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Employment and concepts of work in the new global economy

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We approach the end of a century of upheaval whose beginning is extraordinarily remote. Amid conditions of total war and mass horror, the nineteenth-century political firmament was smashed and new paradigms emerged. Concurrent transformation took place in the circumstances of daily life. At least in the developed world, technical innovation in the household liberated women from culturally determined domestic drudgery and fostered their integration into the world of men. That world — beginning with the transatlantic community — was also revolutionized. Mechanization engineered a human desertification of the countryside. The Industrial Revolution had already given momentum to that transition, and created the iron cage of regimented employment, as Taylorism structured the lives and blunted the sensibilities of factory workers. Ultimately, capitalism became less oppressive, until sanguine observers spoke of the century of the common man. But advanced technology now assumed the role of an industrial proletariat in a post-industrial world; human labour was being ousted from industry even as new, uncertain avenues of employment began to emerge. And the ways that were first Europe's became the ways of the world. Technology globalized its consequences, with startling reductionist effects. The twentieth century was a century of surprise.

This inquiry looks toward the future from the vantage point of the twentieth-century experience. The shock of the past forewarns against confidence in extrapolation, but it is important to make the attempt. The focus of attention may be identified by two questions:

- (a) on the basis that technological and structural dynamism are likely to be sustained, at very least, at the pace set during the past century, what is in prospect for the conventional world of work; and
- (b) if the indications are that human labour may have a dramatically shrinking role as a factor of production, what are the implications for contemporary concepts of work — the accumulated baggage of work-related beliefs?

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The inquiry is necessarily speculative but is not intended as polemical. There is no ideological assumption for or against the existence of a fundamental personal, social or religious value in respect of work.

The argument begins by noting the historical development of contemporary concepts of work. Attention then turns to assessment of global employment prospects — is orthodox confidence in the possibility of full employment (however defined) still justified or does emerging evidence suggest the probability of an employment collapse? Finally, the article considers the erosive implications for present-day concepts of work if, as a secular trend, a large proportion of available and intending workers can no longer be absorbed in the labour market.

There is a threshold question of definition. Within its generic meaning, “work” has many connotations. Some are far removed from understandings of the kind of work known as “employment” — the focus for present purposes. The narrower term raises its own difficulties. It is normally associated with work that is essentially contractual and has an essential purpose of reward. But how does that sit, for instance, with self-employment that is wholly or substantially indifferent to market criteria? Except as is otherwise apparent in the text, the dilemmas are evaded by reading down “work” as “employment” in its ordinary meaning and ignoring the debatable margins.

Concepts of work

The concept of work developed into modern times by way of a long march from the presumed original role of ensuring subsistence. But an assumption in those terms is itself hazardous, since play — the essential verve of *homo ludens* — coloured the labour of primitive societies and assimilation into religious ritual was quite general. Rarely in human experience has work been understood as confined within purely instrumental objectives.

Greek civilization is said to be an example of escape from the instrumental approach — by way of semantic sleight of hand. Work needed for the satisfaction of material needs was held to be degrading and largely left to slaves. Higher callings such as philosophy and politics were not classified as work (Méda, 1995; Piore, 1995). The pertinent point is that work as a concept was limited in ambit, pejorative in usage and without claims to central ideological value (Lyon-Caen, 1996).

That approach made some contribution to the doctrinal confusions of early Christianity. Key texts such as St. Paul’s *First Epistle to the Corinthians* and the *De civitate Dei* of St. Augustine contain quite powerful vindications of work but were doubtfully compatible with an ascetic and intellectual monastic tradition that set the tone. That tradition resisted legitimation of work for gain. Such attitudes broke down gradually; certain occupations were accepted as meritorious and St. Thomas pronounced the overarching test of community value.

In mediaeval Europe, notwithstanding, the spiritual element was fundamental; economic motives were subordinate and suspect (Tawney, 1926). Populist ideas of the dignity and humanizing ministry of work that lurked in

Christian doctrine were stifled by the institutional inclinations of the Church. But theocratic hegemony and the feudal order that gave it special strength were soon shattered by forces of social change.

The most representative was the Reformation. Luther sanctioned worldly labour, now invested with a certain nobility and a spiritual aspect as the will of God. That was a solvent of mediaeval assumptions, but not a prescription for individual assertion. Socially, Lutheran doctrine was rooted in the status quo (Weber, 1976). Work within traditional society would ensure the salvation of souls.

Calvinism collected a more potent following and had a greater role in creative destruction. It also reconstructed Christian religion to admit an audaciously encompassing ideology of work. Luther's distrust of acquisition was replaced by the notion of gainful employment as a fundamental life purpose. The doctrine of predestination, which might have seemed to invite fatalism, became an engine of assertion. Industry and success in dignified accumulation served to demonstrate inclusion in the ranks of the elect. The more abundant the fruits of enterprise, the more conclusive the proof. "God's stewards" deployed explosive energies for which the comparatively static conditions of the mediaeval world did not provide as good an outlet (Weber, 1976; but see Fanfani, 1935).

Thus the concept of work was transformed: work was now regarded both as an economic means and as a spiritual end (Tawney, 1926; Furnham, 1990). There were rather different long-term implications. Calvin's theocracy and its offspring struck a special chord with solid middle-class burghers of self-reliant and utilitarian inclinations. Individualism filtered out some of the original religious and ethical essence of Calvinism. Social morality and religion ultimately became less determinant of economic conduct.

The movement of philosophical fashion strengthened these tendencies. The European Enlightenment sanctified reason at the expense of religious faith and institutions. In England, Hobbes asserted a secular individualism but found individual destiny so wretched as to need the refuge of a sovereign. Without such reservations, John Locke proclaimed an insistent credo of individual liberty. Emphasis on the rational also derived from the mechanistic model — and retreat from religion — proclaimed by Descartes. That was antecedent to Political Arithmetic and also to the partly veiled economic materialism of Adam Smith.

These developments culminated in the secularization of work as a factor of production in the industrial machine. That did much more than simply validate individual assertion. Because of the historical legacy, work was still equated with righteousness. It was an easy step to the proposition that lack of work involved a fecklessness and turpitude which society should not indulge. In this way, the work ethic was distorted into a bleak prescription for social control which dragooned the poorer classes into submission to commodification of labour and the dark satanic mills of the factory system. More generally, it landed up as a weapon to blackguard the poor (Bauman, 1998; and see Silver, 1994).

While the poor laboured under a goad, the rich and upwardly mobile were presented with an open sesame for the worship of mammon. To the extent that

ethical foundations had been removed, the work ethic was threatened with debasement as an ideology of greed. But here again the historical legacy worked its magic. The pursuit of wealth was still affirmed as a moral imperative, although progressively divorced from public as well as ethical purposes. To speak generally, ends were taken to justify means. Money-making was endorsed as a fundamental preoccupation of Western culture. In the industrial age, work came to be venerated — and enjoined — as instrumental to acquisition.

Idealism, notwithstanding, recovered a place on the agenda by way of the “oracular philosophy” of Hegel (Popper, 1966). Work was ennobled as the essence of human existence and as a means of connecting with the Universal Spirit. Hegel’s system had a collectivist emphasis but also envisaged an ultimate consummation of joyful and self-directed labour effected by historical evolution.

Marx took over this historical determinism, including the utopian element, but brought it down to earth. In his dialectic, primacy belonged to economic forces, and that gave a more practical twist to the concept of work. Marx regarded work as a fundamental and inherently fulfilling human function. In capitalist society, however, utopian possibilities were blocked by the alienating conditions of wage slavery (Méda, 1995). Revolution and the final withering away of the State would alone make possible the flowering of human capacity. This paradigm owed a debt to contemporary French socialists such as Louis Blanc — whose main contribution was to launch into history the pregnant concept of the right to work (Gray, 1946).

As industrialism gathered momentum, the scales tipped toward urban living and structured employment. Idealism faded in face of the extreme instrumentalism of the labour market and workplace brutalities exemplified by Taylorism.¹ These trends were mitigated by the new collective solidarity of organized labour and a public conscience that gave rise to labour reform. A further consequence was another paradigm shift in the role and meaning of work. Employment became the conventional indicator for the allocation of national welfare and for assessment of the public liabilities of the citizen. To speak generally, work in industry lost the factor of aspiration and was deprived of ethical sanction.

The change was never complete. Because a civilization of work had emerged (Castel, 1995 and 1996), however, work was sanctified as the touchstone of citizenship as well as economic utility. The concept of work as a human imperative took on greater importance as work became the most significant channel to social affiliation and relationships and defined community standing. These trends reflected the new primacy of economic considerations in the ideology of the state. The citizen was valued, first and foremost, as economic man.

¹ This label is generally preferred to “Fordism”, presumably because Taylor is remembered as the *theoretical* architect of the “secular theology of technology”. The constituents of the theory have been well characterized as: (i) division of tasks; (ii) standardization of tasks; and (iii) organization by managers (Lansbury, 1981).

The purpose of peeling off all these archaeological layers becomes apparent. In the evolution of Western societies, so many concepts of work have emerged. None was completely dropped off at the gate of the Industrial Revolution; at the threshold of the post-industrial order, none has been completely abandoned. In the result, “work” now bears an oppressive overload of semantic significance and conceptual implication. The key ingredients may be suggested as follows:

- (1) instrumental/utilitarian
 - work for survival or subsistence;
 - for personal enrichment;
 - for community security and abundance;
 - as a factor of production.
- (2) individual
 - work as a psychological imperative, intrinsic to human nature;
 - as an expression of creativity;
 - as personal affirmation or validation;
 - as a path to power;
 - as a defence against idleness, boredom or temptation.
- (3) ethical
 - work as a spiritual calling and source of redemption;
 - as testifying to divine selection;
 - as sacramental obedience to the will of God;
 - as a means of entry into a Universal Ideal.
- (4) social
 - work as an implied contract of social obligation;
 - as a process of socialization;
 - to establish social identity;
 - to maintain social solidarity and cohesion.
- (5) institutional
 - work as a lever of authority and control;
 - as the conventional mechanism of distribution;
 - as the touchstone of liability for public contribution.

The economic civilization and its prospects

Discussion of the complex evolution of the European concept of work should not evade the difficulty that non-European societies have followed different paths. Some primitive societies would seem to have had no ideology of work at all. In other communities, the background is more compatible. Within the “social familism” of Japan, for example, a congruence of individual and collective objectives fostered an ethic of strong group loyalty and effort and of inter-group competitiveness (Kubota, 1983; Sampson, 1989). That ethic was apt for remoulding into the civilization of work (Lyon-Caen, 1996). The result was a certain convergence but not uniformity. The economic civilization is a Western invention, and is not identical even within its own orbit, since Anglo-

American and Rhenish capitalism diverge. Capitalist institutions and attitudes still exhibit their separate cultural legacies.²

As the assimilative influences of industrialization, corporate organization and advanced technology penetrate ubiquitously, however, it is not so important to stress unique characteristics deriving from local tradition. For present purposes, developed countries that are now entering upon the post-industrial era may be dealt with as an entity and their global model is being substantially followed elsewhere.

There is abundant evidence of convergence in the elaboration of fundamental principles. In international converse and compacts, two matters stand out: the right to work and the objective of full employment. The Constitution of the International Labour Organization (1919), as amplified by the Declaration of Philadelphia (1944) and the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122), entrenches the goal of securing “full, productive and freely chosen employment” (Article 1, C. 122). From Bretton Woods (1944) to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the European Social Charter (1996) and the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development (1995), the same issues are addressed. It is a fair question, however, whether approaches reflecting the prevailing multi-layered ideology of work are still realistic. Are post-industrial conditions creating a fundamental disjunction between labour market supply and demand?

Factors of reassurance

Both in Keynesian and in neoclassical theory, there is no sympathy for the notion of an irretrievable employment collapse. Unemployment is regarded as a disease of the economic system which may be diagnosed and cured — though that process is not necessarily straightforward. The Keynesian view is that the market has a propensity to reach equilibrium below the point at which full employment is generated (see Moggridge, 1992; Soros, 1996). The gap may be closed by stimulating aggregate demand, most effectively and accurately by government measures of fiscal, monetary and structural manipulation. The regime implies a public sector of substantial size and responsibility (Galbraith, 1992). Neo-Keynesians, it should be added, have less confidence in this traditional nostrum, partly because it is nowadays unacceptable to financial markets. They prefer, or are impelled, to pin their faith to interest rate movements.

Neoclassical theory denies the effect of demand management and assumes full employment is attainable if conditions are created for clearing the market (see Singh, 1995). The emphasis is placed on supply-side factors such as labour

² “Rhenish capitalism” is useful as a distinguishing generic term (see p. 21 below), but the European “nations” certainly retain distinct cultural characteristics that influence governance. The following identikit sketches illustrate succinctly: Italy — feudal/ paternalistic structures and relationships; France — elitist/ hierarchical; Germany — corporatist structures and beliefs; Sweden — individualism balanced with welfarism in an outward-looking enterprise economy (Raymond S. Milne, private communication).

market flexibility, training and the reduction of production costs. Since government activity is seen as “crowding out” investment in productive enterprise, there is much emphasis on slimming the State (Kelsey, 1997). In contrast to the Keynesians, neoclassical economists have supreme confidence in the unconstrained mechanisms of the market.

There is also an important difference in defining full employment. Keynesians adopt the conventional or Beveridge measure (accounting for frictional unemployment) of about 3 per cent (Beveridge, 1944). Neo-Keynesians acknowledge that, having regard to greater instability and “churning” in the labour market, a more elastic measure may now be appropriate (ILO, 1996b; Britton, 1997). Neoclassicists, perhaps mindful that the bogey of inflation latterly dogged the Keynesian consensus, postulate a “natural” rate of unemployment below which wage pressures generate inflation (Friedman, 1968). The rule of thumb for this equilibrium (the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment — NAIRU) was about 6 per cent, but recent realities have thrown the concept into some disarray because the relationship between inflation and unemployment appears to be asymmetrical (Baker, Epstein and Pollin, 1998; and see Krugman, 1998, p. 32). In the afterglow of the 30-year boom, neoclassical thresholds are bound to appear socially insensitive.

Technical unemployment, then, is thought to be logically impossible (Gruen, 1981). Demand management or correction of market failure and rigidities (as the respective allegiances prescribe) is said to be able to ensure a full employment equilibrium (ILO, 1994a). Irreconcilable differences as to means, moreover, still allow room for a measure of common ground. Prospects of a virtuously expanding circle of higher production > higher income > higher consumption and investment and increasing capital stock bewitch the imagination of economists generally (Lee, 1995; Krugman, 1997). On this showing, unemployment is not inevitable or irreversible.

These considerations take the discussion closer to the actualities of the labour market, where recent trends are confused. Some of the confusion relates to sharp shrinkage in important sectors. To generalize, advanced countries now manage agriculture with less than one-tenth of the post-Second World War labour requirement or about 3-5 per cent of the workforce (Wieczorek, 1995, p. 216; Brown, 1997b). Manufacturing employment has been similarly downsized to less than half that of 30 years ago, despite expansion of output. Much reliance is placed on the compensating effect of the move to services, which in some economies now absorb up to 75 per cent of workers. But hopes may be misplaced, because large activities such as banking, insurance and retailing have a capacity for concentration through technological and managerial innovation. Wholesale staff cuts result.

The services sector, notwithstanding, is said to be robust. The star performer may be health services, where explosive expansion is taking place. In the United States, they now assure about 8 per cent of total employment (see Britton, 1997, p. 303). Other emerging growth activities include hospitality (including tourism), security services, the sports industry and work relating to the environment, where expansion could be very substantial but for funding

constraints. Domestic services, it should be recalled, formed about 20 per cent of the working population of England before the First World War. In recidivist economies pushing toward the hierarchical world of *laissez-faire*, large numbers of the losers could be impelled to domestic employment. Finally, very diverse recent growth gives some support to claims that the labour market future depends on smaller enterprises and occupational invention. Evidence from the United States is quite persuasive — between 1987 and 1991, corporations are estimated to have shed 2.4 million jobs, whereas enterprises employing fewer than 20 workers picked up 4.4 million (Boissonnat, 1996). Most of the increase is said to have been in low-paying industries such as services and retailing, but a high proportion of new work in those spheres was in comparatively senior positions (ILO, 1994c, p. 709). In the opinion of Paul Krugman, the possibilities for our grandchildren — and for us — are limited only by individual capacity for imagination (Krugman, 1994).

These anecdotal indications are compatible with ILO statistical analysis to the effect that there is not much evidence of labour market saturation. Fears of “jobless growth” and of the “inexorable disappearance” of jobs are not supported by analysis relating to the years 1960-95 — which indicate steady employment growth. Despite an acknowledged trend to non-standard and contingent employment, moreover, conventional job tenure during that period was holding up quite well. A large core of the workforce still had “stable and secure jobs” (ILO, 1996b, p. 25).³

That employment record does not support assertions as to chronic problems on the demand side, even though one of the very largest economies — Japan — had plunged into a liquidity trap by the end of the stated period. It is not possible, however, to discern the momentum of an historical (Kondratieff) or technological (Schumpeter) long cycle. Information technology is identified in terms of some such impulse, but the evidence is not convincing. Production is not notably labour intensive, dramatic innovation is becoming less predictable and supply is already pressing upon effective demand.

The longer-term implications of IT usage are more complex and conjectural; labour market effects have been dramatic so far but there is no obvious net trend. The demand for operatives once seemed nearly insatiable but is now slackening; there is closer scrutiny of proposals for further intensive installation of IT equipment in view of suspicions — epitomized in Thomas Landauer’s “productivity paradox” — that efficiency gains cannot be taken for granted (Landauer, 1995). If employment gains balance the losses, with lower-order processes directed increasingly to the huge industrial reserve army of the developing world, we shall probably be lucky (but see, for example, Freeman, Soete and Efendioglu, 1995; Zuckerman, 1998).

³ The significance of such findings is hotly debated, especially on the ground that global statistics do not capture social deficits and realities of deprivation among substantial sectors of the population that are losers in the transition to radical capitalism; see, for example, MacDonald, 1997; Sennett, 1998; Applebaum, 1998 and the discussion commencing at p. 14 below.

The total demand for working time also shows no clear overall trends. Especially in North America, skilled technical workers and those described by Robert Reich as “symbolic analysts” (Reich, 1992) have recently been working longer than in earlier years and are considered to be under serious pressure (Schor, 1991). Pleas to expand élite education are partly based on the proposition that suitable recruits are necessary to spread the load. But there is much variance between countries, regions and occupational groups and from time to time. Less skilled workers, in any event, are encountering problems in terms both of finding work and of the quality of employment available.

Institutional seers would find a remedy for that kind of shrinkage in a rationing regime, an approach that has the merits of gradualism and familiarity, since it continues broad contemporary trends. Especially in Europe, quite fruitful experiment is taking place with job-sharing, and there is significant movement toward a shorter working week. Some initiatives of this kind are alien to Anglo-American thinking. At rather different rates, notwithstanding, all industrialized economies are adopting flexible labour market regimes that imply rationed work. A shorter working week is consistent with *longer* term trends. The average working week in the United States and other advanced countries is now about half as long as it was before the twentieth century (Bosch, 1999).

There are other synergies. In developed countries, childhood is insulated from work. There are pressures to make that universal on human rights grounds. It is a long road, but child labour is in rapid retreat. Moreover, time spent in education and occupational formation has been increasing, and a greater proportion of that is full time. Theory and practice, formerly in double harness, do not function so compatibly together in a more sophisticated age. Especially in the case of higher-level cadres, gainful “lifetime” employment may begin only after an apprenticeship (including schooling) of at least 20 years.

By the same token, an employment lifetime is not what it once was. Although arbitrary retirement ages are being discarded as discriminatory, more older workers — especially men — are leaving their jobs early and not seeking, or not finding, re-employment. All too frequently, redundancies and departure packages speed them on their way. In France, only 40 per cent of men in late middle age are still in the labour force (Sennett, 1998). Japanese law enforces retirement at age 55. Thus, the conventional work profile of industrialism has been transformed in the developed world: employment starts later, finishes earlier and is restricted in between.

These trends might seem apt to relieve any prospective imbalance between the potential workforce (however identified) and the availability of jobs. So far, however, employment aggregates have not been substantially affected, because of the massive influx of women into paid work. Another qualification needs to be made. Comparison with earlier times is revealing, but also to an extent unrealistic. For most industrial workers in the nineteenth century, retirement had no practical meaning — they did not live long enough to get there.

Disabling factors

Some influences, while not fundamentally destructive, may militate against conditions of “sufficient work”. A threshold matter which does not affect real employment should first be mentioned. From a world perspective, it is impossible to know what is happening in the labour market. Despite advanced statistical capacity, that is readily understandable for the developing world, where rural underemployment merges indistinctly with unemployment and uncertainties are inescapable in capturing the movement of urban migration. China is the classic example; implosion of the communes and recent restrictions on urban settlement appear to have left great numbers of peasants in a state of near-vagrancy — not to mention a statistical limbo. Some estimates put the current level of “real” unemployment at more than 100 million.

The position for developed countries is also unsatisfactory. Hidden employment is an important reason. Pamela Meadows has fairly recently suggested that, despite an apparent economic revival in the United Kingdom during recent years, as many as 7 million people may recently have been out of work (Meadows, 1996). That would mean that official surveying methods are not getting to grips with realities. It is also true that, for political reasons, they incorporate dampening strategies — such as deleting from registers all those in certain older age-groups. Suggestions of underestimation in the United Kingdom are compatible with Ajit Singh’s conclusion for the early 1990s that European unemployment may have been understated by as much 50 per cent (Singh, 1995).

The accepted international measure of employment creates further confusion and makes a near-nonsense of unrefined statistics. By ILO norms gainful work for more than one hour per week is counted as employment. Thus a person working eight hours weekly for the United States minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour (from 1997, under the Fair Labor Standards Act 1938) ends up with \$41.20 a week and is said to be employed. The measure appears to inflate assumptions as to real work in countries with radically rationalist regimes, substantial labour market flexibility and high levels of non-standard labour. In some advanced countries, about 45 per cent of total employment is not permanent and full time (Beynon, 1997). “Employment” ought to bear a reasonable relation to livelihood and the measure does not remotely do so.

To turn to substantive obstacles to employment, the first port of call is globalization, in this analysis taken to comprise trade liberalization, liberalization of capital flows and the dominance in world production and trade of transnational corporations. The rationale is comparative advantage, and implies mobility of resources. But practice falls well short of the ideal. In many corporate decisions, comparative advantage is a long way subordinate to short-term issues such as tax concessions, or even irrational choice, and all resources — especially labour — are not equally mobile. The discontinuance of activities that do not satisfy theoretical tests of viability may cause more economic disruption and social distress than integration into the international system is worth. Great instability has accompanied the evolution of the global economy (Haass and Litan, 1998). It has been usefully brought to attention that the massive employment dislocations

brought about as that process advances can be more comfortably accommodated if economies are run at or near full employment — a condition rarely obtaining in today's world (Hutton, 1995). At this stage, detriment cannot be satisfactorily measured against present and foreseeable rewards (see Lee, 1996). Employment aspects of the process share that opacity to evaluation.

Structural and institutional inadequacies also endanger the stability on which employment in the global economy depends. The progress represented (for example) by the World Trade Organization (WTO) has to be acknowledged, but it falls well short of establishing comprehensive regulation of global commerce, and compliance machinery is likely to prove fragile. And the WTO is no more than one link in an incomplete chain. If finance rather than trade is in question, the salient feature is that Bretton Woods was never rebuilt with updated mechanisms and that its breakdown has never been repaired (ILO, 1994b; Hutton, 1995 and 1997).

International institutions and great power interventions have had some positive effects but also bear responsibility for spectacular setbacks. The draconian rationalism of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the 1980s was at first supported by economic orthodoxy, though always condemned by a distinguished professional fringe (see George, 1989). It now has few friends. So many programmes — Africa, Latin America, Asia — have turned out badly and so many conditionalities have proved ill advised. The current consensus is, on a charitable view, that IMF constraints and liberalization went much too fast and far too far (Feldstein, 1998 and 1999; Krugman, 1998; Garten, 1999). It is tenable that the key international institution in the development field has been more trouble to the developing world than it has been worth. If that standard of intervention is to remain the norm, the outlook for economic optimization — and dependent labour markets — is gloomy.

Great power impacts are usually less transparent and are not always direct. In some episodes, international relationships are an expedient screen for unilateral assertion. For assessment of the most important of these influences — that of the United States — these matters are an impediment. But case histories are not in short supply.

The classic example relates to the Volcker shock. At the beginning of the 1980s, following the Vietnam war, inflation was endemic in the United States and economic indicators were in disarray. The remedy chosen was severe and included a new approach to monetary management. The conspicuous feature was a sharp rise in interest rates. The measures taken were initiated not with an imperialist agenda but in order to rectify difficulties within the United States system. But the new interest rate regime was at once communicated to countries in the developing world which had been encouraged to borrow too heavily at moderate rates during the 1970s. That world was now expendable. A narrow national egotism produced severe economic dislocation and social distress (Emmerij, 1994; Singh, 1995). Latin America and Africa entered upon a lost decade.

The next question is a topical one: is it in prospect that the social consequences of economic rationalism and globalization will thwart optimum performance on the part of the economic machine? Certainly increasing attention

is being paid to theories to the effect that markets are not perfect and governments are not necessarily malign. But, especially in the key Anglo-American sector, a paradigm shift is not in sight. Realities of polarization, trashing of the low-skilled workforce and exclusion are not unique to that sector but are most significant in it. Robert Reich's characterization of "two economies" (Reich, 1992) and Will Hutton's searing 40:30:30 formula — yielding the conclusion that one-half of the population of the United Kingdom lives in conditions of poverty or permanent stress and insecurity (Hutton, 1995) — recall the facts of present-day inequality. In quite dramatic statistical terms, Simon Head has identified how the ordinary American has been put on short commons — "for the bottom 80 per cent of the American working population, average weekly wages (adjusted for inflation) fell by 18 per cent between 1973 and 1995, while pay of the corporate élite rose 19 per cent before taxes and 66 per cent after the tax accountants had worked their magic" (Sennett, 1998, p. 54, quoting Head, 1996, p. 47).

Latter-day capitalism has disturbingly recidivist features, even in Europe. While great numbers are condemned to contingent and precarious employment, ordinary workers in "good" jobs and apparently most higher cadres typically endure long hours and an unrelenting sense of urgency. Insistent pressure for higher productivity, anxieties relating to workplace status and strong tendencies to wage compression negate the supposed advantages of any concurrent flexibility in working arrangements.

In all "advanced" societies, concepts such as the family wage and the 40-hour week, which once seemed to be engraved in stone, have been swept unceremoniously away. In most of those societies, most women of working age now work. In the United States, it is estimated that a working woman with a family may expect a total workload of not less than 80 hours weekly. The resultant psychological pressures are formidable. It is suggested that, in 1996, 46 per cent of workers in large American firms feared being laid off. This was twice the 1991 level — despite five years of expansion and a significantly lower unemployment rate. The psychological problem is that workers in this situation feel "their lives [are] buffeted by forces over which they have virtually no control" (Zuckerman, 1998, p. 30). In New Zealand, where a somewhat draconian form of radical capitalism has been imposed, more than 40 per cent of the labour force is said to be suffering from disturbing levels of stress (see *New Zealand Herald*, 24 Nov. 1998).

Japan and the newly industrializing countries have partly distinct arrangements but are scarcely more favoured. The strong work ethic of the former, and lifetime employment and corporate loyalty, are eroded by traumas of recession. Management approaches quite recently trumpeted as world best practice are threatened; insecurity has more than a foothold. Under compelling conditions of global competition, it is harder to hold out against a universal tempo and methods and the global vision of radical capitalism. Newly industrializing countries, including China, appear to have no escape. Wage slavery, entrepreneurial (and state) exploitation, managerial dictatorship and the insensitivities of laissez-faire are exhumed from their graveyard in the European

past to find among abounding populations elsewhere a scarcely less heartless vitality.

Does this have implications for the “reputation” of work? To an extent not known since the worst decades of the European industrial revolution, the labour force everywhere is exposed to a work fatigue that is deeper than and different from mere physical or nervous exhaustion. Notions of work as fulfilment, as the expansion of individuality, as an enjoyable alternative to idleness, are retreating before the remorseless instrumentalism of global competition and rationalist ideology. And so is the work ethic which helped in the nineteenth century to lock the working poor into the “iron cage” of factory employment. That cohort had few other options. But what happens now if the generality of workers turns off work? What happens if deunionized workers elect to reorganize collectively to say so?

Since radical capitalism implies high profit levels, there is room for movement. In competitive conditions, however, it is not easy to accommodate demands for less work, or different work styles. And declining work commitment and vitality imply falling standards and output. Precarious employment already fosters those trends, partly because insecurity is not conducive to expertise. In short, hyper-competition exacts hyper-work and may bring hyper-profits, but the price cannot be ignored. Inferior performance through stress is the least of the hazards involved; disillusion and alienation are more fundamental, and there may be no cure.

The immediately preceding comments relate particularly to “lucky” workers who are overcommitted in jobs a traditional taxonomy would characterize as solid and respectable. As has been indicated, the numbers involved are still substantial but declining. By way of emphasis, an authority with practical experience in depressed areas may be heard in evidence — “the reorganization of work in late twentieth-century capitalist societies is forcing an increasingly large proportion of people to seek the means for their economic and social survival through various types of disorganized, insecure, risky, casualized and poor work” (MacDonald, 1997, p. 123). Even if the work available to those people may be frequently or mostly performed under pressure, they are essentially under-committed. In the Anglo-American sector, the realities of social exclusion, psychological deprivation and economic waste are pretty much swept under the carpet — even if the archetypal insider of that sector, Alan Greenspan, has suggested that such realities could become a major threat. Even more than those who are overworked, the underworked have reason for alienation.

Another aspect of the matter has economic as well as social implications. With current settings, especially in deregulated economies following the radical capitalist road, dispersion of earnings has become very considerable and is still increasing (Bosch, 1999; Krugman, 1994, p. 131). That aggravates social inequality but may also threaten economic equilibrium. As has recently been recalled, authorities of great standing, including Keynes, J. K. Galbraith and Myrdal have linked unequal income distribution with crises of underconsumption (Hutton, 1995). A distinguished American voice echoes this apprehension — generally free markets, with all the benefits they bring, are unlikely to survive

in a world where insufficient demand is a continual threat (Krugman, 1999, p. 157).

Unless — we have indeed entered a new “consumer society” from which the spectre of lagging consumer demand has been banished for ever. In that event, the alternative would appear to be mountains of debt. As in much else, the United States may be showing the way. The sharp turnaround during the Reagan years and the subsequent record are certainly ominous portents. American external liabilities are now estimated to be more than \$4 trillion and net foreign debt around \$2 trillion (Bergsten, 1997, p. 93; 1999, p. 26). The implied dilemma is painful and serious (Krugman, 1996). One way or another, the survival of the “new” economy may be at stake.

As globalization proceeds, it is a further disabling influence that state action is out of favour. One fundamental reason is that it narrows the field of activity for the private sector and thus for the operation of the profit motive. Neoclassical theory also adopts the simplistic position (stoutly contested by James Tobin and others) that state activity is unproductive; slimming the State is necessary to avoid crowding out productive enterprise. On that ground and because public expenditure is so oddly regarded as alien to “public choice”, minimum taxation is advocated. These features of the supply-side agenda have a facile popular appeal and are now conventional wisdom. As Galbraith and others have lamented, that deprives the public sector of much of its earlier capacity to act as a balancing force in the economy. In case of a setback, there is no immediately sufficient engine to stimulate aggregate demand and employment (Galbraith, 1992). That means sacking the fire service in a situation of unusual fire hazard. Moreover, the very large issue of environmental degradation is now an urgent item on the world agenda. Enterprises will bear mounting exogenous costs and public power is indispensable, not only as the presumed allocative agency for the attribution of charges but for direct rehabilitation.

Negative factors

The above-mentioned matters may prejudice the employment outlook by way of functional breakdown. But that is contingent only; effective policies may possibly avoid it. Are there factors with an ineradicable propensity to cause labour market deflation? Earlier discussion mentioned theoretical confidence that unemployment results only from inappropriate techniques, and also optimism as to the foreseeable prospect. Must those assumptions be treated as conclusive?

Current perceptions incorporate a distorted historical vision. In the afterglow of the 30-year boom, unemployment is seen as an aberration. The record of capitalism since the industrial revolution proclaims otherwise; unemployment has been endemic and in some phases a scourge of the system. The 30-year boom is the aberration (Singh, 1995). Some time earlier, even before the Depression of the 1930s, underconsumption theories and theories of the mature economy proliferated. As in the nervous 1990s, work-sharing and work-

shortening schemes were legion. In 1933, the United States Congress very nearly enacted the Black Bill, which would have conferred on American labour a 30-hour week (Rifkin, 1995).

Widespread opinion to the effect that there was a gremlin in the works thwarting the functioning of the economy appeared to be vindicated by Roosevelt's pragmatic reflation and Keynesian theory. The gremlin was that the process of production did not necessarily generate *and make available* the means to buy the product back. Provided that was identified, the difficulties could be overcome. Even during the Keynesian consensus, however, significant questions on the demand side were unresolved. And then the consensus broke down. In two respects, that was the story of the Emperor's clothes: confidence in the consensus had apparently been misplaced — and no consensus could be found on the reasons for the failure. These developments painfully exposed the limits of economic understanding.

Neoclassical, supply-side thinking muscled out the enfeebled Keynesian system and purported to establish the Washington consensus on theoretical foundations that were this time secure. Application in the developing world — where advanced economies would have no trouble bearing the political costs of experiment — gave early indications that all was not well (George, 1989). To speak generally, material instability actually grew and theoretical bewilderment did not cease. In the United States, Ronald Reagan, the political figurehead and popular icon of the new secular religion, led the country from being the largest creditor to being the largest debtor in the world. During his terms, United States citizens formed the bad habit of borrowing 20 per cent of the world's savings (Sampson, 1989).

In other respects, the analytical reliability of neoclassical policy proved lamentable. Nobody knew certainly why some economies collapsed so badly and unexpectedly (Mexico, South-east Asia, Brazil), why they stubbornly resisted revival (Japan), or why they should suddenly seem to become successful (as latterly, the United States). The extreme distributive polarization produced by the system was not foreseen and has not been adequately explained. Important weapons in the neoclassical armoury, such as the NAIRU, failed to fire as intended. A fresh aim was taken on capacity utilization. Small wonder that this latter-day subspecies of general equilibrium theory provoked a substantial neo-Keynesian counter-revolution. These developments painfully exposed the limits of economic understanding.

Little confidence remained in the idea of the market economy as a mechanism which, as Fourier said of his phalanstère, “une fois montée, elle marchera d'elle même” [once set up, it will function automatically] (see Soros in Schlesinger, 1997, p. 8; Garten, 1999). The cognoscenti were reminded that macroeconomics rests on value judgments — and of Karl Polanyi's prescient condemnation of “the utopian endeavour to establish a system of self-regulating markets” (Polanyi, 1944). The huge confusion, overload and contradictions of current data compound the difficulties of using judgment to arrive at workable basic principles — and some principles whose validity seemed settled are now shown to be precarious. Does the assumed correlation exist between output and

employment? Is the consumer society governed by rational choice and expectation? (see Krugman, 1994; Greider, 1997; Soros, 1998). Is some degree of indifference now appropriate in respect of indifference curve techniques and elasticity of demand? In the post-industrial world, what is the role of a calculus relating to economies of scale? In the rush to labour market deregulation, is it forgotten that such a measure cannot of itself create aggregate demand (ILO, 1994b)? The conclusion to be stressed is straightforward. In face of the current crisis of macroeconomic theory, reliance on mainstream confidence in long-term employment prospects would be culpably imprudent.

To make these points is not to disparage all theoretical inquiry or to deny the certainty of new and fruitful insights. Theory and policy, notwithstanding, are shrouded in mystery. Economic planning in the broadest sense is planning for the unknown. With that caveat, it is agreeable to return to practical discussion of the likely employment consequences of globalization and advancing technology.

The glut of low-skilled workers in Europe is a good starting-point. Three distinct causes are identified — labour displacement by the development of newly industrializing countries, technological displacement and internal problems of structural mismatch or policy mismanagement. The first two invite comment here. In the prevailing view, the foreign trade of Europe — relevant imports amount to only about 1.5 per cent of GDP — is too insignificant to be responsible for mass unemployment and steep income inequality (Appelbaum and Schettkat, 1995; Lawrence, 1996; Krugman, 1996; Lee, 1996, pp. 487-488). But that conclusion is controversially challenged. Adrian Wood concludes that the pertinent calculations may understate the true position by as much as a factor of ten (Wood, 1994). By focusing on commodity exchange, moreover, the calculations appear to leave a yawning gap. What industries might have been established or maintained in Europe — irrespective of production *for* Europe — if they had not been captured elsewhere? (see Freeman, Soete and Efendioglu, 1995).

Globalization is dictating relocation from the developed world and the preferential siting of much new enterprise in the newly industrializing countries (NICs). No end to that process is in sight and the employment consequences are incalculable. Much higher productivity per worker and technical sophistication have been the standard advantages of the developed world, but the gap is closing. Cheap infrastructure and labour costs are the historical attractions of the NICs, but that logic is losing its force. Both in industry and in services, state-of-the-art enterprise places more reliance on compatible conditions and reliability than on cost. And the vision of a Taylorism of huge congregations of low-skilled non-European operatives is out of date. The favourable labour costs on which transnational corporations prefer to rely relate increasingly to highly trained technicians, computer operators and engineers. The bad news for the developed world is the prospect of continuing *relative* decline. The bad news elsewhere is the dwindling expectation that very large numbers of prospective workers, typically drawn from underemployment in the countryside, can be taken up. In the People's Republic of China, a quasi-official estimate foreshadows unemployment exceeding 250 millions within ten years (see Greider, 1997, p. 70).

If technological displacement is important, why are employment outcomes perverse? Recent indications are an enigma. During the 1960s and 1970s, the rate of technological innovation in both Anglo-American and Rhenish capitalism was higher than in the 1980s, yet employment depression was avoided. That occurred despite good productivity gains and substantial entry of women into the workforce. A productivity effect does appear to have been significant in the 1980s. The American productivity record was flat and employment remained fairly robust. European productivity gains were substantial and employment began to fall away (ILO, 1996b, p. 31; and see Wieczorek, 1995, pp. 220-221).

Were European problems the bitter fruit of productivity success? Was American stability the anomalous reward of comparatively static performance? Different adaptation rates of technological innovation were an implausible explanation of the difference. And how does the recent leap in American productivity fit in? One theory is that a long time lag occurred before the benefits of recent innovation were captured. But the relevant investment (as far as identifiable) did not occur in a similar surge. Nor has the predictable adverse pressure on employment eventuated. Has this apparently favourable outcome occurred not because of technological change *per se* but because the labour market has developed a better structural fit?

Latterly, confident assertions about different economic outcomes and employment regimes in the United States and Europe have been fashionable. This comparative commentary should now be noticed. Some analysis focuses on allegations of Eurosclerosis and approaches the American record with more than a tinge of triumphalism. European persistence in sustaining decent wage levels is contrasted unfavourably with severe wage depression in the Anglo-American sector — widely identified as a major engine of recovery for employment and activity. That calculus, typically, does not dwell on the exigencies of the working poor who are supposed to have made it all possible. True to the tenets of radical capitalism, moreover, European social protection is presented as a crippling public burden that crowds out the development of enterprise.

More fundamentally, it is contended that, since about 1980, OECD countries have been hit by a major shift in the occupational structure of labour demand toward a managerially and technically superior workforce (Heylen, Goubert and Omev, 1996). Europe has reacted comparatively sluggishly. Structural and operational flexibility in the United States has fostered a more rapid and successful adjustment. Flexibility is a sacred cow of radical capitalism — which is far from ensuring consensus about its value as a workplace expedient. The distinguished American observer Richard Freeman has argued that its only significant effect is redistributive — in favour of employers — with no appreciable effect on output and no favourable implications for levels of employment (see ILO, 1996a, p. 110). Flexible work arrangements are gaining ground rapidly, notwithstanding. In the lower reaches of the hierarchy of work, conventional full-time jobs may be almost on the way out. In terms of *overall* statistics, it should be conceded, full-time employment is not yet in that degree of crisis.

It is true that European capitalism is more protective of the citizen. There is a greater propensity to uphold public systems of welfare and to sustain as a

public good provision for education and health. Minimum wage levels are comparatively high and higher unemployment is tolerated. The Anglo-American approach is less sensitive to community values, venerates self-reliance and includes the historical obsession with the work ethic. Unsurprisingly, therefore, authorities in that camp criticize “smug” European persistence with “generous” social security benefits and urge market-clearing flexibility in wage rates — adoption of the Washington consensus or *pensée unique*. Amartya Sen has recently offered a doleful but persuasive taxonomy of the psychological and social ills attendant upon unemployment (Sen, 1997).

Other approaches suggest greater flexibility in Europe than that kind of commentary would admit and throw much doubt on the likelihood of appreciable employment growth from further deregulation (Appelbaum and Schettkat, 1995; Judt, 1997). There is good evidence that wage flexibility in Europe improved during the 1980s and that real wage rigidities are not higher in Europe than in the United States (ILO, 1996b, pp. 39-40). And why should neoclassical thunderbolts be launched as if the Washington consensus constituted an ideal model? Since it has been shown to be theoretically fragile and a social disaster for disadvantaged groups, it obviously does not. Real alarm is justified where workers are commodified and factors of human fairness and feeling become irrelevant. A political rather than economic paradigm might imply that there is a basic immorality and irrationality in imposing employment at any level below a “sufficient wage” — and would sustain the hoary dictum that the labourer is worthy of his hire.

As between the situation of psychological insecurities and material humiliations of Americans locked into an undercaste of precarious employment and the socially adequate security of jobless Europeans, the balance of misery does not necessarily fall on the European side. It is simply not true that any job is necessarily better than no job. That thought would appear to be inherent in references under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to “just and favourable remuneration” and “an existence worthy of human dignity” (Art. 23).

The argument can be taken further. Within assumptions unwelcome to Anglo-American ideology, Rhenish capitalism is rational and viable — and also successful. France and (usually) Germany record healthy current account surpluses, as against massive American deficits (see Bergsten, 1999). The scale of financial wealth in relation to the underlying economy is large. With acquired prosperity, static populations and correspondingly modest growth, there is no need for the aggressive expansionary impulse and obsessively mean human perspectives which unconstrained capitalism tends to. Moreover, there is no clear empirical evidence that high non-wage costs hamper the totality of economic performance (ILO, 1996b, pp. 92-94). Unemployment that constitutes a “waste” — and even something of a personal crime — for transatlantic critics tends to be regarded neutrally in Europe. For reasons that are historical and cultural, in any case, the United States model “causes quivers of distaste and anxiety” in Europe (Judt, 1997, p. 106) and is not likely to gain a secure foothold. Because the social will and financial means exist, non-workers can be adequately maintained.

Two conclusions emerge. In the long run, but long before all of us are dead, the market-clearing orientation is likely to be seen more clearly as offensive to human rights and dignity and thus found unsustainable. Secondly, European unemployment rates, which the conventional wisdom prefers to regard as temporary, are likely to be the heralds of a permanent trend. As the work ethic attenuates and new paradigms evolve, European arrangements, not those of the Americans, are likely to prefigure the future of work.

Environmental concerns are likely to cause further employment problems because of the potential to inhibit growth. Under traditional relativities, GDP growth is taken to stimulate employment. Okun's Law placed the growth threshold where employment creation begins at about 2.5 per cent. It is now apparent, however, that the GDP-employment nexus is not consistent. (Appelbaum and Schettkat, 1995; Freeman, Soete and Efendioglu, 1995). Much lower estimates have been made for some countries — 0.6 per cent for the United States and 2 per cent for Europe (ILO, 1996b, p. 17). More recently, figures much closer to Okun have been confidently advanced (Krugman, 1998, pp. 34-36). Especially in relation to developing countries, then, the equation of lower growth = higher unemployment may still be relied on as a significant rule of thumb.

That is ominous in relation to the emerging need to attend to environmental degradation. The case is familiar. Global warming — whose existence is not now much contested — is simply the best advertised illustration. Production and use of many accessories of the modern industrial State will have to be curbed. Modernization programmes in populous regions such as South and East Asia may appear as threatening prospectively as are present indulgent levels of consumption in the United States. Nil growth advocates are finally getting a hearing. On present indications, their objective seems unrealistic. But even if present growth rates were merely moderated sufficiently to avert impending crisis, current employment levels would be unsustainable. Environmentally induced contraction would contribute a significant multiplier effect to factors already conducing to employment collapse.

It is important, however, that focused argument should not exclude conjecture as to the grand sweep of historical trends. Beginning in Europe, the industrial revolution fostered urban migration and expansion, continuing technological innovation, regimented employment and profound social change. Nearly concurrently, village-centred rural societies based on status and intensive farming were mortally wounded by agricultural transition. That dual upheaval was communicated to the rest of the world. Similar dramatic contraction is now taking place in factory industrialism as the labour requirement per unit of output rapidly diminishes. The impact, likewise, is global, but much more sudden in its incidence. The implications are portentous because industrial civilization in its universalizing form has been a civilization of work. There is no certainty that employment shrinkage of the industrial state will be balanced by the universal unfolding of new spheres of gainful activity. Humanity is once more venturing over the edge of the familiar into uneasy continents of the unknown.

A world without work

The preceding safari through the debatable domain of radical capitalism and the slough of despond of present-day economic arrangements ends, appropriately, close to its starting-point — in the shifting sands of concepts of work. On the arguments presented, it is clearly conceivable that such influences as technological and organizational change, globalization and persistence with faulty policy settings may finally precipitate an employment collapse — of just what magnitude it is unnecessary to speculate. In terms of regular, lifelong, full-time work, such a process is already well under way. What are the implications for the complex of work-related beliefs visited in the opening stage of our journey? The concluding commentary takes up that question.

Work in the widest generic sense will always be with us. About work as employment, we cannot be sure. A distinction between these two terms is fundamental to this article and has been suggested by way of introduction. The doubt is whether enough employment can, or will, be generated for all the populations of what is now considered working age. The indications are that society may be dividing into Spartans and Helots — the former an elite of Robert Reich's "symbolic analysts" locked into onerous responsibilities and work pressures, the latter surplus to requirements in part because of intrinsic incapacity for the requisite conceptual and technical mastery (Rifkin, 1995). Does it appear so heinous that they might as well be pensioned off at the beach? Not all, it must be interposed, for even in a brave new world of automation and robotics, somebody may have to do some dirty jobs. But the essential thing is the trend — and a trend toward employment collapse is postulated.

Political implications should first be quarantined. If the contraction should come about by attrition, protective mechanisms would presumably have time to develop. But political or economic shock could initiate more violently what longer trends were preparing. And globalization implies universal effects. The large issue put aside for present purposes is conjecture as to the political consequences if an employment debacle seriously threatened domestic cohesion and international stability.

Instrumental assumptions are a convenient starting-point. The immemorial assumption is entrenched that every man must earn his daily bread. Emancipated women have succumbed to the contagion. Even in times of occupational specialization, work is conceived as obliquely fulfilling requirements of subsistence and is also regarded in terms of social obligation. That is endorsed institutionally. The conventional mechanism for the distribution of welfare is work. It follows that contemporary societies and international conventions treat access to work as a basic human right and proclaim the objective of full employment. How else could the existing system function? These matters are not pronounced in the language of aspiration but as undertakings of a social contract.

Assertions in international instruments in relation to full employment and the right to work imply a human right to subsistence. Such "rights" are statements of principle, expressed at large; no agency (or method) is identifiable with a

correlative duty of enforcement. But the world must have aspirations and it is right to embed them by collegiate processes. Does that hold, however, if the gap between aspiration and reality is so large that credibility is destroyed? Not much is to be said for undertakings that are essentially deceptive and foster illusory expectations. The implied contradiction is a reminder of the hazards of setting up ethical absolutes. Even “rights” that are apparently infeasible may owe their sanctity only to the circumstances of a particular era.

It is awkward, however, that adoption of work-related principles came as the culmination of a protracted struggle; their emotional weight is substantial. Understandably, resistance to their removal from codes, or even modification, might be stubborn. Could related and more pertinent guarantees be substituted? It is certainly arguable that the fundamental purpose is not so much to establish a universal claim to employment as to secure distributional equity of welfare by the medium of work. If work is no longer the standard distributional mechanism, work-related “rights” will appear in a different perspective. Attention will necessarily focus directly on the conditions for sharing wealth within whatever political entity is relevant, not on the conventional intermediary device of employment. The “right to work”, in that event, will lapse from the social agenda as a slogan of exhausted purpose.

At the individual level, problems of cultural adjustment would seem formidable. What is to become of economic man when he (or she) can no longer live to and for work? How is the void of time to be filled without access to work? That was less of an issue in the pre-industrial age because needs of subsistence and obligations of status imposed a menu of activity, and because personal culture was possibly more expansive and unhurried and less confined. It may well be true that humanity generally led a life described by Hobbes as nasty, brutish and short, but much of that life would appear to have been less concentrated and channelled, and much less driven by the clock.

Almost universally, of course, public and private entities are nowadays quite heavily involved in promoting and providing activity and education for those who do not work — not simply by way of training to resume employment but also to enable greater satisfaction in the pursuit of leisure. Movements such as the University of the Third Age readily come to mind. As long as historical attitudes to work persist, however, such initiatives do not intend or effect a basic remoulding of the public mind. Frequently, indeed, work is there in the background as a kind of passport to entry — in terms of expectation or voluntary (or involuntary) release. Modern man would lose important psychological moorings without the looming presence of conventional understandings of work.

Employment, moreover, confers identity and status. How is a person to establish identity, how is a person to be placed by others, without the measuring rod of work? As authorities have been at pains to tell us, workers in the industrial age of contractual employment have been beneficiaries as well as victims, because liberated by the system from traditional tyrannies of status. Would new principles of status emerge to answer to apparent human imperatives of precedence?

No ethic, it has been said, is as ethical as the work ethic. Whether or not attributed to the Protestant Reformation, a Western work ethic is still a significant

impulse of the civilization of work, and is still loaded with religious connotation (Furnham, 1990). Sacralization of work as a calling, the belief in fulfilling the divine will through work, survives. And a great many people who have no religious affiliation or conscious religious inclination still have ethical beliefs about work. Puritan beginnings and the frontier experience gave those beliefs much greater currency in the United States than they have in the old Catholic culture in Europe, or even in European areas where reformed churches have been influential. In a world of vanishing work, such convictions would lack a field of operation — “we have based our social structures on the work ethic and now it would appear that it is to become redundant with millions of — people” (Jenkins and Sherman, quoted in Furnham, 1990, p. 235). How could the beliefs remain credible? Unless an ethical or more broadly cultural revolution eventuated, the implied contradiction would result in considerable individual crisis.

A civilization of work readily absorbed the secular concept that work is a fundamental human impulse and psychological imperative (see Supiot, 1996). That approach was called in aid to validate Taylorism and the shabbier aspects of industrialism. The idea of work as an expression of creativity was swept in also, even though the creative or inspirational ministry of factory labour would have been difficult to identify. But decoupling of work from creative activity does not present difficulties, since there is no necessary connection. In an evolution Marx would have applauded, the withering-away of structured jobs could open the way to a free and imaginative release of individual capacities.

It is rather less hopeful that all this seems doubtfully compatible with the conventional function of work as a distributional mechanism. If work rationing schemes (and implied distributional constraints) are left aside, the puzzle is to ensure the subsistence of those who have no work. If the commodification of people must be abandoned and employment is no longer the touchstone of distribution, what mechanisms will be feasible? That question must be asked in the climate of a prevailing ideology that resists state intervention, opposes the growth of a “culture of dependence”, has a doctrinaire obsession with the supposed benefits of a very low tax regime and rests on individualist concepts that subordinate motives of community solidarity.

It is possible to keep calm. Paradoxically, the historical position of women is the joker in the pack. It demonstrates that, where the social will exists, very significant groups may be supported in disconnection from the market. In relation to women, the traditional expedient in many societies has been to throw responsibility upon the private sector — a breadwinner husband was expected to keep his wife. The responsibility extended to children of the union, themselves dissociated from the market until an age at which they might be employed. This precedent was created in the straitened world of the economics of scarcity. In modern-day communities of abundance (to take a cue from the developed world), how could a corresponding obligation be found unrealistic?

As women have entered the workforce, the traditional paradigm dissolves and the breadwinner worker is, in a sense, off the hook. Even the nurture of children may become a shared expense. Gender dependence is vestigial, up to a

point. Whether that brings satisfactory financial relief is conjectural, for the modern style is a lifestyle entailing great expense. The point to emphasize is that dependence has not been eliminated — its incidence and implications have simply been changed. Care of the aged, for example, used to be an obligation with which families were burdened. Contraction to the nuclear family and evolving social expectations mean that such a view of the matter is now widely regarded as inappropriate. The burden is evaded or, more accurately, displaced.

Voluntary agencies are prominent as a substitute source of support. Some who fear for the future of market-related employment, such as Jeremy Rifkin, are optimistic that activities of that kind will take up much of the slack. Social upheaval and employment volatility are certainly giving them an expanded role. But there appear to be limits: most such entities operate under financial strain and many depend to a greater or lesser extent on state funding. Under conditions of economic rationalism, needs are becoming too large and urgent for dispersed and partly uncoordinated assistance. That implies state intervention, with some loss of autonomy. Insulation from market criteria is precarious.

As the welfare state generations supposed, social protection is best assured, and human dignity maintained, by using public power. On that assumption, the world of less work is bound to impose substantial demands, probably in the well-canvassed form of a universal “dividend” or wage. There is nothing new, of course, about redistributive assistance with a large field of operation; in numbers of countries in the developed world, more than one-third of the population draws some state benefit (Boissonnat, 1996). The difference envisaged may be just a matter of scale. Because habits of individualism die hard, however, there would be an expectation of resistance if state aid crossed perceived boundaries of social deprivation. In conventional language, why should the working segment of the population “support” another segment that is perceived to be idle, has no shame about it and is cosseted in a culture of dependence?

There are persuasive answers. First of all, the concept of lifetime employment is already fading in face of the imperatives of competitive markets and restless structural change. The typical worker at any level may expect to hold successive jobs, with intermissions of no work when social insurance is important. State responsibility for education and for age assistance is still considered to be an implied term of the social contract, and health care may be an additional part of the package. Thus every citizen is a contingent beneficiary. The social budget is not an infliction upon the reputable to indulge the laggards, but a public good involving contribution according to capacity and distribution according to need. Radical market liberalism has obscured the credibility of this paradigm, but its essential cogency is untouched. In a world of less work, well-embedded impulses of mutuality and community would have to be reanimated.

The basic recidivism of the neo-liberal credo has revived assumptions of the *laissez-faire* era. Entitlement is in retreat and charity is in vogue. The practical limitations of charitable provision have been outlined. It has no prospect of providing a sufficient response if an employment collapse comes about. Charity, moreover, is identified with an ethic of individualism and invested with class

connotations of good works for the deserving poor. Condescension is inherent. The point is disingenuously disregarded, but that is fundamentally at variance with modern community beliefs. The contradiction of charity within equality would soon be exposed in conditions of disappearing work.

There are formidable obstacles on the road back from radical individualism, the sovereignty of greed and the ambiguities of charitable aid. The ancient concept of the citizen deriving aspiration from and finding personal validity within the political community has fallen into discredit. Collectivist ideologies spawned the totalitarian aberration of the 1930s. Once it was over, influential theorists such as von Hayek and Popper nailed down the beast's coffin with a powerful individualist message (von Hayek, 1946; Popper, 1966). Scared out of their wits by the Nazi perversion, democratic communities and their spokesmen recoiled from the idea of the *Gemeinschaft* — of the community as a closely knit unit. For purposes of political discourse, the *Volksgeist* had been done to death. In the eyes of Margaret Thatcher and her ideological associates, for example, there was no such thing as society.

The neo-liberal credo takes that orientation from the realm of political ideas and applies it to the realities of governance. The resultant extremism is a curious image of totalitarian excess, crowding out ancient and benign habits of the European home. Globalization of that credo erodes belief in the generally more collectivist values of non-European countries. An ideology of extravagant individualism now ranks as a worldwide problem.

A possible outcome is an ideologically unified global society purporting to operate as a market-powered machine. The pretension of economics to act as a value-free calculus with application over the whole range of human activity (Méda, 1995) would to that extent be satisfied. The historical priority of political and ethical standards would be subverted. Under the new ethos of egotism, commodification of labour and market-clearing mechanisms, values of human dignity, group solidarity, social compassion — and ultimately personal individuality — would be lost. Under a radically instrumental approach, the worker as factor of production would be exposed to obsessive efficiency and reductionism. That prescription would be calamitous for civilized society, not to mention for the future of work.

A cultural counter-revolution could mitigate these trends. The first step would be in the field of ideas. Vilification of European collectivism after the totalitarian years was an over-reaction to a political deviation caused by singular circumstances. Even if individualism is cultivated, moreover, any regime in the complex modern world must impose far-reaching limitations on liberty. Greater acknowledgment of that truth would allow renewed confidence in concerted action pursuant to the popular will. There is no reason why a society building on democratic trust in the mandate of the state should turn to oppression or be more alien to legitimate freedoms than any other.

A necessary parallel measure would be to dethrone economics from pretensions to be the overarching regulator of human organization. That usurpation stands the logic of history on its head. It forestalls concern with political and ethical issues which, because they are truly fundamental, any society

should be thrashing out. Economic considerations ought to be instrumental only. That point is the more easily appreciated once conceptual foundations of economics that purport to be mechanistic are revealed as a camouflage for value judgments.

Is an ideological reorientation possible? For Europe, the portents are favourable; statist doctrine still strongly influences France and communal inclinations in Germany were not extinguished by the Nazi disgrace (see Judt, 1997). Hegel's idealist collectivism was a representative local emanation. In Anglo-American capitalism, by contrast, political and economic individualism has the powerful sanction of centuries of dominance. In the United Kingdom, that has now turned to a cruder conditioning with an extreme economic bias. Self-reliance is the watchword of the United States, but there an odd equilibrium may be perceived. The American experience also instilled the lesson of community dependence. Two credos blend in a manner Americans find compatible — macropolitical (and macroeconomic) individualism beside micropolitical (or microsocial) collectivism. Big government is disfavoured; the authority of church council and town council is indulged with deference. Beyond the transatlantic heartlands, detoxification from the *pensée unique* of societies in which principles of social solidarity once had prior importance is unlikely to be excessively traumatic.

As well as ideological and individual problems, the twilight of the civilization of work would impose difficulties affecting the practical affairs of society. That civilization is based on hyper-competitive national and regional entities that fear the consequences of relaxation of effort. So far, globalization has intensified the spirit of international competition. If income is delinked from work, how is the effort to be sustained? Without the goad of work as the mechanism of welfare distribution, what other incentives can be imagined? There is no guarantee that societies will spawn enough workaholics to continue the momentum on a basis of work for work's sake (see ILO, 1996b, esp. p. 21).

It is germane to the present argument, however, that there are additional compelling reasons for a slackening of the insensate frenzy latter-day capitalism is developing. Sadly, moves toward remodelling of the basic architecture of the world economy are so far concerned only with functional management, transparency and disciplined regulation (Haass and Litan, 1998). It is scarcely within contemplation that nations at different levels of development would be ready to accept economic speed limits. In principle, notwithstanding, that would be a splendid alternative to the "race to the bottom" which is a possible issue of current trends.

Uncertainty is the inseparable henchman of the new millennium. Destructive forces are felling the protective barriers of established ways. With the advent of neo-industrial conditions and globalization, a convulsion comparable in its implications to the agricultural and industrial revolutions is eventuating. A consequential collapse of traditional modes of employment cannot be excluded. For present purposes, that is taken to be more likely to occur than not. The burden of analysis is that prevailing neo-liberal policies which are colonizing the whole world are peculiarly unfitted to deal with the resultant exigencies. As

long as ideological remoulding is resisted, there can be no adequate adjustment to a world of vanishing work. The concept of the political community will have to be revived. Once policies focus on the citizen rather than on economic man, on common purpose and a decent dignity for all, advanced technology and globalization will no longer be demons for the fearful, but will take their place as instruments for the pursuit of happiness in a less fraught, more leisured and more equitable world.

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