The Struggle Over Work

The ‘end of work’ and employment alternatives for post-industrial societies

Shaun Wilson
with the assistance of Peter McCarthy

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Since the 1980s, there have been repeated warnings that post-industrial societies face the 'end of work' – job numbers are declining, work is less important in people's lives, and labour movements are losing their power. Wilson argues that this scenario is misleading and distracts us from the problems confronting societies still dependent on paid employment.

The Struggle Over Work examines the theoretical origins and contemporary versions of this scenario, criticising the arguments of leading thinkers Claus Offe, André Gorz, Alain Touraine, and Jürgen Habermas. These thinkers advocate a basic income to cope with falling employment. Wilson contrasts this proposal with employment-centred alternatives: the 'US model' of work and welfare advocated by business and policy-making elites, and a full-employment model advocated by revived labour movements.

The Struggle Over Work challenges the pervasive pessimism about work and argues for a new engagement with the pressing problems of employment. This book will interest students and academics in labour economics and the politics and sociology of work as well as public policy specialists.

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To Mohsen Rezaie and a free Iran

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Introduction

When Jeremy Rifkin published *The End of Work* in 1995,[1] the *US News and World Report* claimed that more Americans were working than at any other time in the country's history.[2] With working hours fast approaching an annual average of 2,000 hours per person, the article concluded that the United States was 'addicted' to work. These two developments seemed at odds: a high profile book forecasting the 'end of work' published during one of the stronger periods of employment growth in American history. The strengthening prospects for employment during the Clinton years justified a major shift in social policy that favoured getting people off welfare and into paid work. Other advanced countries, led by the market-embracing Blair Labour Government, followed the American model of promoting employment and workfare. Even those European countries usually most resistant to American social and economic policy solutions looked to the American experience as they searched for ways out of long-term unemployment. Clinton left Washington, recession came and the employment boom slowed remarkably. Yet the policy experience of the United States during the 1990s has had a lasting impact on policy-makers and politicians, especially those who support deregulated labour markets as an alternative to extensive employment and welfare protections.

Strengthening employment trends in the English-speaking world at the end of 1990s contrasted starkly with the pessimism about the future of work prevailing elsewhere. Like Rifkin, various major European social scientists (following in a long line of distinguished writers) have made their reputations by forecasting the decline of a work-based society. They have argued that technological change leads to irreversible job loss, and employment no longer sharply defines contemporary social structures. While many thinkers have proposed different versions of the 'end of work' argument, the most important recent advocates belong to the European 'post-industrial left' and, in this book, I shall devote particular attention to their claims. Inspired by new social movements and pessimistic about class-based change, the post-industrial left has looked not to employment and the class structure but to civil society for alternative ways of organising a diverse society. The post-industrial left's key thinkers – Claus Offe, André

Gorz, and Alain Touraine – have not claimed that work will disappear in any literal sense. But they abandon their Marxist past when they claim that work has lost its central function in the social structure and its driving force in politics and society. Jürgen Habermas even wrote of the 'exhaustion of utopian energies' attached to work when he dissected the shortcomings of a society based on full employment.[3]

Given the employment situation there, European pessimism is understandable. If we take the employment-to-population ratio over time, which measures the number of people in paid employment within the working-age population, major continental European countries have experienced decline. However, in other parts of Europe, and in the English-speaking world, employment levels measured this way have been steady or have even risen.[4] These divergent employment trends make it timely to ask two questions, which I hope this book will help us answer. The first question is: what are the sources and propositions for the 'end of work' argument we encounter among writers on the post-industrial left? And the second is: what alternatives can societies ponder in considering how work might be transformed in the coming decades? In helping to answer these questions, my contribution seeks to challenge the 'end of work' argument. My challenge proceeds in two stages, forming the respective parts of this book. The rationale for Part I is to establish the sociological sources and main arguments of this pessimistic view about work, revealing its widespread influence. The rationale for Part II is to use my critique of the arguments proposed by the post-industrial left to evaluate three alternative models for transforming work that seek to solve the current impasse: one that relies on deregulated labour markets, one that relies on a basic income scheme, and one that relies on renewed labour movements to drive full employment objectives.

Part I: the sociological sources of contemporary pessimism

Part I traces the sociological sources of contemporary pessimism. By this I refer to the pessimistic arguments about work that have had a lasting impact in sociology. For now, I will sketch out just a few points of departure. In Chapter 1, I take up the insights of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. Despite his early attempts at building a social theory around the idea of production, Marx went on to present a dramatic version of a post-work society arising out of technological change and the passing of scarcity. When Marx foresees the emergence of a 'collective labourer', he assumes that, by virtue of capitalist development, labour becomes so abstract it almost ceases to depend on meaningful human input. While Weber did not directly anticipate a post-work society, he shares common ground with Marx. Both writers envisage a severe rationalisation of work which strips it of its human qualities. Taken together, Marx and Weber set a pessimistic stage for understanding the relationship between work and modernisation. This pessimism has cast a long shadow.

Throughout the twentieth century, writers have drawn attention to work's apparent waning importance. In the 1950s, Herbert Marcuse and Hannah Arendt represented these efforts in social theory. Marcuse attempted to realise Marx's 'liberation from work' argument. Arendt attempted to slay the idea that the foundations of democracy could ever rely on a work-centred social theory. Inspired by the social revolts of the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of social thinkers returned once again to these themes. Intellectuals, including Habermas, Touraine, and Offe, have attempted to go beyond a sociology founded on work and social classes, looking to other concepts and social forces to explain contemporary change.

Chapter 2 examines the contributions of the three most prominent theorists for our purposes: Habermas, Touraine, and Offe. Taken together, these thinkers offer a distinctive and plausible account of post-industrial social change, which describes in dramatic fashion the declining importance of a work-centred industrial society. They have tried to draw out the implications of the decline of work for social theory, for welfare and for social movement contention. Because their arguments are important in their own right, and provide a lynchpin between the two parts of this book, I'll spend a moment outlining each author's contribution.

Influenced by Marcuse and Arendt, Habermas attempts to find a better foundation for a general social theory. But in laying down new foundations, he ends up suggesting that work is closer to a kind of 'instrumental action' than a social practice, as Weber had implied before him. In doing so, Habermas's challenge to traditional Marxism went much further than his Frankfurt School predecessors. Confining work to instrumental action gave Habermas room to develop a new and durable concept of communicative action that would allow him to better explain the forces that drive social rationalisation. For Habermas, our communicative achievements, and not our work activities or the things we produce, determine 'social rationality'. Work no longer provides a clear reference point for explaining social transformation. But Habermas pays a price for this achievement. As even his sympathetic critics point out, Habermas's recourse to systems theory means that he obscures an ongoing understanding of the impact work has on social identities, conflicts, and social structure.

While Habermas concentrated his efforts on moving social theory away from work-centred categories, Alain Touraine's theory of social change pointed to the displacement of labour movements from their central role as social movements with the advent of post-industrial society. For Touraine, labour's role was quickly being replaced by other social movements engaged in new social struggles such as for the rights of women, the environment, and for the recognition of social identity. Declining social activity in the sphere of work is consistent with a post-industrial society that has simply 'moved on' into new areas of contention and conflict. This leads Touraine to a gloomy forecast: 'the role of trade unionism is not over ... the history of the workers' movement is.'[5] But we must ask: does Touraine adopt an overly pessimistic view of unions by insisting that they cannot maintain or return to a social movement-style of activism and politics?

Post-industrial thinkers responded to rising unemployment in the 1970s and 1980s by doubting the prospects for full employment, and searching for a new model of welfare and redistribution that could cope with permanent joblessness. Claus Offe's contribution addresses these declining prospects most thoroughly, and I will use his insights to help establish some basic parameters of the employment debate, the subject of this book. Offe argues that welfare states can no longer operate on the prospect of full employment, and that the most viable, progressive alternative is now a basic income scheme. This scheme, which I shall examine in detail in Chapter 4, proposes to guarantee a *universal* minimum income with few or no work obligations on the part of citizens. Because a basic income scheme promises to break the nexus between work and income, it has naturally received support from post-industrial thinkers who see it as a viable exit route from a work-based industrial society. But are the prospects for employment growth as dim as post-industrial critics like Offe assume?

When the ideas of the post-industrial left are stripped of their nuances, we can see that they depend on a pessimistic scenario of permanent joblessness, declining skill and attachment to work, weak labour movements, and hopeless prospects for full employment. But this scenario depends on a number of assumptions that we must scrutinise. Five brief points are sufficient here to get at the argument I'll develop throughout the book. First, if we take objective measures of employment rates in advanced societies (like employment-to-population ratios), we find no clear trends to lower employment levels. Second, evidence suggests workforce skills are generally increasing, and, in some instances, skill differences are actually narrowing. Third, survey evidence suggests that workers still prefer paid employment – *even* when presented with the alternative of a living income without having to work. Fourth, while in many countries unions face serious problems (decreasing membership, strikes, and reduced political power), their problems are not necessarily irreversible. Finally, full employment policies may still be possible if they are politically 'reinvented' and find new public support, bolstered by strengthened labour movements.

Part II: post-industrial pessimism and three options for work and society

The post-industrial 'end of work' scenario is a compelling reading of change. If its assumptions hold, and employment levels continue to decline, then it would point clearly to policy solutions, like a basic income, that would distribute income in a way less dependent on participation in employment. But if the assumption that work will inevitably decline does not hold, then at least two other scenarios and some quite different policy solutions come into view. Each of these alternative scenarios is examined in Part II. The first model is a deregulated market approach such as we find in the United States which claims to have restored employment levels through competitive labour markets and pro-work social policies. The second is a social-democratic alternative, closer to what we find in contemporary Scandinavia, which would attempt to re-establish full employment, presumably with the support of revived labour movements. Taken together, it is these three approaches – a deregulated labour market model, a basic income model, and a new full employment model – whose prospects and desirability we evaluate in Chapters 3 to 5. Table I.1 summarises some key features of these alternative models.

The recent American employment experience is our point of reference for the deregulated market approach. As I mentioned in the opening paragraphs to this book, the 'US model', as Lawrence Mishel and John Schmitt and others call it,[6] has received unprecedented attention for its apparent ability to marry deregulated labour markets with tough new 'workfare' policies, and thus to stimulate jobs. Although employment and growth in the United States dropped sharply after President George W. Bush assumed power, America's success during the 1990s made it a source of 'policy

Table I.1 Three alternative paths for work and society

Model	*Diagnosis of the problem*	*Proposed solution*	*Main advocates*	*Main opponents*
'US model': deregulated labour market	Over-regulation; welfare state disincentives	Deregulation; pro-work social policy; institutional and legal limits on unions	Business; market-oriented think tanks; conservative and liberal parties; some mainstream social democratic parties	Organised labour; welfare groups
Basic income	Permanent employment deficit; over-emphasis on work in social policy	Basic income (universal minimum income)	Some post-industrial left and green parties; some liberal parties; some liberal economists; social movements	Taxpayers
Full employment social democracy	Public policy ignores unemployment	Regulation of labour market; employment creation	Labour movements; traditional social democratic or socialist parties; pro-labour think tanks	Business

transfer' for other countries looking to lower unemployment without increasing spending. We shall start with the US model because the American approach is clearly dominant, finding support among political, bureaucratic, business, and media elites, and because its claims of employment success comprehensively challenge the 'end of work' scenario. These two facts make it a sensible vantage point from which to compare apparently less probable alternatives: the basic income and social democratic models.

What are the claims made for the US model? Advocates say that the US model produces higher employment rates because of its business-friendly labour market, and lower welfare 'dependence' because of its tough welfare policies. In the eyes of its supporters, these two strengths make the US model the most likely to maintain a high level of employment, especially when America is compared with more regulated economies elsewhere. Chapter 3 tests these claims by offering a detailed assessment of the policies and problems of the American path to higher employment. Although the USA has experienced higher employment growth, it is misleading to assume that this is simply the result of its pro-market policies. We also find high levels of inequality in the labour market, abetted by a difficult, if not hostile, environment for unions and collective bargaining. The US model makes it harder for workers to 'find a voice' through union activity and contention so that they might better shape their working lives. A wealth of evidence, some anecdotal, some psychological and some sociological, points to the pressures faced by an over-worked, under-paid workforce. Still, we explore the reasons for the US model's international reputation and ask: is it a viable model for international policy transfer to other advanced countries looking to solve the problems of work and welfare?

The inequality problems of the US model make the exploration of alternatives desirable or even necessary. In Chapter 4, I take up the basic income model preferred by the post-industrial left who argue that employment gains in a tough, market-driven work and welfare regime are not worth the costs. For them, it is better to forsake the employment goals of modern societies if these heavily compromise the goal of equality. Emboldened by a belief in the impossibility or undesirability of full employment, basic income advocates propose to restructure work and welfare regimes so that an adequate minimum income is provided universally, regardless of people's employment status. For this reason, basic income schemes are sometimes called citizens' income schemes.

Chapter 4 looks at the assumptions that underlie basic income proposals and tests some of their arguments empirically. I foreshadow here three problems with basic income. First, as I have suggested already, basic income ideas frequently depend on the 'end of work' scenario. Continuing employment growth undermines the rationale for basic income reform. Second, basic income advocates often assume that people have only weak attachments to their work, or, in economists' language, find work to be a 'disutility'. But when the British Social Attitudes Survey of 2000 asked employees, 'if without having to work, you had what you would regard as a reasonable living income, would you still prefer to have a job or wouldn't you bother?', a large majority responded that they would prefer to work. And when we analyse these findings further, we discover that disengaged attitudes towards work are more a product of *poor working experiences* than a lack of interest in working as the post-industrial left would have it. The third problem for basic income proposals lies in their political feasibility. Finding a supportive political coalition would be essential for such root-and-branch reform. Business would object to the costs, and to the possible disincentives to work. Taxpayers would resist what conservatives would easily misrepresent as 'subsidising the lazy'. And the public may not be satisfied, given they, for better or worse, still expect government to create jobs.

Does a basic income scheme face better prospects if it is taken up in a more modest form, either by reducing the benefit level or restricting coverage? Recently, basic income advocates have begun to take seriously the option of partial implementation. And in a hard-edged policy environment, policy-makers have been developing income support policies that could arguably be seen as the first steps towards a basic income scheme. The Earned Income Tax Credit scheme in the United States or the Working Families Tax Credit in the United Kingdom are two obvious examples of this kind of policy, providing income support to low-wage working individuals and families. Some basic income supporters see these policies as the institutional foundations for building a basic income-style scheme in the form of a universal negative income tax.

But it is not clear whether negative income tax policies or tax credit schemes would weaken the link between employment and income, as post-industrial supporters of a basic income seek, or actually reinforce it. Certainly, for pro-market advocates, the appeal of these kind of measures comes in their design: these policies deal with the problems of inequality not through raising wages, which critics claim costs jobs, but through tax-based redistribution. Writing of North American policies, John Myles and Paul Pierson refer to such schemes as 'Friedman's Revenge', reflecting the growing influence of the Chicago School economist's original negative income tax proposal.[7] One consistent criticism of these policies is their potential to entrench low-wage employment. So we must ask: do these policies offer a building block for a basic income scheme that breaks with employment, or do they compromise basic income ideals too greatly?

If the dynamic performance of the US model suggests a quite different transformation path than that envisaged by the post-industrial left, one that remains centred on employment and job creation, are there still hopes for committing to employment expansion of a more social-democratic kind? Certainly this has been the long-term mission of labour movements, and labour parties committed to the goals of full employment. If a 'jobs with inequality' model remains viable, is it possible to aspire to a 'jobs with equality' alternative? Critics would say no. Pro-market critics would say the model is a proven failure because it depends on sclerotic regulations that make jobs growth too costly. Post-industrial critics would claim that technological and social change, and an 'exhaustion' of the forces that built full employment make this goal undesirable and not feasible.

Chapter 5 argues that the prospects of a 'jobs with equality' approach will depend critically on the capacity of labour movements to offer an alternative model for labour market regulation. But I shall argue that for this alternative to emerge, presently weak union movements would need to revive their influence in the workplace and in politics. How likely is this prospect? Chapter 5 attempts to answer this question by considering the factors that have led to union weakness in the advanced industrial economies. We find that there are good grounds to challenge the view that labour movements, especially in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, are weak because of 'post-industrial social change' that deprives unions of their social relevance and power. Instead, we find that national labour institutions, historical factors, and internal organisation of unions matter more in the union decline story. By highlighting these factors, and studying recent developments in national labour movements more carefully, we can identify the difficulties unions face in their efforts to assert workplace influence and increase their political power. We conclude the chapter by considering how unions could, once again, become a driving influence on politics and policy. I shall argue that a revived union movement is the most important institutional influence for a new full employment policy designed to suit the times.

Methodology of the book

Before proceeding further, I shall declare some of my guiding instincts and methodological influences. I am not proposing to make a specialist contribution to the sociology of work. There is already plenty of other writing making this kind of contribution. Rather, I wish to raise some general arguments about prospects for work and confront them in a debate about directions and ideas. For some, my contribution will not deliver the specialist or country-specific insights that now tend to dominate this area and set the terms of reference for further research. Instead, my efforts are argument-driven, and I am eager to find empirical evidence that helps sort fact from fiction, as well as drawing out the socio-political implications of alternatives.

My comparative, empirical analysis includes ten advanced nations: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These comparisons are not intended to be exhaustive; rather, they are largely used to develop relevant contrasts between national outcomes and approaches. Readers may find this book has greater purchase for the English-speaking countries that I examine than for the other countries included in this research. This is partly because the English-speaking countries have travelled further down the road to 'employment reform' than many of their European counterparts. In the coming decade, European economies and societies may increasingly follow a similar path of reform. Others could plausibly argue that the most exciting developments at the moment are occurring elsewhere, in countries like South Korea, South Africa, and Brazil. While these developments have greater importance for advanced democracies than ever before, they are the subject of a different book. Mine is about comparing countries with broadly similar profiles and levels of development so that we can meaningfully assess their performance, policies, and institutional development.

Either sympathetic or critical, no book about the general direction of work in advanced societies can sidestep the Marxist tradition. Within Marxism, work has a special, universal significance, a kind of 'meta-category' status as Axel Honneth puts it.[8] I do not seek to defend work as a universal category that, either by clever or outmoded extrapolation, is used to explain all human action. As Habermas has demonstrated over the past four decades, this approach has definite limits. My motivation is a more pragmatic defence of the place of work in social identities and structures, and in political life. My view is there is a real risk of the social sciences neglecting the interactions between work, society, and politics.

Understanding social trends depends on what we assume about social change. I contrast two views. A 'thin' approach assumes that the technical accomplishments of ever-more complex systems will displace the institutional foundations of work. 'Formal' macro-sociology tends to talk about systems, structures, and technically driven transformations. Habermas, for example, adopts a 'formal' approach to understanding large-scale organisations even as he searches out the links between systems and what he calls the lifeworld. Such approaches sometimes neglect or cannot explain persistent social institutions within technical systems and organisations. By this I mean that the web of social relationships disappears from view in this type of theorising, even though these relationships matter in understanding change. How institutions conform to and mould social structures is an important part of the 'micro–macro' problem in sociology.[9] When we talk about work environments, I think the micro-social processes that motivate action, and particularly collective action, help us understand the broader dynamics of work and social change. Formalistic macro-sociology assumes away the institutional role of work in social structures, and it also assumes away the role micro-processes play in social change. Chicago School sociologist, Everett Hughes, brought concrete attention to this kind of problem several generations ago. He stated:

> We are ... alerted to the value of work situations as posts for observing the formation of groups and the generation of social rules and

> sanctions. I am not sure that we are using the findings of such observation vigorously enough in building our theories of social control and of the larger legal and political processes.[10]

Finally, some qualifications about my use of the term ‘work’. Feminists rightly point out that identifying ‘work’ with paid employment implicitly excludes unpaid domestic work. Reducing work to *paid employment* does not recognise the traditionally defined contribution of women to work. I agree with this. Unfortunately, since most sociological theory (such as Habermas’s distinction between ‘work’ and ‘interaction’) refers to work when the authors mean paid employment, I shall persist with the term ‘work’ for purposes of convenience while recognising the traditional, implicit bias it maintains against household labour. Also, a number of writers like Hannah Arendt, for example, distinguish between ‘work’ and ‘labour’ to distinguish between self-directed craft work and labour that is more externally directed and more menial. I refer simply to ‘work’ in the present project, aware of the practical importance of Arendt’s distinction.

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