

# Work and Social Alienation

**Chris Bousquet**

*Philosophical Studies*, 2022 (please cite final version)

**Abstract:** In this paper, I offer an account of social alienation, a genre of alienation engendered by contemporary work that has gone largely overlooked in the ethics of labor. Social alienation consists in a corruption of workers' relations to their social life and the people that make it up. When one is socially alienated, one's sociality and close relations exist as a mere afterthought or break from work, while labor is the central activity of one's life. While one might think that existing solutions to alienated labor would resolve this social alienation, I suggest that such solutions at best leave the problem intact may in fact contribute to it by giving labor the place of priority in workers' lives. Resolving social alienation, I suggest, requires rethinking the amount of time we commit to work, the rigidity of the work schedule, and most crucially, the value that we attribute to work as the primary source of purpose in our lives.

“Even idleness is eager now.” - George Eliot

Many workers today are alienated from their social lives. For them, sociality has become a mere footnote to their work, rather than an equal and independent source of value. Work has become the dominant feature of many people's lives, leaving social interests and activities with at best secondary status. As a result, individuals have become disconnected from their close relations and from their social lives as a whole. This leaves many lives deficiently one-dimensional, oriented around work to the detriment of other crucial sources of value.

In this paper, my main aim is to characterize this social alienation and its sources in contemporary work culture. I will start by sketching social alienation, explaining how workers' social lives reflect features that philosophers identify as central to the phenomenon of alienation and diagnosing the work conditions that create this alienation. Then, I will specify why social alienation is bad for those who experience it, arguing it makes one's life go worse on each popular theory of well-being. Next, I turn to potential solutions, assessing the ability of recent accounts of unalienated labor to resolve this problem of social alienation, arguing that while these accounts offer appealing visions of work, they leave the problem of social alienation intact. Finally, I offer some speculative suggestions for resolving social alienation, building on Marx's suggestions of reducing the time committed to work, increasing flexibility in work life, and creating new opportunities for communal engagement.

## 1. Characterizing social alienation

In this first section, I aim to characterize a kind of social alienation engendered by work that has not received scholarly attention. My hope in this section is not to offer a comprehensive analysis of the social alienation with which I'm concerned, but rather to offer an initial sketch of this phenomenon that I'll then flesh out throughout the remainder of the paper.

As a first pass, social alienation describes an arrangement in which one's social life is a mere afterthought, while one's work is the default activity of one's life. What I mean by this is that one's identity and day-to-day routine is defined by work, while one's social activities and close relations get at best secondary status, garnering only perfunctory devotion and attention. By work, I mean roughly what Elster describes as "any organized and regular activity whose purpose is to produce use-values or intermediate goods for the production of use-values."<sup>1</sup> The core features of work are therefore that it is a regular activity and has primarily instrumental value, devoted to creating some product. In the first half of this paper, I will focus on work as we know it today i.e. primarily as employment; I will later consider revisions to the current model of employment that retain the features of Elster's definition and see how these affect social alienation.

In many ways the dominance of work in our lives is not a new phenomenon. Joseph Pieper observed more than 70 years ago that "'work' [had] invaded and taken over the whole realm of human action and of human existence as a whole."<sup>2</sup> I suspect that Pieper's observation is, however, only more apt today. In our contemporary work culture, even in the moments where one isn't working, one is acting with an eye to work—making sure one doesn't stay out too late and gets enough sleep, prepping one's office meals for the week, curating a professional wardrobe, ingesting enough caffeine to get through the work day. In short, work is the central node around which all other activity is organized.

The result is that one relates to one's social life and the people that constitute it in a deficient way. Most agree that the distinctive feature of alienation generally is a relation of "problematic separation" between a subject and some object, whether another person, an experience, a place, or something else.<sup>3</sup> A relation of alienation is problematic because it disrupts

---

<sup>1</sup> Elster, 1986a, 110-111.

<sup>2</sup> Pieper, 1948, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Leopold, 2018.

a connection that is in some way meant to obtain between subject and object.<sup>4</sup> Rahel Jaeggi identifies alienation as a “relation of relationlessness,”<sup>5</sup> given that one can only become alienated from something to which one previously had a connection or ought to have a connection.

There are two ways that social alienation reflects this kind of disrupted relation. First, one becomes alienated from one’s social life as such: sociality is no longer an integral part of one’s life, a locus of connection, fulfillment, and satisfaction, but instead becomes a mere diversion from one’s work life. As a result, one’s social life appears as foreign, a place where one is *not doing* rather than doing, and specifically not doing the activity that is meant to define one’s life. Sociality also becomes anemic, full of brief encounters interrupted by the demands of work, preventing full immersion into other people and social activities. This disconnection from one’s social life also crucially involves alienation from those to which one is meant to have a deep connection—one’s closest friends and family. The relations one maintains with family members and especially with friends are at times anemic and strained, as one sees them not as equally and independently important subjects, but breaks from one’s work.

Social alienation clearly reflects some of the other features that Jaeggi identifies in her influential account of alienation. For one, there is a sense of powerlessness, an inability to realize one’s aims, desires, or values in the world.<sup>6</sup> One is thrown into an arrangement in which one is expected devote the majority of one’s time and mental energy into work, while one’s relationships and social activities merely fill in the gaps. As I will discuss more below, large majorities of workers wish they could spend more time with friends and family, indicating that most workers are unable to change or evade this work-dominated lifestyle. Those in thrall to this culture cannot reorient their lives to prioritize free social activity without risking their careers and livelihoods. Because they are unable to transform the social world in the way they wish, that world appears alien to them: sociality remains a mere footnote to work, lacking a robust independent existence.

Related to this sense of powerlessness is a lack of freedom on the part of workers. As Jaeggi describes it, this lack of freedom entails that one is unable to “make what one does, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Wood, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Jaeggi, 2014, 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

the conditions under which one does it, one's own."<sup>7</sup> When one is alienated from something, one may be unable to engage with it at all, or unable to choose the conditions under which one engages with it. With respect to social alienation, this lack of freedom is apparent in the diminution of spontaneity in one's social life. One is unable to socialize when one wishes or under conditions one chooses, but rather must deliberately schedule sociality into one's life. Hayden Ramsay (2005) stresses the constitutive role of freedom in leisure, explaining that true leisure "remind[s] us of the possibility of existence apart from the daily round, life beyond the anxieties of work and need."<sup>8</sup> Given the dominance of work, however, both in our mental lives and our schedules, sociality becomes merely another part of the "daily round," squeezed precariously into our hectic lives and hardly free from the pressure of looming work.

Theorists of alienation often distinguish between subjective accounts of alienation, which equate alienation with particular subjective feelings, and objective accounts, which locate alienation in certain objective features of the world or agent,<sup>9</sup> Depending on which type of alienation exists in some case, we may get very different answers as to how to respond: for instance, Hegel famously thought that people are merely subjectively alienated and must come to appreciate the ways in which social and political structures constitute a home, while Marx thought only radical structural changes can overcome the objective alienation present in capitalist society.<sup>10</sup>

In typical cases, social alienation consists in both subjective and objective alienation. There are certainly typical feelings associated with social alienation: a sense that one is disengaged in social activities, that these activities are foreign, and a general lack of connection with others that produces anxiety, stress, depression, and loneliness. Yet underlying these subjective experiences are a number of structural conditions. One feels disconnected and disengaged in one's social life because one actually is. As I will discuss more below, one's social activities and close relations occupy only a small fraction of one's time, and the time they do occupy is circumscribed within the confines of work, meaning work looms over these activities and precludes immersion. The result is a smattering of ad hoc social gatherings that do not allow people to fully experience their social life or consistently connect with their closest relations.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ramsay, 3.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Schroeder and Arpaly, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Hardimon, 1994, 121.

There may however be cases in which one's life contains the objective features of social alienation, and yet lacks the subjective features—that is, where one is not deeply engaged in one's social life and the people that make it up, but one doesn't experience the negative feelings associated with this phenomenon. For reasons I'll explain in section 3, I think most such cases still include a problematic kind of alienation.

## **2. Causes of social alienation**

Thus far, I have sought to offer an initial sketch of the phenomenon of social alienation. In order to fill in this account, it will help to turn our attention to the causes of social alienation. Social alienation starts with the immense amount of time committed to work. Social alienation is not a uniquely American phenomenon, but may be particularly salient in the U.S. given the extremity of American work habits. In the US, around one-third of laborers work more than 45 hours a week, and one-eighth work more than 55 hours a week. Moreover, one-third of laborers work on weekends and one-fourth work at some point between 10 pm and 6 am. Over 80 percent of those working more than 50 hours a week say they'd like to work less, and 60 percent of all workers would prefer shorter hours. This immense time commitment to work, what Julie Rose terms “overemployment,” has been associated with adverse effects on physical and mental health, as well as low self-reports of life satisfaction. And perhaps most importantly, what workers seem to crave the most is more social activity: two-thirds of workers say they'd like more time with friends, and four-fifths more time with family.<sup>11</sup>

Employment is of course not the only commitment in our lives that produces social alienation. Childcare, household labor, personal care, and other demands can also get in the way of fully engaging in one's social life. It is for this reason that when Rose calls for more free time, she focuses not just on non-work time, but time not consumed by meeting the necessities of life, time in which people can do whatever they wish.<sup>12</sup> I focus on work in particular as a cause of social alienation first because it tends to be our largest time commitment, occupying nearly half of people's waking hours. It is also, as Rose notes, a commitment that most people want to spend less time on. And finally, as I'll address later, it is both possible and desirable to reduce the dominance of work in our lives, while it's not clear the same goes for time spent on childcare or personal care.

---

<sup>11</sup> Rose, 2016, pp. 9-14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 1-2.

It is worth noting that working hours have improved over the last 70 years: in the United States, annual time worked per laborer has fallen by nearly 250 hours, about five hours per week.<sup>13</sup> To point out that working conditions today are better than those of the immediate postwar period may however be damning with faint praise, a sign that the balance has improved, not that it's good. Again indicating that social alienation may be particularly strong in the U.S., American workers still work more than 400 hours a year more than their German, British, and Scandinavian counterparts.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, hours worked have actually increased by nearly 50 hours per year in the U.S. over the last ten years,<sup>15</sup> implying a recent trend toward a work-dominated lifestyle.

It's not only the amount of time devoted to work that produces social alienation, however, but the rigidity of the work schedule. While the gig economy and COVID disruptions have changed the work schedule somewhat, individuals still tend work for a pre-determined number of hours in a pre-determined location, left to socialize in the intervening hours. Work hours appear on one's schedule as given, non-negotiable blocks of time. As a result, what social activity one can pursue must be scheduled and organized around these blocks, often tagged with a pre-determined start and stop time. This disrupts the spontaneous character of sociality and, given the dominance of work, ensures that work is at top of mind even when one enters the social sphere. There is a countdown associated with social activities, as one remains conscious of the exact hour at which work will recommence.

Workers therefore not only have limited opportunity for social activity, but even when they are able to engage, it is often only in a degenerate form of sociality. Social activities become stilted and contrived and come to serve as a mere means to the end of rejuvenating oneself for the next day of work. This relation to sociality is similar to what Stanley Parker calls the opposition pattern of work and leisure, in which laborers engage in escapist leisure in order to decompress and return to work refreshed.<sup>16</sup> Sociality becomes parasitic on work for its value, serving as a means to working more effectively, rather than possessing its own independent value. This approach to sociality reflects Bertrand Russell's observation that "there was formerly a capacity for light-heartedness and play which has been to some extent inhibited by the cult of

---

<sup>13</sup> FRED Economic Data.

<sup>14</sup> OECD.

<sup>15</sup> FRED Economic Data.

<sup>16</sup> Parker, 1972.

efficiency. The modern man thinks that everything ought to be done for the sake of something else, and never for its own sake.”<sup>17</sup> Work, not only because of its dominance in individuals’ lives but also because of its emphasis on instrumental reasoning, encourages workers to view leisure as a mere means to the end of returning to work.

While long hours and a rigid work schedule are nothing new, I suspect that much of the recent intensification of social alienation reflects what *The Atlantic*’s Derek Thompson calls “workism”: the philosophy that our work is meant to be the central source of purpose and satisfaction in our lives. According to Thompson, many of today’s laborers turn to work not merely as a source of income, but a source of identity.<sup>18</sup> As people come to see work as the central activity of their lives, everything else must move into the background. Many workers have come to embrace what Al Gini calls the ethic of “busy-ness”, which grants moral superiority to a life of work and activity. In our society, Gini explains, workaholism is “a clean addiction.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, those features of our lives that were once reserved for life outside of work have been swallowed by work. Sarah Jaffe explains, “...the things we used to keep for ourselves—indeed, the things the industrial workplace wanted to minimize—are suddenly in demand on the job, including our friendships, our feelings, and our love.”<sup>20</sup> The energies and sentiments once devoted to developing meaningful relationships outside of work have now been redirected toward work itself.

To get a more concrete idea of how working conditions inhibit social connection, consider the typical life of an American worker. On weekdays, she wakes up and spends her morning preparing to go to work, spends the better part of her day at an office, warehouse, or other workplace, and then commutes home. This leaves only a limited number of evening hours before having to get to sleep and do it all again. Within this window there’s some opportunity for socializing, but this opportunity is circumscribed within the other activities of daily life. For instance, she might go out for drinks with friends after work, but she’ll need to fit this into the rather rigid schedule that surrounds the activity. So, she’ll stay at the bar from 5:30-7:30 in order to leave time to cook, eat, and get enough sleep to perform at work the next day. The important thing to note in here is the order of priority: It is never that the worker needs to fit her work life

---

<sup>17</sup> Russell, 1935.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Gini, 2003, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Jaffe, 2021.

into the interstitial gaps left within her social life, but rather she always squeezes her social life into the gaps left by work life. It seems entirely natural then that she would find her social life to resemble a break from real life, an exception for which she must work to find time within the pre-existing given of her work life. This, I suggest, produces alienation. Her sociality is not an integral part of her life, but rather something fit into the moments where her real life pauses. This manifests in feelings of anxiety in one's social life, a sense that one has to desperately cling to these brief moments before they expire and one's work life resumes, and detachment from friends and family who become diversions rather than the vital stuff of life.

### **3. Why is social alienation bad for people?**

I've tried to paint a picture of the socially alienated life that will strike readers as intuitively unappealing. However, one might wonder what precisely is wrong with such a life. My argument is fundamentally one about well-being: many people today are socially alienated and their lives go worse as a result. Alienation is bad for people, I want to suggest, no matter what theory of wellbeing one holds, though whose lives go worse and how much worse will depend on the theory one embraces. Below I will show how social alienation worsens many people's lives on each of the three most prominent theories of wellbeing: hedonic theories, desire satisfaction theories, and objectivist theories. There will be cases, however, where objectivist theories tell against social alienation, while neither hedonic nor desire satisfaction theories do. While such cases will be rare, I argue that objectivist theories can best account for the intuitive deficiencies of such lives. Thus while proponents of all three theories should be worried about social alienation, objectivists will be more concerned in the full range of cases where I think social alienation is detrimental.

Hedonic theories of well-being maintain that people's lives go well when they consist in the greatest balance of pleasure over pain.<sup>21</sup> These theories come in various shapes, but no matter which kind of hedonism one embraces, social alienation must be a problem because it reduces individuals' experience of pleasure. Social activities tend to be those that people find most satisfying. A 2004 study from Kahneman et al asked participants to reconstruct their activities and experiences from the previous day, finding that people reported the most positive emotions when spending time with intimate relations and socializing, while they rated working and

---

<sup>21</sup> Crisp, 2021.

commuting at the bottom.<sup>22</sup> There are admittedly some limitations to relying on this kind of study to reveal the harms of social alienation. I suggest that the dominance of work not only keeps people from valuable social activities, but that it also deteriorates the quality of those activities; evidence that individuals find these activities most pleasurable might seem to shed some doubt on this thesis. Yet even the socially alienated have at least some engaging social experiences, and it may be these that cause respondents to rate social activity so highly. Moreover, that our current social activities are not as immersive and engaging as they could be does not mean they are not still more pleasurable than the alternatives.

Complementing these self-reports on the pleasantness of various activities, there is also evidence that when people increase their level of social engagement, they become happier. In a survey in Germany, researchers asked participants to develop ideas about how they could improve their life satisfaction, and then studied which types of ideas predicted changes in life satisfaction a year later. Those who proposed plans for becoming more socially engaged reported improvements in life satisfaction, while those who planned to make other kinds of changes (like finding a new job) did not report increased life satisfaction. The study determined these effects were at least partly explained by the participants actually socializing more over the next year.<sup>23</sup> This and the Kahneman et al study tell strongly in favor of the thesis that people would derive more pleasure from their lives if they spent more quality time with close relations. They imply that those who are unable meaningfully connect with others—for instance those who are committed single-mindedly to their careers—tend to experience less pleasure.

Desire satisfaction theories, on the other hand, maintain that a good life consists in having as many of one's desires satisfied over the course of one's lifetime.<sup>24</sup> Different desire satisfaction theories identify different kinds of desires as the locus of concern, but I suspect that attention to worker desires would put pressure on any of these theories to conclude that social alienation is a problem for well-being.

For one, as I've already emphasized, a large majority of people express a desire to work less, and particularly a desire to spend more time with friends and family: two-thirds of workers

---

<sup>22</sup> Kahneman et al, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Rohrer et al, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Heathwood 2016, 2019.

desire more time with friends and four-fifths more time with family.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, many indicate that they desire changes in their current work life: fewer than half of Americans are “very satisfied” with any of six determinants of job quality<sup>26</sup> and two thirds report a mismatch between working conditions they desire and working conditions they have.<sup>27</sup> At the end of their lives, people also tend to wish they’d worked less and spent more time with loved ones. Based on her conversations with dying patients, palliative nurse Bronnie Ware developed a list of the top five regrets of the dying; among these five were “I wish I hadn’t worked so hard” and “I wish I’d stayed in touch with my friends.”<sup>28</sup> All of this evidence indicates that people desire to work less, engage in sociality more, and change the conditions under which they do both. Social alienation may in fact partly consist in the frustration of these desires: referring again to Jaeggi, one is powerless to reform the conditions under which one works and socializes and therefore unable to engage with one’s social relations with the frequency and depth that one wishes.

I do not want to overstate the case against work on the grounds of pleasure or desire satisfaction, however. Much evidence indicates that people fare better in terms of pleasure and desire satisfaction when they work at least some amount. As Michael Cholbi documents, there is good evidence that unemployment has negative effects on physical health, mental wellbeing, and self-worth; many report being at least somewhat satisfied with their jobs; and lottery winners and retirees tend to continue to work despite not needing the income.<sup>29</sup> I do not doubt that work is an important part of the good life; rather, I suggest that it is too central in many lives, while social activities are not central enough. I argue that people desire and would find more pleasure in working less, not abandoning work altogether.

As Cholbi argues, however, there also may be reason to treat some of these desires for work with suspicion. Cholbi suggests that the desire to work, or at least the desire to work as much as one does now, may be an adaptive preference: a desire formed under unjust conditions whose satisfaction is not necessarily good for the subject that holds it. Cholbi outlines two reasons for thinking this is so. For one, not working or working significantly less are

---

<sup>25</sup> It might again seem odd to point out that people desire more social activity, given that I’ve argued that work interferes with the quality of such activity. However, this survey evidence might imply that people think their social activities would be of higher quality if they had more time to spend on them.

<sup>26</sup> Jenkins et al, 2008

<sup>27</sup> Maestas et al 2017

<sup>28</sup> Ware, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Cholbi, 2018, 3.

“unthinkable options” today. People cannot pursue them without suffering considerable social and economic consequences, and therefore treat them as impossibilities. Secondly, there tends to be a mismatch between people’s appraisals of work generally, which tend to be positive, and their appraisals of the constitutive aspects of work, which tend to be negative. This suggests that workers’ general sympathy toward work may be a product of cultural pressure, rather than their actual experiences of work.<sup>30</sup> If Cholbi is right about this, we should discount individuals’ general desires for work, which strengthens the desire-satisfaction case against social alienation. Even if he’s not, however, enough individuals express a desire to work less and spend more time with social relations that the case for reducing social alienation remains strong.

Finally, objectivist conceptions of well-being also tell against social alienation. There are two kinds of objectivist theories of well-being: objective list theories and perfectionist theories. Objective list theories are pluralist in nature, identifying a number of non-reducible goods that contribute to individuals’ well-being. Almost all of these theories identify friendship or social activity as crucial to the good life. As just a few examples, Finnis’ list consists of “Life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness, “religion;”<sup>31</sup> Fletcher’s consists of “Achievement, friendship, happiness, pleasure, self-respect, virtue;”<sup>32</sup> and Murphy’s consists of “Life, knowledge, aesthetic experience, excellence in play and work, excellence in agency, inner peace, friendship and community, religion, happiness.”<sup>33</sup> One method for developing such lists is to ask what goods (if any) would be missing from one’s life if one was plugged into Nozick’s experience machine.<sup>34</sup> Authentic social relations and activities are goods that many identify as missing in the experience machine and therefore as belonging on objective list theories. As I’ve argued, social alienation interferes with the sustenance of meaningful relationships.

Perfectionist theories, on the other hand, identify well-being with the development of human nature, with many associating this nature with rational agency. Thomas Hurka argues that the good life consists in developing one’s rational nature, i.e. one’s ability to form and act on beliefs and intentions.<sup>35</sup> Sociality is a crucial part of developing this nature because love and

---

<sup>30</sup> Cholbi, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Finnis, 1980.

<sup>32</sup> Fletcher, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Murphy, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Bradley, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Hurka, 1993, 39.

friendship extend one's rational agency beyond oneself. One becomes concerned for others, intending good states for one's close relations for their own sake. One also develops and carries out joint projects, exercising rational agency cooperatively. Insofar as it prevents one from engaging in sociality, the perfectionist would insist that social alienation therefore interferes with the development of one's human nature. Not only does it keep one from spending time with friends and developing joint projects, but it also prevents one from truly extending one's concern outside oneself, given that social alienation often involves using others as a mere means to recharge for work.

In this section, I've hoped to be agnostic as to which theory of well-being we ought to embrace and insist that no matter which theory we prefer, we ought to be concerned about social alienation. Despite this, the scope and degree of our concern about social alienation will depend on which theory we endorse. Most obviously, there will be certain cases that the objectivist would worry about, while neither the hedonist nor the desire-satisfactionist would. These will be cases where one's social life and close relations play only a secondary role in one's life, but this doesn't cause one any less pleasure nor does it frustrate any of one's desires. Using the distinction between subjective and objective alienation described above, these will for the most part be cases where one is objectively alienated from one's social life, but not subjectively alienated.<sup>36</sup>

For the reasons I've outlined above, I think such cases will be rare, but they are far from impossible. Imagine for instance the happy recluse, who now spends all of her time working on her novel and has largely lost touch with friends from previous stages in her life, but for the occasional cursory interaction. We might imagine that she wouldn't find it any more pleasurable to be more engaged in her social life, nor does she desire more social engagement. I am inclined to think that her life is still deficient. A full-throated defense of an objectivist conception of well-being is well outside the scope of this paper, but I suspect that when many readers reflect on their own lives, they will find that their social lives with friends and family are among the most important goods they enjoy. I also suspect most of us would balk at the idea of having all the pleasures these social connections produce, without the connections themselves. And while many of us desire to sustain these relations, I think we desire them because they are good, not

---

<sup>36</sup> Or perhaps even less commonly, cases where one is subjectively alienated but doesn't mind this experience.

vice versa. A life without deep social connections simply seems incomplete, even if it doesn't contain less pleasure or desire satisfaction.

#### **4. Unalienated labor and social alienation**

One might wonder if there already exists a solution to this problem of social alienation. After all, alienation is a familiar word in the ethics of work, and it is natural to turn to solutions to alienated labor for insight into resolving social alienation. In this section, I argue that contemporary solutions to alienated labor do not resolve and may even contribute to social alienation. I'll focus on the accounts of Elster (1986b), Gilibert (2015 and 2020), and Kandiyali (2020) who offer critiques of and solutions to alienated labor broadly in the Marxist tradition. These accounts reflect two important strands in the literature on alienated labor: Elster emphasizing self-realizing labor, and Gilibert and Kandiyali focusing on labor that promotes others' flourishing. I should note that to say that these authors' solutions do not address social alienation is not to fault them, given that it is not their purpose to address social alienation. Rather, it is to show those who might reasonably think that solutions to alienated labor can resolve social alienation that they in fact cannot and might actually exacerbate it.

##### **a) Self-realizing labor**

Elster offers an account of unalienated labor that is individualist in nature. He outlines a model of unalienated labor that is self-realizing, which on his account means that is freely chosen, challenging, and manifests the laborer's personality.<sup>37</sup> Elster's thesis is that a life characterized by this self-realizing activity, achieved centrally through work, is superior to a life characterized by consumption. For one, he maintains that self-realization offers an economy of scale with respect to one's satisfaction, as one develops skills and creates better products.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, self-realizing activity is better with respect to autonomy, allowing individuals to exercise capacities that, even if they don't contribute to subjective welfare, are objectively valuable.<sup>39</sup> While contemporary work is often stultifying and unfulfilling, Elster thinks work offers immense potential as a medium for self-realization, at its best offering challenge, complexity, and a means of producing valuable expressions of one's individuality.

---

<sup>37</sup> Elster, 1986b, 102-103.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 103-105.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 107.

In places, Elster suggests that he endorses the kind of one-dimensional commitment to work that I worry about. He explains that he intends to argue, following Marx, in favor of “a specific conception of the good life as one of active self-realization rather than passive consumption.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, he explicitly notes that “spontaneous interpersonal relations” are among “activities that for various reasons do not lend themselves well to self-realization”<sup>41</sup> and therefore ought to have at best secondary status.<sup>42</sup> To be clear, Elster’s vision of work differs significantly from the kind of work that is typical under capitalism, providing a much more appealing medium for pursuing meaning and satisfaction. And yet, the individualist commitment that Elster endorses to self-realizing activity generally and work in particular seems likely—even intended—to contribute to the social alienation I’ve described. As he mentions, achieving this self-realization in work requires a commitment to a single craft in order to take advantage of potential economies of scale. As I’ve argued, orienting one’s life around one’s work can turn the other elements of life into mere sideshows, ways to fill the space before returning to work. Based on his preference for self-realizing activity over spontaneous interpersonal relations, Elster might not view this as much of a loss.

#### **b) Contributing to others’ flourishing**

Elster explicitly rejects an account of unalienated labor on which labor must produce for others in order to count as unalienated, remarking that “The idea that one can derive pleasure from knowing that one provides a service to “society” is, in my opinion, unrealistic.”<sup>43</sup> Gilabert and Kandiyali on the other hand, make production for others much more central to their accounts of unalienated labor, offering perhaps a more promising solution to social alienation. Gilabert endorses a model of work based on what he calls Marx’s “abilities/needs principle”: “from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs.” He interprets this principle as the demand that work provide the conditions of everyone’s flourishing.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting that in other writings, Elster seems to soften his endorsement of self-realizing activity over social relations. He says, “I shall only compare self-realization and consumption, although these do not exhaust all the possibilities. Some people devote their lives to friendship or to contemplation,” implying that social activity may not count as either self-realization or consumption and is therefore not his subject (Elster, 1986a, 45).

<sup>43</sup> Elster, 1986b, 120.

<sup>44</sup> Gilabert, 2015, 198.

Kandiyali's account of unalienated labor synthesizes the prescriptions of Elster and Gilibert: unalienated labor must self-realizing<sup>45</sup> and serve the needs of others. In particular, it must promote others' self-realization, be intended to do so, and be acknowledged by its recipients as promoting their flourishing.<sup>46</sup> This has much in common with Paul Gomberg's argument in favor of work that contributes complex abilities to the community, allowing workers to gain esteem from others in their social group. For Gomberg, such work is essential to human well-being, and so governments have an obligation to create equal opportunities for engaging in it.<sup>47</sup>

In these accounts, there is an important social element, which makes them more plausible solutions to the social alienation engendered by work. For Kandiyali in particular, it's not enough to merely produce for others, but doing so must also be the motivation for one's production, and others must appreciate what one has produced. If, as he suggests, laborers maintain valuable social relations through work, one might conclude that it's no problem that work dominates their lives. Given that work is by its nature social, it will not cause social alienation.

While this model of work is more appealing than work under capitalism, I doubt that these social-oriented solutions to alienated labor resolve the kind of social alienation I characterize in the first section. This is because a fully satisfying vision of sociality cannot be achieved within the confines of work alone. The relations that Gilibert and Kandiyali integrate into labor remain relations of producer and consumer: the worker produces in order to satisfy the consumer and relishes her use of the product, and the consumer appreciates the work of the producer. While an appealing vision of work, this is far from a complete realization of sociality. Again, I want to be careful here; I do not mean to imply that Gilibert or Kandiyali think these social relations formed through work ought to exhaust individuals' social lives. I merely want to make the point that even a more social vision of unalienated labor, without other important revisions to work and sociality, does not resolve the problem of social alienation. If laborers have a more social work life but still orient their lives one-dimensionally around work, they engage only with a small component of each others' personalities. For individuals are not mere producers and consumers—they are also thinkers, lovers, idlers, performers, players, and much

---

<sup>45</sup> Kandiyali, 2020, 564.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 564-567.

<sup>47</sup> Gomberg, 2007, 66-74.

more—and engaging with them primarily under these two categories limits connection. When one sits with a friend in deep conversation, for instance, it would be perverse to think of oneself or one’s friend as producer or consumer, as if one must actively create something for the other to make the social interaction successful. Approaching all social activities through the lens of production inhibits full social connection, transforming interactions from opportunities for spontaneous association into yet another instrument of productivity, imposing the logic of work on the domain of leisure. As I will explain in more detail in the next section, sociality is often most fully realized precisely when approached as something apart from production. That Gilabert and Kandiyali’s solutions leave social alienation intact shows the risks of focusing narrowly on social relations within work, rather than the effects of work on social relations more broadly.

### **c) Sociality and production**

Thinking that a more social vision of labor can resolve social alienation fails to appreciate that one’s social life is meant to be something apart from one’s labor, a place for meaningful engagement without the pressures to produce. Perhaps revealingly, this is part of the reason that Elster thinks that the good life should not be oriented around socialization. For Elster, the good life should revolve around self-realization, self-realizing activities must have a purpose external to the activities themselves, and “Spontaneous interpersonal relations can be deeply satisfying but have no purpose beyond themselves.”<sup>48</sup> Many of our most satisfying social interactions do not involve any intention or effort to produce something for the others involved. Rather, they are approached and executed without an aim or agenda beyond the interaction itself. Consider, for instance, watching a sporting event with a few friends. It would be self-aggrandizing and bizarre for the participants to think of themselves as producing something, as if they honor the others with their presence. Rather, the participants engage in an activity apart from production, connecting without any external goal.

This idea of approaching social relations as ends in themselves is one that was beautifully captured by Michel de Montaigne in his famous essay “On Friendship.” Speaking of friendships, Montaigne says, “all forms of it which are forged or fostered by pleasure or profit or by public or private necessity are so much less the beautiful and noble—and therefore so much the less

---

<sup>48</sup> Elster, 1986b, 99-100.

‘friendship’—in that they bring in some purpose, end or fruition other than the friendship itself.”<sup>49</sup> Sociality through work has production as its first principle: one connects with others in a relation through which one produces something for them and they appreciate what one has produced. As a result, one does not take the relationship nor the other person as one’s primary end, but rather the acts and products of labor.

Entering into social relations with the purpose of producing for the others involved seems likely to undermine meaningful connection, preventing one from being fully immersed in the other participants. Many of us are familiar with the host who seems so intent on making every detail of the experience perfect for the participants, constantly fussing over minutia and as a result putting everyone on edge. Sociality calls for letting go of the impulse to create, sitting back and allowing the interaction to carry one away. If one’s vision of sociality revolves around producing to promote others’ flourishing, one offers a means of creating the conditions under which to achieve a significant social life without carving out a place for actually engaging in that life.

## **5. Two Objections**

In this section, I will consider two potential lines of response from critics of alienated labor. Both of these responses maintain that I in some way underestimate the force or scope of their criticisms, and that their accounts can indeed resolve the social alienation I describe here. The first maintains that transforming one’s work life inevitably transforms one social life as well and the second that we can categorize sociality as itself a type of work. Each of these responses, I contend, in some way misunderstands or distorts the nature of sociality and cannot therefore respond to the problem of social alienation. As in the last section, my hope is not to denigrate solutions to alienated labor, but rather to maintain that the problem of social alienation runs deeper than the problem of alienated labor.

### **a) Unalienated labor makes it easier to engage in sociality**

The first potential response from critics of alienated labor is that resolving alienated labor allows workers to engage more fully in their social lives. On this view, the social alienation I describe is really a product of the anxiety one feels about returning to one’s stultifying and unsatisfying work. This phenomenon has been recently captured in popular culture via the

---

<sup>49</sup> Montaigne, 1580.

concept of “the Sunday scaries”: that feeling of creeping dread that one feels on Sunday afternoon, knowing that one has to return to work. As *The Atlantic*’s Joe Pinsker describes it, it is “a dreadful period when time feels like it’s quickly disappearing.”<sup>50</sup> This feeling makes it harder to engage in one’s social activities, as one is preoccupied with the looming work week. And it is undoubtedly worse when one finds one’s job tedious and unsatisfying, as work becomes something it is rational to dread.

According to this objection, it is the persistence of this dread that orients all of one’s attention to one’s work. One views work as the default activity and sociality as a mere break because one cannot get work off one’s mind, even when one is engaged in what should be valuable social activity. Periods outside work feel like coming up for air, frantic moments of relief before being plunged back in. As a result, resolving alienation in labor will resolve social alienation by allowing one to be more present in one’s social life. Social activity becomes no longer a brief respite from the drudgery of work, but rather another source of value.

While I think allaying the dread associated with unsatisfying work may go part of the way in mitigating social alienation, it leaves much of the problem intact. It may be true that one source of social alienation is a sense of dread about returning to an unsatisfying job, but it seems that such alienation can persist even when one does find one’s job satisfying. Quoted in Pinsker’s article about the Sunday scaries, Anne Helen Petersen of *Buzzfeed* says, “I don’t think this is about hating your job. I think the Sunday scaries are about feeling an overwhelming sense of pressure.”<sup>51</sup> Also interviewed for this piece, one 30-year-old professional explained that one source of the feeling is that “you almost have to shrink who you are a little bit sometimes to fit into that mold of your job description.”<sup>52</sup> Both of these quotes reveal something important about social alienation: it is tied to the outsized role that work plays in our lives and the way that this inhibits the expression of other parts of our personalities. The problem is not merely that people find their jobs unsatisfying, though this certainly doesn’t help. The problem is also that people feel defined by their jobs to the extent that they orient the rest of their lives around work. Referring again to Jaeggi’s account, one is trapped within the confines of the work schedule and defined by work in a way that alienates one from other parts of life. When work becomes the

---

<sup>50</sup> Pinsker, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

crucial source of one's sense of purpose and identity, the pressure to perform at work becomes immense and inescapable. Failure at work means failure in life more generally, and the impulse to produce follows one around everywhere. This pressure of identification is the root of one's constant attention and deference to work, not dissatisfaction with one's job.

There are plenty of examples of people who find satisfaction and fulfillment in their work, but remain socially alienated. Consider the character of Stan Beeman from the TV series "The Americans." Beeman is deeply invested in his work as an FBI agent, and finds it challenging, fulfilling, and important. However, this work alienates him from his social life, straining his relationship with his wife, kids, and friends as he spends more and more time at the office. Even when he's home with family, he seems distracted, as his mind always moves back to his work. His work is his calling, while his time at home a mere diversion. This is of course an extreme example, but shows that satisfaction in one's work need not resolve alienation in one's social life.

#### **b) Thinking of sociality as work**

Another response that critics of alienated labor might offer is that I give short shrift to the scope of their concept of labor, which in fact extends to one's social relations. On this view, social activity is in fact one particularly important type of work, and so embedded in their commitment to work is also a commitment to sociality. Kandiyali includes housework and care work within his concept of work,<sup>53</sup> and he, Gilabert, and Elster identify unalienated work as anything that involves creative and spontaneous production, a rather capacious category. Many parts of sociality would appear to involve such activity: offering advice and support, organizing communal activities, or learning to respond to friends' eccentricities.

There are two ways in which we might integrate sociality into the commitment to work. The first calls for producing for one's close relations: offering care, entertainment, commiseration, and the like. This approach to sociality, however, encounters the problems I suggest in section 4, in that viewing social interactions as production for others corrupts the nature of sociality. The second way of integrating sociality into work, which I will analyze in more detail here, views sociality not as a matter of producing for others, but as itself a product to develop and sustain. On this view, one might understand relationships as works of art, products

---

<sup>53</sup> Kandiyali, 2020, 583.

to craft through careful attention and inspiration. Those who endorse orienting one's life around work might insist that these relationships fall within this commitment.

There remains something wrong with approaching one's relationships as a product of labor. Indeed, taking this approach to our relationships seems likely to further alienate us from those to which we're closest. For if one sees relationships as a product to create and develop, one no longer takes the people in those relationships as the ultimate end. Instead, one acts on behalf of the relationship as an abstraction, a thing apart from the people who serve as its relata. This, I think, denigrates the proper nature of relationships, in which one is meant to view the people and experiences involved as ends in themselves. As Jack Samuel emphasizes, "our social integrity requires making sense of how others can be significant for us as external and as particular."<sup>54</sup> This means that in our relationships, we focus our energy on treating others as the concrete and particular subjects that they are, not on creating some beautiful product apart from the other person. As Montaigne puts it simply in "On Friendship," "If you pressed me to say why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed except by replying 'Because it was him: because it was me.'"<sup>55</sup>

A beautiful relationship might, of course, be the result of treating another as a valuable subject, but devoting oneself to creating such a relationship itself seems likely to be self-defeating. Consider a person who talks constantly about all the kind deeds he does for his friends and how beautiful and deep his friendships are. We would tend to think that this person is focused on the wrong thing and likely does not have the deep relationships he claims to have because he's more interested in curating relationships than connecting with real people.

One might object, however, that the person imagined above is simply failing to create beautiful relationships. This person is more interested in making it appear that he has such relationships than actually pursuing them. Even granting this, there are more subtle ways that approaching sociality as a product goes wrong. If asked why she did something for a close friend, someone answered, "I'm trying to cultivate and maintain a beautiful friendship," I suspect many would find this answer off-putting. This simply seems like the wrong reason for aiding a friend because it doesn't take the friend as the ultimate end of one's actions. If instead she

---

<sup>54</sup> Samuel, 2021, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Montaigne, 1580.

answered, “Because he’s my friend,” I imagine that most people would find this a much more satisfying response.

Approaching relationships as a product seems to have much in common with the way a thoroughgoing consequentialist might approach her relationships, as criticized by Bernard Williams (1981) and others. A strict consequentialist must choose their relationships and how to act within them by reflecting on what will produce the best outcomes. As a result, she has no investment in the particular people involved in her relationships, but only in the good outcomes she can produce by interacting with them. Faced with the dilemma between remaining loyal to a lifelong friend or pursuing a new relationship, she has to ask which course of action will produce better consequences. Yet merely engaging in this reasoning when it comes to one’s friends or family seems perverse. One should act on their behalf simply because they are one’s friends or family, not because doing so will produce the best outcomes from an impartial point of view. One should respond to them as people, not the abstractions posited by moral theory.<sup>56</sup> So too it seems wrong to approach one’s social relations as a means of producing something like a beautiful relationship. Such a perspective corrupts the proper nature of sociality, in which people relate to each other as subjects like oneself. Something has gone wrong in one’s social life if one focuses on producing relationships, rather than engaging with those involved in them.

## **6. Solutions to Social Alienation**

Thus far, I have argued that there exists a kind of social alienation engendered by work that accounts of alienated labor don’t resolve. Moreover, I have considered and rejected two ways of extending such accounts to address this social alienation. It is of course much easier to identify a problem than to resolve it. In this section, however, I want to briefly suggest some ways that one might address social alienation. I should note up front that there are bound to be practical barriers to implementing some of these reforms. Offering a political and economic defense of implementing a reform like UBI would require a whole other paper that pays much closer attention to social scientific research. On the other hand, there is a risk of irrelevance if one proposes reforms that will never happen; it would be unhelpful, for instance, to endorse reinstating the French monarchy as a means of reducing social alienation. I will therefore suggest reforms that have at least some currency within today’s political landscape, make note of

---

<sup>56</sup> Williams, 1981, 18.

evidence about their feasibility where I can, and encourage others to more deeply investigate the practical details of implementing them. I would also note, as Erik Olin Wright remarks, that “what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions.”<sup>57</sup> Our sense of feasibility is influenced strongly by our social context, and what is possible is just as much a product of our will and priorities as social scientific constraints.

I have thus far only vaguely cited the contributions of the most important critic of alienated labor—Marx himself. This is because while many contemporary theorists of alienated labor build their accounts on Marx, their solutions differ from his in important ways. I think Marx was more sensitive to the problem of social alienation than many contemporary writers. While in some places he seems to retreat from or even contradict his proposals for resolving social alienation, it is worth looking to these solutions for guidance on how one might address social alienation.

Before explaining specifically how his prescriptions apply to social alienation, I want to briefly outline Marx’s views on the relations between work and social life. Marx promises that under communism, individuals will have much more leisure time than they do under capitalism. He explains:

If everybody must work, if the opposition between those who do work and those who don't disappears...and moreover, one takes count of the development of the productive forces engendered by capital, society will produce forces engendered by capital, society will produce in 6 hours the necessary surplus, even more than now in 12 hours; at the same time everybody will have 6 hours of 'time at his disposition,' the true richness...<sup>58</sup>

For Marx, communism will offer increased productivity first because everyone will work, and second because the technology previously developed under capitalism will allow workers to produce goods faster. As a result, people won’t have to work as often—here he predicts they’ll have to work half as much. Moreover, he also thinks communism will abolish the division of labor under capitalism and the traditional work-life structure. In his *German Ideology*, Marx famously says:

---

<sup>57</sup> Wright, 2009, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Marx, 1863, pp. 303-4.

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wished, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic.<sup>59</sup>

Here he turns the traditional working life on its head. One no longer devotes themselves entirely to a single profession, but rather engages in a variety of productive activities. Moreover, one's work and social lives are not regimented into a strict schedule. One socializes and works as they "have a mind," cycling between various activities throughout the day, rather than going to the workplace for the entire day and returning home in the evening.

One might interpret Marx as suggesting something more radical here: not a revision of our relationship to work and sociality as distinct activities, but rather a blurring of the boundaries between work and sociality. On this view, Marx's suggestion is not that we devote less time to work or increase the flexibility of the work schedule, but that we integrate work and sociality such that production is social and sociality is productive.

I think, however, there's reason to resist this interpretation. For one, in emphasizing the reduced hours required under communism, Marx makes a clear delineation between the 6 hours in which one will produce and the 6 hours one has "at his disposition." This implies that production and leisure remain distinct, but that one has more time for leisure. Further supporting this reading, in *Capital*, Marx argues, "The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper."<sup>60</sup> Here Marx again describes a division between the realm of production and the realm of freedom, defined by "the development of human powers as an end in itself."<sup>61</sup> Production and leisure inhabit distinct spheres of human life.

Moreover, Marx celebrates communism for facilitating sociality as an activity distinct from production. He predicts a resurgence of "Communal activity and communal consumption—that is activity and consumption which are manifested and directly confirmed in real association

---

<sup>59</sup> Marx, 1846, p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> Marx, 1894, pp. 958-959.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 959.

with other men.”<sup>62</sup> He envisions social activity as one of the core features of communist society. Of the newly minted Parisian Commune, he notes "what appears as a means becomes an end. You can observe this practical process in its most friendly results wherever you can see French socialist workers together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring together. Company, association, conversation, which again has society as its end, are enough for them."<sup>63</sup> While Marx here describes social interactions among workers, crucially, they are not interactions *qua* workers i.e. not interactions that take place under the guise of production. Sociality is not a means to any end nor an avenue for production, but rather an activity of connection with other persons that's valued for itself. There is a sort of tranquility evoked by this image of French citizens smoking and conversing. They simply spend time together with no agenda, seeing their social activity not as a type of work nor as a mere break from work, but as an independent source of value.

Now, this vision of work and sociality from Marx is quite different from the account that those like Elster, Gilabert, and Kandiyali attribute to him. This is not an interpretive error on their part, but rather a reflection of an ambivalence in Marx, who seems to oscillate between fetishizing work and recognizing its role as one of a number of values. Indeed, there is much debate over whether Marx's views on work, leisure, and flourishing are consistent across time.<sup>64</sup> While extolling communism's ability to offer more free time, he also celebrates that under communism, work will become "life's prime want."<sup>65</sup> Contemporary critics of alienated labor tend to focus on this element of Marx's work, emphasizing the importance of work to human life and the need to reform its current conditions. Moreover, as Kandiyali explains, an account in which work plays a central role avoids some of the more controversial assumptions that Marx makes, specifically his assumption of abundance.<sup>66</sup> If work becomes life's most central and rewarding task, individuals will neither want nor need to work significantly less, and so will not require material abundance to support free time.

---

<sup>62</sup> Marx, 1844, p.104.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>64</sup> See for instance G.A. Cohen (1974) "Marx's Dialectic of Labor." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 3(3): 235-261; James C. Klagge (1986) "Marx's Realms of 'Freedom' and 'Necessity'." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (4): 769-777; Jan Kandiyali (2014) "Freedom and Necessity in Marx's Account of Communism." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22 (1): 104-123.

<sup>65</sup> Marx, 1875, 321.

<sup>66</sup> Kandiyali, 2020, 575.

Yet I think there is much to take from Marx's vision of communist society with respect to resolving social alienation. For one, allowing workers to reduce their hours and reform the times and places in which they work seem like promising ways to reduce social alienation. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that workers ought to be forced to work less or on a less rigid schedule, but that these opportunities ought to be made available to them such that workers don't see them as "unthinkable options", and that public policy may have a role to play in creating these opportunities. Allowing individuals more free time is the central prescription of Rose (2016), who thinks ensuring adequate free time is a distributive duty of justice.<sup>67</sup> Whether created via public policy reform or changing work habits, spending less time on work obviously leaves more time to spend on one's social life and also seems likely to diminish the centrality that one attributes to work. If work does not dominate one's schedule as it does now—consisting of roughly half of one's waking hours—but rather becomes balanced with other pursuits, it seems likely individuals will see work as one of many sources of value and purpose in one's life, rather than the only one. As a result, people will come to see one's social life not as a break from work, but an independent and equally important aspect.

Reforming the work schedule, from one in which one attends the office on a strict schedule all day to one in which one works as one wills, seems likely to have a similar effect. A schedule in which one works and socializes as one wishes again diminishes the feeling that sociality is a break from work, or for that matter, vice versa. Rather, both activities are presented as available options throughout the day, live sources of value that one can freely choose. This allows workers to reclaim the power and freedom that Jaeggi sees as crucial to overcoming alienation. Rather than living within the confines of an oppressive work schedule, one is able to chart one's own path, working and socializing under conditions that one chooses.

One might think that increasing the flexibility of the work schedule would actually cut the other way, blurring the line between work and leisure such that one ends up always working or at least always thinking about work.<sup>68</sup> For this reason, I think that increasing the flexibility of the work schedule without also reducing working hours will tend to be insufficient for curbing social alienation. Moreover, I should emphasize that increasing the flexibility of the work schedule does not mean abolishing the line between work and leisure. One may maintain a sharp

---

<sup>67</sup> Rose, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for identifying this worry.

division between work and leisure, such that one is only working in the hours devoted to work and only socializing in the hours devoted to sociality, while still moving away from a rigid schedule and toward working when one pleases.

Finally, creating and pursuing more opportunities for communal activity, when paired with more free time and a more flexible schedule, presents individuals with a range of meaningful social activities. Whether undertaken by governments or private individuals, this might mean creating opportunities for alternative living arrangements, investing in co-living spaces and other forms of communal living, and replacing the civic societies that have disappeared in the last few decades, as famously documented by Putnam (1995).<sup>69</sup> Taken together, these reforms both offer individuals more opportunity to engage in their social lives, and help create a culture that values sociality as an equal and independent source of value.

The ideal of college life is probably something that approximates an unalienated relation to labor and sociality. One works in college, and works quite a lot, but work does not seem to dominate one's social life in the way it often does in the working world. Part of the reason, I think, is that one's work schedule is not nearly as regimented. While one certainly has deadlines and scheduled classes, the majority of one's work is done on one's own time. For the most part, one works as one wishes, and integrated into the normal course of the day are periods of both work and sociality: one can go to the library to read for a couple hours, then play basketball with friends, return to the library to write, go to eat lunch with others, and so on. Moreover, there are many opportunities for communal engagement, whether athletic competitions, poetry readings, cocktail parties, lectures, movie nights, or concerts, all built into the fabric of one's life. And finally, one usually lives with friends. This means that one can walk out of one's room after cramming for an exam to have a conversation with a neighbor, or sit in the common room and hold court after class. In short, sociality is an integral part of one's life. Of course, this ideal of college life is not the reality for everyone. However, there is good evidence that many find this lifestyle more satisfying. For instance, many individuals experience heightened levels of depression following graduation from college,<sup>70</sup> as they transition from this lifestyle into one in which work is much more regimented and communal activity is harder to come by.

---

<sup>69</sup> Putnam, 1995.

<sup>70</sup> Meadows-Fernandez, 2017.

Proposing that firms reduce worker hours and allow for more flexibility may come across as naïve. This would be nice, one might think, but firms are unlikely to make these changes of their own devices. Indeed, some might object that calling for these changes fails to address the fundamental cause of social alienation: capitalism. By capitalism, I mean here an economic system comprised of free markets of private producers, in which economically profitable enterprises survive and unprofitable ones die off. It is a system in which an enterprise's value is located in monetary gain, incentivizing the maximization of revenue and minimization of costs.

There are, I think, two ways in which capitalism might be responsible for social alienation. First, as Marx argues, capitalism may corrupt the relations that one maintains with others in society, leading one to view other individuals as mere producers and consumers, means to an end, rather than ends in themselves. On this view, capitalism encourages us to instrumentalize others, seeking to exploit them for profit rather than connect with them as subjects. While I think there may be something to this, it does not capture the problem of social alienation that pervades contemporary work life. The deficiency in our social lives is not that we seek to use those around us, but that we feel torn away from them. We lack the time to spend with friends and family, and even in the moments we do have with them, feel compelled towards work, unable to remain fully engaged in our social lives. Part of the tragedy of this predicament is precisely that we do see our loved ones as full subjects calling for deep connection, but our social interactions with them remain a footnote to our work lives.

The other way in which capitalism might figure into social alienation is by setting the conditions that incentivize long hours, a rigid work schedule, and an emphasis on work as the central source of purpose in our lives. The idea here is that in embracing the profit-maximizing logic of capitalism, firms demand long hours and obsessive devotion from laborers in order to produce more and more profit. Moreover, workers are socialized in this culture of profit-maximization and therefore pursue economic gain at the expense of other parts of their lives.

I should note first that I am sympathetic to the idea of introducing market interventions to curb the profit motive and thereby ameliorate social alienation. Programs like universal basic income (UBI), a public intervention in the ostensibly free market for labor, would certainly allow individuals to work less frequently and more flexibly. UBI mitigates the effects of firms' profit-maximizing behavior on workers: it reduces the pressure to take bad jobs with incredibly long hours and rigid requirements, offering a cushion if workers want to look for a better job or work

part time. It might even encourage employers to offer higher wages, shorter hours, and more flexibility in order to attract workers who would turn them down otherwise.

There have been trials of UBI in a number of countries including the United States, Germany, Spain, India, Kenya, and elsewhere, which have shown the promise of UBI in reducing poverty, increasing educational attainment, and improving health outcomes.<sup>71</sup> Most relevantly to this discussion, UBI has also encouraged some to shift from wage labor to work that carries more financial risks, like agriculture or household businesses,<sup>72</sup> and driven others to spend more time on care work.<sup>73</sup> This illustrates the ways in which UBI enhances the range of opportunities available to workers, and while some worry about its cost, proponents argue that the cost will be offset by reductions in other social service programs and higher taxes on those at the top of the income distribution.<sup>74</sup>

Increasing the minimum wage would likely have a similar effect, allowing workers to make a decent living while working fewer hours. A number of cities and counties in the United States have already instituted a \$15 dollar minimum wage and more are sure to follow.<sup>75</sup> In general, it seems plausible that any legislation that improves laborers' bargaining power vis-à-vis their employers would ameliorate social alienation by allowing workers to pursue less taxing, more flexible jobs that leave them more opportunity to pursue social activities and reframe their lives to be less oriented around work. Again, these are ways that public policy might enable individuals to work less often and more flexibly, not ways of requiring them to do so.

However, recent research on the four-day work week also implies that profit seeking and worker satisfaction need not be mutually exclusive. New Zealand company Perpetual Guardian recently trialed a four-day work week, reducing working hours from 37.5 to 30 per week, and found that this schedule improved workers' job satisfaction and stress levels, and in fact increased worker productivity.<sup>76</sup> In a larger study between 2015 and 2019, 1 percent of Iceland's workforce switched to a four-day work week, with most moving from a 40 hour week to 35 or 36 hours. The study showed that this change increased worker happiness and had either a positive or neutral effect on productivity in the majority of workplaces. Thanks to the study, unions

---

<sup>71</sup> Hasdell, 2020, 15-18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Wright, 2009, 3-4.

<sup>75</sup> Renzulli, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Booth, 2019.

renegotiated working patterns, and now 86 percent of Iceland's workforce either work shorter weeks or have the right to do so.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, a study of worker flexibility at the United States Patent and Trademark Office found that increasing worker flexibility by allowing employees to work where and when they wanted increased productivity.<sup>78</sup>

By no means are these studies decisive, but they indicate that significant reductions in worker hours and improvements in flexibility are not pie-in-the-sky reforms, and may actually be beneficial to profit-seeking firms. Of course, it's not clear that a four-day workweek would increase productivity in every firm, and even if it were, this by no means guarantee that firms would agree to reform their practices. It is possible therefore that policy interventions or union advocacy would be necessary for workers to gain a right to shorter hours. However, this evidence shows that firms could reasonably shorten worker hours even within the logic of capitalism, and would give policymakers and advocates ammunition for demanding change.

There are also limitations to dismantling capitalism as a solution to social alienation. Many critics of workers' obsession with labor seem to think this phenomenon goes deeper than the profit motive. Pieper, Russell, and Thompson imply that the dominance of work has deeper cultural and almost spiritual roots. For them, the priority that we assign to work derives from the popular belief that work is the principal source of value in our lives and that through work we ought to pursue transcendent purpose and a sense of identity. Intuitively, capitalist logic doesn't seem to explain the obsessions of the artist, academic, or non-profit worker. As Thompson notes in his piece on workism, the rich work more now than ever, not for higher wages, but for a sense of purpose. Indeed, studies of UBI have shown that in most cases, individuals receiving UBI have not shortened their working hour.<sup>79</sup>

That said, it is certainly possible that the profit-maximizing logic of capitalism has had some role in encouraging these attitudes. One might think, as Cholbi suggests, that laborers under capitalism have developed adaptive preferences for constant work because the conditions have often demanded it, and that these preferences have seeped pervasively enough into the culture so as to affect even non-capitalist labor. Non-capitalist workers live in a capitalist culture, after all, and are not immune from its influences.

---

<sup>77</sup> BBC, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Choudhury, Foroughi, and Larson, 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Hasdell, 2020, 16.

I still doubt, however, that dismantling the capitalist market structure would change the priority of work in people's lives. For one, even if "workist" attitudes developed as a result of capitalism, this does not mean that removing capitalism would change these attitudes. For it may be that the priority of work has become such a pervasive norm even for those not primarily pursuing profit that it would persist after capitalism has gone. If workers have come to see work as their primary source of purpose rather than merely a source of profit, removing the profit motive seems unlikely to change their vision of work. Moreover, it's not clear that a purely capitalist ethos is even consistent with the priority of work in people's lives. For while capitalist markets value work, they value work primarily as a means to the end of economic gain and consumption. In "workism" on the other hand, the means and ends are reversed: activities outside work are merely means of recharging for work. If this is right, dismantling the capitalist logic seems unlikely to enhance the value that workers attach to their leisure time. Thus while I find it plausible that certain restrictions on the market might ameliorate social alienation—UBI, a higher minimum wage, ceilings on hours per week, requirements to provide more flexible working conditions—I don't think a radical dismantling of the market is necessary or sufficient to resolve social alienation.

What I do think is needed is a cultural shift away from the idea that work is the only or at least the principal source of purpose in one's life. In many ways, this a much more difficult goal to realize because it requires not only reforming the structural conditions under which we live, but also reshaping our psychology. One potential area for intervention is the education system. If schools emphasize the importance of community and social connection to the same degree as they do academic and professional achievement, students would be more likely to develop the sense that sociality is an equal and independent locus of value. Teaching people to value sociality more highly might smack of paternalism, indoctrinating children into accepting a particular view of the good life. I would contend, however, that it is only to counter a different kind of paternalism that emphasizes work as the defining principle of a good life. If anything, emphasizing sociality alongside work is only to increase the range of possibilities to which people are exposed.

This also implicates parents, who have become increasingly concerned with children's academic and ultimately professional achievement rather than their social and emotional development. In a recent study, while 90 percent of parents say that one of their top priorities is

that their children care for others, 80 percent of children say their parents value achievement over caring.<sup>80</sup> While caring for others is not a perfect proxy for prioritizing sociality and community, the study reflects parents' emphasis on productivity over relationships. Emphasizing the value of sociality at home is likely to temper the impulse towards workism. This is not to say parents should be forced to do so, merely that they ought to.

One might perceive a tension between these cultural and psychological reforms and the existing survey evidence that most people want to work less. If people already want to work less, one might wonder what good it will do to teach them to assign less value to work. I think this conflict is only apparent, however. It is perfectly coherent to feel like one ought to be working all the time, to value work above all other commitments, and yet to find this orientation unsatisfying. There's a parallel here to the unhappy moral fetishist, who feels that she ought to spend all her time and energy on satisfying the obligations of morality, and yet who would prefer not to do so. It is not that workers must learn to want to work less, but rather must learn that it is okay and even desirable to work less, that there are other equally important sources of value in the world.

#### References

- BBC. (2021) "Four-day week 'an overwhelming success' in Iceland."
- Booth, R. (2019). "Four-day week: trial finds lower stress and increased productivity." *The Guardian*.
- Bradley, B. (2014). "Objective theories of well-being" in *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 220-238.
- Cholbi, M. (2018). "The Desire For Work As An Adaptive Preference." *Autonomy* 4: 2-17.
- Choudhury, P., Foroughi, C., and Larson, B. (2020) "Work-from-anywhere: The productivity effects of geographic flexibility." *Strategic Management* 42 (4): 655-683.
- Crisp, Roger. (2021). "Well-Being." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- de Montaigne, Michel. 1580. *On Friendship*. Trans. M.A. Screech. London: Penguin Books.
- Elster, J. 1986a. *An Introduction to Karl Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1986b). "Self-Realization in Work and Politics: The Marxist Conception of the Good Life." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 3 (2): 97-126.

---

<sup>80</sup> Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2014.

- Finnis, John. 1980. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fletcher, Guy (2013) "A Fresh Start for the Objective List Theory of Well-Being," *Utilitas* 25(2): 206–220.
- FRED Economic Data, "Average Annual Hours Worked by Persons Engaged for United States."
- Gilabert, Pablo (2015). "The Socialist Principle 'From Each According to Their Abilities, To Each According to Their Needs.'" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 46 (2): 197-225.
- (2020). "Alienation, Freedom, and Dignity." *Philosophical Topics* 48 (2).
- Gini, Al. 2003. *The Importance of Being Lazy: In Praise of Play, Leisure, and Vacation*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gomberg, Paul. 2007. *How to Make Opportunity Equal*. Blackwell.
- Hardimon, Michael O. 1994. *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Harvard Graduate School of Education: Making Caring Common Project (2014). "The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults Are Sending About Values."
- Hasdell, Rebecca. (2020) "What We Know About Universal Basic Income: A Cross Synthesis of Reviews." Stanford, CA: Basic Income Lab.
- Heathwood, C. (2016) "Desire-Fulfillment Theory" in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Well-being*. London: Routledge, 135–47.
- (2019) "Which Desires are Relevant to Well-being?" *Nous* 53(3): 664-88.
- Hurka, T. 1993, *Perfectionism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jaffe, Sarah. 2021. *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.
- Jenkins, K., Kopicki, A., Van Horn, C., & Zukin, C. (2008) "The anxious American worker." Rutgers University Heldrich Center for Workplace Development: Worktrends.
- Kahneman, D., Krueger, A., Schkade, D., Schwarz, N., & Stone, A. (2004) "A survey method for characterizing daily life experience: the day reconstruction method." *Science* 306(5702): 1776-80.
- Kandiyali, Jan (2020). "The Importance of Others: Marx on Unalienated Production." *Ethics* 130 (4): 555-587.
- Larson, Sarah (2020). "Why Do We Still Love 'The Office'?" *The New Yorker*.
- Leopold, David. (2018) "Alienation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

- Maestas, N., Mullen, K.J., Powell, D., von Wachter, T., & Wenger J.B. (2017) “Working conditions in the United States: Results of the 2015 American working conditions survey.” RAND Corporation.
- Marx, Karl. 1894. *Capital: Volume III*. Trans. D. Fernbach. London: Penguin Books.
- (1875). “Critique of the Gotha Program.” Trans. L. Easton and K. Guddat, eds. Lawrence H. Simon. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- (1844). “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts.” Trans. M. Milligan. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- 1846. *The German Ideology*. Trans. R. Pascal. London: International Publishers.
- 1863. *Theories of Surplus Value III*. Ed. K. Kautsky, trans. G.A. Bonner and Emile Burns. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Meadows-Fernandez, Rochau (2017). “There’s such a thing as post-graduation depression. I know: I had it.” *The Washington Post*.
- OECD Data, “Hours Worked.”
- Parker, Stanley. 1971. *The Future of Work and Leisure*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers.
- Pieper, Joseph. 1948. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Trans. Gerlad Malsbary. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press.
- Pinsker, Joe. (2020) “Why People Get the ‘Sunday Scaries.’” *The Atlantic*.
- Putnam, Robert. (1995) “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1): 65-78.
- Ramsay, Hayden. 2005. *Reclaiming Leisure: Art, Sport, and Philosophy*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Renzulli, K. (2021) “33 Places in the U.S. Where the Minimum Wage Is Already \$15 an Hour—or More.” *Newsweek*.
- Rohrer, J. M., Richter, D., Brümmer, M., Wagner, G. G., & Schmukle, S. C. (2018). “Successfully striving for happiness: Socially engaged pursuits predict increases in life satisfaction.” *Psychological science* 29(8), 1291-1298.
- Rose, Julie. 2016. *Free Time*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Russell, Bertrand. (1932) “In Praise of Idleness.” *Harpers*.
- Samuel, Jack. (2021) “An Individual Reality, Separate from Oneself: Alienation and Sociality in Moral Theory.” *Inquiry*.

- Timothy Schroeder and Nomy Arpaly. "Alienation and Externality." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (29) 3: 371-387.
- Thompson, Derek (2016). "Too Many Elite American Men Are Obsessed With Work and Wealth." *The Atlantic*.
- Ware, Bronnie. 2012. *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
- (2019). "Workism is Making Americans Miserable." *The Atlantic*.
- Williams, Bernard (1981). "Persons, Character, and Morality," reprinted in *Moral Luck*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, Allen. 2004. *Karl Marx*, second edition. London: Routledge.
- Wright, E. O. 2010. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Verso.