

Work in a Society of Abundance

[Toby Russell](#), February 2009

“To work is to pray.”

“Idle hands make the devil's work.” Religious sayings

“Labour – the common lot of mankind – is necessary and honourable.”

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism p45, R. H. Tawney

“But not all creation is work. Work is never done for its own sake, it's done on account of some product or output that the worker (or, more often, somebody else) gets out of it. This is what work necessarily is. To define it is to despise it.” [Bob Black](#)

This short article is one of six satellite articles to “[Is Money the Problem?](#)” In it I briefly lay out some basic thoughts on the role of work in a non-monetary, as compared to labour in a monetary society. The arguments presented here are reactions to a common objection to a moneyless system, namely that no one would do any work without money and the fear of poverty motivating them. As I point out [in the other articles](#), I am no expert on any of these matters, but consider post-scarcity economics important enough a subject to add my voice to the debate, in the hope of encouraging further study and a more open-minded attitude to the idea.

Introduction

In considering work in society, the first step is to distinguish between it and labour. Labour is what we exchange for a wage in order to have purchasing power in the market place, whereas work (for the purposes of this essay) is what we do, for a variety of reasons, to get something done. Some few of us are lucky enough to enjoy the labour we exchange for a wage, but most often our job is an unwanted, though necessary inconvenience. Typically we are unhappy about having to “work.” This unhappiness, this sense of being chained to some boring chore that will never be finished, lies behind the strongly negative connotations of the word “work,” and lurks behind sayings like “first work, then play,” as if the two were mutually exclusive.

So we associate “work” (by which we typically mean “labour”) with “bad,” or “serious,” sadly seeing it as the opposite of fun and frivolity. [Bob Black's engaging essay](#) on this topic (quoted from above) represents an extreme, though well-argued position, and yet though extreme, his passionate message probably resonates on some level for most of us. That it does resonate says something quite damning about society generally. Whence this deep rooted cultural belief we must suffer (work) to earn reward (money)? I believe it stems from religion's complex, historic relationship with power and the state, and in particular it's long struggle with money, the market place, and economics through the Middle Ages and towards the Reformation (see R. H. Tawney's “Religion and the Rise of Capitalism” for a deeper analysis).

This belief in earning reward the hard way, in the sweat of the brow being noble, is a noise that scrambles our ability to think calmly and clearly about work, and by extension about pleasure. So when an idea comes along for an alternative way of organising society such that money itself would be unnecessary, we hear the noise that hisses at us from our cultural inheritance, and dismiss the idea as idle fantasy. So the question I raise is this: Is the scientifically untested belief, namely that work is necessarily tough and unpleasant and therefore needs money as an incentive to ensure it gets done, justified? As a rhetorical first foray into answering it (within the framework of a [resource-based economy](#)), I offer the arguments and observations that follow.

On motivation, reward and fun

I get very little satisfaction from my paid labour, but enjoy deeply, and have fun writing, these essays, as well as poetry and novels. That I might never make any money from them is only frustrating

because money is necessary for survival in the current system, meaning I cannot dedicate all my time to my preferred work. On the other hand, if my writings never earn me a penny, I will regret not one second of my effort. The process of learning (which is unending), the process of developing my skills and understanding, of producing quality, is easily satisfaction enough. Work can be both rewarding and fun, and unpaid. To repeat, work is what we do to get things done. That need not preclude fun.

Others enjoy other pursuits, like dance, or socialising, or gardening, or programming, or mathematics, or engineering, or painting, etc. Different people find fun in different areas. Fun is a powerful and, more importantly, healthy motivator. If we have fun we are happy, if we are happy our happiness benefits others around us. The more people having fun, the healthier society can be. Fun is important, juicy, contagious and good. It grows, does not land us in debt, and directs people down paths that are right for them.

This is distinct from how money motivates. Riches are pursued at the expense of other people, as a measurement against them to determine who is more successful. Money encourages hoarding, not sharing, envy, not mutual appreciation. And while by the simple logic deployed above people can have fun accumulating money, can this accumulated wealth be the source of a fun suited to sharing? I believe not. Of course, should money accrue to someone not in pursuit of it specifically, then the chance is higher that wealth will be shared. But sharing monetary wealth is not easy. Take a look into the lives of people made suddenly rich by a large lottery win. Few survive the experience unwounded.

Furthermore, we do many things not because we are paid to, but because we know they are beneficial. For example, no one pays me to shower, brush my teeth, and generally keep myself and my life in order. I have been at least educated enough to understand that such things, though often irritants getting in the way of doing something more pleasant, keep me healthy. Health is good. I know this. This relationship between work and outcome is motivating. I need no financial incentive. In my paid work the link between me sitting in front of my monitor for nine hours, and some beneficial outcome out there in the world, is tenuous at best, an illusion at worst. By my reckoning it benefits the corporation I work for, my bank account, the financial health of me and my family, but nothing else. I find that demotivating. How many of us feel this way? Many millions I am sure.

Finally, even though communes have a reputation for degenerating to bickering and acrimonious break-up, they warrant a mention. Communes successfully took care of great tracts of the European peninsula for centuries, until, via force and violence, they were wrested from the peasants that jointly owned them by Lords, Kings and States who felt they could make more money out of them (Kropotkin, Mutual Aid , Ch. VII):

“The last blow to communal ownership in Middle Europe also dates from the middle of the eighteenth century. In Austria, sheer force was used by the Government, in 1768, to compel the communes to divide their lands—a special commission being nominated for that purpose two years later.” Mutual Aid, p194

If communes were weakly systems prone to collapse due to selfish human nature, why the need for force? The book is bursting at the seams with similar examples and is very well sourced. Obviously we are not genetically incapable of apportioning work without money to motivate the lazy.

Post-scarcity and work

When assessing the idea of a resource-based economy it is wholly insufficient to picture it like today's, just minus the money. *There is no plan to switch money off and hope for the best.* That would be lunacy.

To state it plainly: today's world could not function without a medium of exchange; neither we, psychologically, nor the infrastructure, technically, are ready for it. The alterations to society – at all levels – necessary to fulfil the requirements of producing an abundance, as well as the effect of abundance on our culture, cannot be fully appreciated in advance of the fact. Try to imagine an abundance of clean, sustainable energy available to all people *everywhere* (a prerequisite for a post-scarcity world), a world in which no school or home or hospital need worry about cost, where *no one*

need worry about their financial future. Try to imagine what effect that would have on our values, on our sense of “holiday,” of “time off,” of wealth, etc.

In economic systems where labour is exchanged for money, money is seen as a reward for doing something that might not otherwise be done, acting thereby as an incentive. From this arises the frequent comment that a non-monetary economy would be both unfair and unworkable – no one would be proportionately rewarded for their efforts, no one motivated to work. But this is of course a somewhat circular criticism, which presumes money as sole reward-mechanism, then bemoans its absence in a society in which it is absent by design. It is to criticise white for being white on the (untested) assumption white is bad.

The concept that needs to be more deeply considered here, therefore, is reward itself, not money. Money's absence does not mean reward's absence. Where money is necessary for purchasing both the necessities and luxuries of life, of course money is a reward. On the other hand, where money is not needed for those things, the rewards for work would be, necessarily, non-monetary, and as a consequence, our relationship with work would also be different. This is a simple, logical progression.

For example, work would not be something we need to escape from – having no reason to fear automation, a greater proportion of human ingenuity would be deployed in automating all of the drudge-work progressively away. Any public work remaining for human hands would take place in conditions vastly different to most people's work place today. The work place would be designed to bring out the best performance of those involved. This would necessarily be so, since the motivation would be a combination of sustaining the system responsible for the [eradication of most crime](#), the end of poverty and war, and the pleasure of contributing. Don't underestimate the deep pleasure humans get from a job well done (think of parenting), especially when they *understand clearly* how everyone everywhere benefits from their work.

Besides that, there would of course be no cost-cutting, no profit-oriented deadlines, no draconian or uninspiring bosses, no sense of enslavement or compulsion etc. Work would be something we enjoy. It would be stimulating and fun (which is not to say there would be no struggles and frustrations). To put it crudely, it would have to be. And any public work still to be done by humans would be absolutely necessary for the effective and healthy operation of society (otherwise, why do it?), which is not something that's true of monetary systems. They are obliged by design to create as much employment as possible, which might well be another factor behind work's poor reputation.

To look briefly at how corrupting monetary incentives are in the field of work, we need only consider the vast difference in remuneration between financial experts and teachers, even though the benefits to society from education far outweigh the benefits from finance. Of course, you can argue that schools require funding, but that is only true of monetary systems, and anyway the people organising the funding in monetary systems have received an education to skill them for that task. However, in professions such as teaching – to address a not obviously fully-automatable profession, one where it might not be wise to try too hard to do so (“humans need humans”) – there are significant non-monetary rewards from the joy of assisting others on their journey forwards through their lives.

Besides, the entire education system would have to be [redesigned](#), and I am sure look far different from what we know today. I imagine a necessary blurring of the current dividing lines between “school” and “home,” between “teacher” and “care-giver,” and even between “teacher” and “student.” The objective would be to teach the joy of learning, not force learning down unwilling young throats. Learning is natural, endless and inescapable. To have turned it into into a fixed-period of duty, like a sentence whose end we eagerly anticipate, is an aberration. Other professions and sectors would be likewise transformed by the change from monetary to non-monetary system.

Sadly, in a society shaped by the profit motive and its debilitating, nigh on inescapable short-termism, these non-monetary, more human rewards are dangerously eroded by lack of funding, by a shortage of decently trained personnel, by the tendency for “talent” to go where the money is, by lack of moral support from society at large, and the general work-stress that arises from each of these factors.

As noted [elsewhere](#), a society with no need for a medium of exchange would render much human labour redundant, regardless of automation: retail, accountancy, banking, finance, advertising, insurance, pensions, stock markets, billing, etc. The human and other resources freed by this are

enormous. I imagine a world in which more people would want to do such work as teaching and medicine, such that the load on carers and educators would be far lighter, even before we consider the changed circumstances in which they would work. A society organised around abundance calls indeed for a *total* redesign of all societal components. Road accidents, “road rage,” [violent crime](#), stress-related illness and other illnesses whose cures are in the far future for want of [the proper motivation](#), could all be progressively “designed out.” The world of work would be transformed beyond all recognition.

Technological unemployment

I want finally to touch upon the “threat” of [technological unemployment](#). I put “threat” in speech marks, because technology (cybernation and AI in this instance) ought to be our friend. To not have to perform repetitive and mind-numbing labour should be considered a worthy objective, but all monetary systems' dependence on the purchasing power of consumers renders such improvements of efficiency threatening. I want also, before I cover this point, to mention the position on technological unemployment held by orthodox economics, namely that increasing efficiencies in the work place lead, via falling prices, to higher demand for labour over time. I disagree with this position for the reasons that follow, and recommend too *The End of Work* by [Jeremy Rifkin](#) as a good starting point in understanding this topic.

For ever increasing productivity to mean ever increasing numbers of jobs – as orthodox economics posits – increasing economic activity would always mean increasing human labour (and vice versa), which would mean human labour is what economics is about, at root. This relationship would result in, furthermore, increasing demand for labour as a direct consequence of increasing efficiencies, which would be revealed in rising wages and ever stronger labour unions (over time of course). And yet neither of these things are in evidence over the last three decades in the western world, where technological unemployment is most threatening. On the contrary, we see falling real wages and ever weaker unions.

Monetary systems are wedded to work as labour, since without labour there is no one to buy the goods and services on sale, and without purchasing power no monetary system can function. So are we seeing, as Rifkin suggests, the slow but certain end of work?

Of course historical developments are fitful and clear trends are hard to pick out (especially) over shorter timescales, but I think it valid to look at the logic rhetorically as a precursor to studying the data. So I ask if it can always be that some amount of production sufficient to meet the demand of a given population, necessarily requires a corresponding amount of human labour, such that sufficient purchasing power exists.

Or are matters arranged in monetary systems – come hell or high water, regardless of alternatives – so that as many people as possible have a job, any job? Is self-preservation – that is systemic self-preservation – the driving force behind what look on the surface to be relatively healthy historic levels of employment in the face of technology that might threaten it?

If efficiency is doing more with less (to borrow from Buckminster Fuller), to my mind it logically follows that technological developments in the work place leading to increasing efficiencies will trend (fitfully) over time to less and less need for human labour. Are not weakening union power and stagnant wages signs of this? That there have been fearful yet unfulfilled warnings raised repeatedly about the threat of technological unemployment need only suggest that the threat has taken longer to materialise than expected, and that measures to counter it were unexpectedly effective. I suggest only the timescale is important, and that the trend *is* discernable. The service sector rescued us for a few decades (labour in agriculture and manufacturing has been decimated by technological developments), but software and AI developments will erode the need for humans even here. What comes after services?

Again, if machines, software and AI tend to replace over time the need for human labour, all monetary systems' ongoing challenge is to keep humans necessary for the task of producing goods and services they might want to consume, to find/create labour that cannot be replaced by machines/AI, at a speed

greater than technological development can match, AND in sufficient quantity to keep purchasing power sufficiently powerful.

This process has been fitful and observed over centuries, but the race is hotting up, becoming more pressing. Assuming we don't destroy ourselves, what are our chances of staying ahead of our inorganic competitors in this race indefinitely? Over the next hundred years? The next twenty? If we fall behind, that is, if human labour becomes sufficiently unnecessary for producing the required/demanded goods and services, we will need a new economics, a resource-based economics.

Conclusion

Work will always be there, but this is neither good nor bad. Our relationship with it depends on how society is designed, and how work arises as a component of society within that design.

Currently we take work too seriously, and play not seriously enough. The deep division between these two concepts is damaging society generally, and needs to be addressed. Monetary systems, necessarily tied to labour as they are, stand between us and a thorough, impartial assessment of this issue.

As outlined above, a resource-based economy would result in institutions themselves being radically altered to operate effectively in such a society. So when pondering the viability of a post-scarcity world, picturing the conditions teachers, doctors, ambulance drivers etc. face today, in short directly comparing today with the [updated and reoriented model](#) of tomorrow, is unhelpful, and does not begin to address the complexity and profundity of change such a transformation would entail.

We tend to overlook the degree to which "the way things are" now, shapes how we imagine them being in the future, how today inhibits our ability to imagine a different tomorrow. I hope this article goes some small way to show that contemplating radical alternatives to current models is both interesting and fruitful.