The Elusiveness of Free Time: On the Feminist Futures of Technology and Care in After Work

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Hester, H., Srnicek, N. 2023. *After Work: A History of the Home and the Fight for Free Time*. London, New York: Verso Books.

We wake up in a flat that turns the light on when we ask it to, press a button to make the morning coffee and a waffle while the robot cleaner hums in the background, and receive freshly delivered meals for the day from a Deliveroo courier at the door – yet we still feel like we're stuck on a hamster wheel. Why did time-saving technologies break their promises and leave us with even more work?

After Work: A History of the Home and the Fight for Free Time, by Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek, addresses this paradox head-on. It offers a sharp analysis of why, despite rapid technological development aimed at making housework more efficient, domestic labour remains an enduring and unevenly distributed burden, while the nuclear family remains the primary place of the care to be performed.

Drawing on the feminist tradition of analysing social reproduction, the book repositions domestic work at the centre of the post-work imaginaries of a society no longer organised around wage labour – a society that has radically reduced not work itself but the amount of unnecessary labour we have to do. It argues that mainstream post-work discourses – often focused on industrial or white-collar work automation – have neglected the sphere of care and household labour. Hester and Srnicek enter the post-work discussion with the idea that if we are serious about building a post-work future, we not only have to pay more attention to the field of social reproduction and, especially, to the unpaid work that is performed at home and still primarily by women, but we must also critically rethink the very design and purpose of technology in the domestic sphere, considering both its current and its desirable effects on our liberation from unnecessary chores.

The book foregrounds how the blurred lines between public and private, made even blurrier by digitalisation, uphold patriarchal divisions and sustain exploitative structures, whether through smart home devices, the gig economy, or normative expectations around 'productive' free time.

Let's explore the book's core claims and see how the authors address unresolved social reproduction dilemmas in the ongoing discussion and political reimagination of life after work.

The domestic work paradox

Hester and Srnicek carefully dismantle the assumption that technological progress automatically leads to the reduction of domestic labour. As they show, time-use studies reveal a stubborn persistence: despite the influx of dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, and pre-prepared meals, the time spent on housework has barely changed over the last century. Instead, cleanliness, nutrition, and care standards have steadily risen. Floors must be spotless, meals freshly cooked and healthy, and the children brought up to be well-rounded. The heightened expectations, particularly towards mothers, are especially pronounced in 'intensive parenting' (as those expectations particularly concern mothers, it is worth recalling Hays (1998) 'intensive mothering' concept), a mode of childrearing that requires extensive time and emotional investment to cultivate children's human capital. As Hester and Srnicek argue, this shift links parenting even more closely to the reproduction of socioeconomic status, and the home becomes a site where children are trained to be as competitive as possible in the future labour market.

Furthermore, the authors highlight that many household technologies – such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and food processors – are overwhelmingly designed for individual or nuclear family use, not for shared or collective arrangements ('Chapter 2: Technologies'). The washing machine in each household replaced the laundrette, but not the labour itself. The 'smart' kitchen streamlines labour but does not redistribute it. As the authors note, innovation in the domestic sphere has reinforced the individualisation of domestic labour and maintained the gendered division of responsibility within households. Rather than automating housework, many technologies have entrenched its privatised and feminised character. Technical limitations cannot explain this trajectory of technological development, as it embodies a particular historical political choice.

The book's historical analysis of this trend, framed through what has been termed the Cowan Paradox, is based on Ruth Schwartz Cowan's analysis (Cowan 1983). Cowan's observation that new technologies did not reduce but instead reorganised domestic labour underlines the importance of sociotechnical critique: it is not just what a tool can do but how and for whom it is designed. In this way, *After Work* applies historical feminist critiques to contemporary digital cultures, demonstrating that digital tools continue to reproduce, rather than transform, the gendered architecture of domesticity.

‘Free time’ and ‘unfree choice’

Alongside the persistence of domestic labour, Hester and Srnicek critique another central myth: that technological advances have increased our free time. While specific tasks may be performed more efficiently, the supposed surplus of time has not been reclaimed for rest, pleasure, or freely chosen care, be it self-care, caregiving for others, or anything else that is a genuinely free choice unfettered by necessity. Instead, in ‘Chapter 3: Standards: Fix Up, Look Busy’, the authors argue that ‘free time’ is increasingly colonised by the imperatives of productivity and self-improvement, so even what is supposed to be leisure time is filled with rigorous fitness routines or upskilling. Moreover, increasing impoverishment, the housing crisis, and the rise of the ‘working poor’ (individuals who are employed yet live below the poverty line as a result of low wages and insufficient income) have led to more and more people taking on secondary or supplemental employment and various gig jobs obtained on increasingly popular digital platforms – and all of this is being squeezed into the ‘remaining’ time.

This desperate search for more time to be spend on paid work and/or increase one’s value and competitiveness in the labour market is also embodied by the increasingly sophisticated and elaborate tracking, ranking, and scheduling programmes embedded in the devices and digital services we use.

Towards temporal sovereignty

‘Temporal sovereignty’ is an essential aspect of freedom that can and should be achieved in the post-work world. As the authors explain in ‘Chapter 5: Spaces’, to have sovereignty over our time is to have enough space to ask ourselves what we should do with our time, which is rarely possible under a capitalism where time is organised around the principle of ‘value’. This means that value currently limits our choices, as working less to spend more time on a hobby would mean earning less money. The authors write that ‘the choices available in free time become subject to the same calculative deliberation performed under the metric of value’ (Hester, Srnicek 2023: 135). In this context, temporal sovereignty means ‘authoring our own norms and obligations to the collectives in which we live’; therefore, it does not involve abandoning all the responsibilities we have but instead reshaping them after we obtain some freedom from necessary tasks and duties, including economic ones, so that we are able to determine our values beyond their economic dimension.

In general, the potential that Hester and Srnicek still see in technologies for attaining a fairer distribution of unpaid care work and domestic chores could be used to

achieve greater temporal justice and specifically to address the gendered division of time and gendered time poverty. Their description of genuinely free time is similar to what Robert E. Goodin (2010) defined as 'discretionary time', which is the time 'over which you have autonomous control, after satisfying the demands of necessity' (Goodin 2010: 2). Goodin mentions three dimensions of necessity: ensuring income, performing unpaid household labour, and keeping the body functioning. For Goodin, what is left after that is when we can exercise our agency and engage in the activities of our choice, yet this type of time is unequally distributed. Like him, Hester and Srnicek's reflections are focused on the measures to be taken to achieve distributive justice over time, which they all place at the centre of a social justice concern. However, while Goodin focuses more on the dimension of state policies, Hester and Srnicek go beyond this, proposing a braver reconfiguration of how much time we could spend on the dimensions of necessity – were it not for capitalism and the technological development subordinated to its logic.

A new look at technology in a post-work society

Rather than accepting the current technological landscape purely as a result of the success and limitations of technology and science (which gadgets can be produced given the level of technological development at the current moment), Hester and Srnicek ask us to imagine what tools and infrastructures might emerge in a genuinely post-work society. For this, what if technologies were not designed for individual use but for sharing? What if technological development were primarily not profit-driven? What if homes were built to enable communal living rather than reinforce the isolating logic of the nuclear household?

The authors invite us to reimagine domestic life outside of capitalism and the fixation on family-type households as the central unit of social reproduction. Drawing on socialist feminist traditions, the authors propose reorienting technological development towards collective benefit. They sketch the possibilities: cooperative kitchens, shared childcare, platform infrastructures governed by users, and robust public services that decentre the family as the sole unit of care and social reproduction.

Overall, *After Work* is a valuable read for anyone interested in post-digital intimacies, as it offers a renewed lens for the politicisation of technologies and their everyday use in private spaces. By stressing the gendered nature of all the 'smart' domesticity proposed to us by technical innovations, it offers both a critique and hope for reinventing not only gadgets and applications but also the very forms of domestic life known to us. By centring reproductive labour within post-work imaginaries, Hester and Srnicek challenge the dominant narratives and offer a feminist roadmap towards a post-work society, where all work is valued and we all enjoy genuine autonomy

over our time, choices, and lives. This is not a book just for scholars; it also speaks to a broader public, including activists, students, carers, and anyone interested in rethinking how we live, work, and care in everyday life.

While the book focuses primarily on Western capitalist democracies, its framework is elaborate enough to be brought into dialogue with diverse geographies, including post-socialist settings, where care arrangements and infrastructures may take different forms, as may the usage of technological innovations and digital platforms. This, in turn, opens space for further research.

As we navigate an era in which homes are wired, lives are platformed, and care is increasingly commodified, this book reminds us that the fight for free time is inseparable from the battle for justice, including temporal justice. It begins by asking not only what our technologies do but also what kind of world they help build.

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Tvorba rodinné politiky: norský model a měnící se tvář otcovství

Kateřina Švihálková

Brandth, B., Kvande, E. (2022). *Designing Parental Leave Policy: The Norway Model and the Changing Face of Fatherhood*. Bristol University Press.

Kniha *Designing Parental Leave Policy: The Norway Model and the Changing Face of Fatherhood* od autorek Berit Brandth a Elin Kvande přináší detailní pohled na norský model rodičovské, jeho dopady na genderové role a vývoj otcovství v rámci soudo-