

A Tale of Two Utopias: Work in a Post-Growth World

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Abstract

In this paper, we aim to contribute to the literature on post-growth futures. Modern imaginings of the future are constrained by the assumptions of growth-based capitalism. To escape these assumptions we turn to utopian fiction. We explore depictions of work in Cokaygne, a utopian tradition dating back to the 12th century, and William Morris's 19th century *News from Nowhere*. Cokaygne is a land of excessive consumption without work, while in *News from Nowhere* work is the route to the good life. These competing notions provide inspiration for a post-growth vision of work. We argue that biophysical and social dynamics mean that in a post-growth economy we are likely to have to be less productive and work more. But, this can be a utopian vision. By breaking the link between work and consumption at the level of the individual, we can remove some of the coercion in work. This would free us to do jobs that contribute to the social good, rather than generate exchange value, and empower us to fight for good work. Finally, we draw on eco-feminist analyses of capitalism to argue that by challenging labour productivity growth we can also challenge wider forces of oppression.



Fig. 1. The Land of Cockaigne, Pieter Bruegel, 1567. Image Source: [wikipedia](https://www.wikipedia.org/)

1. Introduction

To achieve sustainable societies we are likely to have to move beyond growth based economies. Historically, economic growth has been coupled with environmental impact. It is extremely unlikely that we will be able to decouple one from the other (Hickel and Kallis, 2019¹; Jackson and Victor, 2019²). There are a number of dynamics that drive the growth-environment coupling. One key example is that the socio-economic structures that incentivise resource efficiency gains also incentivise using those gains to fuel further growth in production. Under such dynamics, efficiency gains ultimately drive up resource use (Jackson, 2017;³ Mair, 2019;⁴ Sakai et al., 2019⁵). Addressing this and other drivers of growth will have major implications for how we live. In this paper we take the issue of work as a case in point.

1.1. Work beyond growth?

Currently, work is bound up with growth dynamics. Take, for example, the ‘productivity trap’ (Jackson and Victor, 2011⁶). To reduce their costs, grow profits and break into new markets, firms attempt to increase labour productivity. The net result of labour productivity growth is that fewer people are needed to produce the same amount of goods. This means that without growth people are made unemployed. Under the political economy of growth-based capitalism, unemployment means a loss of social status and only limited access to the material goods of life. Consequently, the political economy of work in wealthy capitalist economies puts pressure on all of us to support growth.

A second example is the way that work is organised to support growth. When economists and politicians speak of growth they are usually discussing increases in ‘real’ GDP (Kallis, 2017⁷). GDP is primarily designed as a way to measure and understand market activity (European Commission et al., 2008⁸). Consequently when our economies are organised to drive growth, this results in the expansion of markets and market work – often at the expense of non-market forms of work (Dengler and Strunk, 2017⁹). Feminists and ecological economists have for a long time argued that endless pursuit of market growth degrades other forms of work, notably ‘reproductive’ work. This is the work done by nature, and that done in the commons and in the household. This work is essential to the reproduction of society but is rarely rewarded financially. It is not coincidental that the forms of work that are degraded are those that came to be associated with women in the Middle Ages (Federici, 2014¹⁰; Saunders and Dalziel, 2017¹¹).

Ecological economists have put forward two key ideas for how work might function in a post-growth or degrowth economy. 1) Reducing the number of hours worked and 2) reducing the amount of goods and services produced for

¹ ↪ J. Hickel, G. Kallis: Is green growth possible? *New Political Economy* (2019), pp. 1-18;

² ↪ T. Jackson, P. Victor: Unravelling the claims for (and against) green growth *Science*, 366 (6486) (2019), pp. 950-951

³ ↪ T. Jackson: *Prosperity Without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow* (2nd edn), Routledge, London and New York (2017)

⁴ ↪ S. Mair: [Climate Change and Capitalism: A Political Marxist View Online New Socialist](#) (2019)

⁵ ↪ M. Sakai, P. Brockway, J. Barrett, P. Taylor: Thermodynamic efficiency gains and their role as a key ‘engine of economic growth’ *Energies*, 12 (1) (2019), p. 110

⁶ ↪ T. Jackson, P. Victor: [Productivity and work in the ‘green economy’: some theoretical reflections and empirical tests](#). *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 1 (1) (2011), pp. 101-108

⁷ ↪ G. Kallis: *Socialism without growth — Capitalism Nature Socialism* (2017)

⁸ ↪ European Commission, [IMF, OECD, UN and World Bank — System of National Accounts](#) (2008) (Accessed: 17/11/2015)

⁹ ↪ C. Dengler, B. Strunk: The monetised economy versus care and the environment: degrowth perspectives on reconciling an antagonism — *Fem. Econ.*, 24 (3) (2017), pp. 160-183

¹⁰ ↪ S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2nd edn), Autonomedia, USA (2014)

¹¹ ↪ C. Saunders, P. Dalziel, Twenty-five years of counting for nothing: waring’s critique of national accounts *Fem. Econ.*, 23 (2) (2017), pp. 200-218

each hour worked. In other words, we can reduce working hours (Hayden, 1999¹²; Jackson and Victor, 2011¹³; Victor, 2012¹⁴; Dengler and Strunk, 2017¹⁵; Zwickla et al., 2016¹⁶). We can stop, reverse, or slowdown labour productivity growth (Jackson and Victor, 2011¹⁷; Nørgård, 2013¹⁸; Ferguson, 2016¹⁹; Jackson, 2017²⁰). Or we can do both.

In this paper we bring a new perspective to these debates. We use an exploration of depictions of work in historical utopian fiction as the basis for a discussion of work in post-growth futures. We argue that the most fruitful focus for research, policy, and activism towards post-growth futures is to challenge the dynamic of labour productivity growth.

1.2. The value of utopian thought

We turn to utopian fiction because we believe that a central challenge of post-growth economics is the difficulty of finding appropriate models in today's economic structures, which are dependent on growth. Utopian fiction is a valuable resource for critically rethinking socio-economic structures and drawing inspiration for new ecologically sound and socially just post-growth economic futures.

Utopian fiction in particular, and literary analysis more generally, has been underused by ecological economists. However, there are a few notable exceptions that point to the possibilities that utopian fiction opens up for ecological economics.

Kallis and March (2015)²¹ use the anarchist society described in Le Guin's (1974/1987)²² *The Dispossessed* to explore the political appeal and purpose of the degrowth concept. Other ecological economists have pointed to the utopian impulse of ecological economics (Martinez-Alier, 1992²³; Ingebrigtsen and Jakobsen, 2012²⁴). Recent contributions from Foster (2017)²⁵ and Levitas (2017)²⁶ engage with utopian fiction and pick up themes familiar to ecological economists. Foster uses William Morris's *News from Nowhere* to discuss possibilities for work in a sustainable future. Levitas argues for the potential of utopian fiction to help us envisage the radical social change required for a 'sustainable prosperity'. In this paper we aim to build on these works and show how utopian fiction can be a useful part of the ecological economics toolkit.

¹² ↪ A. Hayden, *Sharing the Work, Sparing the Planet: Work Time, Consumption, & Ecology* Zed Books, New York (1999)

¹³ ↪ T. Jackson, P. Victor, Productivity and work in the 'green economy': some theoretical reflections and empirical tests *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 1 (1) (2011), pp. 101-108

¹⁴ ↪ P. Victor, Growth, degrowth and climate change: a scenario analysis *Ecol. Econ.*, 84 (2012), pp. 206-212

¹⁵ ↪ C. Dengler, B. Strunk, The monetised economy versus care and the environment: degrowth perspectives on reconciling an antagonism *Fem. Econ.*, 24 (3) (2017), pp. 160-183

¹⁶ ↪ K. Zwickla, F. Disslbachera, S. Stagla, Work-sharing for a sustainable economy *Ecol. Econ.*, 121 (2016), pp. 246-253

¹⁷ ↪ T. Jackson, P. Victor, Productivity and work in the 'green economy': some theoretical reflections and empirical tests *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 1 (1) (2011), pp. 101-108

¹⁸ ↪ J.S. Nørgård, [Happy degrowth through more amateur economy](#) *J. Clean. Prod.*, 38 (0) (2013), pp. 61-70

¹⁹ ↪ P. Ferguson, [Productivity growth as a barrier to a sustainability transition](#) *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 20 (2016), pp. 86-88

²⁰ ↪ T. Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow* (2nd edn), Routledge, London and New York (2017)

²¹ ↪ G. Kallis, H. March, Imaginaries of hope: the utopianism of degrowth *Ann. Assoc. Am. Geogr.*, 105 (2) (2015), pp. 360-368

²² ↪ U. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* Collins, Glasgow (1974/1987), p. 319

²³ ↪ J. Martinez-Alier, Ecological economics and concrete utopias *Utop. Stud.*, 3 (1992), pp. 39-52

²⁴ ↪ S. Ingebrigtsen, O. Jakobsen, [Utopias and realism in ecological economics—knowledge, understanding and improvisation](#) *Ecol. Econ.*, 84 (2012), pp. 84-90

²⁵ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, [The Meaning of Work in a Sustainable Society](#) – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, June 2019.

²⁶ ↪ Ruth Levitas: [Where there is no vision, the people perish: a utopian ethic for a transformed future](#) – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, July 2020.

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We live under a form of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009³⁰) – the collective belief that there is no way to organise social

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relations other than those we see under capitalism. Under such conditions the utopian act of imagining a future, with different social institutions, is itself a form of resistance and struggle (Davies, 2018³¹). Yet it is one that is extremely hard to do – more often than not, future visions are either apocalyptic, or based on technological,

rather than social, innovation (Slaughter, 2004³²). By virtue of being written at different points in time, historical utopian fiction has the advantage of distance from the apocalyptic and tech fuelled economic imaginaries that permeate our everyday experiences. In this way it enables us to achieve critical distance from today's economy. This is essential for constructing post-growth economic theory which must be radically different from the economics we live with day-to-day.

We treat historical utopian fiction as analogous to economic theory. Historian of economic thought Warren Samuels argues that economic models and utopian novels are similar in form. Both tell a "story not about actual economies but of an abstracted rational reconstruction" (Samuels, 2003, p. 204³³). And, like models, utopias are often explicitly informed by economic thinking. For example, utopian author Kim Stanley Robinson's recent work was informed by green and ecological economists including: Hazel Henderson, Herman Daly and E.F. Schumacher (Robinson, 2016³⁴). Here we seek to uncover these economic elements in the work of William Morris, and in the utopian tradition of Cokayne. Like studying the history of economic thought or interrogating an economic model, bringing the economic ideas embodied in historical utopian fiction into conversation with modern insights can be a useful way of developing new economic theory.

1.3. Aims and contribution

In this paper we ask what a positive future of work could look like in a post-growth society. To this end we focus on visions of work in two contrasting utopias. First, we explore a variety of interpretations of the depiction of work in the

²⁷ ↪ M. Gregory, Ethical criticism: what it is and why it matters *Style*, 32 (2) (1998), pp. 194-220

²⁸ ↪ A. Johns-Putra, "My job is to take care of you": climate change, humanity, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* *MFS Mod. Fict. Stud.*, 62 (3) (2016), pp. 519-540

²⁹ ↪ Ruth Levitas: [Where there is no vision, the people perish: a utopian ethic for a transformed future](#) – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, July 2020.

³⁰ ↪ M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* Zero Books (2009), p. 80

³¹ ↪ W. Davies, *Economic Science Fictions* Goldsmiths Press, UK (2018)

³² ↪ R. Slaughter, *Futures beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight*. Routledge Falmer, USA and Canada (2004)

³³ ↪ W. Samuels, *Utopian Economics* W. Samuels, J. Biddle, J. Davis (Eds.), *A Companion to the History of Economic Thought*, Blackwell Publishing, UK (2003), pp. 201-214

³⁴ ↪ K. Robinson, Remarks on utopia in the age of climate change *Utop. Stud.*, 27 (1) (2016), pp. 2-15

Cokaygnian tradition of folk utopias. Cokaygnian tales span the 12th and 21st centuries and are all set in a land of plenty where work is forbidden. We then explore the concept of work in *News from Nowhere*, a late 19th century English utopia written by the socialist and romantic William Morris. In contrast to Cokaygne, *News from Nowhere* makes work a central route to the good life. Finally, we bring the ideas of Cokaygne and *News from Nowhere* into conversation with insights from ecological and feminist economics. On this basis we sketch our own ideas on the role of work in a post-growth economy.

Our vision of a post-growth future is one in which we work more, but radically differently: we are less 'productive'. We argue that this is necessary because labour productivity growth is a dynamic that is symbiotic with growth and degradation of the environment. Consequently, a move to a post-growth economy must also be a move to a low labour productivity growth economy. However, this symbiosis also means that labour productivity growth is also implicated in over production, and the degradation of work. By removing coercive market forces we can improve working conditions and reduce levels of production by freeing people to work in socially useful ways. Drawing on eco-feminist analysis, we then show that labour productivity growth is implicated in patriarchal oppression. Therefore, challenging labour productivity growth will allow the post-growth movement to build a broad-based coalition of interests against growth based capitalism and towards greater equality and happier lives.

2. Cokaygne: utopia without work?

Cokaygne³⁵ is the setting for a long tradition of folk utopias, a fantastical land of plenty where people feast on self-roasting geese and sleep all day. Cokaygne is well known in the utopian literature, but has received little attention in ecological economics or futures studies. Here we introduce readers to the tradition and a selection of its varying interpretations. The multiple interpretations of the Cokaygnian tradition demonstrate the richness of utopian writing on the economics of work.

The Cokaygnian tradition peaked in popularity in 12-16th century Europe (Lochrie, 2016³⁶). One of the earliest surviving Cokaygnian manuscripts is the French poem 'De Cocaingne', written as a performance piece in 1250. De Cocaingne (reprinted in Parsons, 2015³⁷) establishes numerous tropes that are characteristic of later Cokaygnes. These include linking idleness to monetary reward, and animals that cook themselves. Slightly later comes 'The Land of Cokaygne', a Middle English poem written in Ireland around 1300 (reprinted in Millett, 2003³⁸). 'The Land of Cokaygne' takes the imagery of De Cocaingne and sets it in the context of a monastery. An example of Cokaygne from later in this period (1567) is 'The Land of Cockaigne', a painting by the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder ([Fig. 1](#)).

The Cokaygnian tradition survives in more modern cultures. Perhaps the most established modern Cokaygne is The Big Rock Candy Mountains,³⁹ a folk song describing a hobo's⁴⁰ paradise, a land filled with cigarette trees and whisky lakes.

³⁵ ↪ We use an English term Cokaygne throughout this paper. In French it is Cocaingne, or Cucagna; in Spanish Jauja; German Schlaraffenland; and in Dutch Luilekkerland (Lochrie, 2016). There are variations on the spelling of these terms and other names outside of Europe.

³⁶ ↪ K. Lochrie, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia (2016), p. 320

³⁷ ↪ B. Parsons, *Fantasy and fallacy in the Old French Cocaingne Viator*, 46 (3) (2015), pp. 173-193

³⁸ ↪ B. Millett, *The land of Cokaygne* Available at [Wessex Parallel WebTexts](#): University of Southampton,

³⁹ ↪ Harry McIlintock's polite version [can be heard at](#) and is reprinted in Raulerson (2013).

⁴⁰ ↪ Here Hobo is the name for a North-American subculture defined by a transient nature and a commitment to work. See Raulerson (2011).

The song was brought to prominence in 1928 by the singer Harry McClintock, but was written in 1905 based on earlier oral traditions (Raulerson, 2013⁴¹).

The thread connecting all Cokaygnian tales is a land where the link between labour and production has disappeared. For example, in De Cocaingne, “the more you sleep the more you earn” (Parsons, 2015 lines 26–28⁴²). Alternatively, The Big Rock Candy Mountains does away with the means of production: “there are no short-handled shovels, no axes, spades or picks”. Presumably these were disposed of when the residents “hung the jerk/That invented work” (Raulerson, 2013 Verse 3 lines 6–7⁴³). But the lack of workers and means of production does not mean that Cokaygne is a place of material restraint.

Cokaygne is a land where everything is produced without labour and consumption is spectacular. In Medieval Cokaygnes it is common to find rivers, lakes and streams “Of oil and milk, honey and wine” (Millett, 2003 line 46⁴⁴). More modern Cokaygnes have “lemonade springs... And a gin lake too.” (Raulerson, 2013 verse 1 line 6 and verse 4 line 6⁴⁵). So it is unsurprising that we don't find dairy farmers or distillers. Likewise, in Cokaygne there are no cooks, but they aren't missed because the animals of Cokaygne prepare themselves to be eaten. De Cocaingne has “Fat geese, turning/All by themselves, and fully ready” (Parsons, 2015, lines 38–39⁴⁶) and Bruegel's The Land of Cockaigne features a roast pig walking around with a knife strapped to its side. Similarly, the preparation of places to feast happens with no servants in sight. For example, in De Cocaingne (Parsons, 2015, lines 41–44⁴⁷),

“...at all times

In the streets and in the lanes

You find tables already laid

And spread over with white cloths”

In short, Cokaygne is a land where no-one ever appears to work but where everyone consumes extravagantly.

2.1. Between utopia and moral instruction

Cokaygne's extravagant consumption most likely started life as a satirical take on paradise myths. Manuel and Manuel (1979)⁴⁸ and Kumar (1991)⁴⁹ argue that the roots of Cokaygne are in satirical mockings of the Ancient Greek myth of the Golden Age. Medieval Cokaygnes mock the relative poverty of the Judaeo-Christian paradise. For example, The Land of Cokaygne (Millett, 2003, lines 5–8⁵⁰) opens with:

“Though Paradise is fair and bright,

Cockaygne is a finer sight.”

⁴¹ ↪ G. Raulerson, Hoboes, rubbish, and “the big rock candy mountain” *Am. Music.*, 31 (4) (2013), pp. 420-449

⁴² ↪ B. Parsons, Fantasy and fallacy in the Old French Cocaingne Viator, 46 (3) (2015), pp. 173-193

⁴³ ↪ G. Raulerson, Hoboes, rubbish, and “the big rock candy mountain” *Am. Music.*, 31 (4) (2013), pp. 420-449

⁴⁴ ↪ B. Millett, The land of Cokaygne. [Available at Wessex Parallel WebTexts](#): University of Southampton, (2003)

⁴⁵ ↪ G. Raulerson, Hoboes, rubbish, and “the big rock candy mountain” *Am. Music.*, 31 (4) (2013), pp. 420-449

⁴⁶ ↪ B. Parsons, Fantasy and fallacy in the Old French Cocaingne. Viator, 46 (3) (2015), pp. 173-193

⁴⁷ ↪ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ ↪ F.E. Manuel, F.P. Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World. Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1979)

⁴⁹ ↪ K. Kumar, Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times. Basil Blackwell (1991)

⁵⁰ ↪ B. Millett, The land of Cokaygne. [Available at Wessex Parallel WebTexts](#): University of Southampton, (2003)

The poet then goes on to contrast the sparseness of heaven, with the luxury of Cokaygne (Millett, 2003, lines 9–17⁵¹):
“Though paradisaal joys are sweet,

There's nothing there but fruit to eat;

No bench, no chamber, and no hall,

No alcoholic drink at all.”

The poet continues this comparison at some length, finally concluding that “Cockaygne offers better fare” than heaven. Cokaygne's extravagance has also been used to satirise excessive consumption. For Lochrie (2016)⁵², Cokaygne started life as a utopia, but become increasingly moralised as the Middle Ages progressed. By the time of Bruegel's painting (Fig. 1) Lochrie argues that Cokaygne has ceased to be a utopia. Rather, Bruegel's lifeless figures warn us away from Cokaygne's life of excess. For Parsons (2015)⁵³ this narrative is only partially correct. Cokaygne hasn't *become* a moral lesson, it has *always been* a moral lesson. Discussing *De Cocaingne* (written three centuries prior to Bruegel's painting), Parsons notes that two out of the three original manuscripts are found alongside poems that have moral intent. Based on this and what he terms its “grotesque imagery” (p. 173), Parsons concludes that Cokaygne “*is in essence an exercise in reductio ad absurdum, taking the belief that happiness can be attained in the material world to its most ridiculous possible extreme in order to direct its reader towards more spiritual ends*” (p. 180).

However, this view is far from settled – where Parsons sees grotesquery, others see a ‘carnival spirit’ (Kendrick, 2004⁵⁴). In this view, rather than being a warning to avoid a life of materialism and leisure, Cokaygne is seen as depicting a desirable life. This utopian reading sees Cokaygne's combination of fantasy and comedy as expressions of desire that overwhelm any moral intent. There is some contextual evidence to support this idea: one early copy of *De Cocaingne* is introduced as and included alongside several French ‘fabliaux’, known for their obscene humour (Parsons, 2015⁵⁵; Lochrie, 2016⁵⁶). However, the utopian case for Cokaygne is more usually based on its imagery and content.

Most authors who see a utopia in Cokaygne do not argue against its satirical intent, but maintain that this is undermined by the use of rich imagery and appealing central concept. For example, Kumar (1991)⁵⁷ argues that Cokaygne ends up looking like a drunken feast of the type enjoyed by medieval peasants. Manuel and Manuel (1979, p. 79⁵⁸) suggest that this comes about because the writers of Cokaygne are too close to their audience to “dismiss their vulgar aspirations with philosophical contempt”. The result is that even if Cokaygne started life as a cautionary tale of excess, its writers got so caught up in the imagery that things “quickly got out of hand, and the satire was swallowed up in the Utopia” (Morton, 1969, p. 17⁵⁹).

⁵¹ ↪ B. Millett, The land of Cockaygne. [Available at Wessex Parallel WebTexts](#): University of Southampton, (2003)

⁵² ↪ K. Lochrie, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia (2016), p. 320

⁵³ ↪ B. Parsons, Fantasy and fallacy in the Old French Cocaingne. *Viator*, 46 (3) (2015), pp. 173-193

⁵⁴ ↪ C. Kendrick, *Utopia, Carnival, and Commonwealth in Renaissance*, University of Toronto Press, Canada (2004), p. 382

⁵⁵ ↪ B. Parsons, Fantasy and fallacy in the Old French Cocaingne. *Viator*, 46 (3) (2015), pp. 173-193

⁵⁶ ↪ K. Lochrie, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia (2016), p. 320

⁵⁷ ↪ K. Kumar, *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Basil Blackwell (1991)

⁵⁸ ↪ F.E. Manuel, F.P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1979)

⁵⁹ ↪ A. Morton, *The English Utopia*, Seven Seas Books, Berlin (1969)

2.2. Cokaygne as a critique of inequality

The utopian reading of Cokaygne is facilitated by the assumption that the Cokaygnian audience are those who have worked long hours and lived in material poverty. In this vein, Cokaygne is seen as the utopia of “those at the bottom of the social hierarchy” (Sargent, 2015, p. 21⁶⁰). The idea here is that utopias are an expression of desire for a better way of living. Therefore, a utopian vision is one free from the struggles that most plague its audience.

From this perspective, Cokaygne – the land of abundance and idleness – makes sense as a utopia for those who are burdened with arduous work and poverty. Following this logic, Medieval Cokaygnes are often thought of as the utopia of peasant farmers (Levitas, 1990⁶¹; Pleij, 2001⁶²). In the USA, the Cokaygnian tradition is thought to belong to various poverty-stricken groups: African-American slave communities, Native Americans (after colonisation), and the unemployed of the Great Depression (Sargent, 2015⁶³). Cokaygne makes sense as utopia for these groups because “for people who were constantly hungry, with little or no chance of earning money to buy food, and dependent on handouts, these images [of Cokaygne] have an obvious appeal” (Sargent, 2015, p. 32⁶⁴). Because of this basis in appealing imagery, the Cokaygnian utopia has been interpreted as a naïve compensatory fantasy (Parsons, 2015⁶⁵; Lochrie, 2016⁶⁶).

However, the view that Cokaygne's audience is primarily the overworked and marginalised poor lends itself to a more critical utopian reading. This interpretation does not dispute the base pleasures of Cokaygne's materialism or idleness, but it argues that alongside this is a critique of inequality and injustice (Morton, 1969⁶⁷; Kendrick, 2004⁶⁸; Lochrie, 2016⁶⁹). In contrast to the real world, in Cokaygne people have everything they need regardless of their wealth or status. For example, *The Land of Cokaygne* states that “All is common to young and old/To strong and stern, to meek and bold.” (Millett, 2003, lines 63–64⁷⁰). Similarly, in *De Cocaingne* (Parsons, 2015, lines 45–56⁷¹):

“You can drink, and eat as well,
As much as you want with no problem,
With no challenge, and no refusal.
Nor does anyone have to pay the bill
After he eats, for no-one keeps count.”

The explicit recognition in this passage that consumption has nothing to do with the ability to pay, can be seen as a critique of the way that actually existing economies of the time distributed goods in ways that excluded the poor. This interpretation roots Cokaygne's utopianism in a critique of economic inequality.

⁶⁰ ↪ L. Sargent, *The American Cockaigne from the sixteenth century to the Shmoo and beyond Utop.* Stud., 26 (1) (2015), pp. 19-40

⁶¹ ↪ R. Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*. Phillip Allan, Great Britain (1990)

⁶² ↪ H. Pleij, *Dreaming of Cockaigne*. Translated by: Webb, D. Columbia University Press, USA (2001), p. 533

⁶³ ↪ L. Sargent, *The American Cockaigne from the sixteenth century to the Shmoo and beyond Utop.* Stud., 26 (1) (2015), pp. 19-40

⁶⁴ ↪ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ ↪ B. Parsons, *Fantasy and fallacy in the Old French Cocaingne*. Viator, 46 (3) (2015), pp. 173-193

⁶⁶ ↪ K. Lochrie, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia (2016), p. 320

⁶⁷ ↪ A. Morton, *The English Utopia*, Seven Seas Books, Berlin (1969)

⁶⁸ ↪ C. Kendrick, *Utopia, Carnival, and Commonwealth in Renaissance*, University of Toronto Press, Canada (2004), p. 382

⁶⁹ ↪ A. Morton, *The English Utopia*, Seven Seas Books, Berlin (1969) A. Morton, *The English Utopia*, Seven Seas Books, Berlin (1969)

⁷⁰ ↪ B. Millett, *The land of Cokaygne*. Available at Wessex Parallel WebTexts: University of Southampton, (2003)

⁷¹ ↪ B. Parsons, *Fantasy and fallacy in the Old French Cocaingne*. Viator, 46 (3) (2015), pp. 173-193

A central element of the critical utopian reading of Cokaygne is the way it takes the lifestyle of the aristocracy and makes it available to the poor. Lochrie (2016)⁷² interprets the way that Cokaygne disrupts the work-production relationship as redistribution, taking the lifestyles of the wealthy and making them available to all. From this perspective, De Cocaingne's maxim 'the more you sleep, the more you earn' can be seen as a reflection of the lives of medieval European aristocracy writ large. In Medieval Europe, almost all economic surplus was taken from peasant farmers by the aristocratic class (Milanovic et al., 2010).⁷³ By contrast, in Cokaygne everybody has access to material comfort.

Some authors go a step further, arguing that rather than distributing goods to everybody, Cokaygne distributes goods only to the poor. Morton (1969)⁷⁴ argues that rich people cannot access Cokaygne. Sargent (2015)⁷⁵ makes the same point, noting that in several Cokaygnian texts, to get to Cokaygne the traveller has to endure trials that reflect everyday experiences of peasants but are alien to the aristocracy. To get to The Land of Cokaygne, for instance, a "Gentlemen, well-bred and kind" (Millett, 2003 line 183)⁷⁶ must spend seven years wading "through pigshit to his chin" (Millett, 2003 line 181).⁷⁷ For Morton (1969, p. 24),⁷⁸ the meaning of such imagery "is clear enough: the land of Cokaygne is, like the Kingdom of Heaven, harder for a rich man to enter than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle."

2.3. Cokaygne as a sham utopia

Finally, it is useful to turn to an interpretation of Cokaygne which serves to connect the critical utopia and the moral lesson. Cokaygne as a moral lesson points to the emptiness of Cokaygne's lifestyle. Cokaygne as a social critique highlights the way that Cokaygne inverts existing economic relationships to make consumption more widely available. The final interpretation we raise here is also based on a critique of economic relationships but is more critical of Cokaygne's lifestyle than the utopian reading.

The central relation in the 'sham' interpretation of Cokaygne is exploitation. This is particularly clear in some versions of The Big Rock Candy Mountains which bookend the verses about the wonders of Cokaygne with interactions between an older 'jockey' and younger 'punk'. These interactions reframe Cokaygne as a lie told by the older man in order to convince the younger man to join him on the road (Raulerson, 2013).⁷⁹ Eventually the punk refuses:

"I've hiked and hiked till my feet are sore,
I'll be God damned if I hike any more,
To be buggered sore, like a hobo's whore,
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains."

Raulerson (2013)⁸⁰ argues that as well as highlighting exploitative sexual politics that can be found in hobo culture, these additional verses support a wider political intent from McClintock. McClintock was a member of the revolutionary global union the Industrial Workers of the World. In the versions of Cokaygne with the additional verses, Cokaygne represents the lie told by the employer class to workers. There is no Cokaygne, at least not for the working class. This is a

⁷² ↪ K. Lochrie, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia (2016), p. 320

⁷³ ↪ B. Milanovic, P. Lindert, J. Williamson, *Pre-industrial inequality*. *Econ. J.*, 121 (2010), pp. 255-272

⁷⁴ ↪ A. Morton, *The English Utopia*, Seven Seas Books, Berlin (1969)

⁷⁵ ↪ L. Sargent, *The American Cockaigne from the sixteenth century to the Shmoo and beyond Utop.* *Stud.*, 26 (1) (2015), pp. 19-40

⁷⁶ ↪ B. Millett, *The land of Cockayne*. Available at Wessex Parallel WebTexts: University of Southampton, (2003)

⁷⁷ ↪ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ ↪ A. Morton, *The English Utopia*, Seven Seas Books, Berlin (1969)

⁷⁹ ↪ G. Raulerson, *Hoboes, rubbish, and "the big rock candy mountain"* *Am. Music.*, 31 (4) (2013), pp. 420-449

⁸⁰ ↪ *ibid.*

perpetual lie, a false promise designed to keep workers in line. The punk's retort represents the working class becoming aware of their oppression and refusing to go along with the lie of Cokaygne.

2.4. Leaving Cokaygne

We are not arguing here for one or other of these interpretations as correct. Nor is our discussion here comprehensive – there are other interpretations of Cokaygnian tales. Texts take on a life of their own, and are always ambiguous in their meaning. In part this is the usefulness of Cokaygne specifically and utopian studies more generally. Reading various Cokaygnes and seeing how they are interpreted by others gives us an insight into multiple possible understandings of work. Engaging with multiple interpretations gives us space to reflect on work in the here and now. In [Section 4](#) we will reflect on some of the themes of Cokaygne in the light of our understanding of today's economy. But first we turn to another utopia with an altogether different depiction of work.

3. News from nowhere - work as prosperity?

Written by William Morris, *News from Nowhere* is a late 19th century utopia. Morris takes us into 'Nowhere' through the eyes of 'William Guest', who one-day finds himself in a post-revolutionary England. Guest tours this strange new

in this section we demonstrate how engaging with the economic thought embodied in utopian fiction can provide a basis for new economic theorising.

land and finds that communist revolution has transformed England into a classless, stateless and moneyless utopia populated by artisans. Unlike Cokaygne, *News from Nowhere* is relatively well known in sustainability circles

(e.g. Miller, 2011;⁸¹ Foster, 2017⁸²). While the previous sections served primarily to introduce an unfamiliar utopian tradition and the multitude of ways its view of work can be interpreted, in this section we demonstrate how engaging with the economic thought embodied in utopian fiction can provide a basis for new economic theorising. To this end we present our account of the economic thought underpinning the depiction of work in *News from Nowhere*.

At the heart of *News from Nowhere* is a theory of work as key to human wellbeing – a position re-emphasised recently in relation to prosperity (Jackson, 2017⁸³; Foster, 2017⁸⁴). Throughout his travels in *Nowhere*, Guest meets people engaged in various forms of work (mending roads, studying mathematics, blowing glass). Although much of this work has instrumental value, people undertake it primarily because they derive something from the work itself. This is most explicitly illustrated in an exchange between Guest and 'Hammond' (a resident of *Nowhere*),

"how do you get people to work when there is no reward of labour, and especially how do you get them to work strenuously?"

'No reward of labour?' said Hammond, gravely. 'The reward of labour is life. Is that not enough?'"

(Morris, 1890b⁸⁵ emphasis in original)⁸⁶

Hammond goes on to tell Guest that people work in *Nowhere* in order to create, and the reward of creation is "the wages which God gets" (Morris, 1890b⁸⁷). Through this and other interactions we learn that in *Nowhere* people find

⁸¹ ↪ E. Miller, Sustainable socialism: William Morris on waste. *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 4 (1) (2011), pp. 7-26

⁸² ↪ John Bellamy Foster, [The Meaning of Work in a Sustainable Society](#) – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, June 2019.

⁸³ ↪ T. Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow*, (2nd edn), Routledge, London and New York (2017)

⁸⁴ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, [The Meaning of Work in a Sustainable Society](#) – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, June 2019.

⁸⁵ ↪ W. Morris, [News from nowhere or an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance](#). (Accessed: 05/12 2017)

⁸⁶ ↪ We are using the versions of Morris's writings made freely available by the Marxists Internet Archive. They do not have page numbers.

⁸⁷ ↪ W. Morris, [News from nowhere or an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance](#). (Accessed: 05/12 2017)

meaning through their work. However, Morris's theory of work in *News from Nowhere* should not be read as an endorsement of the reality of work in the 19th century.

In fact, the theory of work as prosperity is one of the most utopian elements of *News from Nowhere*. Morris saw most work in late 19th century England as “useless toil” characterised by a lack of pleasure (Morris, 1884b⁸⁸). Morris believed that capitalist dynamics made work bad by pushing the division of labour (that is, the simplification of tasks, and specialisation of workers) to its extreme, and through the production of unnecessary goods. Consequently, in *News from Nowhere* the economy is reimagined: there is no consumerism, and production is motivated by art and need rather than profit.

3.1. Morris on the division of labour

Morris's principle argument against the division of labour is that it takes creativity and variety out of work. This argument draws heavily on his mentor John Ruskin's belief that the division of labour improved productivity by taking thought out of work:

“You can teach a man to draw a straight line, and to cut one; to strike a curved line, and to carve it; and to copy and carve any number of given lines or forms, with admirable speed and perfect precision; and you find his work perfect of its kind: but if you ask him to think about any of those forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head, he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and ten to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being.” (Ruskin, 1853/2009, p. 161⁸⁹).

For Ruskin, thought is not only the process by which we make mistakes in work, it is also the process which makes us human. Consequently, he argues that a loss of productivity from less specialised labour organisation is justified because when you give a worker the freedom to think, you make “a man of him ... He was only a machine before, an animated tool” (p. 161).

Morris's interpretation of Ruskin was that work would be good when made so creative that it became art (Kinna, 2010⁹⁰). In the preface to an 1892 reprint of Ruskin's *The Nature of Gothic*, Morris (1892)⁹¹ wrote: “the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour”. In his own writing, Morris argues that ‘art’ is not restricted to “pictures, statues, and so forth, but has been and should be a part of all labour in some form or other” (Morris, 1888).⁹² In *News from Nowhere*, Morris realises this ideal: in *Nowhere*, there is no longer a word for art “because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces” (Morris, 1890b).⁹³

To enable the condition of art as work in *Nowhere*, Morris limits the division of labour. Residents of *Nowhere* are artisans who move between occupations as they please (Kinna, 2000).⁹⁴ Early in *News from Nowhere*, we are introduced to this idea through Bob “a weaver from Yorkshire, who has rather overdone himself between his weaving

⁸⁸ ↪ W. Morris, [Useful work versus useless toil](#)

⁸⁹ ↪ J. Ruskin, *The nature of gothic*. The Stones of Venice, Project Gutenberg (1853/2009), pp. 151-230

⁹⁰ ↪ R. Kinna, Morris, Watts, Wilde and the democratization of art. W. Parkins (Ed.), *William Morris and the Art of Everyday Life*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (2010), pp. 87-108

⁹¹ ↪ W. Morris, [Preface to the nature of gothic: a chapter of the stones of Venice](#). (1892)

⁹² ↪ W. Morris, [The aims of art](#) (1888)

⁹³ ↪ W. Morris, [News from nowhere or an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance](#). (Accessed: 05/12 2017)

⁹⁴ ↪ R. Kinna, William Morris: art, work, and leisure. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61 (3) (2000), pp. 493-512

and his mathematics” because both are “indoor work” (Morris, 1890b).⁹⁵ Consequently, Bob has decided to spend time working as ferryman: outdoor work. But despite having the freedom to practice multiple occupations, the residents of Nowhere are not self-sufficient and there is still a substantial division of labour. Bob cannot survive on rowing, weaving, and mathematics alone: some people are engaged in cooking, cleaning and growing food. Consequently, Morris is not describing a complete removal of the division of labour. Rather he is advocating what he sees as the ideal level of the division of labour, closely modelled on his view of medieval artisans (Breton, 2002).⁹⁶ This limits the division of labour to a level which allows substantial variety and creativity in work.

3.2. Over-production and over-work

It is worth comparing Morris's views on the division of labour with those of Adam Smith. Though Smith had reservations about its social effects, he believed that the division of labour was necessary to increase material wealth. Book I of the *Wealth of Nations* is largely concerned with the benefits of the division of labour for economic growth. In the opening lines Smith (1776⁹⁷)⁹⁸ argues that “the greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour ... seem to have been the effects of the division of labour”. The fundamental difference between Morris and Smith is that where the latter sees a need for increased levels of production Morris believes that 19th Century England is over-producing.

In much of Morris's writing he is railing against the wastefulness of an emergent consumer capitalism. Consumer capitalism is an economic system that seeks growth and profits by attempting to subsume all other wants into the desire for new and immediate pleasures that lack wider social value (Fisher, 2009⁹⁹; Jackson, 2017¹⁰⁰). We see these themes in Morris's writing. For example, Morris thought that the profit motive had led to most production being socially useless (Kinna, 2000¹⁰¹). Speaking to Leicester Secular Society in 1884, Morris argued that in order to get and maintain profits, capitalists must sell a “mountain of rubbish...things which everybody knows are of no use”. In order to create demand for these useless goods, capitalists stirred up:

“a strange feverish desire for petty excitement, the outward token of which is known by the conventional name of fashion—a strange monster born of the vacancy of the lives of rich people”. (Morris, 1884a¹⁰²)

By contrast, in *Nowhere*, nobody makes goods “on the chance of their being wanted; for there is no longer any one who can be compelled to buy them. ... Nothing can be made except for genuine use” (Morris, 1890b¹⁰³). Morris never uses the term, but his description of a production system driven by the consumption of novel goods in a vain attempt to foster personal wellbeing parallels modern understandings of consumer capitalism.

3.3. How Morris limits the division of labour

To understand how Morris limits the division of labour in *News from Nowhere*, it is useful to look at his historical analysis of the transition from feudal society to industrial capitalism. In large part, Morris's analysis falls under ‘traditional commercialisation’ accounts, where the transition from feudalism to capitalism is the result of the expansion

⁹⁵ ↪ W. Morris, *News from nowhere or an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance*. (Accessed: 05/12 2017)

⁹⁶ ↪ R. Breton, *WorkPerfect: William Morris and the gospel of work Utop*. Stud., 13 (1) (2002), pp. 43-56

⁹⁷ ↪ A. Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. Available at [Marxists Internet Archive](#), (1776)

⁹⁸ ↪ As with Morris, we are using the version of *The Wealth of Nations* made available by the Marxist Internet Archive. Consequently there are no page numbers.

⁹⁹ ↪ M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* Zero Books (2009), p. 80

¹⁰⁰ ↪ T. Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow* (2nd edn), Routledge, London and New York (2017)

¹⁰¹ ↪ R. Kinna, *William Morris: art, work, and leisure*. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61 (3) (2000), pp. 493-512

¹⁰² ↪ W. Morris, [Art and socialism](#). (1884)

¹⁰³ ↪ W. Morris, *News from nowhere or an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance*. (Accessed: 05/12 2017)

of market forces (Wood, 2002).¹⁰⁴ For example, Morris (1890b)¹⁰⁵ argues that in the early Medieval period “Capitalism does not exist”, because “there is no great all-embracing world-market; production is for the supply of the neighbourhood, and only the surplus of it ever goes a dozen miles from the door of the worker”. This changes with the rise of a “commercialism” and a turn to “foreign commerce” (Morris and Hyndman, 1884¹⁰⁶; Morris, 1890a).¹⁰⁷ Morris argues that the quest for profit and the rapid expansion of overseas markets was a key driver of the privatisation of commonly held land. As markets expanded, “the landed nobility... so got hold of the lands and used their produce, not for the livelihood of themselves and their retainers, but for profit” (Morris, 1890a¹⁰⁸). For Morris, this rapid expansion of markets and the giving over of land to the production of goods for profit was the key to the rise of industrial capitalism and the extreme division of labour.

Specifically, Morris believed that market expansion led to the breakdown of the artisan guilds, and it was this breakdown that enabled a greater division of labour. On the one hand, the displacement of peasants from their land meant that “the towns were flooded by crowds of the new free labourers” (Morris, 1890a¹⁰⁹) who would provide the larger workforce required to split production into smaller, more specialised stages. Simultaneously, Morris argued that the rapid expansion of the world market required an increase in production levels, which meant a “wider organisation of labour was needed, and, therefore, ... a more and more regulated division of labour, supplanted the old handicraft.” (Morris and Hyndman, 1884¹¹⁰). For Morris, these processes were complete and a global market established by the 18th century.

The key consequence of the transition to a global capitalist system for Morris was that it established labour as a resource. This is outlined through Hammond in *News from Nowhere*, who says that under the World-Market: “it became impossible ... to look upon labour and its results from any other point of view than one - to wit, the ceaseless endeavour to expend the least possible amount of labour on any article made.” (Morris, 1890b¹¹¹).

For Morris, this is the final and most fundamental consequence of the expansion of markets: the re-conceptualisation of labour into a form of economic capital to be squeezed through the extreme division of labour. This historical analysis frames the solutions that Morris proposes in *News from Nowhere*.

In order to limit the division of labour in *Nowhere*, Morris scales back of the geographical scope of production, and removes market exchange altogether. Hammond tells Guest:

“men make for their neighbours' use as if they were making for themselves, not for a vague market of which they know nothing; and over which they have no control... [and] there is no buying and selling”(Morris, 1890b¹¹²).

In short, having identified the expansion of markets as the ultimate degrader of working conditions, Morris does away with them altogether in *News from Nowhere*. Under Morris's historical analysis, there can be no profit if there is no exchange, and there is no need to gain productivity if there is no pressure to supply an expanding world market. So, by

¹⁰⁴ ↪ E. Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (2nd edn), Great Britain, Verso (2002), p. 213

¹⁰⁵ ↪ W. Morris, *News from nowhere or an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance*. (Accessed: 05/12 2017)

¹⁰⁶ ↪ W. Morris, H. Hyndman, [A summary of the principles of socialism](#) (1884)

¹⁰⁷ ↪ W. Morris, [Development of modern society](#) (1890)

¹⁰⁸ ↪ W. Morris, [Development of modern society](#) (1890)

¹⁰⁹ ↪ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ ↪ W. Morris, H. Hyndman, [A summary of the principles of socialism](#) (1884)

¹¹¹ ↪ W. Morris, *News from nowhere or an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance*. (Accessed: 05/12 2017)

¹¹² ↪ *ibid.*

getting rid of these mechanisms, Morris removes what he sees as the key drivers of the extreme division of labour. In doing so he attempts to create the conditions under which work can become art, and useless production disappears.

4. The post-growth utopia: let's be less productive¹¹³

Our vision of a post-growth utopia is one with more work, not less. We see a post-growth future as being more dependent on a greater quantity of human labour in order to function. Reducing the energy and material throughput of society and living more satisfying and meaningful lives requires us to work more but differently. Inspired by the visions of work we find in both Morris and some interpretations of Cokayne we believe that a world with more but better work can not only be utopian in the best sense of the word but can provide a platform from which to agitate for a post-growth society.

The key to creating a post-growth utopia lies in addressing the issue of labour productivity growth. Labour productivity growth is implicated in the violation of biophysical limits, the degradation of work, the generation of inequality, and the devaluing of reproductive work. Tackling labour productivity growth enables us to transition to a world of less environmental damage, and stronger social bonds.

4.1. In a post-growth economy, productivity growth must fall

Labour productivity growth is an endogenous dynamic of fossil-capitalism. Labour productivity growth has historically had a symbiotic relationship with capitalist markets and fossil-energy. Economic histories locate the transition to fossil fuels as a key dynamic in the transition from a low productivity to a high productivity economy. The low labour productivity period is characterised by the use of wood and water, the high labour productivity period by fossil fuels (Wrigley, 2016¹¹⁴; Malm, 2016¹¹⁵). Fossil fuels were a dense energy store that greatly improved the productivity of other economic processes (Hall and Klitgaard, 2012¹¹⁶; Smil, 2017¹¹⁷). But fossil fuels alone are not enough to drive growth. China had widespread coal use in its economy at the time the industrial revolution started in Britain. However, Britain's labour productivity and growth rapidly expanded in the 1700's while China's remained steady (Broadberry et al., 2018¹¹⁸).

The explanation for this is in the difference of the social structures of Britain and China at the time. Coal in China: "did not create new social needs, did not constantly push the borders of its own market outwards...proto-industrialisation and economic growth were remarkable achievements but failed to generate an accelerated division of labour." (Debeir et al., 1991¹¹⁹)

On the other hand, in Britain, the consolidation of a new set of social relations meant that the energy of fossil fuels was used to create new markets and restructure the organisation of labour to make it more productive. This can be

¹¹³ ↪ The subtitle for this section was taken from [an article in the New York Times](#)

¹¹⁴ ↪ E. Wrigley, *The Path to Sustained Growth: England's Transition from an Organic Economy to an Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom (2016)

¹¹⁵ ↪ A. Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. Verso, US (2016)

¹¹⁶ ↪ C. Hall, K. Klitgaard, *Energy and the Wealth of Nations: Understanding the Biophysical Economy*. Springer, New York (2012)

¹¹⁷ ↪ V. Smil, *Energy and Civilization: A History*. MIT Press, USA (2017)

¹¹⁸ ↪ S. Broadberry, H. Guan, D. Li, China, Europe, and the great divergence: a study in Historical National Accounting, 980–1850 - *J. Econ. Hist.*, 78 (4) (2018), pp. 955-1000

¹¹⁹ ↪ Debeir, J., Deleage, J. and Hemery, D. (1991) *In the Servitude of Power: Energy and Civilization through the Ages*. Translated by: Barzman, J. London: Zed Books.

interpreted in Marxian terms as fossil fuels being used as a tool of social control by the capitalist class (Malm, 2016¹²⁰), or in liberal terms as the result of new institutions and cultural attitudes that afforded social status to entrepreneurs (McCloskey, 2010¹²¹). Either way, labour productivity growth has historically been bound up with both the use of highly dense energy sources, and the dynamics of capitalist markets.

Because of the way that productivity growth emerges from fossil-capitalism, it is hard to disentangle productivity growth from the overproduction that drives ecological crises. The endogenous view of productivity growth that we propose here suggests that productivity growth emerges from the same dynamics that drive endless economic expansion. This is not to say that labour productivity growth is a necessary consequence of economic growth. Rather, the dynamics that enable economic growth are a necessary (but not sufficient) pre-condition for labour productivity growth.

Both work sharing and reduced productivity proposals threaten to disrupt key dynamics of capitalist economies in ways that may also act to prevent future productivity growth. Both cases seek greater redistribution of surplus and less production. This will reduce profits. Capitalist markets are competitive environments which encourage producers to re-invest their profits in ways that reduce their costs and increase their sales. This is necessary for survival on the micro-level – firms have to be profitable to survive. A corollary of this is that productivity gains are necessary for the survival of the macro-economy as we know it. Firms without profits eventually stop investing, triggering economic collapse (Gordon and Rosenthal, 2003¹²²; Binswanger, 2009¹²³). This story sees productivity growth as emerging from the concentration of wealth and in the pursuit of over production. Consequently, even those work sharing proposals that do not see a need for productivity growth reductions (e.g. Schor, 2015¹²⁴) may end up leading to declining or stagnating productivity growth. But this is not the only reason to focus on productivity dynamics. We also face another, more bio-physical, threat to productivity growth.

Fossil-capitalism has been able to generate enormous productivity growth because fossil fuels have high energy return on energy invested (EROI). EROI is a measure of energy quality. It is a ratio of energy outputs to energy inputs. Fossil fuels have been able to drive productivity growth because we have to invest relatively few resources to get large amounts of energy out of them.

We may be entering an era in which the quality of available energy sources is declining. Though the science is not yet settled, we appear to be on the edge of a precipitous decline in EROI values (Rye and Jackson, 2018¹²⁵; Brockway et al., 2019¹²⁶). Estimates suggest EROI has been declining over time as energy production shifts to more unconventional sources (Hall et al., 2014¹²⁷; Jackson, 2019¹²⁸). Renewables are also thought to have low EROI, especially when issues such as intermittency are addressed (Victor and Sers, 2019¹²⁹). It is possible that in the near future EROI could reach

¹²⁰ ↪ A. Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. Verso, US (2016)

¹²¹ ↪ D. McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press (2010)

¹²² ↪ M. Gordon, J. Rosenthal, Capitalism's growth imperative. *Camb. J. Econ.*, 27 (2003), pp. 25-48

¹²³ ↪ M. Binswanger, Is there a growth imperative in capitalist economies? A circular flow perspective. *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, 31 (4) (2009), pp. 707-727

¹²⁴ ↪ J. Schor, *Work sharing*. G. D'Alisa, F. Demaria, G. Kallis (Eds.), *Degrowth a Vocabulary for a New Era*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York (2015)

¹²⁵ ↪ C.D. Rye, T. Jackson, [A review of EROEI-dynamics energy-transition models](#). *Energy Policy*, 122 (2018), pp. 260-272

¹²⁶ ↪ P.E. Brockway, A. Owen, L.I. Brand-Correa, L. Hardt, Estimation of global final stage energy return-on-investment for fossil fuels with comparison to renewable energy sources. *Nat. Energy*, 4 (7) (2019), pp. 612-621

¹²⁷ ↪ C. Hall, J. Lambert, S. Balogh, [EROI of different fuels and the implications for society](#). *Energy Policy*, 64 (2014), pp. 141-152

¹²⁸ ↪ T. Jackson, [The post-growth challenge: secular stagnation, inequality and the limits to growth](#). *Ecol. Econ.*, 156 (2019), pp. 236-246

¹²⁹ ↪ P.A. Victor, M. Sers, *The limits to green growth*. *Handbook on Green Growth* (2019), pp. 30-51

such low levels that the energy sector effectively ‘cannibalises’ other sectors (Sers and Victor, 2018¹³⁰). That is, it is possible that EROI could fall so low that in order to maintain the levels of energy use we see today, we have to put so much energy and other economic resources into energy generation that the resources available to be used in other economic activities will be severely reduced. If this happens, a reduction in overall productivity levels is likely to be forced upon us (Elkomy et al., 2019¹³¹).

Whether we run up against physical limits, or we successfully transform our societies such that they are more equal and no longer built around chasing output growth, we are likely to continue to face falling productivity growth. In either case, we must be prepared to work more. Can this be a utopian vision?

4.2. Free from the threat of hunger: working more, but working better

Both Cokaygne and News from Nowhere offer inspiration as to how working more could be utopian. Specifically, both can be read in such a way as to see them as being about the social conditions around work rather than work itself.

The key dynamic that could make work utopian is the removal of coercive forces. We see this in both Cokaygne and News from Nowhere. In both utopias, no-one can be forced to work because they have access to everything they need. Cokaygne achieves this with recourse to the supernatural, breaking the link between labour and consumption altogether. Though unrealistic, this serves an important lesson drawing our attention to the freedom that comes with material security. News from Nowhere achieves the same freedom but in a more promising way. In News from Nowhere, there is still a link between work and consumption – but this link is at the societal rather than the individual level. In News from Nowhere, each worker produces not to secure their own material conditions, but instead as part of a collective effort to construct a society capable of providing for all its inhabitants. On the surface, Cokaygne and News From Nowhere are very different. But they share at least one key attribute: those who do not work, do not sacrifice their ability to meet their material needs.

By removing the threat of material loss from any individual worker if they do not work, we weaken the coercive powers that force people into work. This is why some feminist and other radical scholars have called for a universal basic income. They argue that a universal basic income hands power to workers by allowing them to refuse work they do not want to do.

By removing the threat of material loss from any individual worker if they do not work, we weaken the coercive powers that force people into work. This is why some feminist and other radical scholars have called for a universal basic income (e.g. Weeks, 2011¹³²; Srnicek and Williams, 2015¹³³). They argue that a universal basic income hands power to workers by allowing them to refuse work they do not want to do. For this reason, a universal basic income has been characterised as a ‘utopian demand’, capable of destabilising the capitalism (Weeks, 2011¹³⁴). This comes about because a genuinely universal basic income creates the security for individuals to refuse work.

Removing the coercive forces that push people into work will benefit individuals and society as a whole. Without having to fear losing our access to material goods, we will be free to refuse work with conditions that we do not like. We will be

¹³⁰ ↪ M. Sers, P. Victor, [The energy-emissions trap](#). Ecol. Econ., 151 (2018), pp. 10-21

¹³¹ ↪ S. Elkomy, S. Mair, T. Jackson, [Energy and productivity—a review of the literature](#) (2019)

¹³² ↪ K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, Durham and London (2011)

¹³³ ↪ N. Srnicek, A. Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. Verso, US (2015)

¹³⁴ ↪ K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, Durham and London (2011)

free to demand better working conditions and to form new ways of working. At the societal level, removing coercion will also help put a stop to the over production that threatens to take us beyond biophysical limits.

A lack of coercion creates the conditions under which we are free to refuse work that serves no social purpose. People working in jobs they believe to be socially useless often express unhappiness and a desire to work more usefully (Graeber, 2018¹³⁵). Conversely, people working in undeniably useful jobs – such as nursing – often put up with very low material reward and unpleasant working conditions. This is because they are primarily motivated by the knowledge that they are performing a socially useful task (Folbre and Smith, 2017¹³⁶). Unfortunately many of these people are eventually forced out of such jobs by their material conditions (Morgan et al., 2013¹³⁷). This suggests that if people are free to choose, they are likely to choose work they believe is socially useful. Moreover, it suggests that people will choose this work even if that it is commonly believed to be challenging, difficult or simply unenjoyable (as is often the case with care work).

Much work in modern Western society is something we are coerced into doing in order to secure our individual material conditions. Removing coercive forces enables workers to safely and securely refuse work, creating the conditions for a radical reimagining of work as something done out of a desire to contribute to the social good.

4.3. Challenging productivity, challenging the master subject of capitalism

So far we have discussed the removal of coercion via a separation between work and consumption at the level of the

One key idea for thinking through the implications of labour productivity is the ‘master subject’ of capitalism... One of the reasons it is so difficult to escape capitalist structures in our thinking is because our thinking has been colonised by the ways of knowing that gave us capitalism.

individual. This is effectively the removal of the coercion associated with markets. However, not all forms of coercion are purely market based. The gendered nature of work is largely ignored in both the utopias we have discussed. Both lack substantive discussion of reproductive work: care work and housework. This work is not free from coercion simply because it resists market reasoning (Weeks, 2011¹³⁸; Dengler and Strunk, 2017¹³⁹). Non-market work also emerges from a history of

violent coercion (Federici, 2014¹⁴⁰). While not purely market driven, however, the market and productivity are implicated in these other forms of coercion.

Feminism offers us an analytical framework with which to understand the interlinked nature of coercion in market work, coercion in non-market work, and the origin of environmental crises. Using a feminist framework we can locate productivity as a part of the oppressive force of growth based capitalism, and outline the ways it is implicated in patriarchal as well as capitalist forces of oppression.

¹³⁵ ↪ D. Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Penguin Random House UK (2018), p. 333

¹³⁶ ↪ N. Folbre, K. Smith, *The Wages of Care: Bargaining Power, Earnings, and Inequality 4*, Washington Center for Equitable Growth, Washington, DC (2017), p. 2017

¹³⁷ ↪ J.C. Morgan, J. Dill, A.L. Kalleberg, *The quality of healthcare jobs: can intrinsic rewards compensate for low extrinsic rewards?* *Work Employ. Soc.*, 27 (5) (2013), pp. 802-822

¹³⁸ ↪ K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, Durham and London (2011)

¹³⁹ ↪ C. Dengler, B. Strunk, *The monetized economy versus care and the environment: degrowth perspectives on reconciling an antagonism*. *Fem. Econ.*, 24 (3) (2017), pp. 160-183

¹⁴⁰ ↪ S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. (2nd edn), Autonomedia, USA (2014)

One key idea for thinking through the implications of labour productivity is the ‘master subject’ of capitalism. Introduced by Hartstock (1990)¹⁴¹ and Haraway (1991),¹⁴² and elaborated by Plumwood, 1993a,¹⁴³ Plumwood, 1993b¹⁴⁴ the master subject of capitalism is a logic of domination that sits at the heart of capitalism. One of the reasons it is so difficult to escape capitalist structures in our thinking is because our thinking has been colonised by the ways of knowing that gave us capitalism (Ruder and Sanniti, 2019¹⁴⁵). This domination of our thought is ‘the master subject of capitalism’ and it confines our ways of knowing to a limited and specific form, while presenting itself as objective and universal (Haraway, 1991¹⁴⁶).

The perspective of the master subject relies on a logic system based on false dualities (Plumwood, 1993b¹⁴⁷). The core duality is the association of ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’ with the master subject (who is human, masculine, white and western), while nature, animality and emotion are associated with the other (who is inhuman, feminine, of colour, and non-western). In this way, Plumwood argues, nature and the feminine are bound up together and seen as less valuable, less than human. While there are many aspects to this dualism, here we focus on production vs. reproduction, a key feature of the concept of labour productivity.

The master subject of capitalism privileges certain forms of work and production while backgrounding and delegitimising others. The transition to capitalism, as Morris recognised, is marked by production for the market, rather than for use (Wood, 2002¹⁴⁸). In this way, capitalist production separates work for ‘production’ from work for ‘reproduction’. This separation is unique to capitalism (Federici, 2014¹⁴⁹). The separation of productive and reproductive work enables a distinction to be made between market work which is termed ‘valuable’ and work carried out by nature and in the household which is not considered valuable. The feminization of nature is older than capitalism. For example, in Ancient Greek mythology, the earth is feminised as a ‘mother’ and the heavens masculinised as a ‘father’ (Hamilton, 1942¹⁵⁰). But it is under capitalism that ‘feminine’ reproductive work becomes effectively valueless.

Federici (2014)¹⁵¹ provides the relevant historical context for this framing, arguing that the development of capitalism required not only the division of labour in terms of work-tasks, but also in terms of gender. Prior to the complete takeover of market-based production, Federici argues that work for production and work for reproduction were not understood as separate and the work itself was not gendered. Rather, as all work was in aid of supporting the household, it was participated in by both men and women. In addition, although gendered discrimination did take place, women's dependence on men was limited by the fact that they had access to resources held in common – principally land. Capitalist social relations developed by excluding women from waged work. Federici sees land enclosures as a relatively minor part of the development of capitalism and is critical of theories that place large emphasis on them. However, she

¹⁴¹ ↪ N. Hartstock, Foucault on power: A theory for women. L. Nicholson (Ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge, New York (1990), pp. 157-175

¹⁴² ↪ D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Taylor & Francis Group, Great Britain (1991)

¹⁴³ ↪ V. Plumwood, Environmental ethics and the master subject: a reply to Janis Birkeland. *Trumpeter*, 13 (4) (1993), pp. 193-196

¹⁴⁴ ↪ V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, London (1993)

¹⁴⁵ ↪ S. Ruder, S. Sanniti, Transcending the learned ignorance of predatory ontologies: a research agenda for an ecofeminist-informed ecological economics. *Sustainability*, 11 (5) (2019), p. 1479

¹⁴⁶ ↪ D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Taylor & Francis Group, Great Britain (1991)

¹⁴⁷ ↪ V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, London (1993)

¹⁴⁸ ↪ E. Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (2nd edn), Great Britain, Verso (2002), p. 213

¹⁴⁹ ↪ S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2nd edn), Autonomedia, USA (2014)

¹⁵⁰ ↪ E. Hamilton, *Mythology*. New American Library (1942)

¹⁵¹ ↪ S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2nd edn), Autonomedia, USA (2014)

does note that land enclosures meant the loss of non-market subsistence for women. Many men lost access to land, but they gained access to the women who were now dependent on them. As a result: “women themselves became the commons, as their work was defined as a natural resource, laying outside the sphere of market relations” (Federici, 2014, p. 97).¹⁵²

The systematic devaluation of feminised non-market work is found throughout the history of labour productivity. Histories of productivity often refer to Adam Smith's notion of productive and unproductive labour (Bleischwitz, 2001¹⁵³; Abbott, 2018¹⁵⁴). While Smith (1776)¹⁵⁵ does not explicitly deal in gendered terms he is clear that ‘productive’ labour is that which directly supports the accumulation of wealth – either by producing material goods or by producing goods that can be sold. On the other hand, unproductive labour is that which supports maintenance of the household – reproductive labour (Blaug, 1990).¹⁵⁶ As Smith writes in the opening lines of Book 2 Chapter 3 of *The Wealth of Nations*:

“The labour of a manufacturer adds, generally, to the value of the materials which he works upon, that of his own maintenance, and of his master's profit. The labour of a menial servant, on the contrary, adds to the value of nothing.”

This way of thinking remains codified in the national accounts today, which exclude inputs to production from nature and the household (Waring, 1988¹⁵⁷; European Commission et al., 2008¹⁵⁸; Saunders and Dalziel, 2017¹⁵⁹). Labour productivity (conventionally measured as market output divided by hours worked in the labour market) is intimately linked to the dominating logics of capitalism.

By challenging the value of labour productivity, we therefore challenge a powerful part of the master subject of capitalism. Power (2004)¹⁶⁰ argues that the proper starting point for economic analysis should be as a system of social provisioning: the way in which societies organise to meet their collective needs. Similarly, Weeks (2011)¹⁶¹ argues that we must reclaim the economy by directing it away from generating profit to generating the conditions to support life. From these perspectives, what matters is not how much market value is created for how little resources, but how well society is able to care for all its inhabitants. This stands in stark opposition to the working of modern labour productivity chasing economies, where people are forced to work jobs they believe to be useless, or to leave jobs they believe to be useful because of a need to access the market to maintain their livelihoods (Druckman and Mair, 2019¹⁶²). We have already argued that the removal of coercion may lead to more care work being done, because this work is socially useful. Note that care work resists the market mentality, more often than not being the preserve of the public and charitable sector. Note also that care is a

we must reclaim the economy by directing it away from generating profit to generating the conditions to support life.

¹⁵² ↪ S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2nd edn), Autonomedia, USA (2014).

¹⁵³ ↪ R. Bleischwitz, Rethinking productivity: why has productivity focussed on labour instead of natural resources? *Environ. Resour. Econ.*, 19 (1) (2001), pp. 23-36

¹⁵⁴ ↪ M. Abbott, Productivity: a history of its measurement. *History of Economic Thought and Policy* (1) (2018), pp. 57-80

¹⁵⁵ ↪ A. Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. Available at [Marxists Internet Archive](https://www.marxists.org/archive/smith/), (1776)

¹⁵⁶ ↪ M. Blaug, *Economic Theory in Retrospect* (4th edn), Cambridge University Press, Great Britain (1990)

¹⁵⁷ ↪ M. Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*. Harper & Row San Francisco (1988)

¹⁵⁸ ↪ European Commission, IMF, OECD, UN and World Bank, [System of National Accounts](https://www.oecd.org/publications/system-of-national-accounts/) (2008)

¹⁵⁹ ↪ C. Saunders, P. Dalziel, Twenty-five years of counting for nothing: waring's critique of national accounts. *Fem. Econ.*, 23 (2) (2017), pp. 200-218

¹⁶⁰ ↪ M. Power, Social provisioning as a starting point for feminist economics. *Fem. Econ.*, 10 (3) (2004), pp. 3-19

¹⁶¹ ↪ K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, Durham and London (2011)

¹⁶² ↪ A. Druckman, S. Mair, Wellbeing, Care and Robots —[Prospects for good work in the health and social care sector](https://www.cusps.ac.uk/working-paper/21/), CUSP Working Paper No. 21. University of Surrey, Guildford (2019). Accessed 18th Sep 2019

profession that requires emotional as well as ‘rational’ intelligence (Druckman and Mair, 2019¹⁶³). In these ways, the removal of coercion challenges the master subject by challenging productivity.

4.4. Work without coercion may be less productive

Removing the threat of coercion may reduce labour productivity growth. Though it originally came from the abstract

the experience of the health and care sectors suggests socially useful work is unlikely to coincide with the most profitable forms of market work.

notion of the production of ‘value’, productivity has become synonymous with the production of market value (Foster, 2016¹⁶⁴; Abbott, 2018¹⁶⁵). A useful post-growth project may be to reject the current notion of productivity, arguing instead that we should care about life rather than exchange value. The proliferation of ‘bullshit

jobs’ suggests that socially useful work will not coincide with market work (Graeber, 2018¹⁶⁶). At the very least, the experience of the health and care sectors suggests socially useful work is unlikely to coincide with the most profitable forms of market work (Druckman and Mair, 2019¹⁶⁷). A reduction in market activity could drive a reduction in labour productivity growth.

Moreover, improvements in working conditions may also reduce productivity growth. Economists have believed since Adam Smith that measures that improve productivity can have negative impacts on workers. Although he believed it necessary to increase material production, Smith (1776)¹⁶⁸ himself thought that highly specialised labour would degrade our capacities for moral and mental reasoning. And, as we have seen, Morris and Ruskin believed specialised work to be dehumanising. Modern sociological accounts of work argue that autonomy is key to good work – the ability to have control over what and how we do our work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011¹⁶⁹). Specialisation and the division of labour limit this. Consequently, it is unlikely that free people would consent to work in highly specialised roles and thus would be less productive.

Finally, as a strategy that challenges the master subject of capitalism, freeing workers from coercion is a challenge to the very idea of productivity. The modern notion of productivity is hard to understand outside a market context. The frameworks we use for measuring productivity do not work in non-market contexts (Diewert, 2018¹⁷⁰). What may develop in its place is unclear. But it is unlikely to follow the dynamics we see today.

4.5. Towards an ecological utopia?

Removing coercive forces and overthrowing the productivity drive leaves us with questions not adequately answered by Cokaygne, or News from Nowhere. Namely, how do we decide what to produce, how it should be produced, and how do we get there?

¹⁶³ ↪ A. Druckman, S. Mair, Wellbeing, Care and Robots —[Prospects for good work in the health and social care sector](#), CUSP Working Paper No. 21. University of Surrey, Guildford (2019). Accessed 18th Sep 2019

¹⁶⁴ ↪ K. Foster, Productivity and Prosperity: A Historical Sociology of Productivist Thought (2016)

¹⁶⁵ ↪ M. Abbott, Productivity: a history of its measurement. History of Economic Thought and Policy (1) (2018), pp. 57-80

¹⁶⁶ ↪ D. Graeber, Bullshit Jobs: A Theory. Penguin Random House UK (2018), p. 333

¹⁶⁷ ↪ A. Druckman, S. Mair, Wellbeing, Care and Robots —[Prospects for good work in the health and social care sector](#), CUSP Working Paper No. 21. University of Surrey, Guildford (2019). Accessed 18th Sep 2019

¹⁶⁸ ↪ A. Smith, An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. Available at Marxists Internet Archive, (1776)

¹⁶⁹ ↪ D. Hesmondhalgh, S. Baker, Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries. Routledge, Abingdon (2011)

¹⁷⁰ ↪ E. Diewert, Productivity measurement in the public sector. E. Griffell-Tatje, C. Lovell, R. Sickles (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Productivity Analysis, Oxford University Press, New York (2018), pp. 241-285

These questions return us to old debates around socialist calculation, but with new elements introduced by the frame of environmental limits. The socialist calculation debates revolve around the possibility of determining the collective

while it may be possible to use algorithms to determine how many goods people want, acknowledging environmental limits to production provokes a more radical question... we must decide not only what to produce but when to stop. Environmental limits mean that we have to decide what not to produce.

economic needs in the absence of capitalist markets, and specific mechanisms for doing so. On the one hand, the fact that we have likely already crossed some planetary boundaries (Steffen et al., 2015¹⁷¹) shows us the deep problems that come with leaving production decisions to markets. But this does not mean that we should endorse central planning. When the socialist calculation debate is occasionally revisited, it is sometimes noted that we now have much increased computing

power with which to approach socialist calculation (e.g. Srnicek and Williams, 2015¹⁷²). This notion has also been explored in utopian fiction (e.g. Le Guin, 1974/1987¹⁷³). But while it may be possible to use algorithms to determine how many goods people want, acknowledging environmental limits to production provokes a more radical question. In this case, we must decide not only what to produce but when to stop. Environmental limits mean that we have to decide what not to produce. This is not a question that can legitimately be left to a machine. Rather, it requires debate and deliberation (O'Neill, 2002¹⁷⁴; Hammond, 2019¹⁷⁵). The question of what and how to produce are normative, not technical, questions.

The need for democratic apparatus in work is highlighted in feminist works. One example of this is Weeks's (2011)¹⁷⁶ life centred economy. One of Weeks's primary concerns is that many forms of work happen outside the market economy. So it is not sufficient to get rid of the market and assume that a) the distribution problem will solve itself and b) that we will be free from compulsive forces. Rather we must construct new ways of working and being that are free from coercion. This raises the distributive question of how we as a society decide how much of our resources go into these new structures. Morris ducks this issue by assuming that in localised economies people's needs are immediate and obvious. It is not clear that this is actually the case, particularly when we consider an expanded understanding of work from the feminist perspectives of social provisioning or the reproduction of life.

In this context it is also useful to recognise that we are dealing with multiple intersecting systems of oppression. The

proto-capitalist states deflected antagonism between the classes into an antagonism between genders.

forces that compel us into work are not only capitalist, they are also patriarchal. The discussion of feminist work in Section 4.3 highlights that the development of capitalist markets went hand in hand with the degradation of working and daily life for women. We must also be aware that many men

actively participated in the degradation of life for women. This was partly as a way to retain their own power as it was diminished by the expansion of markets. Indeed in Federici's (2014)¹⁷⁷ account of the development of capitalism this was the intended outcome: proto-capitalist states deflected antagonism between the classes into an antagonism between genders.

¹⁷¹ ↪ W. Steffen, K. Richardson, J. Rockström, S.E. Cornell, I. Fetzer, E.M. Bennett, R. Biggs, S.R. Carpenter, W. De Vries, C.A. De Wit, C. Folke, Planetary boundaries: guiding human development on a changing planet. *Science*, 347 (6223) (2015), p. 1259855

¹⁷² ↪ N. Srnicek, A. Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* Verso, US (2015)

¹⁷³ ↪ U. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*. Collins, Glasgow (1974/1987), p. 319

¹⁷⁴ ↪ J. O'Neill, Socialist calculation and environmental valuation: money, markets and ecology. *Science and Society*, 66 (1) (2002), pp. 137-151

¹⁷⁵ ↪ M. Hammond, A cultural account of ecological democracy. *Environmental Values*, 28 (1) (2019), pp. 55-74

¹⁷⁶ ↪ K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, Durham and London (2011)

¹⁷⁷ ↪ S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2nd edn), Autonomedia, USA (2014)

This has practical insights for how we organise a post-growth society. On the one hand we must seek to rebuild broad-based class support (Collard and Dempsey, 2018¹⁷⁸; Ruder and Sanniti, 2019¹⁷⁹). This means recognising that growth-based capitalism seeks and maintains growth by creating differences within classes (Collard and Dempsey, 2018¹⁸⁰). Our

Work in a post-growth utopia should combine an understanding of work as a means of social provisioning with the view that the economy must be materially restricted.

response to this must be to build what Fraser (2019)¹⁸¹ calls 'progressive populism'. This requires building an inclusive politics that recognises power differentials within classes and couples this with a radically egalitarian economic vision. We must also be aware that if this vision threatens existing economic and social

power structures, it will be actively opposed – as it has been since before the emergence of capitalism (Federici, 2014).¹⁸² Building this kind of broad-based support can be done by recognising that the drivers of both social and ecological challenges have shared roots.

Based on the above analysis we suggest that a post-growth movement centered on challenging the productivity growth dynamics would be well positioned to build such a broad base of support. Labour productivity growth has its roots in capitalist practices that degrade work, the environment and gender equality. It therefore offers us a new front on which to struggle and begin to build broad based class solidarity.

Work in a post-growth utopia should combine an understanding of work as a means of social provisioning with the view that the economy must be materially restricted. This allows us to build away from a system of labour productivity growth predicated on capitalist and patriarchal oppression and towards a life centred economy built on a democratic basis. In a life centred economy, work becomes something we do to create meaning (as in Morris) but also something we do to produce collective goods and collective freedoms (as in Weeks). In this way we can understand the problem of the economy not as a calculable question of how we produce the things we want, but as a normative question of what we want to produce and how we want to do it. In this view the utopian demand is for an economy in which we can all negotiate a meaningful life.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have explored utopian ideas of work, using an analysis of depictions of work in the Cokaygnian tradition and in *News from Nowhere*. Cokaygne is a fanciful land where labour has been taken out of the production process: so no-one ever works. But whether this is a utopian or a dystopian lesson is disputed. For those who see Cokaygne as a moral lesson its imagery is a caricature of consumption and reveals the emptiness of a life without work. On the other hand, the utopian interpretation of Cokaygne points to the hardships endured by the presumed audiences of Cokaygne. Utopian readers suggest that what was intended as a moral lesson could look like a utopian dream to overworked and poverty stricken peasants. Some interpretations of Cokaygne go further, taking Cokaygne out of the realm of fantasy by grounding it in a critique of economic inequality. This perspective views Cokaygne as the ultimate land of redistribution – a land where everyone lives like the 1%.

¹⁷⁸ ↪ R. Collard, J. Dempsey, Accumulation by difference-making: an Anthropocene story starring witches. *Gend. Place Cult.*, 29 (9) (2018), pp. 1349-1364

¹⁷⁹ ↪ S. Ruder, S. Sanniti, Transcending the learned ignorance of predatory ontologies: a research agenda for an ecofeminist-informed ecological economics. *Sustainability*, 11 (5) (2019), p. 1479

¹⁸⁰ ↪ R. Collard, J. Dempsey, Accumulation by difference-making: an Anthropocene story starring witches. *Gend. Place Cult.*, 29 (9) (2018), pp. 1349-1364

¹⁸¹ ↪ N. Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born Verso* (2019)

¹⁸² ↪ S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2nd edn), Autonomedia, USA (2014)

News from Nowhere differs from Cokaygne in that it sees work as the proper route to fulfillment. Morris, following Ruskin, argued that work could be meaningful and creative, and News from Nowhere is his attempt to set out a society in which work fulfills these roles. However, News from Nowhere and the utopian reading of Cokaygne are not entirely at odds. Both recognise that in the real world, work can be painful. Where they differ is in their solutions to this problem. Morris understands that although there is pain in work, work is also valuable in personal and social terms. Consequently he focuses his utopia on transforming work into something good.

Drawing inspiration from Cokaygne and News from Nowhere we sketched the outline of work in a post-growth utopia. The key to this vision is that we work more rather than less, but we work less productively. We argued that this was necessary for both biophysical reasons, and because all proposals for work in post-growth economies are likely to reduce productivity growth. However, Cokaygne and News from Nowhere both share dynamics that enable us to see how more work could be made utopian. In both utopias, a key coercive element is removed. People can no longer be forced to work because their individual consumption is not dependent on their individual production.

Removing coercion, such as through something like a universal basic income, is likely to reduce productivity growth. As a result, it could contribute to ending over production, improve working conditions, challenging the master subject of capitalism and the patriarchy. We pointed to evidence suggesting that workers desire socially useful jobs but remain locked in jobs that do not fulfil this criterion due to the threat of losing their livelihoods. We further argued that the concept of productivity is implicated in Plumwood's (1993b)¹⁸³ master subject of capitalism: it is bound up in the human-nature duality by its adherence to 'production' over 'reproduction'. Removing the coercive forces that push workers into market work challenges this story. Moreover, by giving workers the ability to refuse work that is useless or in bad conditions, removing coercive forces is likely to undermine productivity and the very idea of productivity itself. In these ways working more comes to be seen as part of a project for a better, more equal world with an economy more in line with the feminist notion of social provisioning. However, achieving this means engaging with questions left open by the utopian literature around how we as a society decide how to produce the means of daily life.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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¹⁸³ ↪ V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, London (1993)

A Tale of Two Utopias: Work in a Post-Growth World

True Democracy and Capitalism

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