

The Long Read: What Will We Do in the Post-Work Utopia? by Mareile Pfannebecker and J.A. Smith

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The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work. David Frayne. Zed Books. 2015.

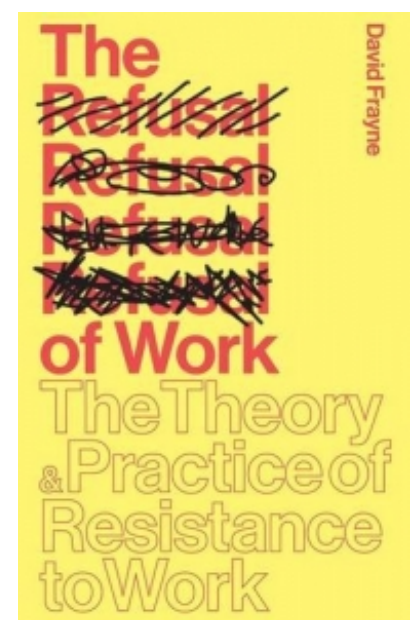
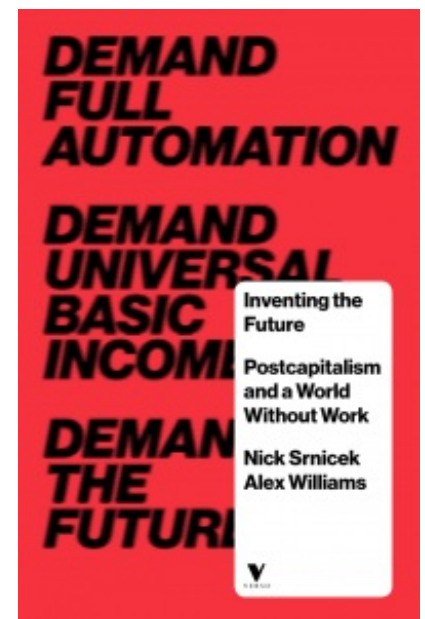
Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. Verso. 2015.

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There is today a preoccupation with the idea of ‘the end of work’: whether in chronicling the decline of permanent careers in the age of precarity; dystopian warnings that digitisation is about to bring a new age of mass unemployment; or utopian demands that we seize the opportunity to radically redefine our relationship to work. The most practical proposal of the latter is the campaign for a Universal Basic Income, an amount paid to every citizen without means-testing, the cost of which, it is argued, could be defrayed by a combination of savings in welfare bureaucracy and reductions in health spending. Until recently, UBI was spoken of as a ‘[thought experiment](#)’, but numerous countries are now witnessing campaigns and trials dedicated to making the policy a reality. In Britain, the Green Party, Labour and the SNP have expressed varying levels of openness to it, and there are also advocates on the libertarian Right. The basic annual amount of £3,692 proposed by UK campaigners may not keep the majority from pursuing further income, but such practical questions are less significant than the change that UBI represents to the very ontology of work. For the first time since the Garden of Eden, work would no longer be the condition of being, and all of us could live without paid labour if we chose.

Two recent books have offered coordinates for thinking through this ‘end of work’ moment. In *The Refusal of Work*, David Frayne makes a case against the culture of over-working we see at all points on the social scale; and in *Inventing the Future*, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams offer a radical programme for bringing about a ‘post-work’ future in which everyone is sustained by the fruits of digital technologies and a UBI. Both books are rigorous in their arguments for the desirability of an end – or a radical reduction – to the amount of work we do, and searching in their analyses of how this might be achieved. They also have another interesting thing in common: both come up against the question of what we are to do when we no longer depend on paid work. This, we want to suggest, should become a more central question for the post-work debate, even more so for the fact that it leads to the question of how we judge what we are without paid work.

Central to *The Refusal of Work* are case studies of people in Britain who have reduced the amount of paid work they do. Whether they have other sources of income, live on benefits or find ways to make money outside regular employment, they each do so in order to pursue more fulfilling activities. Anne leaves a stressful job in the media to focus on photography; Matthew abandons administrative work to study and volunteer for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; and Rhys aspires to leave his job as a computer programmer to develop



his allotment. 'There is a limit to the extent to which people will tolerate the contradiction between ethical ideals and daily realities', Frayne remarks, which leads to an 'opposing tradition of insurgency and rebellion, arising wherever people have refused to internalise the idea that to work is good, healthy and normal'. Most of Frayne's participants find modern labour to be as damaging and unhealthy as unemployment is generally alleged to be. Part of the problem of work is the dreadful gap between the unhappy experience many have of it and its status as a high ethical demand. Even those among his interviewees who are not benefits claimants and live by their own means said they feel stigmatised for not doing paid work.



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The work ethic's moral injunction, however, is often met by an equivalent moralism of the refusal (or the pose of a refusal) to participate in capitalist culture, meaning that work and non-work both tend to be justified in moralising terms. As Frayne puts it, 'a lot of popular anti-capitalist polemic [...] tells people (often in a rather pious fashion) that they will be happier if they choose to work less and moderate their spending'. Frayne is careful to question any critique of work that places its stress on the 'brainwashing or moral laxity' or acquisitiveness of those who fail to resist work, and he takes pains not to idealise the often trying lives of his interviewees. And yet, whenever he discusses what is beneficial in their lives, Frayne's discourse cannot entirely extricate itself from its own kind of moral 'piety'.

Take, for example, the fact that so many of Frayne's interviewees find that because working full-time generates expenses, giving up work actually gave them a head-start on making up for lost income. 'Given the extent to which many modern commodities – from pre-prepared meals to high-caffeine drinks, car washes, repair services, care services, personal trainers, dating agencies and so on – are capitalising on our lack of free-time', Frayne says, 'it is not surprising that many of the people I met found that working less was allowing them to save money. They were able to do more for themselves' (180). However, when we 'do more for ourselves', we are still performing work; only it is work of an implicitly idealised kind.

What is at stake in the ideal of 'doing more for ourselves' comes to the fore in an early response to the argument that liberation from certain kinds of work can give rise to personal autonomy and creativity. Anticipating [later arguments](#) in feminism for domestic and reproductive labour to be recognised as work, Virginia Woolf argued that much of the intellectual potential of women has historically been stifled by the everyday household: 'daughters of educated men

have always done their thinking from hand to mouth [...] They have thought while they stirred the pot, while they rocked the cradle'. Frayne's comments, however, have more in common with one of Woolf's harshest detractors. In a review of Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), literary critic Q.D. Leavis [remarks](#):

I feel bound to disagree with Mrs Woolf's assumption that running a household and family unaided necessarily hinders or weakens thinking. One's own kitchen and nursery, and not the drawing-room and dinner-table [that is, the spaces of upper class coterie conversation]... is the realm where living takes place, and I see no profit in letting our servants live for us.

Leavis's objections are inflected by class, explicitly contrasting her tough-minded petit-bourgeois background to Woolf's suspiciously louche aristocratic one. (In one of the better jokes in literary criticism, she wonders whether someone of Woolf's breeding would 'know which end of the cradle to stir'). For Leavis, intellectual creation and self-fulfilment are not to be abstracted from the tasks of ordinary life, but draw their strength precisely from them (though whether men are expected to participate in intellectually rewarding cradle-stirring remains unanswered here).

This position is consistent with what Raymond Williams called the 'culture and society' tradition in middle-class radical thought since the end of the 1700s, which opposes the deadening alienation of modern 'society' with an idealised, unalienated form of lived 'culture'. A residue of this idealism remains implicit in the arguments of many post-work exponents. For instance, in a discussion of André Gorz, Frayne describes 'the injustice in a society where one section of the population buys their free-time by offloading their chores on to the other' (40). This remains a poignant observation, particularly with the rise of platforms such as TaskRabbit and Amazon Turk that encourage the most casualised labourers to compete to undercut each other to perform household work for those who can afford them. Where the Leavisian moralism creeps in, however, is when Frayne's discussion suggests that it is not merely unjust that many of us offload our unpleasant but regrettably necessary day-to-day tasks, but that we are missing out when our hectic work lives oblige us to do so. At best, the situation of Frayne's interviewees is that for as long as they can abandon work, they are no longer servants; in being freed to grow their own vegetables, plan their own exercise regimes and raise their own children, they are no longer 'letting servants live for them'. These activities, in this analysis, are no straightforward kind of work, but the privileged space of 'culture' as such. We were duped into thinking work was life, and now we learn that life is staying at home.

This idealisation does not come down to any theoretical neglect on Frayne's part; rather, it is a problem structural to the post-work idea. While it aims to rescue us from the faulty moralism that keeps us in jobs we hate, it only justifies itself by proposing a more grounded, fulfilling and self-sufficient life, which it falls to post-work theorists to define. This comes to the surface whenever the literature on post-work describes what everyone is *specifically* projected to do once they have stopped working for a wage. For Frayne, 'shorter working hours would open up more space for political engagement, for cultural creation and appreciation, and for the development of a range of voluntary and self-defined activities outside work' (36). In their own ambitious manifesto for a post-work future, Srnicek and Williams offer analogous statements: 'leisure should not be confused with idleness, as many things we enjoy most involve immense amounts of effort. Learning a musical instrument, reading literature, socialising with friends and playing sports all involve varying degrees of effort – but these are things we freely choose to do' (140, 85).



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For these authors, work in the sense of effort is tolerable if we pursue it voluntarily and towards some meaningful project. In both books, the vital statement of this ethos comes from Karl Marx, in a remark in *The German Ideology* that can be seen as totemic for the post-work movement. Marx proposes that under ideal circumstances, it would be possible 'to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind'. This famous passage about self-determined pursuit is often linked to Marx's demand for a shortened work-week as the only way to human freedom; what is less noted is that Marx is still implicitly prescribing *how* we should use our newfound freedom. It is not incidental that this ideal of leisure is made up entirely of what we might call 'productive enjoyments': it is not about viewing waxworks and magic lanterns in the morning, reading penny novels in the afternoon and drinking gin all evening. It seems that the argument for post-work has always been rhetorically dependent on making the case that not only should we do away with work because it is unjust, unnecessary, damaging etc, but also because the alternative activities we would be freed to do would be actively good for us. Marx, as well as those of us attracted by his vision of self-determination, falls into the idealism held out by the hope for an 'unalienated' labour.

For many people –academics and activists included – the prospect of living between the allotment and the Hegel discussion group might seem idyllic. But there are plenty of others for whom this post-work utopia could sound like hard work: a mix of newly idealised domestic labour on the one hand, and a haughty obligation to constantly improve ourselves on the other. The accusation is anticipated in the slogan coined by new media activist Aaron Bastani. 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism' is a provocative and maybe partly tongue-in-cheek phrase gaining traction as a means of summarising a future where most waged labour has been automated, everyone is sustained by UBI and advanced Green technologies keep all in a state of ecologically-sound plenty. While it does not include the phrase, Srnicek and Williams's book is the outstanding analysis of how to bring about a future of this sort: *Inventing the Future*, in its call for a 'synthetic freedom' to bring the potential of today's machines on the side of a common good life, leans towards a more luxurious post-work future than hitherto imagined.

Through this link between technology, a work-free future and pleasure, 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism' is to rescue Left utopianism from the dour, ascetic and pious reputation Frayne warns about: whether mental images of Soviet bread queues or Jeremy Corbyn allegedly eating cold baked beans after a long day's leafleting. If a new popular movement is to emerge, the communist prospect is going to need to sound like something people might

actually like. This is where the promise of Green technologies that can produce virtually anything – that is, a *post-scarcity economy* – comes in. In this analysis, it is no longer a choice between saving the planet and ending inequality or pursuing our desires. [An accelerated digital future claims to deliver both](#): shared ownership of the means of production, with any kind of luxury watches, cars (electric, of course) and other commodities that we covet.

The post-work prospect appears to be justified according to two not entirely reconcilable ideals of what it is we are to do 'after work'. On the one hand, the considerable effort of overturning society demands the traditional justification that work is keeping us from reaching our full human potential, hence the promise that we could all become craft brewers, learn ballet and hold three PhDs. On the other, for those concerned that most post-work definitions of the good life are rooted in class-specific productive pleasures, overly domestic or simply a bit worthy, we have to bring in the other promise that one can still enjoy the hedonistic joys of capitalism that automated communism will produce all the more plentifully.



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One of the virtues of *Inventing the Future* is that, despite the seismic reimagining of society it describes, its pragmatic emphasis makes it sound a fairly no-nonsense affair to bring it about. All the Left need do is abandon its love affair with virtue-signalling 'folk politics' of protest, its nostalgia for the alleged sweet spot of post-war welfare capitalism and aim to gain control of hegemony-creating institutions. (Whatever one's assessment of Corbyn, Bernie Sanders, Syriza and Podemos individually, their successes in recent years suggest that the last is not an unattainable prospect). This pragmatism extends to the authors' concession that while such a change in society would have unanticipated consequences, it is still worth trying. Whatever unknowable things people might want to do with their freedom, it has to be better than the lack of autonomy that exists now. Theirs is 'a humanism that is not defined in advance', a humanism of 'synthetic freedom' that even anticipates the dangers of essentialism:

[Synthetic freedom] is constructed rather than natural, a collective historical achievement rather than the result of simply letting people be. Emancipation is thus not about detaching from the world and liberating a free soul, but instead a matter of constructing and cultivating the right attachments.

As such, Srnicek and Williams are off the hook as far as the humanist essentialism of the ‘culture and society’ tradition is concerned. They acknowledge that whatever freedom there can be, it will be the product of social and power relations. But if we’ve abandoned the old humanist faith that people can be vaguely trusted to sort themselves out in a congenial manner once liberated from their alienation, who or what will shape our lives in the post-capitalist future? If there is no human essence that can guarantee the form of the transformation, and yet we continue to hope that it will ‘cultivate the right attachments’, then this new kind of human subject has to be scrupulously promoted, created and maintained in a manner that seems irreconcilable with the impish consumer easygoingness promised by Bastani. In the book’s closing remarks, the unbuttoned ‘luxury’ of ‘Fully Automated Luxury Communism’ falls by the wayside:

Such a project demands a subjective transformation in the process – it potentiates the conditions for a broader transformation from the selfish individuals formed by capitalism to communal and creative forms of social expression liberated by the end of work.

Here, we have returned to something akin to Frayne’s ideal of ‘political engagement’, ‘cultural creation and appreciation’ and ‘the development of a range of voluntary and self-defined activities outside work’: activities enormously attractive to certain kinds of people, not inevitably so to others. While there are strategic and theoretical reasons for smudging the point a little, there seems no post-work prospect that is not ultimately prescriptive in this way.

One tentative conclusion might be that these admirable steps towards a positive programme for the future of work, which acknowledges that ‘subjective transformation’ is required, might also explicitly acknowledge that work could never simply be ‘driven by our own desires’ in the manner hoped for in Srnicek and Williams’s conclusion. In what is virtually the sole reference to the Russian Revolution in his works, Sigmund Freud remarks in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929) that while the end of economic inequality might be desirable, it could never result in everyone peacefully undertaking ‘whatever work is necessary’ in a state of happiness. Freud’s book grapples with the reason for this: the myriad ways in which our drives and desires are diverted, thwarted, harnessed and given shape to by human society and culture, beyond economics alone. We do not end with this reference in the spirit of conservative pessimism, but rather to suggest that while we find that these books make a post-work future look attractive and even achievable, the ideological, economic and political measures they present do not take account of the problem of desire. Our desires are never simply our own, and therefore work can never be driven simply by ‘our own desires’. If, as Srnicek and Williams demand, the Left is to rediscover itself as a force of utopian optimism, then the forms that desire might take when it is no longer stymied by alienated labour is a question we must continue addressing.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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