

# Keynes, Foucault and the ‘Disciplinary Complex’: a Contribution to the Analysis of Work

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## Abstract

Economists often agree that productivity and wealth levels rose sharply until the 2008 crash, particularly in the developed world (see *inter alia* Piketty & Saez, 2013; OECD, 2015). Such prosperity, however, still has not caused a significant reduction of the working week, which remains, on average, 40 hours a week in developed nations. This article deploys a critical examination of the longstanding utopia of a reduced working week. We propose a return to John Maynard Keynes’s economic reflections in early 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning the material possibilities for future generations, and how high productivity levels associated with new technological advances could, and should, allow individuals to reduce their workload without harming the economy. Whilst reviving Keynes’s reflections on the links between the economy and the lives of the population, we also introduce the (Foucaultian) concept of the ‘disciplinary complex’ and explore some of its explanatory potential. Finally, we suggest that in order to reach the ‘post-work’ world that Keynes predicted for us, we must consider the role of labour not just in economic terms, but also as a disciplinary institution that has its own inner cultural and practical mechanisms. Overcoming the disciplinary complex, and the work-centred society, therefore requires technological, economic but above all cultural and organisational overhaul.

**Key Words:** Working time; Work relations; Capitalism; Discipline; Work Ethic; John Maynard Keynes; Good Life; Michel Foucault; Post-work

## Introduction

Debates about the impacts of technology and automation in the workplace are certainly not new. Classical political economists such as David Ricardo [1821] (2001) already paid attention to the “influence of machinery on the interests of the different classes of society” (2001: 282); nowadays, similar fears of artificial intelligence (AI) to scrap employment levels are currently being examined by economists, philosophers and sociologists (e.g. Van Parijs:

2017; Mason: 2015; Ford, 2015). Complementary to such debate is the discussion of the cultural role of work in contemporary society. Has work lost its association with practical survival and self-preservation, becoming now “a painful and meaningless ritual acted out for its own sake” (Fleming, 2015: 1)? Or does it play another role within capitalist societies?

Despite work being called into question in our contemporary technological moment, there has not been a proportional reduction in worktime in line with the increases in productivity and wealth levels over the past half century – particularly in the developed world. For instance, Huberman & Minns (2007) show that whilst significant worldwide reductions in the worktime were put into place between 1870 and 1929 (from 64.3 to 47.8 hours of week, on average), less changes occurred in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where worktime was reduced by only 9.1 hours a week (45.4 hours in 1950, compared to 36.3 hours in 2000).

The possibilities of a reduced work week, however, are currently under increasing scrutiny. While economists claim that such reduction is feasible (New Economics Foundation, 2010), we investigate the reasons why such measure has not been concretely implemented in the workplace. Our hypothesis utilises and develops non-economic (in the narrow sense) arguments regarding the role of work in society, understanding it as a key disciplinary function in contemporary capitalism. As French theorist Michel Foucault (1978, 1995) acknowledges, modern social institutions – including work practices and the workplace – are responsible for embedding certain power relations and for creating different modes of control, aiming at producing docile and disciplined individuals under a specific pattern of normality. Thus, the idea of work must be considered not solely as an activity of production and/or of simply selling one’s labour capacity in exchange for money, but also as a disciplinary activity that has processes built into it that aim at the maintenance of individual behaviours and attitudes. To this end, we introduce some of the insights of Michel Foucault into the current debates regarding the crisis of work. These debates tend to utilize concepts drawn from Marx (e.g. ‘surplus populations’: Srnicek and Williams (2015)), Arendt (e.g. the labour/work distinction: Standing (2011)), Andre Gorz (e.g. ‘autonomous time’: Frayne (2015)) or critics of the work ethic such as Weber (Weeks: 2011). Integrating Foucaultian and Keynesian approaches to the problematic of work, in our view, develops these already existing innovations drawn from other sources.

This article deploys a consideration of the utopia of a world with less work, exploring the possibility of reducing working hours without affecting wage levels. We argue that the debate on the benefits of reduced working hours are not new. On the contrary, as advocated by British economist John Maynard Keynes, a 15-hour working week is economically feasible and provides greater intangible benefits to society, such as increasing the hours dedicated to knowledge, science, leisure and creativity. We propose a return to John Maynard Keynes's writings on economic activity, associated with a reflection on the role of work in contemporary capitalism and a discussion of how much is enough (see *inter alia* Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2013) to achieve the necessary means for a comfortable life.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section situates work within contemporary capitalism, presenting a review of core ideas and concepts about the economic and social purposes of labour. Section 2 explores John Maynard Keynes's ideas on capitalism and the possibility of achieving a satisfactory material life with a reduced work week, addressing the main reasons and benefits of such a reduction. Section 3 critically analyses the possibility of achieving this utopia in the light of the arguments discussed in the previous sections. We argue that a significant, global reduction in working hours has not yet been put in place at least partly due to cultural and technological forces too often overlooked in economic analyses. Work is here considered as a disciplining social institution that colonises the population's time and energy, primarily for the needs of increased capital accumulation but also as an expedient mode of social control that has its own history and specific mechanisms. We present some examples of how discipline can materialise both in the discourse and practice of work, drawing from a range of research literature. The last section presents our concluding remarks on the subject and its relevance today – when work as an institution is at stake once again.

## **1. Situating work within contemporary capitalism**

This section has two objectives: first, it provides a summary of different approaches to work in economics, each one with different assumptions, modes of analysis and conclusions on the role of work: classical, neoclassical, neoliberal and social. Secondly, it introduces the issue of work as a social and individual formative process – to be further developed below via the concept of the 'disciplinary complex'.

## *Classical*

It is not news to say that work shapes and defines the economy and society, both ontologically and epistemologically. Since 18<sup>th</sup> century classical political economy, the issue of work (or labour, more specifically) has remained the primary concern of economics, together with its underlying analytical elements (division of labour, value creation, productivity, wages, labour supply and demand).

For instance, in *The Wealth of Nations* [1776] (1976a, 1976b) Adam Smith notably pointed out the importance of labour to humankind and concluded how the division of labour could improve productivity levels by increasing returns to scale (the rate of increase in output) when combined with technological advances. Much less acknowledged, however, is Smith's critical view towards work and its detrimental effects upon mankind. In *The Wealth of Nations* [1776] (1976a, 1976b), Smith emphasises how the division of labour can be morally degenerating and mentally stultifying (West, 1964) by claiming that “[t]he man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has not occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur.” (Smith, 1976b: 781-782). Modern work, in Smith's words, is not an abstract economic activity, but rather an increasingly standardised activity that has psychological, cognitive and even existential effects.

Similarly, other political economists such as David Ricardo (1821) and Karl Marx (1867) also pointed out the contradictory dynamics of work, and how its economic outcomes may have different (or undesired) social consequences. For example, Marxian analyses of surplus value theory (see Marx, 1982 [1867]) emphasise, among other issues, the alienating nature of work insofar as it is the mere creation of surplus value. With the rise of capitalism, in which labour becomes commodified and made available to be bought and sold in the market according to the mechanism of price (Polanyi, 2001), the social function of work itself is reconstituted: it now complies to the rules and norms of the market, rather than first and foremost providing the necessary means and conditions for human life.

## *Neoclassical*

Neoclassical, or “mainstream” approaches (see *inter alia* Lewis, 1957 and Stigler, 1962)] towards labour in economics understand the movements of increases in labour demand and supply as responses to the mechanism of prices (or wages). For neoclassical economics, employment generates disutility<sup>1</sup>, which is compensated by monetary remuneration. The remuneration is then used to purchase market goods and services to satisfy human wants. Mainstream (neoclassical) labour market theory thus expresses the implicit belief that the purpose of economic life is the trade-off, or the conflicting choice, between scarce physical means and unlimited human wants.

### ***Neoliberal***

In addition to the neoclassical approach to work, neoliberalism conceives of labour as an individual choice – that is, it focuses on the *decision* to work for a certain wage level – where a ‘wage’ represents a return of investment for one’s human capital, such as years of education (Foucault, 2008: 241). Negative externalities, such as unemployment and work precarity, for example, fall under the classification of “bad individual choices” in the sense that workers were unable to carry out maximising cost-benefit analysis that considered human capital inputs (such as years of education) *versus* wage outputs (or return of investment). Importantly, the neoliberal categorisation of work integrates worker subjectivities (their personal ‘choice’ and ‘analysis’) with the social institution of work.

### ***Social approaches: work as a formative process***

We now turn to how the role of labour has changed within contemporary capitalism and particularly via the dominance of the neoliberal rationale, investigating if labour can still be depicted as a routine practice that commodifies human activities and/or simply cultivates ‘human capital’. Social approaches to economics such as institutional and feminist economics, for example, understand and analyse economic processes from a perspective that does not prioritise the market. They challenge the mainstream view that material goods and services are the purposive ends of economic life, emphasising economics as “the study of

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<sup>1</sup> Neoclassical economics proposes that the value of a product is explained by its utility (or usefulness) to the consumer. Utility maximisation is the ultimate goal of economic activity for neoclassical economics, or how one should spend his/her money and/or time to *maximise* utility? In this discourse, worktime is effectively a disutility, unless it is remunerated with a sufficient wage. For more on this, see Mas-Colell *et al*, 1995.

social provisioning” (Dugger, 1996: 32), which explores how society organises economic activities *vis a vis* culture, ideology and institutions (Power, 2004).

In social economic approaches, work is defined by sets of social relations and institutions. For social economists (see *inter alia* Wisman 2003; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005; Figart & Mutari, 2008) it is the social relations organising how work is performed that will largely determine whether work is meaningful or alienating. Work is conceived within a more complex, holistic framework than many previous economic frameworks (although there are always exceptions), as it is linked to human flourishing instead of the mere generation of value. It is not simply about the production of material goods and the generation of monetary value, but also creating social relations, lifestyles and ethical behaviours. Therefore, for this school of thought, work *can* be a source of satisfaction: in social provisioning, economic processes “produce goods and services, but they also produce people” (Dugger, 1996: 36).

If for social economists work represents a socially embedded action that generates more value than the creation of material goods and reproduction of routine activities, it needs to be understood together with other underlying social and human institutions. Work represents a social activity that affects (and is affected) by other social institutions. For instance, the ideal of a decent, modern society inevitably assumes a consistent, overall improvement of labour relations because employment (is ostensibly aimed at) yielding many benefits besides economic goods and services, such as providing social networks and psychological well-being (Pressman and Summerfield, 2000).

Developing these insights further, we can say that work represents a process of ‘subjectivation’,<sup>2</sup> or the construction of the individual via certain conducts, modes of existence or styles of life. Work relations exercise a core function in society by determining how individuals behave and shape their modes of living in accordance with labouring. Even though such processes of subjectivation-via-work and other underlying labour relations might be integrated with the quasi-teleological approach to work found in mainstream economics (where the purpose of working or selling one’s labour capacity is primarily the exchange of a

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<sup>2</sup> For philosophical references on this topic, see Foucault (1995, also developed below); Deleuze and Guattari (2005). The surrounding literature on this is vast.

monetary remuneration), this conception is certainly not enough to understand (or justify) how work changes the ways and norms by which society and individuals live.

As we will expand upon later, Foucault demonstrates that social institutions and their discursive formations such as the school, the hospital, the family and the factory are responsible for creating and disseminating disciplinary power relations, that is, specific conducts of behaviour and existence that are entwined in social formations in ways that make for relations of dominance and subjugation (Foucault, 1995).<sup>3</sup> Work in particular deserves closer attention insofar as it performs a larger social role: not only does it determine the provision of food, shelter and other needs, but also influences the ways individuals think and act. For example, when analysing the industrial revolution and the rise of the managerial profession, Foucault points out to the role of surveillance and control in the workplace as means to increase productivity and control the workforce: “Surveillance thus becomes a decisive economic operator both as an internal part of the production machinery and as a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power.” (Foucault, 1995: 175).<sup>4</sup>

### ***Work changes, discipline remains***

It is easy to imagine that with the move away from the routine of the manufacturing assembly line, towards the ‘knowledge’, ‘information’ or ‘post-industrial’ economy, disciplinary mechanisms would in turn transform or even disappear. Perhaps, some commentators thought, new forms of work would allow for a less docile and more independent subject to appear (Offe 1985). More recent commentators have underlined the contrasting reality of the situation: while forms of work change, discipline remains (Fleming et. al, 2004). It is

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<sup>3</sup> Despite some claims that Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower’ supersedes his concept of ‘disciplinary power’, or that we have ‘moved beyond’ disciplinary society (see, e.g. Deleuze: 1992), Foucault is very clear that different types of power can and do coexist. See, for example, in the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures where he writes that the two forms of power ‘are not mutually exclusive and can be articulated together’ or later where he discusses how the “norm” ‘will circulate between the disciplinary and the regulatory [biopower]...The normalizing society is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation intersect along an orthogonal articulation’ (Foucault, 2003: 250, 253). We claim that with the continuation of work practices, disciplinary power has retained its efficacy, albeit sometimes in *dislocated* settings.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to reiterate that Foucault’s approach, while addressing itself to specific phenomena, is entirely consistent with a Marxian understanding of capital. The aforementioned quotation from *Discipline and Punish* is immediately followed in the text by this extract from *Capital, vol. 1*: ‘the work of directing, superintending and adjusting becomes one of the functions of capital, from the moment that the labour under the control of capital, becomes cooperative. Once a function of capital, it requires special characteristics’ (Marx, 1970: 313).

essential to note that disciplinary mechanisms have not disappeared in contemporary labour relations; they have in fact become more intense, pervasive and subtle. One study, drawing on Foucault's vocabulary, described the modern call centre as an 'electronic panopticon' (Ferne and Metcalf, 2000; discussed in Frayne, 2015). Recent scandals involving large employers reinforce the analytical line Foucault draws between different disciplinary institutions such as the workplace, the prison and the school. In 2016 it was revealed that Sport's Direct had been using a whole set of disciplinary techniques that could easily be confused with techniques utilised in prisons.<sup>5</sup> Rigorous strip searches, 'encouragements' over a loudspeaker to work harder and corrective threats of firing were all found to be used. The parliamentary inquiry that followed likened these practices to those found in 'Victorian workhouses'.<sup>6</sup>

Another emergent deployment of contemporary discipline 'at work' is the ideal of the company as an affective attractor for employees' aspirations. By signifying the company as a 'team' or 'family', employers seek to make their discipline 'smooth and inconspicuous' (Frayne, 2015: 56; Casey, 1995). Catherine Casey's study of a particular Fortune 500 corporation showed how, by understanding themselves as part of this 'family', workers are encouraged to feel a sense of devotion and obligation – inculcating certain practices and self-understandings (Casey, 1995: 127). Employees responded to these obligations 'with emotional labour, which saw them engaged in careful, sustained efforts to manage their comportment and use of language' (Frayne, 2015: 57).

Further, Gregg (2011) suggests how technological advances and organisational changes in the workplace have not improved our relationship with work, nor has it reduced our working hours. On the contrary, even though work-flexibility practices – enabled by new technologies – such as 'remote work' are offered to workers as liberalising, attractive alternatives that reduce worktime, in actuality they simply expand work into the field of life, blurring the work-life relationship (See also Berardi, 2009). Consequently, workers incorporate the disciplinary processes of labour into their own individualities, becoming shaped and controlled by their work whether they are in traditional workplaces or not. With disciplinary power expanding outside of its localised sites and further into the 'extra-economic'

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/dec/09/how-sports-direct-effectively-pays-below-minimum-wage-pay>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jul/22/mike-ashley-running-sports-direct-like-victorian-workhouse>

subjectivities of *individuals*, we might hypothesise that disciplinary power has been systematically intensified and distributed, but not yet transformed into biopower (which takes *population* as its object of intervention).

If subjects are increasingly defined and structurally positioned by their own labour activities, it is possible to conceive of a society without work, or even *less* work? The next section proposes a return to Keynes's economic ideas to illustrate how such a debate was already in place after the Great Depression, suggesting that our current wealth and productivity levels could afford shorter working days and/or weeks.

## **2. Work for who? The economic possibilities for our (great-)grandchildren**

This section reviews John Maynard Keynes's (1883-1946) core arguments concerning economic prospects and the role of work in society, addressing his view on future economic possibilities for the underlying relations between productivity, working hours and leisure. We argue that his thesis on productivity and wealth levels written during the Great Depression of 1929 can provide meaningful insights for rethinking the current patterns of work in contemporary capitalism.

Interestingly, the economic crisis of 2007/8 brought Keynes back to the centre of economic analyses, discussions and practices. Keynes's revolutionary conception of economic dynamics addressed the role of several institutional, political and psychological variables that were important to economics, such as the role of government as an active economic entity to fight uncertainty and instability, as well as the existence of social conventions and expectations that affect economic outcomes.

Keynes's strong ties with philosophy and ethics provided him with a holistic interpretation of the economy. The evolution of Keynes's political and economic view was pragmatic in the sense that he saw the solution to the economic problem as a prerequisite to a better society, which would allow people to concentrate comparatively less on the production of wealth, and more on activities of creative leisure, or the 'matters of supreme value': what Keynes designated as the arts of life (Keynes, 2013a) or aspects of 'the good life' (Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2013).

In practical terms, Keynes approached the issue of the good life in his 1930 essay *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren* (2013a), where he emphasised the idea that society as a whole could only enjoy and experience leisure, culture and other universally-desired values (which he designated as “arts of life” or as aspects of a “good life”) after reaching an economic optimum. Seeking the economic optimum is the end (*telos*) of economic activity and policy; hence economics (as a moral science) would help supply the material conditions to reach said good life.

Keynes’s thought was heavily influenced by ancient Greek ethics, particularly Platonic and Aristotelian ethics and politics (see Carabelli, 2002 and Crespo, 2004). Keynes’s developments on the issue of the good and the absorption of the good in itself were influenced by Plato (see Keynes, 2013b: 445), whilst the search for the good life was based on Aristotle’s idea that economics is the use of what is necessary for life in general and for the good life (Crespo, 2013: 105). Indeed, the issue of the good life must be investigated further in this section insofar as Keynes believed that fine actions were compatible with economic activities; in his view, economics would lead to the good, beautiful life.

Keynes (2013a: 326-327) stresses the role of technological improvements and economic conditions, such as fine-tuned fiscal and monetary policies, as instruments for achieving a better standard of life. Although he admits that technical efficiency may cause temporary unemployment, he calls it a “temporary phase of maladjustment” so in the long run the economic problem of mankind would be almost solved. Moreover, if the economic problem is not a permanent one (i.e. there is the possibility of its resolution), this means that individuals would need to work less to achieve the level of necessary income which would allow them to actually enjoy the “real values of life”, such as leisure, philosophy, arts and freedom (amongst others that we could add).

Keynes argues:

If capital increases, say, 2 per cent per annum, the capital equipment of the world will have increased by a half in twenty years, and seven and a half times in a hundred years. Think of this in terms of material things—houses, transport, and the like. (Keynes, 2013a: 325).

This suggests that in one hundred years the population of the advanced capitalist world would have a standard of living between four and eight times higher than in the 1920s (Keynes, 2013a: 326). Consequently, people would need to work less hours to satisfy their needs, and would be able to enjoy leisure, virtues and pleasures of a good life.

Keynes's predictions about output growth and hours of work were correct, as Skidelsky & Skidelsky (2013: 19) demonstrate by comparing Keynes's forecast in the late 1920s with recent data for developed economies. Whilst hours of work per week between 1929 and 2000 have, on average, dropped by 11.5 hours a week (Huberman and Minns, 2007: 542), growth of capital, measured as GDP per capita, has more than quadruplicated between the early 1930s and late 2000s (Bolt et al, 2014). The trend has continued into more recent times, despite the 2007-8 recession. For instance, in OECD countries<sup>7</sup>, productivity (calculated as GDP per hour worked, in USD) has increased from 38.9 in 2000 to 46.8 in 2015 (OECD, 2015). Despite the fact that such statistics are stylised representations of reality (one cannot simply assume that all job positions had a reduction of 11.5 hours a week in that period, but this rather represents an *average*), they do indicate that wealth creation and average working time can be inversely correlated – presenting us with the notion of a world of increased luxury and time.

### ***Needs and wants***

For Keynes, working less hours and enjoying the “good life” was associated with a conception of a finite quantity of material needs – which are different from wants. ‘Needs’ represent the objective necessities of mankind, such as food, clothing and shelter. ‘Wants’, however, mean higher objects that also refer to the inventiveness of humankind and its ability to create new necessities, such as the ones invented by technological development (computer tablets, computers, cars, films, etc.), or what some authors might call ‘non-necessities’ (e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2006).

Skidelsky & Skidelsky (2013: 135, 141) draw a few critical conclusions from Keynes's view. Keynes rejected the possibility that capitalism in its current form might be evolving forms of

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<sup>7</sup> OECD countries include 35 members: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Latvia, Luxemburg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States.

the good life as it matured. Indeed, while Keynes reminded us of what money could potentially provide us in terms of a good life, he also criticised the strict love of money and consumerism. In this sense, according to a Keynesian point of view, we should put the issue of ethics – of what the *purpose* of economic activity is – back on the table, together with appropriate policies or forms of investment that involve the arts, architecture, sports, education and other leisure activities that people might wish to pursue in their versions of the good life.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of, or perhaps *because* of, his views regarding basic needs and wants, Keynes's prophecy regarding the drastic reduction in working time has proven untrue, despite his accurate prediction of the levels of wealth 80 years after his essay. Why, is this the case? Skidelsky & Skidelsky (2013: 27) attribute the failure of Keynes's prophecy to three main hypotheses: "people are said to work the hours they do either because they *enjoy it*, or because they *are compelled to*, or because they *want more and more*." (*ibid*). Based on our above account of work, we put forward our own synthetic hypothesis regarding the persistence of long working weeks, as a response Keynes's theoretical failure. We then discuss the possibilities for achieving Keynes's utopia of 15-hours a week in the light of this hypothesis.

### 3. The disciplinary complex

Our hypothesis for understanding why our worktime has not decreased significantly in the last 100 years relies on an analysis of what we call the 'disciplinary complex', drawing from the ideas of Michel Foucault and Max Weber, which we began to introduce in Section 1. This explanation is intended to (partially) contribute to answering *why* we continue to work such long hours, and also (to a larger extent) *how* the work-centred society is enforced and maintained. Needless to say, as only a contributory explanation it would require complimentary analyses of capitalist social and exchange relations, as well as other political structures in order to approach the comprehensiveness of a 'catch-all' theory. Nonetheless, our 'disciplinary complex' argument can account for various 'efficient' (how) causes as to

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<sup>8</sup> Something akin to a return to this way of viewing economic intervention is present in the UK Labour Party's 2017 election manifesto where they attempted to outline what an 'economy that works for all' looks like. <http://www.labour.org.uk/index.php/manifesto2017/economy>

the dominance of work in (and despite) our affluent societies; it also touches on the way in which individuals can and have become ideologically wedded to work.

In a sentence, our claim is that people work the hours they do not simply because work is the creation of (scarce) productive and monetary value but, in fact, *because work is an expedient complex of disciplinary practices and ideologies that have emerged within, and have predominated, modern society*. We therefore broadly accept the Skidelsky's second hypothesis that the social institution of work continues to dominate our society due to compulsion – although our account fleshes out the complexities of what this 'compulsion' involves. Within this argument also lies the claim that these work practices and accompanying ideologies have come to play an important role in defining who we should be and how we should act inside (and outside) the workplace; this identity-formation is crucial to the reproduction, sedimentation (and seeming unquestionability) of work practices in general.

### ***The disciplinary complex***

To reflect about the state of work in contemporary society means to consider the two sides of the disciplinary complex. First, we have to consider the influence of discourses and ideologies that accompany, justify, and thereby prop up work practices. Secondly we have to consider the specific power relations embedded in the workplace (some of this work has already been done in section 1). In this sense, one could view the concept of the disciplinary complex as the theoretical product of an encounter between Foucaultian critique and post-Weberian diagnosis of the contemporary work ethic (exemplified by Weeks (2011) and Frayne (2015)). The product of this nexus between discourse and practice is a particular subjectivity and thus we end the section by discussing the 'employable subject'.

### ***Disciplinary discourses***

Society is not simply the suturing together of a variety of objective practices – it requires the deployment of value systems in order to justify, authorise and regulate individual behaviours and practices themselves. The primary example of how this plays out in work places and practices is the way in which the ideals of 'work values' and above all the 'work ethic' have become dominant cultural tropes across the political spectrum. These normalising and

moralising discourses accompany the practical disciplinary work environment effectively as the mechanisms by which individuals assent to their own subjection. Specifically, the modern work ethic directs subjects to consider their jobs as ‘an essential source of individual growth, self-fulfilment, social recognition, and status’ (Weeks, 2011: 11). Often, these basic moral overtones overlap with other discourses such as idealising the entrepreneur or the ‘self-made man’ as a role model, in which work represents a path down which individuals can reach greater and greater social and economic status.<sup>9</sup>

The Protestant work ethic, as described by Weber (2005 [1930]) is perhaps the discourse most influential in spreading the idea that work represents both a virtue of humankind and a duty or a calling (bequeathed by God to be followed by all men). As Weeks has noted (2011: 37-79), this ethic has evolved into different post-industrial/post-Fordist forms. These changes in the mode of articulation, national contexts and specific ideals have been made largely to increase productivity and dedication to work in new work spaces, historical periods and types of work, such as in the service sector. The current, prevalent model of work, for example, requires the capacities of leadership, enthusiasm, self-discipline and flexibility as a part of a mandatory ethos, transforming personal, innate capacities, such as attitudes, motivation and behaviour into pliable work tools. Consequently, the use of ‘ideal capacities’ – the work ethic in list-form – acts as a disciplinary tool to compel workers to change *themselves* in the name of work (rather than be told directly to increase productivity levels or profit margins), engaging in new practices and processes intended to cultivate their subjectivities into appropriate and serviceable agents (more on the ‘ideal subject’ below).

The work ethic has become embedded in work practices, often anchored in the concept of freedom (flexibility, relaxing of dress-codes, etc.). This (post-industrial) ethic produces the necessary level of commitment and subjective investment from workers. For instance, practices that stimulate investments in human capital (such as higher education) and in other innate abilities, such as ‘human resources’ (leadership capacity, self-discipline, sense of responsibility) are based on easily accepted ideas of self-improvement and freedom. Again, the interpretation of these practices as ‘investments’ in future capacity is to be understood as the further extension of commodification to previously non-commodified objects as identified

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<sup>9</sup> This discourse is familiar to us today in books such as Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2013) where it is identified, problematically, with feminism. For a critique of this position, see Nicole Ashcroft’s *New Prophets of Capital* (London: Verso/Jacobin, 2015).

by Polanyi.<sup>10</sup> However, despite the elasticity of the work ethic in the face of the changing forms of labour and of employment sectors we should note that work relations, i.e. the disciplinary mechanisms imposed upon individuals in order that they remain compliant and efficient, remain firmly in place.

### ***Disciplinary practices***

These disciplinary discourses are the counterparts to the practices that go on within the work environment. Insofar as workers take on normalising and moralising behaviours through due to the design and maintenance of work practices themselves, the act of work has extra-economic effects (economic conceived here in the narrow sense of the mechanism whereby surplus value is produced, or, if you prefer, the act of earning a wage. The economy conceived more broadly as society's *arrangement* of subjects and things – in the original sense of *oikos* – obviously includes and relies on the power dynamics we are here describing). In analysing work practices, and the various disciplinary technologies involved, it is increasingly hard to say that the purpose of a job is to solely reproduce labour-power's capacity – or even solely to produce extractable value. Rather, what we encounter is an apparatus designed to control and organise individuals.

The power relations involved in work are continuous with neoliberal restructurings of the workplace and with the increasing mobility of capital and labour, which have caused significant threats to jobs, an increase in the net amount of precarious work and a contraction of social welfare provisions. Economic pressures are the default tools of control under capitalism – whichever ideological guise they adopt. Indeed, the disciplinary practices that surround and enforce work that we are highlighting here dovetail with the basic Marxist premise that proletarian existence – and even the value form – are part of the pressure wielded against the majority of the population.<sup>11</sup>

One clear example of these practices is demonstrated by Wood's (2017) ethnographical study of two major retail firms in the US and UK in 2012-13 and their use of flexible scheduling by managers to punish workers, bringing a widespread sense of insecurity and psychological slavery. Workers, according to Woods (*ibid*), are forced into negotiating their schedules,

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<sup>10</sup> See also lecture 9 in Foucault (2008) on neoliberal understandings of work as an 'investment'.

<sup>11</sup> For one introduction to the idea of value as a power relation see Cleaver (2000 [1979]).

creating an environment where workers must continually strive to maintain managers' favour. He shows that even when regulatory workplace institutions exist (particularly in the UK), which ostensibly facilitate collective voice and worker-controlled flexible scheduling, the ability of workers to actually influence their work scheduling is ultimately dependent upon bargaining power with their managers. In the case of major firms, this bargaining power is significantly reduced or even lost given the economic conditions of the financial crisis, with abnormally high unemployment and underemployment in the developed world.

Normative disciplinary practices, however, do not necessarily demonstrate a single downward causality between employers and employees, in which the employer (or the manager) represents the single controlling agent (as in the Taylorist model). What these disciplinary practices exhibit is a change in the 'employer-employee' rationale through a complex relationship of increasing self-discipline and peer control among the workplace, realising the notion of the 'embodied worker', or the worker as the self, often accompanied with a normalising discourse that reinforces the numerous "benefits" of these practices. Other common examples embedded in the workplace reveal the manifestation of discipline in a subtler way, which include, for instance, the imposition of new metrics and practices where workers are often being asked to measure their own productivity (such as 'work games'), satisfaction, health and well-being.

Moore and Robinson's (2015) definition of *quantified self at work* (QSW) seem appropriate to define these normative practices of constant assessment and improvement imposed on workers. Organisational studies reveal the spread of these disciplinary practices based on the development of new work metrics that emphasise the need for *better* performance, *better* productivity and *better* health and well-being, often correlated to peer control. For example, Posthuma *et al* (2013) highlight the rise of new human resources (HR) systems that leverage human capital by acquiring, developing, and motivating the best talent via new recruiting, selection and continued self-assessment practices at work. These include a continuous disciplinary micro-management of productivity, creativity, personal initiative and interpersonal skills carried out by the entire workforce. Fan *et al* (2013) suggest the adoption of the workplace social self-efficacy (WSSE) metric to stimulate interpersonal relationships and increase forms of self-efficacy in the workplace (productivity, use of technology and creativity), associating one's productivity to the whole group. Measures to improve the health of the workforce can even include a control of the time workers spend sitting down:

Clark *et al* (2011) defend the collection of sitting time data from workers in an office-based setting to suggest that controlled sitting patterns can improve employees' productivity and sense of well-being, leading to long-term health benefits.

Controversially, pressure is also put on individuals that are out of the labour market, which have been transformed into 'job seekers' and also suffer the acute disciplining effects of interventions, procedures and techniques within social welfare offices. When analysing documents from Jobcentres in the UK and popular websites which include job advertisements and advice for unemployed individuals, Boland (2015) demonstrates how normalising discourses and practices of the workplace also affect those that are out of it. For instance, a Jobcentre Plus document (2010) addresses the unemployed as a problematic population who are necessarily the target of interventions through, for instance, raising the possibility of accepting any temporary job or face sanctions as a punishment (such as having a jobseeker's allowance suspended).

Further, the disciplinary complex intersects with the power relations of gender in at least 2 ways. Firstly, certain occupational structures are gender-determined because they follow gendered norms and roles, such as the sedimented gender designations of caring and domestic labour, which are most often carried out by women. Care and domestic work have been naturalised as "female jobs" within capitalism (Federici, 2012 [1975]), and these tend to be poorly paid or even not paid at all (Killewald, 2011). As with the discourse of the traditional or post-Fordist work ethic, women embody a certain (gendered) discourse (of the 'naturalness' of their caring labour) and materialise it inside *and* outside the workplace. Recent studies, for example, show that women carry out domestic and care tasks, on average, 7 hours a week more than men in European countries (Treas and Tai, 2016).

Secondly, as Federici points out, the traditional – and persistent – male breadwinner model disciplines both partners in the relationship, although in different ways. By maintaining housework essentially as a 'labour of love' (i.e. by not paying for it), economies ideologically discipline women into carrying out the work of maintaining the domestic sphere (thereby spatially and economically constraining them). '[A]t the same time, [work] has also disciplined the male worker, by making "his" woman dependent on his work and his wage' (Federici, 2012 [1975]: 17). The gendered division of forms of work, compounded by the

effects and exclusions of wage-dependency, creates a practical lock-in that makes such inclusions and exclusions habitual and ‘natural’.

### *Ideal subjects*

The disciplinary complex’s product is the ideal worker-individual, and today it has its own specific form. Maurizio Lazzarato writes:

What modern management techniques are looking for is for “the worker’s soul to become part of the factory.” The worker’s personality and subjectivity have to be made susceptible to organization and command. It is around immateriality that the quality and quantity of labor are organized. This transformation of working-class labor into a labor of control, of handling information, into a decision-making capacity that involves the investment of subjectivity, affects workers in varying ways according to their positions within the factory hierarchy, but it is nevertheless present as an irreversible process. (Lazzarato, 1996: 134)

Lazzarato’s words touch on recent organisational transformations (in the type of work, the material worked upon and so on) as producing a new form of subjectivity which is incorporated by the worker as a ‘way of life’. The internal rationale of work and its underlying elements of value creation, normalising behaviour and corporate ethics have spread to contexts outside of the traditional work sphere, in a similar – but more pervasive and intensive – process to Polanyi’s commodification. Work and the work logic now dominates spaces and individuals even outside of work locations – working on the subject-as-possible-worker.

Phoebe Moore’s work on contemporary ‘employability’ discourse is particularly relevant here. She notes that within much academic literature and public policy documentation, “employability” – the capability of a subject to suit a role – ‘is increasingly described...as though it is a skill in its own right’ (Moore, 2010: 39). To cultivate one’s employability means to shape oneself as *potentially* commodifiable, and this temporal stance towards oneself (you are always anticipating employment) means that the disciplinary relationship with capital and its agents (e.g. the employer) begins *even before* employment itself. Whereas previously, disciplinary power worked on the body and the soul within a tightly-bound spatial

location – the hospital, the office, the school – and *once* the individual had entered the employment relation, now the individual is always already disciplined by *future* employment:

The worker who can demonstrate employability has begun a relationship of subordination to capital before even necessarily being employed, meaning that capitalism is successfully becoming integrated into increasing levels of people's everyday lives. (Moore, 2010: 40)<sup>12</sup>

Utilising the notion of the 'disciplinary complex', we can see how 'employability' is both a (relatively new) form of the work ethic ideology *and* the product of material and technological practices. These practices can be characterised broadly as mediations between the self (including emotions, intellect, desire, etc.) and the CV, the interview, the potential employer(s), the future disciplinary work environment to be adapted to and the broader social relations in which these things are embedded. We should thereby understand employability as a disciplinary technology constituted by a discourse of virtue and a practice of control.

### **Concluding remarks**

As many authors, past and present, have asserted, to call for the end of work is to call for a re-appropriation of our own time (Williams and Srnicek, 2015:82; Frayne: 2015; Gorz: 1982). When Keynes predicted that individuals could work, on average, 15 hours a week by 2030, he correctly anticipated that wealth and productivity levels could afford the elements of 'the good life' to the majority of society, such as (but not restricted to) the provision of basic goods, good health, security, respect and leisure. As we have outlined, this was *not* a call to widespread idleness, but an assumption of world wherein people would no longer be bound to their jobs, but free to actively create their own lives.

Indeed, our findings point in at least two possible directions for shifts in policy and economic calculation necessary if the effects of the disciplinary complex are to be reduced. First, a change of how economic outcomes are measured should be enacted, which is also an opportunity to re-situate Economics as a *social* (and not natural) science that is concerned with human flourishing rather than the measurement of crude economic outcomes (e.g.

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the specific characteristics of the ideal 'employable worker', see Worth (2003: 608).

GDP). In this sense, if an economy is judged by restrictive performance measurements that are devoid of humanistic values, the disciplinary techniques deployed over and through working subjects will inevitably continue, coupled as they are with the need to constantly increase productivity levels, maximise profits and ultimately maintain competitive advantages. Such an issue sheds light on the development and adoption of universal economic measurements that are based on (or encompass) elements of the ethical understanding of the good life, including an emancipation from toil, as the NEF (2014) or the OECD (see Boarini *et al.* 2006) argue. This would recall what was implicit (or perhaps obvious) in Keynes' perspective: economics as a means for human flourishing. Indeed, Skidelsky & Skidelsky (2013) reach a similar conclusion when they argue that other policy goals need to replace economic growth as the ultimate economic achievement of a nation.

Secondly, policies facilitating the absolute reduction of the (waged) working week, thereby expanding autonomous time and reducing 'heteronomous time' (Gorz, 1982), would also – in conjunction with public and cultural campaigns – encourage new values beyond work for work's sake and it would most likely bring an overall improvement on other areas of life (mental health, inter-personal relations, creative leisure). This could, for instance, be made possible via a dissociation between work and income (such as basic income measures), or a wider and more radical replication of the Danish law of 1993 (*FerieLOVEN*) (PwC, 2009), which recognises people's right to work discontinuously while guaranteeing their right to a continuous income, such that workers can demand improved working conditions without fear of being fired.

Ultimately, transforming such a deeply entrenched complex as the system of work would entail transforming each of its elements and their relationship to each other. Therefore, we would also suggest that the restructuring of ownership models, the repurposing of labour technologies and other means of loosening the dependency upon the wage relation are all appropriate directions in this regard. Although this essay has not been a discourse on such positions, it has demarcated some of the crucial coordinates of the problem area for intervention.

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