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Introduction: Celebrating the life and work of André Gorz

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs**Edward Granter** 

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Abstract

In this introduction, we thank those who supported and contributed to our special issue of *Classical Sociology*, on the work and life of André Gorz. We then provide a sketch of Gorz's place in intellectual history. Along the way, we explain some of our motivations for editing the special issue, then move on to a discussion of our contributors' papers. We end with a reiteration of our goals for the issue, and with thanks once more to those who helped make it happen.

Keywords

Critical theory, Gorz, Marxism, post-industrial, sociology, Utopia, work

We are very grateful to the editors of the *Journal of Classical Sociology* – Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner – for accepting our proposal for a special issue on the life and work of André Gorz, in celebration of the centenary of his birth in 1923. We thank also Nivedha and their team for shepherding the text through the production process.

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We offer sincere thanks to the contributors to this special issue – Neal Harris, Javier Zamora Garcia and Lucy Ford; Jaeho Kang; Nichole Marie Shippen; Abigail Schoneboom, Daniel Mallo and Armelle Tardiveau; Diana Stypinska.

André Gorz was born Gerhard Hirsch in Vienna, Austria, in 1923. With Jewish heritage from his father and Catholic on his mother's side, he changed his surname to Horst when his father turned to Rome, in keeping with his wife's beliefs. Such a decision also reflects the atmosphere of the time and by the 1930s Austria, like Germany, was not somewhere people with Jewish heritage, howsoever derived, could feel safe. Like the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin amongst others) with whom he shared an affinity for Marxist social analysis, Gorz found it necessary to relocate and spent the Second World War in Switzerland, studying chemical engineering (Turner, 2007).

By 1949 Gorz was in Paris – Benjamin's *Capital of the 19th Century* (Benjamin, 1973), with his wife Dorine. In the post-war years France, like most Western European countries, was experiencing vigorous economic growth, technological modernisation and sociocultural liberalisation. Across the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st, Gorz forged a career in journalism and authorship on social issues, becoming one of France's leading intellectual figures. Outside of France, it is his books on a range of philosophical, social and ecological issues that carry his legacy and makes it available to new generations of sociologists. Gorz's subject matter is broad, from Sartre and existentialism (*The Traitor*) to the labour movement (*Strategy for Labour*; Gorz, 1968) to collections of short essays on social issues (reminiscent of the mythologies of Roland Barthes, or the aphorisms of Adorno and Horkheimer) that reveal a deep commitment to social justice (*Capitalism in Crisis and Everyday Life*; Bosquet, 1977 [writing as Bosquet]).

Let there be no doubt about what social justice meant for Gorz – it meant being on the side of the workers, as well as the workless, the landless and the exploited. It meant holding capitalism, as a system, to account for the unnecessary and arbitrary harms inherent to its operation. It meant explaining how capitalism works, and why it should be abolished. Environmental justice, which Gorz saw as indivisible from other forms, was a central theme in Gorz's vision for liberation. Whether expressed through essays on what's wrong with cars (*Capitalism in Crisis and Everyday Life*), or books focused on the topic (*Ecology as Politics* (Gorz, 1983), *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* (Gorz, 1994), *Ecologica* (Gorz, 2010b)), Gorz evidenced a commitment to understanding ecological costs of both consumption and production that was ahead of its time. Indeed, he is credited with inventing the term 'degrowth' itself (Asara et al., 2015).

Outside of France, in the English-speaking world in particular, Gorz's star could not be seen quite as clearly, but he achieved a significant level of name recognition when *Farewell to the Working Class* was published in English in 1982. Unfortunately and – though the title was certainly provocative – unfairly, the book was widely criticised for its supposed central premise that the working class has 'disappeared' or was 'no-longer relevant'. At the time, many sociologists and commentators from the wider, more traditional Left seized on the notion of the disappearing working class, which they portrayed as being as heretical as it was erroneous. A careful reading of *Farewell* furnishes the reader with a much more nuanced analysis of social, technological, political and

economic change in the 20th century, one which is multifaceted enough to almost belie the notion of having a central premise at all. If there was a core argument in the book then yes, it did involve the changing shape of the class structure but more accurately, Gorz was writing about fundamental changes in the practice, ideology, organisation and experience of work, and what this meant for life under and beyond capitalism.

Some sociologists working in English did read Gorz more closely, and we as guest editors have shared an interest in his work across a number of decades. Beyond a sentimental wish to commemorate a scholar who has inspired us as our own sociological careers have developed, we wanted to invite other sociologists and scholars from across the humanities and social sciences, to engage with his thought. The first step was to gather a group of researchers whose interests and intersections with Gorz speak to the diversity of themes covered in his writing. The next, we hope, is for readers of *Classical Sociology* to join them in their exploration – discovering for themselves what Gorz has to offer those who seek to understand society better.

If Gorz can be seen as the preeminent theorist of the end of work, it is appropriate to consider what we will do in a post-work society. The question arises in more than one of the contributions to our special issue. One possibility is explored by Schoneboom, Mallo and Tardiveau who conducted a sensory ethnography in the setting of an urban community garden. As another element of their innovative methodological approach, their paper is illustrated with photographs taken using the ‘pinhole’ technique. The photographers here are the members of the community themselves. This paper represents an excellent example of how sociological research can both enrich, and be enriched by, the urban communities which have been part of the development of the discipline almost since its inception. The links with Gorz’s work are clear and not only because he himself once wrote about miners growing leeks in their gardens (Gorz, 1982: 1). Gorz saw that exclusion from work under capitalism can be harmful at an individual as well as a social level. Schoneboom, Mallo and Tardiveau show how it is possible to create convivial spaces, even alongside that exclusion. In so doing, they point towards the sort of life that could be possible, beyond the dictated rhythms of productivism.

Stypinska’s paper continues with a sense of the temporal, or rather its withering under the heat of our rush to work and consume, within a maelstrom of unexpected events. Why worry about the future when we are bombarded daily by a litany of crises? A phone-screen ‘doom scroll’ through the disasters of the day has become a daily ritual for some of us – a reminder, if nothing else, that even the best laid plans can come unstuck. And yet, as the paper shows, life under capitalism does seem to unfold according to a certain format, a certain driving rationality. Economic rationality, as Gorz called it (Gorz, 1989a), which as Stypinska argues, closes out the alternative, the other, the better, rendering it counter-rational and unrealistic. Gorz’s interest in ecological thought is brought into the frame to help counter this exclusionary logic. Thinking through ecological rationality is not *all* about being ‘green’ or avoiding pollution. It is also a ‘particular form of imagination’ which encourages us to re-centre a sense of the future, and the fragility of the present.

Ecological rationality is certainly on display in Abbinnett’s piece, where he too speaks of the necessity of recognising that our ‘permanent sense of emergency’ can only be transcended through thinking differently. Abbinnett brings in Stiegler’s concept of the Neganthropocene to go alongside Gorz’s writing on work and technology, to help

suggest possible ways of achieving escape velocity from the decaying and unsustainable Anthropocene. Early in their paper, Abbinnett reminds us of how Gorz's best known essay in English, *Farewell to the Working Class*, was dismissed by certain sections of the intelligentsia. At the same time, he showcases the richness of ideas therein, as well as the theoretical and thematic heritage back to Marx himself. Just as the proletariat played a key role in Marx's visions for a post-capitalist future, so the paper shows how the notion of a social subject was re-interpreted by Gorz in the late 20th century. Perhaps Gorz's 'postindustrial proletariat' or 'non-working non-class' will play a defining role in going beyond the Anthropocene?

This class of neo-proletarian non-workers is also discussed in the paper from Granter and Aroles. Their paper takes the reader on something of a 'whistle stop' tour of Gorz's writings on work in and beyond high capitalism. It traces the evolution of Gorz's thought in terms of his shift of emphasis from reducing alienation in work, to reducing work-time as a whole. Of course, to say Gorz left behind the concept of alienation completely, would be inaccurate and the paper thus considers what a less alienated, more convivial existence would look like. What would be the balance between work in technically complex 'heteronomous' organisations, and 'autonomous' self-directed work? While Granter and Aroles aim to showcase Gorz's thought in itself, they place alongside this an analysis of contemporary narratives on the future of work. A field that has exploded in recent years, future of work or 'post-work' narratives are part of the same tradition of utopian thinking that tracks back through Gorz to Marx and beyond. Through this juxtaposition, the authors highlight commonalities as well as focussing the readers' attention on how Gorz's analysis was able to presage important sociological concepts such as precarity and 'gig work', which are today central to thinking on work and employment.

We return to the theme of alienation in the paper by Harris, Zamora Garcia and Ford. They explore Gorz's 'post-productivist understanding of labour'. They do this through a detailed interrogation of the concept of the dual society – Gorz's bifurcation of work into the realms of the heteronomous and the autonomous. Clearly, Gorz was committed to a vision of a liberated society, and the paper's authors are quite correct to align him with the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School, who shared that commitment. Their paper moves the frame from a consideration of Gorz alongside the first generation of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse), to its contemporary exponents such as Habermas and in particular, Honneth. Harris, Zamora Garcia and Ford note that 'third generation' Critical Theory is not without its limitations. In doing so, they highlight the necessity of what could be called a 'totalising' critique – one that includes not only the machinery of work and production, but its ideological and psychological scaffolding; the industrialised culture of consumption.

With Gilloch's contribution we remain in the company of the Frankfurt School, with a particular focus on Walter Benjamin. In keeping with the notion of the text as fragmentary, indeed, of the life as fragmentary, the paper combines the autobiographical with the theoretical, across decades and across texts; it examines themes of identity and memory as well as emotions, love and loss. Gorz and Benjamin shared origins in the German speaking world, they shared membership (perceived or otherwise) of a religious and ethnic community, and they shared a destination; Paris. Gorz, of course, was to remain there, while Benjamin's final, premature, terminus was Spain in 1940. Gilloch's paper is

distinctive amongst those in the special issue for its attention to Gorz's biography, not to mention its intersections with that of another influential Marxist intellectual. In this paper, we encounter Gorz's early book *The Traitor* (Gorz, 1989b). In this volume, Gorz sought to 'rethink and to combine Freud and Marx in a move that positions him close to two of his contemporaries: the Herbert Marcuse of *Eros and Civilisation* (Marcuse, 1956) and the Frantz Fanon (1986) of *Black Skins, White Masks*'. The traitor, for Gorz, is not necessarily a negative figure, in moral terms. Rather, contemporary society paints as the traitor those who remind it that the system is built on inequality and exploitation. With its attention also to the positive and playful elements in Gorz's life, Gilloch's paper reminds us of the power in creating a life geared towards freedom. With Gorz, we are reminded that truly critical social theory always includes an element of treason.

In Kang's paper, we return to Gorz's more explicitly sociological writings, with a focus on his later works such as *The Immaterial* (Gorz, 2010a) and *Ecologica* (Gorz, 2010b). If some of our other papers discuss conviviality, the reader can find in Kang's paper a reminder that it remained relevant to Gorz throughout his oeuvre and across the decades. We are also offered an examination of the role of technology in Gorz's thought which takes account of current debates around Artificial Intelligence (AI). We learn that Gorz was keen to maintain a distinction between human and robot, person and machine – something which speaks to his commitment to understanding and celebrating what makes us 'truly human'. For Kang, Gorz is perhaps too pessimistic with regards to the potentials of AI, whilst at the same time he is overly optimistic in his notions of hackers serving as a vanguard for a revolutionary cognitariat. Perhaps a middle way is possible – one that places both Artificial Intelligence, and the world wide web, at the service of humanity *contra* the capitalist megamachine.

Knowledge is once again the theme for Shippen – that is, the way knowledge is organised, controlled, delivered and sold. Shippen focuses on recent changes to the way Community Colleges in the USA operate. Community Colleges are in some ways a distinctively American phenomenon. Having said that, parallels can be seen in the system of Polytechnics that used to exist in the United Kingdom. Around the world there are of course other higher education institutions that are notable for their accessibility to 'non-traditional' groups. What do we mean by non-traditional? Working class. Urban. Latino. Black. Diverse. Low-income. An oversimplification, for sure, but Shippen's piece is able to show how Community Colleges have served as engines of opportunity for groups who might tend to be otherwise excluded from university level education. And yet, seeing education as primarily a pathway to the 'opportunity' of a job highlights the dominance of what Gorz called economic rationality. Drawing on a hitherto less-well-known article by Gorz (1970) called *Destroy the University*, Shippen argues that even as elements of the wider structure of capitalism, Community Colleges can still offer a space for reflection, conviviality, and the development of (real) critical thinking.

We in turn hope that we have offered a space for fellow scholars and sociologists to offer perspectives on a theorist and writer for whom critical thinking can hardly have been more important. Their perspectives are of value to readers new to the work of André Gorz, as well as offering fresh insights and new directions of study for those with an established interest. Once again, the guest editors would like to thank our contributors

for the thoughtful, relevant and useful contributions, and for working together with us to celebrate Gorz's work.

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Ross Abbinnett is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Birmingham. His work lies on the intersection of three intellectual traditions: recent continental philosophy (particularly Levinas, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Stiegler), German idealism (especially Kant and Hegel), and the Frankfurt School critique of culture, technology and capitalization. His recent research has focused on four areas: Social Implications of Technology; Media, Culture and Identity; Politics and Sociology of Happiness; and Global Ethics and Cosmopolitanism. He has developed an internationally recognized body of research that has focused on the relationship between contemporary critical thought and the social, political, and technological evolution of modernity.