

Why do we still work so much? Reflections on an Automated Society

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Abstract

For more than a century now, the automation of the means of work has created great apprehension among us. After all, will we all be replaced by machines in the future? Will all forms of labor be automatable? Such questions raise several criticisms in the literature concerned with machine ethics. However, in this study, I will approach this problem from another angle. After all, we can criticize the automation of the means of work in several ways. I invite the reader to entertain the following hypothesis: What if the automation of the means of labor is something beneficial? What if human emancipation does come through our technological development? If the answer is yes, why do we still work so much? I conclude that if automation processes are applied to key points in our social structure, we can emancipate the individual from a reality where we work for no reason.

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1. Automation, Technological Unemployment, and Universal Basic Income

The automation of processes that were once performed by human individuals has been one of the main sources of technological unemployment over the past two centuries (Peters, 2017). Many forms of employment have not lasted more than a century in our society, such as telephone operators, typists, public pole lighters, night soil collectors, elevator operators, ice cutters, furnace burners, among several other examples.

Nowadays, with the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and other intelligent automation techniques, companies can significantly reduce their need for human labor to lower

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their costs. However, the adoption of this management policy has two obvious consequences:

- The accumulation of wealth for AI-oriented companies;
- An unemployed population, replaced by intelligent autonomous systems, with no source of income.

This reality is best summarized by Erik Brynjolfsson in the following quote:

It is one of the dirty secrets of economics: technological progress grows the economy and creates wealth, but there is no economic law that says everyone will benefit (ROTMAN, 2013).

A survey conducted by Frey and Osborne (2013) estimated the probability of automation for 702 occupations in the US. The result showed an estimate that 47% of these occupations will be eliminated by technology over the next 20 years, and such results can be generalized to other countries, with higher or lower percentages depending on the level of development of the country in question.

With these estimates in mind, I ask the reader:

- How can we combat technological unemployment?
- How can we mitigate the increasing inequality of wealth generated by the technological industry and automation of the means of production?
- How can we distribute the new goods and services generated by this economy supported by intelligent automation?

One solution to this problem would be the institution of some form of Universal Basic Income (UBI) (Russell et al, 2015). UBIs are a public, theoretical, periodic payment program to all citizens of a given population, without demands such as proof of minimum income or work requirements.

Two of the most commonly raised criticisms against the institution of UBIs are (Matthews, 2020):

- Giving people money will make them work less, which will deprive them of the meaning that work gives life;
- Providing a reasonable level of income for everyone is impossible.

However, are such criticisms "really" justifiable? In this brief article, I would like to propose a critique of the criticisms raised above and argue that the automation of the means of production should not be causing the paradoxical effect we have experienced in our modern society.

2. Why are we working so much?

We can criticize the automation of the means of production and labor from a point of view antagonistic to what is usually done, and thus, come to different conclusions and questions. First of all, let's imagine that the automation of the means of production and labor is something positive. Since this process has been going on for at least more than a century, what benefits should we be experiencing in the 21st century? And if we are not experiencing them, why is this happening?

The British economist John Maynard Keynes (1930), in his work entitled "*Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*," sought to answer the question: What can we reasonably expect of our economic life a hundred years from now? Thus, what are the possibilities that, in principle (90 years have passed), we should be experiencing today? Keynes justified his prediction based on the continuous increase in the efficiency of the means of production, much given by their automation. Keynes even considered the phenomenon of technological unemployment as a transitory phase, something inherently positive (in his words):

For the moment the very rapidity of these changes is hurting us and bringing difficult problems to solve. Those countries are suffering relatively which are not in the vanguard of progress. We are being afflicted with a new disease of which some readers may not yet have heard the name, but of which they will hear a great deal in the years to come—namely, technological unemployment. This means unemployment due to our discovery of means of economizing the use of labor outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labor. But this is only a temporary phase of maladjustment. All this means in the long run that mankind is solving its economic problem. I would predict that the standard of life in progressive countries one hundred years hence will be between four and eight times as high as it is. There would be nothing surprising in this even in the light of our present knowledge. It would not be foolish to contemplate the possibility of a far greater progress still. (Keynes, 1930, p. 359-360).

What we should be living today, according to Keynes, is the "age of leisure and abundance." However, Keynes did not disregard the value we place on work,

something closely linked to the meaning we give to our own lives. The economist merely promoted the idea that we don't need to work so hard anymore! The human species is perhaps far from knowing how to appreciate total freedom and leisure, and Keynes (1930, p. 361) was aware of this:

For many ages to come the old Adam will be so strong in us that everybody will need to do some work if he is to be contented. We shall do more things for ourselves than is usual with the rich today, only too glad to have small duties and tasks and routines. But beyond this, we shall endeavor to spread the bread thin on the butter-to make what work there is still to be done to be as widely shared as possible. Three-hour shifts or a fifteen-hour week may put off the problem for a great while. For three hours a day is quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us!

How optimistic, no? Not in the sense that we can learn to fulfill ourselves with a workload of 15 hours a week, but that in a hundred years we would be working on this regime!

After all, what happened? In my opinion, dear reader, we had a choice. Either we increase the free time of individuals, still guaranteeing the same amount (or even more) of fees for work done and aided by automation (machines don't need to be paid), or we employ a strategy of mass production to produce more than we ever produced before, to sustain a society that consumes more than has ever been consumed. Obviously, we have chosen the second alternative.

We own 12 different types of iPhones and countless types of iPhone covers, and we still work 5-6 days a week, 8 hours a day, 44 hours a week. If we are fortunate, (micro)entrepreneurs, the new caste of the proletariat, generally work 52 hours a week. In other words, the 8-hour-a-day, five-day-a-week work regime, the classic industrial model of the early 1990s, has not been overcome, but we have managed to make our situation even worse.

3. The “Value of Work” and “Bullshit Jobs”

Another question we can ask is that certain professions, such as drivers, delivery people, teachers, nurses, caregivers, jobs that indeed produce value for society, are being the main targets of automation.

When I say "Value," I mean jobs that promote and enable human flourishing within the social context. After all, someone needs to transport people, workers, students, the general population needs mobility, and there is dignity in such work. At the same time, someone needs to transport our goods. Food must be transported from the countryside to the cities. Medicine must be delivered to the sick. Food must reach people's homes. There is value and necessity in these forms of occupation.

- It is estimated that by 2021, at least five major automotive companies will have autonomous cars and trucks available for sale to the general public (Maxmen, 2018).

Someone needs to guide the building of critical and practical thinking in individuals. Without education, people are left helpless in their formation process, and much human potential is lost.

- In Brazil, academic professors have been dismissed and replaced by "monitors" aided by AI systems for proofreading (Domenici, 2020).

Nurses, caregivers, psychologists, recyclers, housekeepers, cleaners, the list is long, and the value of each of these professions is immeasurable. Countless jobs that provide value and structure to society are being targeted by automation. But, why? Why don't we get rid of the jobs that add no value to the individual? Why don't we get rid of the jobs that nobody wants to do? Like coltan mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This brings us to another point. In the words of anthropologist and anarcho-activist David Graeber (1961 - 2020), the phenomenon of "Bullshit Jobs" (BS-Jobs). For Graeber, our society, in technological terms, would be able to provide this reduced work regime. However, what has been happening in recent years is the opposite. Technology has made us work more. In Graeber's (2013) words:

In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.

What has happened, since the beginning of the 20th century, is that the number of workers employed in the agricultural sector and industry has been decreasing. Yet, interestingly, we are neither eating less nor buying less. However, in this last century, there has been a considerable increase in managerial and administrative jobs. That is, jobs that produce something have been automated while an entire industry based on junior managers, financial consultants, market analysts, public relations specialists, human resources consultants has emerged and expanded massively.

Remember that only private-sector jobs were cited. If we extend the criticism to public sector jobs, such as, for example, Members of Parliament (in Brazil) with their 25 to 50 assistants, the list will become much, much longer. Simultaneously, new jobs have been generated, such as janitors, security guards, 24-hour delivery, cleaning assistants for coworking spaces, i.e., jobs that produce something serving those who produce nothing. Graeber offers this analogy, which is comical and illustrates the concept of BS-jobs:

Once, when contemplating the apparently endless growth of administrative responsibilities in British academic departments, I came up with one possible vision of hell. Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at. Say they were hired because they were excellent cabinet-makers, and then discover they are expected to spend a great deal of their time frying fish. Neither does the task really need to be done—at least, there's only a very limited number of fish that need to be fried. Yet somehow, they all become so obsessed with resentment at the thought that some of their co-workers might be spending more time making cabinets, and not doing their fair share of the fish-frying responsibilities, that before long there's endless piles of useless badly cooked fish piling up all over the workshop and it's all that anyone really does. I think this is actually a pretty accurate description of the moral dynamics of our own economy. (Graeber, 2013).

But of course, there is no objective way of saying which jobs are useless and which are not, which have social value and which don't, and Graeber himself admits this. The point is not for us to say which people are doing socially valuable work or not. That is subjective, and a junior manager may well feel fulfilled and productive in his task of making sure that everyone is doing their jobs.

But what to do with those who admit to finding no meaning, or no use, in their jobs? Graeber, in his book "Bullshit Jobs: A Theory," brings together a collection of

hundreds of testimonials from people who self-proclaim the uselessness of their jobs (Graeber, 2018). Thus, we can define a "truly" BS-job as:

[...] a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case (Heller, 2018).

In his book, Graeber (2018) argues that more than half of the jobs in our modern society, adding the public and private sectors, are useless jobs, which can be classified into five categories:

- “Flunkies”: Jobs that only exist for status reasons, e.g., any self-respecting publishing house (even if it is not publishing anything) must have a secretary to answer the calls that may never come. Such jobs also exist to make superiors feel important, such as secretaries, receptionists, door attendants, financial assistants, administrative assistants, etc.;
- “Goons”: Jobs that only exist because other companies also employ such people. For example, if no company used telemarketing, no other company would use it either. Its existence is only justified circularly (A does telemarketing because B does telemarketing and vice versa). Other examples are lobbyists, corporate lawyers, and public relations specialists;
- “Duct Tapers”: Jobs that involve temporarily fixing problems that could be fixed permanently. Such as IT assistants who fix problems that could be solved with a simple software or hardware upgrade, or airline attendants responsible for dealing with passengers whose bags have been misplaced;
- “Box Tickers”: The "make-believe" jobs. Jobs that create an appearance that something is being done, when in fact it is not. As internal satisfaction analysts and researchers, journalists for corporate magazines, or corporate "Coaches";
- “Taskmasters”: Those who monitor the work of people that don't need to be monitored. Or worse, jobs that they create meaningless extra work for other people.

Are these the kinds of tasks that give "Value and Meaning" to human life? I believe not. Let machines do that, and let us do what we want. Let us preach the morality of "freedom and autonomy," not the morality of "BS-work and consumption."

4. Closing Remarks

Responding to the criticism raised against the institution of UBI policies, first:

- *“Giving people money will make them work less, which will deprive them of the meaning that work gives life.”*

Most people who depend on BS-jobs to support themselves no longer see any point in doing so. If such jobs "really" don't need to be done, couldn't we simply pay such people to do whatever they want and remove the obligation to work? An actual prediction of such consequences, should the above suggestion be implemented, is beyond the critical analysis of this study. Now, answering the second criticism:

- *“Providing a reasonable level of income for everyone is impossible.”*

If we remove all the BS-jobs from our society and use all the money that is used to maintain the industry of "uselessness," wouldn't we have money to institute UBIs for everyone? Or at least for a large portion of the population?

Wouldn't workers be happier if, for example, instead of spending hours doing nothing, with no meaning at all (usually idly scrolling social media), they could pursue their passions? Start a music project, write a book, learn a new profession, study, become an artist or anything that is not a BS-job.

In short, anything that the free individual wants. I believe that this seems to be an automated future worth living. A future where automation does not replace the human individual from that which gives value and meaning to its life. But automates and frees the individual from that which prevents him from finding value and meaning for his life.

If automation can free humanity from the infinite maximization of capital, wouldn't technology itself have achieved its goal? That is, the liberation and flourishing of humanity. Surely this is an "autonomous future" worth building.

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