

1 | THE REAL FUTURE OF WORK

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No one can understand the future of work unless they understand the everyday lives of working people. So instead of the usual argument between 'better work' and 'beyond work', a really transformative approach would bring a new set of questions to the heart of the discussion: the geographic make-up of the local economy, the location of schools and of amenities, the balance between paid work and unpaid care, and the ways in which people relate work to other sources of meaning in their lives.

Overlooking the Thames, a stone's throw from Westminster and Whitehall, and tucked behind the glamorous houses of Belgravia, is a modest social housing estate in Pimlico. It is across the river from the office where we both work, and is home to a group of mothers whose story perfectly encapsulates the sharp end of London's unequal economy. Surviving on low incomes, and keen to work, they find that the apparent luck of living in one of the few remaining blocks of social housing within a very wealthy part of town comes together with a particular set of challenges. State schools in the area are over-subscribed and their children are spread between schools scattered across the borough. The underground is too expensive for most to use regularly, and the bus connections across the area are surprisingly poor. Food shops local to them are small and expensive. For an affordable family

shop they must travel into the neighbouring borough. They are adept at managing all this – but quite simply, it adds additional time, and additional hassle, to the unpaid job of caring for their families.

And what does it mean for paid work, the subject of our essay? Well, it means only a particular kind of job can really help. A job that offers security, a degree of flexibility and, crucially, a decent hourly wage. One of these women told us she used to work as a dinner lady in her children's primary school but on these wages she couldn't afford for her own kids to have school dinners. Another had to give up her job as a beautician when the hourly cost of childcare – linked with the extortionate cost of local premises to childcare providers in central London – crept too far past her frozen hourly wage. Shift work at a supermarket, another had found, could pay ok, but the shifts simply did not match with the opening times of the nursery, and no flexibility could be negotiated. What's more, there was a queue of students ready to fill the job she reluctantly relinquished.

So what do reformers – whether of left or right – actually have to say to people faced with these challenges, people caught between full time unpaid care, or jobs which simply don't pay their living costs? How can we plot a path to a better, more secure and more rewarding future? Put most simply: is there a vision for the future of work that speaks directly to this experience?

Better work or beyond work? Two reforming traditions

Those are our questions for this essay. But they are hard questions to answer. Hard, in part, because of the complexity of the economic, political and social phenomena that makes this situation up. And hard too because of contradictory instincts about the issue at their heart: work itself.

For decades, there has been a divide between the argument for 'better work' and an argument that we should

move 'beyond work'. In practice, for the Pimlico families, this is the question of whether they just need access to higher paid, more secure work, – whether that's about creating more such jobs, or equipping them with better skills, better transport links and better childcare options? Or, whether, in fact, they need a guarantee of financial security and stability to underwrite the vital job they are already doing in bringing up the next generation without the need to find paid employment?

Reformers like the Fabians have always had this divided relationship to the very idea of paid work. The question of whether we should seek 'better work' or move 'beyond work' stalks the Fabian tradition.

On the one hand, reformers have often turned to work – good work, better work – as the way out of fundamental social problems. For at least two centuries now, work has often been understood not as a source of income but as a source of strength, pride and identity. Across that time, women fought for the ability to work alongside men and to be treated the same at it. The Jarrow marchers campaigned for a right to work. William Morris and John Ruskin celebrated the community that can be found in labour. The very idea of a 'working class' was at the centre of political renewal and gave rise to the name of the political party whose interests it was supposed to represent: 'Labour'.

On the other hand, work has also always been something that Fabians and their fellow-travellers have wanted to help people escape. Back before the first world war, Bertrand Russell dreamed of providing everyone with an equal income so that they could choose how much or little they wanted to work for themselves. In the middle of the 20th century, Anthony Crosland and his colleagues hoped that the welfare state would enable millions more to escape the drudgery of wage slavery and be able to take greater pleasure in leisure, community and the arts. Even back before that, Karl Marx himself famously – or infamously

– imagined a world where people could go fishing in the morning and write poetry in the evening, surrounded by an abundance that they did not need to strive to create with the efforts of their own hands.

Better work or beyond work? The current debate

This tension is not just a historic artefact. It has been surprisingly persistent in mainstream political and public debate in the last five or six years.

For much of the last parliament, the focus of all parties – not just of the left but of the right too – was on work, its creation and its proper remuneration. The fear on this account started with worklessness. Shortly before the last election, George Osborne committed the Conservatives to being the party of full employment, a position that had escaped them ever since the 1980s. Others, meanwhile, talked instead both about the quality of work and of its material rewards. The fear was that Britain was creating an ‘hour glass’ economy – polarised between high-paying, high-skill jobs at the top and low-paying, low-skill jobs at the bottom – and that we were enduring a recovery that might have been ‘jobs rich’ but was ‘wages poor’. The emphasis Ed Miliband placed on the ‘squeezed middle’ spoke directly to this concern. So too did research by the Resolution Foundation and others, which emphasised that wages had begun to stagnate even before the financial crisis and that they did not appear to be rising with the return of growth. Osborne himself, of course, returned to this theme almost as soon as the election was over, announcing a new national living wage, that went far beyond the reform to the national minimum wage for which Labour had called.

Naturally, these concerns have not died away in the months since. And for many the campaign for ‘good jobs’ rather than poorly paid, insecure, low-skill jobs remains the centrepiece of a reformist agenda. But these issues have

been joined – in activist and intellectual circles at least – by a new concern: the impact of automation or the rise of the robots. 100 years ago, of course, a particular kind of automation ended some sorts of jobs and created others. The invention of the production line, of early calculating machines, typewriters, telegraphs and telephones, ended the sweep of cottage industries across 19th century Britain and created the office-based, professional new middle class. Now, however, the thought is not about new jobs. It is about no jobs. Automation threatens to do away with jobs altogether. Our century brings the possibility not of creating new accountants but of making accountancy as a vocation redundant. Retail jobs are to disappear as shelves are stacked by androids and tills run by super-sensitive bagging machines. Even surgery is to be conducted more effectively with robotics than with the trained hands and eyes of human beings.

For some, this world without work is dangerous, to be resisted by a turn to humane, value-added jobs, like those that rely on creativity or caring, the kinds of things that no-one can really yet imagine a robot doing very well. But for others, it is a world awash with possibility. Journalists and commentators, from Philip Collins to Owen Jones, have been swept along on a wave of excitement. A world without work could be a world of leisure and personal experience. Radicals are said to be ‘inventing the future’ and promise a new order of undimmed leisure, with the needs of ordinary people to be funded by an unconditional basic income: that old idea from Tom Paine that if there is a surplus created by the luck of all that it can be shared equally by all.

Slightly less utopian, but of the same vein, is Paul Mason’s idea of a ‘post-capitalism’, within which work does not disappear entirely, but a network of peer-to-peer horizontal forces takes over from the hierarchical wage labour of the past. In this version of the ‘new economy’, the creativity

and innovation of Silicon Valley sweeps across the rest of the developed world. Here the managerial offices and call centres with which we are familiar are replaced with hubs of independent but interrelated creative entrepreneurs; a new world of technologically-enhanced self-employment, offering a combination of material reward and lifestyle choice not even dreamed of a decade or so ago.

The limitations of the orthodox visions

For some these visions are breathtaking. They are certainly breathless. And for those who feel that history must always tend in a progressive direction they appear to offer some proof of their underlying instincts.

But they are both a long way from the day to day concerns from the mothers in Pimlico with which we began. In fact, both visions – the idea of ‘better work’ that is more secure, more skilled, more highly paid and the idea of a future ‘beyond work’ – feel extraordinarily distant from what we know of the British labour market from our own experience. They are, therefore, unlikely to offer much in the way of real solutions to the challenges we face.

And why is that?

It could be because bold, reforming visions of this sort are the wrong place to look. There have always been those in economics who believe we should just settle for how things are. Right now that would mean being satisfied with a recovery in jobs that is, after all, historic. A vision of full employment secured by maximal labour market flexibility and global competitiveness – even if it is in a race to the bottom – does attract some. But the notion that working life in Britain could not be substantially better than it is, does not attract us. And we don’t believe it attracts most people either. Most people know that the economy in Britain today isn’t working in some fundamental ways. There is widespread awareness of the

dangers of job insecurity, of stubbornly low wages, of a dependence on publicly funded benefits to prop up people's standard of living.

But even if there is a shared critique of the world of work today, there is an equally widespread scepticism about many of the proposed solutions. People don't believe either that a future where robots do the shopping or where everyone goes to university and ends up in middle management is a satisfactory answer in and of itself to the problems people face. Neither the orthodox 'better work' nor the newly energised 'beyond work' solutions are, then, compelling by themselves.

Work and everyday experience

So to understand and plan for the future of work, you need to start not with idealised abstractions or vague visions. You need, instead, to start with the lived experience of working people. Because when you start there, the questions you must ask and the answers you must provide begin to look very different. And the problem for all reformers of work in recent years is this has tended to be the last place they look.

Think, for example, about the people with whom we began this essay and ask what would follow if we allowed them to set the agenda for our discussions about the future of work.

The questions they would ask are, we believe, clear enough. They would be about wages, security and flexibility, for sure. They might even be about technology from time to time. But they would also be about how people's paid time interacts with their unpaid time, or how the unpaid economy as a whole interacts with the paid economy. They would be about the extent of the safety-net people have when paid work doesn't work for them. About whether they have access to assets above and

beyond those provided by paid work, including tangible goods like wealth and housing, but also less tangible ones like personal support networks and a sense of belonging to a place that cares for them. They would be about how long it takes, how expensive it is, how unpleasant it is, to get to and from different kinds of work. Which would take us to how close people live to public services and amenities, be it schools, healthcare, or shops, and the way we plan our highstreets. And they would be about the experience in the workplace itself, not just the possibility of material reward, but the chance to find both some sense of independence and pride, community and solidarity.

What this all highlights is that accessing the labour market is not simply a question of qualifications, aspirations and availability of jobs. Nor is it about the role that technology might play in reshaping the working environment, despite the fact that these questions dominate almost every single aspect of policy discussions about employment. Instead, the geographic make-up of the local economy, the location of schools and of amenities, the balance between paid work and unpaid care, the ways in which people relate work to other sources of meaning in their lives – these questions have got to be right at the heart of the discussion, too. If they are not then we don't understand what we are really doing. And our efforts will fail to improve the real lives of real people.

The real future of work

What we are arguing, then, is that a really transformative approach to work in our future economy must be built on far more than the usual argument between 'better work' and 'beyond work'. To get to the kind of vision we need, we must learn how systemically to tackle the real, and practical, challenge people grapple with when it comes to work.

To do that, we need to do two things.

First, we have to make sure that economic decision making is not isolated from other concerns but is always inter-connected with decisions about the ways in which our cities are laid out, where shops are located, how support networks are properly constructed, what transport infrastructure looks like, and how finance can support industries that are based near to places where people live and bring up their kids. That kind of economic thinking is all too rare in Britain, but it is a commonplace in some other countries, especially in places where economic control is not vested either in a centralised state nor in an abstract market but in responsive and regionally relevant devolved authorities. In other words, where economic decisions are made closer to the people whose lives they will most directly affect.

Second, we have to make sure that working people themselves – and those who want to work but can't – are an integral part of that economic decision making. For too long politicians and reformers of all stripes have talked about work without talking to those who conduct it. There have been promises of policies that work 'for hardworking people' but little sense that the immediate concerns of those who labour are likely to be at the centrepiece of any programme for reform. Our call is for that to change. There is a practical wisdom in lives of work that has been excluded for far too long, and without it both the wrong questions will be asked and the wrong answers pursued.

So, what is the future of work? And how are the best policy solutions to enhance it to be shaped? There seems no doubt that in part, we as a country will have to respond to the problems of skills and training, to do all we can to overcome productivity challenges, to help generate middle-income jobs, just as the advocates of 'better work' have long argued. It seems true, too, that we will need to rise to the challenge of automation, know how to make the best of technology, rather than to see it as a threat to our inherited

understandings of how the labour market works, just as those who call for us to move 'beyond work' insist. But there is also much more to it than either of these theses understand. Because most of all, it needs to be a future that reflects what work really is and what its challenges are for all those millions of people who do it every day. It needs to be a future that puts their concerns and their knowledge right at the centre. And, for reformers, that probably requires the biggest mind-set shift of all: an acknowledgment that anyone who longs for a new economy, needs always to remember that it must be a new economy built by the people for whom it is intended to work.

EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: WORK

As a wise man once said, we make our own history not under circumstances of our own choosing but under those pre-existing, given and transmitted from the past. And for us in Europe in 2016, the circumstances are clear: quality jobs with decent pay and secure contracts are not on offer – they must be fought for.

In many ways, it has (regrettably) been the UK that has provided the blueprint for the dismantling of collective workplace rights in Europe. Now the flexible labour market is everywhere, yet unevenly distributed, from the Nordic countries to Spain where we find young workers engaged in 200 separate employment ‘contracts’ per year.

At the heart of this lies the murky notion of accountability – a particular problem at the European level where decision-making can be opaque and responsibility nebulous.

It is not all doom however. In the UK there has been increasing interest in workplace organising – which is fortunate as this is a much more significant resource in other European countries. However, unions need to be more realistic about the workers that they represent. In a period of hyper-flexibility, defending set groups of workers with set contracts is increasingly fanciful – a painful reality for union movements often built on shared notions of professional identity over a century or more. Unions that have fared best throughout the crisis are those with a broader conceptualisation of their role: those that include new groups of workers from ethnic minorities to young workers to those with the most precarious contracts and bogus self-employed.

If unions are to survive and indeed build upon the crisis, they must respond to the world of work as it is, not as they wish it to be.

Ben Egan