

Killing Time: Alienation theories in an era of chronic under-employment and over work

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KILLING TIME:

Alienation theories in an era of chronic under-employment and over-work

Synopsis: The ideological disorientation of the working class demands a restatement of the once obvious, but in ways that rework those insights for the current stage of globalisation. In ten years of research, ACIRRT has established an unrivalled empirical base about working life in Australia. Those reports have been done from an empiricist position which is part of the impasse confronting labour movements everywhere. This discussion paper reaches out for a counter to the grand project of capital expansion by renewing debate over the meaning of work itself.

Outline

The paper will alternatively meander and bolt through the following issues:

- A. market socialism as oxymoron.
- B. Materialist ideals:
 - i. metaphysical origins;
 - ii. the fetishism of commodities.
- C. the benefits from work.
- D. a teleology of work.
- E. consumption as work time.
- F. The Australian economy from the 1940s to 1960s:
 - i. mechanisation;
 - ii. the good old days.
- G. industrial democracy.
- H. Current conflicts.
 - i. work and social life;
 - ii. service jobs;
 - iii. computers;
 - iv. work for the dole.

Conclusion: A new fetishism of capital.

KILLING TIME

Of course, all the time would not usually be spent “at” a job: sleep, food, even leisure are required for efficiency, and some time ... would have to be spent on those activities ... Slaves, for example, might be permitted time ‘off’ from work only in so far as that maximised their output ...

Gary S. Becker, 1965.¹

Introductory hypotheses

The starting point for this discussion paper is a perception that academics and activists now give alienation a smaller part in their discussions of working life than they did between the 1950s and the 1980s.

The changes to management and unionism since the 1980s are unlikely to have increased job satisfaction, or the operative’s control over work processes, and in many cases appear to have made matters worse. Insecurity of tenure and the greater effort expected over longer or broken shifts have intensified displeasure, lifting levels of stress. Any waning of Fordism has not ended the degradation of labour.

The paper offers no survey data for such a decline in interest, or for why it has occurred. My guess is that the urge to increase the number of jobs has deflected attention from their capacity to accommodate creativity. Nowadays, quality employment means limiting hours or ensuring parental leave, in short, being away from work.

ALP shadow minister for employment, Cheryl Kernot, has recalled her introduction to the idea of “the dignity of work” through the 1974 television series of Jacob Bronowski’s *The Ascent of Man*. After acknowledging the problem of the jobless, she turned aside from work as a source of human dignity to “the one issue that Bronowski didn’t have to address for those who do have work, and that is, balancing work and life”. Kernot argued that “workers with a stable and happy life outside work are better, more productive workers inside working hours”. She failed to

¹ Gary S. Becker, ‘A Theory of the Allocation of Time’, *Economic Journal*, 75 (3), September 1965, p. 498.

consider whether happiness at work is a good in itself, and whether a satisfying job enriches life outside the workplace.²

Sharon Beder's recent *Selling the work ethic* (2000) pays little attention to the improvement of life at work. Her five passing mentions of "alienation" indicate scant acquaintance with the vision that work should be fulfilling in every dimension.³

A further indication of the fading concern about alienation is to be found in ACIRRT's *Australia at work* (1999). Its concluding chapter on new directions for managing work says little about a sense of fulfilment from work. Instead, its authors promote a new pattern of employment across a life cycle, "a working life model" which focuses on "*workers* defined more broadly as *people who work for multiple employers* over the course of key phases of their life cycle, within the context of *integrated industrial and social security rights* provided by the state".⁴

Nonetheless, *Australia at work* proposes that "*the treatment of people at work is one of the leading indicators of a civilised society*" (italics in original).⁵ This sentiment comes close to alienation without quite getting there. The emphasis is on what management does and what governments provide by way of rights and entitlements. The ACIRRT volume also neglected industrial democracy, or worker participation. Did the anxiety to hold back the erosion of conditions through individual agreements twist attention away from the collective control of the work processes, and hence away from the provision of work that enlarges the humanity of its performers?

My reason for raising the topic of alienation is political. The socialist project fails once it neglects the dignity of labour. Marxism discredits itself when it fails to pursue the sources of immiseration in capitalism. One task for socialists is to keep the ideological stakes high. In particular, we must demand more than a return to full employment. All should have work that is as fulfilling aesthetically and socially as it is rewarding materially. The utopian element in both strands is what makes them part of practical politics. To ask why more jobs and greater satisfaction are impossible is to question the logic of capital. A utopian dimension about goals has never been in conflict with a scientific approach to their implementation.

² Cheryl Chernot, *The Sydney Papers*, Sydney Institute, Sydney, 2001, pp. 30-31 and 35.

³ Sharon Beder, *Selling the work ethic*, Scribe, Carlton North, 2000, pp. 104, 118, 205, 233 and 261-2.

⁴ Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training, *Australia at work: just managing?*, Prentice Hall, Sydney, 1999, p. 167.

⁵ *Australia at work*, p. 173.

A. Market socialism?

Australia at work reported a growing literature in which the “key idea ... is the notion that the market is a good servant and a bad master of social and economic development”.⁶ Where has the market served labour? Were the price mechanism to clear Australia’s labour market at \$3 an hour, of what would the servants become masters?

Evidence for those who doubt that the market can serve labour came from the vice-chairman of the G7 Group of industrialised nations, Alan S. Blinder. Delivering the 1999 Adam Smith Award Address, he reported that, since the 1980s, corporations were increasingly treating labour ‘as “just another commodity” to be bought and sold on “a spot market”’. The reality, he said, was catching up with the market model.⁷

In *The Great Transformation* (1944), economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi observed that Ludwig von Mises

justly argued that that if workers “did not act as trade unionists, but reduced their demands and changed their locations and occupations according to the requirements of the labor market, they could eventually find work”. This sums up the position under a system based on the postulate of the commodity character of labor. It is not for the commodity to decide where it should be offered for sale, to what purpose it should be used, at what price it should be allowed to change hands, and in what manner it should be consumed or destroyed.⁸

Polanyi had recognised the injustice behind the free market position that, to receive benefits, the unemployed must agree to take any job offered to them: “It is not for the commodity to decide where it should be offered for sale, to what purpose it should be used, at what price it should be allowed to change hands, and in what manner it should be consumed or destroyed”. Polanyi thereby spelt out the consequences of an deregulated market in labour that its local advocates, such as Flinders University Professor Judith Sloan, are reluctant to acknowledge, whether out of shame, or for fear of the reaction from workers should her assumptions be made explicit. A recent

⁶ *Australia at work*, p. 159.

⁷ *Business Economics*, January 2000, p. 20.

⁸ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon, Boston, 1957, p. 176.

call from philosophers at the same university for voluntary slavery at least had the merit of truth in labeling.

Before Sir Samuel Griffith became Australia's first chief justice, he wrote, in 1889, that if 'a measure of freedom of contract exists' between the employer and the employed "it has been obtained by combination on the part of labourers".⁹ Today's individual workplace agreements fail the Griffith test for civilised behaviour as both Coalition and ALP industrial relations policies are dissolving the collective bargaining essential for any fair go between capital and labour. State intervention is again breaking the back of unionism.

The linkages between production and consumption are intrinsic to the replenishment of labour power. Hence, even if labour power could be exempted from the rule of market forces, the impress of price mechanisms on all other commodities would impinge on labour power in the process of exchanging wages for the means of reproduction on a daily and generational basis.

Bertell Ollman reasons that a system where labour is a thing can never be socialist. His critics counter that, without price mechanisms, socialism is doomed to inefficiency.¹⁰ If both claims are correct, then any kind of socialism will be out of the question. The disappearance of that possibility would affect the relative confidence of the corporations and the working classes even more than we have seen since the collapse of the centrally planned economies after 1989.

Socialists seeking an economic program after the implosion of the command economies are puzzling over the extent to which the market and society are capable of serving each other. Those who think a balance is achievable lean on Polanyi to show that most markets have operated without taking charge of the economy, still less of society. The other camp contends that Polanyi had demonstrated that the crux of the great transformation was its turning of the worker into another commodity. Capital, they argue, cannot surrender control over working conditions without sapping its capacity to expand. In turn, those socialists consider the treatment of labour power as a commodity as an abandonment of their reason for being.

Delegates to the ALP National Conference in Hobart in July ignored this conundrum. Their vote for free trade rather than fair trade was followed by the adoption of programs to treat health and education services as if they were not

⁹ Samuel Griffith, "The Distribution of Wealth", *Centennial Magazine*, 1 (12), July 1889, pp. 833-42.

commodities. Kim Beazley has yet to detail how he can subordinate the market to society on a few social issues while allowing market forces to dominate everywhere else. Polanyi appreciated that to ‘take labour out of the market means a transformation as radical as was the establishment of a competitive labour market’.¹¹

B. Materialist ideals

If my supposition about a decline of interest in alienation is correct, a sketch of earlier debates will be valuable. This background will be given in six segments, centered around the Marxist tradition.

i. Estrangement

Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to get this notion out of their heads, say by avowing it be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful consequences all statistics brought him new and manifold evidence.

Karl Marx, *The Germany Ideology*.

Most writers on alienation have assumed an essence for humanness. Some posited a nature which we cannot avoid, even if we can diminish its impact. This approach extends from the concupiscence of the flesh in the doctrine of the Fall to the genetic determinism. Others suppose an ideal type towards which we are compelled to strive, without necessarily being able to reach perfection.¹²

Pursuit of the conceptual underpinnings of alienation carries us back to belief systems predicated on separation as the source of unhappiness. Some analysts see birth itself as a severing from the security of the womb. At one stage further, the process of hominisation brought a split from nature, summed up by Nietzsche’s aphorism that cows are happy because they ruminate without remembering. Plato supposed male and female to be halves of a whole which find fulfilment in coitus. Buddhism offers a path for the individual’s absorption into Nirvana. St Augustine’s

¹⁰ Bertell Ollman (ed.), *Market Socialism, The debate among socialists*, Routledge, New York, 1998.

¹¹ Polanyi, p. 251.

prayed: “My soul is restless, Lord, until it rests in thee”. On the other hand, western mystics presented an affirmative account of alienation as an ecstatic moment during which the spirit leaves the body to become submerged in “the One”. For the third century Graeco-Roman philosopher Plotinus, that form of alienation was a grace, not a distortion.

Early in the nineteenth century, Hegel disengaged from this treatment in two ways. First, he envisaged that the transcendent would be achieved through capital-H History and capital-N Nature. Secondly, the transcendent found its realisation back in an enriched self, not in a mystical instant. Despite the abstractions in Hegel’s account, his attention to process in History pointed towards work of a kind. Feuerbach offered a materialist formulation of Hegel’s interest in the active and affirmative elements in alienation. Although Feuerbach saw every stage of alienation and transcendence as illusory, he welcomed the projection of human ideals onto the concept of a god as an advance by allowing humankind to worship its own potentiality.¹³

In Marx’s view, Feuerbach had distorted our understanding of alienation by picturing the illusion as operating outside social practice. The alien was not the idea of a god, but arose from relations with other human beings. The task in philosophy was to demolish the notion that ideas decided events: “It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness”.¹⁴ The goal was to remove the conditions that made such illusions necessary. Marx accused Feuerbach of forgetting that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated”,¹⁵ which is possible only through social practice.

The schema that Marx and Engels adopted for the evolution of social formations included an era of Primitive Communism before the divisiveness represented by the family, private property and the state disrupted human solidarity. The Edenic qualities of that condition continue to be exaggerated, whether by overlooking the harshness of everyday life, or by ignoring the privileges attached to older males. Little is to be gained in the quest for a non-alienated industrial order by nostalgia for the Primitive or the Pastoral.

¹² John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, Duckworth, London, 1970.

¹³ Marx-Engels Collected Works, 3, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1975, pp. 330-33; Nathan Rotenstreich, *Alienation*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1989, pp. 6-13.

¹⁴ *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 5, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1976, p. 37.

¹⁵ *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 5, p. 4.

Marx turned from Hegel's capital-H History as an Ideal type towards history as the sum of human activities and thoughts. In this sense, work is synonymous with human activity, that is, with history. Work is not a category in the sense that capital-H History, or capital-S Science, are instances of reification. Idealists can assert that "History tells us...", or "Science shows...", whereas the Materialist can propose only that "certain scientists show ..". Small-h history, that is to say work, is made only by human beings, not by Hegelian Ideas realising themselves in the world.

Marx's assertion that the point was to change the world meant more than a call for social reform, or revolution. To change the world involved every kind human endeavour, from child's play to mathematics, that is, all those activities that deserve to be called work.

ii. *Marx and commodity fetishism*

... the goal of the economic system is the *unhappiness* of society.

Marx, 1844.¹⁶

Acknowledgment that our feelings of alienation encompass an element of species estrangement allows us to distil Marx's analysis of the alienation peculiar to the capitalist mode of production. That unravelling can never be complete because Marx carried forward more than terminology from pre-Materialist thinkers. His debts to Hegel were at once profound and playful. "A commodity", Marx warned, "is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties".¹⁷ These jests reveal how determined he was to steer clear of the mechanistic in favour of the dialectical, even at the risk of becoming stuck in Philosophical Idealism.

The vocabulary of alienation had originated in theology, before being quasi-secularised.

Marx gave up using such terms as "estrangement", "alienation", "return of man to himself", as soon as he noticed that they had turned into ideological prattle in the mouths of petty-bourgeois authors, instead of a lever for the empirical study of the world and its transformation ... Marx's general

¹⁶ *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 3, p. 239.

abandonment of such terms does not mean that he did not continue to follow theoretically the material conditions designated by them.¹⁸

Despite this distancing in terminology, Marx's writings on alienation maintained a dialogue with pre-materialist concepts.

Marx dealt with overlapping experiences of alienation. First, he retained some notion of humankind as estranged from a potential nature:

But man is not merely a natural being: he is a *human* natural being. That is to say, he is a being for himself. Therefore he is a *species-being*, and has to confirm and manifest himself as such both in his being and in his knowing ... And as everything natural has to *come into being*, *man* too has his act of origin – *history* - which, however, is for him a known history, and hence as an act of origins it is a conscious self-transcending act of origin.¹⁹

Marx urged that we could move ourselves towards a nobler nature. To be consistent in his historical materialism, he needed to accept that this higher state was part of an ceaseless process, not a preordained terminus.

Species-being was at once tied to nature, but went beyond those animal functions. However, the conflict between capital and labour blocked that development. Instead of leading the species towards “universality”, through “free, conscious activity”, the domination of labour by capital “reverses this relationship” until life becomes “a mere means to his *existence*”, not as “*a means to life*”.²⁰

The immiserisation of life and labour denies universality for the worker. This blight afflicts the capitalist as the personification of capital for he must renounce spending in favour of accumulation:

The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save - the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour – your capital. The less you are, the less you express your own life, the more you have, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged being.

The very thing that takes away the capitalist's universality, gives it back in its reified form as money:

¹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, I, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1958, p. 71.

¹⁸ Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, New Left Books, London, 1971, pp. 129 & 228.

¹⁹ *Marx-Engels, Collected Works*, 3, p. 337.

Thus, what I *am* and *am capable of* is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness – its deterrent power – is nullified by money... I am brainless, but money is the real brain of all things and how then should its possessor be brainless? Besides, he can buy clever people for himself, and is he who has power over the clever not more clever than the clever? ... He who can buy bravery is brave, though he be a coward.²¹

Here, we have the theme of *The Wizard of Oz* with its tin man who has no brain, its straw man who wants a heart, and the lion who lacks courage. Their solution shares with Marx a commitment to association and a rejection of magic.

The second form of alienation for Marx is known to us as “the fetishism of commodities”, as spelt out in *Capital*, volume one. In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Ludwig Feuerbach had argued that human beings create gods in our own image and likeness. Marx, in turn, inverted this fetishism for his account of how workers fall victim to a fetishism of commodities.

So far as [the commodity] is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labour. It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for example, is altered, by making a table out of it, Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was.

Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism is so familiar, that it is in danger of being taken for granted. The difficulties in this section of *Capital* arise from subtleties that reveal themselves more with each encounter, which justifies their continued quotation:

²⁰ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 3, p. 275-6.

²¹ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 3, pp. 324-26.

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of their labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us as a subjective excitation of our optic nerve. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events, an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from external object to the eye. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.

In the capitalist mode of production, the commodity "is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things":

In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of man's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

This Fetishism of commodities has its origin, as the foregoing analysis has already shown, in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them.²²

A further difficulty in comprehending the operation of commodity fetishism arises because it masks its own existence and hence disguises the form that exploitation takes under capital.

²² Marx, *Capital*, I, pp. 71-72.

Another manifestation of the universal in our species-being is the association with other human beings. Through the estrangement of labour, capital disrupts the socialisation that has made us more than natural-beings. Every worker is confronted by every other worker as a competitor. However, the conditions of their work bring them together in opposition, first to their employer, and then to capitalists as a class, thereby reinstating “association, society, conversation”.²³

The third kind of alienation in Marx is also the easiest to understand. Under reification – thing-ification – labour power is treated as just one more commodity – a factor of production. Capitalists used machines in ways which turned their operatives into idiots in the Greek sense of not being citizens: “Machinery is put to a wrong use, with the object of transforming the workman, from his very childhood, into a part of a detail-machine”.²⁴

From the late eighteenth century, concentrations of production and population proceeded together while immiseration spread beyond the factories and cities: “Capitalist production ... destroys at the same time the health of the town labourer and the intellectual life of the rural labourer”.²⁵ In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels had called for a reversal of those disasters through the “Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries: a gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country by a more equable distribution of the population over the country”.²⁶

Frederick Engels, in *The Condition of the English Working Class* (1845), drew attention to the interlocking deprivations of factory and urban life. Stephen Marcus compared Engels’s prose style more and narrative power more than favourably with that of Dickens, and pointed out that the descriptor that Engels used more than any other for working-class life was “demoralise” and its related forms.²⁷ Engels had opened the road that an historical materialist treatment of alienation would take.

²³ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 3, pp. 277 & 313.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 422.

²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 505.

²⁶ Dick J. Struik, *The Birth of the Communist Manifesto*, International Publishes, New York, 1971, pp. 111-12.

²⁷ Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class*, Norton, New York, 1987, p. 133 and 198. Engels carried forward his analysis of the cross-overs between exploitation through wage-slavery and through rents in *The Housing Question*.

iii. *Post-Stalinism*

Apart from the crimes of Stalinism, the USSR had promoted an engineer's view of humankind. A mechanistic account of social relationships and individuality had informed Soviet textbooks on dialectical materialism and Socialist Realism in the arts – satirised as love under a tractor. As a purgative, socialists embraced humanism. From the 1940s, Jean-Paul Sartre proposed that existentialists take up the questions about meaning that Marxists were ignoring. In Poland in the early 1960s, the dissident philosopher Leszek Kolakowski wrangled with the Academician Adam Schaff, over the relations between existentialism and Marxism.²⁸

For the Anglo-Saxon Left, Erich Fromm's *Man for himself* (1948) and *The Sane Society* (1955) prepared the way for the 1959 translation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844-45*, followed by Istvan Mezaros *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (1970). The 1971 translation of Georg Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* revealed how his 1922 account of reification had paralleled the concerns of the *EPM*, which was not published for another decade.²⁹

In another of the peculiarities of the English, an historian, not a philosopher, reclaimed the concept of creativity through social labour as the key to overcoming capitalism. E. P. Thompson's 1955 biography of William Morris celebrated the revolutionary socialist who had called for work to be art, and art to be recognised as work, so that both should be liberating. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963 reinvigorated socialist politics by demonstrating that class was an experience, not just a thing.

Thomson's achievement highlighted a tension. One part of him wanted to embrace all of humanity while the other side sought to raise class consciousness by humanising how the proletariat understood its own circumstances. A Marxist humanism in revulsion against the Gulag risked falling into line with Schiller's entreaties for all men to be brothers, which resound through Beethoven's choral symphony. Furthermore, the necessity for the proletariat to become a class-for-itself, that is conscious of its position and possibilities, if it is to prove politically effective does not eliminate the conditions under which all classes are always things-in-themselves.

²⁸ see Leszek Kolakowski, *Towards a Marxist humanism: essays on the Left today*, Grove Press, New York, 1968; Adam Schaff, *A Philosophy of man*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1963.

This conflict between two expressions of humanism could not be resolved by equating the working class with the longer-term interests of our species. When that role had been borne by the capitalists, the historic mission of human liberation did not prevent their killing millions of their fellows. Socialists had either to abandon taking sides in the class struggle, or accept that the suppression of the bourgeois state remained part of a class-based humanism. With the exception of grouplets such as the Red Army Faction, First World socialists have been able to avoid that choice in practice because the occasions for class violence have been absent. When not cheering on Third World rebellions, we have been more likely to take up the cause of an undifferentiated species by opposing war, nuclear energy or genetic modification.

Yet, the choice cannot be avoided for always and everywhere as was shown in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the citadels of US imperialism. To speak of those assaults as “crimes against humanity” is to accept that the species possesses undifferentiated interests. The hard tasks are, first, to specify what such values might be, and then to decide which social groups express them. That they are not accepted by the perpetrators of the killings is axiomatic. It is not as clear cut that the principles of humanity are embodied by the US security state and its collateral corporations.

The popularity of any notion is proportional to the ideas against which it is a reaction. Hence, twenty years of Stalinism spurred on the enthusiasm for notions of alienation among Marxists. Similarly, the acceptance of structuralist methodologies by the generation of 1968 reacted against the individualism that had flowed from the previous flight from determinism. Althusserian rigour privileged the mature Marx over the young Marx – the Marxist against the Hegelian. The *Manuscripts* were out: reading *Capital* was back. Detritus from all these approaches strew what remains of the socialist project, yet remain one measure of its worth. Bricolage is less of a danger than getting entombed beneath whatever notions one imbibed as an undergraduate.

In contrast to these philosophical treatments, a call to refocus on the labour process itself came in 1974 from Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, subtitled *The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Fordism entered the lexicon of the Left.

More potent as a source for fresh approaches to social equality was the women’s movement which surged along with stepped-up rates of female participation

²⁹ Marcuse had responded to their publican in Germany in 1932 with “The Foundation of Historical

in the paid workforce. At the same time, campaigns against militarism and racism criticised the biological essentialism that regarded males as natural aggressors, or skin colour as an IQ marker. The distinction between sex and gender gained acceptance. These debates reformulated the concept of a “species being” from which individuals, classes or groups could be alienated.

In regard to alienation, feminists re-opened the debate over “productive labour”. The adjective “productive” implies that the “unproductive” kind in the home was morally less valuable than that of men in the market. Such ranking is irrelevant to Marx’s definition of “productive labour” since its supply of surplus value can take place only in the market. At issue is not the worthiness of the labour itself but its place in the social relationships of capitalism. The ironing that a wife does for her husband is “unproductive”: if she takes a job ironing in the laundry to which she sends his shirts then her labour is “productive”. Discussion of this question rarely achieved even this degree of clarity because women were right to suspect that the theory was sullied with the chauvinism of those advancing it. Nonetheless, the feminist challenge re-invigorated the discussion of creative labour and thus of how the alienation of every kind of work might be overcome.

C. Arbeit macht Frei

The highest reward for man’s toil is not what he gets for it but what he becomes by it.

John Ruskin.

In a Cossack village, a mile from Tanais, the English journalist, Neal Ascherson, encountered a priest who asked:

What are we to think of this new Russia? In this village of ours, people are beginning to come from outside and sell things which they have not made themselves. To travel in order to stand on the street and sell carrots which you have grown, a toy which you have carved, a kettle which you fashioned in your own workshop – why, yes, that is natural and even good. But these new people do nothing beyond buying and selling. They buy an article in one place, and then they come here to sell it for a higher price. They do not work,

they do not make anything! I have told my congregation that it is a wickedness, a sin, to make money out of what you have not produced.³⁰

Sceptical though we may be about Ascherson's transcription of this homily, its sentiments evoke a world we have lost. No matter how remote from our time and place, the priest poses the question central to this paper: what are the virtues in making?

Mao Tse-tung offered one answer when he responded to his own question about where correct ideas came from by asking:

Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone; they come from three kinds of social practice, the struggle for production, the class struggle and scientific experiment.³¹

Of course, social practices are also where incorrect ideas come from. None of Mao's social practices lets us know the correct from the incorrect. Yet, his epistemology is from where we must start. Through making and doing, we learn about the nature of materials (science), of social relations, and of collective change.

Changing ourselves, our social relationships and our natural habitat has made us human. Frederick Engels summed up this aspect of human nature as a human creation in the title of his 1876 article *The part played by labour in the transition from ape to man*. That outlook was furthered by the founder of Pre-History, the Sydney born and educated V. Gordon Childe, in his *Man Makes Himself* (1936):

The constructive character of the potter's craft reacted on human thought. Building up a pot was a supreme instance of creation by man. The lump of clay was perfectly plastic" man could mould it as he would. In making a tool of stone or bone he was always limited by the shape and size of the original material: he could only take bits away from it. No such limitations restrict the activity of the potter. She can form her lump as she wishes; she can go on adding to it without any doubts as to the solidity of the joins. In thinking of "creation", the free activity of the potter in "making form where there was no

³⁰ Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea, The Birthplace of Civilisation and Barbarism*, Vintage, New York, 1996, p. 107.

³¹ Mao Tse-tung, *Four Essays on Philosophy*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1966, p. 134.

form” constantly recurs in man’s mind; the similes in the Bible taken from the potter’s craft illustrate the point.³²

Childe illustrated how understanding came from activity.

As a Materialist, Marx began from the proposition that human beings share a “natural being” with other species, primarily in physiological needs. In addition, he recognised that we have a “species being” which distinguishes us from other creatures, principally by our self-consciousness capacity to remake our species through the creation of social actions.³³

The object of labour is, therefore, the objectification of man’s species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created.³⁴

For good or ill, our species is still remaking itself through work, through tool- and machine-making, through scientific experiments, and through social re-organisation.

Magi treat humankind and nature as one. Theologians see humanity as a special creation. Scientists now picture our species as part of nature yet possessed of power over nature. During the drift from magic and religion to science a curtain fell between the ages of the world. The Classicist Bernard Knox explained that

the Greek word *opiso*, which means literally “behind” or “back”, refers not to the past but to the future. The early Greek imagination envisaged the past and the present as in front of us – we can see them. The future, invisible, is behind us. Only a few very wise men can see what is behind them.³⁵

Exceptions included Tiresias and Cassandra, one blinded and de-sexed, the other discredited and slain. Although a Chiliastic strand in Christianity looked forward to the Second Coming, the notion that we moved forward into the future did not triumph until after 1000AD, an achievement which was part hubris, and part the consequence of work on ourselves through our working on the rest of nature.

Giambattista Vico in *The New Science* (1744) averred that “the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind”. By contrast, we cannot

³² V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself*, Thinker’s Library, London, 1941, p. 93.

³³ Peter Dickens, *Reconstructing nature: alienation, emancipation, and the division of labour*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 57.

³⁴ *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 3, p. 277.

³⁵ Bernard Knox, *Backing into the future*, Norton, New York, 1994, pp. 11-12.

understand “the world of nature”, said Vico, “since God made it, He alone knows”.³⁶ That limit on our knowledge has been shrunk by various kinds of work on nature. Stephen Dawking recalled how the French determinist, the Marquis de Laplace, had confined God “to the areas that nineteenth-century science did not understand”. These days, Hawking continued, modern cosmologists are leaving god with nothing to do except to say why the universe exists.³⁷

Work liberated our species in as much as human beings no longer saw ourselves as sport for the gods. Scientists and technologists freed us from the blind necessity of the natural world. In 1513, Machiavelli could advise his prince on how Fortune might be opposed, providing one of the first expositions of the modernising mentality.³⁸

By the 1860s, developments in geology and biology had revealed our place in nature while we were enlarging our capacity to reshape its course. On one side, we were becoming freer from spooks just as we accepted our place in a great chain of being. It is no paradox that our understanding of how we are part of nature became possible because of our greater influence over it. Work set us free from the fetishism under which we had conceived nature after our own image and concerns, for instance, by portraying thunder as a god.

Because Marx believed that our understanding of the world depended upon our engagement with it, he derided an education confined to contemplation as equivalent to theology. In the last of the ten measures that Marx proposed in the *Communist Manifesto* for the proletariat to become the dominant class, he called for the “Combination of education with industrial production”.³⁹ Marx did not mean that children should be sent down the mines. Indeed, his bitterest scorn went on the masters whose comfort rested on the ignorance of pit boys and factory lasses who did not know that they lived in England, that its capital was London, and that its monarch was a woman named Victoria:

Meanwhile, late by night perhaps, self-denying Mr Glass-Capital, primed with port-wine, reels out of his club homeward droning out idiotically, “Britons never, never shall be slaves!”

³⁶ Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (eds), *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1970 ed., pp. 52-53; Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 372, n. 3.

³⁷ Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam, New York, 1989, p. 182.

³⁸ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince and The Discourses*, Modern Library, New York, 1940, p. 91.

³⁹ Struik, p. 112.

In opposition to this Podsnappery, Marx hoped to build on the efforts of Robert Owen so that “the education of the future ... will combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics ... as the only method of producing fully developed human beings”.⁴⁰

In light of the importance that historical materialists give to work, what are we to make of Marx’s picture of communism as a society where people will fish in the morning, hunt in the afternoon and critically criticise after dinner? Was this Arcadia no more than a swipe at his opponents, the Holy Family of Young Hegelians, addicted as they were to Critical Criticism? The target was broader. Marx had no reason to oppose specialist knowledge. His objection was when practitioners reduced the particularisation of skills, in a division of labour, fractured human beings into cretinism.

Marx’s idyll not only rises above the particularisation of labour but comes close to praising idleness: huntin’, criticisin’ and fishin’. The benefits from work as human activity in no way exclude the attractiveness of doing nothing from time to time. Social parasites are another matter and the social order that allows them to live without working deserves to be swept aside. Play, on the other hand, is another form of social practice, of work in the sense of which we are speaking. Marx condemned how ‘compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place ...[of] ... the children’s play’.⁴¹

The 1950s hobby of painting-by-numbers seems as remote from free play as it does from deepening one’s understanding of nature. Yet, one practitioner reported how that practice had helped her to see: “A tree used to be just a tree to me. Now I often see as many as ten different colors in a single tree”.⁴²

Instead of rescuing work from its capitalist chains, progressives are now inclined to devalue it. In *Australia at work*, ACIRRT accepted that “Reduction in standard hours of work are an indication of how advanced a civilisation is”.⁴³ This claim is historically debatable. Hunter gatherers spent less time providing for their physical needs than have many agricultural societies. For contemporary Australia, the claim is also dubious. Shorter hours with an increase in the speed of the line raise stress levels more than they advance civilisation.

⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, I, pp. 259n, 264 n. and 483-84.

⁴¹ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 395.

⁴² William L. Bird, Jr, *Paint by Number*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 2001, p. 97.

The German labour movement is regretting the 35-hour week, while French bosses are delighted as work processes have been intensified with few additional positions created, which was the rationale for its introduction. Employers in Australia are not frightened at any loss of productivity by shorter hours, providing they retain managerial prerogatives.

In *Selling the Work Ethic*, Sharon Beder denigrated human labour as a civilising experience. In part, her prejudice is the result of her conflating “work”, “the work ethic” and “hard work”. This confusion follows from her failure to distinguish human activity from paid employment. She also is ill at ease with work because it must alter nature, which she wants to protect against human destructiveness. After giving statistics on depressive illness, she declared: “Work is clearly not healthy for individuals”. The element of truth in that view needs to be restated as “Certain kinds of work are not healthy”. Beder considers work to be

one of the least challenged aspects of industrial culture, one that has also been incorporated into other cultures and political ideologies such as socialism.

Again, the truth in that proposition needs to be balanced against the socialist tradition of valuing human inventiveness and of criticising alienation, thereby promoting a fund of affirmations. She gets herself into the position of deprecating all human activity, including gardening and handicrafts. Nowhere does she indicate what people are to do if we do not work in the broadest sense of being engaged with our social and physical worlds.⁴⁴

Beder’s muddles about the future are of a piece with her picture of pre-Reformation life and work. “Ancient Roman and Greek workers apparently had abundant holidays”. Having thus abolished slavery with a keystroke, she achieves the same for serfdom: “Nor did medieval workers work any more than was necessary for their subsistence. If a worker could support his family by working three days a week, it was unlikely he would work any more days”.⁴⁵ Heigh ho for Merrie England! It is true that the class struggle raged around the making of reluctant serfs supply their lords with produce. It is not true that the time or effort that serfs allocated to work was marked by insouciance.⁴⁶ To overlook the coercive element in labour relations is common among apologists for exploitation. That it should surface in an author

⁴³ *Australia at work*, p. 175.

⁴⁴ Beder, pp. 207 & 262-63.

⁴⁵ Beder, p. 248.

striving to redress the inequities of capitalism is reason enough for this discussion paper.

D. A *teleology of work*

In theological terms, God is pure thought. When it thinks of something, that reflection is all the “work” it has to do for that thing to come into existence. God created the universe through pure thought. By contrast, human planning is provisional, closer to the mechanism of evolution as a run of rough fits, never a perfect adaptation towards a pre-set goal.⁴⁷ The telic tends to the theological.

In the 1980s, the British designer Mike Cooley took the title *Architect or Bee* from Marx’s capital:

a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this: that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.

That much is almost acceptable, but Marx’s next sentence goes too far:

At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement.⁴⁸

To suggest that the final product of the worker’s imagination is ever the same as that conceived at the start is to fall for a theological epistemology, denying historical materialism in which human beings must learn by doing. An ability to adapt as we go along distinguishes the architect from the bee. The latter waits for natural selection.

Jorn Utzon conceived a shape for the Sydney Opera House but, even before his forced resignation, the building was never an exact transcription of sketches into concrete and ceramics. At every stage, he and his team of engineers and tradesmen had to amend the design and the construction processes, and through those adjustments approached the ultimate achievement of the eighth wonder.

Marx’s parable of the architect and the bee was also theistic, a hangover of god-structured thinking. Human beings require experimentation. The theology behind Marx’s architect-and-bee example becomes obvious when we recall Plato’s concept of Ideal Forms, in which all human endeavours are a poor copies of a pre-existing

⁴⁶ See Rodney Hilton, *Class conflict and the crisis of feudalism*, Verso, London, 1990, pp. 49-65.

⁴⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda’s Thumb*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980, pp. 19-25.

⁴⁸ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 179.

perfection, a view which Plato set down in this exchange between Socrates and Glaucon concerning a carpenter:

Socrates: “Didn’t you agree that what he produces is not the form of bed which according to us is what a bed really is, but a particular bed?”

Glaucon: “I did.”

Socrates: “If, then, what he makes is not ‘what a bed really is’, his product is not ‘what is’, but something which *resembles* ‘what is’ without *being* it. And anyone who says that the products of the carpenter or any other craftsman are ultimately real can hardly be telling the truth, can he?”

Glaucon: “No one familiar with the sort of arguments we’re using could suppose so”.

Socrates: “So we shan’t be surprised if the bed the carpenter makes is a shadowy thing compared to reality”.⁴⁹

This kind of Idealism is what historical materialists still have to combat, often inside our own thinking.

E. *Consumption as fulfillment*

In 1844, Marx could write that “political economy knows the worker only as a working animal – as a beast reduced to the strictest bodily needs”.⁵⁰ That allegation was true for the political economy of Adam Smith:

A man must always live by his work, and his wages must at least be sufficient to maintain him ... there is however a certain rate below which it seems impossible to reduce, for any considerable time, the ordinary wages even of the lowest species of labour.⁵¹

Thomas Malthus chorused that truth about life under capitalism:

It is the want of necessities which mainly stimulates the labouring classes to produce luxuries; and where this stimulus is removed or greatly weakened, so that the necessities of life could be obtained with very little labour, instead of more time being devoted to the product of conveniences, there is every reason to think that less time would be so devoted.⁵²

⁴⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987 revised edition, p. 424

⁵⁰ *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 4, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1974, p. 242.

⁵¹ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Vol 1, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976, pp. 82-3.

⁵² Thomas Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy*, William Pickering, London, 1836, p. 320.

Only later would capital need workers both as consuming machines and as working animals.

This realignment of the labourers' usefulness to capital's cycles of production and consumption brought a switch in economic orthodoxy, from an approach focused on production in the labour theory of value to one devoted to consumption, where marginal utility is taken as the determinant of price. Mainstream economists now laud this change as the attainment of science, a claim which maroons their hero, Adam Smith. Radicals have accused the profession of prestidigitation once the honesty of Smith or Ricardo proved hazardous in the face of a proletariat which could read and organise.⁵³ Leaving aside the issue of why the new doctrine arose, its acceptance as positive science required expanding sales, as luxuries became necessities. The endorsement of the concept's naturalness relied on more people making more choices at the margin of their wants, instead of being lucky if they had enough to eat.

The more that the expansion of capital depends on mass consumption, the more the fulcrum between work and marketing shifts towards the latter. This change will be explored through the integration of sales with work.

i. *Consumption as worktime*

In the *Economic and Philosophical Notebooks of 1844-45*, Marx had contrasted labour with capital, as life against death:

In labour all the natural, spiritual, and social variety of individual activity is manifested and is variously rewarded, whilst dead capital always keeps the same pace and is indifferent to real individual activity.⁵⁴

Yet, capital is also full of life, avid for its own expansion, vital at inducing new needs in consumers, as Marx spelt out in the late 1850s:

Capital's ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth drives labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness, and thus creates the material elements for the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Maurice Dobb, *Political Economy and Capitalism*, G. Routledge & Sons, London, 1937, pp. 26-28.

⁵⁴ *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 4, p. 236.

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 325.

For this expansion of capital to occur, the separation of workers from the means of production had to be extended to severing them from their supplying the use values they need for the reproduction of their labour power. Much that had been made inside the domestic sphere had to become commodities produced in the market economy:

Domestic work, such as sewing and mending, must be replaced by the purchase of ready-made articles. Hence, the expenditure of money. The cost of keeping the family increases, and balances the greater income”.⁵⁶

This embryo has grown into the mass marketing of every need, underwritten by consumer credit.

In developing this line of analysis in 1977, the Canadian media scholar, Dallas W. Smythe, asked his fellow Marxists to recognise that there is no such thing as “free time”. In the era of monopolising capitals, the consumption of branded commodities is another part of working life. Smythe’s colleague, William Livant, put it thus:

Just as it appears, at work, that you *are* paid for all the labour time you *do* sell, so it appears, off-work, that the labour time *you are not paid for is not sold*... (Italics in original).

The commercial media use the news and entertainment to package the audience’s purchasing power for sale to merchandisers. The time we give those so-called leisure activities is appropriated by the communications business.⁵⁷ Corporations sponsor sporting fixtures and fine art exhibitions as vehicles for selling so that physical and mental exercise delivers us to the snare. Moreover, time away from work always involves replenishing the mental and muscular vigour needed to please capital.

Capitalism brings immiserisation as much as impoverishment. In material terms, the poverty level is raised or lowered to match the needs of capital. The socially necessary costs of reproducing labour power expand with the expansion of the needs that capital offers to meet. As Canadian Marxist, Michael Lebowitz explains, “each new need becomes a new requirement to work”.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 395n.

⁵⁷ Dallas W. Smythe, “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism”, *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1 (3), Fall 1997, pp. “Free time”, remarked Smythe, has the same status as “free world”, “free enterprise”, “free elections”, “free speech”, “free flow” of news (p. 14), and one can now add, “free trade”.

⁵⁸ Michael A. Lebowitz, “Capital and the Production of Needs”, *Science and Society*, 41 (4), Winter 1977-78, p. 442; *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 3, p. 272; Humphrey McQueen, *The Essence of Capitalism*, Sceptre, Sydney, 2001, chapter 14.

F. *The economic contexts*

Eight hours work
 Eight hours play
 Eight hours rest
 And eight bob a day.
 Demands of the Eight-hour movement, 1856.

The degree of interest in alienation among socialists has swerved along with the level of employment and the political strength of the labour movement. That strength requires on a class analysis of its interests and opportunities if it is not to be trapped in its own achievements at holding back the demands of capital expansion. The dissolving of the distinction between Left and Right brings the advantage of allowing us to see that those labels have always concealed how the crucial political divide is the expansion of capital at the expense of labour and nature.

i. *mechanisation*

The quality of work had been a marginal issue in the hard times before 1940s. In the mid-1950s, talk of automation provoked fears of a return to mass unemployment. The displacement by mechanisation of hundreds of miners on the northern New South Wales coal fields spurred the State Labor government to establish a Royal Commission on automation which began its hearings in December 1958. In a 1957 Fabian Society pamphlet, *Automation, friend or foe?*, Brisbane Trotskyist Ken Kemshead argued that automation required a transitional program to socialism, including a 30-hour week, but he made no mention of creative work.

The authorities were uncertain about the nature of automation. The professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of New South Wales, R. E. Vowells, identified four stages: mechanisation; automatic control; computerised control for complete automation; and ultimately thinking machines.⁵⁹ Kemshead, as a working technician and a Marxist, had a clearer understanding of the continuities and changes involved in automation: machines running machines; flows between automated machines; and computers. (pp. 6-7).

For many socialists, automation promised to realise Marx's prophesy that the social revolution would erupt through a conflict between new means of production

⁵⁹ *Australian Factory*, 2 February 1959, p. 26.

and the old social relations. Automation would also underwrite the superabundance of material goods essential for the communist ethic of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.⁶⁰ How automation would affect the prospects for a universalising of creative activity was mentioned less often.

As had been true from the eighteenth century, mechanisation brought relief from labouriousness but added to tedium:

The lightening of the labour, even, becomes a sort of torture, since the machine does not free the labourer from work, but deprives the work of all interest. Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour-process, but also a process of creating surplus-value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman.⁶¹

The promise that the age of plastics would be “as interesting and attractive as it is modern” had, by 1952, had been reduced to the routine of “too many young people finding themselves with dead-end jobs” that required no more than “the placing of powder in a machine and the pulling of a lever”.⁶²

Capitalism’s avoidance of another depression in the late 1940s, and the sprouting of the affluent society, offered an opportunity for trade unionists to interest themselves in the non-monetary rewards of work. Economism proved more appealing. The escape from work came through a 40-hour from 1948. In 1957, the ACTU, endorsed a 35-hours week. NSW awards provided for three weeks annual leave after 1958. Long-service leave came in New South Wales from 1951-52, followed by Queensland and Victoria, and for Commonwealth Public Servants in 1957.

One major employer, Sir John Storey, Chairman of the Overseas Telecommunications Corporation, alleged that most wage-earners put in no more than 33 hours a week “after allowing for public holidays, tea breaks, late starting and early finishing”.⁶³ In a period of near over-full employment, these measures brought more opportunities for overtime than they did for either paid creative work or rewarding leisure.

Australian Public Opinion Poll had reported 60% in favour of the 40-hour week when it was announced by the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in 1947. After

⁶⁰ *Marx-Engels, Selected Works*, 3, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1970, p. 19.

⁶¹ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 423.

⁶² *Australian Plastics*, July 1952, p. 9.

six months experience, 70 % said the reform should have been delayed; a year later, the percentage saying the reduction had come to soon was down to 60%. A majority favoured a 42-hour week. Among semi-skilled workers, 75% opposed any increase on 40 hours. As late as November 1951, 54% favoured a return to the 44-hour, although the semi-skilled and ALP voters were 75-80% opposed. This resistance to shorter hours among even employees stemmed from their belief that real wages were being eroded through inflation caused by the loss of production. Hence, the lack of enthusiasm for a reduced working week was in effect a demand for higher wages.

ii. The good old days

Certain features of the current dislocations at work will be clearer if we remind ourselves of a pattern of work that has disappeared. In the 1950s, the need was to fill in spare time. The smaller scale of many enterprises into the 1960s meant that the owners participated in the daily rounds of labour, or, at least, could be seen doing the books in the front office. Enthusiasm for work-based social and sporting clubs varied even among those enterprises where they existed. A 1964 report of twenty-four such bodies in Victoria showed that almost all conducted children's parties at Christmas, sixteen organised annual balls and fifteen had cricket teams.⁶⁴ In 1955, BALM paints erected an amenities block with a shop run by a social club.⁶⁵ The contraction since the 1960s in the number of union picnics, or trades picnics sponsored by employers, is another sign that how the workplace has become less a site for life's satisfactions. Notwithstanding their limitations, the existence of such clubs and outings indicates an approach towards the workplace that has disappeared.

Pope Products Ltd in Adelaide opened a recreation hall in 1954 as part of the paternalism of its founder, Barton Pope. At the opening ceremony, the audience of business executives, union officials and employees stood "to attention while a record of 'The Call to the People of Australia' was played" – "The Call" being an appeal for moral regeneration in the fight against Communism.⁶⁶ In a move typical of South Australia's political economy, Pope had initiated, in 1950, an annual cricket match between unionists and employers, playing for the "Ashes of Industrial Discord".⁶⁷

⁶³ *Clay Products Journal of Australia*, January 1954, p. 39.

⁶⁴ *Personnel Practice Bulletin*, XX (1), March 1964, pp. 35-37.

⁶⁵ *Hardware Journal*, August 1955, p. 40.

⁶⁶ *Hardware Journal*, September 1953, p. 38.

⁶⁷ *Hardware Journal*, May 1959, p. 86.

As offices came to resemble factory production lines, managers of both were advised to adopt a human relations approach to industrial relations. A primer in this movement, J. A. C. Brown's *The Social Psychology of Industry* enjoyed fourteen reprints in the twenty years after its publication in 1954. The aim was to make the employee feel at home at work, mitigating the effects of alienation in order to prevent their eruption into strikes or anti-capitalist sentiments. What management sees as alienation is often their workers' resistance to alienation.

The critique of managers The Chairman of the Commonwealth Banking Corporation, Warren D. McDonald, recognised in 1962:

we missed a generation in management ... Our industrial growth was so rapid that many firms moved from being backyard operations to complex national organisations in a few years. Father, who often started in shirtsleeves and with perhaps a limited education, had to cope with immense problems and back-breaking work. Instead of his better educated, better trained sons taking over in the natural course and being able to handle the new problems, as in older industrial societies, he had to do everything himself in a few years or he failed to survive. He often did not possess either the background or, most important of all, the time to be concerned with things like marketing research and scientific management techniques.⁶⁸

All industries included a spread of competencies among their managers, from the well-prepared and forward-looking to the lucky, the second-rate, and those executives whom Donald Horne accused of glorying in “a look-no-brains attitude”.⁶⁹ In 1955, the Commonwealth sponsored the Administrative Staff College to train managers.

Industrial relations in Australia were constrained on both sides by the Commonwealth and State systems of conciliation and arbitration, with their standardising of wages and conditions, and by the legislative interventions of Labor governments. The employers' desire to dismantle the uniform system in favour of incentives and managerial prerogatives never disappeared but was displaced by their use of that penal powers to hold down wages in the 1950s.⁷⁰ Queensland employees, organised through the Melbourne-based Institute of Public Affairs, mounted a

⁶⁸ *Australian Marketing Projects, The Hoover Award for Marketing*, National Committee of the Hoover Awards for Marketing, West Ryde, 1962, p. vi.

⁶⁹ Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1964, p. 239.

campaign against a new social order of planning. Tame-cat unions became company unions in the vehicle building and other industries, often by backing the Industrial Groups in union elections.⁷¹ In the 1950s, the “human relations” gained ground as often from larger foreign firms transferring procedures from the United Kingdom or the USA, and as managerial training moved into universities.⁷² In his history of *The Management of Labour*, Christopher Wright traced these shifts and conflicts, and the tardiness of many firms to employ personnel managers, let alone trained ones.⁷³

Time-and-motion studies and incentive payments remained part of the managerial curriculum, yet they were open to disruption by employers as well as workers. At the head office of the project building firm, A. V. Jennings, tea-breaks in the canteen were a time for “a laugh and a chat”. When a supervisor tried to limit those exchanges by ringing a bell, the son of the founder had it disconnected.⁷⁴

Contentment and informality was far from universal. European immigrant labourers suffered social isolation at work because of language barriers and social rejection. In the late 1940s, clay products firms welcomed “Balts” because they were contracted under their immigration arrangements to work where they were directed for two years. Because much of the work was with pick and shovel, many soon had medical grounds to quit.⁷⁵ Their rates of turnover were part of a wider problem of workforce mobility, averaging 7% in March 1949.⁷⁶ Personnel officers did little more than chase potential employees. That task disappeared once “the availability of large numbers of migrant workers relieved management of the need to develop more advanced personnel techniques”.⁷⁷ The immigrants also found that their qualifications were not accepted and so had to start again as labourers when they had been skilled tradesmen in their home countries. Hence, many saw work as the place to make the

⁷⁰ Kevin Blackburn, “Preaching ‘the Gospel of Efficiency’: The promotion of Ideas about Profit-Sharing and Payment by Results in Australia, 1915-1929”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 107, 1996, pp. 257-80.

⁷¹ Doug Blackmur, “Employer Industrial Relations Policy in Queensland in Postwar Reconstruction”, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 26 (2), 1984, pp. 166-87.

⁷² Peter Cochrane, “Company Time: Management, Ideology and The Labour Process, 1940-1960”, *Labour History*, 48, May 1985, pp. 54-68.

⁷³ Christopher Wright, *The management of labour: a history of Australian employers*, OUP, Melbourne, 1995, chapters 2-4.

⁷⁴ Don Garden, *Builders to the Nation*, MUP, Carlton, 1992, pp. 81, 130 & 132.

⁷⁵ *Clay Products Journal*, August 1948, Editorial, & p. 4; October 1948, p. 7; June 1949, p. 17; April 1950, p. 13; *Manufacturing and Management*, September 1951, pp. 86-89.

⁷⁶ *Bulletin of Industrial Psychology and Personnel Practice*, September 1949, pp. 21-4; between March 1949 and December 1949, every issue of this government publication carried at least one article on labour turnover.

⁷⁷ Wright, p. 49.

money that would give them the material compensations for a lack of status in the society.⁷⁸

Workers of any background could also miss out on social returns at work if they were exhausted from industries with little mechanisation, or from working overtime, or at a second job. Sleeping through the lunch break was not uncommon. The time required to get from home to work was rarely as vast as the two hours each way for “Balts” housed at Fisherman’s Bend.⁷⁹ However, travel time increased throughout the 1950s and 1960s, partly because of industrial and residential zoning. A labourer who could walk to his job in five minutes in 1949, would take a 30-minute bus trip when he moved to a new house in the suburbs and then as long in a private car to an outer suburban site after the first factory had been closed as a noxious industry.

Quantitative evidence for the levels of alienation in workplaces is fragmentary. A 1950 survey of 500 wage earners found more support for “socialism”, defined as government ownership to benefit all people equally, than for “nationalisation”, defined as government ownership. Questioned about their preferred type of employer, 37% opted for the government; 40% of those then working in firms with fewer than fifty staff, favoured jobs with small firms, whereas 35% of those in larger enterprises wanted to remain in bigger workforces. Nonetheless, more than 60% of those in such operations were critical of monopoly pricing and profits. Although 90% workers said their own bosses were fair, a third said that the worst feature of employers was their greed or excessive demands. Another third named the employers’ “inhumanity”, as evidenced in “no team spirit”, unfriendliness and lack of trust.⁸⁰ These contrary results suggest some apprehension on the part of the workers that organisations with social linkages were preferable to impersonal systems.

Sample opinion polls among Ford Motor Co. employees in 1951 and 1952 reported high levels of contentment in current jobs, with only four in ten wanting more responsibility.⁸¹ Two surveys of women in the clothing trade in 1965 and 1966 revealed a low 4% who did not care for their jobs, a third who liked it on the whole,

⁷⁸ Jean L. Martin, *Refugee Settlers*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1965, pp. 18 & 43.

⁷⁹ *Clay Products Journal*, April 1950, p. 13.

⁸⁰ *A Survey of Industrial Relations Between Employers and Employees*, George Patterson, Sydney, 1950, pp. 9-16.

⁸¹ *Manufacturing and Management*, 15 Mat 1952, pp. 384-7, and October 1952, pp. 123-5.

and up to a third who loved it.⁸² The questions in all these investigations were framed within the prevailing management and ownership structures. The answers cannot be extrapolated to any altered social order but they do indicate that one hangover for any post-capitalist society will be the impact of hundreds of having learned one's place.

G. *Industrial democracy*

Industrial democracy is variously defined, and not all its components can redress alienation in the workplace. Indeed, for as long as capitalist relations of production operate, industrial democracy can do no more than can a fair day's pay to prevent the expropriation of surplus value.

For a working class linked to "socialism without doctrine", or to *etatism*, the Australian labour movement nonetheless has sustained a strand of shop-floor control. The syndicalist element in the Industrial Workers of the World influenced the Communist Party during its first decade, later to be denounced by the leadership as shearing-shed anarchism. Inheritances from the One Big Union movement became intertwined with the shop steward tradition of craft unions, notably the Amalgamated Engineers, now the Metals Division within the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union. Among Communists, this impulse towards factory councils had to compete against the Leninist notion of a vanguard party capturing the state on behalf of all working peoples.

The longest-standing group pushing for worker control was around the Balmain ironworker, alderman and Trotskyist Nick Origlass. His faction saw self-management as a counter to the bureaucratisation of socialist revolution. He extended this outlook into urban conservation battles.⁸³ A Melbourne comrade, Alan Roberts, developed the notion of the Self-Managed Environment, challenging the Leninist "cadre".

From the late 1960s, most of the Left factions advanced some variant of worker control and self-management in place of the bureaucratisation of democratic centralism. Antonio Gramsci's participation in the Turin factory occupations around 1920 boosted the popularity of his theoretical writings on hegemony and praxis. The Yugoslav road to socialism stressed self-managed enterprises. In China, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution saw workers seizing control of factories. These

⁸² *Personnel Practice Bulletin*, December 1965, p. 13, and December 1966, p. 42.

experiments became beacons to Western revolutionaries but also brought reminders of the conflict between the general welfare under a national plan and the particular interests of the more profitable enterprises.

The worker-intellectual and lifelong, if dissident Australian communist, Jack Blake, summed up the change of mood after the 1968 May Days in Paris and the Prague Spring. In his *Revolution from Within* (1971), Blake presented the classic Marxist position that the overthrow of capitalism was already coming, not from a Leninist insurrection, but from the conflict between the means and the relations of production – a revolution from within. The twist was his perception that “the intellectual culture is being built into the structure of the workforce itself by the developmental needs of modern industrial society”.⁸⁴ If true, this concept meant that socialist consciousness would not be starting from scratch and so could avoid the crimes of the Stalin era.

Out of an academic background in social theory and education, two of the founding editors of the Melbourne-based Marxist journal *Arena*, Geoff Sharp and Doug White, developed their “Arena thesis” about “the intellectually trained”. Their proposition drew on the student revolt, with its disparaging of the industrial working class as conservative, although the O’Shea strike of May 1969 buffeted that notion.

The *Arena* editors proposed that the structure of the work undertaken by the emerging professionals would bring them into conflict with the centralised commandism of capitalism. This stratum was “not simply a higher level of skilled worker”, but represented a new way of working, namely, the application of an analytical approach to established skills:

Always the intellectually trained worker is called on to exercise his general powers of knowledge and theoretical standpoint in relation to fresh particular tasks. This perhaps is a quite central condition tending to generate an autonomous person, who, because he cannot readily be supervised (except by those who share his capacities) is to a degree self regulating and is the more conscious of his individuality.

... because the intellectually trained have no voice in setting the objectives they strive to attain they are alienated from the products of their working effort just as much as is the industrial worker.

⁸³ Hall Greenland, *Red Hot*, Wellington Lane Press, Sydney, 1999.

[the intellectually trained] is likely to have contempt and disregard for his employer who judges things by a different set of standards from those he has. And because he wishes to carry through the whole of his life activity in accord with his values, is more concerned about the uses of the product of his labour than older style workers.⁸⁵

Sharp and White gave the example of school teachers who were then rejecting assessment by an inspectorates and demanding promotional criteria established by their own professional institute. Academics later put into practice the freedom to manage their own affairs that had been seized by their students.

Ever hopeful that student power would be the seedbed for a new generation of revolutionaries, Sharp and White nonetheless recognised that the needs of the intellectually trained could be met through adjustments to capital's social and cultural regimes, leaving its political and economic power stronger. In the West, that is what happened as the personal computer tookover from the mainframe, although the monopolising passed from IBM to Microsoft. By contrast, the crumbling of the centrally planned economies can be dated from the suppression of the Prague Spring and, with it, the Czech Academy's manifesto to ally socialism with cybernetics.⁸⁶ A political fear of uncensored information blocked the shift from the primitive accumulation of capital to the supply of consumer goods. Gorbachev acknowledged that restructuring could not succeed without openness.

In the 1970s, the state deflected the calls for industrial democracy away from the overthrow of capitalism to reconciling workers with their lot. Responding to the 1960s upsurge among the intellectually trained, the technocratic laborites around South Australian premier Don Dunstan put forward plans for worker participation in 1973.⁸⁷ Somewhat more subversive, the Federal Minister for Labour, Clyde Cameron, commissioned Canberra academic Fred Emery to report on *Living at work*.⁸⁸

As a question of high policy, worker participation found another outlet in the largely forgotten 1975-6 *Report of the Committee to Advise on Policies for the Manufacturing Industry*. Those volumes included a commissioned survey of the role of workers in industry, undertaken in response to a recognition "that a lack of

⁸⁴ J. D. Blake, *Revolution from within*, Outlook, Sydney, 1971, p. 114.

⁸⁵ *Arena*, 15, 1969, pp. 30-33.

⁸⁶ See R. Richta (ed.), *Civilisation at the Crossroads*, Australian Left Review, Sydney, 1969.

⁸⁷ For a blanket rejection of the Dunstan proposals and an almost equal distaste for the grass roots Worker Control Centre, see *Arena*, 32-33, 1973, pp. 9-20.

common purpose between management and workers was impairing the performance of industry and frustrating the achievement of a satisfying work environment”.⁸⁹ A three-person team investigated worker participation in Romania and Yugoslavia.

A decade later, the 1987 report of *Australia reconstructed* devoted a chapter to “Industrial Democracy, Production Consciousness, Work and Management Organisation”, drawing on Swedish and Norwegian experience. That document formed the framework for ACTU policy alongside the Accord, which had crimped the room for shop-floor activism. The proposed consultative process found some expression in industry plans, more often to manage redundancies than to decide investment strategies. The ACTU blueprint also spoke of the need to install a “production culture”. Did this phrase mean more of the same through higher productivity? If it did imply “better”, did that improvement in quality refer to the lives of the makers, or only to their products? The optimistic view is that one is not possible without the other.

Although John Mathews carried forward the principles of *Australia reconstructed*, his most recent book – which was in 1994 – said little on alienation directly but had much advice on practical workplace reconciliation. Irrespective of the applicability of his proposals to any given job, the design of steps to end immiserisation remains essential, no matter how controversial those proposed by Mathews.⁹⁰ There is no way to leap from managerial perogatives into self-management.

Since the 1980s, managerialism redeployed the 1960s language of radical social activists about empowerment as a disguise for disabling workers. In his doctoral thesis, John Buchanan collated results from case studies of “Best Practice” to conclude that they “record management-driven change processes aimed at decreasing the labour content of output, usually undertaken in a consultative fashion”. By contrast, the parallel push to cut staffing levels was never “subject to consultation, let alone joint determination”.⁹¹

⁸⁸ F. E. Emery, *Living at work*, AGPS, Canberra, 1976.

⁸⁹ *Report*, III, pp. v.and 253-387.

⁹⁰ John Mathews, *Catching the wave: workplace reform in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, pp. 264-5; see Bethuene Carmichael, *Post-Fordism, political unionism and the work of John Mathews*, M. Environmental Science, Monash University, 1992.

⁹¹ John Buchanan, *Beyond fragmented flexibility? The restructuring of labour management in the Australian mental industry since the mid 1980s*, Ph. D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 2000, Chapter 9.

Even employee representation has been beaten back into special areas, and in many of those is hanging on for dear life. For instance, one prong of the attack on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is the ridiculing of “ABC culture” which refers to the staff view that the nature of their work requires them to resist “Management rules. OK”. Donald McDonald reacted to criticism of Jonathan Shier’s delaying a *Four Corners* program in July 2001 by deploring “the union commenting on a non-industrial matter”.⁹² ABC staff assert that the integrity of their reporting requires a say over the whole organisation to prevent its corruption through the back-door of budgets, staffing levels and promotion procedures. Comparable values are prized by academics, Fairfax journalists and medicos who argue that the nature of their work requires them to control the product of their labour. The case for self-managing work processes should not be confined to the already privileged. All workers must be able to feel responsible for what they do, and enriched by the doing, or at least, not demeaned.

The ABC retains an elected staff representative on its board. Academics have surrendered many of the gains they made towards self-management during the student upsurges of the 1960s and 1970s. Plenty of other cultural institutions do not accept that even their professional staff deserve to be represented in management. The State Library of Victoria has again refused to accept an elected staff member on its Board.

In a recent issue of *Arena*, Glenn Patmore lit a “New light on an old hill” by calling for a commitment to industrial democracy. In his summary of political party platforms, he reported that the Greens want employee ownership and flexibility, while the Democrats endorse “the maximisation of employee representation”.

The ALP is committed to “the right of workers to meaningful participation in decision-making in the workplace about industrial matters”. Patmore adds that this promise is “couched in generalities, contains no standards against which to measure progress. No standards mean no commitment”. Moreover, the ALP’s statement limits participation to industrial matters. The struggle to protect the entitlements of sacked employees has exposed how wages and conditions are inseparable from investment decisions so that there can be no limit to “industrial”.

Patmore himself wants to extend workplace democracy beyond “having a say about industrial matters” and on to “commercial ends, market investment and future

⁹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-22 July 2001, p. 2.

development of the company”. He mentions personal development, but not as a benefit to be achieved through the work itself. Although he looks towards “more democratic, more productive and more secure workplaces”, he does not explore how we can have all three at once. Democratisation has to answer the class question: for whom are workplaces to be “more productive” and “more secure”? A workplace that secures higher productivity for its owners will not necessarily secure jobs for its workers, or offer them more fulfillment from their work.⁹³

Militants fear that consultation will slide into collaboration, to a buying off of delegates at the point of production, and to a corporatist mentality for the society. Those outcomes are inevitable if the workers’ representatives are not infused with a political programme about transforming the meaning that work has for society. That ideological requirement means that participation cannot be confined to industrial matters.

In light of complaints about the encroachments of work time on life, we have to consider how much of the workers’ time and mental energy will be available for a participatory democracy. If the in-put is during working hours, will this impinge on productivity? If the consultations happen after hours, they will reduce the time available for socialising or family.

Industrial democracy challenges more than managerial prerogatives. It also threatens the class bias of the state. Bourgeois democracy is an expression of plutocracy whenever the social inequalities built into capitalism are neglected. For example, the call for “one person, one vote, and one vote, one value” ignores that a non-citizen, Rupert Murdoch, has more political influence because of his media proprietorship than he would have if he became a propertiless voter.

The claim that liberty depends on property rights conflates three kinds of property:

- the personal, such as one’s toothbrush or dwelling;
- productive property, that is, capital, whether in land, money, plant or commodities;
- a capacity to labour.

⁹³ *Arena*, 53, June-July 2001, pp. 45-48.

To own personal property, but none of the productive kind, is to be subject to those who have both. To be in that situation is also to face state officials who regulate labour for capital's expansion.

During the bailout of National Textiles, Federal Treasurer Peter Costello explained to John Laws's radio audience on 11 February 2000 why the claims of that company's bankers took precedence over those of its workers. In lending, Costello continued, the banks had secured a mortgage over the firm's assets and so were, in effect, its owners. Employees held no such legal title over what they had produced. Despite the workers having advanced their labour power, they still owned nothing in the production process except that necessity to go on working for wages. Without recognising the import of the distinction he was drawing, Costello had touched on the bias in the law of property relations.

The hope that socialism would be the heir to liberalism ignored those relations. It is truer to say that political democracy can be assured only by industrial democracy, than to believe that the flow can be from the other direction. Liberalism is linked to socialism only by exposing how much bourgeois democracy fails to deliver. Moreover, the political freedoms associated with bourgeois democracy were secured by workers in their struggle to organise for social and workplace reforms. Militant liberals, as Polanyi recorded, recognised democracy as a threat to capital.⁹⁴ Their task has been to make democracy safe for capital.

The surge towards participatory democracy from the 1960s was contested in the 1975 Report of the Trilateral Commission's *Task Force on the Governability of Democracies* – a title which assumes that democracy should not be self-governing. The Trilateral Commission was the godchild of David Rockefeller of the Chase Manhattan Bank, bringing together leaders of thought and action from the pillars of capitalism – the USA, Europe and Japan. The Report's authors were pessimistic because the electorate was refusing to remain apathetic, and because the fiscal crisis of the state limited the opportunities for buying their quiescence with welfare measures. Between 1958 and 1973, the percentage of US interviewees who believed that their government was “pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves” had trebled from 17.6 to 53.3. One recommendation called for a lowering of job expectations from too much education. In tandem with that cut-back, work

⁹⁴ Polanyi, p. ???; C. B. Macpherson, *The life and times of liberal democracy*, OUP, New York, 1977.

needed to be reorganised to reduce alienation, but the German experiments with co-determination were not acceptable in the Commission's managed democracy.⁹⁵

The reformed Thatcherite, John Gray, sees the free market and democracy as antagonists. For market forces to rule, their instrumentalities, such as the WTO and IMF (or the postponed Multilateral Agreement on Investment), must be protected from legislative review. Since the Asian implosion, the IMF has retreated from its anti-statist prescriptions to underwrite the installation of "effective states", that is, governments powerful enough to keep order during the chaos caused by the expansion of capital.⁹⁶

Polanyi countered that the graver danger was that the logic of capital was inimical to a social democracy. That incompatibility, he wrote, explained why "the reform of capitalist economy by socialist parties is difficult even when they are determined not to interfere with the property system".⁹⁷ The inability of the Hawke-Keating administrations to deal with this obstacle meant that the Kelty Accords found it easier to restrain labour than to marshal capital. For Keynes, deficit budgets had been but a tactic to counter the failure of capitalists to invest. The ALP's retreat from Keynesianism in the 1980s was not in cuts to public spending, but in failing to coordinate the flows of capital.

Industrial democracy will remain hollow until it also flourishes inside the labour movement. Union resistance to strike ballots would be more convincing if more officials welcomed fair and open elections. Of course, union despots can feel confident that their power will be unchallenged if they offered to trade fair elections for compulsory open votes of shareholders.

H. *Current conflicts*

Summarising the situation in Australia today, four aspects of alienation apply in regard to work:

⁹⁵ Alan Wolff, "Capitalism Shows Its Face", Holly Sklar (ed.), *Trilateralism*, South End Press, Boston, 1980, pp. 296-8 & 307. That the US sections of the *Report* were the handiwork of Samuel P. Huntington is no surprise. Notorious now for his "Clash of Civilisations" thesis to justify the military-industrial complex after the Cold War, Huntington had won his spurs as the initiator of the forced urbanisation of Vietnamese ("Strategic Hamlets"), to deprive the guerillas of the ocean of peasants in which to swim. Huntington is the face of bourgeois democracy.

⁹⁶ John Gray, *False Dawn*, Granta, London, 1998.

⁹⁷ Polanyi, p. 226.

first, there are those employees who are bored by their tasks, though not necessarily as equally bored by being at work, because a job offers a hub for social contact;

secondly, tumult in the workplace is leading to greater stress;

thirdly, there are those whom Tony Abbott accuses of being alienated from work - the dole-bludgers, the work-shy – or those Aborigines whom Noel Pearson alleges are content to take sit-down money;

finally, the vast majority of workers remain alienated in the sense dealt with in section A (iv) on Marx above. Here, we will take that condition as a given from which to explore three issues current in the Australian labour market:

- work and social life;
- dignity and service jobs;
- work for the dole.

i. work and social life

The demands made by longer or faster work patterns on family life are at the centre of much current commentary. The effect of tired parents and over-worked teachers on children has multiple dimensions. For instance, kids diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder may be presenting clapped-out adults with no more than normal energy levels. The grown-ups need sleep more than the infants require Retalin.

Family and social life overlap but they are not the same, especially when more people are childless or living alone. Greater demands at work are reducing its capacity to provide pleasure at the workplace or after hours. The changed patterns of employment as documented by ACIRRT in *Australia at work* confirm why paid work is less satisfying in terms of out-of-hours fulfilment:

- to lose one's job is to be cut off from one's social circle because one has less money to spend and because those who have retained their jobs are reluctant to be in one's company, either out of survivor guilt, or for fear that they will be contaminated by the "pink slip" virus;
- longer hours reduce opportunities for social contact at work and out of hours;
- flexible hours for part-time casuals can have the same effect because they are not at one site long enough to take meal-breaks together, and thus to get to know each other;

- acceleration or intensification of tasks for permanents can bring the same outcome;
- lay-offs can pit workers against each as well as unite them against the firm;
- labour-force churn can teach workers not to invest too much into work-based friendships because they are more likely to be short-term;
- shifting between employers during a working life disrupts the maintenance of work-initiated friendships.

In the face of these negative experiences, a majority of employees polled in 2001 continue to place satisfying work and getting along with co-workers as the most important factors in “making work a positive experience”. When recognition of effort and control of the work process are added, the fraction reached two-thirds.⁹⁸

Another factor disrupting social life is the extra time taken to travel to and from work. Most travel is in private vehicles which gives almost no chance to socialise, or it is in government transport which is uncongenial for social contact. In addition, the trip is fraught with traffic jams, road rage or a run-down in the tax-funded infrastructures.

ii. *Service jobs*

Hospitality courses promise careers in an industry where 90 percent of certificated cooks quit within four years. Table-staff are stuck in low-paid dead-end jobs with small likelihood of union coverage. Alienation in the service industry is ritualised as “Have a nice day” and first-name approaches to total strangers.

The impact of the spread of service jobs on fulfillment at work is more acute in Australia which has no culture of service, unlike Japan and parts of Europe. Instead, both customers and staff endure the “what-the-fuck-are-you-doing-in-my-restaurant” style of waiting on tables. Yet service can be dignified, as European waiters demonstrate. In Australia, the conflict between the dignity of such labour and our democratic temper brings about a disinclination to call anyone “sir” or “madam” – “mate” or “dear” are more likely.

Two expanding areas of employment are hospitality and computers. At first glance, an espresso machine seems remote from a PC, the one requiring rudimentary skills and offering little hope for meaningful work, and the other sophisticated and

⁹⁸ *Beyond flexibility: skills and work in the future*, ACIRRT & RCVET, Sydney, 2001, p. 39.

profitable. Pride in work is not inherent in the operation of either machine but depends on the culture of production. The screen jockey can know little of the satisfactions that a coffee-maker gains from a following of addicts.

A 1997 investigation of the vacancies in Western Sydney reported that a fifth were for five low-skilled and service designations. The vacancy levels indicate the unsatisfying nature of those slots more than to a surplus of opportunities or a lack of operatives. Long hours and low pay make it hard for those who take such work to improve their prospects by training in their own time.⁹⁹

Is dignity possible for all? Or is dignity a feature that discriminates, and thus is incompatible with equality and fraternity? This difficulty leads to a criticism of socialism since no social order can dignify the most menial jobs. Professionals thinking about fulfillment in the workplace too readily suppose a universe of other professionals, or at least, of skilled craftspeople. As a minimum, we should uphold the 1908 refusal of Higgins J to “make an award on the basis of conditions which are unnecessarily unwholesome or degrading – in other words, to treat ship-owners as entitled to purchase the right of treating men as slaves or as pigs”. (2 C.A.R. 60) The payment of “dirt money” indicated that the exchange of lucre for physical degradation continued. Enterprise agreements are reproducing the assumption that workers should be prepared to trade any aspect of their lives for more cash in hand.

One solution to the least creative jobs has been to abolish the activity, as in case of shit-carters who were replaced by sewerage systems. The labouriousness of garbage collecting has been eased by trucks that pick-up the bins, but the contracting out of their work has increased the pace at which they must move through the streets. Nothing is gained by relabeling their positions as “sanitary engineers”. Their standing could be advanced by giving them an active role in environmental protection. Such adjustments will be marginal until the value given to all work takes over from forced consumption as the centerpiece of our culture.

This repositioning of work in general and of particular jobs will be essential in securing the dignity of labour. Nonetheless, an ethic of service distinguishes socialism from the cash nexus with which the expansion of capital infects every human relationship. Improving the workload and pay of nurses and teachers should be in

⁹⁹ *Beyond Flexibility*, p. 43.

addition to the respect that they earn for seeking those jobs, and for being prepared to go the extra mile to assist patients and students.

iii. *computers*

...since robots can't be programmed to behave like people, people will have to learn to behave like robots.

Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (2001)¹⁰⁰.

Human beings have reshaped human nature by extending our capacities and skills through the invention and application of tools and machines. Our “species being” now includes these techniques. Capital’s expropriation of those means of production was an assault on that expanded “second nature”. John McMurtry explained that the property relations of capitalism divided labourers from themselves, perpetrating a psychic and physical dismemberment which is prior to any tedium at the point of production, or fetishism regarding the extraction of surplus value.¹⁰¹ Bertell Ollman argued that, because the institution of private productive property arises through the expropriation of values, this accumulation becomes the departure point for ever more expropriation and hence for spirals of alienation in every sense.¹⁰²

Carpenters once asserted control over their work processes by supplying their own tools, and chefs still bring their own set of knives. Nowadays, the tools that the specialist carries are more likely to be mental, as with computing skills. Yet their innovations are copyrighted to their employers. Although the applications can be flashed around the planet, they are no longer portable by their makers. A patent exists over even the instructions “Click” and “Double Click”. The promise of democratisation via the net confronts its monopolising under Microsoft. For many workers in Information Technology, their job means a sweatshop assembly line or in a Call Center, which, in terms of creative work, is hardly an advance on the pick and shovel.

The *Arena* thesis about the tensions arising from the management of the intellectually trained is worth reconsidering in relation to the IT workforce. One

¹⁰⁰ Herbert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 101.

¹⁰¹ John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1978, p. 64.

¹⁰² Bertell Ollman, *Alienation, Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1971, Chapter 24.

difference is that more computer operatives are involved in creating the skills that they analyse than were the intellectually trained of the 1960s. Contempt for non-computer literate bosses is also greater.

If competence on screen is inscribing a visual literacy as creative as that brought by the print revolution, the long hours of video play or net surfing are suggestive of a desire for fulfillment that paid employment does not deliver.

iv. work for the dole

Even if the jobless benefit equaled average weekly earnings for ever, with no social stigma attached, the benefits from getting the unemployed to work would remain. In resisting the wage-cutting and victim-bashing involved in the government's work for the dole, we should never surrender the demand that everyone deserves work that is fulfilling. The case for working for the dole rests on the social benefits from work, not the reduction in tax outlays. Indeed, we should pay more to buy the jobless the civilising effects of work.

Employment Minister Tony Abbott, for example, attacks those among the unemployed who are reluctant to abandon their homes in order to sell themselves hundreds of miles from their families and friends. Minister Abbott thus assumes that labour is a commodity with no ties to place or kin, and with no investments in housing. This attitude comes from a spokesperson for a government which simultaneously deploys rhetoric about 'the family as the best social welfare system ever devised' to claw back anti-discrimination laws.

Mutual obligation should be turned back against the government. Many of the jobless have already paid for structural adjustments on behalf of the economy. How about putting a price on what the unemployed have lost so that others can gain? Restructuring and deregulation hit the poor in the bush, thereby further disadvantaging Aborigines. The closure of railways to reduce the indirect costs from government to the corporate sector, and the withdrawal of government and corporate services, took away both career opportunities and menial labour. The meat workers, who lost their jobs with the closure of abattoirs to allow for the live sheep trade, have paid their dues. The moral imperative is on the corporations to meet their obligation towards the employees who have had their future blighted by the devaluation of regional housing stocks and the disappearance of prospects for their children.

Tony Abbott is right to say that the state cannot make us happy. But governments can install circumstances which makes us more or less so. Grief at loss is inescapable. Welfare benefits, however, can make those sorrows easier to bear, emotionally as well as materially. The intractability of the human condition is not a reason for making more people even more miserable.

Conclusion: Abstract capital

The political purpose behind this working-paper has been to explore concepts that could contribute to the labour movement's getting around its current impasse. The survey has been both conceptual and historical but always intended to illuminate the current and the concrete. Those criteria cannot be met unless our primary focus is on the constants and dynamics required for the accumulation of capital. Its illogic marks out the field in which its critics must make our challenge. Those rules are more inexorable than rational.

Young unemployed males in rural South Africa are assassinating male witches whom they accuse of creating zombies to take jobs from the living.¹⁰³ Before lamenting this violence as a relapse into barbarism, we should consider the simultaneous spread of superstition into the elites of the most technically advanced industries. One.Tel's managing directors employed a *Feng shui* master to decide the purchase of office accommodation.¹⁰⁴ The leaders of Wall Street explain their speculative behaviour with quantum and viral analogies.¹⁰⁵

Before the market came to dominate societies, economies relied on the sale of Commodities for Money with which to buy more Commodities (C-M-C). Capitalism involved the advancing of Money to purchase Commodities for the expansion of Money (M-C-M+). In the 1990s, a larger than usual segment of capitalism careered onto a fast lane where Money is exchanged for Money to accumulate more Money (M-M+-M++). With the deletion of commodities other than money itself, the system is left without a reality check. As a response to this leap into the unknown, gambling on derivatives appeared as rational for mutual fund managers as playing the pokies was for the unemployed. The New Economy is based on intangibles, such as brand identities, valued at tens of billions of dollars, but which accountants are reluctant to

¹⁰³ Jean and John L. Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming", *Public Culture*, 12 (2), Spring 2000, pp. 316-17.

¹⁰⁴ *Bulletin*, 12 June 2001, pp. 46-47.

enter into balance sheets.¹⁰⁶ The logic of this higher stage in the fetishism of capital is more than ever beyond the comprehension of its operators.

Since Marx began his commentaries on alienation as a critique of fetishism, it is appropriate that this discussion paper should have come full circle. After 170 years of capitalist ratiocination, its spokespeople are again waltzing in treacle. An explanation for their slide back into metaphysics is also to be found in the young Marx:

All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.¹⁰⁷

The key to our escape from the confusions required by the market economy is through work in its many splendours and miseries.

¹⁰⁵ *Fortune*, 6 July 1998, p. 208; 25 May 1998, p. 46.

¹⁰⁶ *Fortune*, 26 April 1999, pp. 206-8.

¹⁰⁷ *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 5, p. 5.