

There are people in the lesser-developed parts of the world who do work that our modern societies have long forgotten. Women and children live atop mountains of garbage that they sort through to find anything that can be sold for a few pennies. In India, women sort through slag heaps from coal-mines to find a few pieces of coal that can still be used for fuel.

Miners in China, Latin America, and Africa do not live as do our modern miners, whether coal or other minerals, who are unionized, well paid, and use modern machinery. Unlike their earlier predecessors who for eons were forced by poverty to go into holes in the ground that were dark, dangerous, and filthy, modern miners do strip mining, using machinery. Not that strip mining is a good thing, considering how it distorts mountains and fouls watersheds, but the few people still involved in this dying industry do better than their ancestors did.

In our modern world, we are (mostly) far removed from the horrors of how work used to be. Our earliest ancestors, for millions of years, were migratory clans that spent all of their time finding food. Women also wove and sewed garments and men chipped rocks to form arrowheads. Other than those activities, the heaviest work they did was carrying babies and sometimes tents from place to place, a task made easier when animals were domesticated.

With the advent of agriculture, work changed. Some men worked with their minds, organizing irrigation, providing justice, or placating imagined gods. But most men and women did backbreaking work at farming, animal husbandry, and food production. Some women served as breeders for the men in charge. Life was short and brutish for the majority.

Modern notions of work only arrived with the industrial revolution and the process of political reformation in the 19th century. Slavery in the Western World finally ended. In the lesser-developed world, it still exists: mostly as sexual slavery and the near-slavery conditions of mining and agriculture. From the beginning of time, nobody thought anything amiss about child labor. If a child were too small to labor, they could still beg or prostitute themselves. Child prostitutes still exist in the more unsavory cultures of the world.

Modern industry produced the assembly line, in which each person had only one task, repeated all day long, with the resulting product emerging more quickly and more consistently than could be done by a skilled laborer doing the entire process. This was boring and often dangerous work, but over time, the salaries paid for this labor (unionized) enabled a breadwinner to support a family.

The horror of sweatshops in which women sewed from dawn to dusk is now only a remnant found among poor immigrants, and is illegal. There really is no work in the modern world that reflects the horrible past in human history with the possible exception of immigrant farm labor.

But now we are facing a future where the very nature of human labor is changing. Artificial intelligence and robotics are being developed that can do many tasks once done by human beings; these technologies often work better and are much less bother than human beings with human needs.

Today, jobs that were universal are disappearing in the modern world. A very few farm corporations can feed the world, a task that used to require the labor of most of us. Robots can manufacture, mine, become driverless cars and trucks, and (horror of horrors) become soldiers and even police for us.

Fortunately, the fertility rate of human beings is finally in decline. In the future the earth will be able to sustain half the population we have today, giving us the food, health, and science that have so improved human existence. Our footprint will be less, which will help ecosystems survive that are threatened today. But what will human work be like? Can we survive endless leisure? What will become of human beings who no longer need to work? How many have the capacity to be self-directed rather than self-destructive? It is essential to think about this.

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Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author. You may contact her at [Lfarhat102@aol.com](mailto:Lfarhat102@aol.com) or [www.globalthink.net](http://www.globalthink.net).