

Examen écrit- session 1- Semestre 1 2018-2019

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Post-work: the radical idea of a world without jobs

By Andy Beckett, *The Guardian*, Friday 19 Jan 2018 (adapted)

§1. Work is the master of the modern world. For most people, it is impossible to imagine society without it. It dominates and pervades everyday life – especially in Britain and the US – more completely than at any time in recent history. An obsession with employability runs through education. Even severely disabled welfare claimants are required to be work-seekers. Corporate superstars show off their epic work schedules. “Hard-working families” are idealised by politicians. [...] Tech companies persuade their employees that round-the-clock work is play. Gig economy companies claim that round-the-clock work is freedom. Workers commute further, strike less, retire later. Digital technology lets work invade leisure. [...]

§2. And yet work is not working, for ever more people, in ever more ways. [T]he evidence of its failures is all around us.

§3. As a source of subsistence, let alone prosperity, work is now insufficient for whole social classes. In the UK, almost two-thirds of those in poverty – around 8 million people – are in working households. In the US, the average wage has stagnated for half a century.

§4. As a source of social mobility and self-worth, work increasingly fails even the most educated people – supposedly the system’s winners.

§5. Work is increasingly precarious: more zero-hours or short-term contracts; more self-employed people with erratic¹ incomes; more corporate “restructurings” for those still with actual jobs. [...]

§6. Whether you look at a screen all day, or sell other underpaid people goods they can’t afford, more and more work feels pointless or even socially damaging (...). [...]

§7. Unsurprisingly, work is increasingly regarded as bad for your health: “Stress ... an overwhelming ‘to-do’ list ... [and] long hours sitting at a desk,” professor Peter Fleming notes in his new book, *The Death of Homo Economicus*, are beginning to be seen by medical authorities as akin to smoking.

§8. Work is badly distributed. People have too much, or too little, or both in the same month. And away from our unpredictable, all-consuming workplaces, vital human activities are increasingly neglected. [...]

§9. And finally, beyond all these dysfunctions, loom the most-discussed, most existential threats to work as we know it: automation, and the state of the environment. Some recent estimates suggest that between a third and a half of all jobs could be taken over by artificial intelligence in the next two decades. Other forecasters doubt whether work can be sustained in its current, toxic form on a warming planet. [...]

§10. Our culture of work strains to cover its flaws by claiming to be unavoidable and natural. “Mankind is hardwired² to work,” as the Conservative MP Nick Boles puts it in a new book, *Square Deal*. It is an argument most of us have long internalised.

§11. But not quite all. The idea of a world freed from work, wholly or in part, has been intermittently expressed – and mocked and suppressed – for as long as modern capitalism has existed. Repeatedly, the promise of less work has been prominent in visions of the future. [...] In 1884, the socialist William Morris proposed that in “beautiful” factories of the future, surrounded by gardens for relaxation,

employees should work only “four hours a day”. In 1930, the economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by the early 21st century, advances in technology would lead to an “age of leisure and abundance”, in which people might work 15 hours a week. [...]

§12. Since the early 2010s, as the crisis of work has become increasingly unavoidable in the US and the UK, these heretical ideas have been rediscovered and developed further. [A] a loose, transatlantic network of thinkers advocate a profoundly different future for western economies and societies, and also for poorer countries, where the crises of work and the threat to it from robots and climate change are, they argue, even greater. They call this future “post-work”.

§13. For some of these writers, this future must include a universal basic income (UBI) – currently post-work’s most high-profile and controversial idea – paid by the state to every working-age person, so that they can survive when the great automation comes. [...]

§14. Post-work may be a rather grey and academic-sounding phrase, but it offers enormous, **alluring**³ promises: that life with much less work, or no work at all, would be calmer, more equal, more communal, more pleasurable, more thoughtful, more politically engaged, more **fulfilled**⁴ – in short, that much of human experience would be transformed.

§15. To many people, this will probably sound **outlandish**⁵, foolishly optimistic – and quite possibly immoral. But the post-workists insist they are the realists now. “Either automation or the environment, or both, will force the way society thinks about work to change,” says David Frayne, a radical young Welsh academic (...).

§16. One of post-work’s best arguments is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the work ideology is neither natural nor very old. “Work as we know it is a recent construct,” says Benjamin Hunnicutt, a leading historian of work. Like most historians, he identifies the main building blocks of our work culture as 16th-century Protestantism, which saw effortful labour as leading to a good afterlife; 19th-century industrial capitalism, which required disciplined workers and driven entrepreneurs; and the 20th-century desires for consumer goods and self-fulfillment.

§17. The emergence of the modern work ethic from this chain of phenomena was “an accident of history,” Hunnicutt says. Before then, “All cultures thought of work as a means to an end, not an end in itself.”

[...]

1. erratic: irregular, variable - 2. hardwired: genetically or innately predisposed - 3. alluring: appealing, attractive - 4. fulfilled: satisfying, contented - 5. outlandish: grotesque



Please, write all the answers on the sheet you were given

Please, make sure you do the following exercises in the right order (PART 1 and then PART 2) and you use a pen (not a pencil)

PART 1: COMPREHENSION /10

In your own words, answer **the three questions** in about 70/80 words each.

1. What main paradoxes regarding work are mentioned in the text (find 2 or 3)? Use the appropriate linking words when writing your answers. (3 pts)
2. What is 'post work' and what are the arguments put forward by its advocates to defend this concept? Organise your answer in a coherent way. (4 pts)
3. What does Benjamin Hunnicutt mean when he says that "work as we know it is a recent construct" (§16)? (3 pts)



PART 2: WRITTEN EXPRESSION /10

Choose **ONE** of the following subjects and write a well-organised essay*. Give strong, convincing arguments to support your ideas; choose relevant examples; and make sure your English is sophisticated enough.

Do not forget to mention **which subject you have chosen** and give a **word count**.

*300 words (+/- 10%)

1. According to Benjamin Hunnicutt, in the US, "belief in work is crumbling among people in their 20s and 30s. They are not looking to their job for satisfaction or social advancement." Discuss this statement in reference to young people outside America as well.
2. The 4th paragraph contradicts the widespread notion of meritocracy or the general view that work and hard work unquestionably reward the most industrious. Discuss this idea.
2. Comment on the "enormous, alluring promises" of a post-work world as described in §14 (and §13). As a "vision of the future", is post-work likely to remain utopian?