




TOWARD
A FUTURE
BEYOND
EMPLOYMENT

Mehmet Cangul



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For my mother

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Preface and Acknowledgments

There is an unpredictable fluidity, a mysterious and self-sustaining momentum to current events, shaping the future in ever uncertain terms. In times such as these, there is a natural turn to philosophy. Perhaps for our own sanity, in an attempt to make sense of it all, there is a temptation: the age-old temptation to explain.

Just as tempting however is the instinct to dismiss. In the age of restless skepticism, any attempt to try to build an integrated vision immediately comes under the painful scrutiny of modern sophists who can bring about a logical paralysis to anything one deems certain, let alone a theory; all attempts are ex-post in nature by virtue of their ambition to “make sense” after the fact.

There is also increasing pressure against “integration” and “theorizing” from the specificity of academic disciplines. Albeit necessary and inevitable to some extent, this current state of specificity has become defensively narrow to the point of blind focus, and produced vast deserts of microscopic information that are discontinuous. This tenuous branching reinforces the notion that information and explanations that are disaggregated and specific have to be somehow more accurate and less adulterated by assumptions than an integrated vision that requires bridges to make sense. However, the security of fewer

assumptions could be an illusion. An analogy would be the behavior of a single bird in a group. Seen as a single bird, the motions of the creature would be viewed as random. However, seen as part of the entire group's movement, the apparent idiosyncrasy of a single bird is not so anymore. Therefore, a process of aggregation that inevitably requires some assumptions could ironically be the price to pay to actually gain more perspective. Adam Frank, in his book *About Time*, refers to a hypothesis that Steven Mithen makes about early humans on the original state of the mind with discontinuous "specialized intelligence." The argument is that what enabled consciousness and culture to emerge in ancient humans was the connection of thoughts originating in different domains, of walls breaking across silos of "specialized intelligence."¹

Connections are needed again to reignite a dying consciousness and a culture, both academic and at large, increasingly dominated by isolated and mechanic impulses imprisoned within rigid constructs. Being aware of these rigidities is a starting point in overcoming the ex-post trap, for it is the skeletons of these frameworks that make dependence on the limitations of accepted theories the central point of criticism against efforts to "explain." Hence this book embraces the effort to connect where the evolved impulse points otherwise.

However before one can explain and integrate, one has to first disintegrate. This is the sense in which there is an option that still tries to build an insight and a connection, but one that questions not just the logical assumptions, but the underlying *normative* values of the overriding narratives. This is the approach this book takes; it embraces the dissolution of even the most sensible value or aphorism in order to begin anew. Value assumptions, although comprising the very framework of

any idea, its stability and rigidity, are treated as nonexistent. Their limiting presence becomes diluted by the overwhelming discussion of “logical assumptions.” For example, economic growth is foremost assumed as a good, worthy goal without any explicit discussion of whether it is desirable in the first place. Employment, the main topic of this book, is similarly treated as a moral, desirable goal a priori without a single explicit discussion, while different approaches on how to increase employment become the main focus of the debate. There is then a jump to discuss these approaches and their underlying assumptions without discussing the *first* assumption, that of the very normative value underlying the concept.

Therefore the starting point has to, in one sense, go back to a stage as elementary as possible, to a germinating principle that one has to pin, not necessarily to construct a storyline, but rather to deconstruct as deeply as possible, perhaps at times as pedantically as possible, down to the very absurd. Perhaps then one can then find some semblance of objectivity and redemption from the ex-post trap, which does seem unavoidable, even in the utterance of the very idea itself.

Rising and persistent unemployment in a number of advanced nations during a time of crisis has provoked fresh debates about the meaning of work. On the one hand, while the policy discussion compulsively searches for answers to the question of how to “create jobs,” I began to scratch my head, and thought about what all of this meant not just in an economic context, but simply what work meant, and how it fit into a rapidly evolving complex life in a broader scope. In this process, some elementary questions emerged. For example, what did it really mean to “create jobs”? It seemed there was something inherently illogical and absurd about the construct of this premise

that jobs had to be created. I asked myself, shouldn't jobs emerge naturally to require labor? After all, labor is only a means. But it seemed as if what was a means toward a goal, had become the goal. It did not matter what employed us or how, as long as there was employment.

Thus every time I stopped to ponder what seemed to be obvious, I forced myself into a process of justification of preconceived notions, of *the value assumptions*. But the arguments and the justifications became less intuitive as they grew more complex and rigid. The more I stopped to think about these preconceived notions, the more I became convinced there was something that did not make sense in them. One kept running into a redundant circularity that masked a deeper perspective beyond the frameworks that traditional economic arguments encapsulated. As I began to collect my thoughts, it became clear to me that the supposedly obvious was not obvious at all, and needed rethinking. This was a path worth exploring and so began the journey *Toward a Future Beyond Employment*.

The book asks two main questions. The first is, is there a certain structural dimension, a natural strand to unemployment in advanced economies? This is not necessarily a new question; it has been asked, especially in the context of the current crisis, and answered many times with different arguments and approaches. The second and perhaps more controversial and less asked question is, does this have to be necessarily harmful? Can society tolerate more unemployment while maintaining or even increasing its wealth in spite of and especially for the unemployed? Further, and more importantly, can society become happier as a result? Therefore, does the current so-called employment crisis provide society, especially certain advanced economies with the right structural characteristics,

an opportunity to view what we convinced ourselves to be a problem from a radically new perspective? The book explores these core questions from various angles and specifically in relation to an evolving crisis both in the United States and in Europe. Undoubtedly, this exploration involves emerging and low-income economies as well, and the nature of the inquiry poses important questions for the structure of economic growth and relations among nations.

The book is organized as follows.

Chapter 1 introduces a generalized conceptual framework, and argues why there might be a distinct shift underlying current events—the basis of a structuralist interpretation that sets the scene. This discussion provides the basic motivation.

Chapter 2 pins down more specifically the issue of work and unemployment from a bluntly, some may say, naively philosophical angle while beginning to elaborate on the social and microeconomic connections as well as exploring the question of technology *vis-à-vis* work.

Chapter 3 first introduces a sociological critique of the “Western” paradigm and specifically the culture and psychology of work. Then this critique extends to a more explicit economic argument and articulates the macroeconomic inefficiencies that could be endemic to the present work structure. Based on this evaluation, the chapter continues with the exploration of an alternative, and perhaps a naturally emerging system that can tolerate more unemployment. This door opens the discussion to the centrality of spirituality and art.

Chapter 4 introduces a more explicit political argument with implications in international relations.

Chapter 5 underscores links to the environment. This is perhaps the oddball chapter in the book and speculates on a

dynamic among economic growth, artificial job growth, the speed of human life, and the stresses building in nature, possibly leading to a higher incidence of natural disasters.

Chapter 6 provides the conclusion.

Before proceeding to the chapters themselves, I would like to emphasize that all opinions, speculations, and hypotheses I express in this book are personal; they do not in any form represent the position or the official policy of any organization with which I may or may not be associated.

In the writing of this book, I am indebted to many friends and colleagues whose valuable insights helped in innumerable ways. Most importantly, I can never be thankful enough to my mother, whose sacrifices, present and past, have contributed to the necessary willpower, knowledge, and creativity in the writing of this book.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

There is a perpetual complaint one hears in advanced economies besides the lament of not having work: for those fortunate enough to have work, there is just too much of it. There is no time left for family, leisure, idle philosophical thinking, staring at the cloudless sky, even sleeping and dreaming—the life that is supposed to be more than work. However, perhaps a more cynical claim is that not only is there too much work, but much of it is not even needed. If it were the case that work was too much, but was needed toward a concrete goal, then there would be some redemption at the end of the day. However, if it is in fact the case that there is work beyond need and arguably choice, and, by virtue of this excess, too much of it, then any redemption that comes of “too much work” would in fact be delusional. The possibility of a collective self-denial, an autoconviction that this excessive work is necessary and does matter brings an oft-ignored psychological dimension to the modern debate about work—how much of

work is necessary and how much of it is self-justifying and circular? More than two hundred years ago, Goethe said, “The human race is a monotonous affair. Most people spend the greatest part of their time working in order to live, and what little freedom remains so fills them with fear that they seek out any and every means to be rid of it.”¹ Can this be the reason for the perpetuation of work beyond necessity, our constant need to fill the vast emptiness of time? This is a principal question this book tries to answer.

Of course, what is necessary and what is not? Who is to say that something is necessary and something is not? Ultimately, does this question imply that anything can in fact qualify as necessary if we convince ourselves so? There is a type of necessity that is indispensable, like food and shelter—things that connect us to life. There is another type of necessity, however, that emerges on the basis of choice. I choose to have a smartphone, and thus bind myself to the necessity of having a charger, headphones, a host of “indispensable” software, the Internet, a carrier and so on. So these other “accessories” are not strictly necessary, but they become necessary once I make a certain choice and continue to maintain this choice; once society makes a choice and continues to maintain it. One can argue that in fact necessity is an extinct concept. Nothing has to be necessary, but rather based on choice, because arguably humanity has already mastered the strict necessities. However, the psychological notion of necessity is still predominant. One does really have to stop to think that it is not actually strictly “necessary” to check e-mail today, but rather that notion of necessity is a constructed prerogative that emerges out of a series of choices that we have been making for hundreds of years, that precede the moment of the urge to check e-mail,

a series of engagements that we almost forget we have “chosen” that make it inevitably “necessary” that we check e-mail today. Therefore the question of what is necessary and what is not is in essence a question about what is desired and what is not. The overwhelming social structure to which we are borne is the starting point of this so-called desire. After all, not all the choices the human race has been making over the millennia are ours as individuals borne into the path that is dictated by those choices. Upon the moment of the first breath, there begins an imposition of structures and conventions that become so immersed in the psyche that they become foregone unconsciously as “choice” dictating desire rather than the external impositions they are. In fact, one has to make a distinction between individual choice and a set of individual choices that comprise a notion of collective choice. While in an ideal world, the system should produce a seamless match where individual choice meets the larger choice so that what we choose to do individually is also demanded by “collective” choice, this is not the case for at least two reasons. First, there are jobs in construction or waiting tables that reflect the collective choice of society, but are not necessarily “chosen” or “desired” by individuals who may do them nonetheless for monetary gain. Arguably technology is increasingly rendering these jobs extinct, not only in the realm of manual production, but in nontangible services as well. However, even taking into account more widespread automation and technological efficiency, there is a stage at which choice is increasingly buried within a self-feeding complexity that hides the absurdity of jobs that may be neither demanded by individual choice nor the choice at large. There could be a whole array of reasons from economic efficiency to cultural bias about work that may perpetuate this state only

to be exposed by a crisis. Ultimately, does the “choice” of the individual belong to the individual or is it the continuation of a choice of an alien structure elsewhere, detached from individual choice?

This throws to relief the question: Is there something in fact so undesired in what we convince ourselves to be the desired, cloaked in terms of necessity and imposed by an outdated social structure? And this question in turn brings me to a fundamental reason why I decided to write this book. Besides complaining about the amount of work, there is another pervasive complaint one hears from people “fortunate” enough to have work: they are not happy. There is an acute and deep sense of dissatisfaction permeating the essence of modern work. According a recent Gallup poll, 70 percent of Americans are not engaged at work.² This is especially true among young workers who feel that their skills and creativity are often underutilized or not utilized at all in work environments that overwhelm them with menial tasks that dull their minds. There is a wide-reaching frustration that the modern work structure does not accommodate the creative, the meaning-seeking element that is at the very root of our humanness. This creates a deep sense of disconnect between the work one does and the desire to have a meaningful and a useful contribution to the world at large, beyond the esoteric corridors of the universe that has sucked people into its self-convinced, all-too-important mold. This is indeed a paradoxical state. On the one hand, while strict necessities are extinct, and when ideally choice should be the basis of work, why should people be stuck doing jobs to which they do not feel any connection? Thus if our so-called needs have evolved beyond pure necessities, how much of the current state of the work culture emanates from choice, and how much of it

is mired in a deep web of psychological repression that possibly survives based on a number of economic inefficiencies?

On the other hand, there are certain emerging, legitimate needs one cannot deny. Just the constantly growing vastness of the human population brings into focus the very immediate task of dealing with each other, that is, human management. This is a “need” that becomes more complex and convoluted as society evolves and interacts with technology in ever uncertain terms. And, inevitably, as needs evolve from other needs, which have in turn evolved from changes we have long accepted, the complexity grows larger. Therefore, there is indeed an inevitable sense of needs arising and branching out, multiplying further and further, and therefore, one might think, there is a valid basis for the expansion of work, not necessarily its elimination. However, what I argue in this book is that the work paradigm in the West has transcended beyond this natural evolution and deviated into a realm that displays many of the symptoms of self-justification and collective autoconviction of a necessity of work that is not consequential at all except in our minds—a subtle, but powerful rendition of dogma that is pervasive.

One immediate and obvious argument for why there should ideally be less work today than what we observe is simply technology. More robots can do more routine tasks, which should leave humans with more time. However, a more subtle reason that emerges from the technological evolution is that technology enables humans to focus more on the production of ideas rather than the production of material goods, which can be done by robots. In an economy of ideas where more and more people produce ideas instead of tangible goods, labor and the length of labor become more complex. One hour of labor does not correspond to the same “quantity” of output that it would,

for example, in an economy whose predominant paradigm is industrial, material production. There is a decreasing marginal productivity of labor in any given setting with certain natural constraints where working more does not necessarily produce a higher output in quality or in quantity. However, in an economy of ideas, this is even more so. More hours of work, by virtue of the complexity of the ultimate output, could even conceivably produce more inferior and mediocre ideas that simply reinforce inefficient structures and outmoded group-think. A useful idea that solves problems or brings creative solutions does not necessarily emerge from simply more hours of work sitting behind a desk in a cubicle. Therefore, in an economy of ideas, we reach this concavity of the productivity of each additional hour of work even faster. Hence, there is fundamentally a different relationship between labor and output and simply a lesser “need” for the same hours or the same types of work. However, have our culture and psychological construct of work reached a parallel understanding of this change? Has the economic system adapted to this change or is it simply trying to adapt in the guise of a crisis?

Despite this evolution, the construct still insists on working the same hours. There are a number of arguments the book proposes for this insistence: from cultural biases to economic inefficiencies that can be self-reinforcing. Ultimately the discussion converges to basic questions that need rethinking. Of course, the question of more or less work is separate from the question of more or fewer workers. While an economy can decrease its number of work hours, it can actually simultaneously increase the number of employed. This is an important distinction that further adds to the complexity of the topic.

As the title suggests however, the book is as much about the future as it is about the present. Once past the messy terrain

of the debate, and the toxicity of the crisis mentality, there is a foray into a field that is simply about “why not.” How would a future without work or with significantly less work look? How would this state come about? How would such an economy function? As automation and robots enter ever more deeply into different domains of production, what will more and more people do? All of these questions are considered with as wide a reach as possible. And that is the reason why the book does not shy away from issues that may not strike the reader as readily relevant to the topic at hand. From current events to economics, philosophy, art, education, and environment, there is a speculation about everything under the sun. This path contains more questions than answers and more opinions than facts; it is an unruly journey of rough corners and ephemeral musings into unexpected plains. But this is only natural. Take, for example, one of the most concrete elements that labor entails—the competitiveness of an economy; how that can quickly degenerate into completely unexpected depths! Labor cost is one of the components of an economy’s competitiveness. Lower labor cost makes the production process more competitive. But imagine a situation where labor is not only too costly, but it is not even useful at the most fundamental level, and continues to exist on the basis of various reasons from social and psychological biases to microeconomic inefficiencies. Then the discussion of competitiveness quickly runs into a limit; it fails to capture a deeper underlying issue. One immediate reason is that wages can always be susceptible to upward pressure; there is a fairly unanimous consensus that in fact wages face asymmetrical upward pressure, and therefore simply adjusting wages downward at one time does not effectively restore competitiveness to fundamentally useless labor. Where there is lack of relevance