods of labour management in its crudest forms, seeing these as technologically determined relations. In the USSR and in the left in general, Marx’s (and Morris’s) critique of the capitalist labour process, was thus largely forgotten, and the conception of progress in this sphere was reduced to relatively minor improvements in working conditions, some degree of “workers’ control,” and socialist planning. “The similarity of Soviet and traditional capitalist practice,” Braverman wrote, “strongly encourages the conclusion that there is no other way in which modern industry can be organized”—a conclusion, however, that went against real, objective potential for the development of human capacities and needs embedded in modern technology. Alienation and the degradation of work were not, he argued, inherent in modern work relations but were enforced by certain priorities with respect to profit and growth that had been replicated as well in the Soviet Union, contributing to the undermining of the original promises of that society.

A World of Creative Work

The foregoing leads to the conclusion that the essence of a future sustainable socialist society, reflecting both permanent material necessities and the whole course of human social development, must be located in the labour process—in Marx’s terms, the metabolism of society and nature. Attempts to depict a post-capitalist future that pivot on the expansion of leisure time and general prosperity, and which do not address the need for meaningful work—taking into account human corporeal being and human creativity—are bound to fail, both in regard to the necessary social-metabolic conditions and in meeting essential human aspirations.

Yet, most of today’s depictions of a future sustainable society, take work and production as economically and technologically determined, or as simply displaced by automation, and focus instead on leisure as the end of society, coupled with income guarantees to the population. This can be seen in the works of degrowth theorist Serge Latouche and first-stage ecosocialist André Gorz. Latouche defines “degrowth” as a social formation “beyond the work-based society.” Left arguments for the development of a society in which work takes on a more creative role are criticized as “pro-work propaganda.” Instead emphasis is placed on a society in which “leisure and play are as highly valued as work.”

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

Standard work relations, in Gorz’s conception, will be dominated by automation. The reduction in work time will allow the most enjoyable, professional jobs to be shared out among more people. Yet, all of this takes second stage to a vision of a vast increase in free time, enabling individuals to engage in all sorts of autonomous activities. These are portrayed in terms of individual, leisure activities, and home-based production, and not in terms of associated labour. The normal capitalist workplace is left essentially to Taylorist scientific management, with the question of automation and the degradation of work hardly raised. Freedom is seen as not-work in the form of pure leisure, or as home-based or informal production. The alternative socialist view which centers on the transformation work itself in a future society, is dismissed as arising from “the disciples of the religion of work.”

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Yet, the kinds of absolute automation and robotization that are now projected for advanced capitalist society, and which are frequently treated as representing inevitable, teleological tendencies—leading to discussions of “a world without work”—do not sit well with a conception of a higher steady-state economy and society, where human beings would be neither appendages to machines nor their servants. Nor is today’s dominant fatalism grounded in the critique of contemporary capitalist contradictions. In today’s political economy, it can be argued, productivity is not too low but too high. Mere quantitative development is therefore no longer to be regarded as essential. In a higher, more rational society based on abundance, Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols argue in People Get Ready: The Fight Against a Jobless Economy and a Citizenless Democracy, the qualitative aspects of working conditions would be emphasized. Work relations would be seen as a basis of equality and sociability rather than inequality and associability. Repetitive, deskill jobs would be replaced by forms of active employment that emphasize creativity and all-around human development. The joint stock of knowledge of society that constitutes technology would be used for the promotion of sustainable human development, rather than for the profits and accumulation of a very few.

Not only do human beings need creative labour in their roles as individuals, they also need it in their societal roles, since it is constitutive of society itself. A world in which most people are removed from work activities, as pictured in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Player Piano, would be little more than a dystopian existence. For Marx, alienated labour is a contradiction insurmountable under capitalism. However, the cessation of labour altogether, as represented in many post-work schemes, could only lead, from a socialist standpoint, to a kind of absolute alienation: the estrangement from the core of “live activity,” severed from human corporeal existence which requires that human beings be transformative beings actively interacting with nature. To abolish work would constitute a break with objective existence in its most socially meaningful, active, and creative form—a break with human species-being itself.

The failures in some visions of a sustainable prosperity, to confront the full potential of freely associated human labour, therefore, only serves to bely the often-courageous critiques of economic growth that characterize today’s radical ecological visions. The unfortunate consequence is that many of the arguments for a prosperous no-growth society have more in common with Bellamy than with Morris.
(or Marx), since they focus on the expansion of leisure time almost exclusively, while downplaying the role of human beings as productive, i.e., transformative, beings. In truth, it impossible to imagine a viable future that does not focus on the metamorphosis of work itself, in such a way as to as expand the capacity for true human development. For Morris, as we have seen, art and science, were the two “inexhaustible” realms of human creativity that all people could participate in actively within the context of associated human labour.

Notes


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


pp. 685, 789, 897.


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


12 Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse*. London: Penguin, pp. 611-12. Marx was here referring to the same passage from Smith quoted above. Marx was using a French translation of Smith at the time and this was later translated into German and then into English with some distortion in the text. Where Marx in the English translation of the *Grundrisse* quotes Smith as referring to “tranquility” the original word was “ease.”


25 The critique of economic and ecological waste, and theorization of this in terms of the social reproduction of society has long been central to Marxian political economy, including concepts of specifically capitalist use value and negative use value. See for example, Baran, P.A. and Sweezy, P.M. (1966) *Monopoly Capital*. New
In such analyses, waste is not seen primarily in “ethical” terms but in economic and ecological terms, in terms of criteria of social reproduction. A nuclear weapon, for example, is a dead end, with no direct contribution to social reproduction.

26 Morris, Signs of Change, 148-49.


28 Morris, “Art and its Producers”, 9-10. The three dots here are Morris’s own, meant to indicate a pause, and are not in this case ellipses for omitted material inserted by the present author.


32 Morris, News from Nowhere (Oxford), 148-51. Morris’s feminist intent here is made evident in the name Philippa, which was meant to refer to the gifted mathematician Philippa Fawcett in his own time, who he much admired, and who stood for the intellectual equality of women.


34 See Morris, News from Nowhere (Oxford), 59; J. Bruce Glasier, William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921), 76, 81-82.

35 Thompson, E.P. William Morris, 37-38; Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 481.


38 Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, 320.

39 Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, 8-11. Beginning in the 1930s, human relations psychology was introduced into management, ostensibly to make labour more pleasurable and less alienating, though this did not involve a fundamental shift away from the objective degradation of work itself. Braverman dealt with this in a chapter of his book significantly entitled “The Habituation of the Worker to the Capitalist Mode of Production.”

40 Much progressive analysis of the future substitutes a kind of technological determinism for human agency, thereby gaining a sense of credence in the present, that is soon dispelled. See, for example, the arguments in Mason, P. (2015) Postcapitalism. London: Penguin.

41 Latouche, Farewell to Growth, 81-88.


46 Marx, K. Early Writings, 327-29.

About the Author

John Bellamy Foster is editor of Monthly Review and professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. He has written widely on political economy and has established a reputation as a major environmental sociologist. He is the author of Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature (2000), The Great Financial Crisis: Causes and Consequences (with Fred Magdoff, 2009), The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth (with Brett Clark and Richard York, 2010), and The Theory of Monopoly Capitalism: An Elaboration of Marxian Political Economy (New Edition, 2014), among many others.