



Undoing Work, Rethinking Community

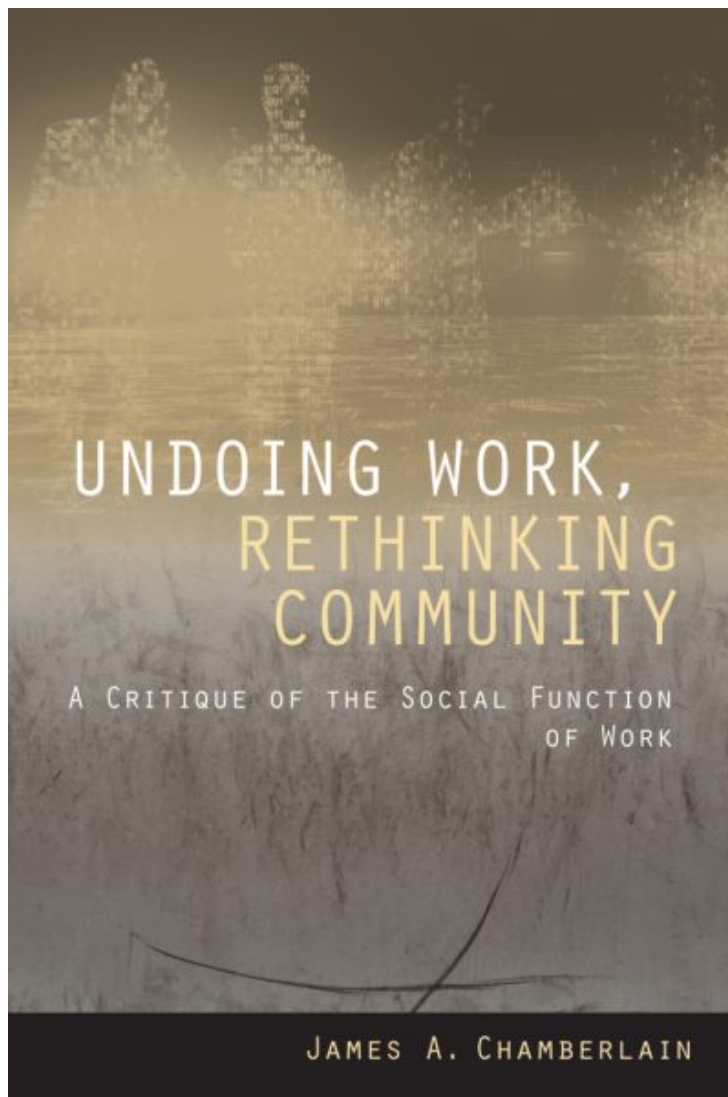
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April, 2019



How does work confer dignity and a sense of belonging? Is work the central identity-conferring activity of society? What if society were structured around something other than work? In an effort to bring Marxian theory to bear on imagining a more equitable society, political scientist James A. Chamberlain grapples with these and related questions throughout his new book [*Undoing Work, Rethinking Community: A Critique of the Social Function of Work.*](#) Chamberlain focuses on flexibility and the notion of an unconditional basic income



as necessary building blocks for such a society. His definition of work remains unsettled, perhaps because he wants to leave open his discussion to include various imaginable, actual, or not-yet-imagined forms of work, or perhaps because work is a difficult concept to pin down. While leaving the concept undefined (14) and sliding between notions of employment and work, he does distinguish between paid and unpaid labour, and includes both in his analysis.



Chamberlain doesn't envision a utopia where humans are "freed" from labour altogether, nor does he see such a condition as desirable. His purpose appears to be to challenge the centrality of work, especially formal employment, when it comes to social inclusion. He draws primarily on André Gorz to demonstrate the integration between paid work and social belonging. But Chamberlain is not uncritical. He points out a tension in Gorz's thinking, namely that Gorz condemns the obligation to work while arguing that if people were no longer obligated to work, they would lose their "social existence (15)." Chamberlain also brings in Hardt and Negri's work

to argue for alternatives to the contemporary work society, including one that would "involve the full flowering of cooperative activities, unimpeded by the barriers and enclosures erected in the name of private property and the accumulation of capital (102)." Thus, *Undoing Work, Rethinking Community*, is



anti-capitalist and Marxian, without being a proponent of a specific, concrete model for a new society.

Chamberlain looks at an unconditional basic income (UBI) as a political strategy that might contribute to undoing work's social centrality, but he cautions against naïve thinking that such an income would inherently solve the social stresses that arise from low income (141).

He carefully deconstructs the political rhetoric that enhances the status of employment, even when the societal or personal value of such employment is questionable. He also considers the uses of such rhetoric when those wielding it actively ignore or fail to consider the social conditions that lead to inequalities and suffering. Examples of this rhetoric come mostly from the US and the UK, which suggests that the rhetoric may not be as universal as Chamberlain seems to suggest (e.g., US Senator Bernie Sanders is quoted as saying, “work is part of what being human is about” and former UK prime minister David Cameron is quoted as saying, “work is at the heart of a responsible society” [2]).

A lot depends on how the UBI is implemented, and with whose interests in mind (76). As an example, Chamberlain describes how workplace flexibility can be beneficial or detrimental to employees or managers/owners, respectively, depending on how that flexibility plays out and who has the most control over it. Flexibility can free up workers to make their own choices about when and how much they want to work, but it can also increase their precarity and vulnerability to the demands and desires of employers. In the latter scenario, time potentially dedicated to work can actually expand, while remunerations and benefits shrink. Chamberlain does not explain how this would play out in specific professions or workplaces.

But higher education would be a good example of increased flexibility, which also means higher expectations without proper compensation - either monetary or career advancement.



While Chamberlain makes a lot of strong points, as a political scientist his analysis is abstracted from ground-level data, including ethnographic or sociological data, which means that some of his claims lack empirical evidence. While he establishes the place of work in political rhetoric with evidence from speeches, he does not engage in any depth with how actual workers or the unemployed might experience or understand the place and function of work in their lives. That being said, he draws on other scholars, such as Kathi Weeks, who have deconstructed neoliberal discourse that hold individuals responsible for their own employment (102). In this way, Chamberlain contrasts this neoliberal logic with the possibility that a group or society as a whole could be *collectively* responsible, as long as everything necessary and desired gets done (53). This is the version that he promotes in the book, although it is not the only version he would accept. He affirms repeatedly that he is not trying to offer a single, specific solution. Arguably, there are socially acceptable exceptions to this individualizing discourse of responsibility to work, which Chamberlain does not discuss (e.g., children or people with disabilities). He writes as if this discourse is totalizing and uncontested. At the same time, however, he allows that his coverage of the topic is partial, and only a beginning. The book makes some overly general claims that would be more nuanced through an analysis of existing data on people who might resist or repurpose work's apparent centrality in social life. Anthropologists could step in to fill this gap.

This book lays some groundwork for, as the subtitle says, a critique of the social function of work.

Perhaps both its lack of examples and its tentativeness are evidence of the author taking first steps in an unmapped new direction. There is much left to be said on the subject. Anthropologists might take up this book for theoretical inspiration around work and precarity, both in the academy and elsewhere. Since the book is set up mostly as a discussion among scholars, it lacks the depth and real-world groundedness of empirical research. With that in mind, anthropologists can use this book as a springboard to develop, challenge, and build upon the interesting



and important conceptual foundations Chamberlain has laid in this book.

James A. Chamberlain. 2018. Undoing Work, Rethinking Community: A Critique of the Social Function of Work. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

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