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## The Promotion of a Secular Work Ethic

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# THE PROMOTION OF A SECULAR WORK ETHIC

Sharon Beder\*

The compulsion to work has clearly become pathological in modern industrial societies. Millions of people are working long hours, devoting their lives to making or doing things that will not enrich their lives or make them happier but will add to the garbage and pollution that the earth is finding difficult to accommodate. They are so busy doing this that they have little time to spend with their family and friends, to develop other aspects of themselves, to participate in their communities as full citizens.

Unless the work/consume treadmill is overcome there is little hope for the planet. The work ethic and the corresponding respect accorded to those who accumulate wealth, are socially constructed but rapidly becoming dysfunctional for social and environmental welfare. Much has been written about the role of Protestant preachers in the rise of the work ethic but the continued reinforcement of a secular work ethic owes much to literature, particularly self-help books and children's literature of the nineteenth century, which promoted work as a route to success and a sign of good character.

In the centuries following the Protestant reformation the emphasis on work as a religious calling was gradually superseded by a materialistic quest for social mobility and material success. This success-oriented work ethic encouraged ambition, hard work, self-reliance, and self-discipline and held out the promise that such effort would be materially rewarded. Through example and reiteration, the myth that any man, no matter what his origins, could become rich if he tried hard enough, became firmly established. The self-made man owed his advancement to habits of industry, sobriety, moderation, self-discipline, and avoidance of debt. (Beder)

In early America the middle classes "controlled the major institutions of social influence"—the schools, churches, factories, political offices and publishing companies—and used them to propagate work values (Cherrington 32-3). Their children learned the value of hard work from their parents and this was reinforced by school teachers, classroom readers and popular books.

Benjamin Franklin was one of the best known early propagators of work values. *Poor Richard* and Franklin's autobiography sold millions of copies at the time and was translated into many languages for sale abroad. In his books he urged thrift, industry, pursuit of money and hard work.

"[N]ewspapers, books, interviews, speeches, and literature abounded with praise of the successful who had made it on their own." Success was defined in terms of doing well in business and making lots of money. Owning one's own business was supposed to be a route to success that was open to all, as Abraham Lincoln explained in an 1861 speech to Congress:

The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account for awhile, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This is a just, and generous, and prosperous system; which opens the way to all—gives hope to all, and consequent energy and progress, and improvement of conditions to all. (qtd. in Chinoy 4)

The earliest text books published in America promoted work values as part of good character and the formula to success. These included the Peter Parley books first published by Samuel Goodrich during the 1820s and 30s (Peter Parley was a pseudonym). Goodrich

wrote some 150 children's books beginning with *Tales of Peter Parley about America*. The Parley books covered geography, history, commerce and even mathematics.

McGuffey's Eclectic Readers were the standard English textbooks in American schools from 1830s through to 1920s. They were first published in 1836 and became perhaps the most widely read children's books in the 19th century with 122 million copies of the six readers sold to an estimated four fifths of US school children (Cherrington 36). American children learned to read and write using these books, which also taught middle-class values including the work ethic and success through hard work: "Work, work, my boy, be not afraid; Look labor boldly in the face." (qtd. in Bernstein 161) They are again being promoted today by conservative groups in the US (see for example <http://www.liberty-tree.org/ltm/mcguffeys-reader.html> and <http://www.aobs-store.com/reviews/mcguffey.htm>)

American story books also taught work values. Horatio Alger (1832-99) was one of the most prolific American writers. He wrote some 130 books that taught work values to young boys. Twenty million copies of Alger's books were sold with titles such as *Strive and Succeed*, *Ragged Dick*, *Mark the Matchboy*, *Risen from the Ranks*, *Bound to Rise*. They typically told of poor boys who became self-made men through their own efforts and perseverance.

In the twentieth century children continued to learn at school about how various successful businessmen had started from humble origins. From the 1940s the American Schools and Colleges Association presented an annual "Horatio Alger Award" to businessmen whose "rise to success symbolizes the tradition of starting from scratch under our system of free competitive enterprise" (Chinoy 1) and there are still a range of Alger associations and awards current today (see for example <http://www.ihot.com/~has/> and <http://www.horatioalger.com/>).

Self-help books supplemented fiction in showing the way to success. Books at the turn of the 20th century with names such as *The Conquest of Poverty*, *Pushing to the Front*, *Success under Difficulty*, all preached the message of how any motivated, hard-working individual could overcome life's obstacles.

Work as a route to success was also promoted in Britain in books, newspapers and official reports. Workers were urged to work hard towards success, to be independent and raise themselves above their lowly stations in life through saving, striving, and industriousness. Nineteenth century organisations such as the Bettering Society promoted thrift and self-improvement and criticised measures to aid the poor (Roach 69). Samuel Smiles was one of the foremost advocates of "the spirit of self-help". His 1859 book *Self-Help* argued:

In many walks of life drudgery and toil must be cheerfully endured as the necessary discipline of life... He who allows his application to falter, or shirks his work on frivolous pretexts, is on the sure road to ultimate failure... even men with the commonest brains and the most slender powers will accomplish much... (qtd. in Ward 22-3)

The myth of the self-made man was also evident in popular music hall songs in the 19th century, such as *Work Boys Work* by Harry Clifton (1824-1872):

...labour leads to wealth  
and will keep you in good health,  
so its best to be contented with your lot.

Whilst it was true that some of the early English manufacturers started off as workers themselves, they tended to come from the middle classes and as time went by the opportunity for working people to become capitalists were reduced as the income gap between capitalists and workers broadened.

In fact the much publicised gospel of improvement and self-help served only to obscure the very limited prospects and achievements of the self-made men within early and later Victorian society, and investigations of the steel and hosiery

industries, for instance, have shown how little recruitment occurred from the ranks of the workers to those of the entrepreneurs. (Thomis 86)

However, there were enough oft-repeated stories of individuals moving from poverty to wealth to keep alive, at least in the minds of the well-to-do, the idea that hard work could lead from rags-to-riches, despite this not being the case for the vast majority of people who were born in poverty and died in poverty after a life time of hard work (Furnham 198). In this way the affluent were able to feel comfortable about poverty in their midst, blaming it on individual weakness rather than societal failings.

In Britain, as in America, the myth of the self-made man persisted in children's literature into the twentieth century. Academic Philip Cohen noted:

When I was growing up in the early 1950s it was still possible to get given 'improving books' for one's birthday, consisting of biographies of self-made men, engineers, inventors, industrialists, entrepreneurs, philanthropists and the like. These men, and they were all men, had usually lived in the 'heroic' age of nineteenth-century capitalism and the books themselves were clearly prepared for the edification of the young. (Cohen 61)

The contemporary reception by audiences of the texts discussed in this article is unknown. In particular, the degree to which children were able to resist the none too subtle moral lessons contained in their texts and stories is a question requiring empirical research that has yet to be carried out. However, it is evident that the promotion of the work ethic has been a successful enterprise and this article has shown that 19<sup>th</sup> century books played an active part in that. Although not everyone subscribes to the work ethic today, the myth of the self-made man remains a myth in most English speaking countries, even though the disparities between rich and poor are widening and it is becoming more and more difficult for the poor to become rich through talent, effort and opportunities.

Despite the dysfunctionality 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. Yet it is based on myths and fallacies which provide legitimacy for gross social inequalities. If we are to protect the planet and our social health we need to find new ways of judging and valuing each other which are not work and income dependent.

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