

It's the 21st century – why are we working so much?

Owen Hatherley

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The right calls for hard work, the left for more jobs. The dream of mechanisation leading to shorter working hours seems forgotten



Oscar Wilde: 'Man is made for something better than distributing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine.' Photograph: CORBIS

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If there's one thing practically all futurologists once agreed on, it's that in the 21st century there would be a lot less work. What would they have thought, if they had known that in 2012, the 9-5 working day had in the UK become something more like 7am to 7pm? They would surely have looked around and seen technology take over in many professions which previously needed heavy manpower, they would have looked at the increase in automation and mass production, and wondered – why are they spending 12 hours a day on menial tasks?

It's a question which isn't adequately answered either by the right or by the official left. Conservatives have always loved to pontificate about the moral virtue of hard work and much of the left, focusing on the terrible effects of mass unemployment, understandably gives "more jobs" as its main solution to the crisis. Previous generations would have found this hopelessly disappointing.

In almost all cases, utopians, socialists and other futurologists believed that work would come near to being abolished for one reason above all – we could let the machines do it. The socialist thinker Paul Lafargue wrote in his pointedly titled tract [The Right To Be Lazy \(1883\)](#):

"Our machines, with breath of fire, with limbs of unwearying steel, with fruitfulness wonderful inexhaustible, accomplish by themselves with docility their sacred labour."

And nevertheless the genius of the great philosophers of capitalism remains dominated by the prejudices of the wage system, worst of slaveries. They do not yet understand that the machine is the saviour of humanity, the god who shall redeem man from working for hire, the god who shall give him leisure and liberty."

Oscar Wilde evidently agreed – in his 1891 essay The Soul of Man Under Socialism, he scorns the "nonsense that is written and talked today about the dignity of manual labour", and insists that "man is made for something better than distributing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine". He makes quite clear what he means:

"Machinery must work for us in coal mines, and do all sanitary services, and be the stoker of steamers, and clean the streets, and run messages on wet days, and do anything that is tedious or distressing".

Both Lafargue and Wilde would have been horrified if they'd realised that only 20 years later manual work itself would become an ideology in Labour and Communist parties, dedicating themselves to its glorification rather than abolition.

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Here too, though, the idea was that this would eventually be superseded. After the Russian revolution, one of the great advocates of the cult of work was Aleksei Gastev, a former metalworker and trade union leader who became a poet, publishing anthologies with titles like Poetry of the Factory Floor. He became the USSR's leading enthusiast for Taylorism, the American management technique usually criticised by the left for reducing the worker to a mere cog in a machine, running the state-sponsored Central Institute of Labour. When asked about this in 1926 by the German leftist Ernst Toller, Gastev replied: "We hope by our discoveries to arrive at a stage when a worker who formerly worked eight hours on a particular job will only have to work two or three". Somewhere along the line, this was forgotten, in favour of musclebound Stakhanovites performing superhuman feats of coal-hewing.

American industrial theorists, strangely enough, seemed to share the socialists' view. The designer, engineer and polymath Buckminster Fuller declared that the "industrial equation", ie the fact technology enables mankind to do "more with less", would soon eliminate the very notion of labour altogether. In 1963, he wrote: "[W]ithin a century, the word 'worker' will have no current meaning. It will be something you will have to look up in an early 20th-century dictionary". If that became true over the past 10 years, it was only in the "we are all middle class now" sense of New Labour – not in the sense of actually eliminating menial work, or the divide between workers and owners.

Surveys have long shown that most workers think their jobs are pointless, and looking at the heavily contested vacancies at the average jobcentre – call centre staff, filing clerks and above all the various tasks of the service industry – it's hard to disagree.

Yet the utopian vision of the elimination of industrial labour has in many ways come to pass. Over the past decade Sheffield steelworks produced more steel than ever before, with a tiny fraction of their former workforce; and the container ports of Avonmouth, Tilbury, Teesport and Southampton got rid of most of the dockers, but not the tonnage.

The result was not that dockers or steelworkers were free to, as Marx once put it, "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon and criticise after dinner". Instead, they were subjected to shame, poverty, and the endless worry over finding another job, which, if it arrived, might be insecure, poorly paid, un-unionised work in the service industry. In the current era of casualisation, that's practically the norm, so the idea of

skilled, secure labour and pride in work doesn't seem quite so awful. Nonetheless, the workers' movement was once dedicated to the eventual abolition of all menial, tedious, grinding work. We have the machines to make that a reality today – but none of the will.