

**LQ** *The Lab's Quarterly*

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2021 / a. XXIII / n. 3 (luglio-settembre)

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ISSN 1724-451X



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“The Lab’s Quarterly” è una rivista di Scienze Sociali fondata nel 1999 e riconosciuta come rivista scientifica dall’ANVUR per l’Area 14 delle Scienze politiche e Sociali. L’obiettivo della rivista è quello di contribuire al dibattito sociologico nazionale ed internazionale, analizzando i mutamenti della società contemporanea, a partire da un’idea di sociologia aperta, pubblica e democratica. In tal senso, la rivista intende favorire il dialogo con i molteplici campi disciplinari riconducibili alle scienze sociali, promuovendo proposte e special issues, provenienti anche da giovani studiosi, che riguardino riflessioni epistemologiche sullo statuto conoscitivo delle scienze sociali, sulle metodologie di ricerca sociale più avanzate e incoraggiando la pubblicazione di ricerche teoriche sulle trasformazioni sociali contemporanee.





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## **MONOGRAFICO**

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Orientarsi nella società dell'incertezza. Percorsi e traiettorie di vita nell'epoca della *New/Net/Knowledge Economy*

a cura di Elena Gremigni e Franca Settembrini

Elena Gremigni, Franca Settembrini	<i>Orientarsi nella società dell'incertezza. Percorsi e traiettorie di vita nell'epoca della New/Net/Knowledge Economy</i>	9
Maria Cristina Ginevra, Sara Santilli, Ilaria Di Maggio, Salvatore Soresi, Laura Nota	<i>Il contributo dell'orientamento per la progettazione di un futuro inclusivo e sostenibile</i>	43
Marco Pitzalis	<i>Ferramenta (di una sociologia relazionale dei sistemi di istruzione)</i>	61
Emanuela Susca	<i>"Abbandonare l'ipocrisia dell'istruzione". Riflessioni e proposte a partire da Capitale e ideologia di Thomas Piketty</i>	89
Aina Tarabini, Judith Jacovkis, Alejandro Montes	<i>Classed choices: Young people's rationalities for choosing post-16 educational tracks</i>	113
Fiorenzo Parziale, Giuliana Parente	<i>L'orientamento scolastico come pratica di riproduzione delle disuguaglianze scolastiche dovute all'origine sociale</i>	139
Elena Gremigni	<i>Disuguaglianze di opportunità educative e higher education. Orientamento e dispositivi di riproduzione sociale nell'accesso all'istruzione terziaria in Italia</i>	165

Giovanni Abbiati, Giulia Assirelli, Davide Azzolini, Carlo Barone	<i>L'università conviene? Un'analisi dei rischi dell'investimento in istruzione universitaria nel sistema del 3+2</i>	207
Davide Girardi	<i>Oltre la "colpa" individuale. La costruzione sociale delle competenze quale dinamica di campo in un sistema d'impiego locale</i>	247
Sebastian Carlotti, Irene Paganucci	<i>Distinguersi per uniformarsi. Il lavoro cognitivo nell'università tra produzione della conoscenza e mito della mobilità</i>	273

### **LIBRI IN DISCUSSIONE**

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Padmini Sharma	<i>Alessandro Gandini (2020). Zeitgeist Nostalgia: On Populism, Work and the 'Good Life'</i>	299
Alessandro Gerosa	<i>Adam Arvidsson (2020). Changemaker? Il futuro industriale dell'economia digitale</i>	305

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**Alessandro Gandini**

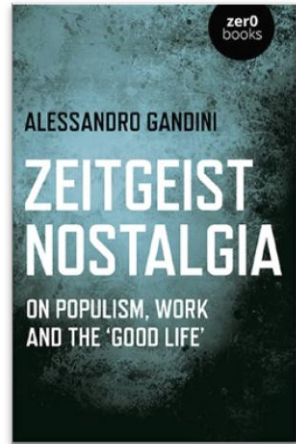
**ZEITGEIST NOSTALGIA:**

**On Populism, Work and the ‘Good Life’**

Winchester, UK–Washington, USA, Zero Books, 2019, 136 pp.

by *Padmini Sharma*\*

This book delves into some pressing concern towards the increasing regressive nostalgic tendencies among Western societies that have been further triggered through populist ideologies. It takes the reader through the changing notion of “good life” due to the onset of neoliberalism towards growing hostilities against immigration with the failing of the societal model to live up to its promises. The author addresses the fear over regressive nostalgia that is leading to certain startling outbursts through events like Brexit and Trump election, and raises a broader concern over where the society is heading. As explicitly stated, this book entails a rich understanding of the phenomena based on social theory and illustrations based on diverse experiences, discussions and snippets of real life. One thread that connects all the chapters is the author’s deliberate and constant effort to contextualise each argument. The author has put together a comprehensive set of five chapters, in a way that is claimed to be semi-sociologically driven in both its content and pattern, and which enables the reader to know his stances while reading the book.



The author begins the book with an interesting chapter on Nostalgia. He defines nostalgia as, «a journey that takes one backwards but also forwards. It often transforms the past into the illusion of a future. By mythologising the past, nostalgia provides with a sometimes uncon-

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DOI: 10.13131/1724-451x.labsquarterly.axxiii.n3.299-304

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scious, sometimes conscious vision of the past as a place to return to» (Gandini 2019: 7). On the one hand, Gandini's neutral stance over nostalgia is reflected in his growing concern over regressive tendencies, whereas, on the other, the author also extends respect to those who long to return to the past "good life". He sets certain premises on which the book engages in different discussions: he does not believe that capitalism can end, that society is degenerating, or that technology serves as the answer to all problems. The nostalgic drive is claimed to be a result of the accumulating sentiments among the Western societies to the collapse of the societal model that had social cohesion and living a good life as its premises. Indeed, the seeds to the nostalgic breeding are claimed to have sown with the economic downturn and unprecedented technological change that reconfigures production, consumption and socialisation to a significant extent. Though this book relates to the Western societies, these changes can be also related well across the Global South, which is witnessing a massive change in the last decades owing to technological encroachment in all aspects of the societies.

The author argues whether Brexit or Trumpism can be seen as a sign of a societal transition. It sets a thought-provoking breakdown into the reasons that might have led to nostalgic growth and outbreak among the people. The notion of "looking back" or "taking back control" makes one connect the disenchantment, anger and fear among the people who voted for these events to happen. The author reflects on the support to these movements being driven through the nostalgic desires among people – mostly the Baby Boomers – to get back access to a «simpler world made of nation-states, hard borders and a largely white, ethnically homogeneous, heterosexual and patriarchal society» (Gandini 2019: 2). Though the author mostly elaborates on the populist sentiments among the people in the US and the UK, he also presents cases from countries like China, Mexico, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and Brazil, that predominantly emphasised the restoration of national sovereignty. The book raises an interesting concern on "regressive nostalgia" or "retrotopia" resulting from the nostalgic outbreak through right-wing movements emphasising antisemitism. Indeed, Brexit is seen as being about one essential issue, that is, fear for immigration. However, the author also remarked that most areas in which the Leave vote was larger did not experience much immigration and multiculturalism.

The author takes the reader through the "good life" introducing the middle class' model for a living, the changing "good life" across the Baby Boomer and the Generation X cohorts, and the contexts that laid the breeding ground for regressive nostalgia. "Good life" for the middle

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class in the twentieth century is approached as a dual concern, that is, to possess secured employment and the means to purchase goods that generate social status and recognition. The introduction is set through illustrations of the Brexit and Trump campaigns that highlight the political tactics used to bank on the nostalgic tendencies among the individuals. The author contextualises the emerging disappointment towards the societal model, especially in context to the Baby Boomer generation, by drawing on several media that has been used to educate the cohort to the capitalist ‘good life’, ranging across advertising to music. In addition to this short-lived period, the experiences of the succeeding generation, that is, Generation X, born between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, are used to illustrate the budding perceptual difference with their earlier cohort. However, the author contradicts the tags attached to this generation, like the “Me Generation”, stating this cohort to have been grown «with the promise of living a “good life” that largely failed to materialise. What they got instead was a first-row seat to watch the dismantling of the “good life”, propelled by neoliberalism» (Gandini 2019: 34). This discussion closes through reflections on the breeding of ‘regressive nostalgia’ in a period characterised by shifting demographic features, work structures, consumption practices, moral values or sexual habits affecting the Baby Boomers and Gen X. The author stresses on the different writings that look at neoliberalism, that once disregarded class relations as a barrier to success among individuals, and now see it as the root of all problems. Nevertheless, despite such regressive nostalgic tendencies, in the third chapter the author captivates the reader through an insight into hipster culture. He rationalises such inclusion based on the marginal distinction that Hipsters exhibit that, in turn, has been used to earn social status without accepting the middle-class job as a mechanism to social recognition. As he states, «Nostalgia [...] is a precondition to the overall process of marginal distinction as status-seeking practice in hipster culture» (Gandini 2019: 55). Through embarking on the high social capital derived from their ability to know things before others do or the minute difference between products or tastes, the author illustrates hipsterization in Milan. One essential attribute highlighted among the Hipsters is their emphasis on progressive nostalgia that makes them strive towards the “good life” through indulging in alternative models that are based on reviving craft production techniques from a pre-industrial era. The discussion on retrofuturism embarking on «going back to go forward» (Gandini 2019: 57) highlights some striking illustrations on innovative practices ranging from bread and winemaking, brewing to bartending. These illustrations are enriched through the motives and challenges the

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generation encounters to contribute with something novel to production practices, by introducing their services. Finally, the author closes the chapter with a question on whether «hipsters are going to save the world?» (Gandini 2019: 65). Though he doesn't indulge in direct response to this, however, he thinks hipsters' progressive thinking enables an adaptation to the global economy whereby industrial capitalism can be headed towards a new "industrious modernity".

In the preceding chapters, the discussion has been centred on changing perceptions towards the "good life" arising through altering connection with work. This altering relation with work is captured in the fourth chapter, where the author touches upon the different perceptions and orientations attached to work across different generations; then Gandini introduces the changes encountered by workers, owing to technological modifications across diverse phases; eventually, he uses the gig economy to examine the notion on post-employment society. By relating events starting from the post-war era to the Bretton Woods Agreement, neoliberalism, globalisation and the nation-state's changing role, the author elucidates the restructuring of work. It stresses how social cohesion has been shaken by neoliberal policies, eroding stable and secured employment possibilities among the people across the globe. Such destabilisation has occurred through an increase in flexible and precarious work activities that blurs the boundaries between work and leisure. As the author rightfully puts it, «As work ceases to be the bedrock around which one's adult life can be built, a condition that was long considered acquired and immutable, enter nostalgia: in their longing for a time that can't return, the Brexit and Trump votes ratify the end of the "long" twentieth century» (Gandini 2019: 7). The author argues on the premise that technologies since the old time significantly influence societal practices; and the current changes in big data, algorithms, robotics and artificial intelligence is claimed to have revived the old debates dating back to the Luddites contestation against textile machinery. It makes some reference to empirical and sociological writings to highlight the technological influence on current jobs, employment and social inequality; like Eric Bjornolfsson and Andrew McAfee's *Second Machine Age* (2014), or Carl Benedikt Frey and Martin Osborne's *Technology at Work* (2015). Nevertheless, sociologists like Kevin Baker (2018) and Paul Thompson (2018) contradict such claim on the basis that technological revolution would reconfigure tasks rather than wipe out whole occupations. The section on the gig economy highlights some pressing concerns related to these platform economies that range from poor working conditions and contractual status to algorithmic control over the work-

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ers. Nevertheless, conceptualising “post-employment” society in the context of the digital economy demands a more critical and rigorous elucidation. Furthermore, it would be more interesting to connect this emerging platform economy to the earlier discussions on the hipster generation. The author in this chapter touches upon diverse concepts ranging from work-life imbalance, employment relations, resistance, skills evolution across traditional jobs, labour process, to automation. This rich blending in a limited space enables the reader hailing from a different discipline to get a picture of the general discussions concerning work. The last section *After Work* envisages a society constructed without work, that is drawn from Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’ *Accelerate Manifesto* (2013). Nevertheless, despite the criticism against the post-work imaginary, the author too seem to be pressing towards a new imaginary that emphasises earnestly thinking about the future after nostalgia. This rich discussion on the evolving notion of work, however, rests on one essential remark, that is, the cultural conception of work has remained the same. As the author succinctly states: «work has a clearly-defined temporality – commonly represented by the 9-to-5 trope – and spatiality, as one must go to a designated location – the workplace – to execute tasks that are coordinated when not ordered, supervised when not surveilled, by another human being» (Gandini 2019: 80).

The author concludes the book with some insights into the reactions to the return of a pre-global era, “predominantly white world”, as well as about hipsters’ progressive nostalgia. Despite their own shortcomings, these options are also claimed to be irreconcilable, as the Trump/Brexit values are more masculine and patriarchal in nature, with less inclination towards gender or ethnic concerns; whereas the hipsters are more based on diversified and open cultures, supporting towards sensitive issues like LGBTQ rights or racial and sexual minorities. Hence, Gandini draws in a nexus between recursive nostalgia and progressive vision; whereby, in recursive nostalgia, the author connects the Luddite riots in 1811 to Romanticism at the end of the 1800s to highlight different facets of nostalgia that are mostly backward-looking in nature. The author uses an extensive reference to Hartmut-Rosa’s modernisation process and the possibilities emerging after temporal misalignment; the possibility of a collapse of the modern social order leading to a “revolution against progress” is seen as the nostalgic zeitgeist of the beginning of the twenty-first century. Hence, the author highlights, as progressive ideals fade with the breeding of distrust, the inclination towards nostalgia strengthens. In a concluding section titled *Coda*, the author mostly uses references to renowned writings like James Bridle’s

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*New Dark Age* (2018); Peter Frase's envisions on future after capitalism (2016); or, Paul Mason's "postcapitalist"'s vision (2016). The author considers nostalgia as a cultural zeitgeist that has already stirred in restlessness toward societal change, one that persists along with the conservative and the progressive cultures. The book ends with a remark on uncovering the possibility of building on a progressive rather than a nostalgic vision.

The author has used extensive examples to elucidate its arguments that blend in references from the past, experiences from the present and assumptions about the future. *Zeitgeist Nostalgia* enables the reader to critically reflect on current societies and relate to common assumptions about budding perceptions among new generations.

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