

Chapter 1

Introduction:

Critical Social Theory and the End of Work

Of his book *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, Krishan Kumar wrote: ‘This is a book about books’ (Kumar 1987: vii). It seems appropriate to begin with a quote from Krishan Kumar, since his work (Kumar 1978, 1987, 1988, 1997) has been something of an influence on this book, particularly in terms of approach, or, perhaps, methodology.

In fact this is a book about ideas – focused around one particular idea – just as Kumar’s analytical surveys of social theory, social change, and utopian thinking are studies of ideas. It is frequently necessary, in the context of professional sociology in twenty first century Britain, to attempt to define one’s methodology, but with a book such as the present one, this is rather difficult, since it operates largely in the realm of discourse, rather than empirical investigation. There is no immediately obvious reference point, no methodological template. However, by situating theories of the end of work (which we will see are more often than not critical social theories) in the context of historical, social and cultural change, and in relation to developments in social theory, I aim to evaluate their usefulness for social analysis. In this sense, this book situates itself within critical social theory in terms of approach. By looking at the effectiveness of various permutations of the end of work thesis, we will hopefully gain some useful insights about the way capitalist society, its structures, its antagonisms and injustices, and the ideological underpinnings that support it, operate. To clarify the aims of this book further, let us explain what we mean by Critical Theory and critical social theory, before outlining what is meant by the phrase ‘the end of work’.

Critical Theory

The term Critical Theory is used to refer to the work of the Institute for Social Research, better known as the Frankfurt School, a group of mostly Jewish, Marxist intellectuals who left Germany for the USA following the rise of Nazism. This group included theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal and Herbert Marcuse. Because the latter wrote most extensively and explicitly on the end of work, it is on him that our most extended analysis of one of the original Critical Theorists will focus, in Chapter 5.

Unlike positivist sociology, Critical Theory rejects the separation of facts and values, and sets out to analyse society ‘from the standpoint of its emancipatory

transformation' (Benhabib 1986: 2). As we shall see in our forthcoming encounter with Marcuse, Critical Theory observes that emancipatory transformation is necessary, since current society fails to satisfy the true needs of civilised individuals. Not only that, but it fails even to create civilised societies, with even the most advanced nations riven with economic injustice, alienation and violence.

Critical Theory is known for its commitment to reason, even as it is often seen as critiquing the increasingly instrumental rationality dominant in modernity. In the period when postmodernism was fashionable in sociological circles, it was common to question the very foundation of reason, and even now, statements in mainstream sociology remain tentative. Who can say what is rational and what is not, and should one section of society (the intelligentsia) propose to pass judgement for the whole? Sociologists, after all, are not philosopher kings. The Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School were in fact steeped in the philosophical tradition, both ancient, Kantian, and Hegelian, and had no compunction about making statements about what is rational and what is not. It is possible that having narrowly escaped death in the Holocaust, and having observed fascism at first hand, the Critical Theorists had an acute sense of the irrational, since in many senses fascism demonstrated the triumph of irrationality, whilst functioning in an apparently formally rational manner. Such contradictions are at the centre of Critical Theory. Irrationality, however, inheres in modern industrial society more generally, and particularly in capitalism, of which fascism is one formation. Life in the modern democracies is equally irrational. It is irrational for individuals, and indeed nations, to annihilate each other, as they continue to do. It is irrational to condemn, structurally, whole sectors of populations to poverty, toil, unhappiness and servitude, as continues to be the case.

What is most irrational, from the standpoint of Critical Theory, is that this state of affairs is objectively avoidable. A community of free human beings, according to Critical Theory, 'is possible through technical means already at hand' (Horkheimer 1972: 217). Although we noted that only Marcuse provides an analysis that makes the end of work an explicitly extended theme, other Critical Theorists have a sense that needless toil is part of the system of domination under advanced capitalism, and therefore should be abolished. The contemporary organisation of work, for Adorno and others, should be transformed not only because it is at the centre of a particularly pathological organisation of society, but because it mutilates the individuality of identity that bourgeois society purports to value (Sünker 2007: 135). Work, for the Critical Theorists, has an individual as well as a social or economic element, and the capitalist division of labour limits the development of true individuality.

That the technical means exist for work to be abolished is one of the more obvious irrational features of advanced capitalism, according to Critical Theory. Marx had suggested that the abolition of capitalist labour as we know it was within reach many years earlier. Herein lies the essence of the analytical usefulness of Critical Theory, and its suitability for looking at the end of work: Critical Theory does not simply diagnose social injustices and irrationalities, it seeks to account

for their perpetuation by proposing that capitalist (that is, all modern) societies hide their own potential from themselves, in order for the current system of economic and social domination to be perpetuated. This theory is not particularly new, of course. Marx provided an analysis that highlighted the fetishisation of commodities; that is, the tendency for impersonal economic and social structures and processes to appear to take on a life of their own. At the heart of theories that prioritise the end of work, is a conviction that people should decide for themselves how to work, produce, and live, and that there is no objective necessity for present conditions to endure.

It is clear that Critical Theory is situated in the Marxist tradition. It is equally clear, however, that Critical Theory is an attempt to adapt Marx's insights in the face of profound social and economic change. In his 1937 essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory', for example, Horkheimer pointed out that 'even the situation of the proletariat is, in this society, no guarantee of correct knowledge' (Horkheimer 1972: 213), and Marcuse saw the role of the working class as historical subject as having changed, something that will be discussed in Chapter 5. The fact that, as we shall see, the central dynamic of the end of work is set out by Marx himself, makes the task of adapting Marxism to changing socioeconomic conditions more feasible, and indeed relevant, if not necessarily easy. Not only in the case of Marxism, but more generally, Critical Theory is particularly sensitive to historical change. This makes it appropriate for analysing theories of the end of work, since these theories are intrinsically linked with change – the idea of the end of work often appears as bound up with theories about social development.

Returning to the idea of the perpetuation of domination by impersonal structures; Critical Theory seeks to identify and penetrate the ideologies that cloak this domination. Thus, Critical Theory is ideology critique. This makes it particularly useful for looking at theories of the end of work, since the ideology of work is one of the prime factors preventing its transformation or abolition. We shall see that far from evaporating in the white heat of postindustrialism, this ideology persists, and is ably assisted by the ideology of consumerism. That the theorists of the Frankfurt School were at the forefront of critical analyses of emerging consumer society further reinforces the impression of suitability of this set of theories for understanding the idea of the end of work.

Critical Theory is useful as a way of looking at the end of work because it is totalising theory. That is, it seeks to conduct social critique from the standpoint of an analysis of the social whole, including history, culture, and, as already noted, consciousness, often in the sense of false consciousness, or ideology. I think that exploring the idea of the end of work lends itself particularly well to totalising social theory because the subject of work does not only exist in the realm of economics, but extends into politics also. Work is a topic the exploration of which must also necessarily draw in existential, ontological and, indeed, quotidian concerns. As Adorno says, 'free time depends on the totality of societal conditions' (Adorno 1998: 167). Free time and work are, of course, if not dialectically, then certainly inextricably, interrelated. If we say that one of our aims is understanding the end

of work in itself, as an idea referring to a dynamic of social change, in doing so we are forced to consider political, cultural, and ontological questions. Critical Theory (as we will see in Chapter 8) reminds us of the interconnectedness of society, and as such, should lend itself well to an analysis of work. At some point of course, we make a choice to embark on totalising social analysis. The history of Critical Theory shows us that this choice is not without methodological grounding in the sociological tradition.

Critical Theory is theory that attempts to be self aware. It should be pointed out that Critical Theory serves here not just as a methodology or approach, but is itself part of the subject matter of the book. This is not merely a result of the fact that the end of work is discussed within Critical Theory itself, making Critical Theory an object as well as subject, but that to some limited extent, this book will hopefully make a contribution to furthering our understanding of Critical Theory in the contemporary world. I hope to use the end of work as a way of highlighting the continued usefulness of Critical Theory, and in fact, critical social theory more widely – usefulness in the sense of understanding a social world that despite previously undreamt of technological and material advances, systematically fails to rise above barbarism and unhappiness at both a national and international level.

Critical Theory and critical social theory

Maeve Cook suggests that ‘[c]ritical social theory is a mode of reflection that looks critically at processes of social development from the point of view of the obstacles they pose for human flourishing’ (Cook 2004: 418). Agger applies a 7 point definition of critical social theory:

1. CST [critical social theory] opposes positivism...
2. CST distinguishes between the past and present, largely characterized by domination, exploitation, and oppression, and a possible future rid of these phenomena...
3. CST argues that domination is structural...[and 4.] structures of domination are reproduced through people’s false consciousness...
5. CST argues that social change begins at home, in people’s everyday lives – sexuality, family roles, workplace...
6. Following Marx in this sense, CST conceptualizes the bridge between structure and agency as dialectical...
7. By connecting everyday life and large – scale social structures, CST opposes the notion that eventual progress [can only be achieved by] sacrificing people’s liberties and even lives (Agger 1998: 4–5).

Clearly, critical social theory (without capitals) encompasses Critical Theory. It should be understood that while Critical Theory is a more specific term, referring to a particular group of writers – a wider range of work, encompassing a wider

range of figures, can be considered critical social theory. It is the case, I believe, that theories of the end of work can be used by theorists as a keystone of critical social theory that offers insights into the development, and indeed future, of capitalist society.

One of the best known critical social theorists is, of course, Karl Marx. While much critical social theory draws inspiration from Marxism, this is not always the case. Indeed, in Chapter 3 we will examine utopian visions of a world without work, some of which were in fact constructed before Marx came to prominence. In Chapter 6, we will look at a range of theories on the future of work, many of which, like Critical Theory or Marxism, are based on the idea that social life – the economy, the polity, the individual's working life – are connected. Like Critical Theory also, some non Marxist writers on the future/end of work seek to criticise the current society from the perspective of possibility, of what could be. Similarly, many social theories focus on social change, and these dominate the discussion in Chapter 6, since it is the case that social change and changes in the sphere of work are intrinsically linked.

In Chapter 7, we examine the contribution of André Gorz, whose epistemological position illustrates the links between Critical Theory and critical social theory. As we shall see, Gorz, while not one of the Critical Theorists, develops a form of critical social theory that has, more than any other theorist, perhaps, the idea of the end of work at its centre.

The meaning of the end of work

Some readers will already have noted that *The End of Work* is used as the title for Jeremy Rifkin's 1994 book. It should be obvious that in using this phrase I am not referring to this book specifically, except when explicitly stated (such as in Chapter 6). I have attempted to think of another phrase, in order to avoid this titular clash with Rifkin, but to do so would be rather contrived. The phrase 'abolition of work', among others, is sometimes used as an alternative, as appropriate. However, the end of work is the term that most accurately sums up the various analyses that we will explore.

The end of work appears to be a fairly straightforward idea, and in some ways it is. In its essential meaning, the end of work refers to the fact that advances in production technology (automation), are increasingly eliminating the necessity for human work, and will eventually eradicate the need for human labour altogether (I am using the terms work and labour interchangeably here – see Chapter 2 for a discussion of this). Consideration of the various subtleties in the meaning(s) of the end of work will be carried out throughout the book, as one would expect. It is sufficient here to suggest that the essential definition is complicated by variations in the way work is conceptualised, and the way need (necessity) is understood also. This means that the idea of work 'ending' is somewhat more complicated than we might at first imagine. However, when one gives the matter some further

consideration, it is unlikely that any social thinker would seriously propose that work, or human effort, would cease altogether. The end of work then, must be taken by the reader at this stage as a term into which many different understandings of work, technology, and humanity, are packed. The unpacking of these meanings will be part of the forward movement of this book.

Work

So far we have talked about critical social theory, the end of work, but not work. At the heart of this book, of course, is a belief that work is important. The belief in productivity or creativity as the essence of human beings can be traced back to Marx in its most explicit conception. To some extent, the value for social critique or advances in understandings of the social world (including the world of ideas and discourse) of the end of work approach depends on the extent to which one sees human productive, or creative activity, as the essence of what it means to be human, or perhaps, the 'key sociological category'. This is a question that we will deal with throughout the book.

Catherine Casey, in her book *Work, Self and Society*, sought to '[bring] critical theory back to work...' (Casey 1995: 6). Casey also seeks to return the social to critical theory, that is, to show that critical social theory can be used not only to analyse developments in the cultural sphere, but in the sphere of production and purposeful creative action. Again in common with Casey's standpoint, the present book seeks to make some small contribution against the tendency for social theory to shy away from the world of work. Casey asserts that: 'What people produce and consume, and the social relations engendered by that production, remain at the present time primary constituent elements in defining the social and cultural relations of postindustrial societies as we currently observe them' (Casey 1995: 25).

This book is an attempt to show that sociology can engage with work in a theoretical way which is totalising, and sometimes philosophical. Hopefully, the book will be sociological. Even when discussing theoretical or philosophical ideas, I hope to retain a sense of connection with actually existing society. To that end observations are made throughout the book that are based on reports, sociological investigations, and official statistics, plus literature and art. While this may not be empirical in the classic or conventional sense, I have, to repeat, attempted to maintain a commitment to social reality. In this sense the book shares much with the work not only of established figures such as Krishan Kumar or Paul Ransome (1996, 1999, 2005), but also more recent entrants onto the sociological scene such as Ernesto R. Gantman, whose 2005 book *Capitalism, Social Privilege and Managerial Ideologies* shares many characteristics, in terms of approach, with the current work.

Scope of the book

Every book has a specific scope, and in one such as this, there are going to be some omissions. I have attempted to provide a fairly comprehensive, although not exhaustive, critical survey and analysis of theories of the end of work. I have even included, if only briefly, some fairly obscure literature, such as the writings on the ‘revolt against work’ in Chapter 6. I have omitted extended discussions of pieces such as Lafargue’s *The Right to Be Lazy* (Lafargue 1883) or Bertrand Russell’s *In Praise of Idleness* (Russell 1932), although the former is mentioned briefly in Chapter 2. These pieces are omitted from extended discussion for the same reason as I have excluded commentary on the literary journal *The Idler*, and the book *How to Be Idle* (Hodgkinson 2004), by that journal’s editor. While pieces such as these are interesting, I have made a judgement on the threshold of seriousness and engagement with sociological ideas that writers must reach in order to be discussed. The same threshold was applied to Bob Black’s work (Black 1996).

Some readers may also be surprised that there is no extended discussion of unemployment. I do discuss unemployment, particularly in the latter part of the book. However, unemployment and the end of work are two quite different things. Unemployment is a (usually) temporary state within the context of a conventional labour market. The end of work is a long term tendency which has the potential to undermine the existence of this labour market, and, as we shall see, the capitalist system as a whole. The issue of unemployment in relation to globalisation is covered in Chapter 10, but as we shall see, the relationship between unemployment and the end of work remains far from straightforward.

Outline of the chapters

At the start of this introduction, I suggested that Kumar was an influence on the methodology of this book. I attempted to show how Critical Theory was influential also. I then suggested that, in fact, the present work seeks to explore and assess theories of the end of work from the standpoint of critical social theory, rather than Critical Theory, as more narrowly defined. As such, I have chosen to follow the evolution of the end of work historically, and across different intellectual contexts, just as Kumar explored and surveyed the way ideas about industrial, postindustrial and postmodern ideas evolved, and assessed their usefulness in the context of social theory.

In Chapter 2 I trace the historical development of work. This development is understood in the sense of both work as social practice, concept, and work as an ideology. This Chapter demonstrates that modern conceptions of work developed under certain social and ideological pressures, and as social constructs, practices and understandings of work (that is, the social position of work) is open to contestation and change. Chapter 3 looks at the way utopian thinkers often made the end of work part of their vision for a better future. We see in Chapter 3 many

of the underlying dynamics of end of work discourse starting to develop, such as the relationship between needs, consumption and necessary work. Chapter 4 seeks to show how Marx further developed the idea of the end of work, or at least, work as understood under capitalism. Chapter 4 introduces some of the ideas, such as creative work activity as the basis of human identity, that will be important to subsequent discussions in later chapters. Chapter 5 introduces Marcuse, and attempts to place the end of work at the centre of his analysis, and show how he successfully adapted the insights of Marx to changing social conditions – and how thinking about the end of work helped facilitate this. Chapter 6 moves away from explicitly Marxist analyses to show how a broad range of commentators have incorporated thinking about the future of work into their theories about the future of human society more widely. In Chapter 6 we also begin to look more closely at the distinct lack of progress in terms of the actual reduction of working hours, let alone the end of work. Chapter 7 moves the focus back onto explicitly critical theories, and indeed, theories heavily influenced by Marx. We consider the contribution of Gorz, and compare his analysis of the relationships between technology, social change, and work, with those of earlier writers such as Marx, as well as contemporaries such as Negri and Marcuse. Continuing our focus on the way social theory mediates between changes in the social world and changes in theory itself, Chapter 8 enters the debate on whether or not work can still be considered a key sociological category, or whether we should look instead to the world of consumption for the essence of social life in late modernity. The contributions of theorists such as Offe and Habermas are also considered. In Chapter 9 we discuss the theoretical relevance of the end of work to theories to the concept of globalisation, arguing that although some sectors of the Western workforce are effected by globalisation in terms of unemployment, it is far from the case that the export of manufacturing to the developing world means the end of work in the advanced societies. The conclusion will return to some of the aims set out in this introduction, and will discuss whether or not we are right to consider theories of the end of work as a promising and insightful line of analysis within modern critical social theory.