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Conclusion

When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals. We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues. We shall be able to afford to dare to assess the money motive at its true value.

*John Maynard Keynes*¹

There is something ridiculous about producing unnecessary trinkets and various other products just to keep people busy working.

*Ernie J. Zelinski*²

Has the time not come to employ some mechanism other than work as the basis for distributing the wealth of a nation and for cementing the social bond?

*Dominique Méda*³

The gains in living standards in affluent countries are now being eroded by the degradation of quality of life that is accompanying the capitalist imperatives of work and production. The environment is being degraded and rates of depression, suicides, and drug taking are all increasing in the most affluent countries.⁴ Graham Burrows, a professor of psychiatry, suggests that much depression is work related and also associated with a feeling of powerlessness. The World Health Organisation predicts that by 2020, stress will account for half of the top ten medical problems in the world.⁵

Despite a booming economy during the Clinton years ordinary American citizens did not feel any better off. The *New York Times* headline “Paradox of ‘94: gloomy voters in good times” summed it up.⁶ Over 45 million American adults (and not an insignificant number of children) are taking medications to treat depression, anxiety and stress and other psychological ‘disorders’.⁷ In Australia, suicides amongst young people are increasing⁸ and family doctors are treating more depression.⁹ A study of thousands of British civil servants found that the further down the hierarchy a worker was, and the less control s/he had over her job, the sicker they were likely to be.¹⁰

Work is clearly not healthy for individuals and the products it produces are no longer healthy for the planet. Yet governments everywhere pursue policies aimed at encouraging more jobs, preferably jobs in the private sector aimed at producing things that people will pay for individually. Yet despite the disfunctionality of the work ethic it continues to be promoted and praised, accepted and acquiesced to. It is one of the least challenged aspects of industrial culture, one that has also been incorporated into other cultures and political ideologies such as socialism.

Gramsci used the term ‘hegemony’ to describe the phenomenon by which the majority of people accept the values and political axioms that ensure their own subordination to the ruling elite. However this hegemony is not stable and requires constant reinforcement. Reinforcement occurs through social conditioning, aided by leading social institutions, as well as the rejection and marginalisation of those who propose radical change. It requires the promotion of the virtues of the existing system and the denigration of alternatives as unworkable, disastrous, undesirable. Ralph Miliband observed that:

The smooth functioning of capitalist democracy requires that the working class should accept the general validity and legitimacy of the social order; that it should believe that any grievance or demand that it may have is remediable within the confines and by traditional procedures of the political system; and that it should be convinced that any radical change in existing arrangements must be highly detrimental to its best interests.¹¹

Many institutions have taken part in this process of ensuring a capitalist hegemony. Miliband notes that “One important reason why the claims [of a capitalist democracy] can be advanced with a certain measure of plausibility and confidence is that the enterprise of indoctrination proceeds neither from a single source nor from a single doctrine or body of thought.”¹²

In this book we have seen that the work ethic in its various forms, has been promoted by the churches, the schools, the media, political parties and government bureaucracies. Various professional and academic groups have taken part, particularly social scientists, economists, writers, and later the advertisers

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and public relations experts. Many of these institutions and individuals believed themselves to be independent of business leaders. However their own socialisation and conditioning was aided by the fact that, at the higher levels of the social hierarchy particularly, political 'soundness' has been a necessary requirement for advancement.

The work ethic has evolved over time to suit the changing social conditions. From its religious origins, as a calling and moral duty to God, it evolved into a secular success ethic and the basis for justifying inequalities in wealth in society. For the upwardly mobile, work still has meaning as a road to success. But the work ethic that is advocated to those who have little chance of success is as an ethic of work as responsibility to the family and the nation. This latest manifestation of the work ethic is most pronounced in the rhetoric of welfare reforms, in the language of obligation, responsibility and dependence.

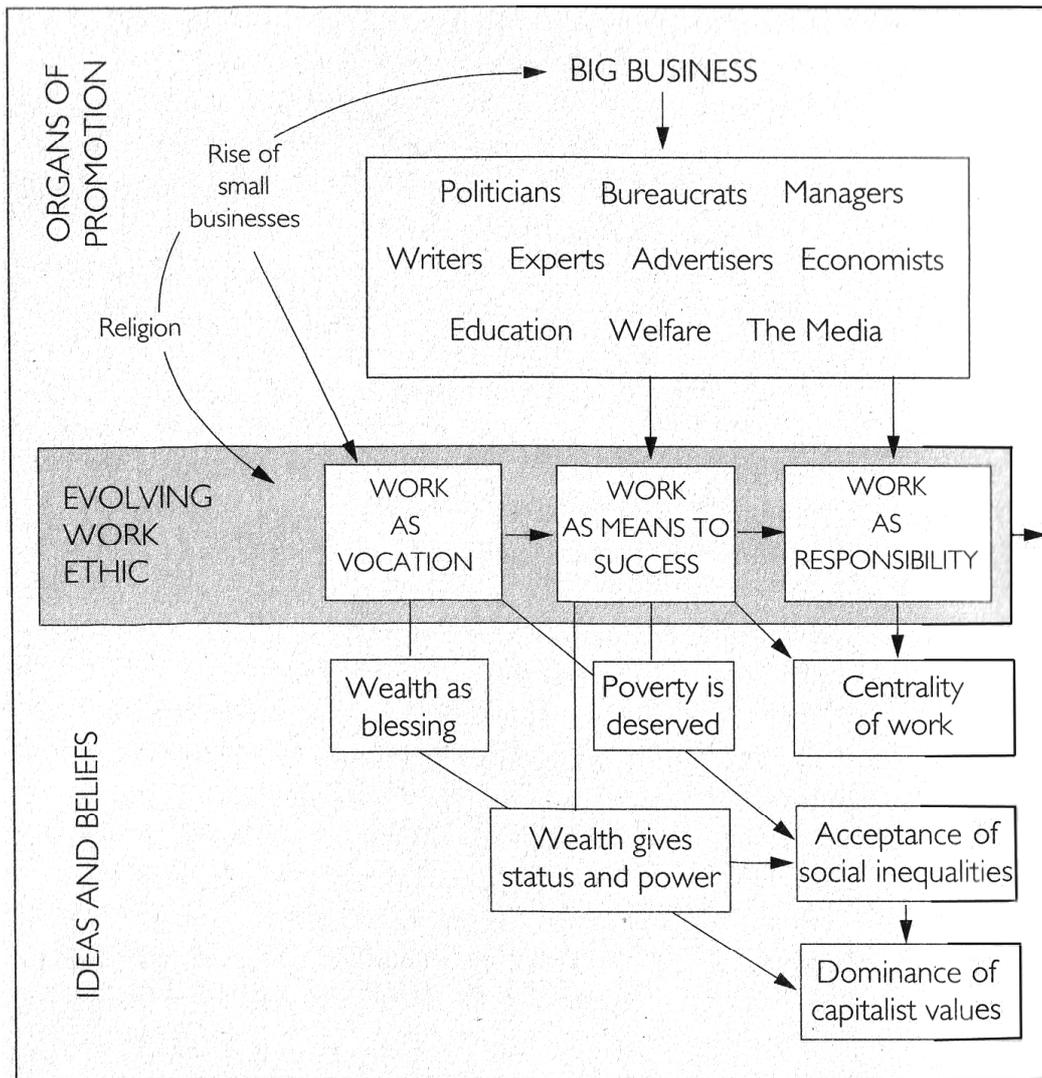
Throughout the evolution of the work ethic, hard work has been associated with good character and virtue. Work has become the central feature of most people's lives, the source of their self-identity, income, status, and the respect others give them. It gives them their purpose and provides them with social relations and a structure to their day.

And just as important as being a motivator for work, the work ethic with its associated beliefs of individual responsibility, and the promise of fair rewards for hard work, has legitimised the social structure of inequalities. It has been the lens through which social inequalities have been viewed. It says that those who are poor deserve to be because they lack a work ethic, those who are rich also deserve to be because they have worked harder and taken better advantage of the opportunities which are available to everyone. (The promotion of the work ethic and its impact on ideas and beliefs is shown in the diagram below.)

The acceptance of capitalist values by workers has been more effective than force or coercion in ensuring a passive, compliant workforce. This has been done by ensuring that the virtue of work and wealth, and the resulting social order have come to be seen as natural, desirable, morally right and inevitable. It is because of this that people consent to spending most of their waking days working for someone else.

We have become a nation of employees. We are dependent upon others for our means of livelihood, and most people have become completely dependent upon wages. If they lose their jobs they lose every resource, except for the relief supplied by the various forms of social security. Such dependence of the mass of the people upon others for all of their income is something new in the world. For our generation, the substance of life is in another man's hands.¹³

SELLING THE WORK ETHIC



Alan Wolfe notes in his book *The Seamy Side of Democracy* that “various ideologies have associated with them certain values; if people uphold these values, belief in the ideology will almost automatically follow.” Although he does not list it as one, the work ethic is key value from which capitalist ideology follows. Wolfe lists individuality and competitiveness as key values in a capitalist society, because they work “to prevent collective action for social change” and reinforces the status quo.¹⁴ Yet both individualism and competitiveness in a capitalist society have their origins in the work ethic, as this book has demonstrated.

The values associated with the work ethic have permeated every institution of modern industrial societies; schools, government, the media, churches, family, unions, clubs. The dominance of these values has been driven by business interests with the help of large donations, infiltration of these institutions by business people, and the use of public relations and advertising. But it has also

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been made possible by the cooption of key intellectuals, including economists, scientists, psychologists, sociologists and others who have all provided an intellectual rationale and demeanour for ideological beliefs.

Earl Shorris, in his book *The Oppressed Middle*, discusses how:

The most insidious of the many kinds of power is the power to define happiness. It is the dream of merchants, despots, managers, and philosophers, because whoever defines happiness can control the organization and the actions of other men: he not only assigns aspirations and desires, he constructs the system of morals by which the means of achieving happiness is judged.¹⁵

In a work-dominated society, happiness must be earned through hard work. The suffering and boredom associated with work is the price one has to pay in order to attain happiness.¹⁶ Shorris goes on to say that the “enforcing aspect of happiness is its impossibility.” It is only whilst people are seeking happiness that they can be manipulated and expected to behave predictably. A person who is happy is more likely to be independent and free of other influences. A merchant in an affluent society defines happiness in ways that encourage acquisitiveness, wastefulness “and social competition through displays of material wealth”.¹⁷

In such a society, many people participate in this definition of happiness so that they can sell their own services and goods. Managers “prove the system” by enjoying “more of the signs of happiness” than those beneath them and by the status and power they have over their subordinates. Each step up the social hierarchy offers the aspirant a small reward in terms of status, power and income, a proof of the eventual happiness in store for those who keep climbing: “The aspirant is pushed and pulled toward his dream of managerial happiness, constantly having to renew his faith in the definition given to him by his managers to overcome the disappointments that dominate his life.”¹⁸

The deceptively enticing, never fulfilled, promise of consumer goods is also a reason why many workers are willing to put up with dismal working conditions. The lack of alternatives for unskilled workers and the scrambling to keep up by more affluent workers goes some way to explain people’s passive acceptance of their jobs, no matter how unpleasant. But it doesn’t explain the continued work ethic they often display nor their embracing of a political and social system in which they are the losers.

Employers have specific and mutually recognised powers over their own employees through their ability to reward and punish workers. They are able to control what people do for a large part of their waking hours, when they are at work. But employers as a social class, also have more subtle and unspecified powers over employees. They have what John Kenneth Galbraith calls conditioned power, the sort of power that people are often unaware of:

The acceptance of authority, the submission to the will of others, becomes the higher preference of those submitting. This preference can be deliberately cultivated—by persuasion or education. This is explicit conditioning. Or it can be dictated by the culture itself; the submission is considered to be normal, proper, or traditionally correct. This is implicit conditioning.¹⁹

Such conditioning means that people internalise submission as part of their own sense of what is good and moral behaviour. Rewards and punishments may reinforce this behaviour but it appears to be self-motivated.²⁰ Religious organisations have long practiced this sort of authority through the conditioned power of belief.

The conditioned power of wealthy businesspeople is hidden behind a governmental decision-making structure. The existence of a parliamentary democracy that overtly makes decisions and governs provides the legitimation, as Habermas refers to it, for advanced capitalism, since on the face of it parliamentary democracy enables the participation of the masses in the social system.²¹ The power of businesspeople to shape our culture, our aspirations, our purpose in life and ensure that we work for their benefit, remains largely hidden.

The political consensus in capitalist societies does not require an absence of alternative ideologies or radical thought, in fact the existence of opposition helps legitimate the prevailing ideas as the outcome of a pluralistic and democratic process. All that is required is that the competition for ideas is “so unequal as to give a crushing advantage to one side against the other” as is the case in capitalist societies.²²

At the start of the 21st century there are very few challenges to the centrality of work. John White notes in his book on the philosophy of work that “a striking feature of most of the philosophical writings on work... is their lack of interest in challenging” the centrality of work. He finds this particularly surprising in those who take a liberal vantage point since the centrality of work constrains people’s lives so much: “It seems so patently at odds with the ideal of autonomous well-being that one cannot imagine how radical thinkers could support it.”²³

A major problem with envisaging alternatives to a work-centred life is that many people have become so reduced by their work focus that they have difficulty envisaging what they would do if they had a lot of extra time. Most people spend almost all of their time working, resting from work, or spending the money they earned working. A life that is not fully taken up with work and consuming seems to offer not only boredom but also purposelessness. Langdon Winner in his book *Autonomous Technology* took this to an extreme when he said:

Automation is now much more than a speculative fantasy. Its capacity for the liberation from toil must be balanced against the prospect that man will find

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himself functionless in his own world... In the world of mechanical or electrochemical 'dystopia' people would be left with absolutely nothing to do or be...²⁴

It would be a sad world indeed if people's only function in it was to produce goods for consumption; if this was the highest they could reach for. Yet this seems to be the case today. The centrality of work in the lives of many people reduces their ability to find meaning in anything else. If work was not so predominant we could develop multiple potentials in children at school, encouraging play, creativity and experimentation. Non-vocational subjects such as philosophy and history and politics would become more popular at university. People would have time to develop their relationships with family and friends.

Part of the problem is the amount of time that work takes up, a problem recognised by the ancient Greek philosophers who observed that 'productive' work reduced people's ability to meaningfully pursue politics, art and philosophy. Staffan Linder has argued that increasing wealth and productivity has led to a scarcity of time as goods take time to use and enjoy and time to maintain. As time pressures increase, time spent waiting, thinking, visiting sick people and in personal maintenance is resented and cut down. It is for this reason that affluence has not led to the satisfaction of material needs and onto cultural development. Instead the shortage of time has led to hectic lifestyles whilst idle time and time spent on cultivating the mind and spirit have been sacrificed.²⁵

Fred Hirsch in his book *Social Limits to Growth* also talked about the scarcity of time that arises from increased consumption levels and the time devoted to that consumption and earning the money to pay for it. Social relations, such as friendship lose out under pressure of time, since making and keeping friends is very time consuming.²⁶ As the Shorter Worktime Network of Canada points out: "Family, friendship, community, democracy -- all these take time." They suggest that the cost of lack of time in our society "is a deficit in the healthy, socially positive development of children" and that these costs will manifest as "government services to children—increased child protection and apprehension case loads, increased rates of youth delinquency and need for correctional facilities, etc."²⁷

Time shortages also exacerbate environmental problems as people don't have time to walk, cycle or catch public transport so they use their cars. Cars are the most energy intensive and polluting forms of transport.²⁸ In the US public transport use has declined since 1945 and today 80 percent of all passenger travel is made in private cars. And the highways they run on require four times as much land and energy to construct as railway lines.²⁹ They don't have time to cook so they buy processed and packaged food. They don't have time to enjoy nature so they buy packaged leisure.³⁰

But time shortages are not the only consequence of the predominance of work in our lives. Work can also sap our energy and our desire to develop our potential as people. There is some evidence that routine boring jobs with no individual discretion or autonomy undermine the ability of those workers to exercise out of work hours the qualities they are unable to exercise at work. Some workers are unable to counteract the dulling affects of work during their leisure time and avoid intellectual stimulation.³¹

Whether dull works breeds dull leisure, after eight hours at the office followed by a frantic rush home in peak-hour traffic, few people have much energy left for anything much more than dinner and television. The average Australian, according to the Bureau of Statistics, spends four in every five minutes of passive leisure with audiovisual media, particularly the television, radio and CDs.³²

An Australian worker described how even an average work day can leave little room for other activities:

At the end of each day you are buggered, physically buggered. You're just sort of shattered. And it takes a couple of hours when you get home of sitting down to get over it. There is no hope of being able to play with the children. I go to bed at about nine or ten so that I can get up in time to be back at work by seven in the morning. We are just work machines. They tell you that you are working for BHP for only eight hours a day, but basically you are working for the Company twenty-four hours a day.³³

Those on high incomes tend to also be preoccupied with work. Diane Fassel, in her book *Working Ourselves to Death*, notes the dearth of literature on work addiction, what John O. Neikirk has called "the pain others applaud."³⁴ Whilst other addicts are stigmatised, workaholics are often admired and praised as a "sort of paragon of virtue"³⁵ who is bound to succeed. Fassel also dismisses some of the myths surrounding work addiction, for example, that only high-powered executives and yuppies become workaholics, or that workaholics are happy, and superproductive.³⁶

Yet work addiction seems to be what employers look for in an employee. John Wareham explains to employers in an article on "Spotting the Hard Worker" to choose the person who is driven by a work ethic: "Conscientious workers usually see overtime and weekend work as opportunities to go the extra mile and get ahead in the world. They talk about feeling guilty when not engaged in some productive activity."³⁷

People who work too much and are constantly busy have little time to contemplate or to question. Anxieties are suppressed and critical thought inhibited. One is simply caught up in day to day affairs. To some extent keeping busy enables people to get on with lives that they don't want to think about. Work, like other addictions, enables people to cope with their fears and

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problems by ignoring them, not facing up to them.³⁸ One businessman, Thomas Asacker, noted:

It seems that most of the people I run into simply want enough money and free time for things like annual vacations, watching television, surfing the Net, or kibitzing about this or that. Questioning the way things are and trying to improve them appears to be nothing but a waste of their 'downtime.' Business people seem particularly prone to this status quo way of living. We're running so fast that we often forget to stop, take a breath, look at the map, and question the route.³⁹

Modern workers rush about so much that they don't have time to stop and consider what the point of it all is. A preoccupation with work means that they are less likely to be fully aware of life's pain, emptiness and contradictions. Fasel takes this further: "When you are fully alive, you let yourself feel the pain of living in an environment where we pollute our water and air, where we risk nuclear annihilation, where relationships are fragmented, and so on."⁴⁰

Lack of time for contemplation ensures that most people will not challenge the social system. A job keeps a person busy and "channels energies that might otherwise be disruptive" into work that is specified and supervised by others.⁴¹ Workers are not left with long hours of inactivity during which they might begin to feel purposeless and start questioning the order of things. The "constant low-level attention" required for television and movie watching, radio listening and newspaper reading doesn't allow people to be alone with themselves.⁴² They are always busy and doing something, too busy to concern themselves with larger social issues, even if they are directly affected. The quest for money unites people into the industrial production system.

A Canadian Buddhist observes:

consumer society is moved by people who are in flight. Having no authentic personality they hide their emptiness from themselves and others with the accoutrements now so familiar, from mechanical gadgets to designer clothing to computer games. Totally ignorant of the exercises of meditation and renunciation that would enable them to find themselves, they lead active, busy lives that get them through their years, in plentiful social contact with others vainly seeking to fill the gap caused by the missing contact with themselves.⁴³

Work need not be so all embracing and time consuming. But the endless production of consumer products necessitated by a work ethic, our acceptance of the quest for ever increasing profits as the highest motivation, and our granting of status and power to those who provide us with jobs that enable us to fulfil these goals, prevents us pursuing alternative, superior goals and a better quality of life.

It is a combination of social conditioning and daily busyness which prevents a deeper questioning of the direction in which modern societies are going. There are various choices for the future. If work is merely a means to an ends it is time to reevaluate what those ends are. And if production and consumption are no longer of paramount importance, indeed destructive to our social and environmental wellbeing, then we need to reevaluate the influence that we allow corporations to have over social institutions and government policies.

We also need to find new ways of judging and valuing each other which are not work and income dependent. The search for social status is an important determinant of people's behaviour and most excess consumption and work is driven by it. The question is, can enough people see through the conditioning that we are subject to and recognise that it is detrimental to our future? Can the inertia founded on centuries of carefully built cultural foundation be eroded with increasing public knowledge and awareness?

England's dream of industry
 Is on the wane at last.
 And ancient dreams of wisdom's sheen
 Are waxing from the past.
 As old dreams die upon the earth
 Another comes to birth.⁴⁴

NOTES

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