

Sharon Beder

Selling the Work Ethic

Zed Books, 2000, 292pp

ISBN 1 85649 884 0 (hb) £49.95

ISBN 1 85649 884 9 (pb) £15.95

T.M. Wilkinson

Freedom, Efficiency and Equality

Macmillan, 2000, 199 pp

ISBN 0 333 73602 8 (pb) £42.50

Reviewed by Paul Blackledge

Sharon Beder has written an excellent analysis of the processes whereby capitalist institutions sell, and have sold in the past, the work ethic. Her thesis is simple and compelling: capitalism is characterised by a culture that 'promotes and reinforces lifestyles and behaviours that are damaging to people and to the environment' (p.1). Modern capitalism, she argues, promotes a work ethic, partially reinforced by an ethic of consumption, and 'unless the work/consume treadmill is overcome there is little hope for the planet'. Fortunately, such a catastrophic conclusion need not be the inevitable outcome of the present historical conjuncture. Hope lies in the fact that neither the work nor the consumption ethics are part of human nature; they have been foisted upon us by corporate interests and can thus be challenged by other forces (p.4).

Beder gives a brief historical outline of the evolution and the novelty of the work ethic that builds upon Weber's analysis of the relationship between Protestantism and emergent capitalism. Unfortunately, her discussion is markedly one-sided: for instance, she

notes Aristotle's disparagement of work, but doesn't relate it to the social relations of a slave economy. In a sense to have fully related Aristotle's ideas to the context within which he wrote would have been to go far beyond the remit of her thesis. However, this discussion does reflect a general failing in Beder's top down methodology: she paints a wonderful panoramic portrait of the attempts made by capitalists to instil the work ethic, but she doesn't discuss the struggles from below that these movements have generated—this despite the fact that she notes Edward Thompson's magnificent discussion of the processes of class formation in *The Making of the English Working Class* (p.37). In fact, it is only in the chapter on education that she discusses *struggle*—but this is an analysis of the struggle between liberal humanist and utilitarian approaches to education, both of which are elite discourses (pp.195-219).

Whatever the weaknesses with this approach, she does explain the processes whereby governments, especially in the English-speaking world, have, over the last few decades, increasingly

fostered the subordination of education to control by the business sector. Beder compellingly relates this process of the increasing dehumanisation of educational practice to the ways in which education legitimises inequality—the point here is that education both plays a role in ensuring that workers blame themselves for the crap jobs that they end up doing, while simultaneously ensuring that they are disciplined enough to work well in these environments. Beder also relates changing educational policies to the shifting socio-economic context of recent decades. At the beginning of the last century, Taylorist and then Fordist methods were used both to increase productivity and to sell the idea that increases in productivity was a good thing *per se*. This double-edged strategy was developed in the post-war years by, in Daniel Bell's phrase, the 'cow sociology' of the human relations approach (p.102).

All of these approaches were linked to a meritocratic ideology that related hard work to personal success. However, since the 1970s the shift away from the 'jobs-for-life' aspect of the post-war boom to contemporary flexibility and uncertainty has enforced an adjustment in the work ethic: no longer do we work simply for personal betterment, but through work we also contribute to the good of society as a whole. Beder relates this transformation of the work ethic to the increasing alienation of 'generation x' from the McJobs that they are forced to do—people aren't proud of their job, so they must be proud not to be a drain on the welfare state (p.146). But what of those who can't get work? Beder traces the processes through which this group has found itself increasingly demonised, and even criminalized, by a culture dominated by the work ethic.

However, despite calls to end dole payments from those fearing for the erosion of the work ethic, Beder notes that most intelligent capitalists agree that welfare payments to the unemployed are a necessary safeguard of the social order; so long as payments are kept as low as possible and recipients are stigmatised as much as possible. Low benefits are of course necessary if wages are to be kept down, but if wages are low how can workers afford to purchase consumer goods? The obvious answer is through debt—or credit as the banks rebranded it. Indeed, when debt is combined with massive pressure from the advertising industry to buy consumer goods it acts as the modern underpinning of the work ethic—we work all the hours god sends to pay off our credit card bills after buying consumer goods that offer to make whole our otherwise soulless existence. But, of course, none of this makes us happy—a survey of British workers taken in 1999 found that 'six in ten don't like their jobs, feel insecure and stressed about their work, are exhausted after a day's work, and don't feel the work is of any use to society' (p.253).

Unfortunately, Beder doesn't discuss any processes whereby this kind of reaction to the pressures of work might act as a foundation for the formation of agencies that might transform the system. In the end this is the fundamental weakness with her book—for while she has produced a damning indictment of the ways in which capitalism has created and maintained a working class, she has not written one line on the experiences of the working class rebellions that have punctuated capitalism's history: she might not agree with Marx that capitalism has created its own potential gravediggers in the working class, but her

book is spoiled by the fact that she discusses no potential agency of social change.

The strength of Beder's book, however, is that it goes beyond an abstract analysis of the market to show how, in practice, capitalism creates and legitimises inequalities. Wilkinson has, in contrast, developed an abstract analysis of the relationship between freedom, efficiency and equality in which he argues, amongst other things, that

'efficient equality requires the allocation of labour via a market' (p.90). Unfortunately, he doesn't convince me, at least, that his version of market socialism won't generate all the vices that Beder describes as characteristic of market capitalism. Like Beder, Wilkinson suggests no agency that might transform existing social relations. However, unlike Beder, he does not appear to comprehend just how malign are the effects on us of the market.

