

SOCIETYNOW

**A WORLD
BEYOND WORK?**

Labour, Money and the
Capitalist State Between
Crisis and Utopia

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein

Frederick Harry Pitts

A WORLD BEYOND WORK?

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Praise for *A World Beyond Work?*

A World Beyond Work? is one of the great books of our generation. The future of work and the notion of basic income are topics on which every active citizen must form a view. Too often, these topics are discussed by referring to money and the state in an untheorised and, ultimately, naïve way. Dinerstein and Pitts avoid these pitfalls by drawing on the work of Marx. Political issues and issues in the social sciences compete for attention and, sometimes, have an ephemeral feel. *A World Beyond Work?* is different. It is a landmark. We shall be consulting Dinerstein and Pitts for years.

—Richard Gunn, co-founder of open Marxism

As we look towards building the economic order of the twenty-first century, post-capitalist and post-work visions capture the interest of many across the left and beyond. Dinerstein and Pitts undertake the necessary work of taking this stance seriously, offering a balanced, dense, thoughtful and enriching critique.

—Alessandro Gandini, University of Milan

This is a timely and important book. In it, Dinerstein and Pitts carefully dissect loose arguments that automation and basic income necessarily promise a better future. Their theoretical and empirical rigour offer a vital corrective to misplaced and uncritical hope and invite scholars and activists to

think carefully about the demands they are making, how, and why.

–Neil Howard, *University of Bath*

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein and Frederick Harry Pitts' book is a fundamental contribution to the debate on post-capitalist utopias. The coronavirus crisis has accelerated the morbid symptoms of austerity-driven capitalism, and we must develop new strategies to escape the increasingly authoritarian trends of nation-states. *A World Beyond Work* offers a blueprint ready to develop a future against and beyond capitalism. This will be an essential read for the next decade.

–Mònica Clua Losada, *The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

With an insightful combination of theoretical debates on political economy, the State and social change, this book offers a perceptive debunking of political practice today for a new radical horizon, this book is a must read in these dire times.

–Mariano Féliz, *National University of La Plata*

This book offers a scholarly contribution to studies of value, work, (un)employment, and social movements in the twenty-first Century. This is also a book about hope and creativity at a time of narrow horizons and bleak pessimism. It brings to us a world with new possibilities of freedom. Dinerstein and Pitts point to new pathways to this world – pathways broader than postwar social

democracy, more radical than the traditional communist parties, and carefully attuned to our own times of overlapping crises of profitability, living standards, health and the environment. A must!

–Alfredo Saad-Filho, King's College London

This is a ground-breaking contribution to debates about the future of work, mechanisation and social reproduction. Anyone interested in these themes – and particularly the highly topical issue of universal basic income – should read Dinerstein's and Pitts' powerful critique. The authors offer a vital antidote to the technological utopianism widespread on the left today.

*–Adrian Wilding, Humboldt-Universität
zu Berlin*

The book provides a sustained critique of the notion that we are on the verge of a post-work society, where the travails of wage labour will be overcome by a fully automated production process, underpinned by a universal basic income. Grounded in Karl Marx's value theory of labour, the authors argue human emancipation cannot be dependent on state handouts; but, rather, on the everyday prefigurative struggles of grassroots social movements. Study this book.

*–Mike Neary, Emeritus professor,
University of Lincoln*

Discussing the world to come is essential, but even more important is where we stand to enter this important debate. This book offers an open Marxist critique of the post-capitalist UBI and automation-based utopia by placing ‘uncomfortable’ categories (value, money, state, and class struggle) at the center of the analysis to comprehend the contradictory dynamics and emancipatory power of concrete struggles (utopias) against the world of money.

–Luciana Ghiotto, University of San Martin

A World Beyond Work? is a spirited and rigorous counter argument to the pro UBI Post-Work Prospectus school. The careful ways in which Dinerstein and Pitts have mobilised open Marxist theory, contemporary left politics and case studies of social movements within and outside the UK makes this book both intellectually and politically powerful. Written in pre COVID times, it will be a must read for Marxist and non-Marxist scholars of work in years to come.

–Maud Perrier, University of Bristol

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Crisis and Utopia

BY

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AND

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Elsie, Nico and Owain

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POST-WORK, POST-CAPITALISM, POST-WHAT?

AN INTRODUCTION

This book brings together material written over the last five years on the emergence of a radical left agenda focused on the promise of a post-work society which, through the automation of production, the reduction of working hours, and the implementation of a universal basic income (UBI), potentiates the transition into postcapitalism. We concur, with the new post-work and post-capitalist thinking, that it is time to turn to Marx once again. However, we offer here an ‘open Marxist’ account that places categories like value, money and the state at the forefront of an analysis of the post-work agenda. Open Marxism, as Bonefeld suggests, enables us to reconsider ‘the open and contingent process of class struggle, its changing forms and conditions ... and re-constitutes Marx’s understanding of politics’ by undermining the certainty inherent in orthodox strands of Marxism’.¹

The context for the work presented in the chapters that follow was the rise to prominence of a new generation of post-work thinkers and activists associated in some way with

the post-crisis UK left.² What this new literature lacked in comparison to earlier anti-work writing in the autonomist Marxist tradition – namely, a critical analysis of class society and the forms in which its antagonisms are temporarily suspended (state, money, etc.) – is made up for in its intellectual entrepreneurship and potential popular appeal. Such appeal is based on emancipatory ideas. Take, for instance, the aspiration for a universal basic income, which, its radical proponents argue, will not only be a palliative, but will generate free time, liberate unemployed and precarious workers from the compulsion to seek work, and reconfigure the position of women as the main carers in society. These specific proposals slot into a wider hegemonic project of the left that will, its adherents suggest, lead us to a post-work society as a springboard to postcapitalism.

Having emerged from the occupations, mobilisations and defeats of Occupy and other contemporaneous movements, the post-work assessment of the future, and the transitional measures it prescribed for the creation of a post-capitalist society, ascended over the course of the period in which the chapters that follow were written to a surprising level of political influence and popular press coverage, specifically with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the British Labour Party.³ The left's electoral turn had the strange effect of rendering what was previously the preserve of the far-flung reaches of the radical left a set of increasingly plausible policy propositions taken seriously in seminars and broadsheet columns. This opened up conversations formerly unthinkable even within the social-democratic left and has undoubtedly broadened intellectual and political horizons just as some of ours were once broadened through encounter with the same ideas in earlier guises. But it also threw the observations and demands at the heart of the post-work imaginary – automation, basic

income – into dramatic relief, not simply as radical thought experiments but operationalisable actions of the capitalist state.

Even if under social-democratic stewardship, this gave the agenda a different flavour at precisely the time that an interventionist state was back in fashion worldwide owing to the rapid rise of authoritarian national populism. Resonating in some respects with the rhetorical, critical and organisational character of an increasingly populist left, the ascendancy of a strongman nationalist international placed the prospect of a post-work or post-capitalist utopia against a backdrop of a world turning quickly sour. An optimistic politics might have seemed plausible in the wake of the financial crisis, but the events unfolding from 2016 onwards – including the election of Trump, the Brexit vote, and Assad and Putin’s continued war crimes in Syria – made these utopias seem distant, if not anachronistic, especially when presupposed on the benevolence of a state-form flexing its muscles with dire effects on human dignity the world over. Now, the defeat of the Corbyn and Sanders movements either side of the Atlantic deprives the project of its imagined means for implementing its programme from the left. Whilst some advocates sense the possibility that increasingly interventionist post-liberal administrations could embrace certain reforms in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, the incapacity of left populism to captivate voters when put to the test electorally weakens the state-centred vision of social transformation inherent to post-work politics and leaves the project somewhat stuck. Other paths of social transformation aside from the seizure and wielding of state power are now needed to ‘unstick’ the genuinely emancipatory elements of the post-work imaginary. Whilst often highly critical and largely composed in a pre-pandemic past in which, prior to the defeat of left populism, the success of this agenda at the hands of a socialist government was just about discernible, one of the

contributions of the previous writings collected in this volume is the constructive sorting through of the paths, viable and unviable, that lay before us then and lie before us now.

Meanwhile, in the same mid-2010s period in which post-work ideas gained renewed popularity, we were witnessing, in the social space between individuals and the state guaranteed by fraying liberal institutional life, the possible alternatives afforded in forms of cooperativism and municipalism at a grassroots level in cities like Bristol, UK, where we both live. The combination of a green politics of consumption, playing out in community agriculture for instance, and a 'red' politics of production, playing out in worker cooperatives, has been dismissed by some post-work scholars as 'folk politics', arguably lacking sufficient discrimination between potentially transformative social experiments and mere *petit bourgeois* lifestyle trends. But for us these projects symbolised another way to imagine the future better able to address some of the contradictions and antagonisms elided in the post-work and post-capitalist literature.⁴ Whether they alone are able to adequately operate under, or provide an alternative able to withstand, the looming prospect of a digitally enabled post-liberal interventionist state is uncertain, but they remain spaces of *possibility* (or 'excess') and autonomy eked out from beneath it. This resonates with the long-term research one of us in particular has done with new social movements, organisations and cooperatives in Argentina since the 2001 crisis, which brought about significant political lessons for the Latin American left which governed the region at the time.

It is in light of all the above-mentioned theoretical, political and empirical developments that a large part of this book's contents were written, and they colour our assessment of the potential for the state to effect the kind of demands that underpin what we call here 'the post-work prospectus' (PWP), producing a downbeat appraisal of the importance of this

agenda at a time where the cautious defence of some aspects of the present state of things seemed as necessary as an offensive to sweep other aspects away.

Since then, it must be said, some of the key players in propagating this prospectus have softened their positions and themselves arrived at a more pessimistic, less determinist and radically humanist outlook on the viability and desirability of a technologically augmented programme for social transformation in a world where many of the latter's constitutive tendencies are recuperated by an emergent digital authoritarianism.⁵ Moreover, there has been a wider recognition that the alleged age of acceleration and innovation on which many of the post-work and post-capitalist dreams hinge is not all it is cracked up to be, with capitalism, in its liberal democratic guise at least, suffering from unprecedentedly low levels of productivity and technological advances when placed in historical context, a situation the current slowdown will do little to rectify without the widespread creative destruction lacking in the wake of the 2008 crisis. The fact that utopia cannot depend on capitalist development to bring it into being produces a return to the political question of how these futures must be fought for and organised, and by whom.⁶ This new pragmatism, perhaps, is a consequence of the proximity of the post-work prospectus to the electoral project of Corbynism, and the compromises this imposed on how change was envisioned. Now that the Corbyn project has come to an overdue close, and the coronavirus pandemic appears in the eyes of some as an epochal crisis for capitalism, the paragons of post-work and postcapitalism might recapture some of the extra-parliamentary revolutionary energy paved over at an earlier point in their development – however misplaced their abstract utopianism might be at a time where worlds even worse than this one lie in wait.

It will be interesting to see the directions taken in new entries on the post-work bookshelf, published between the time of writing of this book and the time of reading it.⁷ In the respects raised above and in others the world has changed since we wrote most of the words that follow, and with it the prospects for the post-work agenda. We write this Introduction as the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic tears through Europe and the United States. The basic income is on the agenda and the economic catastrophe sparked by the coronavirus may have propulsive consequences for the automation tendencies discussed – and largely dismissed – in the first few chapters of this book. Its unpredictable effects on economies and labour markets may well lay waste to the former and severely tighten the latter, in a way that might well precipitate moves towards a greater degree of automation in a range of different industries.

The crisis set in train by COVID-19 raises a number of questions about the future of work: will social isolation diminish the centrality of the human to service encounters, making possible previously unviable technologically enabled efficiencies in service work? Will tighter labour markets make it more feasible for firms to automate production without regard to the underlying cost of labour? And will the crisis spark a wave of creative destruction that clears the way for the fulfilment of the current potentials for productivity increases and technological dynamism that some see buried within the present? Moreover, how will it change the development and reception of the proposals for alternative futures of and beyond work covered in this book?

How these tendencies play out in what is likely to be a rocky period politically and economically remains to be seen. As well as emboldened calls for the implementation of an ‘emergency’ UBI, there is demand for a minimum guaranteed income and guaranteed services that could act as a more

effective safety net during the COVID-19 crisis.⁸ The crisis is unprecedented and, whilst some appear to see the possibility of a new and better society emerging from it, it is more likely to present a real challenge for the left.⁹ In this context, presently in-motion developments do not, we feel, diminish our argument for a left keenly watchful for how projects of social transformation propagate the forms assumed by the abstract but nonetheless real social domination on which capitalism is based. The present crisis will likely strengthen the present reshaping of the capitalist state, or, worse, replace it with a more authoritarian version as neoliberalism wanes. Between crisis and capitalist renewal, what will the future hold for a left agenda that captures and translates the utopian content of grassroots struggles in order to shape a new world? The words that follow speak from a time before the one we find ourselves in now, but from within which indications of the unfolding future were already discernible.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2, 'Futures Past and Present: On Automation', places in historical, political, economic and geographical context the current popular and mainstream claims about automation that underpin a lot of radical thinking on the revolutionary possibilities inherent in contemporary capitalism. Evaluating the methodological and empirical debates raging between different models of the levels of automation anticipated to affect the labour market in the coming years, a combination of Marxist critique of political economy and critical organisation studies highlights the economic and practical reasons why imminent 'full automation' is far from likely, and therefore a very weak basis upon which to establish a left political programme for transformative social change. This does not stop it compelling the contemporary left

however, and in the chapters that follow we use a series of key concepts within our ‘open’ Marxist theoretical approach to frame and illuminate what we perceive as key issues to address in the radical left ‘post-work prospectus’ of automation and the basic income.

In Chapter 3, ‘The Post-Work Prospectus: On Labour’, we examine claims about the impacts of automation upon the future of work, before considering how this has been taken up by the left in envisioning a post-work society, identifying a possible issue in the extent to which technology is granted an autonomous quality, accomplishing social transformation in and of itself. We trace the attraction of such a determinist reading of technological development back to Marx’s Fragment on Machines, and specifically the way its insights were appropriated in Italian postoperaismo and subsequently in contemporary post-work and post-capitalist thinking. Marx’s Fragment on Machines associates the decline of direct labour-time in production and the expansion of scientific knowledge attendant upon automation as the harbinger of a crisis in capitalism that constructs the foundations of a new society in the shell of the old. However, we suggest that this deploys an overly Ricardian understanding of value theory that Marx himself would later surpass, associating value with concrete labour rather than the category pivotal to our analysis, which is instead *abstract* labour, a social abstraction central to value that is mediated in money.

We then explain our approach to work and labour in capitalist society and how this differs from the way these categories are typically understood within Marxism and, by extension, much of the post-work and post-capitalist thinking. Ultimately, we argue, the association of the transcendence of capitalist social relations with the transcendence of work misses what is specific about capitalism, which is not the kind of productive activity it features but the social conditions that