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SELLING THE WORK ETHIC

Sharon Beder

In modern industrial societies work and production have become ends in themselves. Employment has become such a priority that much environmental degradation is justified merely on the grounds that it provides jobs. And 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. 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. They never stop to consider why they work and whether they want to work. Work is seen as an essential characteristic of being human. No matter how tedious it is, any work is generally considered to be better than no work. Work has become central to our individual identity and a means of fulfilling our social aspirations.

How did paid work come to be so central to our lives? Why is it that so many people wouldn't know what to do with themselves or who they were if they did not have their jobs?

An ideology of work has been promoted in Western societies since the early days of modern capitalism. Those who don't have to do manual labour have extolled the dignity and nobility of manual labour. The work ethic has justified and legitimated jobs that are characterised by boredom and drudgery. To make sure there is no social identity outside of employment, the unemployed are stigmatised. They tend to be portrayed in the media as either frauds, hopeless cases or layabouts who are living it high at taxpayers expense.

The work ethic, which has been at the heart of capitalist culture, 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 in the nineteenth century. Work came to be valued according to its productivity and wealth creating potential. The myth of the self-made man, with its promise that anyone could advance in society through hard work, was promoted by writers, teachers, businessmen, and politicians.

For the upwardly mobile, work still has meaning as a road to material success. But for those who have little chance of climbing the occupational hierarchy, the work ethic is as an ethic of responsibility—to the family and the nation. The hard work of citizens is advocated as being necessary to national prosperity. 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 social respectability. It gives them their purpose and provides them with social relations and a structure to their day. 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.

And just as important as being a motivator for work, the work ethic with its 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. Poverty tends to be attributed to deficiencies in the poor rather than structural aspects of the society. From this perspective those who are poor deserve to be because they lack a work ethic and advantage of the opportunities which are available to everyone.

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.

This is exactly what has occurred with the work ethic. 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 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.

The work ethic however is based on assumptions and premises that are fast becoming outdated. Those pushing the work ethic today claim that every person needs to work, and work hard, if productivity is to increase. All progress, it is argued, depends on increasing productivity. The fallacy of this assumption is becoming clear as fewer and fewer people are required in the workforce and more and more products are being forced on consumers.

Whilst the work ethic has been important in the past to attaining high living standards, the compulsion to work has clearly become pathological in modern industrial societies. Together with the compulsion to create wealth and consume, it drives the imperative to go on producing goods at the expense of everyone's quality of life. Workers in many countries are in fact working longer hours today than twenty years ago. Leisure time has also been eaten away and leisure activities themselves tend to be dictated by work patterns and demands. Many people do not know how to relax.

Millions of people are 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 cannot accommodate. They are so busy doing this that they have little time to spend time with their family and friends, to develop other aspects of themselves, to participate in their communities as full citizens. Far from being happier as a result of work, rates of depression, suicides, and drug taking are all increasing in the most affluent countries.

Escalating production and consumption are degrading the environment at rates that undermine any improvements that can be achieved through technological and legislative change. Lester Brown notes in his introduction to the Worldwatch Institute's well respected *State of the World 1998*: "Forests are shrinking, water tables are falling, soils are eroding, wetlands are disappearing, fisheries are collapsing, rangelands are deteriorating, rivers are running dry, temperatures are rising, coral reefs are dying, and plant and animal species are disappearing."

But despite the international efforts to do something about this degradation, development and economic growth have such priority that changes are minor and no real change can be affected. The European Environment Agency found in 1998 that in the 44 countries it surveyed there had been little progress on environmental improvements since its previous assessment in 1995. The loss of species had not been halted and waste from manufacturing, mining and urban centres had increased by 10% since 1990.

The international conferences and agreements that have taken place in the last decade have failed to address the key cause of the problem—the ever increasing production and consumption by the world's most affluent nations. Surveys show that the majority of people in most countries are not only concerned about the environment, they think environmental protection should be given priority over economic growth and they believe governments should regulate to protect it. Yet this public concern is not translating into either cultural change or government action.

Too much work is clearly not healthy for individuals and many of the products it produces are not 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. 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.

Even when dissidents challenge capitalism they are usually loathe to advocate the dismantling of the ethical foundations and institutions that underpin national productivity, particularly the work ethic. Social activists almost always seek to accommodate their demands to the centrality of work and economic growth. This is particularly true of modern environmentalists in their search for solutions to the environmental crisis. It is for this reason that sustainable development has become so popular as a solution.

Sustainable development embraces the idea that economic growth and environmental protection are compatible. Sustainable development seeks reforms that do not challenge the political, institutional or cultural status quo and as such the doctrine has been unsuccessful at achieving the sorts of significant changes that are necessary to protect the environment. National and international sustainable development policies leave power in the hands of the corporations that are responsible for some of the worst instances of environmental degradation and avoid any measures that might reduce rates of production and consumption that are clearly unsustainable.

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.

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, prevent us pursuing alternative, superior goals and a better quality of life.

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.

Unless the work/consume treadmill is overcome there is little hope for the planet. History has shown that the values underlying such compulsions, such as the work ethic and respect accorded to those who accumulate wealth, are socially constructed, and temporal. They are not inevitable, they are not an essential part of human nature, they are historical and they are shaped and in contemporary society they are reinforced by corporate interests and by all of the major institutions in modern societies.

It is time to reconsider our unquestioned submission to employers and the value we accord to work and wealth creation. We need to recognise the historical roots and modern underpinnings behind industrial culture, and to consider alternatives. It is time to question the priority we give to paid work, wealth generation and consumption of material goods and the influence that those who provide these things have over our decision-making. Cultures can change and we need to recognise that industrial culture has become dysfunctional and is in need of a major overhaul.