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Review of Jon D. Wisman's *Why We Must Work: Economic Freedom, Fulfilling Work, and Workplace Democracy.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2026, xiii + 255 pp.

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Why We Must Work's title is somewhat misleading: the book is not so much about the economic necessity or moral duty of work, but rather about how and why we should organize work *differently*. In it, Jon D. Wisman argues that work should be recentered as a source of meaningfulness, respect, and self-esteem, by introducing two institutional reforms: 1) a public employment guarantee and 2) the democratization of workplaces. While these proposals are not new, Wisman's original contribution is to connect them to human evolutionary history—which I find interesting, though methodologically trickier than it may seem—and to the current threats to democracy and the climate—which I find completely convincing.

In a nutshell, Wisman's argument is this: in human evolutionary history, working to provide for one's own needs and those of one's ingroup must have evolved into a positive experience for human beings. Over long stretches of human history, work served immediate needs, and was done in small, face-to-face contexts, often accompanied by play and sociability (chap. 2). We need to recover these positive features of work, against the authoritarian and exploitative logic to which most human work has been submitted ever since societies developed into centralized states with unequal property relations (chap. 3). By reorganizing work such that it is experienced as meaningful and maybe even pleasurable, consumption loses its role as a source of meaning and a site for status competitions, which can help fight the current overconsumption that threatens the climate and environment. And by organizing work along democratic lines, we can fight the extreme inequality that has developed over the last decades and that threatens to undermine democracy.

This overall arc of argument is undergirded by detailed historical expositions, also of the rise of neoliberal ideology and material inequality in recent decades (chap. 4–6), and an impressive range of empirical studies, from various social scientific disciplines. Wisman sees the

presentation of his arguments for a job guarantee—which takes the sting out of the threat of unemployment and thereby decisively shifts the power relations between employers and employees (chap. 7)—and democratic work—which gives control and power, and therefore also a greater share of the fruits of labor (chap. 8) back to workers and creates a new sense of community—as a vision for the future that can present an alternative to neoliberal laissez-faire. For it is puzzling, he argues (e.g. p. 120), that workers, who form a large majority in most societies, cannot use democratic politics to reform capitalism, and he takes the ideological claim that there is "no alternative" to be a key culprit. In his own proposal, private property and markets would continue to play a role—and in this sense, it would not be a rejection of 'capitalism'—but the power relations between workers and employers would be decisively shifted because the threat of unemployment would disappear and workers would have power over the work process.[1] In such a future, productivity gains through technological innovations could go into work time reductions for all (e.g. p. 149), another attractive feature that might help create political momentum for these ideas.

The evolutionary arguments that Wisman presents may, among philosophers, lead to some methodological eyebrows rising. There is a risk of an is-ought-fallacy: the fact that something evolved historically does not, per se, make it normatively desirable; some features that can be explained through our evolutionary history—for example, our appetite for certain types of food—backfire miserably under modern conditions. Or take the claim that unemployment is particularly psychologically harmful for men, because their—evolutionarily undergirded?—role of providers for the family is threatened (148). It may well be the case that men who *think* that they *should* be providers (and maybe draw on arguments from evolutionary history for that, even though one may raise many critical questions about these—is it not much more a phenomenon of the 19th and 20th century?) are therefore more hurt in their self-image if they cannot live up to it. But this does not answer the question of whether the gendered division of labor, with a role for men as providers and for women in the household, is normatively defensible, or whether, as societies, we should try to move towards a model in which both care work and work that provides a financial income are more equally divided (see e.g. Nedelsky and Malleson 2023). Most of the time, however, Wisman is very

[1] One might ask whether it still *is* capitalism. My own preferred term would be 'economic democracy'.

careful in his wording, holding, for example, that "our understanding of [human] motivation must be consonant with what has been revealed by the biological sciences" (29), a claim that seems very reasonable. It is certainly methodologically preferable to the strategy that mainstream economics has long used, namely simply to postulate certain assumptions about human behavior (for example, that their motivation to work is mostly money) that do not stand up to empirical scrutiny. And the key argument Wisman takes from evolutionary theory—that "humans enjoy carrying out tasks in concert with others, especially when they freely participate in determining how it is to be done" (33)—is also undergirded by many other forms of evidence.

The connection between making work more meaningful, enjoyable, and a source of recognition and self-respect, and the possibility of downgrading consumption as a source of status, is an extremely interesting dimension of Wisman's account, especially in the context of climate change and other environmental problems. One might wonder, though, whether a third proposal might need to be added to the two that Wisman suggests—guaranteed public employment and the democratization of workplaces. This would be the rebundling of jobs (at specific moments in time) and careers (considered over time) such that both more pleasant and more unpleasant tasks are redistributed more equally across all members of society. Even if democratized, certain forms of work will remain more physically or psychologically demanding than others, and the intrinsic enjoyability of tasks also varies. At the moment, many interesting, rewarding tasks are bundled together in one type of jobs (typically, 'professional' ones), while other tasks are bundled in other types of jobs ('unskilled' ones, although this term is often not at all adequate because they require many practical and social skills). Possibilities to move from the latter to the former are rare, because most societies sort people into one or another type of jobs at a young age, and many people are stuck in 'bad' jobs for the rest of their work life.

To be sure, if work was democratized, such jobs would probably come to include some element of self-governance, for example, at the team level, and if a public job guarantee with decent conditions existed, employers might have to pay a premium for rote work or 'dirty' work. But one can nonetheless ask whether there should not also be opportunities for training and for accessing other types of work—and maybe also a duty to contribute to 'bad' but socially necessary work for all members of society, including those in professional roles, for a certain part of their work

life. However, Wisman might answer this question by pointing out that these could be more ambitious plans for further down in the future, while a job guarantee and the democratization of work are the most straightforward reforms that could be taken in the here and now, to get our societies out of the destructive dynamics of ever-growing inequality and endless consumption, with their detrimental effects on democracy and the climate.

One complaint one might have is that the book hardly engages with the discussion about job guarantees and workplace democracy that takes place within philosophy and sociology (a few historical figures are mentioned, e.g. on p. 13, but the contemporary debate is hardly present—but the claim that "guaranteed employment and workplace democracy are … substantially ignored by social scientists" (175) is definitely wrong; see e.g. the overview of recent research in Herzog 2026). But with its clear and rigorous exposition of the arguments, the book is nonetheless an extremely valuable contribution to the literature, and it will, hopefully, convince broad circles of readers, in the academy and beyond.

Overall, the book addresses many of the urgent problems of our time and provides convincing solutions. One might quibble with some details, and not every reader will be convinced by every part of the argument; for example, defenders of UBI will probably not like Wisman's rejection of it (159–161), and one might also question his views on professional licensing being exclusively driven by economic interests, and not also by greater skills requirements in many fields (183). But the overall vision is compelling, at least if understood as a proposal in non-ideal theory, which starts from the here and now and moves into the right direction. I hope that the book will also be read by Wisman's colleagues in economics—a field which, until recently, has seen work in a purely instrumental way and thereby missed much of the picture (e.g. p. 2), though arguably, this is starting to change (see e.g. Nikolova 2026)—and that it may contribute to the further development of interdisciplinary arguments, and convincing accounts for the broader public, on a better future of work, democracy, and the climate.

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