

heavy annotations. It would not make a suitable instructional text, partly due to sheer length but also due to the assumption of a fair bit of background knowledge. Nor is it by any stretch of the imagination a book to read simply for interest in bed; and lest this be thought to be a frivolous comment, let me at once admit to enjoying many medical history monographs as bedtime reading. Perhaps this book is mainly intended as a reference work for those doing research in this field, although even then, the construction of the text, which makes for the above-mentioned sophisticated critical analysis, also makes the unpacking of specific issues a somewhat tricky task.

But to conclude on a positive note, this is certainly not 'yet another big book on a boring topic', although I still cannot recommend that authors say such a thing. It may turn out to be a little too close to the truth.

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Making a Chore of It

By David Rutledge

Sharon Beder, *Selling the Work Ethic: From Puritan Pulpit to Corporate PR*. London: Zed Books, 2000. Carlton, Vic.: Scribe Publications, 2001. Pp. 292 + viii. A\$30.00 PB.

This is a timely publication. No doubt we all feel we are being worked to death, and a good analysis of the work ethic and its discontents might, hopefully, provide impetus for a revolution whose theoretical lineaments remain as yet unclear. At the very least, a book on this subject, one so close to every Western democratic heart, should be a good read. But a couple of days after opening the book with a pleasant sense of anticipation, I put it down again feeling more than a little disappointed.

Not that *Selling the Work Ethic* is shoddy or spurious or in some other way a waste of time. Far from it: the book offers a thorough, diligently-

researched overview of contemporary work culture. The problem is more that it doesn't do full justice to the subject. There's a fascinating, absorbing, historically complex, angry, passionate and moving polemic to be written against the abuses of the modern workplace. But this book isn't it. I found it redolent with unfulfilled promise. For example, Beder's subtitle, *From Puritain Pulpit to Corporate PR*, seems to promise an intriguing account of the interweaving of an old religious ethic into the contemporary workplace, the story of how a past mentality can be traced into the present. But what the book delivers is nothing more than a simple time-line, starting out with a rather breathless gallop through Graeco-Roman Antiquity, taking a passing glimpse at Jesus and St Paul, before proceeding on to Thomas Aquinas, pausing awhile at Calvin and Martin Luther King. Fascinating moments, such as the Industrial Revolution-era Methodists (who customised Protestantism for the modern workplace by articulating a theology of resignation and obedience to the Divine Foreman), speed by all too quickly. By the time we reach Chapter 4, "Justifying Wealth", social Darwinism and the ethic of the self-made man have seen off any further religious inquiry. This is a pity, as a more sustained development of the relationship between religion and work culture would have greatly illuminated Beder's account of late twentieth-century capitalism (of which more below).

Without doubt, the book's most interesting insights are provided by the authors of the short quotes that open each chapter. The ideological poles of the workplace are neatly summarised early on, with Aristotle firing the first shot: "All paid jobs absorb and degrade the mind" (p. 9). Calvin Coolidge immediately provides the twentieth-century rebuttal: "The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there, worships there" (p. 9). John Stuart Mill opens Chapter 4 with a resonant truth: "Men do not desire to be rich, but to be richer than other men" (p. 53). And one would dearly love to know the identity of the unknown worker who had this to say to then-President Bill Clinton: "Don't tell me about the millions of new jobs created—I've got four of them and I'm not all that impressed" (p. 131).

Sadly, the main text is nowhere near as rich or suggestive as these pungent epigraphs. Not that Beder fails to present her material clearly and comprehensively. She does, particularly in the latter chapters that deal with more recent developments in the world of work, such as the rise of corporate education and the appearance of bizarre MBA programs in fields like Luxury Brand Management, Customer Insight, Football Industries and Siemens-Nixdorf's sinister-sounding Change Agent Program (p. 215). Beder also gives a lucid outline of the way in which the 21st century worker has become an expendable commodity in a labour market

that relies on surplus and waste, and she offers much good ammunition to anyone who wants to skewer the hypocrisy of political leaders, in hock to business interests, who pledge to provide welfare reform for the unemployed, or full employment for all. The truth is, nobody at the top wants anything remotely approaching comprehensive welfare reform or full employment, as fierce competition for jobs within the workforce keeps the price of labour down, while miserable welfare provision ensures that the competition for “dangerous, dirty, distressing or dead-end” work remains high (p. 183). Beder is similarly good on the arguments surrounding work-for-the-dole schemes and ‘workfare’ programs. But the problem is that this valuable information comes couched in deadly, indigestible prose.

Any historical treatment of work really needs to say more than Beder does about the technological horror of the twentieth century. Beder sets out to address this issue in her sixth chapter, “Increasing Productivity”—or at least, she seems to. Here is another point where the book fails to deliver on a beguiling promise. “Increasing Productivity” basically outlines the processes by which workers have been turned into machines, in order to make them fitter for tedious, repetitive jobs in factories. Say what you like about the Industrial Revolution, as the twentieth century unfolded it certainly helped to strip away the hypocritical gloss of virtue that the Protestant work ethic had given to menial labour! This chapter is presided over by the chilling figure of Frederick Winslow Taylor, the turn-of-the-century engineer who was among the first to realise that *homo laborens* had to be transformed into a compliant automaton if he was going to spend his working life efficiently hefting coal from one end of an open-pit mine to the other, or screwing nuts onto engine blocks at a Ford assembly line. (Henry Ford is the other ghost haunting this chapter.) Scion of a prosperous Quaker family, Taylor was the author of *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), a hugely influential publication that gave us the rationale for what we now call downsizing. It also recommended the absolute separation of manual and mental labour, and—in calling for the development an entirely new species of Worker—gave us the dread discipline of industrial psychology, which devotes itself to exploring the complicated systems of stick and carrot by which the workforce can be controlled.

Beder thus far provides a lucid outline of the ways in which humans in civilised democracies can be made to spend their lives doing jobs fit for animals. But here is where another story could—and, I would say, should—be told. Because the twentieth century distinguished itself not just as an era when it was discovered that people could be turned into machines, but also as an era when people were, for the first time, fed into machines at a rate that owed everything to the development of modern

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workplace strategies. The history of the Holocaust and its nature as a technological *tour de force* has been written many times, and I do not think it necessary for Beder to have written it again at length here. But her discussion of workplace efficiency would have been immensely enriched by at least a passing mention of the Second World War and the frightening ways in which it enabled technological progress to be unleashed for a few years. Once again, the epigraphs suggest connections not made in the text, as “Increasing Productivity” opens with these lines from Taylor:

Now one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type (p. 95).

A few pages later, we have Taylor again:

This work is so crude and elementary in its nature that the write firmly believes that it would be possible to train a gorilla so as to become a more efficient pig-iron handler than any man can be (p. 98).

These lofty thoughts are taken from *Principles of Scientific Management*, and in their casual mockery, their offhand contempt and their recourse to the metaphors of inferior species, they resemble nothing so much as German anti-Jewish propaganda of the 1930s. A tenuous connection perhaps, until one goes on to recall the nexus of labour camps, slave workers, and the streamlined railroads that led to Auschwitz, with its heraldic motto *Arbeit macht frei*. The connection is important because it enables us to see the god of Production not just as a Protestant Jehovah, but also as a rapacious Saturn who devours his children in their millions. Like many people, I have never been able entirely to grasp fully the dark constellation of associations around *Arbeit macht frei*, but the words have lost none of their resonance in a postwar world where *Arbeit* professes to offer a new kind of freedom: the freedom to consume ourselves to death. The world of work continues to be a more frightening and insane place, and with a darker history, than Beder’s discussion really lets on.

If the problem is weakly stated, the solution is even more feeble. A glimpse of Beder’s answer to the woes of capitalist oppression comes in the introduction: “cultures can change, and we need to recognise that industrial culture has become dysfunctional and is in need of a major overhaul” (p. 4), a lukewarm admonition reiterated in her final chapter, which opens with this breathtakingly upbeat premise of John Maynard Keynes:

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 afford to dare to assess the money motive at its true value (p. 261).

When the accumulation of wealth is no longer socially important? Every preceding page in *Selling the Work Ethic* bears witness to the fact that the accumulation of wealth persists above all in maintaining supreme social importance, and the book's impact lies largely in the focus Beder brings to this unpalatable truth. And yet here Beder is on the final page:

If work is merely a means to an end it is time to re-evaluate what those ends are... we need to re-evaluate the influence that we allow corporations to have over our social institutions and government policies. We also need to find new ways of judging and valuing each other which are not dependent on work and income. (p. 270)

So we are back to the language of values, and it is a shame that Beder has left her discussion of religion far behind in the book's earlier chapters on the Protestant work ethic, as these pallid admonitions toward revaluation badly need the bulwark of faith behind them. For example, analysis of the ways in which aspects of the Judaeo-Christian tradition can be brought to bear against capitalist abuses might have raised her conclusion above the hollow optimism it evinces. The Bible, favoured instrument of Calvin and Luther, also raises prophetic voices on countless occasions against the downtrodden, and there is a history of resistance to ostentatious wealth creation that runs from the Hebrew Biblical prophets, through the Sermon on the Mount and on to religious groups like the Franciscans and the Poor Clares—a history whose invocation by Beder might have given her discussion the depth and subtlety it needs. As it stands, this book marshals a wide range of sound arguments against contemporary work culture, but it seems strangely reticent in actually putting those arguments to the service of impassioned debate or polemic, or indeed of any positive program. No doubt a seam of genuine anger lurks beneath all the sociology, but Beder never really gives it voice, and her work suffers as a result.

Taken as a whole, *Selling the Work Ethic* lacks the sort of narrative complexity that can make all the difference between a merely useful book and an interesting one. Beder's research is impressive, but more as a closely-documented array of facts and statistics than as a thought-provoking or affecting account of the deeply ambivalent relationship that exists between us and our labour. The text is heavily over-referenced, with an average of well over a hundred endnotes per (short) chapter, and there

are many points at which a quote adds nothing of particular insight to the text, and might as well have been replaced by the author's own words. A style point perhaps, but one that results in Beder's book ultimately being a bibliographically valuable but rather dull reference text. Reading it, one has the impression of eavesdropping imperfectly on other, more interesting conversations. One would like to read more of sampled works such as Gale Miller's *Enforcing the Work Ethic* (1991), or Lydia Morris' *Dangerous Classes* (1994), or Richard Sennet's *The Corrosion of Character* (1998)—even if only because they appear so much more compelling than the pedestrian discussion in which Beder presents them.

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Carving Nature at its Joints

By Niall Shanks

Rebecca Bryant, *Discovery and Decision: Exploring the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Scientific Classification*. London: Associated University Presses, 2000. Pp. 131. US\$30.00 HB.

Recently astronomers have asked the following question: what *kind* of object is Pluto? Alternatively, how is the object to be *classified*? Is it a planet? Or is it—because its mass is about one fifth that of the moon—a member of another group of objects known as ‘Trans-Neptunian Objects’? Or is it perhaps both? As Bryant points out, all three positions have had serious scientific advocates, and observations of the natural world do not seem to be capable of settling the matter. It is very tempting, to use the anatomical metaphor, to think that nature has easily identifiable ‘joints’ that can be readily and straightforwardly ‘carved’ by