



Review

Transforming work: A critical literature review on degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalism and craft labor

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have called for a profound change in capitalist growth-oriented provisioning systems and business models to help address the unique socio-ecological challenges of the 21st century. Reenvisioning how work is organised, constructed, and valued is an essential part of this change. Scholars of degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalist, and craft research have long discussed alternatives to capitalist work from different perspectives and levels of analysis. We believe that cross-fertilisation of ideas between these strands of literature can advance our imaginaries of the future of work and transition pathways towards the vision of dealienated labour. For this purpose, we bring these strands of literature into conversation by performing a critical literature review on work in postcapitalist, degrowth, post-growth, and craft scholarship. Overall, 121 articles were included in the analysis. We identify autonomy, dealienation, and value creation as common themes with complementary insights from the strands of literature. We also observe that macroeconomic policies suggested by degrowth, post-growth and postcapitalist scholars provide an institutional framework that can be compatible with the micro-politics of work, as documented by craft scholars. Lastly, craft scholars provide an empirically grounded analysis of what it means to engage in useful doing, whereas degrowth and postcapitalist literature mainly contains critical theoretical reflections on the decommodification of labour, recognition of reproductive labour and value creation. Degrowth, post-growth and postcapitalist literature can benefit from more empirical research investigating these issues in relation to the everyday realities of workers.

1. Introduction

As local and national governments declare climate emergencies, there is a growing consensus that humanity needs to operate within planetary boundaries. However, visions on how to achieve this goal vary widely—from techno-optimism (e.g. [Asayama and Ishii, 2017](#)) to agendas on degrowth and postcapitalism (e.g. [Büscher et al., 2021](#); [Schmelzer et al., 2022](#)). Scholars adopting the latter vision suggest that ‘the need for remaining within a safe operating space for humanity also encompasses the need for transforming work [...] since the work process is the mediating link between society and the environment’ ([Kreinin and Aigner, 2021:282](#)).

Working time is significantly associated with environmental pressures, as countries with longer working hours consume more resources and emit more carbon ([Knight et al., 2013](#)). Further, many jobs are ‘low-quality, under-rewarded, insecure, stressful and over-managed’ ([Thomson, 2019:5](#)). The phenomenon of ‘bullshit jobs’, that is, jobs with little societal value and a negative effect on wellbeing, has been

popularised by David [Graeber \(2018\)](#) and has received wide social resonance, perhaps not least due to high levels of employee burnout around the world ([McKinsey, 2022](#)).

Post-growth, degrowth, postcapitalist, and craft scholars have been discussing alternatives to capitalist work for years from different perspectives and levels of analysis, albeit with commonalities. In non-academic circles, the term ‘post-growth’ is often used to describe an economy that prioritizes wellbeing instead of GDP, while not necessarily challenging capitalist development paradigm (see, e.g. [World Economic Forum, 2022](#)). In German-speaking countries, the term *Postwachstum*, which translates as post-growth, can entail both a-growth and degrowth positions ([Lehmann, 2022](#)). Academic literature does not always distinguish between post-growth and degrowth either, and in fact they are often used interchangeably (e.g. [Froese et al., 2023](#); [Vandeventer and Lloveras, 2021](#)). Degrowth scholars focus on ‘an equitable down-scaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term’ ([Schneider et al., 2010:512](#)) and offer concrete

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policy proposals (e.g. Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

Degrowth has many points of convergence with postcapitalism, such as aspirations to overcome accumulation and commodification (see, e.g. Schmid (2019) for more detailed comparison). Postcapitalist scholars focus on demonstrating an already existing diversity of provisioning and (re)productive practices and describing the politics of possibility and economic difference (Gibson-Graham, 2006). A growing number of authors are using the label 'postcapitalism' to engage with a variety of practices and domains, among which community economies, post-work, and autonomous politics. As Chatterton and Pusey (2020:33) posit, such scholarship offers 'discrete, overlapping, and sometimes competing, insights into postcapitalism [...] they offer analytical insights on the nature and extent of enclosure, commodification and alienation; commentary on the status and importance of the common, community production and socially useful doing; the role of technology and its impact on the future of work; and the evolving relations between the state, social movements and civil society'.

A stream within craft scholarship aligns with degrowth and postcapitalist literature insofar as it investigates existing alternatives to capitalist models of consumption and production and tackles environmental and social crises (Hodson, 2001; Luckman, 2015; Sennett, 2008). As early as 19th century, William Morris argued that useful, productive labour, such as artisanal production, could transcend labour alienation (della Santa, 2021). The connection between craft work and critiques of labour alienation under capitalism was picked up by alternative social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, as they emphasised craft as central to 'enlightened labour' and purposeful life (e.g. Hodson, 2001). Some degrowth scholars have also engaged with the field of crafts, exemplifying craft work as a type of labour-intensive activity that is desirable for the future (Hardt et al., 2020; Nierling, 2012; Foster, 2017). Both postcapitalist and craft scholars (e.g. Roberts, 2012; Rantz, 2012; Banks, 2010) refer to Karl Marx, who wrote about artisanal labour as a form of art 'immersed in its particular specificity' (Marx, 1857/1993:296) in opposition to abstract labour, indifferent to form and determined by the needs of capital.

We believe that cross-fertilisation of ideas between these strands of literature can advance our imaginaries of the future of work and transition pathways towards the vision of dealienated labour. In this paper, we aim to answer the following research question: How can alternatives to capitalist work be conceptualised by bringing together degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalist studies, and literature on craft imaginaries and practices? For this purpose, we bring these strands of literature into conversation by performing a critical literature review.

Our paper is structured as follows. We start by providing more theoretical context for the article, offering a brief overview of the concept of work under capitalism and its most prominent critiques. In the methods section, we explain the critical literature review on work in degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalist, and craft scholarship, providing a detailed description of the chosen method. The results section is organised for each strand of literature, highlighting key debates and variations in the understandings of central concepts. In the discussion, we bring these strands of literature into conversation with the aim of advancing our imaginaries of the future of work and transition pathways towards the vision of dealienated labour. We conclude by summarizing the main findings of the paper and reflecting on the limitations of the methodological choices.

2. A brief critique of work under capitalism

On a fundamental level, capitalist work is about creating commodities for the market (Pietrykowski, 2019). Therefore, capitalist work includes only paid activities, such as wage labour and self-employment, excluding non-paid activities, such as reproductive or care labour, which becomes effectively valueless. This separation is unique to capitalism (Federici, 2018). The understanding of capitalist work relies largely on neoclassical thinking, which portrays homo sapiens as homo

economicus, that is, as independent, self-motivating actors with rational, utility-maximising economic behaviour (Tilly and Tilly, 1998). Neoclassical theory holds that workers and employers meet each other in a marketplace with equal bargaining power (Tilly and Tilly, 1998).

Labour, however, alongside land and money, is a fictitious commodity that is not created for the market exchange but is still bought and sold on the market (Polanyi, 1944). As Polanyi (1944:76) posited, fictitious commodities are of crucial importance for the entire economic system: 'their demand and supply are real magnitudes [...]'. The commodity fiction supplies a vital organising principle in regard to the whole of society affecting almost all its institutions in the most varied ways'. One of Karl Polanyi's key arguments is that the principle of economic gain governs commodity fiction, which means 'no less than the running of society as an adjunct to the market' (Ibid.:60). We could argue that 80 years later, these statements still hold true, as many companies continue to manage 'human resources' based on profit margins, and access to basic needs such as healthcare is tied to formal employment and income levels in some countries (e.g. Hoffman and Paradise, 2008).

While Polanyi discussed mostly macro implications of commodifying labour, Marx provided a more grounded critique of work under capitalist conditions of production, observing how workers became alienated from the outcomes of their labour, from activity itself, from the self, and from society (Henschen, 2020; Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). According to Marx (1867), this alienation was non-voluntary: under the imperative of profit maximisation and accumulation of capital, workers were forced to spend more time at work than needed to sustain their families, producing surpluses for the owners of the means of production.

Multiple scholars have built on Marx's writings to advance a critique of labour under capitalism. In 1974, Braverman published an influential book, 'Labour and Monopoly Capital', in which he argued that the 'capitalist mode of production systematically destroys all-round skills' as 'a structure is given to all labour processes that at its extremes polarises those whose time is infinitely valuable and those whose time is worth almost nothing. This might even be called the general law of the capitalist division of labour' (Braverman, 1974:57–58). Labour process theory, affirmed throughout the 1980s and 1990s, uses the central thesis developed by Braverman and further unpacks the issue of deskilling of the working class, and the logics of control of the labour process (Gandini, 2019; see Smith, 2015 for an overview of the contemporary relevance of Braverman's thought). The rise of platform work—that is, work mediated by digital platforms to match workers with consumers (e.g. Uber) or companies (e.g. Upwork)—is arguably a contemporary empirical example of the capitalist division of labour that Braverman wrote about, as Edward (2021:3) puts it, 'this model creates a highly segmented labour market: a small core of high value added activities and a non-core of outsourced and franchised activities'.

This leads us to the topic of the *value* attributed to labour and produced by labour. In neoclassical economics, value is determined by *price*, which has direct implications for the justification of desirable economic activities and distribution of income (Mazzucato, 2018). Mariana Mazzucato (2018:14) argues that the definition of value is 'as much about politics [...] as it is about narrowly defined economics'. Today, capitalist labour exists not necessarily to satisfy the needs of workers or even capitalists but to produce value, which essentially is validated by monetary exchange of commodities on the market. According to Bolton's (2020:338) critique of capitalism, 'a *successful sale* means the labour which produced the object that is sold was socially necessary and therefore value-producing' (own emphasis), which means that no matter how useful the result of labour is, it becomes essentially worthless when not sold. This has implications for contemporary work ethics and the normalisation of long working hours, which is almost non-escapable in the culture of 'earning more, selling more and buying more' (Demaria et al., 2013:197).

3. Methodology

This paper is based on a critical literature review, which is especially suitable for research that aims to go beyond description and to include conceptual innovation, combining academic theories and ideas and explaining relationships between them (Saunders and Rojon, 2011). A critical literature review ‘may provide a ‘launch pad’ for a new phase of conceptual development and subsequent ‘testing’ (Grant and Booth, 2009:94), which aligns well with the goals of the present article.

The literature review is based on a web search for peer-refereed journal articles and reviews in the academic database Scopus. Multiple studies have demonstrated that Scopus has a wider coverage of journals compared to Web of Science (e.g. Singh et al., 2021) and meets all necessary performance requirements to be suitable for a literature review (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2020). We included only peer-refereed journal articles and reviews published in the English language as of the end of May 2022. Monographs were excluded, as well as ‘grey literature’, examples of which include ‘conference abstracts, research reports, book chapters, unpublished data, dissertations, policy documents and personal correspondence’ (Hopewell et al., 2005:56). Behind this methodological choice we note: (i) pragmatic considerations relating to the accessibility of books; (ii) the widely accepted academic practice of excluding ‘grey’ materials (Adams et al., 2017), relating to the potential difficulty in assessing the latter’s methodological quality (Hopewell et al., 2005), despite the growing recognition of their potential added value. However, acknowledging this choice as a limitation and following examples of earlier conducted literature reviews that focused only on peer-reviewed articles in journals (such as Kroezen et al., 2021), we informed our analysis by a broader reading of key monographs in each subject area.

Several separate searches were run with the following keywords in the ‘title’, ‘keywords’, and ‘abstract’ fields: ‘degrowth’, ‘post-growth’, ‘postgrowth’, ‘post-capital*’, ‘postcapital*’, ‘work’, ‘labour’, ‘craft*’, ‘capital*’, ‘alternative’ (for keyword combinations, see Fig. 1). The keywords ‘work’ and ‘labour’ were selected because they often describe paid activity and are widely used both in craft literature and in different political economy schools of thought that critique paid labour and offer alternatives to it (from Karl Marx and Karl Polanyi to contemporary scholars). We intentionally excluded articles that describe voluntary work, hobbies, and activism, as these types of labour cannot be compared with capitalist work. The keywords ‘degrowth’, ‘post-growth’, ‘postgrowth’, ‘post-capital*’, and ‘postcapital*’ in combination with keywords ‘work’ and ‘labour’ were chosen to identify relevant publications within respective fields of degrowth, post-growth and postcapitalism.

As the goal of the paper is to identify alternatives to capitalist work, the keyword combinations ‘craft* and capital* and (work or labour)’ were chosen to identify articles that connect the debates on craft work with a larger political economic context. We acknowledge the rich

literature on craft work that is not connected to capitalism; however, given the scope of the paper, we have filtered it out. The keyword combination ‘craft* and alternative and (work or labour)’ was chosen, as craft work is often discussed as an alternative to industrial production without explicitly referring to the capitalist system.

As shown in Fig. 1, selection round 1 is the number of results generated by the initial queries. Selection round 2 shows results left after filtering our irrelevant disciplines (e.g. chemistry, engineering) while selecting the following: social sciences, arts, and humanities, business, economics, environmental science, multidisciplinary, psychology, and decision sciences. Selection round 3 shows how many publications were selected for full-length reading based on the relevance of the title and abstract. Selection round 4 shows how many publications were selected for the final analysis based on the relevance of the full body of text.

For the keyword combination ‘craft* and capital* and craft* and alternative and (work or labour)’, articles were deemed relevant if they connected lived experiences of work with a larger political economic context or explored the nature of craft work by, for instance, describing work motivations and processes. We selected paper based on definition of craft as the creation of unique, actual objects, entailing the handling of specific types of materials (e.g. precious metals, wood, clay) with the use of tools and technology (e.g Hill, 2020). We incorporate in the definition of craft small-scale low-tech and digital production that sometimes takes place in communal spaces such as makerspaces or FabLabs and aligns with the cosmopolitanism movement, in which production stays local but knowledge is shared widely, sometimes on a global scale (e.g. Kostakis and Bauwens, 2020).

The articles were excluded if they were not relevant to the scope of this paper, for example, if they were about job crafting as a managerial concept or if they described manual skilled work performed in industrial settings, such as sweatshops, as the focus of this paper is on craft labour that exists in the ‘cracks’ of the capitalist system. We intentionally kept theoretical papers that provided a meta-view on the subject. During the analysis, papers such as Kroezen et al. (2021) served as an important comparison base to ensure that no essential themes were left out from this review.

Overall, 121 articles were included in the final data analysis: 41 papers for degrowth, post-growth literature, 25 papers for the literature on postcapitalism, and 55 papers for the literature on craft. We used thematic synthesis as a method with the following three steps: coding text, developing descriptive themes, and generating analytical themes (Thomas and Harden, 2008). Atlas.ti was used to code the selected manuscripts. They were read in full length by the first author and coded inductively. The second author read a random selection of the papers and coded them independently to ensure inter-rater reliability. Both authors intended to keep an open mind throughout the process, noticing as many themes as possible and creating the respective codes. Atlas.ti projects were merged to compare the codes. After merging the projects, similar codes were combined, and differences were discussed. Each



Fig. 1. Filtering process of papers for the literature review. Own elaboration. Selection round 1 – all results; Selection round 2 – relevant disciplines; Selection round 3 – relevant articles based on abstracts; Selection round 4 – relevant articles based on the full body of text.

strand of literature was first analysed separately, and descriptive themes were developed based on the most frequently used codes. As themes emerged from articles on degrowth and post-growth were mostly overlapping, we merged the results into one section 4.1. Degrowth, post-growth, and work. Analytical themes were created towards the end of the analysis by combining insights from the analysed strands of literature. The next section presents the results, which are based on descriptive themes, while the discussion section is based on analytical themes.

4. Results

4.1. Degrowth, post-growth, and work

In the degrowth and post-growth literature, two major theme clusters dominate in terms of envisioning alternatives to the work-related status quo: (i) the reduction of paid working hours and its consequences, and (ii) expanding work imaginaries.

4.1.1. Reduction in paid working hours

Proposals to reduce paid working hours come in many forms, for instance, 6-h workdays, four workdays a week, work sharing, longer holidays, or parental leave (Dengler and Strunk, 2018; Gunderson, 2019; Jackson and Victor, 2011). Foster (2017) posits that a reduction in paid working hours is both a proactive strategy for decreasing production and a reactive policy for curbing unemployment. Degrowth scholars argue that this policy measure has multiple advantages, ranging from higher quality of life and increased autonomy to reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, especially when accompanied by sustainable consumption policies (e.g. Gunderson, 2019; Nogard, 2013; Fremstad et al., 2019; Scarrow, 2018; Sekulova et al., 2013). Working time reduction is generally seen as a pre-condition for adopting lifestyles with lower environmental impact, as it allows for more time-intensive activities and inverts the capitalist logic of subordinating life (end) to utility (means) (Gunderson, 2019). Free time is also imagined to be devoted to citizen duty, enjoyment of life, and resting (ibid). Several authors argue for a decoupling of the production of goods and services from wages, notably through the introduction of universal basic income (UBI) as a right (e.g. Kallis, 2013; Gollain, 2016; Foster, 2017; Malmaeus et al., 2020). A critical voice in this conversation is Alcott's (2013) notion of job guarantee, in which he argues that work is a political right that relies on the historical values of most European societies, praising earning against receiving.

4.1.2. Expanding work imaginaries

The second major theme that emerged from our analysis was expanding work imaginaries. What counts as labour? What work ethic dominates our lives? The dominant ideology of work-as-commodity or work-as-employment has been rejected by degrowth scholarship for decades. Some scholars build on Gorz's, Illich's, and Marx's ideas about more convivial, autonomous work aimed at satisfying individual and community needs, as opposed to generating profit and accumulating capital (e.g. Gollain, 2016; Foster, 2017). Autonomy, also defined as the 'creation of value perceived by the workers' (Illich, 1978:83–84), is seen as an important condition for opposing the logics of market value creation, eventually leading to lower labour productivity coupled with more useful and meaningful production. Scholars such as Vergara-Camus (2019) build on Marx and argue that dealienation in labour processes, relationships between people, nature, and commodities would happen as a consequence of workers' control over the means of production. Examples of convivial autonomous work include self-determined creative activities, such as crafts, that can take place either in the realm of self-employment or unpaid voluntary work (Nogard, 2013). Foster (2017) provides an example of craftspeople in rural Atlantic Canada who, having autonomy, chose to apply an alternative work ethic and take a break from paid employment from January

to April rather than looking for ways to increase exports and online sales to keep their operations running through the winter.

Rising recognition of unpaid work, including care work, is seen as another important precondition for a degrowth society (Nierling, 2012). As early as the 1970s, feminist research showed that reproductive labour had to be actively conceptualised as work to make it visible and an object of public negotiation. Autonomist Marxists and feminist scholars have argued for a refusal of capitalist labour that undervalues women's and nature's reproductive work (Singh, 2019). The goal of producing material wealth should be not an end in itself but a means to sustain the 'production of people' or production of livelihood, which means starting from the interest of all human beings. Nutrition, education, maintenance, repair, care, recreation, craft, creativity, and culture are examples of work that is desirable for a post-growth economy, as they reinforce community ties while being less energy intensive (Hardt et al., 2020; White, 2020).

Degrowth scholars imagine a mix of paid or unpaid work as a transitional phase to non-commodified labour based on the principle of reciprocity (e.g. Andreoni and Galmarini, 2014; Littig, 2018; Nierling, 2012). An empirical example of such mixed work is time banking in New Zealand, where people combine formal employment with voluntary service provision to other people (McGuirk, 2017). However, as the research shows, it remains a hobby for people with stable housing and income situations, as well as for those with high awareness of the climate crisis, leaving out people in more precarious positions. Post-growth scholars acknowledge that the transition to 'mixed' work, to be successful, requires the support of macro-economic policies such as tax reform (Littig, 2018).

In 41 peer-reviewed publications selected for the final analysis, degrowth and post-growth scholars were mostly dedicated to discussing theoretical alternatives to capitalist labour and hypothetical macro-economic policies that could support these alternatives, with a few exceptions that empirically explored the connection between working time reduction and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Further, only four papers contained empirical evidence on alternative work ethics. This indicates a substantial gap in the degrowth literature as a critical question—How should work be performed differently under degrowth scenarios?—remains largely unexplored.

4.2. Postcapitalism and work

4.2.1. Workers' control over production

Economic democracy—or workers' control over the means of production and distribution of surpluses—is a major theme in postcapitalist literature. It is considered a precondition for escaping exploitation and creating conditions for a more humane work environment that implies more intrinsically rewarding work, more free time, and subsequently less alienation (e.g. Henschen, 2020; Spencer, 2018). To illustrate the potential of democratically run companies, Larrabure (2017) provides an empirical example of an Argentinian cooperative, where most decisions are taken by workers during open assemblies. The workers also find it the most interesting part of the job, as they feel free and at the same time responsible for what they are doing and how their decisions can either hurt or benefit everyone involved. This system fosters not just enhanced personal and collective responsibility but also a non-monetary ethos: workers choose to stay at the cooperative even if offered higher salaries elsewhere because of their commitment to the principles of the collective. In response, they are seen not just as numbers but as people with feelings and families to support who cannot be easily fired. Similar observations were made by Dey (2016), who examined Argentinian enterprises occupied by workers after the 2001 crisis.

The theme of workers' control is closely related to the issues of technology and automation. Under capitalist conditions of production, automation places downward pressure on wages and widens pools of disposable and insecure labour; workers are essentially reduced to 'appendages' of machines, exploited, and alienated (Spencer, 2018). In

postwork debates, worker-oriented and worker-driven technological progress and automation of tedious tasks, on the contrary, are imagined as creating the conditions for socially useful production as well as more leisure time (e.g. Baker, 2018; Mathers, 2020; Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). In fact, automation of work is a major topic in postcapitalist literature, which, due to authors such as Paul Mason and Aaron Bastani, also made it to the public debate on what postcapitalist society could look like. The reduction of all working hours is often presented as a goal in itself, following Marx and his ideas that 'disposable time' is the 'true wealth of a nation' and that the 'true realm of freedom' can be achieved when work is performed not from necessity but from choice (see, e.g. Beehler, 1989).

4.2.2. Labour value-validating mechanism

To liberate workers from the pressure to enter precarious waged labour relations to secure their livelihoods, some scholars suggest UBI as one of the main policy instruments. While acknowledging the emancipating potential of UBI, most postcapitalist scholars, however, are rather critical of it as a stand-alone measure, arguing that it could contribute to the maintenance of capitalism since it does not challenge the underlying structure of society around subordination to money and commodities (e.g. Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). Mathers (2020) claims that debates on UBI miss the full picture of capitalism's forms of exploitation, for instance, the significance of free digital labour when people share their data for the benefit of private corporations and enter 'immaterial servitude'. Furthermore, UBI could limit workers' capacities to recognise and collectively organise against exploitation, as they would be detached from waged work as a space of socialisation. Thompson (2022) echoes this critique and argues that UBI can be successful only when state and capital are democratised and commons-based alternatives are created.

Scholars call for deeper engagement with the underlying logics of capitalism and its value-validating mechanism through the monetary exchange of commodities on the market (Bolton, 2020). Mercer (2022), for instance, builds on multiple authors, such as Ernst Bloch, Kathi Weeks, Ana Dinerstein, and Frederick Pitts, suggesting that alternative visions for postcapitalist society should shift the focus from the abstract reproduction of value to the concrete reproduction of life. Building on Marx, Browne (2011:313) posits that 'in the capitalist time economy, care for all always appears to be too expensive, despite its evident social utility'. To reverse this logic, Browne suggests that instead of a successful sale, the degree of social utility should legitimise socially necessary production. Postcapitalist scholars agree that without addressing the value-validating mechanism, neither automation, UBI, nor even workers' control over the means of production can radically improve people's livelihoods.

Of the 25 publications selected for the final analysis, only three contained empirical analyses of alternatives to capitalist work. As in the case of degrowth and post-growth literature, we believe this indicates a fundamental gap in understanding how work can be and is already performed differently on the ground from the cracks of the capitalist system. To fill this gap, we now turn to the literature on craft work.

4.3. Craft and work: A continuous reflective dialogue

In this section, we provide an overview of the findings based on an analysis of empirical articles on the lived experiences of craftspeople. An overarching theme that emerged from coding was a theme of dialogue, including the dialogue with tools and materials, between concrete practices and thinking, among craftspeople, and between craftspeople and customers. Below, we elaborate on each dialogue.

4.3.1. Materiality and time in craft work: A dialogue between tools, materials, the body, and the mind

Craft scholars often talk about the 'sensual' relationship that craftspeople establish with materials. It implies a form of dialogue in which

makers get inspiration from the matter through experimentation and study of an original form and context (Thurnell-Read, 2014; Atlas, 2019; Holmquist et al., 2019). Multiple authors disentangle how tacit and sensory knowledge is accrued by makers through smelling, touching, tasting, and hearing (e.g. Gibson, 2016; Thurnell-Read, 2014; Dodd et al., 2021). For instance, Gibson (2016:23) describes the works of contemporary bootmakers in the US who know 'how to best position and how far to stretch a skin over a last, how to skive which kinds of leathers into wafer thin sections for inlay work' through 'muscle memory' accumulated through repeated practice.

Others frame this interaction as 'a continuous dialogue' between craftspeople and their tools (e.g. Clifford Collard, 2021; Paredes, 2018). Hendon (2006:363) documented a historical example based on archaeological studies of textile production in Mesoamerica, explaining how the loom and the body were interconnected physically and symbolically: 'To Tzutujil Maya, human beings are woven and textiles are born. The loom becomes an extension of the woman'. Some studies of contemporary craft work share similar findings. Conservation stonemasons in Scotland, for instance, talk about developing an 'intimate and enduring' bond with their hand tools, which they acquire during apprenticeship and keep in personal possession (Yarrow and Jones, 2014, 267–268); they assign much value to hand tools due to a higher degree of control and a larger 'repertoire of actions that the mason continues to see as an extension of his own'.

The centrality of such interactions calls for a re-evaluation of the relationship between manual practice and thought (Sennet, 2008). As early as the 1800s, authors such as John Ruskin opposed artificial separation between 'hand and mind' due to the socially damaging consequences it produced (della Santa, 2021). Dualism between immaterial production and manual labour remains an essential critique of capitalist work today (e.g. Previtali and Fagiani, 2015). Artisans, however, manage design and execution as deeply interwoven processes (for practical contemporary cases of craft-based design in the Netherlands, see Holmquist et al., 2019).

Time is also essential to constructing such a resonant relationship. Several authors provide empirical examples of makers engaging in slow-paced production that follow 'nature's time' (Rissanen, 2017), either because of low-tech solutions that are directly tied to rhythms of nature (e.g. Paredes, 2018) or because of emphasising creativity and originality in design (e.g. Gibson, 2016). To maximise creative possibilities, some craftspeople collect large stocks of materials (e.g. Gibson, 2016) and spend hours getting to know their qualities.

The temporal dimension of craft work extends beyond the time spent on it. In some instances, tools also provide a 'bodily connection with the past', as Lind (2018:9) described through the experience of a contemporary hand spinner in the US: 'When I use the wheel ... I feel closer to the history of womankind'. Further, craft can provide a connection with the future, as in the case of stonemasons who leave personal marks on blocks they work on: 'in a hundred years' time, what we do here is going to be historical' (Yarrow and Jones, 2014:269).

4.3.2. Shared moral universe: Achieving mastery through social connections and a common work ethos

Craft work is often framed as rooted in deep and meaningful social connections and exchanges. Even though craftspeople often undertake formal training, the level of mastery is defined by informal, on-the-job training, not least because of (tacit) knowledge sharing. Practical training allows the formation of lasting friendships, building a reputation and gaining a sense of community (e.g. Yarrow and Jones, 2014; Rashid and Ratten, 2021). In the analysed literature, the interviewed craftspeople often see each other as peers with complementary skills and knowledge rather than competitors (Thurnell-Read, 2014). Makers prioritise craft excellence rather than commercial growth, often creating spaces for shared learning, exchanging tools and cross-referring customers to each other's niche (Dodd et al., 2021; Rashid and Ratten, 2021; Gibson, 2016). The social character of knowledge acquisition has

deep historical roots, as exemplified in Hendon's (2006) study of weaving practices in Aztec and Maya cultures, which were passed down from generation to generation alongside moral values. Hendon (2006:365) notes that 'increased mastery of what we would consider a practical skill becomes a critical component for the incorporation of children into a moral universe'.

Nowadays, craftspeople are also united by a 'shared moral universe' or common ethos that incorporates occupational identity, values, and purpose (Kroezen et al., 2021). Shared values could be maintained within and outside craft businesses: a few researchers have documented family-like relations between the workers (e.g. Rashid and Ratten, 2021; Varje and Turtiainen, 2017), sometimes with an intentional set up to 'aid interaction, conversation, and a sense of community' (Sandhu, 2020:186). Outside craft enterprises, common ethos is perpetuated through both formal networks, such as craft unions and guilds, and informal networks, such as social networks, clubs, and internet-based collectives (Banks, 2010).

A pertinent question, therefore, is what constitutes a shared craft ethos. Multiple studies show that craftspeople look for balance and happiness in their lives. Some leave 'disembodied' office work in the search for 'their' job (e.g. Thurnell-Read, 2014; Marotta, 2021). The most often cited motivations include interest in activity, profound personal commitment, dedication, broadening of skills and knowledge, sensory reward, enjoyment from the process, creating working times more suitable to personal lifestyles, and having creative freedom (e.g. Kroezen et al., 2021, Gibson, 2021; Warren, 2014; Thurnell-Read, 2014; Luckman, 2018; Yarrow and Jones, 2014). These are sometimes in tension with economic goals (Krupets and Epanova, 2021), even though most makers from the studies included in the analysis were content with making just 'enough' to live (e.g. Luckman, 2018; Gibson, 2016).

Some craftspeople choose to be self-employed to have the freedom to define their own economic goals, manage work processes, and allocate time (e.g. Krupets and Epanova, 2021; Luckman, 2018). As Munro and O'Kane (2022:43) put it, 'self-employment is presented as a liberatory antidote to the lack of autonomy associated with rationalised personnel management in a large bureaucracy'. Further, craftspeople who are employees in larger companies value the autonomy expressed through having control over design and execution (e.g. Kroezen et al., 2021; Varje and Turtiainen, 2017; Moore, 2005).

The craft ethos of commonality and the pursuit of passion impact relationships between craftspeople and customers. According to Munro and O'Kane (2022:47), 'in the artisan economy, the exchange of money for commodity represents a relationship of trust and authentic human connection between buyer and seller'. Empirical examples showcase connections that go beyond commodity exchange and entail encounters in which makers and their customers exchange information, discuss the craft, common passions, and even build long-lasting relationships (e.g. Thurnell-Read, 2014; Dodd et al., 2021; Warren, 2014; Luckman, 2014).

4.4. Craft work under capitalism

It is important to acknowledge that craft work is not always an alternative to capitalism. Precarity is widespread among craft workers, as they tend to explore ways of coping rather than overcoming the insecurities induced by capitalism (Marotta, 2021). Crafts entrepreneurs run a substantial risk of business closure due to their low incomes (Krupets and Epanova, 2021; Warren, 2014). Studies centred on the Global South also reveal common issues regarding low remuneration for artisans (Acharya, 2003; Sandhu, 2020) or insecurities with regard to payment (Rai, 2021). Women are shown to be in a particularly disadvantaged position in patriarchal societies, as preparatory tasks at the start of the supply chain are often not adequately remunerated or simply deemed part of household duties (Rai, 2021). Scrase (2003) argued that the underlying market structure and trend-driven prerogatives place strain on commercial and traditional crafts. Specific challenges include oversupply, conversion to mass production, and fluctuating markets.

The case of Raghurajpur craft artisans is a striking example in this respect. Acharya (2003) showed how knowledge and skills passed on through generations were being challenged by commercialisation, as more opportunities were emerging for unskilled newcomers to tap into market demands for high quantities of paintings rather than finer quality.

According to Balaswamathan (2018), the framing of crafts as 'backwards' is evidence of dominant stereotypes in cosmopolitan markets of the artisan as an archaic and underdeveloped figure, in which the few exceptions to this rule are those who are seen to have embraced technological advances, as is the case of the Vishwakarma sculptors in India. A contributing factor to this framing is, according to Rai (2021), a more general devaluation of manual skills and knowledge as unscientific. Positive narratives connected with craft work, such as passionate, autonomous, and authentic production, are often co-opted by bigger corporations oriented towards profit maximisation and are used by them to 're-enchant' work in the context of budget cuts, insecurity, and heavy workloads (Munro & O'Kane, 2022; Elliott, 2018). In an era of cultural capitalism, or an era of 'the new spirit of capitalism', authenticity becomes a key source of value (Gibson, 2016): a narrative that makes artisan economy ideologically legitimise capitalism (Munro & O'Kane, 2022).

5. Discussion

Having explored the different strands of literature separately, we now turn to our analysis of the commonalities and divergences, allowing us to elaborate on our conceptual contribution. Degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalist, and craft strands of literature share some commonalities in their understanding of work that is an alternative to capitalism. Themes of autonomy, dealiation, and value creation are present in all analysed research strands. Yet, these strands place their focus on different dimensions of alternatives to capitalist work and operationalisations thereof. There are also clear differences between the strands of literature, with degrowth and postcapitalist scholarship focusing on macroeconomic policies and craft scholarship focusing on the micro-politics of work.

5.1. Key commonalities between strands of literature

We find commonalities on the topic of *autonomy*, albeit with a different focal point (see Table 1). The degrowth literature builds mostly on the ideas of Illich and Gorz about autonomous work and places more emphasis on work as the satisfaction of individual and community needs. The literature on postcapitalism builds on Marx's ideas and focuses on the importance of workers' control over the means of production and distribution of surpluses. Empirical examples are scarce; however, they demonstrate that control over the means of production, as occurs in cooperatives, allows workers to enact an ethos of sufficiency and commonality. More plentiful empirical evidence from the literature on craft shows that while makers who opt for self-employment often do so to have the freedom to define their own goals and manage the processes, craftspeople employed in larger organisations more commonly cherish autonomy over design and execution.

While autonomy sometimes appears independently in the literature, warranting its treatment as a separate theme, it is often closely related to the topic of *dealiation*. In degrowth, post-growth and postcapitalist literature, autonomy is seen as one of the preconditions to counter the alienation of labour. Postcapitalist scholars take this discussion further, claiming that autonomy, defined as workers' democracy, is not sufficient. Marx's vision of dealiation encapsulated wider societal and political projects (Brownhill et al., 2012); however, as Gibson ((2021:5) posits, 'Marx and Weber said little about avenues to counter alienation'. In contemporary scholarship, the discussion mostly stays at a high level of abstraction, debating the implications of dismantling capitalist conditions and social relations of commodity production (Chatterton and

Table 1
Comparison of degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalist, and craft literature on alternatives to capitalist work. Own elaboration.

Degrowth, Post-growth	Postcapitalism	Craft
Work to satisfy individual, community needs, workers' control over produced value	Autonomy Workers' control over the means of production, distribution of surplus	Self-employment, autonomy over design and execution
Workers' control over the means of production and the products of labour as a precondition for dealienation	Dealienation Dealienation as useful doing (i.e., purposeful, self-determined activity), independent leisure, machines prolonging 'the corporeal schema', control over productive time, dissolution of capitalist conditions of production	Useful labour, mix of spiritual and material work, moral attachment, machines as a part of the world of meaning and value, reflective dialogue with materials and tools, coming together of corporeal and cognitive skills
Value perceived by the workers	Value creation Deeper engagement with the underlying logics of capitalism; concrete reproduction of life, degree of social utility	Knowledge, skills, trust, human connection, culture, heritage
Macroeconomic policy Universal Basic Income Reduction of working hours More leisure time		Micropolitics Sufficiency, frugality Time for resonant relationship with materials, tools, customers, peers Blurred boundary between leisure and work
Lower labour productivity Recognition of reproductive, unpaid labour	Automation Attributing value to concrete reproduction of life and the production of livelihoods	Slow production and mastery of techniques Blurred boundary between domestic and market

Pusey, 2020; Henschen, 2020). More empirically grounded suggestions include the pursuit of purposeful concrete activities (Mercer, 2022) and designing technologies or machines that 'prolong the corporeal schema' (Simondon in Angus, 2019).

The literature on craft and work has much to offer in terms of empirical evidence. Multiple papers demonstrate how craftspeople feel deeply engaged in their work and are morally attached to it. Reflective dialogue with materials and tools facilitates the inclusion of machines in 'the world of meaning and value' (Paredes, 2018:135) while also becoming an extension of the self. The coming together of corporeal and cognitive skills allows craftspeople to feel connected to the products of their labour, even over time. Lastly, the community of craft workers plays a significant role in the feeling of belonging. All of these characteristics stand in direct contrast to the alienated worker of Marxist analysis.

Based on the preceding findings, craft work does not amount to commodity production and therefore opens up the discussion of value created by craftspeople. From the discourse of makers and from the description of their practices, we can see that craftspeople create multiple types of value, including the reproduction of culture, heritage, knowledge, and skills and the nurturing of trust and human connection. These concrete forms of value could aid debates in degrowth, post-growth and postcapitalist strands of literature that construct visions of value-validating mechanisms alternative to the abstract reproduction of value geared towards profit maximisation. Multiple types of value created by craftspeople align with legitimisation of production based on concrete reproduction of life and the degree of social utility, as discussed by postcapitalist scholars, and with the pluriverse of values from which workers can choose, as imagined by degrowth scholars.

5.2. Key differences between strands of literature

Degrowth, post-growth and postcapitalist scholars dedicate much attention to macroeconomic policy ideas, such as UBI and the reduction of working hours, albeit in different ways. For instance, postcapitalist scholars are much more critical of UBI and call to focus on the underlying logics of capitalism rather than on a few policy measures. Authors such as Baker (2018) envision postwork scenarios with automation freeing up time for more leisure. Several degrowth scholars, by contrast, see a future with lower labour productivity, not least because recognition of reproductive labour calls for accounting for slower rhythms associated with taking care of children, the elderly, etc.

Both degrowth and postcapitalist scholars call for recognition of activities that contribute to the reproduction of life and production of livelihoods. However, empirical examples of how such recognition can be prefigured and institutionalised are lacking in the analysed papers. The experiences of craft workers show that women often find themselves in a difficult position, combining domestic work and work performed for the market, as their skills and contribution to the economy is often diminished and marginalised.

For both craftsmen and craftswomen operating in the capitalist market economy, precarity is a widespread phenomenon. Many craft entrepreneurs adopt the mindset of sufficiency and frugality, as they know that their work will not make them rich. In the economy based on efficiency, high productivity, and competition, craftspeople can afford to focus on quality and spend enough time for resonant relationships with the tools, materials, and their community by blurring boundaries between leisure and work, which sometimes leads to self-exploitation.

Craft scholarship analysed in this literature review does not connect the practices of craftspeople with concrete macroeconomic policies; however, some authors critically reflect on the place of craft in the capitalist economy. For instance, Sennett argues that the current economic system and public moral values work against the type of craftsmanship that values quality and ethical codes (Sennett, 2008 in Leeman and Volman, 2021). Tweedie and Holley's (2016) documented an empirical example of such contestation: school cleaners delivered good quality work due to commitment to their craft and despite managerial controls that aimed to enforce principles of efficiency but in fact were suppressing workers' autonomy. Paredes (2018), reflecting on Hornborg's work through the study of Onta, a Japanese pottery village, points out the dualism in which artisans are caught up: on the one hand machines become 'spiritual extension' of craftspeople, and on the other hand the fetishisation of craft work as safeguard against the ills of the capitalist accumulation obscures the inescapable embedding in the modern capitalist system.

5.3. Opportunities for cross-learning

When conceptualising transformative alternatives to capitalist work, our review shows that degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalist and craft scholarships intersect and converge on some levels. Future research on work and labour can benefit from exploring cross-cutting themes while also paying due attention to the tensions and contradictions that emerge.

By way of example, let us consider dealienation and UBI. Our review highlighted how, in the lived experiences of craftspeople, dealienated work can be tangible and concrete, grounded in conviviality, autonomy, and resonance. Yet, we also noted how the macroeconomic factors that can strain craft work, warranting a more systemic transition, are often alluded to rather than explicitly addressed. The craftivist literature provides an interesting exception, explicitly addressing the link between crafts, climate change, and equity (for instance, Greer, 2014), as well as work by Luckman (2015) and Sennett (2008), who link craft practices with capitalist society.

Meanwhile, degrowth, post-growth scholarship and emerging degrowth social movement construct a new socio-economic imaginary of wellbeing for all within the limits of the planet, yet it often lacks the

empirical investigation of lived experiences of workers in different industries. Similarly, postcapitalist literature already shows different realities of work; however, our selection of articles demonstrates that it also lacks an empirically rich base for deeper engagement with the types of value attributed to work. Addressing the questions of alienation and capitalist value-validating mechanisms from an empirical perspective could advance the project of expanding the spaces of possibilities and showcasing the plurality of economic thought.

Degrowth and postcapitalist scholars present the UBI as a policy instrument that could allow for downscaling production and consumption, as well as competition and working hours. In the realm of craft work, UBI might help to address precarity and self-exploitation while also incentivising lower labour productivity, which is often paired with artisanal and other slower forms of production. Further research might usefully explore the reception of UBI in a craft work setting, testing the challenges and possibilities it could open up in a realm of work that limits production by nature.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we conducted a critical literature review with the aim of aggregating insights on alternatives to capitalist work from the following strands of literature—degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalist and craft literature—and exploring the relationships between them. The literature review is based on a keyword-based web search for peer-reviewed journal articles and reviews in the academic database Scopus. Overall, 121 articles were covered in the analysis.

This paper has presented several findings. First, autonomy, dealienation, and value creation appear as common themes with complementary insights from the analysed strands of literature. Second, macro policies suggested by degrowth and postcapitalist scholars provide an institutional framework that can be compatible with the micropolitics of work, as documented by craft scholars. Third, craft scholars provide empirically grounded analysis of what it means to engage in useful doing, whereas degrowth and postcapitalist literature mainly contains critical theoretical reflections on the decommodification of labour, recognition of reproductive labour, and value creation. Degrowth and postcapitalist literature can benefit from more empirically grounded research to investigate these issues in relation to the everyday realities of workers. Specifically, we believe that further research is needed to unpack the perception and creation of value in degrowth, post-growth and postcapitalist initiatives and artisanal work settings, supporting calls that argue for a systemic shift away from capitalist value-validating mechanism based on commodification and sales towards the degree of social utility (e.g., Browne, 2011).

Our study has a few limitations, including our methodological choice to focus only on English language publications and exclude books and book chapters from the review. Consequently, our analysis centres on mostly Western-based research and the under-representation of realities from the Global South. Future research could address these limitations and build on the results of the present literature review.

We suggest that further cross-fertilisation of ideas between degrowth, post-growth, postcapitalist, and craft strands of literature can advance our imaginaries of the future of work in a beyond growth/capitalist economy and transition pathways towards it. We believe that the main three themes that emerged from the analysis—namely autonomy, dealienation, and value creation—point not only towards the transformation of work but also transformation through work, as unlocking the agency of workers through decision-making power and resonant relationship with the material world might be a critical component to redesign production processes for the thriving of the people and the environment.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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