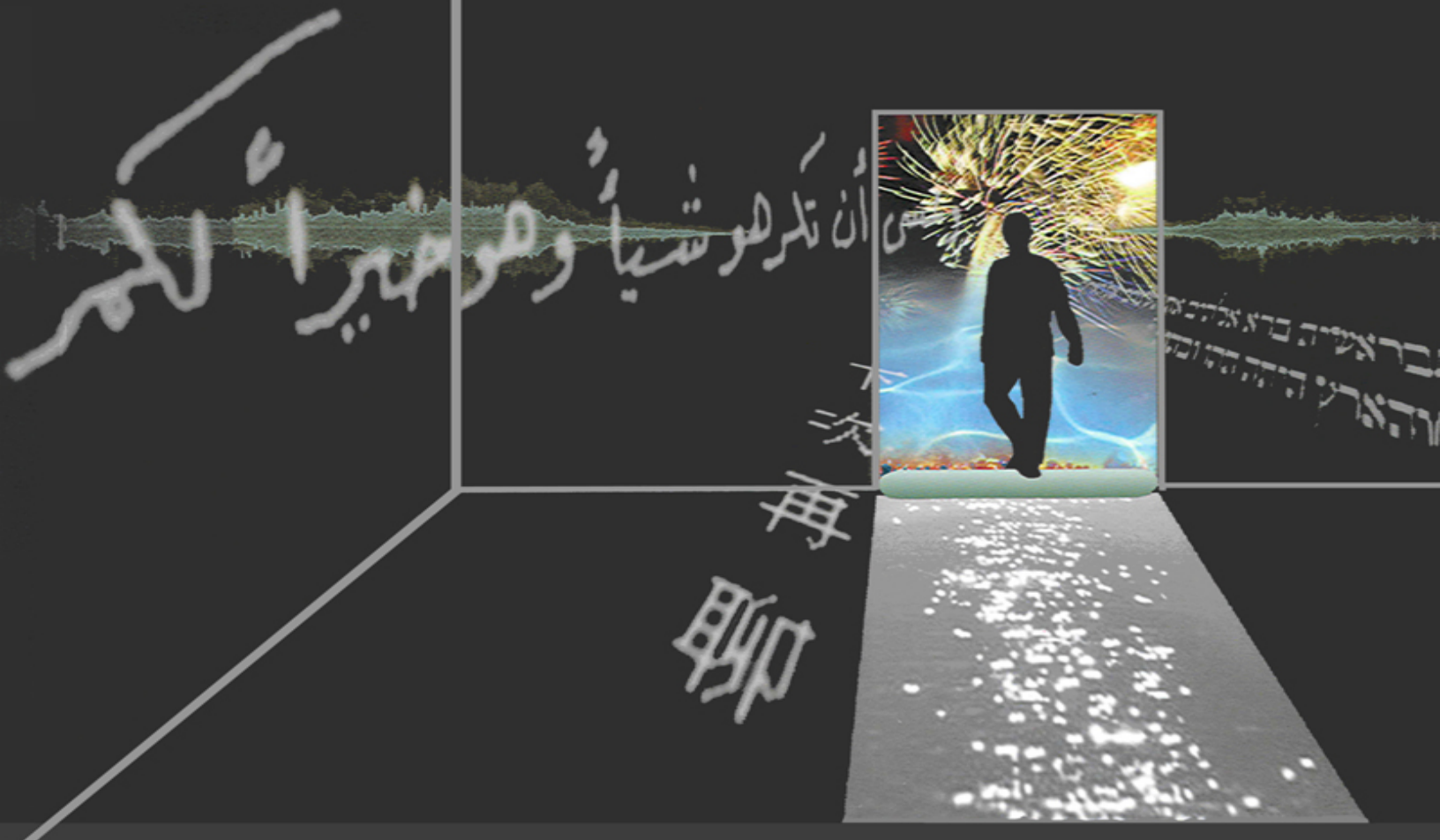
The BRAVE NEW WORLD of Work



ULRICH BECK

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The Brave New World of Work

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1
The Brazilianization of the West
Two Scenarios, One Introduction

The unintended consequence of the neoliberal free-market utopia is a Brazilianization of the West. For trends already visible in world society – high unemployment in the countries of Europe, the so-called jobs miracle in the United States, the transition from a work society to a knowledge society – do not involve a change only in the content of work. Equally remarkable is the new similarity in how paid work itself is shaping up in the so-called first world and the so-called third world; the spread of temporary and insecure employment, discontinuity and loose informality into Western societies that have hitherto been the bastions of full employment. The social structure in the heartlands of the West is thus coming to resemble the patchwork quilt of the South, characterized by diversity, unclarity and insecurity in people's work and life.

The political economy of insecurity

In a semi-industrialized country such as Brazil, those who depend upon a wage or salary in full-time work represent only a minority of the economically active population; the majority earn their living in more precarious conditions. People are travelling vendors, small retailers or craftworkers, offer all kinds of personal service, or shuttle back and forth between different fields of activity, forms of employment and training. As new developments show in the so-called highly developed economies, this nomadic ‘multi-activity’ – until now mainly a feature of female labour in the West – is not a premodern relic but a rapidly

spreading variant in the late work-societies, where attractive, highly skilled and well-paid full-time employment is on its way out.

Trends in Germany may stand here for those in other Western societies. In the 1960s only a tenth of employees belonged to this precarious group; by the 1970s the figure had risen to a quarter, and in the late 1990s it is a third. If change continues at this speed – and there is much to suggest that it will – in another ten years only a half of employees will hold a full-time job for a long period of their lives, and the other half will, so to speak, work *à la brésilienne*.

Here we can see the outlines of what a political economy of insecurity, or a political economy of world risk society, needs to analyse and theorize in greater detail.

1. In the political economy of insecurity, the new power game and the new power differential are acted out between territorially fixed political players (governments, parliaments, trade unions) and non-territorially fixed economic players (capital, finance and commerce).
2. This creates a well-founded impression that the room for manoeuvre of individual states is limited to the following dilemma: either pay with higher unemployment for levels of poverty that do no more than steadily increase (as in most European countries), or accept spectacular poverty in exchange for a little less unemployment (as in the United States).
3. This is bound up with the fact that the work society is coming to an end, as more and more people are ousted by smart technologies. 'To our counterparts at the end of the 21st century today's struggles over jobs will seem like a fight over deckchairs on the *Titanic*.'[1] The 'job for

life' has disappeared. Thus, rising unemployment can no longer be explained in terms of cyclical economic crises; it is due rather to the successes of technologically advanced capitalism. The old arsenal of economic policies cannot deliver results, and all paid work is subject to the threat of replacement.

4. The political economy of insecurity therefore has to deal with a domino effect. Those factors which in good times used to complement and reinforce one another – full employment, guaranteed pensions, high tax revenue, leeway in public policy – are now facing knock-on dangers. Paid employment is becoming precarious; the foundations of the social-welfare state are collapsing; normal life-stories are breaking up into fragments; old age poverty is programmed in advance; and the growing demands on welfare protection cannot be met from the empty coffers of local authorities.
5. 'Labour market flexibility' has become a political mantra. The orthodox defensive strategies, then, are themselves thrown onto the defensive. Calls are made everywhere for greater 'flexibility' – or, in other words, that employers should be able to fire employees with less difficulty. Flexibility also means a redistribution of risks away from the state and the economy towards the individual. The jobs on offer become short-term and easily terminable (i.e. 'renewable'). And finally, flexibility means: 'Cheer up, your skills and knowledge are obsolete, and no one can say what you must learn in order to be needed in the future.'

The upshot is that the more work relations are 'deregulated' and 'flexibilized', the faster work society changes into a risk society incalculable both in terms of individual lives and at the level of the state and politics, and the more important it becomes to grasp the political

economy of risk in its contradictory consequences for economics, politics and society.[2] Anyway, one future trend is clear. For a majority of people, even in the apparently prosperous middle layers, their basic existence and lifeworld will be marked by endemic insecurity. More and more individuals are encouraged to perform as a 'Me & Co.', selling themselves on the marketplace.

The picture of society thus changes dramatically under the influence of a political economy of insecurity. Extremes of clarity appear in small zones at the very top as well as the very bottom, so low down that it is no longer really a bottom but an outside. But in between, ambivalence is the rule in a welter of jumbled forms. More and more people today live, so to speak, between the categories of poor and rich.

It is quite possible, however, to define or reconstruct these inter-categorial existences within a 'social structure of ambivalence'. To this extent, we may therefore speak of a clear-cut ambivalence. In contrast to class society, divided between proletariat and bourgeoisie, the political economy of ambivalence produces not a Neither-Nor but a Both-And culture. This means, first of all, that top and bottom are no longer clearly defined poles, but overlap and fuse in new ways into a kind of wealth-aspect/poverty-aspect or into fixed-term wealth with its corresponding forms of existence. Consequently, insecurity prevails in nearly all positions within society. In accordance with relative weight in knowledge and capital, this leads to splits in societies and perhaps even to the collective decline of whole groups of countries. At first this may be symbolically covered over – discursively 'sweetened', as it were – by the rhetoric of 'independent entrepreneurial individualism'. But it cannot be concealed for long that the bases of the much-praised welfare state and a lively everyday democracy, together

with the whole self-image of a worker-citizen society based on ‘institutionalized class compromise’, are falling apart.[3]

The euro currency experiment is thus beginning at a time when, with the irrevocable loss of full employment in the classical sense, Europe's postwar project and its understanding of itself are in a state of suspense. As global capitalism, in the countries of the West, dissolves the core values of the work society, a historical bond is broken between capitalism, welfare state and democracy. Let there be no mistake. A property-owning capitalism that aims at nothing other than profit, excluding from consideration employees, welfare state and democracy, is a capitalism that surrenders its own legitimacy. The neoliberal utopia is a kind of democratic illiteracy. For the market is not its own justification; it is an economic form viable only in interplay with material security, social rights and democracy, and hence with the democratic state. To gamble everything on the free market is to destroy, along with democracy, that whole economic mode. The turmoil on the international finance markets of Asia, Russia and South America in the autumn of 1998 gives only a foretaste of what lies down that road.

No one today questions capitalism. Who indeed would risk doing so? The only powerful opponent of capitalism is profit-only capitalism itself. Bad news on the labour market counts as a victory report on Wall Street, the simple calculation being that profits rise when labour costs fall.

What robs technologically advanced capitalism of its legitimacy is not that it tears down national barriers and produces ever more with ever less labour, but rather that it blocks political initiatives towards a new European social model and social contract. Anyone today who thinks about unemployment should not remain trapped in old disputes about the ‘second labour market’, ‘falling wage costs’ or

‘affirmative action’. The question that needs to be asked is how democracy will be possible after the full-employment society. What appears as a final collapse must instead be converted into a founding period for new ideas and models, a period that will open the way to the state, economy and society of the twenty-first century.

The right to breaks in lifetime economic activity

The ‘pessimistic optimist’ André Gorz argues that if no recipes are useful any more, the only option is to recognize the ‘crisis’ and to make it the basis of a new normality. ‘We are leaving behind the work society, without seeking the outlines of a new society,’ writes Gorz. And in the poverty of the present, he detects the outlines of an alternative way forward for society, which matches up anew security and liberty for all. ‘We know, feel and grasp that we are all potentially unemployed or underemployed, part-time or makeshift workers without any real job security. But what each of us knows individually has not yet become an awareness of our new common reality.’ Only after the oath of manifestation – which reads: ‘The free market utopia is not the solution but a major cause of the problem, and even new turbo-growth will not revive the good old full-employment society’ – is it possible to delineate a new social model and the paths towards it. André Gorz sketches out a change of perspective whereby lack of work becomes an abundance of time, and low growth an impetus to become self-active.[4]

I propose to go one crucial step further. The antithesis to the work society is a strengthening of the political society of individuals, of active civil society here and now, of a civil democracy in Europe that is at once local and

transnational. This society of active citizens, which is no longer fixed within the container of the national state and whose activities are organized both locally and across frontiers, can find and develop answers to the challenges of the second modernity – namely, individualization, globalization, falling em-ployment and ecological crisis. For in this way communal demoracy and identity are given new life in projects such as ecological initiatives, Agenda 21, work with homeless people, local theatres, cultural centres and meeting-places for discussion.

In place of a society fixated on paid work, this vision offers the prospect of gradually gaining sovereignty over time and experiencing political freedom within self-organized activity networks. Nevertheless, it raises a number of thorny questions, which will be addressed later, in Chapters 8 and 9. To name but two: How can spontaneity be organized? Is all this not just an ideology which frees the state, especially the welfare state, from the responsibilities of public provision?

Civil society and direct democracy presuppose that citizens are able to find the energy for active involvement. But does this not exclude those who cannot participate in social and political life because they are under intense economic pressure or actually on the brink of ruin? Does the idea of a citizens' democracy not derive from a middle-class idyll? And will it not be actually counter-productive, by creating a cheap-wage sector that thins down regular paid labour?

Furthermore this vision of the future, which is opposed to false hopes in a return of full employment, must not lead either to a new class division between paid workers and civil workers or to the eviction of women from paid labour or the worsening of their dual burden of paid work and domestic labour. The animation of local democracy is thus

bound up with the following assumptions about the division of labour in ‘multi-active’ society.

1. Working hours should be reduced for everyone in full-time work.
2. Every woman and every man should have one foot in paid employment if they so wish.
3. Parental labour and work with children should have the same social recognition as *civil labour* (a concept explained in detail in Chapters 8 and 9) in the arts, culture and politics – for example, through equality of entitlement to pensions and sickness benefits.
4. Simultaneous involvement in paid labour and civil labour presupposes a redistribution of family tasks between men and women. But it must be ensured that the prospect of choice is not once again illusory. In modern work society, the idea of taking years out and only later returning to work is fraught with risks. Many women would like to take a break, but do not do so because they fear ending up in the ‘part-time ghetto of the moving track’ (Suzanne Franks).

Basically, this raises the question of how a postnational yet political civil society is possible in Europe. My answer is as follows. Only if the insecure new forms of paid employment are converted into a right to multiple work, a right to discontinuity, a right to choose working hours, a right to sovereignty over working time enshrined in collective-bargaining agreements – only then can new free spaces be secured in the coordination of work, life and political activity. Every person would thus be enabled to plan his or her own life over a period of one or more years, in its transitions between family, paid employment, leisure and political involvement, and to harmonize this with the claims and demands of others. Only then can the three principles

of freedom, security and responsibility be adjusted and reaffirmed. To find a creative balance between paid work and ‘the rest’ (!) of life is already today the main cultural and political project – in the United States, in Europe, in Japan and elsewhere.

Nostalgia for the age of full employment is the last bastion that is being defended tooth and nail, in an effort to prevent the truly major issues of the second modernity from bursting into the open. How can the limits of growth be converted into tolerable forms of life and work? How are we to achieve a political Europe, with its own constitution and civil society, which makes it possible to flesh out the European idea of democracy for the global age? What answers beyond protectionism and indifference will countries find to migratory movements of the poor into the wealthier regions of the world? How will living and loving be possible after the gender revolution? What is the meaning of global justice? Or, more modestly: how will this become a vital issue of transnational political debate? These challenges appear too great, too intimidating. Yet in so far as the loss of work as the centre holding things together places society and democracy in danger, these questions may precisely come to form the new centre for a cosmopolitan society at once local and transnational.

Let us put this in a different way. The antithesis to the work society is not free time or a leisure society, which remain negatively imprisoned in the value imperialism of work. It is the new self-active, self-aware, political civil society – the ‘do it yourself culture’ – which is developing, testing and implementing a dense new concept of the political.

A method with risks

Marcel Proust was right: the true voyage of discovery is not to visit new countries but to see reality with new eyes. For

social scientists, of course, there is the methodological problem of which data and arguments could ever inform a future-oriented study that breaks with the basic assumptions of the work society. This question may be answered with another. How can the present state of the fragmented and globalized work societies be properly analysed and understood *without* scenarios of possible futures?

Conventional analyses of the work society, which never raise the question of alternative futures, nevertheless imply that the biographical, social and political norms of the work society will continue indefinitely into the future. In general, there is a tacit assumption that the past and present model will also be the future model – namely, the full-employment society, with its guiding ideas, institutions, economic and political organizations, and cultural identities. When it comes to specifics, then, investigations of late work societies here rest, strictly speaking, upon an unexpressed More-of-the-Same dogma that fails to confront alternative scenarios either empirically, theoretically or politically.

This approach has long ceased to correspond to the fact that all the social sciences, including economics, are faced with the same questions and difficulties. For it is as problematic to infer the future from current trends and data as it is to read it from the tea leaves. One special source of difficulties is the fact that, given the fundamental changes in the work society, we need con-ceptual frameworks to identify new realities in their specificity, rather than as anomalies to be swept under the carpet of normality. This book represents one attempt to do this – which is why it belongs to the category of 'visionary non-fiction'.[5] The argument is *non-fiction* because, in describing both the present and the future state of things, it has recourse to all imaginable and available arguments, data, concepts and models. It is *visionary* because, in opposition

to the unexpressed self-perpetuation of the work society, it presents the embryonic vision of a post-work society whose basic features and traces can already be glimpsed today, in a new translocal and transnational sense of political civil society. The reader will be able to decide at the end whether this vision is plausible, eccentric, fantastic or realistic – or perhaps even all together.[6]

Notes

1 W. Bridges, *Jobshift: How to Prosper in a World without Jobs*, London 1995.

2 It would be more precise to speak here of ‘danger’, since ‘risk’ denotes calculable insecurity, whereas (second order) ‘danger’ denotes incalculable insecurity (stemming from the characteristic choices of a civilization). See U. Beck, ‘Überlebensfragen, Sozialstruktur und ökologische Aufklärung’, in idem, *Politik in der Risikogesellschaft*, Frankfurt/Main 1991, pp. 117–40.

3 This is ultimately the tone of the report by the Bavarian-Saxon Commission for Issues of the Future, which precisely did not (as many think) reaffirm the optimistic credo of neoliberalism, but pointed and painted up its darker side. I owe a lot of information and ideas to my work in this commission, although the picture drawn in this book goes in a different direction.

4 André Gorz, *Arbeit zwischen Elend und Utopie*, Frankfurt/Main 1999.

5 Cf. David J. Elkins, *Beyond Sovereignty*, Toronto 1995, p. 7.

[6] I am deeply grateful to Wolfgang Bonß, Ludger Preis and Peter Felixberger for important suggestions that helped me in reworking the text.

2
The Antithesis to the Work Society

Every question concerning the shape of the future must be taken to extremes – not for the sake of being radical, but in order to break down the appearance of natural and eternal self-evidence with which What-Exists armours itself against any challenge. The present needs an antithesis to clarify the reach of its dominion and the point at which something different begins. But what is the antithetical concept to the work society?

Paid work is said to be disappearing, but many think that in its place are appearing family work, parental work, ecologically purified work for the common good, or work that people really want to do. The extent to which work is part of the modern European's moral being and self-image is evident from the fact that, in Western culture, it has long been the only relevant source and the only valid measure for the evaluation of human beings and their activities. Only those things which are proven and recognized to be work count as valuable; the antithesis to the work society would appear to involve no more than an act of desertion.

Work has become so omnipotent that there is really no other concept opposed to it. Hence, any attempt to break out of this totalitarian value-circle of work lays itself open to the accusation of cynicism. For a society without work, so it seems, is a society without a centre, a society lacking basic coordinates in matters both large and small, in everyday life as in politics, economics, the law, and so on. Any vision worthy of the name must therefore cast off this spell of work, and begin by breaking the taboo on any antithesis to the work society.

The task, then, is to widen and sharpen our vista of the future beyond the work society. Only then can a systematic answer be given to the question of how far we do or do not still live in a normal work society.

Historically, we may distinguish three epochs (or better, three models) in the relationship between work and freedom, work and political action. These are (1) the Greek polis; (2) the work-democracy of the first modernity, whose ideas go back a long way but which finally became a reality only after the Second World War in Europe; and (3) the possibility of freedom and politics beyond the work society. The following sketch, highly schematic and almost irresponsibly brief, will try to do no more than clarify the radical shift in the valuation of work in the transition from Antiquity to modern times.

The Greek polis, or unfreedom through work

In ancient Greece and Rome, freedom was defined not least – in fact, primarily – as freedom from work. Anyone who had to work was not only unfree; he did not count as a member of society. For its part, society arose and consisted in public political activity. It was beyond work that the 'realm of freedom' commenced. Society was even defined as an opposite world to the world of work, filled by the art of public exchange, leisure and politics. Of course, the polis presupposed an uncomplaining realm of necessity in the shape of extra-human slave society and the repression of women. Here freedom for the few was built upon the unfreedom of the many, indeed their exclusion from society.

Modern work-democracy, or freedom through work

If work once excluded people from society, it has today become the core value and mode of integration in modern societies, to such an extent that almost no alternative remains.[7]

The old hierarchy of 'lower' and 'higher', of useful or necessary chores and free, meaningful, active individuality – a hierarchy expressed in many European languages in such couplets as *ponos*/*ergon*, *labor*/*opus* or *Mühe*/*Werk* – was turned around with the onset of modernity. (Or one might say, according to one's point of view, that it was turned on its head or right side up.) In this sense modernity represented a veritable revolution. People now defined themselves through the very thing that in Antiquity had meant exclusion from society: paid labour. This radical revaluation worked itself out under the aegis of the Reformation, the bourgeois revolution and political economy. The word 'industry', which gave the epoch its name in the concept of 'industrial society' coined by Saint-Simon, itself derives from the Latin *industria*, with its primary sense of industriousness. The term for the epoch was thus also combatively directed against the rule of the unproductive nobility. Labouring men began to demonize men of leisure and to subscribe to the ideology of growth. This led in turn straight into the conceptual cage of 'the realm of necessity'.

'Do some work, so that the devil always finds you occupied', one already reads in the preaching of St Jerome. This mistrust of idleness grew by leaps and bounds with the victory of the bourgeois work society. But this should not be confused with the coming of full employment. 'Historically speaking, high unemployment or underemployment was the normal case.'[8] Around 1800 roughly two-thirds of the working population, the so-called lower classes, had no regular or secure source of income. Day-labourers were probably without an income for a half or so of their working

life, and up to a fifth of the able-bodied population roamed the land as beggars and vagabonds, if not as thieves and robbers.

Ivan Illich has shown in his historical studies that the revalu-ation of work by the bourgeoisie corresponded to a twofold innovation. The availability of paid work was supposed to be the key instrument both for the struggle against poverty and for the integration of people into the social order. Work society thus meant orderly society. And even today, those who get work also overcome poverty, drug addiction, criminality, and so on. The daily rhythm of work, with its discipline, its values and its conception of personal responsibility and cooperation, corresponds to the demands made by the rulers of the work society upon their workers and employees. This demand for order within the work society is still with us today – indeed, it has become part of the self-understanding of people who form, revalue and naturalize their own identity and personality only in and through work. The biblical curse – that only they who work shall eat – has become the work morality grounding human existence; only those who work are truly human.

Thus unemployment and underemployment – or, to use the nicer-sounding modern terms, varied, fuzzy, precarious forms of work and income – were historically the rule. Moreover, there was no unemployment, because there was no norm of work. A minority had a fixed and secure place in society from which it was unusual to rise or fall. Poverty and hopelessness were the ‘God-given destiny’ of large numbers of people. Day-labourers, beggars and criminals constituted forms of existence often hard to distinguish from one another, which were the only means of livelihood for a sizeable part of the population.

In modern times, the idea of democracy came into the world in Europe and America as a work-democracy, in the

sense that living democracy presupposed living involvement in paid labour. The citizen was conceived as a working citizen. That anyway was the political project after the Second World War, reflecting the catastrophic experience of fascism and the opposing image of Communism. Working citizens had to earn their living somehow or other, in order to give life to the political rights and freedoms. Paid labour has been the constant ground of both private and public existence. So the issue now is not ‘only’ the millions without work, nor ‘only’ the fate of the welfare state and the prevention of poverty and exclusion, but also the future of political freedom and democracy in Europe.

The Western association of capitalism with basic political, social and economic rights is by no means an ‘act of philanthropy’ that can be dispensed with in hard times. Rather, socially buffered capitalism is a practical application of enlightened thinking. It rests upon the insight that only people with a home and a secure job, and thus a material stake in the future, are or will become citizens who make democracy their own and breathe real life into it. The simple truth is that without material security there can be no political freedom – hence no democracy, but rather a threat to everyone from new and old totalitarian regimes and ideologies.

The future of work and political action

Quite clearly the work society is reaching its technological and ecological limits. This reintroduces a paradox that was once decisive for the development of the work society: on the one hand, work is the centre of society around which everything and everyone revolve and take their bearings; on the other hand, everything is done to eliminate as much

work as possible. Productivity, to be worthy of the name, means the removal of more and more human labour, yet this sets off and establishes a dynamic in which the *vita activa*, if not yet superfluous, loses its central meaning. Such are the paradoxes of the work-centred society.

‘Is your company planning to expand with the help of new products?’ Hoechst chairman Jürgen Dormann is asked. ‘Will that also mean new jobs?’ – ‘No,’ he answers. – ‘So where are the new jobs being created, if it is not in high-tech pharmaceuticals?’ – ‘That's a good question.’ And Dormann adds: ‘I don't go along any more with all these hypocritical flourishes. Our aim is to keep employment at today's levels. To do even that we'll have to be extremely successful.’

New discoveries, new or at least restructured knowledge, are being deployed on a scale and at a speed that would be appropriate to a new natural resource.

Just as, in the transition from hunter-gatherer to agrarian society, people began to think of the earth they had wandered since time immemorial as a natural resource, or just as, in the transition from agrarian to industrial society, fossil energy sources going back millions of years began to play a completely new role, so is man's knowledge acquiring a new quality from the changed premises of his formation, networking and reconversion. Man, of course, has always used knowledge to make his work easier, but in the past it was only as an aid. Now knowledge is taking the place of working people, and people are enlisted in the service of knowledge. The relationship has been reversed between fluid labour in the shape of human beings and labour that has flowed away in the shape of knowledge. Both inside and outside the human brain, knowledge accounts for a fast-growing proportion of value creation.[9]