

## Technological change and fear of technology

New technologies are frequently the subject of cultural concern that they cause harm or damage the 'social fabric'. Contemporary worries include whether social media means we have poorer relationships with our friends, alongside fears about internet porn and 'sexting'. There may be genuine cause for concern in these areas. But it is also worth noting that very similar concerns have been raised for centuries about new forms of media as they emerge. Barker and Petley (1997) remind us that popular songs were seen as dangerous in the 1500s because they presented criminals as heroes. They write:

For more than 150 years, moral campaigners have been making wild claims about the effects of media which they don't like. When in the 1830s Thomas Bowdler claimed that the plays of Shakespeare would corrupt young girls' minds, he was doing something no different from Conservative MPs [British politicians] today claiming that *Casualty* [a popular UK television drama] could encourage inner-city violence. (p. 7)

We need to be wary, then, of critiques that warn about these new technologies fostering moral or social decay. The technologies may be new, but these cautionary tales are very, very old.

## WORK

Working eight hours per day, five days per week, for the 251 working days a year, we spend up to 22.9 per cent of our year at work. This does not include time spent travelling to and from work, any overtime we do, the weekend time that we spend putting together work for a big deadline on Monday, or the time we spend thinking about work when we are not actually there. It also does not take into account the breakdown of the boundary between work and personal life which has happened as new technologies like laptops and smartphones have enabled us to take our work with us wherever we go (Fleming 2014). Many of us spend much longer than 22.9 per cent of our time doing, or thinking about, our work.

This begs the question as to *why* we spend, at a conservative estimate, a quarter of our adult lives working. There are two ways to answer this question: one is to look at people's motivations and the other is to consider social structures. Personal explanations focus on issues such as gaining a sense of personal identity, striving for 'something better', developing specific skills, connecting to a social network and, of course, earning money.

Yet structural explanations suggest that the nature of work is interwoven with the structure of society – the structure of society dictates the model of work and, simultaneously, work supports the overarching structure of society. If we lived in agrarian or nomadic cultures, our perception of work would be radically different. To examine these issues in more detail, we need a better understanding of 'work'.

### *What is work?*

Defining work is complex. We tend to think of it as an exchange of our time and some form of labour for money. For most of us, this type of work will take place

outside the home and under the direction of another person. Part of our work as authors of this book includes sitting at computers at a university, where we also have to apportion our time between teaching, publishing original research and undertaking administrative activities.

But this model of work is relatively recent and specific to industrial capitalism. Prior to the Industrial Revolution in Western countries, work tended to be undertaken in family groups and focused on survival rather than generating surplus capital (Edgell 2012). Indeed, this is still true in large parts of the world today (see Chapter 9).

Yet this modern understanding of work does not capture unpaid labour such as childcare and domestic chores. These tasks are assumed to be less valuable and not recognized as 'real' work, partly because they have no explicit monetary value (although you can, of course, pay other people to do this work for you).

These unrecognized tasks have tended to be disproportionately undertaken by women, which has led to a strain on many women's lives. Studying women who have jobs and a partner, Hochschild (1989) found that her participants would work a full-time job, and then complete a 'second shift' of several hours of unpaid labour in the home. Despite families becoming more egalitarian, with an increasingly common approach to domestic work where men and women more equally share the burden, Bianchi et al. (2012) find that it is still women who undertake most unpaid labour. There has also been some evidence that when men do take on more equal amounts of childcare, they tend to have a larger share of the fun or enjoyable aspects.

There are two main consequences of this. First, it means that significant portions of the work that women do are not recognized *as* work because it is unpaid. A recent article in the British newspaper *The Guardian* (2015), for example, drew attention to the invisible labour that women do in families, such as making and remembering appointments, arranging children's playdates, buying greetings cards, knowing about allergies, remembering household goods that need replenishing, and so on. While individually these tasks are not necessarily notable and not something we would consider to be work, taken together this sort of labour entails a significant investment of time and emotion, little of which tends to be recognized and none of which is economically recompensed.

Second, people who work in these areas as a waged occupation (e.g. cleaners, carers, cooks, early-year professionals) tend to be paid less money than people who work in occupations of equal value. When we say 'equal value' here, we mean a different job which can be said to make the same level of contribution to society. For example, a refuse collector and a care worker do work of equal risk and equal value – both involve shift work, both are 'dirty' occupations (see Ashforth & Kreiner 1999) and both make an equal contribution to public services. Yet, according to the website Payscale.com, a refuse collector earns an average of £16,572 per year compared to £13,920 for a care worker. Occupations which are paid less tend to be predominantly undertaken by women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds, further reproducing inequality in society.

As such, we can see that defining work is complex because the definition is both social and political – how work is defined determines how that work is rewarded, and which groups benefit and which do not.

### *Why do we work?*

Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1973) argued that ‘for most employees, work has a generally unpleasant quality’ (p. 219). Drawing on a Marxist argument, he suggested that workers in contemporary society are alienated from the content of their work as they have limited control over it. Mills suggested that, for most workers, work is simply a ‘sacrifice of time, necessary to build a life outside of it’ and argued that, where workers are satisfied with their work, it is not so much the actual *doing* of the work that is the source of this satisfaction but the power, status and money that work provides (p. 228). Why, then, do we bother working at all?

There are several sociological explanations. As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), Max Weber argued that work took on a moralistic meaning in the late 17th century – what he called the Protestant work ethic – where working hard in your ‘calling’ (the obligations imposed upon an individual by their position in the world) and being disciplined were thought to be ways to become ‘chosen’ by God. We can see this moralistic framing of work still evident today: being a hard worker is still imbued with positive connotations.

Other scholars have suggested that work provides a framework for constructing a positive identity (Ashforth & Mael 1989). Even when work is stigmatized in some way, workers reframe, refocus and revalue their work in order to present themselves and their work in a positive light (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999). Roberts (2013) has shown this is the case with young working-class men in the **service sector** – men who have taken on jobs that were once deemed solely for women, and adapted them or their perception of them to fit their conceptions of masculinity. In addition to this, sociologists have highlighted the positive social connections, friendships and intimate relationships that work can facilitate (Kakabadse & Kakabadse 2004). Unemployment is also seen to have negative effects on identity (Kelvin 1981).

The value or otherwise of work may become an increasingly pressing question. As we discuss in [Chapter 9](#), the growing automation of technology we are witnessing, from driverless cars to (artificially) intelligent robots, means that we may be approaching a time when there simply is not enough work to share between people. Indeed, work is changing in a number of ways which means how we currently understand and value it as a society is a pressing sociological issue.

**Service sector:**  
a sector of  
the economy  
focused on  
providing a  
service rather  
than goods

### *The changing nature of work*

In Western societies, work has changed significantly over the last century or so (see [Chapter 9](#)). One significant change has been the increase in the number of women working: the so-called ‘feminization’ of the workforce. Standing (1999) demonstrated that this is a global trend, with 71.4 per cent of developing countries and 72.9 per cent of developed countries showing an increase in the number of women working from 1975 onwards. In the West, women who worked outside the home in the early 20th century tended to be from lower socio-economic classes, were concentrated in domestic and other service work and rarely occupied high-status positions in organizations. Today, women from across the social class spectrum work in a multitude of sectors and there are many women in high-status positions.

However, women are still under-represented both in the most prestigious work sectors (e.g. law, medicine, engineering and science) and at the highest levels of organizations (e.g. in the boardroom). In addition, there is still a significant gender pay gap, with women in the UK and US being paid respectively 13.9 per cent and 20 per cent less than men for the same work or work of equal value. This is despite second-wave feminists drawing attention to the gender pay gap back in the 1970s and several laws that are meant to ensure that women and men are paid equally. Although increased female participation in the labour market is understood by feminist scholars as liberating women and giving them financial independence, inequalities persist.

The *nature* of work has also changed significantly. At the turn of the 20th century, much of the Western world was heavily reliant on manufacturing as a source of income, but today the service sector is by far the largest employer. By service sector, we refer to jobs which are based in the production of services (for business and customers) rather than based on the production of goods. This is sometimes also called *affective labour* (Hardt 1999).

Working in shops, cafes, call centres, transport, hairdressing and sales are all examples of service sector jobs. Working in the service sector requires a very different set of skills from the manufacturing sector – it prioritizes what are often referred to as ‘soft skills’, such as good communication, looking presentable and emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). These are all skills which women are traditionally assumed to have a ‘natural’ aptitude for, and therefore, the increased availability of jobs requiring these skills goes some way to explaining the feminization of the workforce. In the Eastern world and developing countries, the nature of work has also changed significantly, becoming increasingly characterized by manufacturing rather than agriculture.

Recently, entrepreneurialism has also become a much more salient feature of Western labour markets. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) found that 10.1 per cent of the US population was self-employed in 2015. These rates significantly increased after the economic downturn of 2008 and have remained relatively steady. Uncertainty about a country’s economic health and in its labour market are key drivers of an increase in self-employment, but sociologists have also looked at more ideological reasons behind increased entrepreneurialism. Richard Sennett (1998) argued that the uncertainty of modern labour markets means that people are unable to form positive connections with, or to fulfil their identities through, work because they have to change jobs so frequently. Instead, they look to self-employment to express their ‘authentic’ selves. In this way, self-employment can be understood as a way of resisting the capitalist ‘rat race’.

However, this notion of entrepreneurialism and personal fulfilment can be somewhat romanticized. Self-employment entails a high degree of precariousness and uncertainty, even if such uncertainty has been ‘rebranded’ through notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘flexibility’ to appear much less problematic. This ‘flexibility’ may be appealing for young, mobile entrepreneurs but is much more challenging for those with caring responsibilities and a mortgage to pay.

The *future* of work is another serious concern for sociologists. Primarily, this concern has focused on **automation** and increased precariousness. Workers

**Automation:**  
the  
introduction  
of automatic  
equipment  
(robots,  
machines and  
computers) in a  
manufacturing  
or other work  
environment

have been concerned about the implications of automation since the early 19th century. The Luddites were English textile workers who smashed new cotton mill machinery out of fear that their traditional way of life would be destroyed and they would lose their jobs to new machinery that was quicker and cheaper than manual workers (Thompson 1963). People are still concerned about automation and the effect on jobs, and sporadically articles appear in the media informing us that our jobs will in the future be done by robots (see this recent example from the BBC: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-34066941](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-34066941)). Braverman's (1974) classic work on deskilling, however, argued that workers' anger and concerns about automation should not be directed at the technologies themselves (as the Luddites did) but at the class and power structures of modern capitalism which focus on companies attaining a monopoly over a particular area of production no matter the cost.

Related to this, sociologists have also drawn attention to the risk of increased precariousness in future labour markets. As machines and computers are increasingly able to undertake work, human workers will be needed less regularly. This means that permanent, long-term contracts will be rarer and people will increasingly engage in irregular work. Guy Standing (2014) has been highly critical of this move towards precarious and irregular labour and argued that a new social class is emerging – the precariat. He argued that the precariat (an amalgamation of the words precarious and the proletariat) is characterized by chronic underemployment (i.e. people work but do not earn enough to make a decent living) and insecurity. While forms of flexible working can be beneficial for people in certain life situations, particularly young people fitting in work around education, the normalization of this type of work is thought to be indicative of just how deep the roots of modern capitalism go (see Chapter 9 for further discussion of organization of work in modern societies).

Autonomist Marxists have theorized the changing nature of work as part of the increased *society of control* that they argue we now live in. Autonomist Marxists are interested in the everyday workplace resistance techniques of the working classes (such as being absent, coming in late and not working as hard as one could) and the changes that such resistance can bring about in the capitalist system outside of traditional organizations like political parties and trade unions. Writing in this tradition, Deleuze (1992) argued that we now live in a society of control in which the boundaries between work and personal life are blurred. As such, while it appears that we have more freedom within contemporary society, we are also subject to more control. For example, many jobs allow work from home but, at the same time, employers now also expect workers to take phone calls or answer emails outside of core working hours. For autonomist Marxists, this tension between freedom and control in work is also evident in forms of workplace surveillance. Whereas previously, workers would be physically watched by a manager while they were at work, we are now subject to surveillance through complex matrixes of information, such as how long we spend online and what websites we visit. This information is not just available to our employers but can also be shared with authorities and even used by and sold to companies to market products to us.



## PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

In 2017, the billionaire businessman Bill Gates called for a tax on robots. What is your response to this idea?

It might initially sound preposterous or surreal, but given what we know about automation, alongside Marxist theories of the economy, perhaps it has merit.

A tax on robots would shift the cost of automation from the worker (who would face losing their job to it) to the businesses (who would pay this tax on it). If these tax revenues were then reserved to support people displaced from work by robots, it might help offset the potential impact of automation.

Considering this, has your view of the idea changed?



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## Employability

At school, college and university, you will be encouraged to think about your own relationship with work in terms of what you want to do after you finish education. Your university or college will have services and opportunities that are designed to put you in the best position possible for securing employment when you leave education. These focus on increasing your **employability**: that is, how attractive you are to potential future employers. Over the past two decades, schools and universities have focused much more on supporting students' employability. The intention is to make sure that students are work-ready (that they have skills and experiences employers are looking for) when they leave education, through activities like careers fairs, guest speakers and key skills modules – and you will find that every university has a careers centre.

This increase in support that schools and universities give to students' employability is known in the UK as the *employability agenda* but is not limited to UK universities. Part of the reason for the introduction of the employability agenda in universities was the increase in student numbers, the widening of university to previously under-represented groups and the subsequent upskilling and professionalization that accompanied these changes. With so many people being educated to degree level, there was a concern that having a degree was no

**Employability:**  
a measure of how attractive individuals are to employers and, by extension, how easy they will find it to get a job

longer ‘enough’ – students needed additional skills and experiences which would be valued by employers. The employability agenda can also be seen to be rooted in neoliberal ideas about personal responsibility, whereby being successful in a particular sector of social life lies with an individual irrespective of the wider landscape of that particular sector. As such, having or not having a job is framed as being down to the success or failure of the individual (their own ‘employability’, or lack of) rather than the wider state of the labour market (i.e. whether there are actually jobs available or not).

While the employability agenda supports students to gain useful experiences and coaches them to present their experiences in particular ways, it fails to recognize inequality of opportunity. Being employable means, in part, having extracurricular experiences such as senior memberships of societies, internships and study abroad opportunities. Yet some of these experiences are more easily secured through personal networks, meaning that students whose networks do not include influential people are disadvantaged. Broadly speaking, students from lower socio-economic groups and minority ethnic students are less likely than their white, middle-class counterparts to have access to people who can facilitate extracurricular activities such as these (see [Chapter 7](#)).

Moreover, the employability agenda assumes that all students will succeed in extracurricular activities like internships and memberships of societies. However, these activities rely on a set of skills, knowledge and codes most often part of a white, middle-class *habitus* (Sennett & Cobb 1972).

Consider the following: imagine you are undertaking an internship and are invited out for dinner with senior partners in the firm. As you sit at the table, you notice that there are several sets of cutlery and three types of wine glasses. Then, the person next to you begins to talk about a recent opera they went to see and the person opposite starts to talk about an exotic holiday they are planning. If this situation and the conversations do not reflect your prior experiences, the chances are you will have a rather uncomfortable time, be less able to bond with your colleagues and ultimately less likely to ‘succeed’ at your internship. This is not because you are incapable but because your *habitus* does not match.

### The benefits of employability

Although we have encouraged you here to take a critical approach to the employability agenda, it is still something you will need to engage with and it is never too early to start. You do not necessarily need to know what you want to do as a career but you should start to think about what kinds of skills employers might be looking for and how you match up against these. When doing this, you should not be afraid to admit if you are lacking skills in certain areas. Where you do see room for improvement, look for ways to improve: join a student society, try to get some voluntary or work experience, enrol on a course.

If you are reading this at university, you should also make sure you do two things. First, start writing a CV and regularly update it as you acquire new skills or experiences. Second, book an appointment with your college or university’s careers service to discuss your skills, CV and career plans.