

## BOOKS

### Recent books

Beder, Sharon. **Selling the work ethic: From Puritan pulpit to corporate PR.** London, Zed Books, 2000. viii + 292 pp. Bibliography, index. ISBN 1-85649-885-9.

The social benefit of having the majority of able-bodied people in a society working hard all week goes unquestioned, particularly by those who work hardest. Few people today can imagine a society that does not revolve around work. But how did paid work come to be so central to our lives? Why is it that so many people would not know what to do with themselves or who they were if they did not have their job?

In seeking to answer such questions, this book follows a line of philosophical inquiry more commonly encountered in the work of continental European scholars such as Alain Supiot – one of the *Review's* advisers – or Dominique Méda, whose recent contribution to the *International Labour Review* is quoted in Beder's introduction. Work, she writes, "has come to be regarded as an inherent feature of the human condition, as the only means of fulfilling all individual and social aspirations. ... [It] has come to dominate the entirety of individual and social time and space [and to be the] main vehicle for the formation of social relationships and for self-fulfilment".

Sharon Beder explores the origins and practices of this triumphant culture

of work in which the wealthy are respected and inequality is justified. As Beder shows, however, these values are neither natural nor inevitable: they have been actively promoted – through religious preaching, corporate propaganda, the education system and socialization – by those who benefit most from them. As a result, work and production have become ends in themselves. Material affluence is accompanied by increasing levels of stress, insecurity, depression, crime, and drug taking. Escalating production and consumption are destroying the environment on which life itself depends. Yet, she argues, people are so concerned to keep their jobs that they are willing to do what their employers require of them even if they believe it is wrong or environmentally destructive.

Beder presents an outstanding critique of this central aspect of modern capitalist society. Arguing that humanity needs to unlearn and change these powerfully held but now pathological values if we are to reverse the declining quality of life in industrial society, she illuminates the impasse we are now in.

The book begins with an investigation of the changing conceptions of work across different societies and over time. From being an unwelcome necessity in the civilization and philosophy of ancient Greece, work has acquired an intrinsic value beyond the pay, products and profits it generates. As a logical

consequence of the virtue of work, unemployment has become a vice – with far-reaching implications for the well-being of millions of jobless people throughout the world. “Whilst the poor are getting poorer and the middle classes are making little headway, the wealthy are booming. ... In the face of the growing inequities in modern industrialized nations, particularly English-speaking nations, it is hard to maintain a success-based work ethic” (pp. 74 and 77). The name of the game then becomes “legitimizing inequality”. But given the prevailing ideology, those on the wrong side of the social divide suffer not only from their unfavourable material situation, but also from the breakdown of their sense of belonging to society because alternative mechanisms for gaining that sense – e.g. church and community groups – have been declining, leaving work as the most important mechanism. According to a recent study Beder cites, 59 per cent of African-Americans think “the American Dream” is impossible to achieve. “Millions of people around the world are finding themselves without identity and purpose” (p. 127). Ironically, those who are supposed to be doing well in today’s consumer society – which is “moved by people who are in flight” – “hide their emptiness from themselves and others with the accoutrements now so familiar, from mechanical gadgets to designer clothing to computer games. ... [T]hey 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” (p. 269). The question is, Beder concludes, “can enough people see through the conditioning that we are subject to and recognize that it is detrimental to our future?”

Beder’s logic and arguments are as provocatively brilliant as the questions she poses are basic. Her excellent book

goes to the very heart of what well-being is – or should be – about. The breadth of her references and scholarship alone make the book a worthwhile read. But the point she makes leaves this reader in no doubt that it deserves to be added to the library of any institution concerned with social policy and read by anyone with an interest in the meaning of life.

M. A. L.

Braun Levine, Suzanne. **Father courage: What happens when men put family first.** New York, NY, Harcourt, 2000. xxii + 264 pp. Bibliography, index. ISBN 0-15-100382-3.

The orthodoxy of male domination/female subordination prevalent in traditional feminism and women’s studies, makes it convenient to assume that men have life choices and that women have none. In reality, however, things are not that straightforward. For men too, freedom of choice is conditioned by gender in their socio-economic environment, particularly when it comes to crossing the heavily gendered divide between work outside the family home and work inside it. Partly because economic and labour market equality have been easier to measure and more rewarding for policy-makers and beneficiaries alike, much of the research and policy focus has so far been on the hardships that women face when they cross the divide to seek employment, careers and social recognition. What happens to men who try to strike a more fulfilling balance between their economic function as providers and their family attachments has remained comparatively undocumented until recent years. Braun Levine’s book makes an important contribution to filling that gap.

“It takes courage to attempt a balancing act that often requires the impossible feat of being in two places at once.

