

Entry

# Society, Work and Precarity

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**Definition:** One of sociology's core tasks is to explain how societies work and change. Work plays a crucial and fundamental role in the formation of societies and is also a major driver of social change. It is therefore of key sociological interest to understand how work creates and changes the social conditions we call societies. However, work also creates different levels of freedom and equality; which manifest as different types and degrees of precarity in what I call 'work societies'.

**Keywords:** work society; employment; precarity; freedom; equality

## 1. Introduction

When we use the word society, we easily take its meaning for granted. However, sociology is about precisely that: looking at that which is taken for granted. If societies are the subject matter of sociological thinking and if part of that thinking is to elucidate what is taken for granted, then we need to define in the first instance what societies are, where they come from and why we not only have but need them. Work plays a crucial role in this. However, the purpose and meaning of work and employment are also assumed to be clear. To gain fundamental insights into the relationship between society and work, this entry focuses on where societies come from, what the role of work is in them and what kinds of precarities, freedoms and inequalities can result from the relationship between society and work.

The fact that humans need to work in order to make a living is stating the obvious. We should not forget though that the 'the struggle for subsistence' [1] (p. 366), the economic problem, is an existential question about survival rooted in the human condition. The human condition for our purposes can be defined as the human lack of instincts, the lack of physical strength and the absence of a pre-existing, stable social environment [2] (pp. 65–66) [3] (pp. 125–126). Together these lacks depict a situation of *existential precarity*. We overcome this existential precarity with '[w]ork' which, as György Márkus explains, 'constitutes the real, historical relation of man to nature and at the same time it determines the fundamental relations between man and man, so it forms the basis of all human life' [4] (p. 15). Work is at once a quintessentially human activity and the origin of society, the social conditions with which we ensure *the material satisfaction of needs* such as food, shelter and clothing. Work is also the activity with which we overcome existential precarity. Modern scientific and technological progress, though, has brought us to a point in contemporary late-modern societies where we can not only overcome existential precarities with the aid of technology, but also to a large extent replace the human labour otherwise required to do so. Above all, this tells us how far we have come as societies in shielding ourselves against existential precarities.

Many of the core issues and questions around contemporary precarities that are the subject matter of the sociology of work today were in essence already identified by the sociological classics, in particular Marx, Weber and Durkheim. All of them share the view that work is the primary social fact that fundamentally defines modern societies and their central dynamics as 'work society'. In particular, Marx defined work as a necessity of social life [5] (p. 129). Marx's main concerns were the alienating and exploitative consequences of a capitalist organisation of work on what he calls 'species being'. By that Marx meant that



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humans and nature need to be in ‘continuous intercourse’ [6] (p. 75). Alienation for Marx can be described as a human cost where the human abilities to think, act, coordinate and cooperate freely and creatively are distorted and split and estranged from nature on the basis of a capitalist division of labour. The economic cost of this process can be referred to as exploitation, which is based on the fact that human labour itself is treated as a commodity. The very fact that human labour becomes a commodity forms the basis for paid work. Under capitalism, this also opens the door for what today is referred to as wage theft, which defines the essence of exploitation [7] (p. 171). Alienation and exploitation cannot be separated, and, as we will see a bit later, the alienating and exploitative nature of capitalist work plays an important role in defining contemporary precarities. While Marx welcomes emancipation from feudal ties, under capitalism, it is the emancipation from any alienating or exploitative work processes that remains a concern in contemporary work societies.

From a Weberian view too, the release from premodern religious and feudal ties into a capitalist organisation of society is understood as emancipation. However, the result is a new unfreedom which Weber refers to as the ‘whip of hunger’, or the structural compulsion under capitalism to earn a living and to accumulate wealth [5] (p. 131) in order to satisfy material needs. It is in particular the changing ethical status of work that Weber highlights and which manifests as specific work ethics that today also can underpin what precarity means, as we will see. One of Weber’s main contributions to the sociology of work is the idea of modern rationalisation. Rationalisation can be defined as an ongoing process of quantification and calculability of all aspects of life [8] (p. 9). This relentless rationalisation of everything that Weber describes as an ‘iron cage’ becomes a hallmark of modern work societies and a considerable force behind the increase in certain precarities, which we will discuss later. Emancipation, therefore, for Weber means an escape from instrumental rationality, which in the case of work is defined purely by the pursuit of profit.

One of Durkheim’s major concerns with the rise of modernity is changing forms and sources of integration. He explains this in *The Division of Labour in Society* [9] by distinguishing between mechanical and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity is defined by social units that are all similar and largely independent when it comes to satisfying material needs. What mainly integrates them is a shared value system to which Durkheim refers as ‘conscience collective’ and which we today would refer to as shared norms and values. With the rise of modern capitalism, the division of labour changes, giving rise to a different form of integration, namely organic solidarity. Now every sphere, organisation and individual throughout society plays an important role and has a specific function to fulfil. What integrates social spheres, organisations and individuals in highly differentiated modern societies are functional interdependencies. If one element fails, it affects the overall system like a malfunctioning organ. Norms and values as an integrating force are also important in modern societies. However, because of an intensified functional division of labour, these norms and values start to pluralise and fragment and are thus harder to identify and maintain. The risk that Durkheim sees here is what he refers to as anomie and normlessness, which means a loss of direction or normative orientation because of fast-paced changes in the division of labour or what we can today call hyper-differentiation. Hence, we can say that emancipation for Durkheim means to avoid a state of anomie on the basis of not only strong functional interdependences but also the struggle to maintain a strong normative bedrock. An intensifying capitalist division of labour is, as we will see later, also a contributing factor to precarity in the sense that it renders societies’ integration fragile.

What is also crucial for understanding the relationship between work and society on the most fundamental level are the ideas of freedom and equality, as they define to a large extent the quality of the social conditions we ourselves create. Originating in the Enlightenment period, the modern ideals of *freedom* and *equality* mean not just economic and technological progress, but also emancipation, liberation and release from rigid economic, political or social structures, such as the shift from feudalism to capitalism, from religious to secular worldviews, and from simple forms of differentiation to highly

individualised, fragmented and hyper-differentiated lifeworlds [10–12]. It includes the emancipation from the yoke of alienating forms of modern labour and bourgeois forms of power as Marx saw them [6,7], as well as freedom from large-scale social processes that are ever more rationalised, administered and bureaucratised and that Weber referred to as the ‘iron cage’ [13] (p. 217). The fact that norms and values that integrate societies are increasingly pluralised and fragmented as a result of an ever-increasing division of labour was Durkheim’s main concern, which he described as ‘anomie’. The themes identified by Marx, Weber and Durkheim are very much present in today’s work societies. The risk of alienation and exploitation of a one-sided and mainly profit-driven rationalisation and a rapidly changing or intensifying division of labour, which challenges contemporary forms of integration, are all contributing factors when it comes to rising precarities. In particular, Jürgen Habermas not only captured the risks that the classics saw with the idea of the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’ [14] (p. 305) but also strongly advocated for a form of emancipation anchored in what he calls ‘communicative action’, an ongoing negotiation of the norms and values underpinning our actions, including the meaning of work and the purpose of technology. These brief introductory remarks sketch the fundamental issues that the sociology of work addresses and that underpin the following discussion of contemporary precarities.

## 2. Society and Work

Work plays a crucial role in creating *equality or inequality* and *freedom and unfreedom* in modern societies not only economically, but also politically [15] (pp. 54–55). John Maynard Keynes, for example, addresses questions of freedom and equality by focusing on technology as a means to realise economic possibilities in terms of productivity and efficiency gains that free us from economic cares [1] (p. 367). It is here where we need to engage more fundamentally with the notion of work as a means to satisfy needs in order to remind us of the economic and political freedoms and equalities involved. This will enable us to gain a basic understanding of economic and political freedom and equalities and correspondingly of economic and political precarities and their origins.

We could simply define work as a life-sustaining human activity from which societies also happen to emerge, which free us from existential precarities. For our purposes, however, we need to define work as a quintessentially human activity without which ‘a single human being could not fully exist by himself, and even if, . . . his existence would be precarious’ [16] (p. 305). Hence, cooperation is essential and, to that end, humans must form societies in order to satisfy material needs. The resultant ‘problem of social organization’ as Milton Friedman points out though, is ‘how to co-ordinate the economic activities of large numbers of people’ [17] (p. 12). For Friedman, it is the market where coordination manifests as the result of mutually beneficial, non-coercive exchange of goods and services [17] (pp. 13–14). What sounds so simple results in a definition of *work as a complex social process of thinking, doing and acting, cooperating and coordinating* as quintessentially human capacities, which is what Marx referred to as ‘species being’. This process transforms the existential precarity at the heart of the human condition into social conditions, which, however, does not mean questions of freedom and equality have been addressed once and for all, as we will see. Ideas discussed by the classics mentioned above, such as the division of labour, specialisation, efficiency or rationalisation, to name only a few, are all concepts that can be applied to work as a social process with a focus on productivity, efficiency and economic growth [17] (p. 12). It is this very social process that, as a result, can be described as differentiated, rationalised, and optimised, but also as paradoxical, pathological, exploitative, alienating, or precarious. Clearly, technology can increase productivity, efficiency and economic and environmental sustainability, but doing so under capitalism also increases precarities. ‘The challenge’, as Friedman writes, ‘is to reconcile this widespread interdependence with individual freedom’ [17] (p. 13).

With the rise of capitalism, economic precarities become a major concern. These are the result of a capitalist organisation of work driven and motivated by profits. What

defines economic freedom under capitalist conditions is therefore the maximum pursuit of profit, wealth or income. Put differently, economic freedom under capitalism refers to individuals' rights enshrined in law to trade, sell, buy or invest in assets, including technologies, or labour power in order to make profits on the basis of private property rights. It is about the freedom to find ever more ways to economically expand, grow and ensure the satisfaction of material needs in pursuit of profits. While a broader discussion of economic liberalism goes beyond the scope of this entry, for our purposes here, *economic freedom* means two things: freedom from existential precarity and the freedom to pursue economic growth and profits which cannot but result in economic inequalities, which Marx most explicitly identified as alienation and exploitation. Friedman describes this as a 'free private enterprise exchange economy' [17] (p. 13). We need to keep in mind though that 'economic freedom . . . is an extremely important part of total freedom' [17] (p. 9), which, if left unlimited, determines 'the shape and form of society' [18] (p. 41). The question is, of course, if economic freedom is only one part of total freedom, what are the other relevant parts here and how can economic freedom and the resulting forms of alienation, exploitation and precarity be limited?

The economic question—overcoming existential precarities—is not the only question work societies have to resolve. Once social conditions emerge from work, there is also the *social question* about the allocation, distribution and redistribution of resources, rewards and penalties [19,20]. Broad debates about Keynesianism, neoliberalism, ordo-liberalism or universal basic incomes all grapple with the question as to how best to achieve the satisfaction of material and social needs. And all these debates oscillate between favouring self-regulating markets (economic liberalism) and various measures of social protection, which Karl Polanyi described as the 'double movement' [21] (p. 138). The central question work societies need to be able to answer is: How can we as societies organise work in a way that all members of society are protected against any form of existential or economic precarity under capitalism or, to quote Keynes, how 'to live wisely, agreeably and well' [1] (p. 367)?

At this point, though, dealing with the social question reveals another essential sociological dimension of work, underpinning particular questions of redistribution; it is about *equality* and the contingency of social needs, what and whose needs are supposed to be satisfied and how. As a species, it is our lack of instinctual programming—the human condition, as mentioned above—to which Zygmunt Bauman refers as underdetermination [22] (p. 141). To put this differently, individuals are 'rich in social needs' [23], meaning their thinking is free and undetermined by instincts, and thus as societies we need to negotiate social conditions or otherwise face what Durkheim called 'anomie'. Because there is no naturally given process that determines which needs are being satisfied, a *social negotiation process* is required, also involving the human capacities to think, do, cooperate and coordinate. It is in this social negotiation process, or what Habermas called communicative action, where the emancipatory potential lies when it comes to questions around work, equality, freedom and precarity [14,24,25].

At this point, we need to go beyond the classics and even Habermas and Honneth, and the question of *equality* and political freedom in capitalist work societies is crucial here. The satisfaction of social needs is about *three interrelated dimensions of equality* in relation to work, which means questions about work are as much about political equality and freedom as they are about economic equality and freedom.

1. Every human being can be *equally recognised for having an unlimited number of diverse needs*. It is not the needs that are equal or the same at this point, but the recognition of their infinite individual diversity [26].
2. Every member of a work society has the *equal right to articulate their needs* and make them part of public debates, thus openly advocating for their satisfaction [27] (p. 129) [17] (p. 16). Polanyi describes this as 'the freedom to differ, to hold one's own view, to be a minority of one, and yet to be an honoured member of the community' [18] (p. 39). This is where needs become truly social by entering the public

arena. Nancy Fraser and Maria Márkus refer to this process as the ‘politicisation of needs’ [28] (p. 166) [29] (p. 168).

3. Resources to satisfy both material and social needs are limited, though. It is therefore important that every member of a society can equally be part of the negotiation of norms and values on the basis of which resources are allocated and distributed. This is not about the equal satisfaction of needs—although, resources permitting, that might be the ultimate goal—but rather *equal control over the definition of needs*, what and whose needs are being satisfied and why others are not [27] (p. 88).

To make the most of the economic (to a large degree technological) and political possibilities available to us depends, as Herbert Marcuse writes, ‘on the establishment of democracy’ [30] (p. 26), that is, a social ‘decision-making’ process within which the profit-driven satisfaction of material needs is embedded. This process should neither be dictated by the state nor the market but is ideally anchored in the realisation of individuals’ economic and political freedoms in what Habermas refers to as the ‘public sphere’ [31,32]. Advancing this process means limiting alienation and exploitation, reducing one-sided systemic forms of rationalisation and maintaining a healthy normative infrastructure rather than anomie or colonisation of the lifeworld.

### 2.1. Freedom, Equality and Precarity

Based on our discussion so far, we can say that freedom, whether we define it politically or economically, on the most fundamental level means the free exercise of thinking, doing, cooperating and coordinating in order to satisfy both material and social needs, and technological progress, in principle, should increase the freedom to do so. From this follow two fundamental questions: how to satisfy material needs, and how to satisfy social needs. What equally defines them and where the potential for human emancipation lies is the pursuit of both political and economic freedoms and the prevention of political and economic precarities (for broader discussions on precarious work see, e.g. [33–37]). This includes any form of alienation and exploitation (Marx), hyper-rationalisation (Weber) or hyper-differentiation and normlessness (Durkheim). Both freedoms and precarities can now be defined as follows:

*Economic freedom* in capitalist work societies refers to individuals being free from existential precarities and being able to freely pursue economic growth, increasing their income and thus feeling economically safe. However, a social organisation of work in favour of economic freedom defined alone by the free pursuit of profits and income maximisation can only increase economic inequalities, including rising *economic precarity*.

*Political freedom* can be defined as an individual’s right to freely and equally participate in and contribute to social negotiation processes about the definition and the satisfaction of social needs, and what and whose needs are to be satisfied given that resources are scarce. Here, I do not mean the exercise of political power by the state as an organised or centralised form of government, but the decentralised multitude of social interactions in peoples’ everyday life anchored in civil society [38]. It is through this very social process that we negotiate what it means to ‘live wisely and agreeably and well’, including the beneficial use of technology as envisaged by Keynes and normative rules underpinning any redistribution mechanisms. The goal of a free pursuit of political freedom is equal recognition, articulation and control over social needs. Correspondingly, any limiting factors that curtail the equal recognition of diverse needs, restrain their articulation and confine the control over the politicisation of needs, resulting in *political precarity* or what could be called the ‘depoliticisation’ of work.

Technological advances in particular should increase economic freedom and thus reduce, if not eliminate, existential precarity. Freedom from existential and economic precarity now also means making use of the political freedom to negotiate the norms underpinning the distribution of income, wealth and resources. With a basic sociological framework of economic and political freedom and the corresponding forms of economic and political precarity in place, we can now look specifically at the idea of technological

unemployment, the work–income nexus and the capitalist work ethic and ask why the economic and political possibilities available to us turn into precarities.

## 2.2. From Possibilities to Precarities

In his essay *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren* [1], John Maynard Keynes delineates an economic utopia where most work is carried out with the aid of technology. In contrast to the pessimistic views associated with the term ‘technological unemployment’ today, Keynes offers an optimistic vision for work societies where technology provides possibilities for more freedom from work. This also includes a softening of the capitalist work ethic, the belief in freedom through work. Today, however, a technologically inflicted freedom from work is largely perceived as a threat to social and economic wellbeing alike, where gainful employment as a cost and meaningful activity is reduced while profits are maximised. At the same time, the belief in freedom through work and normative pressures to be employed, self-sufficient and contribute to society have solidified. Hannah Arendt describes the same process as ‘the advent of automation’ [39] (p. 4). There has been no lack of technological progress and capital accumulation (see [40–42]). How, then, did what Keynes perceived as economic possibilities, ‘our destination of bliss’ [1] (p. 373) turn into economic and political precarities?

We find a first answer to this question in Ralf Dahrendorf’s work, which explains what the real issue with technological unemployment is in his view:

‘Technological innovations are introduced because they are less expensive; and they are not less expensive per se, but in comparison to human labour. The so called “structural” or “technological unemployment” is strictly speaking unemployment because of a price advantage of technology over labour; this is not just the case because of technology becoming less expensive, but also because labour is becoming more expensive. . . . it is this dynamic within work societies that makes it run out of work’ [43] (p. 29 translation NE).

Following Dahrendorf’s argumentation, work society under capitalism ‘destroys itself. It is not that work society runs out of work, it has to run out of work’ [43] (p. 31 translation NE). Technology is not used in order to free us from work but to minimise or eliminate labour costs, and it thus creates economic precarity. Hence, the fact that work societies are running out of work is not proof of technology replacing human labour, thus increasing freedom, but of ‘a further concentration of corporatist power’ [44] (p. 13) beyond political control. That is, technology by itself does not inevitably cause alienation, exploitation, unemployment or precarious work. To argue that it does represents a reductionist understanding of ‘technological determinism’ (see [45,46]). Not only that, but it is also understood as a threat to employment as it sidelines questions about wealth and income redistribution. Moreover, this is particularly concerning since a study by Jim Stanford demonstrates that ‘the use of robots and other forms of automated machinery and technology’ does not accelerate the rise in unemployment at all [47] (p. 7). Technological unemployment is therefore more a spectre than reality. The question is why issues around precarity nevertheless prevail.

Under capitalism, ‘unemployment is, and always has been, endemic in societies where profit is the sole determinant of an investor’s calculation about whether or not to buy labour power’ [44] (p. 14). Hence, humanity’s permanent problem is *not* freedom from work, but the normative decisions concerning the use of technology. Understood like that, technological unemployment is the result of a depoliticisation of work and thus turns Keynes’s possibilities into economic and political precarities, as defined above, and which bear all the alienating, exploitative, over-rationalised and anomic risks identified by the early sociologists that are associated with the rise of modern capitalism.

A further point to consider is the capitalist achievement principle, which operates through *the nexus between work and income* and which makes work the central mechanism for the distribution of life chances. It defines the essence of work societies by making ‘human labor [ . . . ] a commodity’ [21] (p. 107) at the heart of which lies ‘the withering away of ‘pre-commodified’ social protection’ [48] (p. xx). Work societies can therefore be

defined as societies in which anything and everything depends on paid work—or the lack thereof (see [19] (p. 16). Work societies are, to use Weber’s term, societies in which material as much as immaterial ‘life-chances’ [49] (p. 184) are distributed on the basis of gainful work. Put differently, work is *the* central ‘life-shaping activity’ [50] (p. 275) based on the achievement principle and the work–income nexus.

The *work–income nexus* can be depicted in three ways that oscillate between economic and political freedom and the corresponding forms of precarity.

1. A *tight nexus* exists in a ‘market economy [ . . . ] controlled, regulated and directed by market prices’ [21] (p. 71). Making a living on the basis of paid work in such a system relies on competitive labour markets based on the price of labour only [44] (p. 36). What Marx described as alienation and exploitation is most prominent under these circumstances. It favours economic freedom and creates high levels of economic and political precarity.
2. A *weak nexus* includes the use of non-market mechanisms that allow people ‘to *withdraw* . . . from selling their labour power and to *obtain* or produce some goods and services through non-market sources’ [44] (37 emphasis in original). This social-democratic approach keeps economic and political precarities at bay by mixing elements of reciprocity and redistribution [51]. People are in this scenario buffered against the most severe forms of alienation and exploitation.
3. A *broken nexus* is defined by work and income being decoupled and labour de-commodified. This is where the use of technology needs to be fundamentally, that is, normatively, defined. Arguably, this comprises elements of markets and reciprocity, but also a strong emphasis on redistribution of wealth and income. It does not mean an end of work but the possibility to reduce economic and political precarities. Current debates on a universal basic income (UBI) are often presented as addressing this issue in Keynes’s vision. Very briefly, the idea is to provide ‘a secure income [ . . . ] not just to a few via wealth but to all via the state *and* if that income were sufficiently high to provide a genuine choice about whether or not to sell one’s labour power’ [44] (p. 37 emphasis in original). The state is supposed to de-commodify labour and act as the central authority in the redistribution of wealth and income. It is here where Habermas’ idea of communicative action comes to the fore as a mediating force against alienation, exploitation, rationalisation and anomie, which were seen as the major risks by early sociologists.

Finally, some of the possibilities that technological progress enables are also ‘great changes in the code of morals’ [1] (p. 369), that is, the *capitalist work ethic*. It is in particular the pathological ‘love of money’, which Keynes describes quite drastically as a mental disease [1] (p. 369), that is no longer defining future work societies. At last, so it seems, we are not only technologically shaking off the alienating yoke originating in physical and emotional labour, but also its cultural imperatives, Weber’s spirit of capitalism, that is, the exploitative pursuit of profit for its own sake. However, to keep using Keynes as an example, he did not naively assume a smooth transition but anticipated that most people would feel that ‘if the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose’, resulting in ‘a general “nervous breakdown”’ [1] (p. 366). Hence, Keynes acknowledges that the transition will not be easy since we ‘have been trained too long to strive and not to enjoy’ and hence fail ‘disastrously . . . to solve the problem which has been set’ [1] (p. 368), namely of what to do with the newly gained freedom from work.

Hannah Arendt describes this very process as the ‘glorification of labor’ which has transformed ‘the whole society into a labouring society . . . which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor, and this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won. . . . a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.’ [39] (pp. 4–5).

The end of work is therefore not simply about threatening economic precarities; it also amounts to a collective identity crisis. We have long lost the religious belief that worldly

efforts translate into heavenly rewards, as famously outlined by Weber [13]. What we have not lost, though, is a strong secular belief in freedom through work. This manifests in our search for ‘pleasure, experience, social status and grace that are promised to manifest through work’ [50] (p. 274). Late-modern work societies have far from abandoned this economically rationalising capitalist mindset. Unfortunately, this also manifests as rising inequalities and economic precarity.

An economist such as Keynes envisages the possibility for work societies to, if not move beyond, at least soften the capitalist work ethic, the belief that the freedom from existential, economic and political precarities can be achieved through hard work only. Technological unemployment here is not understood as a threat, but as a possibility to create a less strenuous allocation and redistribution of resources and rewards. This includes a less hierarchical stratification of modern capitalist work societies in terms of class, status, political attitudes and lifestyles produced and reproduced via gainful employment. We cannot predict that these changes will happen, but we can raise them as possibilities, the freedom to shape a different kind of work society. This is definitely a valid question in late-modern societies that face many inequalities.

Yet, we have further internalised the belief in *freedom through work* in terms of two ideas that together make up the late-modern work ethic and the normative bedrock for precarities. Firstly, we have internalised ‘the normative demand to live off one’s own work’ [44] (p. 249). As Claus Offe writes, ‘at the level of social integration, work can be normatively sanctioned as a *duty* [ . . . ] [with] work as the pivotal point of a correct and morally good life’ [5] (p. 141 emphasis in original). The ability or inability to sell one’s labour as a commodity becomes a moral imperative and individual responsibility. Secondly, this has been paired with the equally strong normative demand to contribute to society’s productivity [44] (p. 104). This becomes most obvious when society’s support in the shape of government provisions is made conditional and defined as ‘mutual obligation’, when only those who contribute to society to the best of their ability via gainful employment deserve society’s support.

### 3. Conclusions

In *The End of Work*, Jeremy Rifkin presents ‘technological unemployment’ as a dangerous phenomenon [52] (p. 24). This can be contrasted with Keynes’ original idea of technological unemployment where he provided an optimistic outlook, a silver lining on the horizon during politically and economically challenging times in the 1920s and 1930s. Keynes’s core message in *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren* [1] is that technological unemployment is not the end of work, the unavoidable dystopian fate of late-modern work societies. Put simply, he saw the possibilities to free ourselves from existential and economic precarity with the aid of technology. To strengthen Keynes’s point, I have argued that we need to add political possibilities to his economic possibilities. The technologically gained freedom from work and the weakening pressure to find freedom through work creates the political possibilities to negotiate as a society what it means to live wisely, agreeably and well. The key here is the idea of redistribution [51].

With all the technological possibilities we have available to us today in late-modern societies, the question remains of why today’s economic and political precarities increase in the face of even more advanced technological possibilities. It is for this very reason that it is worth reflecting on freedom, technological progress, income distribution and shifting normative expectations and reflecting on the fundamental origins of our own politically and economically precarious times. To be clear, it is not a necessity that economic and political possibilities turn into the precarities as we experience them today.

To that end, and on the basis of the previous reflections, I have suggested a basic sociological framework of economic and political freedom and the corresponding forms of economic and political precarity. This framework is fundamentally anchored in work as a quintessential human activity and major engine room of society. Applying this framework to the question of technological unemployment, the work–income nexus and the changing

normative expectations in relation to work reveals *three basic origins* of our politically and economically precarious times.

It is not technology itself that creates unemployment, but the decisions to use it in order to reduce or eliminate labour as a cost. This is, in Marx's words, the real origin of alienation and exploitation. The origin of economic and political precarity lies in the depoliticisation of work that favours the maximisation of profits for some and increases economic precarity for others. The political process to settle this conflict between capital and labour in order to protect workers against economic precarities does not reach far enough to protect the satisfaction of social needs. Hence, technological unemployment results in an increase in economic and political precarity.

Using the possibilities that technology offers to drive the cost of labour (income) down and increase profits results in a tightening of the nexus between work and income. The viable alternative to counteract the resulting economic inequalities is a fair and equal redistribution mechanism addressing the allocation of resources, wealth and income. Without it, the tension between capital and labour intensifies as profits rise, while wages decrease, resulting in a polarisation of the labour market between those who do not need to work, those who have more than enough work and those who are either under- or unemployed. The result is a shift towards a tighter nexus between work and income and, hence, an increase in economic and political precarity.

The belief in freedom through work has intensified since the working population has generally internalised the belief that everyone needs to be self-sufficient and only deserves support if they are also making meaningful economic contributions to the whole. This internalisation of the capitalist achievement principle is focused on the pursuit of economic freedom, increasing the risk of economic and, in the worst cases, existential precarities.

Taken together, these basic reflections describe a paradox defining the late-modern relationship between society, work and precarity: gainful employment as both a cost and as meaningful activity is reduced and diminished and profits are maximised either with the aid of more efficient technologies or by pushing the cost of labour down by threatening job losses [35]. At the same time, normative expectations for persons to be employed, be self-sufficient and contribute to society intensify. Because of this paradox, capitalist work societies are inevitably drifting towards economic and political precarities. The possibilities that, for example, Keynes imagined could unfold with the aid of technology are just as possible today. Yet, for the reasons outlined above, the reality is rising economic and political precarities. The challenge that late-modern work societies face is not technological progress, but how the pursuit of maximum profits with the aid of technologies and a democratic social "decision-making" process can coexist with a minimum of exploitative, alienating and precarious social processes emanating from work.

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