

Gorz on Work and Liberation

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Work is and always has been a central human activity; but only in the last decade has it become a major political issue. It has taken the re-emergence of mass unemployment to make it so. Right up until the war, the view that mass unemployment is intolerable in a civilized society was confined mainly to the left. However, the war required full economic mobilization; and the major industrial societies emerged from it committed to policies of full employment. The idea that work is a basic human need and right became a central part of the postwar political consensus. It was enshrined even in the United Nations 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', Article 23.1 of which states that 'everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment'.

In recent years, however, these ideas have increasingly been questioned – not only on the right, where they have always aroused suspicion and mistrust, but also on the left. One of the most important and interesting of these left critics is André Gorz. In a series of lively and thought-provoking books, he has challenged traditional socialist thinking in this area and helped to set a new agenda for debate.¹ His latest book* continues this project, extending his position, as well as modifying it in some fundamental respects. It is a work of major importance.

The Future of Work

The book is divided into two very different parts. Indeed, it can almost be regarded as two short, and not always consistent, works bound together in one volume. The first deals with the nature of work and attitudes to work. Apart from some critical discussion of the recent 'post Fordist' literature (Sabel and Piore, Kern and Schumann), it largely repeats the ideas of Gorz's previous books.

These are by now well known even to those who have not read anything by Gorz, for they have become part of the mainstream of debate about the future of work in industrial society. The introduction of new technology, according to Gorz, is leading to a situation in which the old goal of full-time employment for all is no longer either possible or desirable. 'The social process of production no longer needs everyone to work in it on a full-time basis. The work ethic is no longer viable' (p. 220).

The new technology has an enormous potentiality to reduce hours of work; but present policies, still oriented to the goal of full-time employment, are not having that effect. Rather, they are leading to the polarization of society into a core of well paid professionals in stable full-time work on the one side and, on the

other, a growing number of people who are either in peripheral, insecure, servile, part-time jobs, or who are unemployed, marginalized and effectively excluded from social participation. What is required is a fundamental rethinking of the place of work in human life.

The full development of individuals can be achieved only through a 'liberation from work'. By 'work' here, Gorz means quite specifically a job, employment, 'work for economic ends'. Such work, he insists, is a mere means to earning a living. In modern industrial conditions, it cannot be a satisfying or self-realizing activity: it cannot be humanized, it is necessarily and ineliminably alienating. Such work must be reduced, and 'free time' – 'time for living' – expanded, so that people can engage in various forms of productive and creative activity outside the economic sphere. In his previous books, Gorz puts particular stress on the importance of 'autonomous activities': that is, activities which are not primarily aimed to meet needs, but which are ends in themselves, such as voluntary activities in the community, hobbies and artistic activities.

There are still many echoes of these views in the present book, particularly in Part I. However, in important respects, Gorz seems to be moving away from them and to be developing a line of thought which conflicts with them. The most dramatic change has been in his views about the place of employment in human life. In the earlier books, employment was portrayed as an entirely negative phenomenon. The suggestion almost seemed to be that people should welcome unemployment as a 'liberation from work', particularly if no serious loss of income is involved. In line with this, in *Paths to Paradise*, Gorz flirts with the idea of a 'guaranteed basic income'.

With or without a 'guaranteed income', however, there is an overwhelming body of evidence to show that people do not welcome unemployment. In the present book Gorz recognises this. Indeed, he even defends the idea that people have a basic 'right to a job'. For paid work in the public sphere, he acknowledges, is the essential basis of economic citizenship and social inclusion. 'It is by having *paid* work ... that we belong to the public sphere, [and] acquire a social existence and social identity' (p. 13). Moreover, Gorz now firmly rejects the idea of a guaranteed basic income as 'essentially an *unemployment allowance*' (p. 238), which amounts to 'the wages of marginality and exclusion' (p. 205).

Going along with this, there has also been a significant shift in the direction of Gorz's political appeal. The previous books were aimed primarily at marginalized and excluded groups: the unemployed, women, etc. – the 'non-class of non-workers' as he terms them in *Farewell to the Working Class*. It is these groups who are most oppressed by the dominance of the work ethic and

* André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, London, Verso, 1989, 250pp., £24.95 hb, £8.95 pb, 0 86091 253 1 hb, 0 86091 968 4 pb

who were to be the new revolutionary subjects of the 'post industrial' age. Common as it is, however, the idea that the most oppressed in society will be the most revolutionary is a fallacy. At any rate, Gorz has given up his hope that these groups will accomplish the revolution he wants to see (p. 92). His appeal is now directed mainly to the good will of the labour movement (p. 98).

Gorz's philosophy still involves a sharp distinction between work in the economic sphere, and other forms of work outside it. That much has remained constant. In the earlier books this contrast was drawn in black and white terms; but this new recognition of the human importance of employment seems to be pointing in a different direction. It suggests a quite different view of the relations of paid work to other forms of creative activity. For it suggests that both sorts of activity have an essential role and value in human life. This new perspective cannot easily be formulated in terms of the oppositions of heteronomy/autonomy, necessity/freedom, which dominate Gorz's previous works, particularly when these oppositions are interpreted in terms of Gorz's extreme individualism. New terms are needed.

Economic and Non-Economic Reason

These are developed in Part II. Here, at last, we find the critique of economic rationality promised in the book's title. The familiar dualism is still here, but now in the form of a distinction between economic and non-economic rationality. Economic rationality is the rationality of commodity production for the market. It is the rationality governing work which takes the form of a job, employment, work for wages. Work of this kind is purely a means to the end of exchange, of earning a livelihood – it is not undertaken to meet human needs directly, or as an end in itself.

Such work has become the predominant form of work in industrial societies. It is often treated, either explicitly or implicitly, as the sole significant form of work. However, here as throughout, Gorz stresses that its predominance is relatively recent. There are, and always have been, other forms of productive activity, outside the economic sphere.

As in his previous work, Gorz talks of 'autonomous creative activities', but these now play a much less prominent role in his discussion of non-economic work. This is a welcome change. Gorz's 'autonomous activities' are not primarily aimed to meet needs; they are not part of 'the sphere of necessity': they are free and voluntary. For this reason, it is doubtful whether they should be regarded as forms of work at all. At least, if they are, then the distinction between work and leisure is abandoned, and work becomes synonymous with virtually all conscious and deliberate human activity whatever.

In the present book, Gorz's main focus has shifted to what he terms 'work-for-oneself'; that is, work that one does to meet directly one's own needs and those of one's immediate household. This was the normal form of work in earlier forms of society. Even in the modern world it still constitutes a very substantial sphere, not only in the third world, where peasant agriculture still prevails, but also in the most advanced societies, particularly in housework and child care in the domestic sphere. Such work does not involve the production of commodities for exchange. It is not governed by economic rationality but, Gorz argues, by quite different principles based on personal relations, mutual concern, and cooperation.

Gorz is particularly eloquent about the human value and importance of such work.

Work-for-oneself plays an essential role in the creation and demarcation of a private sphere. The latter cannot exist without the former. You can see this very clearly when all

the jobs in the domestic sphere are taken over by external services; you cease to be 'at home' in your own house... Work-for-oneself is, basically *what we have to do to take possession of ourselves* and of that arrangement of objects which, as both extension of ourselves and mirror of our bodily existence, forms our niche within the sensory world, our private sphere (p. 158).

This sphere is under threat of extinction. With the development of capitalism and the growth of commodity production, many tasks which were previously done by the household for itself have been professionalised and converted into paid external services. This process is still continuing. The few remaining areas of creative and productive activity outside the market are being eliminated as more and more areas of work and life are subjected to economic rationalization and the logic of the market.

Traditional forms of work have inbuilt limits. They are governed, as Gorz puts it, by a principle of 'sufficiency'. When one is working for oneself, one produces only what is sufficient to meet one's needs and then one stops. The economic rationality of the market, by contrast, contains no inherent principle of limitation. Quantitatively, its aim is simply to produce the most for the least; unlimited growth becomes its end (p. 120ff.). As members of various New Right Think Tanks keep reminding us, there are no areas of work and life to which economic rationalization cannot in principle be applied. Moreover, as Gorz notes, it is not only the free market right which welcomes this prospect. Until recently at least, most established forms of economic thought, including traditional socialism and Marxism, portrayed the extension of the market as a progressive development.²

This must be resisted, Gorz argues. The market must be regulated, controlled, limited. But how? This is the question that Gorz's critique is designed to answer. The terms he uses in it have their immediate source in Weberian sociology, particularly the work of Habermas; but Gorz's project may also usefully be located in relation to the moral and romantic critiques of the 'commercial spirit' of capitalism by such nineteenth-century writers as Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris.³ However, like Habermas, and unlike them, Gorz is not altogether opposed to the process of economic rationalization. He does not argue for a return to pre-capitalist conditions. Rather he advocates the *limitation* of the economic sphere, in order to preserve a sphere of personal relations and individual autonomy. The purpose of his critique is to spell out the principles by which this should be done.

According to Gorz, there is a clear and sharp distinction to be drawn between those areas in which the market is a satisfactory and effective form of organization, and those where it is not. The economic rationality of the market, he maintains, is the best and most efficient form for the production of basic material necessities. Indeed, market organization is necessary for the level of material production required in modern society.

Domestic Labour

With capitalism, however, economic rationalization is extended to areas where its impact is counterproductive and destructive. To make this point, Gorz considers two main examples. The first is domestic work: housework and child care. Such activity has been increasingly rationalized during the last hundred years or so. A great deal of the work that used to be done by women in the home as private, 'work-for-oneself', has been transferred into the public sphere. It has been converted into paid services and/or mechanized. At the same time, women have increasingly entered into paid employment in the public sphere.

Gorz's attitude to these developments is ambivalent. On the

one hand, as he acknowledges, they have provided the major avenue of women's liberation. Nevertheless, a great deal of domestic work is still done in the home, mostly by women, and often on top of a full-time job. A part of the solution here must be a more equal division of domestic labour between the sexes, as Gorz argues. Many would also argue, however, that further rationalization and socialization of housework is also needed; the process is by no means complete.

Gorz opposes this. Domestic labour, he argues, cannot and should not be further rationalized. Such labour, he insists, is quite different from the instrumental activity of paid employment. It is a form of work which has 'no price, no exchange value .. no "utility" and which consequently merges with the satisfaction its performance procures, even if [it] demands effort and fatigue' (p. 136). Domestic work should not therefore be regarded as a mere imposition and chore. Rather it should be seen as 'a need and means of winning back a greater degree of personal sovereignty in the form of a greater sense of self-belonging within the private sphere' (p. 157).

These views are surely untenable. In the first place, this rosy view of domestic labour is not generally shared by women who, in the main, have to do it: 70% of housewives according to one recent study said that they disliked housework as such.⁴ Moreover, Gorz's arguments on the subject are so sweeping that they offer no criteria for deciding where – if anywhere, the economic rationalization of housework is appropriate, and where it is not.⁵ Instead, Gorz suggests that any further rationalization threatens to eliminate the private sphere altogether. But that is not the issue for most people. To be sure, a small number of wealthy people have already accomplished this with the help of servants, boarding schools, etc.; but for most others, a great deal of housework is inescapable, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Reducing its burdensome aspects, however, would mean that more time at home could be devoted to the more worthwhile and fulfilling aspects of home life. To oppose this on the basis that housework is, or ought to be, a 'labour of love', is reactionary and misguided.

The Caring Professions

The second area that Gorz discusses raises similar issues. It concerns work which involves an essential element of personal care or assistance, such as that of doctors, teachers, and the 'caring professions': nurses, social workers, therapists, and the like. For such workers, Gorz argues, 'the money they earn should be a *means* of exercising their profession and not its end. Somehow earning a living should not come into the bargain... These jobs are only done well when they are performed out of a "sense of vocation", that is, an *unconditional* desire to help other people' (p. 144).

In other words, such work cannot be economically rationalized: like housework and child care, it is governed by a quite different rationality – a rationality of personal care and concern. These two forms of rationality are absolutely opposed to and exclusive of each other. 'Commodity relations cannot exist between members of a family or a community – or that community will be dissolved; nor can affection, tenderness and sympathy be bought or sold except when they are reduced to mere simulacra' (pp. 140-41). For this reason, Gorz argues, activities which involve personal care and concern are best carried out by volunteers. These jobs, he maintains, should be gradually de-professionalised: 'We must rethink all the activities which require us to give of ourselves with a view to developing self-organized, voluntary services' (p. 145).

Much as one may sympathize with the attempt to develop a moral critique of the market, these arguments must be questioned.

For it is simply not possible to draw a sharp line between activities which can and cannot be economically rationalized, as Gorz proposes. Gorz's argument that the work of doctors, teachers, and 'carers' relies on personal relations of concern and care which cannot be professionalised is surely false, as is his idea that such work is best organized on a voluntary individual, family or communal basis. These views involve a gross romanticization of personal and community relations. In reality, such relations are very variable: sometimes they are, as Gorz suggests, warm and caring; but equally they can be bitter and hostile, weak, indifferent, or even non-existent. Care and education provided on this basis, just because it depends on such relations – on friendships and family ties – is by its nature haphazard and variable. If these activities are made into paid professional services, they can be standardized and regularized. Provision of medical care, education and welfare can be ensured and made universal; minimum standards in these areas can be specified and enforced.

None of this is possible while these activities remain on a purely personal and voluntary basis. That was the traditional way, the pre-capitalist way; but it has proved entirely incapable of meeting the needs of advanced industrial society. Thus voluntary and personal provision has gradually been replaced in education, health care and other areas of welfare as well. Moreover, the pure free market has proved equally incapable of meeting these needs. Intervention and organization by the state is required if a satisfactory and universal provision is to be ensured. Thus welfare activity by the state has developed in all advanced industrial societies, not for ideological or political reasons, but because voluntary effort and free market were both incapable of meeting basic needs.

According to Gorz, the welfare state is an attempt to substitute for 'the decay of social bonds and solidarity' which comes with economic rationalization. However, it can never succeed in this, he argues, 'the welfare state has not been, and never will be, a creator of society' (p. 132). That may well be true, but it is beside the point. For what the state *can* provide – which the household or community cannot – is a satisfactory level of educational, medical and welfare services.

No doubt, as Gorz says, there are tensions and conflicts between the instrumental character of wage labour and the essential purpose of work in these areas, with which anyone who has worked in them will be familiar. These conflicts frequently interfere with and frustrate the relationships which such work requires; but they do not usually render care and concern impossible. However, with the professionalisation of these activities, the character of that care and concern *is* altered. It loses its purely personal character, and becomes *universal*. As a doctor, teacher or social worker one cannot attend only to those with whom one happens to have a personal relation, one must attend to *all* those in one's care. Such a universal attitude of care is quite different from the personal and family feelings which Gorz so values. So, far from being incompatible with professionalisation, it is the outcome of it. Ideally, perhaps, caring (in common with other forms of work) would be undertaken voluntarily, and not just because it is the requirement of one's job; but it is an illusion to believe that this was the way in a bygone age, in some previous condition of 'natural' cooperation and mutual concern which capitalism has destroyed. On the contrary, this is an ideal for the future, and the way to it lies in and through professionalisation.

In the present political climate, moreover, the idea of replacing professional with voluntary services is not merely mistaken, it is positively dangerous. For exactly the same ideas are voiced by the Thatcherite right in their attempt to dismantle the welfare state. Gorz disclaims any such intention; but it is difficult to read his philosophy in any other way.

Economically Rational Work

Now let me turn to the other pole of Gorz's dualism – the sphere of work that can be economically rationalized, the sphere of material production. Gorz's account of this is equally questionable. For such work, Gorz maintains, is the absolute, polar opposite of caring work – it excludes any element of personal concern or involvement; it is *merely* a means to the end of earning a livelihood.

Widespread as such views are, they are surely mistaken. A measure of care and involvement is part of all but the most routine and alienating sorts of work. Indeed, what is remarkable is the extent to which people *need* involvement in and satisfaction from their work, and the ways in which they manage to find it even in the most dreary and repetitive of jobs.⁶ This is not just the view of starry-eyed idealists or old style Marxists; it is also the view of an influential school of management thinking, which knows that people can be involved in their work; that they work best when they are; and which tries to 'enrich' jobs accordingly.⁷ No doubt conflicts and tensions inherent in the work situation often frustrate and nullify such schemes; but that should not be allowed to obscure the essential philosophical point here. It is simply wrong to believe that work for wages must necessarily be nothing but an alien and purely instrumental activity.

In short, it is not possible to draw a sharp distinction between activities which can and cannot be economically rationalized. It is not therefore possible to preserve the private sphere by specifying limits to the market, as Gorz proposes. Gorz claims that his is the socialist approach. For he defines socialism, in terms taken from Polanyi, as 'the subordination of the economy to society' (p. 130). True, views like these are currently influential on the left; nevertheless they are very different from socialism as traditionally understood. Indeed, the whole strategy of trying to defend a personal and private sphere by restricting the public and economic sphere is characteristic of liberal individualism. Gorz's version, moreover, is conservative and even backward looking, for its aim is to limit or reverse economic development.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that there is nothing in Gorz's position. Undoubtedly it reflects a common experience. Alienation from work and the public sphere is a familiar feature of modern life. There are many people who get little from their jobs, who despair of finding any satisfaction in the public sphere, and who decide their best hope lies in a retreat into the private world of the home and family. However, this is a despairing philosophy, and it is an illusion to believe that it offers any real answers.

The home may sometimes serve as a refuge, as a 'haven in a heartless world', but it can never adequately compensate or substitute for the heartlessness and alienation of the public world. For we are essentially social beings; and if we give up hope of a satisfactory social sphere, we cut ourselves off from an essential and vitally necessary sphere of activity and potential fulfilment.

Socialism is the very opposite of this. It is not opposed to economic development. Rather it seeks to control and organize such development in the interests of working people. Traditionally, it has been a progressive philosophy, which criticizes the backward-looking romanticism of writers like Gorz. For, unlike Gorz, it does not regard work and other activity in the public sphere as inevitably alienating. It does not regard the split between the economic and the personal, between the public and private spheres, as eternal and unchangeable. These divisions, it believes, are historical and changeable; and the way beyond them is forward.

Notes

- 1 *Farewell to the Working Class*, London, Pluto, 1982; and *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*, London, Pluto, 1985. See also his *Ecology as Politics*, London, Pluto, 1983.
- 2 See S. Sayers, 'The Human Impact of the Market', in P. Heelas and P. Morris, eds., *The Values of the Enterprise Culture: the Moral Debate*, London, Unwin Hyman, in press.
- 3 For a brief survey of these writers and their enduring influence see M. J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985. A useful anthology is E. Jay and R. Jay, eds., *Critics of Capitalism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- 4 Reported in Ann Oakley, *Subject Women*, London, Fontana, 1982, p. 173.
- 5 Gorz does give an economic argument which bears on this, but it is seriously flawed. 'In the heroic age of capitalist or socialist industrialisation,' he writes, the aim of rationalizing domestic work was to reduce the time devoted to it 'in order to employ that time, at a far higher rate of productivity, in industry and collective undertakings' (p. 154). Today, it no longer serves that purpose; it is aimed only at 'creating jobs' by employing personal servants. For no apparent reason, Gorz here simply ignores the possibilities of further socializing and mechanizing domestic labour.
- 6 This is strikingly illustrated in the personal accounts of work is S. Terkel, *Working*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977.
- 7 See *Work in America*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1973.

