Nick Srnicek: The Future of Work [C1]

L'irruzione dell'intelligenza artificiale e i nuovi modelli di economia promossi dalle grandi aziende tecnologiche ridefiniscono le regole del mercato del lavoro. Analizziamo le nuove sfide con l'aiuto del rinomato studioso canadese Nick Srnicek.

If you are in a cycle of **exhaustion** and **worry**, you are not alone. In the post-Covid world work is even more precarious. There are more 'gig economy' jobs and short-term contracts, more self-employed people with erratic incomes, and for those in stable employment, longer hours and more pressure. Work is badly distributed: people have too much, too little, or both in the same month.

BULLSHIT JOBS

For many of us, work is considered important and even thought to give our lives meaning. Go to a café, and people have brought their laptops. Smartphones are sold on the premise that one can work anywhere at anytime. But what is 'work' exactly, when it can feel **pointless**, or even socially or environmentally damaging? In his 2018 book **Bullshit**Jobs the late

anthropologist David Graeber cites hundreds of examples of futile jobs: from museum guards who watch empty rooms, to people employed **to look good** at reception desks, to those who study for years to be employed **to tick** a box in a **senseless link** in a **supply chain**.

ESSENTIAL WORK

On the other hand, the most vital work, and that most in demand, is often badly paid: the bus drivers, the educators, the street, office, or home cleaners, those who care for children or the **elderly**. These **latter jobs** were once considered women's work and unpaid, but the majority of families today can't **afford** to live on one income, and it is poorly-paid employment often **fulfilled** by the most vulnerable women in society.

OLD IDEAS

Nick Srnicek is a Canadian economist and academic. He believes that solutions to the problem of work can be found in the digital world. This, he says, requires a change in perspective. In his book Platform Capitalism Srnicek reveals how the big tech companies have developed a business model that provides a **means** to bring different groups together but with the same old capitalist **goal** in mind: to make as much money as possible and eventually monopolise the industry.

AN ADDICTION

However, Srnicek **argues**, digital platforms, automation and artificial intelligence could all be used for public good if they are developed with social justice as a **goal** and **aimed at** the right areas of life: forget robot **hoovers**, what if we genuinely made an effort to automate housework, for example? This is not a massive **leap** of faith, Srnicek believes, and it is the premise of his new book After Work: The Politics of Free Time co-written by Helen Hester. They argue that the home, rather than being an escape from the workplace, is an extension of it, and propose ways in which we can work less, but live better. Speak Up met with Srnicek. He began by pointing to the

problems with the capitalist model. Nick Srnicek (Canadian accent): Capitalism is generalised market dependency. We've always had markets, people have **traded** goods **back and forth** for as long as we know, but we haven't always had capitalism. So, what makes capitalism different from just being a market: is that they've become so generalised, they spread to such a degree that people then become dependent on them for their **livelihoods**, for getting food, for getting housing, for getting all their basic **sustenance** in everyday life. It creates some new imperatives and that's what capitalism is all about, imperatives which exist as part of the system. It doesn't care about individual human beings, it doesn't care whether or not the ecosystem survives. It just wants growth at all costs.

ME FIRST

So when tech companies claim to be facilitating sharing this is far from the truth. Nick Srnicek: They have a lot of resources, they have a lot of capital, they have a lot of power, but at the same time, they're competing with each other. Facebook and Google are competing for advertising dollars. They're competing on smart home **hubs**, digital assistance, driverless cars, they're competing on mobile phones, they're competing for more data, they're competing for AI …

BETTER TOGETHER

But why compete when co-operation is more productive, **argues** Srnicek. Remove the planet-destroying imperative to continually make money, and the landscape looks very different. The platform business model can be mutually beneficial. One of the most profitable segments of Amazon is Amazon Web Services which rents **cloud space** to companies **on-demand**. Spotify's platform rents us music, Netflix's platform rents us film – both companies focus on user growth and a better **deal** for artists rather than profit. Even established companies like Rolls Royce have **picked up on** a digital trend: renting its **engines** to the airline industry and **gathering** data

through them. A model used by **ride-hailing** and food delivery service Uber in a way that is unfair to workers, who are **liable** for anything that happens, can be put to good public use if social justice is built in. Srnicek gives us an example. Nick Srnicek: Transport for London, which operates the subway and the public buses and all these public transport within London. You can imagine them building a platform that would be like Uber, and it would just offer **seamless** service between the **cab** and the subway, and a bus. And it would all be, maybe, a subscription service, and it would all be **data driven**. And it would be better than Uber, and it would be cheaper than Uber, and it would have better working conditions than Uber.

REACHING OUT

Platforms could also provide support for scientists and medical researchers. Nick Srnicek: The European Union right now is building what's called the Open Science Cloud, a cloud platform designed for researchers and scientists to use for free. So, if your research requires the use of a lot of computing power, you have access to this public cloud as a resource. It's not hard to imagine expanding that to public **utility** of computing for people. So, I think there are some examples we can learn from today.

EQUAL VALUE

A massive ecosystem of open source projects is possible in a **token-based** economy. This can provide incentives far more satisfying than the capitalist ones, while being a much **fairer** and more productive system, says Srnicek. Nick Srnicek: These are virtual **currencies** based on the Blockchain that are designed to incentivise little ecosystems of people, communities, to work on particular projects. It can be applied to open-source projects, open-data projects, open-innovation projects... All these things which are designed not to make anybody money, but a token ecosystem gives people the incentives to work on these things **regardless**.

Glossary

- **supply chain** = filiera
- **argues** = sostenere
- **engines** = motori
- **fulfilled** = svolgere
- **utility** = utenza
- **senseless link** = pedina senza senso
- **elderly** = anziani
- **traded** = commerciare
- **on-demand** = su richiesta
- **token-based** = basata sui token
- **to tick** = spuntare, selezionare
- **afford** = permettersi
- **aimed at** = mirare a
- **hubs** = centri, piattaforme
- **regardless** = in ogni caso
- **worry** = preoccupazione
- **pointless** = inutile
- **leap** = salto
- **picked up on** = incorporare
- **Bullshit** = del cavolo (lett. stronzata)
- **to look good** = avere un bell'aspetto
- **latter jobs** = questi ultimi
- **means** = mezzi
- **goal** = scopo
- **hoovers** = aspirapolvere
- **cab** = taxi
- **fairer** = più giusto
- **liable** = responsabile
- **data driven** = basato sui dati
- **exhaustion** = sfinimento
- **livelihoods** = mezzi di sostentamento
- **sustenance** = sostentamento
- **cloud space** = spazio di archiviazione su cloud

- **deal** = affare
- **gathering** = raccogliere
- **back and forth** = avanti e indietro
- **ride-hailing** = servizio vettura con autista
- **seamless** = senza interruzioni
- **currencies** = valute