



## **Reclaiming Play and Leisure: Toward a Humanistic Psychoanalytic Critique of Adulthood and the Work Ethic**

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### **Introduction**

This article posits the need and expands on the idea of reimagining adulthood by centralising *eudaimonia* ('the good life') rather than just hard work. Winnicott (1958) forged an understanding of the positive aspects of health and living accessed through play, namely spontaneity, creativity, individuality and *being*. Fromm (1941, 1955) saw creativity and spontaneity as integral to relating authentically with oneself and others. He maintained that thwarting these psychic needs hinders the overall experience of life and generates negative psychosocial traits. We will look at the conceptual foundation for adult play—as an essential element of *eudaimonia*—that the two have laid in the past. We further emphasize the need to unwrite the age norms of adulthood that relegate play to childhood and leisure<sup>1</sup> to later life. 'Adulthood' is stunted to the extent that values of 'hard work' are placed central, without playfulness and leisure being equally honored as part of living a full, healthy adulthood.

In the first section of this article, we provide theoretical background concerning the relationship between health, *eudaimonia*, and age norms. We do this in the following steps. We give a very brief outline of the history of the concept of 'the good life' from its appearance in ancient Greek philosophy through its articulation in positive psychology as 'human flourishing.' Next, we discuss the segmentation of adulthood and its narrow association with work. We then describe the theories of Winnicott and Fromm concerning living fully, how this encompasses health but extends beyond it, and how creativity, playfulness, and spontaneity are essential elements.

In the second section we turn to the issue of adulthood and the work-ethic in the historical context of Western capitalist development. We begin by an overview of the history of early capitalism, relying heavily on the classical sociological theories of Marx and Weber as a basic foundation. We then discuss changes in the twentieth century and beyond, which included Fordism or 'scientific management' in the earlier part of the century, and the beginning of post-Fordism or 'flexible specialization' in the latter part, extending into the current century. We explain that the post-Fordist era has included a risen embrace of the notion that the workplace should foster rather than hinder *eudaimonia*, but that this change is warped by the entanglement with the same old motivations behind the Fordism, namely what Marx called 'the coercive laws of competition.'

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<sup>1</sup> The description we give here is simplified, in that childhood is also said to involve education, and we use 'leisure' instead of differentiating relaxation activities, rest, and contemplation (Riley, 1993; Settersten and Hägstad, 1996b). We would include all of these elements in a full adult life, but for simplicity's sake, and considering our focus on workplace culture, we have adopted 'play' and 'leisure' as terms of focus.

In the third section, we turn to the quandary of eudaimonia in the post-Fordist era. Relying on descriptions from the recently published book by Netflix co-founder Reed Hastings, we take Netflix as a case example of an industry-leading corporation known for creating workplace cultures of creativity and innovation. We argue that the playful elements introduced are stretched and warped in service to productivity, rather than play/creativity<sup>2</sup> being centralised as an end in itself. While pointing in important directions, these organizations do not really transform the workplace in ways that *allow* the ‘whole self’ to flourish, but rather *demand* that employees invest, contort, and exhaust the ‘whole self’ in their work. For workplaces that promote eudaimonia, play and leisure both require integration—not in service to productivity, but as ends in themselves, because *people* are ends in themselves. The change that is needed to truly promote eudaimonia in the workplace points away from the narrow, work-centric vision of adulthood that proliferates in late capitalism. It also points to wider socioeconomic transformations in society—e.g. widespread cooperative ownership—that may still seem rare or difficult but are no less important on that account.

### **Theoretical Background: Eudaimonia or ‘The Good Life’**

The notion of ‘the good life’ has taken different names and forms in the history of Western thought since ancient Greece, where the related term ‘eudaimonia’—a concept that combined virtuous living with happiness and well-being—was much discussed, featuring in works by both Plato and Aristotle (Ameriks and Clarke, 2000; Reeve, 2004; Price, 2011; Inwood and Woolf, 2012). The precise meaning, as well as how to achieve it, were points of much speculation and deliberation. The concept resurfaced in a different guise in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1974, 2002), who was less concerned with ethics per se than with the affirmation of life and the full expression of human energies. His insistence on fully living was coupled with the conviction that modernity was stifling the nonrational and amoral parts of humanity, which required liberation in order for people to truly become what they are. Nietzsche decried the work-centrism of the modern West, celebrating instead the importance of leisure and playfulness in living (Roberts, 2019; Harper, 2016). Martin Heidegger (1996) shared much of Nietzsche’s malaise over modernity’s fetishization of rationality, and stifling of the deeper, nonrational self. Heidegger’s philosophy was influential in radically divergent ways, for example being associated with Zen Buddhism (Suzuki, 1996), German Nazism (Farias, 1989), and existential humanism (Sartre, 2001, 2007).

It is through the tradition of existential humanism that the notion of eudaimonia first became a popular topic in academic psychology, popularized most notably in the theories of Abraham Maslow (1954, 1964, 2013). Maslow proposed that having a sense of safety was important for allowing the free, creative self to fully emerge. In his pyramid, the lower-level needs – basic, safety, relationships, and esteem – generally required increased satiation for the higher, self-actualizing needs to be fully experienced and attended to. The higher needs were associated with greater frequency of ‘peak experiences,’ transcendental feelings in moments of awe, joy, ecstasy, enrapture, etc. Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ theory is still influential in organizational psychology (Kaur, 2013), under the premise that organizations that work to satisfy workers’ basic

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<sup>2</sup> See Costea, Crump, and Holm (2005).

needs, and give them opportunities to key into higher needs, are likely to be more productive due to greater intrinsic motivation.

In the 1980s and 1990s, ‘positive psychology’ took shape, propelled forward by thinkers such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman. Positive psychology overlaps with the interests of Maslow but is more firmly rooted in positivist (quantitative) methodology and more disseminated through self-help books. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) studied ‘flow’, which was similar to Maslow’s ‘peak experiences’ but more circumscribed to a person’s energized and motivated state of total immersion in their task at hand. Seligman (2011) explicitly identifies ‘flourishing’ as the goal of positive psychology.

Yet the academic interest in eudaimonia today extends well beyond positive psychology. Philip Gorski proposes sociological work should be done in this vein and identifies Martha Nussbaum in philosophy and Amartya Sen in economics as implicitly working in this direction (Carrigan, 2015; Gorski, 2013, 2017). In 2016, Harvard University began ‘The Human Flourishing Program’ with an explicitly interdisciplinary approach, bridging approaches from quantitative social science and the humanities.<sup>3</sup>

From Greece to Gorski, the notion that ‘the good life’ is impossible to define homogenously has been well understood, and yet at the same time, it is impossible to approach the topic at all without at least provisionally identifying some parameters for discussing it or indicators for how to identify it. The approach we take here brings together concepts from psychoanalytic theory with gerontology. For the former, we are concerned with the theories of Erich Fromm and Donald Winnicott. For the latter, we are interested in ‘age norms,’ in the tradition of Bernice Neugarten (Neugarten et al., 1965; Neugarten and Neugarten, 1986). Specifically, we identify adult human flourishing with the ability to maintain engagement with play, work, and leisure. This model of ‘the good life’ stands against the model of adulthood which identifies the time of life with work, with the centrality of play and leisure relegated respectively to childhood and later life. The ‘unwriting’ of adulthood, in this sense, is integral to living fully.

## **Adulthood**

As a stage of life, ‘adulthood’ is framed within a context of age and ageing. Its interpretation has almost always been a subjective benchmarking according to social meanings attached to chronological ages (Neugarten and Neugarten, 1986). Age norms around adulthood are generally a set of expected achievements and behaviours linking certain age brackets to life events (Settersten and Hägestad, 1996a, 1996b) in education, family, and career. For young men and women today, ‘adulthood’ is primarily about *work*, as the popular use of the term ‘adulthood’ testifies to (Hill, 2018).

While there is some biological basis behind the demarcation of age brackets and their association with differing norms, the biological elements do not map onto the normative elements in any inherent fashion. Biological changes are not reached at the same points in time for all people and so for purposes even of medical precision, ‘biological age’ has been analytically separated from ‘chronological age.’

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<sup>3</sup> <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu>

Often the lived experience of a chronological age is incongruent with its norms. Scholars have further differentiated ‘subjective age’ from both ‘chronological age’ and ‘biological age.’ According to recent research (Morelock et al., 2017) older adults undergo a misalignment between societal age norms and personal lived experience, and attempt reconciliation through discursive strategies: They are found to ‘rewrite’ how they frame chronological age as well as their subjective relations to it.

Age norms have evolved over the years, also with diminishing of rigidities and demarcations between different ages in some contexts. Yet narrative changes such as ‘age rewriting strategies’ still testify to the yardstick of chronological age even as they eschew it. The statement ‘40 is the new 30,’ for example, requires presuppositions about the meanings and norms attached to the age of 30. Age rewriting strategies involving shifts of this type are caught in the same bind, akin to a Heideggerian ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Heidegger, 1996), where the comprehension of the part (the liberating move of transposing one age’s meaning onto another age’s number) is predicated on the presupposition of the already-written whole (that chronology ‘actually’ determines meaning), and vice versa.

Reimagining adulthood requires not just individuals *rewriting* age, but society *unwriting* the scripts of aging that alienate and stereotype adulthood. Instead of narrowly associating adulthood with only full-time work and mundane necessities, in opposition to the play of childhood and the leisure of later life, a better vision of adulthood would flexibly and meaningfully include play and leisure.

## Psychoanalytic Perspectives

### WINNICOTT

According to D.W. Winnicott, the true self, a natural endowment characterised by spontaneity and actualised by the individual, is *the only real self*; the continuous discovery of which is a mark of health and allows the individual to truly feel alive. On the contrary, the false self is a state of defence characterised by conformity and develops when the capacity to realise the true self has not grown. He postulated the existence of a third part in our lives; neither the external nor the internal world but an intermediate interpersonal zone contributed to by both and essential to the creation of their assimilated experience as the individual’s reality and sense of being. This sense of being precedes the discovery of the ‘self’ for a human baby and the ability to play determines whether the baby grows up discovering their true self and living fully or constantly creating a false self and through it tolerating their existence (Winnicott, 1991).

How developed a person’s ability to play is, is determined by the extent to which their *holding environment* caters to the maturation needs of their emotional constitution and makes them feel lovingly held and cared for. For the baby it is provided by the *good enough mother* (may or may not be the baby’s biological mother) whose loving and reliable presence and its lasting impression during disappearance before reappearance, helps the baby develop and use constancy i.e. the ability to maintain the positive feelings associated with a relationship to another person even in the wake of disappointment arising from any event capable of invoking a feeling of loss of nurturance. Hence, the presence of a holding environment determines whether the child feels confident enough

to play which in turn determines whether they are able to realise their true self and thus be in a state of health.

Winnicott deemed the *ability to play* not just a criterion of psychic health (with a lack indicating illness) but an essential need in life (ibid.). He emphasized that the same ability leads to discovering the true self and is the progenitor of creativity as well as prerequisite for ‘cultural experience’<sup>4</sup> in adults. In his later writings, Winnicott wrote relating his earlier ideas to the psychology of the society. He postulated that mass interference with transitional experience would not only reduce the ‘richness of culture’ but also lead to lessening of the democratic potential of a society (Winnicott, 1950). Therefore, a more accurate understanding of health of living would go beyond the absence of disease, to include creative living and cultural experience extending to all aspects of life—a model of human flourishing rather than ‘mental health’—including but not limited to politics, philosophy and culture.

### **Fromm**

Erich Fromm took influence from Freudian psychoanalysis *and* existential humanism, as well as from the sociological theories of Marx and Weber. Similar to his predecessor Nietzsche and his contemporary Maslow, he was concerned with the true self, associating it with a fuller, rewarding, and arguably ‘healthier’ approach to living. In his earlier works,<sup>5</sup> Fromm developed a theory of character orientations that were shaped by the interface of the individual’s existential needs on the one hand, and the economic and sociocultural environment on the other hand. In this theory, human needs such as for rootedness and creativity (to name only two of his dimensions) have the potential to be fulfilled in a positive way, but in the absence of healthy avenues can be satisfied through more negative or unhealthy forms by the individual. The striving for rootedness can turn into xenophobia, ethnocentrism and ultra-nationalism; and creative impulses can turn into destructive ones (Fromm, 1955).

While anyone can fall anywhere on Fromm’s multi-dimensional continuum of needs, in practice, people evolve in response to their social experiences, especially during early childhood development, and by the nature of the available avenues in society for needs-fulfilment or lack thereof which in turn are determined by the economic structure and the culture that it promotes (or requires). Fromm argues that economic society influences greatly the character orientations of parents, child-rearing practices, and hence the early, formative experiences of children (Fromm, 1962). It also shapes social character, like the ‘hoarding’ and ‘exploitative’ orientations or the ‘receptive’ and

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<sup>4</sup> He called ‘cultural experience’ an extension of playing, with emphasis being on ‘experience’ as he accepted culture as an existing reservoir of tradition contributed to by everyone and with which individuals engage if they are adept at interacting in the third zone (Winnicott, 1991). ‘Cultural experience’ in light of his other ideas of the true self and false self (relating to individuality and conformity respectively) also forms a basis for creation of counterculture i.e. rejection of dogmatic tradition.

<sup>5</sup> In his later writings, he drew a simpler contrast between ‘having’ and ‘being’ which he considered to be basic modes of living (Fromm, 1976).

‘marketing’ orientations of the nineteenth and twentieth century Western capitalist societies respectively (Fromm, 1955).

Fromm explains that as children establish independence from their parents, they enter an ambivalent space of greater freedom and power, but also of more aloneness and anxiety. The latter can only be overcome in one of two opposing ways – by moving forward in independence and develop a strong sense of self from which to maintain more mature forms of genuine relatedness and developing, or attempting to retreat or regress, by giving up some of the new independence. Moving towards true independence and healthy, mature relatedness, they develop in the direction of the ‘productive orientation’ in adulthood. This orientation is a generative, engaged, creative, authentic relatedness to others, to oneself, and to the world. Retreat and regression can become character orientations extending into adult life, manifesting in sadomasochism, destructiveness, ‘automaton conformity,’ or ‘non-productive orientations’ fixated on receiving, hoarding, exploiting, or self-marketing (Fromm, 1941, 1947).

### **Adulthood and the Work Ethic in Historical Context Marx, Weber, and Early Capitalism**

The work-centric sense of adulthood is about more than just age norms. Like any such ethos, it is situated in socioeconomic history. In a Marxist reading, the inflated work ethic can be viewed as a form of capitalist ideology, meaning that it serves to support the status quo of economic society. Workers are forced to work hard to deliver surplus-value to the capitalist, but the work ethic frames their exploitation within an aura of moral righteousness, dignity, and self-sufficiency. In contrast to Marx, according to Max Weber (2002) the normative weight commonly associated with ‘hard work’ derives from the advent of Protestantism in the late middle ages, especially via the combination of Luther’s ‘calling,’ and Calvin’s ‘predestination.’ Weber says that this new worldview birthed the ‘spirit of capitalism,’ and set the stage for the modern world to take shape.<sup>6</sup>

For Luther, a person’s ‘calling’ is the work they are divinely meant to do. It is through this calling and dedicating oneself to it, that a person best serves God. This projected an immense moral significance to submitting and working hard in the role determined by one’s social position. In Calvin’s ‘predestination,’ there is no way to know which people are saved or damned; their fates were set before they were born. There are some indications of God’s possible favour, like success in work, personal wealth, and restraint from indulging in this-worldly pleasures. The combination of hard work, wealth, and frugality meant that persons who dedicated little to pleasure, play, leisure, and personal enjoyment, and instead worked hard and were able to save up money, were thereby morally elevated.

Erich Fromm (1941), sees the theories of Luther and Calvin as also connected to the anxiety that people felt as the cocoon of the middle ages began to show cracks - people could attempt to allay and drown out their fears through compulsive work. The

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<sup>6</sup> Weber’s theory is greatly limited by Eurocentrism. We use it more as a helpful anchoring metaphor, with the caveat that ‘modernity’ and ‘capitalism’ in total can only be properly understood by looking at the histories of different peoples and regions, in their own cultural specificity and connected histories. See Bhambra (2007, 2014).

work ethic coincided with the development of rampant ‘workaholism,’<sup>7</sup> constant work activity as a neurotic defence. Economically, ‘mercantilism’ became dominant in Europe starting in the fifteenth century, and the Protestant Reformation happened in the sixteenth century. Historically speaking then, it was during the period of time when the amassing of precious metals inspired war, conquest, and colonization by Europe of many distant regions, that the quasi-religious dedication to hard work took root in the European mind.<sup>8</sup>

In the seventeenth century—hence roughly coinciding with mercantilism and the Reformation—was the invention of the modern concept of childhood, i.e. the radical division of childhood from adulthood (Ariès, 1965). This period also inaugurated the European Enlightenment, where reason was elevated as a supremely honourable aspect of humanity, in many ways as a new source of this-worldly pseudo-salvation. ‘Adulthood’ was infused with these values—the ideal [male] adult is rational, responsible, hard-working, self-sufficient, and financially secure. It was adulthood, more than and in contrast to other times of life (e.g., childhood and later life), that absorbed and normalized the new economic and cultural trends.

### **Bureaucracy, Standardisation, and Post-Fordism**

In Weber’s theory of modernity, the trajectory of society was toward increasing ‘rationalization’. The guiding force behind social life moves from tradition, emotion, morality, and religion, and toward the calculation of means to reach established ends with the greatest efficacy and efficiency. This change extends throughout society, across more and more spheres of life, such as work, education, family, economy, etc. This development is integrated with the expanse of bureaucratic administration throughout society. In this respect, Weber saw modern capitalism as inevitably bureaucratic capitalism—not only would bureaucracy spread throughout society along with rationalization, but bureaucracy is extremely difficult to weed out once established. He famously used the analogy of an ‘iron cage’ to denote where he saw modern society headed (Weber, 2009).

In the sense that Weber saw modern capitalism as bureaucratic capitalism, Marx was much in agreement (Fischer and Siriani, 1994). More than Weber, however, Marx focused on the plight of the worker caught up in the immense capitalist machinery. He argued that under capitalism the worker is alienated in a variety of ways, such as from their own labour, from other people, and from the fruits of their labour (Marx and Engels, 2009). Comparing the labour involved in handicrafts to work under industrial capitalism, he argued that in the former case, the worker has a fuller experience of working, including getting to imagine a finished product, and work in a variety of capacities to complete an envisioned project (Marx, 2004). In the latter case, the worker follows the dictates of the capitalist, organized around the structures of factory machinery, and hyperspecialized – basically instead of creative work, there are rote, monotonous tasks incessantly repeated (i.e. turning a crank). Despite creating his analysis considering the industrial factory, he indicated that the general principles he ascertained would apply to

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<sup>7</sup> This is not Fromm’s term.

<sup>8</sup> It was also the period when *sleep* began to decline (Crary, 2013).

workers in other industries as well, even where material commodities were not the product.

If we take an example from outside the sphere of material production, a school-master is a productive worker when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation. (ibid.: 644)

In the early twentieth century, a new science of workplace efficiency arose: ‘scientific management’ or ‘Taylorism’. Essentially it was based on analysing down to minute detail the various workplace operations, then specializing workers and eliminating any lag time. This was especially influential when it was taken up by Henry Ford in automobile production, and it spread from there, furthering standardization and mass production (Fischer and Siriani, 1994). Many today talk about ‘Post-Fordist’ economies, where the old Taylorist-Fordist principles are still very influential, despite a variety of changes such as globalization, information technologies, the prevalence of service work over manufacturing, ‘flexible specialization’, and – what is of particular importance in this article – a new prevalence of white-collar positions that require *creativity*. Many contemporary writers concur that labour is indeed alienated and hyperspecialized under late capitalism, to note that a kind of ‘deskilling’ or ‘proletarianization’ happens today across a variety of occupations, e.g., medical practice, social work, etc. (Braverman, 1998; Giddens, 2013; Morelock, 2016) The push toward standardization is still immense and spreading. And yet at the same time, the use of information technologies facilitates more independent work, and rapidly changing niche markets – including within the entertainment industry – demand creative response from businesses to maximize profits. This poses a fundamental contradiction within the forces shaping many workplace cultures today.

Under post-Fordism, businesses are discovering the benefits of not just micromanaging workers, but encouraging playfulness and creativity, the ‘whole self’ being in the workplace, rather than just automatons working machines (Kahn, 1990). Evidence suggests that the humanistic notion that work should foster eudaimonia has grown not just as a management strategy, but as a popular ideal (Buchholz, 1978). And yet the principles of Taylorism are still operant because the ‘coercive laws of competition’ have not subsided. In this situation, play and creativity are harnessed in service of maximum productivity and profit. In harnessing them in this way, however, they are still held back. They are strangled in the same motion that they are unleashed.

## **Eudaimonia and the Contemporary Workplace**

### **New Playful Workplaces**

During the last two decades, many Silicon Valley startups of the 80s and 90s (now giant tech corporations), have been reported as having *created* organizational cultures of freedom conducive to creativity. Companies of this ilk include Amazon, Google, Apple, and Netflix, among others. Many are regarded as the most innovative companies for their impact on businesses, industry, and the larger culture (Fast Company Staff, 2018). During the last 5 years, they have repeatedly appeared in LinkedIn’s list of top companies; based



on site activity of its 706 million globally registered users as of September 2020 (Linkedin Pressroom, 2020).

#### *THE CASE OF NETFLIX*

Reed Hastings, co-founder of Netflix, the most innovative company for mastering the smallest screen (Fast Company Staff, 2018), in his recently published book, co-written with INSEAD faculty and business culture expert Erin Meyer, has talked about Netflix's competitive advantage - its locally attuned but globally maintained culture of candor, context over control, and freedom and responsibility, created through and for a 'high talent density' of 'stunning employees' that values 'people over process' and 'innovation over efficiency' – 'a culture where no rules rules' (Hastings and Meyer, 2020). A similar story is told in Creativity Inc. (2014), in which Pixar's co-founder Ed Catmull has talked about the culture of anarchic vibrance at Pixar which facilitates creativity and innovation. A mellower version of the much aggressively narrated culture story at Netflix, it enlists the same constituents of a 'healthy creative environment' – great employees, candor, transparency, no closed spaces, facilitating risk taking instead of striving to prevent error, and decentralizing decision-making (Catmull and Wallace, 2014). Both Pixar and Netflix are leaders in their niches.

The crux is this: Hire candidates who are capable of exceptional ideas and of accomplishing more at exceptional workload capacity, pay them top of the industry rates to lock them in, acclimatize them to giving, receiving, assessing, piloting and incorporating brutally honest feedback to reinvent their work and themselves in the *best interests of Netflix* (Hastings and Meyer, 2020), and keep them aware that should they fail at acclimating they will be exited. Even though lowest among its peers and rivals in the tech industry, 38.89% of its employees reported a burnout in Blind's anonymously conducted survey in which surveyed 11,487 people in 11 days (TeamBlind, 2018). Hastings' book has come two years after the Wall Street Journal reported in 2018 on the anxiety-filling nature of the culture responsible for Netflix's breakneck growth.

#### **NEOLIBERALISM AND GAMING EUDAIMONIA**

For a person to thrive in such an environment, they need to be internally motivated, hyper-adaptable and hyper-productive to place them safely without concern about their fitness for the position. The anxiety of Netflix culture should be eclipsed by a more powerful motor. One possible source is workers' original anxiety and compulsive activity, which primes them for excelling in a highly competitive environment, as Fromm and Weber discussed in relation to early Protestantism. Today, while vestiges of the Protestant work ethic and attitude no doubt remain, the high-roller culture is not about submission or resignation to reality before the will of God —it is about 'ownership' and self-fulfillment. And while the pull of anxiety may drive some overperformers, others may be driven more by the thrill of building human capital. For Michel Foucault, two staples of neoliberalism are amassing skills, assets, and status markers, i.e. 'human capital,' and the fading visibility of oppression due to proactive investment in one's own subjugation, i.e. 'governmentality' (Foucault, 2008). The super-motivation of these workers might be understood as a transposition of the mantle of self-fulfillment onto the reality of neoliberal governmentality.

The theories of Fromm and Foucault diverge on the motive force for compulsive work activity and social climbing under late capitalism. For Fromm it is about removing a sense of deficit, of unfulfilled psychic needs. For Foucault it is about neoliberal subjectivities who are simply being what they are, chasing what they have been forged to chase. Yet we suggest the reality might be more fully conceptualized as a varying combination of the two processes.

Fromm insists that the workaholicism of the twentieth century was driven by the anxiety of existential aloneness and purposelessness in the modern world and often felt as lingering intense boredom that rises once activities and distractions cease. This is a very specific claim that might not resonate with everyone. And yet in a competitive economy, especially under conditions of widespread and growing precarity, it is a safe guess that anxiety must factor into work performance for many people.

Yet neoliberal rationality is also very thick today, including the notion that high achievement will complete oneself, providing status, esteem, and fulfillment. People forged in such an environment will adapt to gain real satisfaction out of fulfilling what they have been reared to consider their purpose. Being born into a high achieving family, for example, one is more likely to internalize early on passion for achievement and anxiety for failure, etc. We might compare neoliberal governmentality and anxiety to a high and a low from the same drug. When the high from each achievement fails to generate permanent enrapture, anxiety may creep. The go-to palliative is to achieve something else, like an addict chasing a legendary but impossible permanent high. Even in the case of the 'high' in this metaphor, the motor is found in the quest for achievement, not the experience of work, making the goal alternate to the process. It is a seductive but deeply flawed incentive system. At Netflix, success stories make up about 60% of the workforce but about 40% struggle as they are squeezed within a system where the only way to thrive is to psychologically align one's sense of personal fulfillment with delivering one's energies entirely unto the workplace.

The rhetoric is that creativity and productivity derive from freedom, comfort, and play in these organizations, and in some sense this may be true. Yet 'the coercive laws of competition' still rule for the organization. The bottom line is a feverish pursuit of human capital, playfulness exploited along the way as a tool to force maximum output of original ideas in minimal time. Arguably, it is an attempt to *game* human flourishing. Does it work? For a few people, maybe.

### **Beyond Post-Fordism**

The new playful workplaces such as Netflix and Google starkly embody the contradictions of post-Fordism. The last three decades have seen organizations urging employees to bring their *whole self* to work; a concept of a self which emerges through *personal engagement* at work and an outcome of a dynamic between job role and self where work successfully provides an opportunity for simultaneous *self-employment* and *self-expression* (Kahn, 1990). In these workplaces, the paradigms of scientific management and eudaimonia co-mingle and compete. The outcome is a self-contradictory environment, where only some can thrive. Understanding this, the model is unsustainable to be translated across the economy, as millions of workers would be mismatched, and numerous industries (e.g., carpentry, food service) simply could not run

that way to that extent. Even in workplaces that adopt the new playful style, aspects of it are proving unsustainable, as in recent years Google has curtailed some of the freedoms previously granted to employees (Bulgarella, 2020). The high employee burnout rate being reported in surveys like *Blind* (2018)—in a lot of corporations that are even known for their playful, creative, and innovative organizational culture—indicates their orientation of free and playful workplaces is insufficient for the eudaimonia it is often touted to promote.

If these workplaces embody the contradictions of post-Fordism, the work ethic of post-Fordism must also embody these contradictions. ‘Hard work’ is honored as a form of self-fulfillment, and the ideal employee is one who seeks great personal gratification out of their own productivity and career success. Activity is ceaseless, and human capital is piled up, not for other-worldly salvation, per se, but for the gratification of living a full life. ‘Self-actualization’ is conflated with ‘self-valorization.’

What we have referred to as ‘new playful workplaces’ develop reputations for setting the laudable goal of providing environments where more of the whole self can be brought in. The problem is, they in some sense ‘put the cart before the horse’ in pushing so hard for productivity. To allow the whole self to best benefit productivity, the engagement of the whole self has to be held central, the increase in productivity being a benefit but not a guiding principle.<sup>99</sup> With productivity still being the ultimate arbiter of success, workers are pressed to align their ‘whole selves’ with the pressures of the organization, rather than the organization truly allowing space for whole selves to guide the pacing and rhythm of the productive process. The problem is not that these employers are misguided in bringing freedom and play into the workplace—they do not go far enough to sufficiently facilitate the kind of flourishing that industrial psychologists have been indicating for decades. Individual managers and CEOs are not to blame though, they cannot or could not go far enough even if they wanted to, because the capitalist mode of production and its ‘coercive laws of competition’ still occupy ‘the bottom line.’

## Conclusion

If instead of being implemented in half-measures, these ideas—from Socrates to Seligman—were taken in a revolutionary way (i.e. placing human flourishing as an end in itself, rather than in service to productivity), they could have profound effects not just on the experience of work, but on the health and well-being of workers in their ‘free-time’ as well, which would extend to their families and communities. In Fromm’s (1962) formulation, the nature of work would shape the social character of the workers, who would bring their molded character structures back home to their families and impart

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<sup>99</sup> Drawing from Winnicott, in health, a person should be able to recognize the existence of other people as humans with agency and not objects or entities without the same. However, reifying social practices and ideological belief systems compromise this ability and prompt people to perceive others as objects and sub- or non-human (Honneth, 1995). In a fundamental sense, whole selves will only be able to safely emerge in the workplace to the extent that people truly experience recognition for their whole persons in the workplace. And this requires dropping the hyper-focus on productivity and enlisting human lives in the service of economic ends, and instead enlisting the workplace in the promotion of eudaimonia.

these character traits to their children. Hypothetically, if such a shift could be enacted on a wide scale, the benefits to public health could be very substantial.

We argue that it is true both that such a shift would be desirable and so is worth trying to move toward, and that there are large impediments. Desirability and impediments are not mutually exclusive. It is useful to take a sober look at obstacles before strategizing how to affect change. We will mention two here.

First, there is the necessity of overcoming or at least severely curtailing of the ‘coercive laws of competition,’ in order to free up workplaces to organize according to principles of eudaimonia rather than being pressed into productivity by the ‘bottom line’. As much as possible, the wider economy should function less as a game of strategy and self-preservation by individuals and organizations, and more as a Winnicottian ‘holding environment’ on the basis of which humanity can have the support and opportunity to flourish. This is a major principle of what Fromm identified as characteristic of a truly ‘sane society’—an economy that serves people, more than people that serve the economy. There are a variety of factors to consider, for instance questions about ‘socialist calculation’ and about the form and feasibility of democratic and/or decentralized economic planning, cooperative workplaces, and so on.

Second, there is a need to embrace a reimagined way of life, a major component of which has to be a different ideal of ‘adulthood,’ where play, work, and leisure are equally honored as components of a full adult life. In the spirit of Emma Goldman, the revolution has to be danceable. None of this is easy, but this does not diminish the good that it could do, nor the value of the vision of a society where ‘the good life’ is the rule rather than the exception.

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