

About Work

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this discussion is a book about work. The theme of this review is the changing nature of work and the serious questions that this change raises for students of public sector innovation. In thinking about how public sector innovators should address questions of work, a paradox immediately arises. The work of research, policy creation, implementation and assessment requires people to be observers and objects of study at the same time.

There is a paradox involved in studying the nature of work. We can see the paradox quite obviously when we consider the plight of theoretical physicists. When they try to inquire into such things as the nature of subatomic particles, they run up against a problem that's been recognized since the advent of quantum theory and the publication of Heisenberg's "principle of uncertainty." This is it: it is impossible to determine simultaneously the location and the velocity of subatomic particles (you can do one, but not both). The problem is that their methods of "observation" alter the phenomena that they are trying to observe.

The world is not only queerer than we imagine, it is queerer than we *can* imagine.
- J. B. S. Haldane, 1927

The same sort of thing happens when anthropologists visit an exotic culture to do "field work." By joining in with the people they are studying, their presence alters the lives of those people. They may expose their subjects to novel technology or interfere with their daily routines just by making them aware that they are constantly being watched. One way or another, the investigators alter, compromise or corrupt what they are supposed to be objectively studying.

Becoming "participant-observers" in the alien communities that they seek to describe and analyze is difficult, but public sector researchers and policy makers working on the theory, development, promulgation and implementation of public policy on the subject of "work" face even bigger problems. Since they are themselves "workers" with subjective awareness and a vested interest in their own jobs, they inevitably see the issues "through the lens" of their own social relations and experiences. Using the abbreviated language of anthropology (Harris, 1980), they combine/conflate/confuse the "etic" (outsider) and the "emic" (insider) perspectives. Or, from another perspective, just like self-medicating physicians and self-advocating attorneys, the experiment seldom ends well.

Indeed, discussing the "talkings" and "doings" of human beings can be even more complicated than inquiring into the structure of the seemingly material world. We share a

community of interests with all those whom public policy affects. We are part of the body politic which our work is intended to influence and to benefit. Whereas physicists and cosmologists can at least pretend to have a kind of “objectivity” with regard to the objects of their studies, working human beings researching, developing, recommending and implementing public policies are obviously implicated and complicit in the problems they address and the solutions they provide. So, I begin with the commonplace but not to be underestimated caution: epistemologically and ethically, it’s complicated.

It becomes incumbent on me to think every time I buy a shirt or a flat of berries, shop at a big-box store, check out of a hotel, or drink clean water from my kitchen faucet. I hope as people read, they will see it’s possible to pay attention. – Annelise Orleck

To make matters even more problematic, in at least one sense, this review can be said to be flying under false colours. *We Are All Fast Food Workers Now* (Orleck, 2018) is a book based on 140 interviews with working-class activists from around the world. Dartmouth College Professor of History Annelise Orleck travelled, as one alliterative advertisement says, “from Manila to Manhattan, from Baja California to Bangladesh, from Capetown to Cambodia” in search of willing subjects. Put in those terms, the result of her inquiries almost sounds like a memoir of a frolicking global adventure on a happy cruise ship. It isn’t.

We Are All Fast-Food Workers Now is an always sensitive, sometimes incensed, and quite remarkably intelligent, insightful and inspirational — but it is not fun. It deals largely, but not exclusively, with low-wage workers in fields and filthy factories. Its subjects also work in low-wage service industries. They perform housekeeping duties in the hotels where the author stayed. Mostly, their lives are remote from the experience of the bulk of professional public servants.

They have in common the fact that they mostly work in unsafe, unhealthy, ill-paid and disrespected jobs. At first glance, their closest link to public sector professionals is that the few public services they receive are threatened by austerity programs. The only immediate question they raise for public sector innovation is how such public services might be better delivered. That’s only, however, a first-glance impression.

The disconnection between public sector service providers and dispossessed or disadvantaged people, however, is not real or, rather, it is all-too-real but it is incomplete. There are important links that go beyond the client-service provider nexus. If I am successful, the links between the fate of garment workers, fruit pickers, taxi drivers, retail store employees and, yes, college professors and public sector contractors in advanced liberal democracies will become clear. So may the moral obligations and practical opportunities for public sector innovation.

Annelise Orleck reveals the personal side, which is to say the surface, of stories that have deep structural connections. She passionately, unapologetically and unrepentantly champions the struggles she witnesses. She promotes the political cause of the people she has met. And yet, as an American speaking mainly to an American audience, she says that the issues she raises are “neither Democratic nor Republican” as though partisans on both sides of the congressional aisle could be brought around to support her cause. She urges “conscientious consumer choice” when

purchasing garments made in sweat shops as though personal consumer boycotts could effect radical change. Sceptics could question the notion that hard-line fiscal conservatives could ever be persuaded by tales told by victims or whether individual consumer choices could seriously alter conditions for farm or factory labourers in underdeveloped countries. These, however, are small quibbles that do not detract from the fact that Orleck's book is well worth reading.

I felt called on in a time of globalization, as an ever-spreading flood of capital transforms our world, to better understand how low-wage workers are starting to resist, to think and act globally as well as locally - Annelise Orleck
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The *larger context* and the consequent *direct connection* to public sector innovation are more important. These parts will be addressed first. I begin with the seemingly obvious, but often deflected observation that work is a human universal, that work is essential to human life and well-being, and that both work's cultural (ideational) meaning and its economic (material) importance are crucial to comprehending pertinent human beliefs and behaviour regardless of when, where and how societies may have been formed. I will first address the meaning of work.

1.

There was a time, not so terribly long ago, when work garnered considerable attention from theologians as well as from employers, economists, sociologists, politicians and, of course, people who actually worked. The lines separating religion, family, work and politics were not as clearly drawn. Lives were more integrated, the division of labour was not as fine, social relations were less fragmented. We played fewer distinct roles and wore fewer hats. We had families and friends, not "support networks." And permeating all aspects of our lives was religion or, at least, a set of shared ethics, morals, values, totems and taboos (call them what you like) — usually associated with common identities, spiritualities, rites and rituals that defined and described us.

In the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, humanity was said to have fallen from a state of innocent obedience through a wanton defiance of God's will by the primeval humans in the mythical personages of Adam and Eve. They had, it seems, an unseemly yen for the knowledge of good and evil, which their Creator was evidently unwilling to share. The prevailing version has it that, as punishment for their insubordination (some call it "original sin"), they and their progeny were cursed. They were expelled and compelled to live by the sweat of their brow, forever toiling to eke out an existence on a despoiled planet that had once been a primordial paradise.

Curiously, the same tradition that saw work as curse has also considered it to be inherently virtuous. Suffering a loss of innocence and being forced to labour was one thing; but, after the deed was done, it was not work itself, but the avoidance of work — "sloth," which included not just abject laziness, but the mere desire for leisure — that compounded and complicated the condition of our species. By these lights, beyond the problems of original sin, we are all at further risk of eternal damnation if we neglect to do our chores. "Idle hands," we are assured, "are the Devil's workshop" (or "playthings" depending on which retranslation of the many previous translations of the holy script catches your eye). So, in time, that awful

consequence of eating the “forbidden fruit” was recommended, especially by Protestant Christians, as a good in itself.

Yet, a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest: and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want like an armed man.

– *The Bible*, Proverbs 24: 34

“Lose no time, be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary action,” said Benjamin Franklin, the consummate American. Indeed, hard work undertaken in practical projects was at the core of the far-famed ethic that promoted north-western Europeans and eventually Americans and other colonials and settlers above those they deemed, in Kipling’s hideous phrase, to be “lesser breeds without the law.” Stern adherence to the doctrine of hard work helped make them the most prosperous and powerful people in the post-Renaissance process that produced mercantile capitalism, industrialism and the high technology that envelopes us today.

Max Weber (1904) was both a primary chronicler and an early critic of the relationship between economic growth and salvation. He understood more than most about the reality of the deeply spiritual sparks in the fire of capitalism as it struggled with and overcame the traditional feudal order before it. He was worried about the fact that our enthusiasm for labour had devolved into the mere desire for the endless comforts and indulgences gained by *homo economicus* in the age of progress. Weber saw that crass materialism was outstripping the spiritual journey initiated by the likes of John Calvin and embodied in the Protestant Ethic, which he had meant to describe, explain and at least partly to justify. We had, it seemed, done so well at atonement for that unpleasantness in the Garden of Eden that we had become distracted from the original purpose of our work. We had made our penalty over into a matter of pride and had come to luxuriate in the products of our penance. Weber’s view is worth repeating at some length:

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today the spirit of asceticism — whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.

Weber, I submit, had already foreseen and had pretty much summed up the twentieth-century; the year was only 1904. As well, I hope I will be forgiven for noting that this paragon of

objectivity in the social sciences and the sociological pioneer most credited with insisting on the distinction between “facts” and “values” did a pretty good job of sermonizing on the moral failings of capitalism in language that might have quickened the pulse of many an Old Testament prophet.

2.

However we may choose to interpret that early theatre of sin, redemption and the crucial role that labour played in it, some of the early pessimism about human nature is still around. So is the frantic need to keep busy lest we fall into bad habits. Our current concerns do not take the form of Weber’s lament about the direction in which capitalism was headed. Rather, they evolved into a debate between what may loosely be called the forces of *Eros* and *Thanatos* as capitalism made its jolly way through the twentieth century. Sometimes the drama was enacted on the academic stage and sometimes on the psychiatrist’s couch, with figures such as Sigmund Freud (for the pessimists) and Herbert Marcuse (for the optimists) holding forth in print and in person on the struggle between deferred gratification and hedonism. Some remnants still persist in enduring debates about “back to the basics” versus “progressive” education or “punitive” versus “rehabilitative” criminal sentencing. One way or another, social issues are often reduced to questions of which should prevail, the repressive “reality principle” or the liberating “pleasure principle.”

And also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God. – <i>The Bible</i> , Ecclesiastes 3: 13
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At times, these long-standing themes take the form of high-minded deliberations within public sector institutions and give voice to competing approaches to the decision making process itself. In 1970, for example, the Government of Ontario, Canada undertook an astonishing array of inquiries into “citizen participation,” repeated Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s invocation of the once youthful phrase, “participatory democracy,” and invited innovative initiatives in citizen-based policy making.

Attentive academics, community activists and inspired public servants commiserated, exchanged notes and phone numbers, and traded giddy reflections and somewhat pretentious explorations into “cybernetic” decision making (all under the auspices of the somber sounding Committee on Government Productivity”). Subsequently (about 1980), an equally idealistic enterprise gained energy under provincial offices dedicated to improving the Quality of Working Life. And, finally (by about 1990), government task forces looked into dysfunctional management-labour relations in the province’s colleges and recommended massive administrative reform under the slogan “participative management.”

None of these initiatives had significant lasting effects as less adventuresome governments or increasingly vengeful governments put an end to such whimsies; however, although none had enduring tangible consequences and although their detailed work is now no doubt stored in secure lock-boxes in the tombs, I assure you that rehearsing the dismal results of these initiatives is not meant to discourage potential innovators. Quite the contrary, the simple

fact that such notions were once semi-seriously floated should encourage anyone who is prepared to argue that the time might be right for another attempt.

Returning to Weber's era, it is worth remarking that, a scant century ago, the issue of morality and leisure time was already grabbing the attention of sociologists and others eager to assess the implications of the multitudinous "labour-saving devices" that were the stuff of both the production and consumption of goods.

For progressives — capitalist and socialist alike — innovations in the social organization of work and improvements in industrial technology betokened an age in which the lifting of the "curse" and the delights of an enlightened world seemed like agreeable possibilities. The prospect that reason would replace superstition, freedom would assert itself over tyranny, science would conquer superstition, health would push back disease and prosperity would become more widespread than poverty had been the established legacy of the European Enlightenment. People had long hoped and expected that human potential would soon be achieved. And, indeed, there are eager visionaries seeking to adopt the Panglossian mantle and enriching themselves by promoting such buoyancy today (see, for example, Pinker, 2018).

For even when we were among you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.

– Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians 3: 10

So optimistic were the Victorian proponents of inquiry and industry, however, that Ernest Renan, reputedly France's greatest mid-nineteenth-century historian, confidently predicted in 1857 that all the main questions of science would be answered by the turn of the twentieth century and that we would reap, individually and collectively, the ultimate benefits of this newly acquired knowledge by means of its energetic technological application. And remember, this was all before telephones, electric lights, automobiles and indoor plumbing. It was also before Pasteur's germ theory of disease, Bohr's theory of the atom, Einstein's theory of relativity, Planck's quantum theory and the discovery of the structure of DNA — never mind the immense gallery of subatomic particles, black holes, dark matter and the ever-impressive evidence for the now-prevailing Creation story — the delightfully described "Big Bang."

Nevertheless, throughout the European-led age of improvement and despite the addition of iPhones and apps to our communicative toolkit, science and technology have failed to eclipse the question of human nature — socially, morally or theologically. Many people still put up fierce resistance against reason and responsibility in politics, public affairs and public policy. After all, depending on which public opinion polls we choose to believe, between 50% and 70% of Americans (citizens of the self-proclaimed and indisputably greatest technological empire to date) do not "believe in" biological evolution and retain faith in either Biblical literalism or "intelligent design" (also known as "Creationism-lite") to say nothing of anthropogenic global warming and climate change. However we may conceive of them, "religious" issues — elastically defined — have certainly not disappeared. Indeed, in some parts of the world, including Mali and Mississippi, Iraq and Indiana, it is apparent that attitudes among so-called "fundamentalists" may be hardening.

The apparent primacy of deep-seated matters of faith is important. They form the foundation of people's attitudes toward an entire range of issues from the most intimate personal attitudes toward the meaning of life to the most general principles of public policy. So, deep-seated attitudes and "gut-level" judgements also flavour our attitudes toward work, as an economic activity, a social value, and a standard according to which we assess the moral worth of others. These foundational norms continue to tax us and to invite an interpretive and potentially disruptive dialogue about what work deeply, truly and maybe even "ontologically" *is* — other, of course, than what Bertrand Russell (1932) said it was. "Work," he explained, "is of two kinds: first altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first," he noted, "is unpleasant and ill paid, the second is pleasant and highly paid." The impish sage was not entirely wrong.

The promise of technology, articulated from the seventeenth century to our own, is to liberate humanity from the curses of famine, sickness, and ignorance, to accommodate our lives with the riches of the world, and to do all this in the powerful and systematic way that modern science opens up. Has the promise been fulfilled?

– Will Griffis, 1989

Few, however, regard work with Russell's cool detachment. When, for example, he combined his arid and impartial sociological tenor with his scathing and satirical moral tones, Thorstein Veblen set a high standard for critical timbre in his social critique of "conspicuous consumption" in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). A stereotypical Scandinavian cultural precursor to Garrison Keillor's denizens of "Lake Wobegon" (1985), Veblen disdained the ostentatious displays of wealth on the part of the already idle and apparently parasitic upper classes as they luxuriated no longer in castles, but in summer mansions in Newport, Rhode Island. Meanwhile, as early as 1920, an MA thesis had been accepted on the post-World War I "problem of leisure" in Lawrence, Kansas (Pearson, 1920). The fear was that technology would relieve us of the need to work and we might not know what to do with ourselves other than to compete in the collection of shiny objects or, worse, descend into debauchery.

As a result, the regimentation of free time and the measured support for the psychological benefits of "play" had become topics of polite conversation and legitimate inquiry among people personally or professionally involved in community planning and recreation management. Then, shortly after World War II, one of America's more prolific science fiction novelists, Kurt Vonnegut, produced *Player Piano* (1952). It provided an exploration of the dystopian post-industrial future that he had conjured while working for the General Electric conglomerate in Schenectady, New York. The curse may have been lifting, but a technologically-induced, market-driven restoration of the Garden of Eden was not guaranteed. Utopias and dystopias competed then and even more intensely compete today — via Alibaba, Amazon, eBay, Expedia, Netflix, Uber and endless start-ups and fall-downs in the virtual world of online commerce — for our attention.

We have now had a century to mull over the effects of technological and organizational innovations from "Fordism" and the mass assembly lines so beloved by Herbert Hoover, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, to the pervasive, invasive and ubiquitous social media. We are experiencing surveillance by corporations — both foreign and domestic and both private and

public (assuming for the moment that such distinctions remain meaningful). And, on the fringes of our sanity, we are invited to ponder the perils of global cyberwarfare that could disrupt air traffic and wireless communication, distort or dispose of our emails, income tax and ballots cast at our next referendum, plebiscite or presidential or parliamentary election — never mind our next Internet purchase or romantic connection on a big data dating site.

We are experiencing technological change at what's commonly though seldom correctly called an “exponential” rate. And yet, we are only now coming to grips with the dominant (post)modern trends as they affect us most dramatically where we live and work — also increasingly a distinction increasingly without a difference. The changes from wood stoves to microwave ovens and from steel-nibbed pens and inkwells to the Internet, as well as the rapid developments in nanotechnology engineering that are constantly rebooting, rejigging, rebranding and occasionally truly revolutionizing everything from “smart” phones to cancer treatments may be what drive the techno-narrative, but sometimes it's good to come down from our fixation on technology and attend to social contexts and the lifeworlds of the people enmeshed within them.

3.

When we do look away from our screens, tools, devices and the patterns of ideology and power that sustain them, it is revealing to pay attention to the enormously lucrative commercial, financial and political elements that frame this dazzling new world. No technology is value-neutral and any that capture our imagination are also capturing a share of some financial or commercial market. It is wise never to ignore this dimension of innovation, whether what's being sold is a new gadget, a new administrative procedure or a new idea.

It is instructive, too, to reconsider primal things to illuminate not just how things work nowadays, but how technology is redesigning the patterns that connect human neurosystems, interpersonal communications, social institutions and what we enjoy calling “intelligences” — whether animal, aesthetic, affective, clandestine, cognitive, evolutionary, military, multiple, or (counter-intuitively and, I suspect, oxymoronically) “artificial.” When we press down into the nooks, crannies, rabbit holes and sewers of psychology and culture, we may feel eerily disoriented, but that discomfort can be a serviceable prompt to open a fresh line of inquiry ... if only to (re)discover that there is much to learn from prematurely discarded traditions.

Apart from the archaeologists and hermeneutists assembling, parsing and interpreting ancient manuscripts, the language of antique scripture is largely in decay, even if the existential anxieties that prompted them are not. So, it is not a horrible idea to revisit the classic texts, if only to use them as a rough cleanser to exfoliate current neologisms, buzzwords and slogans that do little more than paste postmodern labels on obsolete prescriptions, many of which didn't work in the first place.

Likewise, it seldom hurts to turn to an occasional out-of-date radical or mimic (if only in the privacy of our imaginations) and indulge in the therapeutics of revisiting an aphoristic attack on pretty much anything by the hammer-wielding mad philologist, Friedrich Nietzsche or the anarchistic enthusiasms of Emma Goldman, Paul Goodman, Abbie Hoffman or Noam Chomsky just to slice away the watery fat and to interrogate the stolid nostrums of mainstream public

administration journals and the deadly weight of policy proposals, mission statements, accountability rituals, performance indicators and the dismal inventory of authoritative documentation that serve far more as sullen instruments of social control than as innovative instruments of personal and social emancipation. Too often, such texts fail to do more than mask an antique “conceptual framework” with the detritus of last decade’s self-help manuals.

What constitutes the alienation of labour? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased.
– Karl Marx, 1844

We might even consult the unruly voices of two centuries of outsider authors such as Mary Shelley, William Morris, Edward Bellamy, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Harlan Ellison and such fanciful authors of the “post-human condition” as William Gibson (1984), Donna Haraway (1991) and Katharine Hayles (1999). They may have lost some of their mythological awe and edgy excitement, but the themes they address have not. With their help, we can investigate the acutely disturbing and disorienting transition from what Marx correctly identified as “alienation” under capitalism to a more multidimensional and increasingly socially constructed simulacrum of reality.

We could do worse than to start by setting aside our taxonomic conceit as *Homo sapiens* (wise man), and to experiment with some of our other defining qualities. Sometimes, when we were at or near our best, we think of ourselves as *Zoon politicon* — Aristotle’s noble “political animal.” We have also been playful (*Homo ludens*) and we have certainly been teachers (*Homo docens*).

As well, we have, to our mortification, more often adopted the proverb “*Homo homini lupus*” (“A man is a wolf to another man”). In many guises, we have brought it down from Plautus to Hobbes to any number of errant anthropologists and sociobiologists who have called us “naked apes” and claimed that we are governed by the “territorial imperative.” Now, in the still early decades of the twenty-first century, we insist on using it to describe our strategic deliberations in poker, courtship, business and war. I suggest, however, that there is another more commodious door of entry: *Homo faber* or, as I prefer to think of it, “working man.”

4.

Somewhat lost and consciously misled by various lethal ideologies of competition and conflict, we are in rather desperate need of intellectual innovation as a prelude to genuinely constructive thought about our delicate condition. We are poised on the cusp of any number of imminent catastrophes all of which cry out for ingenious public responses. We certainly require a revised vocabulary to help us make sense of the collective culture and the public spaces wherein we might pursue our necessarily social projects. Contemplating our capacity to make our own history, though admitting that we cannot make it just as we choose, we would do well to reflect on our “species-being” as creators, makers and doers.

Work as creativity, productivity and a basis for the allocation of personal and community resources is at or near the top of the list of priorities that must be coherently and thoughtfully addressed. We need to think through the relationships among ourselves, our mechanics, our prosthetics, our extensions and our newly noticed “anthroposphere” (the former “biosphere” throughout which we have injected ourselves in an immense number of noxious ways).

We cannot be eternally content with our unhealthy, inarticulate consensus in service to corporate interests. Time is running out for any kind of palliative, much less for restorative action. So, we must find ways to make our dissatisfaction with conventional “problem-solving techniques” open to honest examination — before the only available answers to our local, regional and global questions are to be found wholly on the cosmic pathologist’s slab.

The first bit of honesty, of course, must come in the recognition that modernity is a function of the beliefs and behaviour of people in a capitalist society. For some reason, capitalists seldom talk of being capitalists in the same way that socialists talk about being socialists, anarchists about being anarchists, or conservatives (not to be confused with neoliberals, white supremacists and the National Rifle Association) talk about being conservatives. It is almost as though they are ashamed of it, or maybe they just don’t want to think about it too much lest its methods, dynamics and its outcomes be too closely scrutinized. In any case, for better or worse, the dominant political economy in the world today and especially in the “advanced” or “developed” world is irrefutably some variation on the capitalist theme.

The current structural changes in the global economy reveal a deepening moral crisis. Capital is re-asserted as the dominant organizing principle of economic life. This directly contradicts the ethical principle that labour, not capital, must be given priority in the development of an economy based on justice.

- Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983

Now, some forms of capitalism are harsher than others. In the alternative, some are softer, more open, and more generous in their treatment of the lower classes and underclasses. Some aspire to a crude social Darwinism while others embrace the ideals of Mussolini’s corporatism—a confluence of private capital, state authority and religious sanction that, he foolishly believed, could restore Italy to the glory of the Roman Empire, celebrate the *fasces* and make the trains run on time. And, of course, some dream of the idyllic era of Adam Smith, when yeoman farmers, artisans and small merchants came together on market day and allowed the “invisible hand” to guide supplies and demands before the legal fiction of the “limited liability corporation” forever replaced the small independent producer with the multinational conglomerate and put paid to the promise of unfettered free enterprise.

Instead, whether speaking of Sweden or South Carolina, Italy or Indiana or, today, even Russia and China, the main elements of capitalism are in place. It is therefore necessary to start with that simple observation if we are to move toward a healthier world. We are, it seems, in what John McMurtry (2013) calls the *Cancer Stage of Capitalism*. We are very close to (if we haven’t already moved beyond) the “limits to growth” (Meadows, Randers & Meadows, 2004).

Confronted with this diagnosis and a generally bleak prognosis, few (apart from McMurtry and other seriously transformative thinkers) offer an immediately obvious, practical therapy.

5.

Traditionally, capitalist society was largely based on the principle that employers extracted the surplus value created by productive workers in the form of profit. In successful enterprises, this meant that the owners thrived and the workers survived. Today, however, there is remarkably little “productive labour” being done at least in advanced societies. So few of us actually *produce* anything to be sold on the open market and to generate profits for the factory, mill, or mine owners that theoretical adjustments are needed if the Marxian tradition is to continue to claim the capacity to provide helpful insights. Even the meaning of “class” and especially the concept of the *proletariat* have been altered. As a result, the ideas associated with its revolutionary historical agency in bringing about the collapse of capitalism are in rather serious need of revision.

Every new advance brings with it loss of employment, want, and suffering...to be discharged from work is the worst that can befall the operative. And what a dispiriting, unnerving influence this uncertainty of his position in life...must exercise upon the worker, whose lot is precarious enough without it! – Friedrich Engels

In “late capitalism,” as Braverman (2001: 292) properly put it, the two masses of productive and unproductive labour need not be counterposed to each other. They form a continuous mass of employment which, at present and unlike the situation in Marx's day, has everything in common.” This realization is crucial for public sector workers both in the tasks that they perform and in their own situation as employees of the state. It is also essential if we are to understand the emerging configuration of work and the common interests of those who perform it. The explicitly political consequences are surprising.

... in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening and criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. – Karl Marx, 1845

Whereas Marx dreamed of liberating the essential creativity of humanity under circumstances that would allow us to choose freely the work we most enjoyed and to do it in conditions that were under our control, more recent writers have come to warn us of the crisis in self-worth that comes when young people are advised that there is no longer secure and satisfying work to do at all and that they are now subject to the vagaries of the newly normal “gig economy” with little expectation of the kind of careers and pension benefits their parents and grandparents had won through trade union organization and collective action. “Job churn” is the term Canadian Finance Minister Bill Morneau used to describe the defining feature of the future economy; “get used to it” was the advice he offered (Johnson, 2016).

6.

The obvious effects of automation, computerization and robotics are plain for all to see. The consequences are not all demonstrably bad. For example, dangerous and deadly repetitive work in mines, factories and processing plants is being increasingly turned over to machines. Neither can anyone doubt the impact on personal and professional communications. Gone are expensive telegrams and long-distance telephone calls; so, no more need we wait a week or sometimes much more for document delivery through national and international postal services. And, of course, speakerphones and Skype have allowed collaborative deliberations including the mutual assessment of body language between individuals and groups in what we are pleased to call “real time.” Outside the normal work and life environments, we can marvel at technological innovations from delicate remote-control surgery to deep-space exploration. We can see clearly how developments from Clustered Regularly Integrated Short Palindromic Repeats (the CRISPR methods of gene splicing) to the subatomic wizardry of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) operated on the Swiss-French border near Geneva by the *Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire* (CERN) are refashioning the most highly skilled of human occupations and enabling scientific inquiries almost beyond the power of ordinary human imagination. Just as the special effects of cinematographers, animation specialists and computerized special effects artists are taking cinema beyond even the most charming Disney cartoons, “real-life” fantasy has encouraged warfare to go “high-tech” so that soldiers safely ensconced in bunkers can, with a single keystroke, unleash “fire and fury” on suspicious targets and wedding parties a half a world away. (Not *all* technological innovation is admirable.)

At the other end of the job spectrum, prospects may be less appealing. In addition to elevator and telephone operators, shop clerks, lens grinders, bank tellers, tool-and-dye makers, taxi and (soon) truck drivers whose jobs have come under withering attack, there are also health care workers, teachers and even barristers and solicitors who are being marginalized, downscaled and deskilled as algorithms perform differential diagnoses, chat rooms substitute for seminars and legal software packages let us be our own lawyers (perhaps making ourselves fools in the process).

In advanced capitalist countries, chronic structural unemployment and involuntary underemployment are becoming widely recognized as major social problems.

– David Livingstone, 2016

Taken together, indications are that those who imagined that the post-industrial society would provide the dual benefits of shorter work weeks, more intellectually and aesthetically rewarding jobs, and improved remuneration may have been terribly wrong.

Almost forty years ago, “futurist” Alvin Toffler (1980) wrote that human history consisted of three great “waves.” First, the agricultural revolution transformed us from nomadic hunters-gatherer-scavengers into farmers. Then, the industrial revolution turned us into urban, steam powered mass producers. Now, he said, we’re surfing the third wave of information, computers and high technology. He seemed delighted.

Even then, however, critics operating wholly within the liberal tradition in America knew that the dream would be illusory. Braverman (2001) had already traced the path of “deskilling” in industrial and clerical occupations; but, in the mid-1980s, two prescient researchers at Stanford University gave empirical weight to their predictions that the post-industrial economy would lead to increased employment mainly in the low-wage, low-skilled sectors (Levin, 1984; Levin and Rumberger, 1983; Rumberger, 1984).

In addition, education critic Neil Postman (1992) warned not only of the economic decline, but also of the authoritarianism implicit in the emerging corporate and governmental power structures which resulted, not in the promised participative, cooperative, flexible and “horizontal” management-labour relations, but in steadily enforced top-down structures enhanced by quantitative performance measurement and accountability rituals in which the chief beneficiaries appear to be those whose work is to measure the performance of other workers (Jorgenson, forthcoming). And, to top it off, we have the recent summary of events by David Livingstone (2016), Canada Research Chair in Lifelong Learning and Work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, who has made it plain that the current and seemingly permanent job crisis forms a pattern that is directly at odds with the rather rosier picture being painted at the beginning of the post-industrial era.

Daniel Bell (1973) and his many optimistic associates had painted rosy pictures in broad strokes. Their faith in the impersonal economic rationality of market mechanisms was boundless and, if they saw trouble anywhere, it was more likely to be in the more ambiguous area of culture and social values as the ancient Devil re-emerged ever-so-slightly to attend to those gilded-aged idle hands.

7.

A better perspective focuses less on the thematic approach to easily distinguishable historical epochs and idealized *Zeitgeists* constructed by such identified factors as dominant technologies and more on the concrete social relations of work and workers. Organized agriculture brought slavery and the peasantry. Industrialism created wage labour and the urban working class. Toffler’s “third wave” features deskilling and precarious work. This sequence is not (or at least not yet) evidence of a progressive saga and certainly not a linear one. If authentic progress measured in terms of equity and human happiness is to be the eventual outcome of this grand historical narrative, it may yet result from a (probably dialectical) conflict between the rulers and the ruled; for the moment, there is plenty of “work” to be done.

That, at least, is Annelise Orleck’s message in a brilliant new book, *We’re All Fast-Food Workers Now*. The “All,” of course, is slightly hyperbolic, but the idea rings true. So, it seems that Russell’s dichotomy now has a third level. In addition to the ill-paid and unpleasant work on the one hand and the pleasant and well-paid work on the other, there is now increasingly a third kind which is most likely to be a sunset of the unpleasant and ill-paid variety, but also includes some of the formerly fairly well-paid and mostly pleasant or at least semi-professional variety. Agricultural workers, airline workers and adjunct professors commonly suffer insecure employment, exploitative wages, bereft of benefits and with no job security; however, plebians and professionals alike are now all being “told” what to do; that is to say that even the

comparatively privileged work of law clerks, practical nurses, laboratory technicians and librarians are to be undervalued and disrespected; moreover, increasingly authoritarian micromanagerial models are coming into place to supervise these well-educated vagabonds.

Over the past forty years, neoliberal capitalism — the idea that pursuit of profit in and of itself is the highest form of virtue, that capitalism and democracy are inextricable, that maximizing shareholder value is the single most important human endeavor — has devastated our world. — Annelise Orleck

Public sector innovators can learn at least one of two important lessons from Orleck's book. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the current popularity of "populism" (that bizarre brand of billionaire-led working class resentment, ethno-cultural purism, anti-intellectualism, and "big-man" authoritarianism) is a temporary aberration that remains mostly contained in a limited number of countries, the rest of the (post)modern world will have a splendid opportunity. Albeit brought on by necessity, there is now an opportunity to address the imminent social and economic problems of the novel social formation, the "precariat."

We are presented with a remarkable chance to solve serious, complex and interrelated problems running from urban housing, transit and waste management to child care, education, recreation, life-long learning and eldercare. This is not small stuff. Taken individually, these policy and program areas are no less than the building blocks of, at worst, a reformed and modified kind of capitalism. It might resemble something as important as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "New Deal" that is generally credited with modifying the worst effects of the "Great Depression" and setting the stage for the post-World War II era of prosperity. It could be comparable to the rise of the welfare state in Western Europe and elsewhere. It might recollect memories of Lyndon Baines Johnson's aborted "Great Society." For Canadians, Australians and citizens of the United Kingdom, it could seem like a call for restoration of recent public sector losses and further improvements on existing models, a better version of business as usual.

This may not be enough to satisfy the lust for change among the more zealous among us, but it is not *nothing*. For the more ambitious, the current trove of troubles could resemble a "perfect storm." It features potentially lethal hazards of global environmental degradation and the possibility of unprecedented international conflict. Interrelated issues of overpopulation and mass migrations, poverty and pandemics and a reversal of the trend toward democracy and human rights that feeds on religious extremism and atavistic nationalism are all present. As a home for aspirant social engineers and deep-state social experimentation, it provides unique opportunities for crisis management and tonic innovation on all fronts. And, it all starts (or ends) with work — making a living, putting food on the table and doing so in a way that can build foundations for a better society, literally from the bottom up.

Poverty, of course, is nothing new; but the specific kind of poverty being visited on otherwise capable, willing, and often well-educated workers is unusual and challenging. We have already built industrial society out of the remnants of a crumbling feudalism. Is it so unthinkable that we could transform it?

The question is not rhetorical. It is asked in deadly earnest; for also new is the degree to which human labor has become marginal to the financialized economic process (at least in the wealthier countries). So, the amazing productivity and the prosperity that was taken for granted only decades ago must now be rethought. Few now see a serious threat in the problem of finding work for idle hands and filling the days of the thirty-hour-a-week for full-time workers with interesting and socially benign or, better, beneficial amusements. Instead, the problem is how to provide a living wage to people in times when official employment levels are decently high, but larger and larger portions of the population have to work at two or more jobs to make ends meet.

Unemployment is no longer the issue. We have almost full employment in this country right now, but people need two or three jobs to put a roof over their heads.
– Annelise Orleck

The range of options is large, only partly outline, largely explored and in need of speedy research and action. Among the proposed and potentially complementary alternatives are such measures as retraining and adult education initiatives, guaranteed annual incomes, public pension improvements, negative income taxes, improved minimum wage rates, government employment initiatives in infrastructure construction, subsidized daycare programs and regulatory regimes that would limit the ability of employers to keep workers on a part-time, limited hour basis (often with reduced or no benefits or seniority in perpetuity).

Fair wages and fair treatment provisions have, in fact, become a major issue in the Canadian province of Ontario where recent legislation is attempting to compel employers of adjunct professors and Walmart associates alike to offer full-time employment to willing workers within a circumscribed period of time — a measure that is being resisted by retail stores, restaurants, private sector providers of public services such as health and education, and of course reactionary/populist politicians alike. Likewise, fair trade requirements could and should be built into the numerous trade agreements now being negotiated in all parts of the world.

There are at this unusual point in the evolution of advanced political economies enormous opportunities for public sector innovation that could go some way toward ameliorating the circumstances of working people, all within the framework of a mixed public-private sector economy of the sort that imaginative policy makers had in mind before the “neoliberal” revolution swept across what had previously seemed to be a relatively progressive post-World War II political climate. What’s more, in this era of increasingly complex international arrangements (one dares not call it “globalization” in some sectors), the inevitability of world-wide interconnectedness offers a striking opportunity to get ahead of the inevitable economic, social, political and ecological problems that will confront us if innovative thinking continues to be repressed.

The questions of precarious work, employment instability, the absence of living wages for willing workers and the many negative consequences that arise in a desperate population is presented by Orleck, who explains why and how the workforce is being reengineered from the local Walmart to Wall Street and from Cambodia to California. The trend toward precarity is neither ultimately inevitable nor immediately necessary. It is, however, socially and

economically unsustainable. Though it is in the obvious short-term material and ideological interests of the “business community,” it is ultimately debilitating and dangerous for society.

A growing annual-income gap is spurring headlines nationally, with some 70 percent of Americans earning less than \$50,000, 50 percent earning less than \$30,000 and 40 percent earning less than \$20,000. But the economic chasm is felt worldwide as the planet’s 62 richest people hold more wealth than half the remaining 7.6 billion inhabitants.
– Annelise Orleck

Orleck’s argument that the trend is not inevitable does not presume that it will be easily altered. Putting the advantage of people over corporate profits is never effortless, but neither were campaigns for unemployment insurance, social assistance, public libraries, public schools, public pensions, public transit, public health insurance and the like. The nature and depth of the current difficulties are such that an already existing sense of urgency can be turned into the catalyst for a major change in the nature of the public sector — not, perhaps, toward a new balance, but toward a return of an older, more generous and more effective public-private relationship in which “public-private partnerships” no longer mean arrangements in which the public assumes the risk and the private sector reaps the profit.

8.

There are other themes in play. In forty compact chapters Orleck gives glimpses of the slave shops that supply our fashion industries and the fields that produce our food. She reports from many lands about successful efforts to rethink labour unions and to reorganize against irredeemably unfair economic arrangements. And, in the Anglo-American democracies, she is acutely aware that public sector unions are leading the way toward restructuring and repurposing the labour movement, often with teachers in the vanguard and even more often with women-led unions at the forefront.

As I write, university lecturers in Great Britain are striking against unjust austerity measures. In West Virginia, school teachers have just won an historic strike against anti-labour legislation. At York University in Toronto, teaching assistants are striking for livable wages and, it is plain, the University is coming dangerously close to a mutually destructive exercise in union-busting. Last autumn, as well, 12,000 academic employees in Ontario’s 24 colleges struck for five weeks in what may have been the first job action anywhere in which the #1 demand of unionized teachers, librarians and counselors was employment equity for their part-time colleagues. Whether such skirmishes will build to the point at which comprehensive changes will apply throughout the workforce is as yet undetermined and it would be foolish to predict events even weeks into the future. Something, however, is taking place in terms of structural changes in the contemporary mode of production and distribution of goods and services. So, even if current conflicts come to naught, the underlying patterns of change will not disappear.

If readers are inclined to take instruction that will lead to a more active “political” role for public sector employees, or even if they are more interested in better comprehending the issues if only to try to “manage” the possibility of higher levels of active participation in the political process both inside and outside the workplace, this book is invaluable. It is a fine resource for people wanting to understand what’s happening in the world’s private and public sector

workplaces and, of course, an encouragement for those eager to push back against short-sighted ideologues who don't understand that long-term stability and prosperity can't be sustained by ruthless exploitation. Even Henry Ford knew that to sell automobiles, working people needed to be able afford them.

As activists around the world have learned from the US-based Fight for \$15 movement, I would say that US activists have much to learn from the brave workers of South Africa, Mexico, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines about solidarity, creativity, and the refusal to back down. – Annelise Orleck

Orleck's overriding good news is that the "race to the bottom" isn't the only option. It will, however, take courage, commitment and coordination to humanize the callous global economy that threatens as Toffler's third wave crashes on the rocks of economic and environmental vulnerability.

This kind of confluence has happened before when politics, economics and technology precipitated a major mutation in the mode of production of evolving capitalism. Two centuries ago, desperate but ill-fated Luddites demanded that factory owners share the benefits of increased industrial productivity that came from steam power. Working people insisted that the windfall of industrial profitability be shared equitably. The owners refused and dissidents paid for their dissent on the gallows. The current abrupt and enormous transfer of wealth from the working classes and the fragile middle classes to the far-famed "1%" is, however, literally unprecedented in human history.

Divisiveness tending even toward ethno-religious *revanchism*, the aforementioned eagerness for "big man" leadership, an outbreak of irrational resentment and the pervasive sense of suspicion bordering on hostility with regard to government are factors not to be ignored. However, there seem to be equal opportunities for resistance against a reorganized political economy in which power and prosperity are denied and democracy itself is put at risk. As some are happy to say, this is 2018, not 1811. Annelise Orleck provides both a diagnosis and the elements of a therapy that might bring a different and more humane outcome for the shift in workplace relations in particular and social relations generally than some that have preceded us. Imaginative and innovative public sector initiatives might just have the capacity to save liberal capitalism from itself (once again).

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