6 Changes in the experience of work

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In assessing the future supply of labour in the UK, it is important to go beyond aggregated demographic data on the numbers and types of workers available. A 'labour force' is a more complex entity than this, and any discussion of its future shape needs to consider questions of attitudes and motivations as well as rather subtle issues relating to skills and aptitudes (Nichols, 1987). As such, it needs to understand the contexts within which these people are 'formed' *beyond* the workplace, as well as changes in work experience itself. Clearly these interrelate (Beynon and Nichols, 1971) and while this can be demonstrated most clearly in relation to gender issues and female employment patterns (e.g. Blackburn and Beynon, 1992), it is generally the case. For example, in 1980 *The Times* and the Committee for Research into Public Attitudes jointly funded a survey of attitudes towards work which concluded that:

> a whole chain of responses suggests that about one in two full-time workers do not wish to work harder than they do at present, are interested in more leisure rather than extra money and would be hard to get to change their attitudes (*The Times,* 23 June 1980).

This survey suggested that the disincentive to work was related to 'external factors' like the tax system (61 per cent), but also to 'internal factors' like management's organisation of work (54 per cent) and the quality of equipment and machinery (39 per cent).

Technology and change

In 1980 research in industrial sociology had, for a decade and more, followed a path suggested by Harry Braverman in his seminal text *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism* (1974). This book was subtitled 'the degradation of work in the twentieth century', neatly summarising its main thesis. In Braverman's view capitalist economies contain within themselves an in-built tendency to *deskill* labour and regulate it through elaborate managerial systems of planning and control. These managerial structures were themselves a part of the deskilling process as office work became increasingly subjected to routine and regulation – processes which were accelerated by the adaptation of machinery to clerical labour.

Braverman developed his thesis by reference to the writings of F.W. Taylor and other theorists in the tradition of 'scientific management', which he saw to have created the bedrock of job design in the twentieth century. He illustrated the implications of this by reference to a number of industries and work situations in the USA. It was his clear view that labour market demand in the future would be for increasing numbers of low-skilled workers capable of performing routine tasks on instruction. This view was partly supported by a manager of a chemical plant who informed researchers in the early 1970s that the future was one in which there would be an increasing polarisation between 'scientific work and donkey work' (Nichols and Beynon, 1978).

The 'deskilling thesis' had a considerable impact upon research in industrial sociology in the USA and Europe. In fact the response has been termed 'Bravermania', as study after study investigated the deskilling tendency within a variety of different work places (for examples see Zimbalist, 1979; Wood, 1982). Many researchers came to agree that 'deskilling' could be seen as a general historical tendency in advanced capitalist states (Thompson, 1989). However, enough problems were identified (e.g. the role of gender, the analysis of new industries producing new products etc.) and evidence collected (e.g. of 'reskilling' of particular jobs within organisations) to question the effectiveness of the thesis in explaining changes in workplaces and predicting micro-level changes in labour markets. This questioning was intensified by changes that took place in the advanced industrial economies in the 1980s.

The combined effects of information technology and major structural changes in economic organisation saw research in industrial sociology change course. In France theorists of the 'regulation' school (Aglietta, 1979; Lipietz,1987) attempted to link changes in the organisation of work to more general features of economic management and change. They suggested that the growth engine of capitalist economies in the post-war period had been built around social arrangements that could be termed 'Fordist'. These arrangements related to the organisation of work (mass production etc.), changes in consumption patterns (mass consumption etc.) and also to the macroeconomic management of the economy (demand management, income policies etc.). However, by the 1970s, the reaction of workers and labour organisations *within* factories, together with changes in consumer preferences and the escalation of fiscal crises, produced a general crisis for the Fordist system of regulation. These authors suggested that:

> capitalism can escape from its contemporary organic crisis only by generating a new cohesion, a neo-Fordism (Aglietta, 1979).

Other theorists responded to these changes in similar ways. In the USA researchers documented the run-down of manufacturing employment and the movement of industrial activity from the North East (the 'rust-belt') to the South-West (the 'sun-belt'). This process was associated with a major transformation in the nature of the industrial economy and society. Piore and Sabel (1984), in their highly influential book, identified this as *The Second Industrial Divide.* They argued that as a consequence of a number of external shocks (e.g. the oil price increases, the Soviet grain crisis) the system of mass production was put under increasing pressure. These authors contrasted this old ('Fordist') system of production with the potential of a new form which they identified as 'flexible specialisation'. This had many similarities with that outlined as 'neo-Fordism' and 'post-Fordism' by regulation theorists. In the view of Piore and Sabel the 1980s and 1990s represented a period when industrial corporations and national governments faced strategic choices. 'Flexible specialisation' was one such choice. In their view, the erosion of mass markets and the arrival of the flexible productive capacities of new technological systems provided the basis for a new kind of efficiency. Within the workplace robots and computers could combine creatively

with teams of skilled and flexible workers to provide commodities for dynamic 'niche markets'. Such a change would require quite different kinds of institutional arrangements, emphasising cooperation and participation rather than conflict. The assumed role of trade unions within these arrangements was often unclear. At times there was the suggestion that their new form might almost be likened to artisanal and pre-industrial patterns. More generally, in the USA, these new developments have been associated with non-unionism (Clark et al., 1986).

These ideas had an impact equivalent to that of Braverman's writings a decade earlier. Commentators on the political left, right and centre have all expressed positive views about information technology and its effects upon the working environment and attitudes toward work. In this regard the views expressed in *Marxism Today* were not far removed from those of the then Minister of Trade and Industry Peter Walker who talked of new technology delivering an 'Athens without slaves' and they represented a genuine optimism and a dynamic view of the future. They also set a new agenda for research (Wood, 1989), and in linking workplaces to national economic strategies they emphasised the importance of comparative analysis.

To an extent any assessment of how British companies have reacted to these changes must be seen as preliminary. However, the contrast between most research findings and these optimistic expectations is quite striking. New technologies *have* been introduced and, not surprisingly, there has been little conflict involved in this. Daniel has noted the extensive introduction of micro-electronic technologies into private manufacture (31 per cent of all such establishments employing manual workers had been involved in the *new* application of information technology in the early 1980s) and the general lack of opposition to these changes from shop stewards (Daniel, 1987; Daniel and Hogarth, 1990). However, there is little evidence to suggest that these changes produced workplaces characterised by multi-skilled workers, involved in rewarding and satisfying work; or that they have been associated with a marked change in attitudes to work. Generally it seems that the jobs of employees have changed in a number of ways. They involve more tasks than hitherto, often they involve more responsibilities and these could be seen as positive features; however, people seem to be working harder with fewer breaks, and experiencing greater levels of stress (for

an assessment see Elger, 1990). These are important changes but they are far removed from the potential outlined in the models of flexible specialisation and contain within them potential lines of conflict.

New forms of organisation at work

The overall effect of these changes upon the supply of labour and the future of employment patterns in the UK is unclear. In the immediate future, they will serve to direct increasing attention upon the nature of industrial and commercial management and its role in organising economic activity (Scase and Goffee,1989; Streek, 1987; Webb, 1992). The new theories of 'post-Fordism' and 'flexibility' emphasise the importance of labour and the need for management to involve people in decision-making as organisations cope with an increasingly complex and unpredictable world. The failings of British management in this regard were brought out forcefully by Nichols (1987), conclusions which were reinforced in two recent case studies. In a factory in North Wales, 'the workers argue that management do not know how to do the jobs but insist on telling the workers that they do'. A common reaction was expressed in this way:

> when decisions come, most men in my department keep quiet... in the workers' experience, nobody ever listens... so we don't say much now (Jones, 1993).

Similar reactions were found in an automotive component plant in South Wales. Here a major organisational change was introduced in which management estimated that 88 per cent of all the jobs had taken on increasing numbers of tasks and where they required the increasing trust of the workforce. A common response was:

> For eighteen years (this) has been a standard company. If they could kick you in the teeth they would and did. Now they expect trust merely because they ask for it (Trotman, 1993).

On the basis of evidence like this, the President of the Board of Trade's irritation at the annual dinner of the Institute of Directors is understandable. Michael Heseltine asked for 'a clear recognition' that there was a gap between Britain's industrial performance and that of the rest of the world, adding: 'we have a rather too fulsome opinion of our own performance'. In this he drew upon a European survey of companies employing under 500 people conducted by the Cranfield Business School (1993) to emphasise the point that:

> the rest of Europe did not think our managers were particularly hard-working or that our companies were focused on the marketplace (*Financial Times,* 24 November 1993).

This point was developed by Christopher Lorenz, a journalist for the *Financial Times*, who argued that British management (along with the Spanish and Italian) was increasingly falling behind the advanced skills and systems developed by their French and German counterparts. In his view far too many British managers, in large and small companies, are 'ill-trained, myopic and therefore poor learners' (*Financial Times,* 26 November 1993). The complacency which this newspaper associates with British management was highlighted in its pages in an interview with Ferdinand Piech, Chairman of the V.W. Group. In assessing his company's problems, Piech did not blame the workforce but rather the previous senior management team which had 'failed to do its homework'. He emphasised the role that labour could play in the reconstruction of the company. In his judgment:

> It's not the fault of the workforce, it's our western organisation that's wrong. These people are not supplied with the things they need and the means of working efficiently: it's disorganisation – macrocomputerisation of things that don't work (*Financial Times,* 25 October 1993).

The emphasis here upon 'western organisation' hints at the significance of competition from Japanese imports, and more especially from the transplants of Japanese corporations into Europe. The expectation here, in automobile manufacture especially, but also more generally in manufacturing is that the current levels of excess capacity will be exacerbated and the long-term decline in manufacturing employment will accelerate. The implications of these changes for labour markets in the short and medium term are considerable.

Macro changes

Clearly, there have been substantial changes over the last 15 years. It is not clear, however, that the idea of 'flexible specialisation' has been any more helpful than 'deskilling' in seeking to understand the nature of these changes and their impact upon labour forces. Most particularly these general theoretical frameworks find difficulty in explaining significant variations between sectors, regions and national

economies. In Britain the most dramatic changes over the past decade and a half have been associated with the rate of unemployment and with increased insecurity (and 'fear') expressed by employees. Unemployment increased in the early 1980s and has remained high since then. While these changes have had a disproportionate effect upon certain age groups (the young and the over-50s) and people from ethnic minorities, they have affected all social groups since 1990. An investigation by *World in Action* (10 November 1992) into the local economy of Slough (the boom town of the 1980s) highlighted 'the fear that affects every office and shop-floor in Britain'. In a sample of 1,000 workers they found that 9 per cent had recently been made redundant, 43 per cent were worried about being made redundant and 60 per cent expected there to be an early redundancy within the family. The leader of the local Council remarked:

> Everyone is depressed on the borough council... this country seems to be geared up for one thing – unemployment. You can't plan your future.

A year later, a MORI/IRS survey commissioned by the *Financial Times* found that:

> the number of workers who fear they might lose their jobs in the next twelve months rose to more than 50 per cent in December – in spite of last week's sharp fall in unemployment (*Financial Times,* 20 December 1993).

This survey revealed some interesting variations in the pattern of change. In referring to a 'surge' in the increased fear of redundancy, particular groups were highlighted:

> Part-time women workers are taking most of the jobs being created but this group has seen the biggest rise in job fears... The anxiety ratio also rose among white-collar staff and lower managerial staff... possibly reflecting the likelihood of more public-sector job cuts.

The emphasis placed upon fear and anxiety in these polls is important and compounds the stress which is related to the intensification of work itself. In the year to March 1993, Britain's largest 1,000 companies shed 1.5 million workers (*The Director,* March 1993), cutting costs and restructuring their operations. In the

view of Alistair Anderson, managing director of Personal Performance Consultants UK:

> Downsizing in companies has meant that often people have been left ill-equipped and ill-prepared for the job expected of them. This itself creates great stress.

He added that in his belief: 'the demands on the workforce are greater than they have ever been' (*Financial Times,* 8 December 1993).

In the 1970s, the problems of British employment relations were strongly identified with the days lost through strike action. In the 1990s it seems that work-related stress (accounting for the loss of as many as 90 million working days a year) has replaced it. This helps to highlight the ways in which *the most significant changes taking place in employment relations involve an interplay between the labour process and the content of the job on the one hand and institutional and external factors on the other.* Of these, the depressed nature of labour markets; the reorganisation of labour contracts and the related changes in the composition of the labour force; and the changing nature of public sector employment are of considerable significance.

Unemployment and the decline of manufacturing

In Britain, manufacturing and mining industries now employ 4 million fewer people than they did in 1980. Several industries (coal, steel, shipyards, docks, mechanical engineering) have been severely reduced in size, often through the precipitous closures of plant and factories. In the 1990s industrial production fell for three consecutive years and this gave the debate on deindustrialisation an added poignancy. On the one hand, it raises questions of economic survival in an increasingly competitive world; on the other, it asks us to consider the employment trajectories of these large numbers of *ex*-industrial workers.

Most of the industries that declined rapidly employed large numbers of male manual workers throughout this century. Often sons followed fathers into jobs, and occupational cultures developed which ordered working relationships and gave a certain social coherence to particular localities. These industries provided detailed training programmes for their skilled and technical workers, and their managements also acquired industry-specific skills and qualifications. There is some evidence to suggest that all groups in these industries experienced demoralisation, cynicism and negative attitudes to work

and industry as a consequence of their experience of closure and run-down.

Both the steel and coal industries set up 'Enterprise' organisations and counselling schemes to attract new industry and facilitate the re-employment of redundant employees. While these have generally been deemed successful (British Coal Enterprise was recently hired by the Ministry of Defence to assist it in its closure programme), there is little independent evidence to support this. The experience of Corby has been positively evaluated, but the evidence from Ebbw Vale, Shotton, Consett and (more recently) Motherwell is less reassuring. Investigations into the experiences of redundant coal miners and British Coal (Enterprise) in South Wales (Vass,1992; Rees and Thomas, 1991), Yorkshire and nationally (Ennis and Hudson, 1993) are even more disturbing.

The researches of David Wray (1993) in Consett and Marilyn Thomas (1990) in Mid-Glamorgan reveal little evidence of trade-union power influencing the kinds of jobs being made available, or the levels of wages set. Wray quotes one steelworker who, after the closure of the Consett plant

> went for a job that was going for £40 a week. I don't know if they really expected people to actually work for that, but I took it because it paid more than the dole.

In answering critics of its policies a senior member of the local development agency argued that he

> would have to agree that the majority of the firms we have attracted have been non-union and have paid low wages, but we have to live in the real world. If we insisted on trade union membership or high wages before we would help anybody, they would simply go elsewhere.

Yet in spite of this fewer new jobs are being created than expected, and fewer redundant workers are being retrained and moved into new employment.

In the early 1980s Pryke (1981) quoted the views of redundant engineering workers on Tyneside. These men took a very negative view of the future, and of the utility of their engineering skills. While they recognised that they would have to adapt if they were to get a job,they were not doing this with good grace. This process of redundancy, unemployment and re-employment, and its effect upon

attitudes and 'orientations to work', has been a critical aspect of contemporary society, yet it is something which we know all too little about. So too is a consideration of any related downward mobility amongst such manual workers (referred to as the 'K-Marting' of the working class in the USA). At a time when 32 million people are currently unable to find jobs in industrial countries, it would be helpful if our assumptions about how labour markets operate were informed by longitudinal studies of the attitudes and behaviour of targeted unemployed groups.

Labour contracts and the changing composition of the workforce

The old industrial economy of Britain was highly regulated; it employed large numbers of highly unionised workers employed on full-time contracts. In the 1950s workers and managers in these industries had 'a job for life', and, as we have seen, most of these were men, and they were paid what was recognised as 'a family wage'. In Britain today, women make up 44 per cent of the labour force, and only 60 per cent of the jobs on offer are full-time, permanent jobs; almost no-one now has 'a job for life'. 'Non-standard' work contracts (part-time, temporary, home-based etc.) or some kind of 'self-employed' activity, have become the rule, especially for women. The 'family wage', as in coal and steel production, is a thing of the past.

The kinds of changes indicated here can be seen to involve an increasingly flexible labour market which offers great opportunities for employers. Some authors have emphasised the advantages for workers also, stressing the ways in which deregulated markets facilitate people moving into and out of particular jobs, careers and markets. For example, Hakim (1987), and others, have pointed to the benefits which self-employment and non-standard work contracts offer for women to re-enter the labour market. These authors argue for greater flexibility and for employment arrangements to be increasingly loosened so as to permit a range of possible living and working options. Patricia Hewitt (1993) has been most adroit in pointing out unnecessary inflexibilities in working arrangements and the potential advantages that could flow from altering our use and understanding of time.

The arguments here are often attractive and resonate with the discussion of industrial transformation and change within the workplace. Here too, however, the evidence is both patchy and

contradictory. Attitudinal surveys have indicated that women are happy to combine paid employment with the demands of child-birth and a family,(to get out of the house, to meet people etc.). They also show that the need for money (for the independence it provides and the necessary income it generates for the household) is an important factor and that for many women (like men) the experience of paid employment is the source of tension as well as satisfaction. Furthermore, the emphasis upon choice often obscures the fact that, in many circumstances, market and power relations favour employers, and that these changes taken together may well trap some women in low-paid employment rather than liberate them. Certainly this view would be supported by some advertisements in places like Consett:

> we are seeking people who are prepared to work on a casual basis, with extremely flexible hours. We can accommodate from 3 to 10 hour stints throughout the 24 when work is available. Applicants must have very nimble fingers to cope with the work involved, and be prepared to work at 24 hours notice (quoted in Wray, 1993).

Furthermore, non-standard work contracts may be imposed, rather than freely negotiated. This has been the case in the retail sector where many employees have found their full-time contracts revoked in favour of part-time ones. A recent MORI poll of senior personnel managers found that

> More than half the managers believed that the desire to cut over-heads by avoiding the legal terms and conditions due to full-time workers might influence decisions to introduce flexible working patterns (*Financial Times,* 31 November 1993).

Clearly, great care should be taken in interpreting the costs and benefits of 'flexibility'.

Given the failure of the British economy in its deregulated form to generate as many new jobs as its US counterpart, we should hesitate before advocating even greater moves in this direction. This is all the more important given the possibly strong interconnections between employment stability and the kinds of commitment to work which a more flexible production system would require. Here, the words of warning spoken by the Director General of the Institute of Personnel Management at the Institute's 1993 annual conference are of some interest. In his view, 'flexibility' had led to abuse by many employers,

with workers being hired and fired on terms determined by employment legislation rather than the needs of the individual or the dictates of the production process. Such policies were leading to: 'the creation of a permanently casualised industrial peasantry, with little protection and no stake in the future'. In his view, this situation 'can't be in the interests of organisations or society' (*Financial Times,* 31 November 1993). This opinion is reinforced by research into home-working which indicates that the experience of unskilled, less privileged workers is more exploitative than rewarding.

Taken together, these findings raise important questions about the employment rights of workers, and the need for better regulatory practices rather than their diminution. This view is supported by the experience of Citizens' Advice Bureaux across the country where counsellors are increasingly involved in providing advice on employment laws and their abuse by employers.

The public sector

Workplaces, and the supply of labour, are regulated (in part) by normative patterns established by employees in relation to their work. This is perhaps seen most clearly with regard to the public service professions. In many middle-class occupations work behaviour is regulated by a professional association and by informal codes of conduct which draw upon ideas of public service. Undoubtedly these codes have served to develop self interest, but this should not detract from their significance as non-instrumental forms of motivation and regulation.

The last ten years have seen quite fundamental changes taking place within the public service sector through privatisation and the imposition of new external budgetary constraints. These changes have strongly influenced the operation of schools, universities, hospitals, local authorities, the civil service, the BBC and the emergency services (fire, ambulances, the police). In each of these areas there have been similar responses of protest, and complaints about increased work-loads. This was demonstrated graphically at the NUT Annual Conference by a delegate who arrived with the documentation relating to the National Curriculum on a porter's trolley! In fact, strikes in the UK are becoming more and more concentrated in the public sector, and public sector unions increasingly dominate the politics of the TUC.

This change is mainly related to the decline in the significance of manufacturing unions, but it also represents an important development in its own right. At one point it seemed as if these professional groups would reinvigorate the work ethic. Teachers talked of being 'at the chalk face'; in these occupations and beyond 'workaholism' became a legitimate illness as people turned up earlier and earlier for work, and often boasted of it. However, there are signs that this phase is now over, and that many of these people are developing strategies of work-avoidance. For example, one senior academic told me that he had

> been working in the University for over thirty years, and I've always turned up for my lectures and class. This term, for the first time, I rang in to cancel my classes saying that I was unwell. I had so much work to do that I just had to have two days alone at home – 'on the sick' – to catch up.

This story was told with a certain amount of angst, and in this respect contrasts with the experience of one Social Services Department I visited where

> The pressure of work has got such lately that people are regularly taking days off work 'on the sick' as the only way of coping with it. As soon as a new virus appears, everyone develops the symptoms: one after the other. I've started to make a joke of it. I call into the offices and ask 'has anyone got something that I can catch: I need a few days at home'.

It seems that many professional people are resenting the increased demands placed upon them in a world where their 'service' is not valued. As one teacher put it to me:

> I went into this job because I was interested in it; interested in teaching kids. But that isn't valued any more. Not by the government or even by the parents. Its 'money' that counts nowadays. There are a lot of things – extra-curricular things – which I just won't do any more.

These views and experiences resonate with the views of students engaged on the various Nursing 2000 training schemes, established in the late 1980s as the basis for a new group of highly qualified 'super-nurses'. Many of the graduates of these schemes are having difficulty obtaining employment in the state sector and the ones I have

talked with resent the enforced choice of unemployment or private nursing.

All this is suggestive of important changes taking place within professional middle-class groups within the state sector. They are related to changes in state policy and to accompanying changes in labour markets. They also emphasise changes in the experience and evaluation of work. In this respect the responses fit well alongside the findings of Cary Cooper's (1992) researches which confirm that many managers are rejecting the demands of the office in favour of time spent in more rewarding relationships outside the workplace. They also point to increasing problems for couples in employment. While this whole area is under-researched, there is already enough evidence available to suggest that significant changes are taking place within the value structures of middle-class groups, and that these changes will affect the supply of labour in the future.

New cultures in the making?

The most significant group in any discussion of future labour supply should be the young. Many of this group are unemployed. More of them than ever before are in further and higher education. The problems of youth unemployment (for young people and for society) have been well documented. In 1974, as Minister of Employment, Michael Foot expressed a general worry from within his Ministry that unregulated youth unemployment could have serious effects upon work discipline and the future pattern of labour supply. There is evidence of this fear being realised amongst a significant minority of young people. Paul Willis' researches (1991) indicate the extent to which unemployed young people identify with consumption rather than production and develop ways of surviving without having to 'do shitwork' or work on 'Schemes'. The best selling investigation into young people's attitudes in the USA (Coupland, 1991) emphasises the ways in which young people are confronting the fragmenting experience of contemporary society in ways which emphasise the significance of positive (and exciting) experience as opposed to the mundane encounters with work. There is some support for this view. In a recent interview on Piccadilly Radio in Manchester a young man explained quite openly why he felt it was more legitimate for him to earn a living as a drug dealer rather than follow the example of his father who had worked for 20 years in a factory before being 'thrown

on the scrap heap'. Perhaps there is the beginnings of an explanation here for the Chief Constable of Avon who regarded the rioting in Bristol as 'very sad' and said: 'I simply don't understand why people are tearing their community apart in this way' (*Financial Times,* 18 July 1992).

Conclusions

Things are changing in our society: sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes dramatically and before our very eyes. Much of this change is associated with work and employment. The processes whereby new labour forces were reproduced have been radically transformed.Many of these had remained unchanged for two or three generations, and the implications of these changes for policy-makers and for those concerned with the future of the labour supply are portentous.

It seems clear that the operation of the new system is strongly linked to the social consequences of high unemployment, lower real wages and the tacit ending of 'the family wage'. The 'deregulation' of the British system of employment relations has brought it more in line with that of the USA. However, it has failed to deliver new jobs at anything like the US rate. At the same time it has done damage to the normative attachment of employees to their occupations and to their particular employer. This double loss can be seen as a tragic one in the context of the imaginative hopes and visions offered by a more flexible economy.

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