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## TOWARD A MEANING OF WORK

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### Introduction

Contemporary observers of the occupation and social fabric contend that individuals as members of families need to assert their rights over their lives and their destinies. That the family and the workplace can be analyzed independently of each other's existence or the dichotomy between the intrinsic value of work and the importance of non-work time for individuals and firms are both notions that are being considered contemporarily and complementary. This paper reviews the history and societal factors that affect the notion of work and its utility as a focus for social and policy students.

### Historical Notions

During the history of civilization, the meaning and function of work has constantly been changing. The evolution of the concept of work—work as a curse, as expiation, as spiritual irrelevance, as means of charity, as a remedy for temptation, as a natural right and duty, as service to God and token of grace, as the means of salvation, as the expression of man's inherent creativity, as his major obsession — is a history of how men and women have engaged their environment to survive and improve the quality of life.

In ancient Greece, work was seen as the painful price man must pay for the goods of life. The Greek word for work was *Ponos*, meaning sorrow. Life without work was seen as the height of the Golden Age. Manual labor of any kind was viewed as brutalizing to the mind and interfering in thinking of truth and practicing the virtuous life. This view should not be too surprising since all of the manual labor was done by slaves, artisans and craftsmen. The elite were to engage in pure thinking about art, philosophy and politics, since "truth alone was the only worthy concern for the spirit".

In Roman civilization there were but two worthy occupations: agriculture and big business, "especially if either led to an honorable retirement into rural peace as a country gentleman."<sup>2</sup> Any other kind of work was a curse and dishonorable. The accumulation of wealth through one's labor was acceptable as long as it led to the supreme purpose of life: to gain independence of external matters, self-sufficiency and personal satisfaction. To accumulate wealth beyond these purposes was to miss the essence of life.

The Hebrew viewed work as a painful drudgery resulting from the original sin committed by the forefathers. "If man", says the Talmud, "does not find his food like animals and birds but must earn it, that is due to sin."<sup>3</sup> To the Hebrew, work was the price to be paid for the restoration of justice and harmony which was destroyed by original sin. Unlike the Greek and Roman, the Hebrew made a connection between work and religion and viewed work as a man's condemnation for sin.

Early Christians held similar views toward work as did the Hebrews, except they added a benevolent function to work. Although work was the result of original sin and a necessary activity of life, it was also the means by which the more fortunate shared with the less fortunate. Thus work takes on a charitable function. Obviously the teachings of Jesus played an important role in this change of attitude. This shift in attitude toward work also changed the attitude toward wealth: the accumulation of wealth was no longer evil as long as the wealthy gave to the poor; by doing so they could gain God's blessing. Idleness was seen as the road to evil thoughts and action; thus it was the duty of the Christian brother to give work to the unemployed. Those who refused work were expelled from the community. "Work, do not despair;" were words of St. Benedict which influenced the religious and lay communities.

To the early Christians work had no intrinsic meaning; it was a means to an end--salvation, charity, expiation--and a means of disciplining the soul. Given this belief, it is not surprising that as the church began to organize, work became mandatory for monks; "...work began to be conceived of as ennobling rather than degrading, as a way of serving God."<sup>4</sup> Thus, with the leadership of St. Augustine and St. Benedict early Catholicism dignified work, added a charitable function to it and developed it a step further than the Hebrews.

During the middle ages work became more important for all members of society, but it was still not an end in itself. Work was viewed as a means to something greater: life hereafter. In the early

part of the middle ages St. Francis of Assisi dictated the function of work. Everyone, especially monks, had an obligation to work to earn the barest essentials and perhaps a little more to be given as alms to the needy. With the passing of time and as the Catholic church became more involved in worldly affairs their views regarding work and profit had to be broadened. St. Thomas Aquinas considered work a natural necessity and believed that workers should receive a just price—enough for the basic necessities—for their labor. Profits were legitimate as long as they were derived from work and not from usury. Now work was dignified and could be performed for a profit. This did not include the men of God (monks) nor did it imply mobility from social classes or caste systems. Contemplation was still the highest form of labor. As the centuries passed and economic development increased, capitalistic profit was encouraged while usury was despised.

By the beginning of the twelfth century, a new group, known as the Christian democrats, declared labor as the force behind progress and viewed work as a social duty and divine right. "Every well organized society should secure to its members the right to work as a natural consequence of the right to live, and further should grant to those unable to work the right to be cared for by those who do."<sup>5</sup> Thus, we can trace the 1946 Full Employment Act to the twelfth century.

It was during the Protestant Reformation and the forceful preaching of Luther that earlier ideas about work began to take hold and be expanded. As did earlier Catholic clergy, Luther viewed work as natural, penal and educational. He saw idleness and beggary as unnatural. Therefore, all who could work should do so. Those unable to work should be given charity. He viewed the contemplative life of the monks as egotistical and removed from their social responsibility of working with neighbors. For Luther, work was the foundation of any society. He viewed work as an activity not for profit, but for maintenance and service. Work on one's profession was the best way to serve God.

With this idea Luther swept away all distinction between religious piety and activity in the world, all question of superiority of one to the other. So long as work is done in a spirit of obedience of God and of love one's neighbor, every variety of labor has equal spiritual dignity, each is the service of God on earth.<sup>6</sup>

By implication, no one type of work was greater than any other in serving God. Work no longer was a mean to an end, to life hereafter. All work, in one's profession, was the way of serving God.

and consequently all work was dignified.

Unlike Luther, Calvin saw no virtue of justification to work for mere maintenance or to stay within one's born profession or class. On the contrary, Calvin believed it was one's responsibility to seek out the kind of work which would maximize one's return. Thus, for the first time in history wealth was associated with salvation, godliness, a right, and poverty with ungodliness. According to Calvin, to select a profession or type of work and pursue it vigorously was a religious duty. To be successful in this pursuit, meaning making a profit, was a way of pleasing God. "The greater the profit, the greater the certainty of serving God with one's work".<sup>7</sup> With this new view of work a new image of man developed: hard working, austere, strong willed, profit and production motivated. Work was now sanctioned by religious conviction and became the means by which the Kingdom of God could be realized on earth.

Given the above it is not difficult to see how puritanism, which developed out of Calvinism, goes further in its teachings:

...it is one's duty to extract the greatest possible gain from work; not for love of money, nor to satisfy a thirst for pleasure, but so that more benediction may fall upon the head of the next needy person. Moreover, success (which is proved by profit) is the certain indication that the chosen profession is pleasing to God.

During the Renaissance work was viewed as intrinsically meaningful and creative. It was seen as the means by which personal craftsmanship and ability was demonstrated. The creation of one's mental and intellectual productivity was an intrinsically meaningful process. Thus, work was less associated with religion (though much of it, especially in the arts, had a religious nature) and more with individual ability. The motivation to work for profit and status seemed to be unimportant.

The Age of Reason provided an ethical and logical rationale for work. The attitude of eighteenth century philosophers toward work was divided between returning to the old, simple, natural life and moving ahead toward progress and developing the environment. In the former camp, Rousseau argued for the return to the basics of life. He distrusted work which did not lead in this direction. Work should be an endeavor which provides the essential necessities of life. Luxuries, wealth, money, and commerce were superfluous. The more complicated the work became, he believed, the greater the unhappiness it bred. Thus, he called for the return to the small artisan and farming form of work.

But the majority of writers during this period were for pushing ahead and developing man's ability and its surroundings. Voltaire, Hume, Locke and Adam Smith to mention a few, viewed man's responsibility and task in life to build and create a more comfortable life; and this was accomplished through hard work. They viewed man as being full of ignorance and surviving on bare subsistence. They saw work and science as the answer to the human plight. To these thinkers work was the answer to the betterment of mankind since from it wealth, comfort, progress, and personal meaning resulted. It was Adam Smith who saw human labor as the creator of mass goods for mass consumption. Natural resources, left to themselves, he said, would not create goods, only human labor would. Adam Smith's thinking was influential in establishing work and human labor as the seeds for wealthy nations.

The nineteenth century could be considered as the Golden Age of the development of the work ethic. During this period, work was seen as the essence of all human progress, materially, intellectually, spiritually, and politically. Nature was seen as wild and needing to be tamed, and only man could tame it through hard work by using his intellect. The rewards of work were the joys, strengths and the sense of accomplishment that it provided the individual. "Every one ought to live by his own work; hence the state has a right to insist that every one do work as much as he can; hence the state has the corresponding duty to assure to all its citizens the right to work."<sup>9</sup> It is through work that man satisfies his needs, said Hegel. Only through work and the utilization of his intellect, said Bergson, can man preserve civilization and raise it to its full potential. Now work had become a duty and essential for maintaining the social structure and developing man's capacities. In Russia, after the revolution, the meaning of work was taking on a less philosophical and personal meaning.

In the philosophy of Marx, work is the central idea, work assumes a metaphysical meaning and importance. Man, the worker, is both cause and effect, both creator and created, determined by environment, but able to alter and adapt environment to suit himself. Work for him (Marx) becomes man's highest dignity and nobility: a religious rite in which priest and victims are one.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the central difference between socialist and capitalists views concerning work was that the former perceived work to be for the common good and toward a common goal equality among the workers and extinction of exploitation by the ruling class. Work was to be less routine and dehumanizing, better organized and requiring

less time for leisure and a healthier life. The purpose of work was to meet man's basic needs and not for profit, avarice and personal satisfaction.

The capitalistic view concerning work can best be traced to early America. From the beginning of colonial time work in America was glorified and held sacred. Not only did the early settlers bring with them religious sanctions for work and profit, as previously mentioned, but they had to put their beliefs into practice in order to survive in their new environment. Not only did they survive, but they created opportunity for all those who were willing to work hard regardless of sacrifice. They showed that going "from rags to riches" was not only possible, but probable, for those willing to put muscle and brains behind their labor.

With the development of industrialization, capitalism and the accompanying affluence, the earlier glorification of work became a cultural norm to be possessed by all who sought the land of opportunity. Work came to be viewed as intrinsically good and virtuous. Through work man found nobility and, more important in contemporary terms, his selfworth. Modern man no longer sought (salvation) through mastery of his intellect, or through altruism, but through work. Work did not need to be justified through a deity. Work was an independent activity which produced wealth, comfort, economic independence and psychological gratification. The meaning of work in modern America became in many ways the answer to the meaning of life itself; work took on the significance of religion. It follows that anyone who did not work, and was physically able, was considered unworthy, especially if the person was poor.

#### Contemporary Perspectives

Since the early twentieth century, the meaning and function of work has gone beyond providing the basic subsistence of food, clothing and shelter, and beyond faith. The meaning and function of work has been tied to peoples' contact with reality, psychologically and socially.

Psychologically, it provides a sense of self-esteem through one's mastery of obstacles and environmental forces. Work provides a sense of order and stability and respect which is related to self-esteem. To be working is to have evidence that one is needed, wanted and a part of society. Work plays an important role in shaping one's identity.

Closely related to identity is the concept of self-worth and respect. Through work a person gains some sense of independence (though admittedly little in some jobs), and a sense of accomplish-

ment, productivity and adulthood, what Erik Fromm calls a sense of freedom.

Work in most cases and especially in this society, provides a sense of pride that one is autonomous, and a sense of citizenship; the status of 'being a worker' is at best a necessary condition for respect, not a sufficient condition. Two other conditions are influential in determining the amount of respect to which the worker is 'entitled'. First different kinds of work are associated with different quanta of respect. The second condition has to do with the specific manner in which a given individual performs his work.<sup>11</sup>

Specific studies have attempted to measure the meaning of work among workers of different occupations. Friedman and Havinghurst, et.al.,<sup>12</sup> conducted a series of studies which focused on the meaning of work to workers in five occupations: steelworkers, coal miners, retail salespersons, skilled craftsmen and physicians. The authors were specifically interested in knowing whether workers close retirement, most of the interviewees were past fifty-five years of age, perceived their work other than in economic terms, and how retirement would affect the workers in the various occupations. Table 1 summarizes the meaning of work among the five occupations studied.

Several interesting factors are clear from Table 1. First, workers in so called lower skilled occupations (steelworkers and local miners) tended to see their work primarily as a way of earning a living. From their point of view the only reason they worked was an economic one. This, however, was not the case for workers in the skilled and professional occupations. In fact, these workers barely attributed economic gain to their meaning of work. Their meaning of work derived from the satisfaction they received from the purpose of their work, the sense of self-expression, new and challenging experiences and the service they provided to others. In part, this finding should not be too surprising given the working conditions of unskilled and semi-skilled workers and those of skilled and professional workers. It is not clear, however, whether the lower skilled workers are only responding to their current job situation or to work in general. One could suspect, especially in light of other studies, that they were responding to their current job situation.

A second interesting finding is that workers in all five occupations derived relatively the same meaning of work in terms of the



Table I

COMPARISON OF THE FIVE OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS  
ON THE MEANINGS OF WORK  
(Relative Percentages Assuming Each Group  
To Have Given One Response per Person)

Meaning	Steelworkers (Unskilled and Semi- Skilled)	Coal Miners.	Skilled Craftsmen		Sales People	Physi- cians
			20-23	Over 65		
1. No meaning other than money	28	18	10	11	0	0
2. Routine	28	19	*	15	21	15
3. a. Self-respect b. Prestige respect of others	16(3,a,b)	18(3,a,15)	30	24(3,a,b)	12	7
4. Association	15	19	18	20	11	13
5. a,b,c. Purpose- ful activity, self-expression, new experience	13	11	28	30	26	15
d. Service to others	*	16+	*	*	10	32
No. of people responding	128	153	242	208	74	39

\*Not covered in the questionnaire or interview  
+ "Work has given me a chance to be useful."

routine their work provided for them and the association, that is, friendships, they established on the job. By routine, workers meant keeping busy, having something to do which organized their time. Besides providing workers with something to do, work provides associations or friendships for workers. As can be seen from Table 1, 15 to 20 percent of the workers in all the occupations stated that work to them meant making and having friendships. While having friendships is not the highest percentage rated in terms of the meaning of work, it is the most consistent percentage rated item by workers across all occupations.

A third interesting finding and perhaps most important, is that at least three-quarters of all the workers derived non-economic meaning from their work; that is, work to three-quarters of all the workers meant more than earning a living, e.g., having something to do, self-respect prestige, respect of others, friendship, purposeful activity, self expression, new experiences and service to others.

Similar findings have been demonstrated by Morse and Weiss.<sup>13</sup> In a national sample of employed men they set out to explore the meaning and function of work. From a random sample of 401 men in all ranges of occupations they obtained some interesting data. They found that:

(1) "working is more than a means to an end for the vast majority of employed men; (2) a man does not have to be at the age of retirement to be immediately threatened by unemployment to be able to imagine what not working would mean to him; and (3) that working serves other functions than an economic one for men in both middle class and working class occupations, but that the nonmonetary functions served by working are somewhat different in these two broad classifications of occupations."<sup>14</sup>

To learn how important work was to these men, the authors asked the following question. "If by some chance you inherited enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think that you would work anyway or not?" Interestingly enough, they found that:

. . . Eighty percent of the employed men answered they would want to keep on working. It might have been expected that such a question would be considered quite unreal to the respondents. The quality of the response, however, suggested that, while the question was not one for which

they had a steady answer, it was one which they took seriously and could answer personally. Furthermore, the vividness and emotionality of their response to this question indicated that we were tapping an area which was real and meaningful to them... 15

Changes in these values appear to be on the horizon. According to Yankelovich,<sup>16</sup> to a "new breed" of American workers who were born out of the social movement of the '60's, work is less important, especially when it is compared to leisure. When work and leisure were compared as a source of satisfaction, only 1 in 5 chose work. 60% of the respondents said that although they enjoyed work, it was not their major source of satisfaction. Yankelovich elaborates further that to this "new breed", there is no greater source of discomfort than the traditional equation of identity with work roles. In this new value system, the individual says in effect, "I am more than my role. I am myself." When asked which aspects of work were important to them, the respondents stressed "being recognized as an individual person" and the opportunity to be with pleasant people with whom to work. Significantly, these demands came ahead of the desire that work itself be interesting and not routine.

In summary, recent evidence seems to indicate that there is not a radically new work ethic, but that there is increasing dissatisfaction with jobs; that there is a new meaning of work, and that younger workers share a new set of values.

There are many theories which explain this phenomena. One theory explains worker discontent as a result of a "generation gap." Another theory points to our highly mechanistic, technologically based system of organizations which are said to rob people of their human potential. A third school of thought argues that dissatisfaction stems from the fact that American business has failed to provide the kind of work environment needed to satisfy peoples' psychological and social needs.

#### Sociological Considerations

The historical chapters in our Western Civilization which have elucidated the transformation of an agrarian society into industrial and therefore urbanized one have created an intellectual debate in sociological circles which has lasted down to today. The uniqueness of these historical events to the sociological imagination has been dichotomized into the concepts of "community" and "urban society."

The shift from folk society to feudal society from sacred to secular, from "gemeinschaft" to "gesellschaft" have been helpful in appreciating the tremendous forces that have shaped the history of Western Man. In the folk or sacred society characterized by its simplicity or extremely limited specialization (pre-industrial, pre-capitalism), ties of land and blood, relatively smallness and degree of isolation, its infusion traditionalism, rites de passage, and face-to-face contact and clear role definitions gave us a legacy of "a unity of society and personality," and a unity of the individual with society.

The traditional agrarian society did not survive the onslaught of capitalism, urbanism, industrialism, rationalism, bureaucracy. Modernity demystified the world taken for granted, gave us a Galilean versus a Copernican interpretation of the world, and created vocations and avocations. The development of a cash economy meant that indirect interpersonal relations which had prevailed for whole epochs. The cash nexus was a new obstrusive... bond relating people to each other. That bond could be used to measure and evaluate others.

The decline of this societal unity and one's attempts to make meaningful and legitimize the new order of urban society are historical catchwords that synthesize epochs such as: the decline of liberalism, the decline of ideology, the growth of secularism, the rise of bureaucratization of the world, rational/scientism, urbanization are still with us and we have not profoundly studied their total impact or conceptualized their full implications. It is these processes that have so transformed our traditional way of life, forms, and functions, that we today often feel dwarfed by our institutions. Life seems out of control, we lack answers or even the "right" questions to our survival as individuals and members of families and/or voluntary associations. A prime example of this incertitude is the 1980 Presidential Elections in which "a sentimental journey into the past" is being marketed in contrast to the historical power of a "sitting presidency" that recently became disemboweled from the notion of an Imperial Presidency. The alienation of constituents coupled with me-too "ism" presents this loss of identity and thereby, the loss of meaning in a world dominated by mass, class and bureaucracy.

These transitions in a historical or sociological perspective can be exemplified if we look at the work of Max Weber, or reflect upon the role transition of the contemporary woman.

A seminal thinker on large scale organizations, religion, social science methodology, and Marxist shadow-boxer, Weber, in his classic work, "The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism,"

carefully studies the fundamental relationships between religion and the economic and social life in modern culture. Weber develops a focus by which the transition from "sacred/folk" to "secular/urban" society can be seen through values, and he astutely develops the notion that capitalism was an unanticipated consequence of a religious reform movement in history) the "theory of an unanticipated consequences to human social actions").

Weber contends that the rise of mature capitalism was affected by the emergence of Protestant, especially Calvinist, ethics. What Weber found in looking into these religious beliefs was two major elements which stood in contrast to traditional Catholic Theology: 1) an insistence on the importance of a man's calling, which means that a man's primary responsibility was to do his best at whatever station God had assigned him in life; and 2) the rationalization of all in life based on Calvinist's notion of predestination whereby work became a means of dispersing religious doubt by demonstrating to oneself that he was one of the elect.

Wealth was not to be pursued for its own sake or enjoyed. Rather, the world existed to serve the glorification of God and for that purpose alone. Thus the more possessions one had the greater the obligation to be an obedient steward and hold these possessions undiminished for the glory of God by increasing them through relentless effort. A worldly asceticism was at the heart of this ethic which gave a religious sanction to acquisition and the rational use of wealth to create more wealth.

In Weber's view, the Protestant Ethic was one element that served to bring meaning and order to European society during the Reformation and post-Reformation period. What existed was cultural, social and psychological strain of major proportions as European culture was in the midst of being radically transformed. The institutional guidelines of the medieval church were no longer meaningful to many people, and the Protestant Churches as institutions could not provide a universal guidelines for behavior or make sense out of the economic forces that were developing. The agricultural dominance of feudal society was being challenged by the growth of towns and the development of trade and commercial enterprises. People were entering into uncharted territory and the old cultural resources were no longer adequate to provide information on how to behave. There was a loss of orientation and lack of usable models by which to comprehend one's rights and duties. The Protestant ethic was for its believers a clear road map, and that provided a guide for behavior in the midst of a terribly confused and disorganized cultural situation.

The contemporary concern family and its high divorce rate is generally seen as a deteriorating institution rather than a decline of the traditional family which has been functional throughout the centuries. It has in this social history been supported by religion, law and economic sanctions. Industrialism made all members of the family "workers" and created changes in what heretofore were clear and static roles. The male role's authority at home was now shared with his wife, at work with his superiors, and his hold on his children began to decline.

Women, whose domestic role was always sharply clear (therefore no ambiguity) were thrust into factories. The supervision of children became a function of public education. The changing male role with its corollary and the increasing ambiguity of women's roles need to be seen as factors that exemplify the changing structure of the family that is now measured by "the divorce rate". Coping today, making marriage work, etc., is a recognition of the blurriness of the sexual roles, i.e., the masculinizing of the feminine role and the conversely.

One needs to acknowledge that most women work for money; many women have no other source of economic support, but their own work, and increasing numbers support their dependent children through paid work. Even when the burden of making a living falls mainly on the man, the money earned by the woman in most families has proven indispensable to maintaining a standard of living the family considers satisfactory.

Much of the work that women currently do outside their home deflates their self-images. The job of secretary is perhaps symbolic of the status of female employment in this country, both qualitatively and quantitatively. There are nine million secretaries and they compose nearly one-third of the nation's female workforce.<sup>18</sup> The secretary is too often stereotyped disparagingly. In addition, the majority of the worst white-collar jobs probably are held by women: keypunch operators, telephone operators, and clerical workers. Women are also over-represented on assembly lines, among the worst jobs in the economy. The women's movement has focused considerable attention on the role in life, and because of the kinds of dissatisfying jobs women have held traditionally, we can reasonably expect women to be speaking out more forcefully on the quality of working life.

The Survey of Working Conditions<sup>19</sup> has shown that women tend to derive the same satisfaction as men do from the intrinsic rewards of work, when they are available. The Survey also found that women are nearly twice as likely as men to express negative attitudes toward their present jobs. The cause of this dissatisfaction seems

to lie in the discrepancy between women's high expectations about work and the actual low social and economic status of their jobs.

A recent study of the Quality of Life<sup>20</sup> shows that college educated women are most happy if they have jobs and less happy if they don't (presumably because they tend to have the most interesting jobs); married women without college educations are not necessarily less happy if they don't have jobs (presumably because of the less interesting jobs available to them).

Most of the literature on work and women deals with upper-class college educated women and is in fact written by them. For the most part, these women work out of choice and at fairly interesting jobs. From these studies, it is concluded that women who work outside the home are more "fulfilled" than are those who do not.

### Conclusion

We have attempted to review and provide an understanding, if only a limited one, of the meaning of work. If one conclusion can be drawn from this brief review, it is that work and its meaning, is a constantly changing phenomenon whose process is consciously being influenced by all forces that shape society. An even more important contemporary policy question is, What should we do with our voluntary and involuntary non-working labor force? We have gone from punishing them, to caring for them, to ignoring them, and recently, we have done all three of these at the same time.

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