

Book Review

Working Poor

Books Discussed

William M. Epstein

Welfare in America: How Social Science Fails the Poor Government
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

James Rinehart

The Tyranny of Work: Alienation and the Labour Process, 3rd edition
Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada, 1998.

Eric Schragge, ed.,

Workfare: Ideology for a New Under-Class
Toronto: Garamond Press, 1997

Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly

Work Under Capitalism
Boulder: Westview Press, 1998

Andrew Jackson, David Robinson, Bob Baldwin and Cindy Wiggins

Falling Behind: The State of Working Canada, 2000
Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2000

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Accounting for the disparity between rich and poor in a way that both explains and justifies inequality in the distribution of wealth is an important intellectual project for those seeking to legitimize their economic dominance. Though not often made the explicit subject of philosophical treatises or political pamphlets, the celebration of greed subtly informs diverse aspects of popular culture from commercial advertising to the school book industry, from professional sport to university-corporate partnerships.

My own first lesson in economics is a modest case in point. It was, I think, in grade five that I was compelled to read a tale featuring no less a tycoon than John D. Rockefeller. As I recall it now (about 45 years later), the story described a confrontation between the oil magnate and a humble worker. The worker had the cheek and impertinence to criticize Rockefeller for having so much while others had so little. For his pains, he was treated to a lecture in which the millionaire explained how his fortune was invested in industries that performed the socially useful tasks of providing goods for the marketplace and jobs so that people would have the money to buy them.

Capitalism was thus "spun" as an especially worthy form of philanthropy. The leveling instinct of the poor worker, who had stupidly suggested that Rockefeller share his wealth, was shown up

as socially useless. Rockefeller ended his argument by saying that he could indeed give away his fortune in equal parts to all and, in that case, he concluded: "Here is your portion, eleven cents!" Thus was I inoculated against the foolishness of socialism, whether expressed in the Sermon on the Mount or the propaganda of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, soon to become the NDP.

Other discourses on inequality are available. Anticipating genetic determinism, late 19th century sociologist Herbert Spencer surely supplied one of the nastiest when he appropriated a specious form of Darwinism. Spuriously applying the phrase "survival of the fittest" to the analysis of wealth, he deduced that poverty was the product of inherited characteristics, and urged the termination of all charitable efforts to relieve suffering and starvation. Our species was being corrupted, he reasoned, because the weak and heritable qualities of the poor (who, of course, breed like rabbits) were being allowed to multiply while those of the well-to-do (who responsibly limit their progeny) were being swamped in an increasingly degenerate "genetic" cesspool. Allowing the poor to multiply would destroy us; by allowing them to die off, our species would be saved.

Only slightly less mean-spirited and just a little less pessimistic was the "culture of poverty" theory that emerged in the mid-20th century. It explained intergenerational poverty in terms of the passing on not of bad biology but of bad social psychology. Poverty, it was said, persists because the children of the poor are deprived of the "values" that would help them break the pattern. Whether poverty was attributed to "genes" or to "memes," however, the primary lesson was plain: the explanation of economic distress was to be found in the life or the life world of the afflicted individuals.

The implications for social policy were clear. Those without compassion could legitimize their privileges on the ground that they were inherently superior folk. Those who felt sorry for the impoverished could develop programs to help a few deserving individuals climb out of their attitudinal holes and join the respectably employed. Thus, both the hard-headed and the soft-hearted found theoretical solace; as for the poor, they generally remained poor.

Today, the related problems of the explanation and justification of wealth remain, but the matter has become more a bit more complicated than in even the recent past. The place of work in the contemporary world is ambiguous. As we move inexorably from the modern to the postmodern, from the industrial to the postindustrial, and from the literate to the postliterate world, what pass for traditional values are sometimes celebrated but sometimes scorned.

Thus, although putative conservatives still speak of the work ethic and its absence when accounting for wealth and poverty, the ever-changing nature of the "new economy" renders many other traditional values obsolete. Loyalty to an employer, for instance, makes little sense when workers are expected to abandon the prospect of a life-long career with a single firm.

What, then, *does* lie at the root of poverty? Why have decades of ostensible increases in state assistance to the poor not significantly improved their lot? What Americans once called the "War on Poverty" has not been won, not even during the last decade of tremendous economic growth. No small amount of money has been tossed at the problem of poverty, yet the poor remain relentlessly and sometimes desperately poor. Each of the five books under review here

contributes in its own way to a reconsideration of what is genuinely at issue when talk turns to poverty and to what we nicely call social stratification, but which we might better understand as social class. Each helps clarify changing social relations in an economy in transition.

William Epstein's *Welfare in America: How Social Science Fails the Poor* is a well reasoned methodological critique of the work done by social scientists and policy experts to analyze poverty and provide empirically testable recommendations for its amelioration, if not its elimination. While reading it, I was reminded of a short paper of perhaps five or six typewritten pages that I have long since and regrettably misplaced. Its author was Martin Nicolaus, later to become a justly famous scholar and the first translator to produce a complete English edition of Marx's *Grundrisse*. In 1968, however, he was an aspiring academic with an "in-your-face" attitude. The paper was disarmingly entitled "Remarks at the A.S.A. Convention." It was, as I recall, delivered at a plenary session of the American Sociological Association in Washington DC, and Nicolaus pulled no punches. He accused his elders of being sycophants in the paid service of the establishment, of acting as the intelligence agency of international capitalism, of reporting back to the state on the poor - their conditions, their ideas, their contemplated actions. Moving through tenement houses and slums, he accused sociologists of keeping tabs on the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat. Sociological research was nothing less than a compendium of reports on the class enemies of the prosperous. Disguising themselves in the rhetorical pomposities of official liberalism, sociologists were double agents. Seeking and often winning the trust of the downtrodden, they offered occasional recommendations to Congress that the poor be treated with a little more compassion. Their tenderness was occasionally rewarded by such innovations as food stamps, but unbeknownst to the poor, food stamps were given as part of a cynical three-way deal. The poor got modest entitlements, the academics got generous research grants and the government got social scientific data on alienation, anomie and any indication that people were paying attention to anyone from Malcolm X to Stokely Carmichael to Frantz Fanon to (who knew?) maybe even Herbert Marcuse. J. Edgar Hoover did it with wire taps; sociologists did it with surveys. The War on Poverty (an essential component of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society") provided material benefits to all concerned, until it was eclipsed by a contemporaneous war in Southeast Asia.

Epstein makes the same point as Martin Nicolaus. He does so, however, without the flamboyance of a petulant pamphleteer. He does it with deliberate attention to detail and to what he finds to be not so much the political betrayal of the poor, but the failure of opportunistic and largely incompetent social science to come to grips with the reality of poverty. *Welfare in America* has elsewhere been described as a systematic challenge to the "conservative's vain hope that neglect is therapeutic for the poor, as well as the liberal's conceit that a little bit of assistance is enough." It is this and a good deal more.

Epstein carefully dissects the fundamental assumptions behind the right wing tradition of crusades against moral decline and its support of voluntary, non-government, non-cash responses to social need. Recent examples range from Nancy Reagan's hilarious "Just Say No to Drugs" campaign to President George W. Bush's current attempt to turn governmental responsibilities over to religious organizations in apparent defiance of the US Constitution's insistence on the division between church and state. Replacing state welfare with a crudely enforced tithe on all citizens is an initiative that postdates Epstein's book, but he does provide successful deconstructions of earlier conservative discourses, especially Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles

Murray's notorious anti-welfare tract *The Bell Curve* (1994) - a polemic that stopped just short of embracing eugenics - and L. M. Mead's *Beyond Entitlement* (1986) which denounces "permissiveness," attacks the "elitism" of people like John Kenneth Galbraith, and zealously denies that there is a problem of poverty that cannot fully be explained by elucidating the flawed "human nature" of the poor themselves.

Liberal social engineering fares little better. If conservatives base their arguments on some variation of the theme of "sin," liberals try to use tricks analogous to those of medical science when it tries to treat symptoms without caring to understand disease. Focusing on the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin, originally funded as the lead agency in the US government's official War on Poverty and later sustained by grants from philanthropic organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the IRP has produced work that, Epstein acknowledges, "is consistently among the best scholarship that the applied social sciences, especially economics, have produced." Alas, the best is just not good enough. Even after decades of study and the production of innumerable reports, R. H. Haveman, one of IRP's leading economists admits, "the only clear conclusion is that inequality can neither be simply explained nor easily partitioned among its various sources."

Despite the sophisticated models of econometrics and methods of operations research, Epstein notes that the IRP can do no better than reiterate traditional liberal assumptions that poverty is the product of "structural failures of the American society and economy, particularly racial discrimination and the differential opportunities offered to various socioeconomic classes." Recent research and recommendations by the IRP call for comprehensive approaches to address "ghetto poverty, macroeconomic strategies for increasing growth, health care reform, creation of public sector jobs, provision of social services, education reform, immigration reform [and] antidiscrimination policies." None of it, however, rests on a social science that meets the test of its claim to provide reliable data, information and knowledge, much less wisdom. Epstein writes: "At its heart the liberal promise claims to identify the essential factors that influence social behavior and to develop programs that successfully short-circuit the many years of deprivation associated with human dysfunctions and social problems." The claim is bogus.

Empirical results, he wisely says, flow directly from their disciplinary assumptions. Economists use rational-choice models to explain how people try to maximize returns, often by opting for welfare when benefits are comparatively high and their earning capacity is low. Psychologists use expectancy models relying heavily on concepts of motivation to relate failure to personal experience. Sociologists use cultural models to show how people are socialized to accept aberrant sub-cultural norms. All three approaches yield empirically verifiable, rational and logically coherent results; yet, all three are different; therefore, none sustain a set of policy recommendations that are demonstrably superior to the others.

Each approach to the study of poverty is rooted in ideological differences that remain untested, and possibly incapable of testing. A legacy of "poorly designed and poorly conducted research in the social sciences preclude[s] any identification of the initial and sustaining causes of poverty," argues Epstein. "Without the possibility of definitive tests," he continues, "the issue of scientific credibility becomes displaced from the methods of the researcher, conflating objectivity and personal motive. Lamentably, the social science community has followed the tunes of the funding sources, permitting intrusions into each step of the research process." Then, in language

different from Nicolaus' angry shouts at authority over thirty years ago, Epstein weighs in with comments about the "shadow government" of private consulting firms, think tanks and policy institutes which advise "funding sources - government, foundations, private donors, and corporations - [that] naturally transmit the preferences of the dominant culture."

His alternative? Epstein declares that contemporary research into poverty "can be read as a generation's intellectual and moral failure to handle grievous social problems - the ascendancy of technique over meaning and professionalism over social purpose ... Recanting a noble vision of society and the common good, contemporary social science cautiously tinkers with existing preferences," he says, while what is needed is a redefinition of the problem. That redefinition must be understood as already existing but temporarily suppressed. "American civic culture," Epstein pleads, "is the nation's most cherished achievement and it requires the deep sustenance of public welfare ... Yet nothing will occur unless the nation dispels its grand illusion that a Darwinian fate operates for the greater glory and social majesty of the United States of America. Destiny," he concludes, "is negotiable."

William Epstein asks social science to recognize that despite drawing battle lines "over even the most incremental of mincing steps to address poverty," in the end conservatives and liberals are merely debating the size of the band-aid to be applied to the cancer. "Liberal proposals," he states, "are simply a more generous version of conservative ones, with liberal politics still refusing to offer deep redesigns of society or the economy."

James Rinehart, in *The Tyranny of Work*, suffers no such inhibitions. Although it is currently unfashionable to enlist even the spectre of Karl Marx in the analysis of almost anything, those who were never seduced into thinking that Leninism, much less Stalinism or Maoism, had much to do with the "Moor," do not find it intolerable to bring some of his insights to bear upon social problems in the 21st century. Among the richest veins in the marxian mine is the concept of alienation. Rinehart, following upon the Harry Braverman's classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, has brought a distinctively Canadian voice to the discussion of the labour process.

He admits, of necessity, that it is difficult to remain optimistic in the era of neoliberal hegemony, globalization and the surrender of even national sovereignty to world capitalism. Still, he says, although "the goals of a democratically planned economy and worker-managed enterprises may seem more remote now than in the past, ... the idea is no less compelling. I continue to believe," he testifies, "that alienation is not inherent to the human condition, that human beings are not eternally doomed to toil under conditions of wage labour, and that ordinary people have the capacity and the desire to govern their own lives - on and off the job."

Work, according to the late American activist Abbie Hoffman, is the only truly obscene four-letter word in the English language. Rinehart (and Marx) beg to differ. Work is necessary to most lives. Work can be physically onerous, intellectually numbing, dangerous and poorly paid. That said, Rinehart understands that work has existential importance far beyond the simple purpose of "earning a living." Why else, he asks, would 35,000 workers in Toronto who earnings are less than they would obtain on welfare, still prefer to hold a job? Why else would 87% of unemployed survey respondents in London, Ontario, say that they would prefer to work, even if winning a lottery put an end to their financial needs?

Work, it seems, is inextricably bound up in self-esteem. But not all work is equal. White-collar work is deemed superior to blue-collar work. Well-paid work is preferred to poorly paid work. Work of demonstrable social importance is seen as better than routine jobs, even though most workers try to put a "positive spin" on their occupations. Citing a US government study, however, Rinehart notes that "what workers want most ... is to become masters of their immediate environment and to feel that their work and themselves are important - the twin ingredients of self-esteem."

When it is not alienated, work provides both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards; the problem with most work in capitalist economies is that alienation is built in to the labour process. In language that is easily accessible, Rinehart proceeds to outline his understanding of Marx's theory of alienation. He sets out three dimensions. First, there is self-alienation. Work should embody human creativity. It should be a means of self-expression and self-development. Under conditions where workers simply sell their labour time and follow the orders of others, the individual is debased. Second, there is alienation from our human essence, the unique qualities that we share as a species and that distinguish us from all other animals. Under conditions where we do not communally participate in the design as well as the performance of work, we are alienated from what is sometimes called our species-being. Finally, we are alienated from one another by artificial divisions which place some in positions of power and leave others powerless.

At a more concrete level, Rinehart introduces the fact that in the labour process, workers lack control over the purpose and products of labour, the organization of the workplace and the immediate work process itself. Alienation, then, is not only a subjective feeling but also an expression of the objective condition of powerlessness. The major contributors to alienation are the complex division of labour, the structure of the labour market and the concentration of ownership and control over the means of production in the hands of a small economic elite.

What remains to be understood is the manner in which this phenomenon and the social relations that produced it evolved in Canada. What remains to be debated is whether or not any other effective means exist to organize the production and distribution of goods and services in a highly complex, technological society. Rinehart may be correct in saying that alienation is not compelled by "human nature." No doubt simpler societies have existed without the encumbrances of social divisions, economic inequity, political privilege and so on; however, it is reasonable to ask if current social conditions are the price we must pay for living in an affluent society, however unequally its amenities may be distributed.

Having set out these theoretical issues and questions, Rinehart plunges forward with a brief but competent history of work in Canada. He brings to the reader's attention a narrative which contains little that is unfamiliar to Canadian historians but does effectively summarize the contributions of such important scholars as Donald Avery, Wallace Clement, Craig Heron, Leo Johnson, Gregory Kealey, Stephen Langdon, Bryan Palmer, Clare Pentland, and Gary Teeple among many others. He then sets out an inventory of both white-collar and blue-collar lives, focusing on contemporary workplace issues, all related to the phenomenon of alienation.

Of special interest is the question of the degradation of work. The industrial revolution had special effects on the skilled trades. Work once done with pride and under the control of the

artisan become routinized in the factory setting. Luddism arose not because workers were romantic machine-breakers eager to bring emerging industrialism to a halt, but because they (handloom weavers) were being displaced and not permitted to share in the material benefits of progress. The discontent of industrial workers eventually found expression in industrial unions, which are now suffering (though somewhat less in Canada than in the US) as structural changes in the labour market take effect.

Today, the focus of work degradation is in the office and even in the sub-professions (e.g., teachers, social workers, health care workers, etc.) whose "defining trait," according to Rinehart, "is an inability to exercise control over their work." Notable developments in public sector union militancy, the articulation of explicitly political aspects of strikes by teachers and health care workers and the unionization of university professors, research scientists and others associated with the "information society" betoken a change in the culture of well educated mental labourers. Indeed, the growing acknowledgement that Law Societies and Medical Associations are becoming more like trade unions than august professional bodies (or old fashioned guilds) underscores what may be an important trend in the privileged workplace.

If alienation is growing among white-collar workers, public service workers and even professionals, what (if any) are the solutions to alienated labour? Rinehart devotes almost a quarter of his book to this crucial question. Amidst all the contemporary hyperbole attending the transformation of industrial capitalism into a new, global economy, a fair amount of attention has been given to new and allegedly improved forms of work organization. The designations (and the acronyms) change regularly but Rinehart addresses several of importance.

First to be addressed is the once popular idea that leisure will be more available and more fulfilling in the new economy. Little time need be spent on this notion. As the Luddites found almost two centuries ago, high technology implies not leisure broadly allocated but unemployment specifically targeted. Today, far from working less, fully employed people are working more. In Ontario, just to confirm some suspicions, the government has made a priority out of introducing the 60-hour work week. This is presented as a measure to facilitate "flexibility," which is a code word for union busting. It arises in part out of "just-in-time" business practices, which require "just-for-a-time" employees.

Organizational change was the next gambit. Worried that unhappy workers could undermine efficiency and profitability, corporations - often with a bow to Japan and the so-called Japanese miracle - initiated a series of strategies to encourage workers' involvement in techniques to improve the "quality of working life." Various methods were used. Some appeared as little more than exhibitions of company cheerleading. Others pretended to share decision making power through "participative management" and "quality circles." Essentially old-fashioned suggestion boxes dressed up in the rhetoric of human relations, these innovations went some way toward reducing the psychological dimensions of alienation but did not alter fundamental power relationships. The right of the workers to be consulted was expanded but nowhere was management's right to final decision making power reduced. Indeed, many workers have been appalled by apparently successful models through which workers allowed their collective union rights to be undermined in exchange for the promise of a consultative process in which management alone made the final determination on every issue. In such arrangements, workers

have commonly assumed much of the responsibility for product quality and worker productivity while yielding collective bargaining power.

The frequent lesson in such innovations is that workers can be cajoled into "doing more with less" by "thinking outside the box" and enthusing about similar clichés. Only, however, when actual control is transferred are objective measures of improvement likely to approach the psychological stroking that is the essence of new managerial practices.

Unfortunately, there are few enduring examples of actual workers' control. Many of these arose in 19th century utopian communities, often with a religious core. Some were by-products of short-lived political upheavals such as the Paris Commune of 1871 or the Spanish Civil War. Even those without radical political content have come about as reactions to stress including the threat of impending unemployment. Canada has seen a number of cases in which workers have developed producer cooperatives, sometimes by starting their own firms and sometimes by buying out their owners when, for example, a plant closure was threatened. Some 600 enterprises - usually small with an average of 50 workers each - are currently active.

Is this a viable alternative for the future? It had better be, for no mere modification of management practices is capable of genuinely reducing alienation; it is inherent in the capitalist mode of production. According to Rinehart, "the antithesis of alienated labour is workers' control." I would go a step further, for Rinehart spends most of his time demythologizing managerial initiatives that produce mainly cosmetic changes and sometimes even worsen the objective conditions of labour by intensifying work, encouraging "snitches," coaxing workers to display better attitudes, minimize conflict and, above all, "have a great day." My "further step" would be back in the direction of Marx. It would be a step toward restoring the philosophical basis of the labour theory of value, recognizing the political importance of exploitation, and coming to the practical realization that, even in virtual economies, the owner-worker relationship is necessarily one of sometimes latent, sometimes manifest conflict. Rinehart makes passing reference to such matters but addresses mainly the hypocrisy of owners and the gullibility of workers. Something more needs to be done.

"What," then (as Lenin and Tolstoy before him famously asked) "is to be done?" What can we do while patiently awaiting the proletariat's assumption of its historical role? (And considerable forbearance will probably be required; after all, minimal preliminary steps must assuredly include the dissociation of the masses from professional sports franchises as objects of deep political loyalty and from watching *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* as a simulacrum of overcoming the gap between wealth and poverty).

One useful project is to deconstruct the language of legitimacy that provides the wealthy with the rhetorical justification for inequality (to say nothing of inequity). The time is surely right for the old aristocratic reliance on "good breeding" to get new life from the political fallout from the human genome product. No doubt someone will find a way to spin DNA into a pseudo-scientific basis for economic disparity. Failing this, there may be a resurgence of reliance upon homilies about the good old Protestant ethic. In either case, demythologizing the inherent superiority of the contingently superior will be worthwhile.

If, however, the future lacks positiv(ist) explanations of economic asymmetry, it will be time for society's winners to accentuate the negative. One illustration of what is in store comes in the form of workfare. If William Safire, former speech writer for US Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew and creator of the phrase "nattering nabobs of negativism," is to be believed, the term "workfare" was coined unaided by US President Richard M. Nixon on August 8, 1969 (see his amusing lexicon *The New Language of Politics* [New York: Macmillan, 1972], pp. 740-742). Eric Schragge of the School of Social Work at McGill University has assembled an admirable collection, *Workfare: Ideology for a New Under-Class*, that goes a long way toward showing the intellectual poverty and the political motivation for this innovation in the provision of social assistance.

Eager to punish the poor for their poverty, neoliberals seek to demonstrate the difference between the "independent poor" (those who have temporarily fallen on hard times but could become respectable with a little volunteerism and, perhaps, encouragement to move to another part of the country) and the congenitally slothful who use their limited ingenuity to figure out how best to cheat the welfare system. By linking the social wage to wage labour (at cut-rate prices to private employers or to "make-work" community projects), workfare performs the task of allocating the poor once again to categories of deserving and undeserving. Structural solutions to poverty are ignored as responsibility is placed firmly on the shoulders of the poor for themselves and for their children.

Before describing Schragge's anthology, let me take Richard Nixon ever so slightly off the hook. Safire insists that workfare, for Nixon, was intended as a genuine aid to the poor. Most welfare laws require earned income to be deducted from welfare payments. What the US president allegedly had in mind was a genuine welfare reform in which the working poor could supplement welfare entitlements with some small additional income while, perhaps, working part-time. The idea was to encourage people to get jobs that might lead to better, full-time employment without unduly penalizing them for their initiative by reducing their welfare cheques. Whatever Nixon's actual intentions may have been (and it took Bill Clinton to make "welfare reform" a priority and a political success), workfare in Canada represents a fundamental change in the philosophy of economic assistance. In part, it is meant to be a component of the overall strategy of deficit reduction and government downsizing; in part, it betokens a change from "passive" assistance to "active" assistance. That change, in turn, contemplates that, except for those deemed unable to work, all other welfare recipients must be forced to participate in work programs on pain of having their social assistance reduced or eliminated.

For Schragge, "workfare, wearing the mask of training, is being used to mobilize the unemployed - the reserve army of labour - to work for either the private or community sectors in conditions far worse than those of the regular workers in those organizations." For private firms cheap labour undercuts full-time (and especially unionized) workers. In the community sector, cheap and underskilled labour offsets the cutbacks to social programs. As Schragge comments more forcefully than I have: "the workhouse as an institution is dead, but as a concept [it] has been reincarnated as workfare."

After a quite devastating overview of the term and its history, Schragge's volume contains excellent accounts of workfare in practice. Capable political and economic analyses of workfare in New Brunswick, Québec, Ontario, and Alberta are followed by a revealing study of its

ideology and efficacy (or lack thereof) in the US. Donna Hardina of the University of California echoes Epstein when she concludes that "there is no empirical evidence that education, job training, job search, or workfare programs are actually effective in putting people in jobs that will help them leave the welfare system."

Workfare, to Schragge, is an ideologically motivated sham. So, his book concludes with a chapter by Jean Swanson, an activist and past president of the National Anti-Poverty Organization. Her contribution, "Resisting Workfare" contains a useful "Dictionary of Social Policy Newspeak" and some needed reminders. She discusses the fact that workfare was made illegal in Canada in 1966 but when, in July 1995, the Liberal government passed Bill C-76, it abolished Canada Assistance Plan "restrictions." Those "restrictions" included guarantees of certain basic human rights. As signatories to the 1976 UN Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, Canada and all its provinces acknowledged the right to employment "freely chosen," the right not to have to work for welfare and the right to income when in need. Then, with no hint nor notice of irony, the Government of Canada chose April Fool's Day, 1996, The International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, to implement its Canada Health and Social Transfer that made workfare perfectly legal in this country from sea to sea to sea.

Jean Swanson also asks pertinent and sometimes almost poignant questions. This is one of them: "Would the wealthy have more self-esteem if they worked for their money rather than inherited it?"

Returning now to the bigger picture, the Tillys, son and father, have produced in *Work Under Capitalism a stunning tour de force*. Part of WestviewPress' "New Perspective in Sociology" series, it is an empirical, critical and theoretical study of the world of work that combines lessons in history, sociology, economics and politics in a splendid synthesis. Unlike most undertakings of this scope, it nowhere indulges in the often pretentious and more often exclusive jargon of professional academia. From the outset, they provide a highly readable text, useful tables and figures containing just enough statistical evidence to be persuasive without being overwhelming. Their task is to conduct a sweeping examination of the evolution and nature of work from a perspective that draws upon Marxist, institutional and organizational insights to explain the social construction of work across space and time. In the process, as the New School for Social Research's Bennett Harrison puts it: "the authors completely and gracefully deal the *coup de grace* to orthodox economic conceptions of work."

Among the reasons why *Work Under Capitalism* merits such praise is the expansive approach that the Tillys take. They are interested in all kinds of work: professional and managerial, white-collar, blue-collar, agricultural, domestic, full-time, part-time, paid and unpaid. They use sophisticated statistical correlations to confirm what Rinehart tells us largely intuitively: people like jobs that pay well, provide access to further training and allow them to have some autonomy in the workplace; people don't like jobs that are insecure, involve repetitive tasks, and entail close supervision. Here it is worth pointing out that some countries (such as Canada) may have their rates of job alienation partly explained by a general tendency to "over-manage." In Switzerland, for example, there are 27.8 workers for every manager; in Italy there are 27; Swedish managers supervise an average of 25 workers; in Germany the number is 22.7. By contrast, Canadian workers can be excused for thinking they are being watched, since there is

one manager for every 7.9 workers; US workers might even be forgiven clinical paranoia because there is a manager to monitor every 5.7 working people!

The Tillys place less emphasis on notions of economic rationality than upon culture, less on behaviouristic motivation than on historical circumstance. The prime determinants of the structure of work and the fate of people within labour markets are sensibly seen to operate at what we conveniently label "macro-level" organizational transformations. So, for those apt to be attracted by the giddy prognostications of big-selling "futurists" from Alvin Toffler on up and corporate mavens from Peter Drucker on down, the Tillys provide some much needed relief.

What leads to the kind of massive changes we associate with things like the agricultural or the industrial revolutions? First, significant shifts in the relative power of different groups of producers and recipients of goods and services (i.e., social classes). Second, the intervention of new actors in the production of use value. Third, the introduction of new organizational models through diffusion or authoritative intervention. Fourth, a notable alteration in the attractiveness of quality, efficiency and power to those who control the means of production.

Such shifts are impeded or prevented by what can reasonably be called social inertia. "Existing culture and social relations," say the Tillys, "both derived from accumulated historical experience, and will continue to limit innovation in organizational forms of production." Accordingly, the future of work will reflect the balance between established cultural practices and genuinely important forces for change. We need therefore not worry much that "low-wage workers in poorer countries will compete their capitalist cousins out of business." We certainly need not think that work will change "because capitalist workers [prefer to] shift from wages to leisure, or because someone invents the ultimate labor-saving device."

What will shape the future? First, the growth of international circuits of capital. Second, the loss of sovereignty of national governments. Third, international migration patterns. Above all, "changing power relations will have larger impacts than new technologies or alterations in market efficiencies." So, since "the character of work under capitalism has always depended on hard bargaining ... future work will continue to depend on struggle - muted, routinized, or openly contentious." Rinehart, it seems, has room for hope.

Hope, however, depends on people understanding their objective as well as their subjective realities. To promote such understanding, it would be well to study *Falling Behind: The State of Working Canada, 2000*. It is a compact inventory of Canadian economic ills. It addresses a number of themes that rarely win space in newspapers and magazines nor time in the broadcast media. Data are provided on the "hollowing out of the middle class," new forms of business organization that intensify work under the guise of employee empowerment, the growing gap between rich and poor, and such seldom mentioned matters as infant mortality. Both domestic and comparative data are provided. So, we may be pleased that US infant mortality is 41% higher than Canada's, but less thrilled that our young children die at a rate 12% higher than Germany's and 40% higher than Sweden's, especially when we remember that our political and economic leaders are increasingly choosing to mimic American rather than European policies and practices.

There is less text in *Falling Behind* than in most books on political economy. Generally, the facts speak for themselves. Its 202 pages (185 if introductory and concluding materials are discounted) display no less than 145 tables and figures. From them we learn that despite neoliberal attacks on trade unions, union men still earn an average of 24% more than non-union men in comparable occupations and, even more impressively, women in unions make 31% more than non-union women. This "union premium" ensures that assaults on labour will intensify as Canada becomes further enmeshed in the global economy.

The measures of growing inequality are also instructive. In the last quarter of the 20th century, middle class families (those earning between \$40,000 and \$60,000 per annum) experienced a decline in constant dollar income of \$3,000. This may not seem catastrophic but the cumulative results are impressive. Combined with income foregone because of the immiseration of the working poor and the destitute, a total of about \$8 billion has been transferred from the lower seven deciles to the top three deciles in terms of annual income.

The book also traces the decline of social income that began in earnest with the de-indexing of family allowances in 1985 and carried on to the federal Expenditure Control Plan which limited transfers to the provinces for health, postsecondary education and social assistance. The Mulroney government plainly reversed course from the previous decades of social program development. The Chrétien government, however, has only amplified the process. Paul Martin's first budget continued cuts, for example, to unemployment insurance; his second, however, was correctly touted as "unprecedented in modern Canadian history."

Slashing the social wage has resulted in special problems for vulnerable groups. One important measure is the number of children living in families whose incomes are less than 50% of the national median. As usual, the US tops the list in disparities with some 24% living in relative poverty. Canada has 13% of its children in this situation. The United Kingdom cuts that rate almost in half with 7% and Germany and Sweden both stand at 4%. In terms of equity, then, Canada has not become totally Americanized, but the trend is clear.

"The greatest burden of poverty," say the authors, "falls on women, whether as single women, as women in families, or as single parent women." Fully 56% of single parent women in Canada live in poverty. The disproportionate number of young adults officially living in poverty is also large and growing. In 1980, for example, 47% of independent young people under the age of twenty-four were poor as were 23% of those between twenty-four and thirty-five. By 1997, that proportion had jumped to 61% of those under twenty-four and 31% of those between twenty-four and thirty-five.

The real problem of poverty, though, may not be poverty itself but hideously unjustified wealth. Looking at family incomes in 1989, Jackson et al. show that the top decile captured 39 times the amount of the lowest decile. By 1997, that number ballooned to 110 times. The rich are becoming shockingly rich and the poor are becoming appallingly poor. The pertinent results of this transformation, of course, include: (a) higher credit ratings for our various levels of government; (b) increasingly repressive legislation such as Ontario's ludicrously entitled *Tenant Protection Act* which makes evictions easier and adds to landlords' ability to discriminate against potential renters; (c) the abandonment of social housing by all levels of government; (d) the

deliberate moves toward two-tier health and education systems. The poor, it seems, will be with us for some time to come.

The books discussed here share common themes. They are all critical (though to various degrees and in various ways) of the political economy of late capitalism. They are all skeptical of public policy initiatives which seek sincerely to help or cynically only to appear to help the poor as individuals and to reduce poverty in general. They are all agreed that social change is unlikely to be managed by corporate, political and bureaucratic organizations whose interests are interconnected. Some changes may be forthcoming, especially those that minimize the most transparent contradictions between our ideology and practice. Equal opportunity, for example, can be promoted since the competitive individualism to which our society pays rhetorical homage can hardly be sustained in the presence of blatant and widespread discrimination. Accordingly, human rights codes and earnest debates about affirmative action programs can be maintained. On the other hand, making competitive individualism fairer by granting equal opportunity will have no pertinent effect on the structural problem of inequality.

If we imagine society as a pyramid-shaped condominium with a few hyper-luxurious penthouses, some commodious dwellings on the next few levels down, an abundance of modestly acceptable units toward the middle, a large number of increasingly uncomfortable spaces as we descend toward the ground, and a growing number of damp, malodorous compartments in the basement, we have a usable metaphor for our society. In such a housing arrangement, it doesn't matter much if – through hard work, skill or dumb luck – a family moves up a few floors. The architecture of the edifice is unchanged.

As long, therefore, as research and consequent political action relies on the study of the virtues and vices of the victims of poverty, as long as we do no more than poke about in society's cellars imagining that its denizens are there through some fault of their own, we will not comprehend that there is no "there" down there, except that which is allowed (nay, required) to exist so that the whole structure of privilege may be built upon it.

Poverty is not a biological problem, nor a psychological problem, nor a sociological problem, nor even an economic problem. Poverty is a political problem and fundamental political change is the only possible source of curative action. Absent deliberate public debate about authentic alternatives and the possibility of deliberate public action to bring these alternatives into being, we will (to reach for a final metaphor) continue to content ourselves with innovations that change the costume on the monkey, while cheerfully leaving the organ-grinder alone.

About the Author:

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