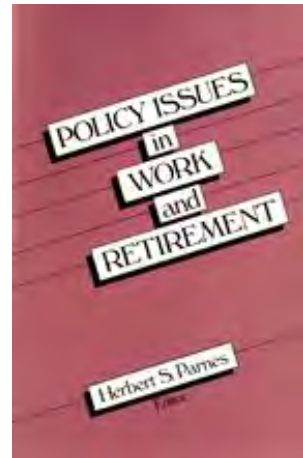




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Chapter 2

Life Without Work: Does It Make Sense?

Eli Ginzberg*

This introductory chapter sets the stage for the contributions that follow. It deals sequentially with four themes: cullings from a half century of work and research on work about the role of older persons in the workforce; some analytic distinctions about the nature of work; placing work within the larger context of life's experiences; and a few modest suggestions as to policy with respect to older workers.

Some Observations on Aging and Work

When I entered Columbia College in 1927, Nicholas Murray Butler, the president, had been at the helm of the institution for two decades during which time he had transformed it from a mediocre into a top-rated university. But Butler remained at the helm for another seventeen years during which he declined in health and energy, and in the process the university was greatly weakened.

For those concerned with the rise and fall of institutions, none offers more detail than the Catholic Church, which has survived for close to two millennia. I was impressed when the Pope acted some years ago to establish a new policy replacing Cardinals who could no longer perform their duties because of their advanced age. That is my first observation.

*I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Dean Morse in helping me transform my oral remarks into written form.

Secondly, I was much struck by the very different ways in which my parents aged. My father was always in mediocre health and in his latter years (he died at eighty) was performing at a much reduced level of output. My mother, on the other hand, slowed up only in her ninety-fourth year.

The next point has to do with health. I spend most of my time currently in research in health economics. There are many arguments as to whether modern medicine pays off. We know that medicine has relatively little to do with longevity. It would be wrong to say that it has nothing to do with longevity but its major contribution lies elsewhere in its adding to the quality of life, particularly the quality of life of older people. Only a few years ago, for example, if you broke your hip you would probably be confined for the rest of your days to bed. There was nothing that could be done in the days before new surgical techniques were perfected. The question is not solely or primarily longevity, but rather the improved quality of a person's later years. This is critical for some of the issues to be addressed at this Conference, for many older persons now entering their later years in good health are capable of and interested in remaining at work.

Another important trend points to the way in which the work and life patterns of women are getting closer and closer to those of men. As more women enter and remain in the workforce, there has been a parallel devaluation of voluntary activity. In the past, voluntary service had much to do with the way in which older persons related to the world. While many older persons are still concerned about their church or hospital, the role of the volunteer has been devalued, which in turn has affected the role and status of many older persons.

Next, career-oriented persons with strong ambitions who enter corporate enterprise will know by the time they are 35 years old or so whether their rate of progress will enable

them to achieve or approximate their career goals. By 35, a person will have feedback from his organization as to whether he is on the fast track or the slow track. Many people in large organizations have plateaued by their mid-thirties. If one's career plateaus in the mid-thirties and that person keeps on doing the same type of work year in and year out, he may decide that early retirement is not such a bad idea after all.

A correlative of the foregoing is that for the few who continue to compete for the top jobs, their only chance of winning is for the old-timers who are up at the top to get out of the way. Since there are only a few jobs up at the top, those who hold these jobs must keep moving out with some regularity if others who are qualified are to have their chance. Professionals who are self-employed or who are members of a partnership or a small corporate group have an easier time of adjusting their workday and workweek as they reach their sixties or seventies. They can shift from full- to part-time activity and most do just that.

When it comes to the rank and file worker, I have been impressed with how many, as they near the end of their working life, look forward to spending more time on avocational or leisure activities such as moving out of the city to their "cabin in the Catskills." They no longer will have to limit themselves to a two or three week stay. They can, when they retire, spend all or most of their time there.

The last observation relates to the more affluent, those who look forward to dividing their "golden years" between pitching horseshoes in Florida and traveling to Europe. This is a typical American, not a European, approach to the later years. Many Americans put a high value on being able to escape from work permanently and to start doing new and different things. If one has never been out of the country, the first trip abroad is usually exciting. But the pleasure

diminishes with the fifth or surely the tenth trip. This observation is a useful reminder that attitudes and behavior toward work and retirement must always be assessed within both economic and cultural contexts which in turn are not stable.

The Multifaceted Nature of Work

My second theme takes off from the premise that work is a multidimensional phenomenon. In a recent article that I wrote on Social Security which appeared in the *Scientific American* (January 1982), I presented a table showing that the group that was best off with respect to income in old age were those who were still working. For this group, work accounted for about 55 percent of their total income. Most people, if they want to be comfortable in the latter years, need income from work. Only the rich can afford not to keep on working.

Secondly, in the United States we have always tended to place a person—first men but now also women—by asking “What do you do?” If we learn about the work that a person performs we can rank the individual. The work-status relationship is critical.

In analyzing the satisfaction that people derive from work it is well to distinguish among intrinsic satisfactions, extrinsic satisfactions and concomitant satisfactions (see my *Occupational Choice*, 1951). For some, surely a minority, intrinsic satisfactions from work are critical. However, one of the consequences of aging is the diminution of one’s mental and physical powers, which affect work performance. A lawyer friend is one of the nation’s great litigators. But now that he is in his early eighties he does not accept certain cases because he can no longer remember all of the details in a trial that might run ninety days or even longer. Similarly, a surgeon may still be a very good diagnostician as he gets into

his seventies, but few of us would want to be operated on by him. In the case of many appellate judges, age does not seem to matter very much. Irrespective of age, they continue to write good or bad opinions. Great musical instrumentalists and conductors are a group apart. Many are able to perform at high levels into their seventies and even into their eighties.

Work has great importance for many persons because of its concomitant social satisfactions, the companionship that it provides. This was first brought home to me in our studies of the long term unemployed in New York City in the late 1930s (*The Unemployed*, 1943). What the men missed most was the daily interaction with their fellow workers on the job and sharing a beer after work. The loss of these social ties took a heavy toll. The vice president of AT&T recently made an interesting point at a Columbia University seminar. He reported that they found there were still some women in their middle seventies working the night shift in the Bell Telephone System in New York City who had to use the subways to get to their jobs. They won't stop because of the pleasure they get from meeting and interacting with their friends at work.

Work also provides a structure for the use of time. If one spends eight hours a day at work, what to do with the rest of one's time represents less of a burden. But to make effective use of 24 hours in a day, day after day, without the routine of work can prove burdensome.

The Several Contexts of Work

These then are the five dimensions of work: income, status, personal achievement, social relations and the structure of time. A complementary approach is to consider briefly the different parties that are or may be involved in the structuring of work. The first point of reference is the individual. Whether an individual needs income, whether he

has a drive for intrinsic work satisfaction, whether he's concerned about social interactions on the job, in all these respects the individual is the center.

Most of us continue to live in family structures. Hence the importance of relating work to the family. We are in the midst of a major revolution in which the majority of families now have two wage earners. Moreover, an increasing number of mothers of even very young children are in the labor force. And many fathers are caught up in a career that allows them to spend very little time with their children. In short, the interface of work and family is a critical dimension.

We know that a disproportionately large sector of our families living in poverty consist of families with only one wage earner. There are very few families in the United States trapped in poverty where both husband and wife are more or less regularly employed. The reports from Europe suggest that a strong force that is contributing to the expansion of flextime comes from the desires of married people who work to spend more time together and with their child or children.

The employing organization offers still another context in which to consider work. Among the more dynamic factors operating in a market economy are the decisions that firms make as to where to locate, expand, and relocate, the basis for which are often rooted in estimations of the competence and pliability of the workforce. When a long established plant is closed down, especially in a one-industry town, the toll of human suffering is often very great.

The community offers still another vantage point from which to assess the role of work. Consider the differences in the socialization in northern cities of the earlier immigrants and the more recent black migrants. Most Americans have failed to appreciate the differences in the infrastructure available to the two groups. The Italians and the Irish who

came to New York had the Catholic Church and Tammany Hall to assist them. The Jews had support from their co-religionists who had come earlier and had put into place an elaborate system of social institutions from schools to hospitals. In contrast, blacks as they moved North have not had the advantage of such self-help structures. I submit that the lack of such infrastructure explains many of the difficulties that blacks have encountered in their efforts to secure a place in urban society.

The final vantage is societal. Does our society need the work that older persons are able to contribute; will it create the opportunities they need to continue to work; and if not, will it provide them adequate income if they do not work? This provides the bridge to a few observations about policy.

Some Policy Questions

The first observation relates to the changing perspectives from a life that is spent working to not working. Currently a college graduate starts to work in his early twenties and ends in his early sixties, a work life of approximately forty years. But the average additional years of life for a man who reaches 62 is 16 years, for a woman it is 21. This points up that at present a person will spend only half of his life at work. The question that must be asked and answered is whether even an affluent society can afford to provide income for half of the population that at any time is not working. I doubt it.

But even if we could afford it, the question must be raised anew: does it make sense? Again, I doubt it. In the penultimate chapter of *The Human Economy* (1976) I postulated that the overriding criterion for measuring societal progress was the broadening of options. Using that criterion, I would argue that many persons in their sixties and seventies and even a few in their eighties would prefer to

keep on working and a society that enabled them to do so would be better off. I am not arguing that they should work, only that they have the option to work if they so prefer. But there is another side to the coin. Some workers become enfeebled or disabled in their late fifties and lose their jobs. I see considerable merit in a transition program, such as the French have put into place, that would carry such persons over until they qualify for Social Security. Moreover, I would consider broadening such a program to include persons who, although in good health, are the victims of plant closures and whose prospects for reemployment are minimal in years when the unemployment rate hangs high.

Although I wrote a recent piece on “The Social Security System” I do not pretend to expertise. However, I see merit in slowly raising the retirement age from 65 to 68; in taxing one-half of the Social Security benefit; in correcting the over-indexation for inflation and introducing still other modifications to shore up the financial foundations of the system. In the absence of such reforms, a conflict between the generations, with all its ugliness, is likely.

There is no point of pushing the elderly to the wall and faulty policies that resulted in such pressure could have serious repercussions. We saw a counterculture of the young in the 1960s that had little to commend it. I submit that inciting the elderly to take to the political ramparts could prove more destructive. There is nothing outrageous or impossible in the demands that their leadership has advanced: a protection of the benefits that have been written into the law and an opportunity for the elderly, if they so desire, to work past seventy. The elderly understand that the value of their benefits are linked to the fiscal integrity of the federal government. They do not stand adamant against all modifications. But they will fight hard to protect the systems that are in place, and so they should. I have long believed that the quality of a people is to be measured by how it deals

with children, women and the elderly. On that criterion the United States gets a passing mark. Our aim should be to improve, not lower it.