

Freedom from Work

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Unemployment is sky-high across Europe. It might not seem the best time to be talking about freedom from work. But less work can provide greater autonomy for the employed, and help the jobless.

Political theories talk about freedom from state oppression, or what resources people need for liberty. But freedom of time, from constraints of work, is discussed less. This is important. Many of us spend large parts of our lives doing work that impinges on this kind of freedom.

The left's traditional constituency is the working class. It wants jobs and better pay and conditions for workers. Some on the left focus on overcoming exploitation and alienation through collective ownership of production. Utopian socialists have favoured lower growth and less industry. But this involves a low-tech self-sufficiency that's quite labour-intensive.

The right is morally righteous about work, at least in relation to the less well-off. They distinguish the deserving working poor from the feckless work-shy. Greens are the most likely to see value in less work. This is because it means lower production and consumption, so less growth, which is good for tackling climate change.

For some, work is fulfilling, and provides structure, purpose and economic independence in their lives. But others see large parts of their jobs as pointless. They work for money and at the receiving end of hierarchical commands. Many would rather slow down, work part-time, or have longer holidays. They want to do things that are more leisurely or fulfilling. But time for this is scarce.

Marx, Keynes and André Gorz did envisage a future with less work. They believed that technological advances and increased productivity should allow us to produce just as much but with less labour. This would mean more time for self-directed, creative or social activities, or just to take it easy. This could be furthered even more if we reduced growth and production. Or if the employed redistributed some of their work to the unemployed, so all work less but all have work.

These ideas may seem utopian. But there are practical measures that could be used for implementing them. A basic income for all could replace the myriad of existing social benefits. It would allow for time free from work. Fairer taxes and redistribution from the top can help fund this. There's already legislation restricting working hours that could be beefed up.

Less work and lower growth aren't right for all times and places. In the short term, under austerity and in the developing world, growth is important. But longer term in rich countries reduced work and lower growth can give us freedom from life-consuming labour and produce environmental benefits.

Would people lose the incentive to work if they were given a basic income? Many would want to earn more, so would work more. Some do jobs because they're

worthwhile; lots of money isn't always needed to make people work. And freedom from paid labour isn't the same as non-work – it allows time for work that's chosen and autonomous, from creative projects to volunteer help, for instance.

Is it oppressive to tell people they should work and consume less? Not if it's done right. A working week that's restricted within reason, by a democratic government, isn't more oppressive than unaccountable corporations fostering consumerist culture - and so long hours of labour to pay for this - to make money for themselves.

We need to rein back the world of growth, profits and labour and take more account of human needs. If the employed work less they can have more free time. And the jobless can have work. Freedom from labour can provide more autonomy. And it can help solve unemployment and climate change.

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