

THE WORKER IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

by J. E. Chesher

It is nearly commonplace now for intellectuals to think that we live in the “post-modern” era in which everything is subjected to not only close scrutiny but “deconstruction,” revision, interpretation, or some other possible adjustment in understanding. Yet such a reflexive way of thinking is nothing new. Philosophers have always engaged in it. With the voices of intellectuals being more widely and effectively transmitted in our high-tech era, however, the reflexive mode of thought is gaining wider promotion and impact.

One of the benefits that accrue from this assault on the tradition is the discovery of mythology disguised as common knowledge or intellectually supported doctrine. An example of this, directly relevant to our concerns in this essay, relates to the idea of the worker in modern society. The commonly received view, as evidenced by an examination of how the worker is depicted in the media, in public entertainment, and indeed, in philosophy itself, has the worker as a victim of powerful, sinister forces variously identified as corporations, or employers, or capitalists, or business, or the military industrial complex—forces that conspire to exploit, enslave, and thereby diminish the worth of those who labor for a living. Deprived of the power that comes from

owning the means of production, the worker is at the mercy of the owners, the capitalists. Short of uniting and eventually seizing the means of production, or threatening stoppage of production through strikes or other collective action, the worker is doomed to remain a victim, slave to the desires of the capitalists.

This model, the reigning but aging paradigm, is clearly adversarial and pessimistic: the worker is inherently disadvantaged, at odds with the owner/capitalist, and bound to suffer injustice and hardship until he joins forces with other workers, prepared to enter into mortal combat. According to this view, the cause of worker suffering is capitalism itself, commerce in a free society. There is, of course, historical documentation of worker abuse, child labor, and hazardous working conditions that is consistent with this view, but several points are worth making.

1) As long as one human being has power over another, the possibility of abuse exists, but this is a feature of human weakness, not of free commerce as such. We ought not blame capitalism for worker exploitation any more than we should blame parenthood for abuse of children.

2) At least some portion of the plight of the worker, especially in the first hundred years or so of the industrial revolution, was due to the ignorance and crudeness that accompany the early stages of any develop-

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mental process, and not to the vicious motives of the owners of production. In retrospect, and, given the knowledge, sensibilities, and expectations that we now have as a result of experience and social-political growth, the working conditions of the early industrial worker are beyond belief, and are certainly unacceptable by today's standards. However, to assume, as the popular model does, that conditions would have been radically better had workers owned the means of production is highly speculative. Nor is it borne out by the experience of workers in Communist countries since 1917, in contrast with the lives of workers in capitalist societies.

3) The unprecedented progress in technology in the present century, resulting in an enormous increase in distributable goods, has made possible the extension of material goods to working people undreamed of in previous centuries. Pressure to distribute those goods equitably has increased in direct proportion to their production. There are, today, many workers in industrial nations whose quality of life matches that of the privileged few at the beginning of the modern era.

4) Regardless of the causes of worker plight in the early and middle stages of industrial development, there is nothing in principle adversarial in capitalism: the worker is not necessarily and always at cross purposes with management; a free market is not necessarily an arena where workers must lose. Indeed, in response to felt needs, workers have, both collectively and individually, found means of securing higher wages and safer, more desirable working conditions for themselves, from forming labor unions, to convincing employers of the cost-beneficial advantages of higher wages and improved working environments. All of this is consistent with the idea of capitalism, not contrary to it, as the popular model would have it.

5) Regardless of the early history of industrialism and capitalism, the world of industry and commerce today so little resembles its crude beginnings that a fresh look is in order, especially if we wish to

understand what it is to be a worker in the post-modern era. The traditional model of the downtrodden masses is an anachronism when applied to societies of developed nations.

In attempting to understand what it is to be a worker as we approach the twenty-first century, I will be making some very fundamental assumptions about human beings, assumptions which I believe are supported by common sense, though perhaps not shared by all intellectuals. It is in terms of this view of human beings that I think we can make sense of the worker, of his concerns, of what he ought to do and expect in an ever-changing, increasingly complex, technology-intensive society. The assumptions are these: the worker is a human being who is by nature motivated to seek his own happiness, is sufficiently capable of recognizing obstacles and opportunities to happiness so as to act in the direction of happiness, and realizes that securing happiness is at least in some measure dependent upon his efforts. He knows, in addition, that success in life (i.e., securing a reasonably happy existence), requires his paying attention to the world, especially those aspects that are likely to affect his chances of success. He also acknowledges that other human beings are, in general, like him in these ways. In short, a worker is a rational, self-interested person in a world of other rational, self-interested persons, aware that reality calls upon them to live intelligently in order to achieve a good life. Of course, this is a very general description, applicable to all human beings in every era, in every place. It is also description at a very fundamental level: the truth or error of this description has profound implications for how we are to understand everything else about human life and human society. Given these assumptions, what can be said about the worker in contemporary society?

The Effects of the Global Economy

Perhaps the most significant relevant feature of contemporary life is the emerging

global economy: national alliances based on mutually beneficial economic interests; foreign trade relations impacting on nearly every aspect of domestic economies; opportunities as well as competitive challenges from abroad in cheaper labor, natural resources, consumer markets, innovations in production, management, distribution of goods and services. The effects of the global economy on the worker are more dramatic and far-reaching than any other development in human history since the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, the very concept of "worker" is undergoing change, as the demand for more skilled labor and white-collar workers increases, and as technology introduces more efficient tools for the production and distribution of goods and services.

The global economy, hastened by the collapse of Communism and the parallel spread of democracy and free-market commerce, has significant implications for workers in developed nations. The available, abundant, and growing supply of unskilled workers in developing nations will increasingly compete with and eventually make obsolete, unskilled labor in the developed nations, just as industrialism over the past two hundred years has replaced human toil with machines in so many areas of life. In the developed nations, demand for skilled labor will increase, opening up opportunities for employment in expanding service, information, and entertainment industries, to name a few.

A worker about to enter the market would do well to consider what skills are likely to be in demand, and to acquire such skills as would be consistent with her aptitude, interests, and special circumstances. This might require educating oneself as to the market demands, seeking employment/career counseling, and embarking upon a course of action such as a training program, vocational school, apprenticeship, or college. Put simply, it would be prudent of a young adult about to enter the labor force, to consider economic realities, to learn of the opportunities available, and move in the direction of those opportunities.

In contrast with workers of the past, a contemporary worker should not expect to work for one and the same employer/company/industry from graduation to retirement, nor should she expect her present knowledge and skills to be marketable for a lifetime. (Consider, for example, the challenges and changes awaiting a young auto mechanic or audio-visual repairman entering the work force in 1960 and expecting to work in that field for the next 35 years!)

Workers already employed would be wise to determine the extent to which the forces of change are likely to threaten or otherwise alter their jobs. If, for example, they are in a low-skilled, labor-intensive industry, competition from abroad will be an increasing reality. It would be wise to consider retraining, education, acquiring skills that will be in demand. All of this, admittedly, goes against the demand for "job security" which in recent years has become quite pronounced, especially among members of unions and others who lobby for protective legislation.

Job Security

Job security is a contemporary economic myth worth exploding. In a free market, a job is "secure" only to the extent that there is a demand for it—that is, to the extent that there are customers willing to pay for the product or service that makes the job possible at all. Thus, to demand job security is tantamount to demanding a "guarantee" that there be customers. This would require state-mandated, coercive measures creating, in effect, involuntary servitude, a condition that exists under socialist planned economies where the state, rather than freely choosing individuals, makes economic decisions. To the extent that one person's job is "made" secure, someone else's job or freedom or opportunity to pursue one will thereby be threatened. To expect "job security," either from membership in a union, or from protective legislation, is therefore not only unrealistic, but attempts to bring it about would shift the burden of responsibility for one's life from

oneself to others, and would deprive individuals of the right to make choices for themselves in precisely those areas where their welfare is at stake. Much of what goes under the name of (special) "worker's rights" as distinct from basic human rights such as the right to liberty and property, is of this nature: ultimately contrary to a free society and to the best interests of workers themselves.

A rapidly changing democratic and capitalistic world favors workers who are flexible, trainable, and adaptable. It also promises growing opportunities for creative and industrious individuals. With more people working as subcontractors, or by piece, the more familiar, traditional image of worker as wage-laborer struggling in assembly-line factories under the fierce command of greedy capitalists is all but obsolete in developed nations. In order to avoid the extra-labor expense and other burdens of having employees, many companies are subcontracting their work to individuals, who then are effectively self-employed and who could, conceivably, enter into agreements, or joint ventures, with other workers.

For example, one company, a manufacturer of fishing tackle, has workers throughout the country assembling lures, spinners, floaters, and small jigs in their homes. Materials are sent to the workers, who assemble them at their own pace, according to their own schedules, then return the completed products by mail and are paid a set fee per certain quantity. The worker establishes his own hours, provides his own workplace, and produces according to personally set quotas, needs, and demands, rather than those of an employer. The worker may even enlist the aid of friends or family. He does not have to punch a time card, account for his every move, or go through some bureaucratic ritual to take an afternoon off or get permission to experiment with a new way to do the work. The "employer," in turn, enjoys the benefit of a nearly endless labor pool, does not have to provide an assembly plant, or pay workers' compensation insurance and fringe-benefits. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement, one that will re-

place, in many instances, the traditional assembly-line-factory model of mass production employment. Such an arrangement, in contrast with the old model, has less of the adversarial, "master-slave" features.

Flexibility for Workers

The new model allows the worker to work for more than one employer at a time if she chooses. It does not impose, from the top down, restrictions and regulations concerning working hours, environmental impact, and safety. Additionally, there is less government involvement, since there is no workplace, no shop, no factory for OSHA to regulate, no labor practices for the Labor Department to enforce, no need for a worker compensation bureaucracy, or the permits, licenses, warnings, affidavits, bonds, deposits, employee records, and various other documents that in-house employment requires. And yet, this is still a worker doing labor; this is still a business owner or a corporation seeking profit: in short, this is still capitalism in operation.

At the high-tech end, as the telecommunications industry expands, and as personal computers, fax-machines, and other information-processing and transmitting devices become common household items, a significant portion of office work now being conducted in commercial buildings, will be performed at home—and in increasing numbers, by workers who will likely be self-employed, hiring out their skills and equipment to companies who will no longer need to lease office space for this work. (These buildings can be converted into apartments, or refitted for other uses; traffic congestion will be eased; air quality will improve and countless other benefits will follow.) And yet, this is still a worker doing labor; this is still a business owner or a corporation seeking profit, still capitalism in operation. As the kind of work, and the conditions of employment change, so too will the relationship between employer and employee and among co-workers. Just as businesses are entering into international alliances, so too might workers unite through computer networks to exchange

ideas and techniques, discuss problems, seek solutions, and form organizations that can help them market their skills and negotiate with prospective employers.

Historically, we have seen a variously progressing evolution in the improvement of life generally, and the conditions of workers specifically, over the past few centuries, certainly since the beginning of "modern" times. Some of this is due, no doubt, to the increasing replacement of human toil with machines, with the growth in productivity due to industrialization, mass production, the division of labor, and the general increase in wealth that has resulted from the expansion of commerce.

When one compares the life, the working conditions, and the prospects for alternatives available to workers in developed nations to that of workers in underdeveloped nations, the progress that commerce makes possible—for workers as well as owners—is dramatically evident. Clearly, that there were downtrodden masses at the beginning of the modern era is not in the nature of a business society, but is owing to other factors. The further we are from those beginnings, the more evident this becomes. In the developed nations, the world is catching up. The ideals of the humanistic tradition: respect for persons as persons, protection of individual rights, in short, personal sovereignty, self-determination, and human dignity, have taken hundreds of years to reach the present point, with considerable distance to go. But progress has been made, due, in large part, to the spread of democracy and the growth of commerce, especially in the last half of the present century. Workers themselves, through organized labor, increased productivity, and political action, have contributed to the growth of democracy and commerce, and thus to their own well-being. But there are limits beyond which one ought not go, even in the name of security or protection, if one is to live in a free society and remain autonomous.

Workers ought to recognize that there can be no free society without economic free-

dom, without free markets. It must also be recognized that human beings, the vast majority of whom are workers, are better off in a free society—have more opportunities and alternatives. Thus, it is in the best interest of workers to champion actions, institutions, and attitudes that promote freedom. With freedom comes risk, and so a worker in a free society ought to prepare for risk. If he expects others to protect him from accidents, job loss, medical costs, and old age then he must relinquish sovereignty to those who will assume the responsibility. But this is the same as relinquishing his freedom. One cannot have it both ways. Freedom means risk. Besides, to give up freedom for economic security is futile as well as foolish, since security is impossible. This does not mean that risks cannot be reduced or guarded against. There are all manner of arrangements, from insurance, to safety training, to education, to negotiated terms of employment, to a variety of worker organizations that can provide workers with protection.

At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, there was widespread worry that machines would put human beings out of work. The very opposite has happened. As we approach the twenty-first century, global expansion of commerce, combined with advancing technology, will provide increasing opportunities especially for creative, skilled, and ambitious workers. Certainly, some industries will disappear, spheres of power and influence will shift, segments of populations will be displaced, some communities will wither. All of this is inevitable in human life. The world is entering a period of unprecedented growth, which means loss and displacement, as well as progress and opportunities. More than ever before, human beings will be called upon to be attentive, thoughtful, and responsive to matters which affect their welfare. The particulars of how this ought to be done will vary with context, but the general recipe for a successful life remains unchanged and continues to hold promise in direct proportion as societies are free. □

THE ETHICS OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

by Steven Yates

Affirmative action has troubled the American political landscape for over three decades. Sooner or later, every ethicist must confront the dilemmas it and a variety of closely related policies—multicultural education, diversity management, sensitivity training sessions—pose. The dilemmas themselves indeed seem acute. It is true, for example, that U.S. history reveals poor treatment of this country's minorities and its powerless. Native Americans were taken from their lands and forcibly relocated. Decades of enforced discrimination left blacks well behind whites politically and socioeconomically. Women were denied the right to vote for years.

The 1950s saw the start of an extensive effort to repudiate discrimination and bring about equal opportunity. Then something went wrong. The struggle for genuine equal opportunity was lost amidst the growing clamor by an ever-increasing number of groups for special government favors. Equal opportunity laws, which initially rejected preferential policies, were replaced by affirmative action programs which could not be implemented without them.

Backers of affirmative action argued that

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blacks and other victims of past discrimination were so far behind in the economic race that without preferential treatment, equal opportunity would never be more than a high-sounding phrase. Thus race-conscious policies emerged with a vengeance. Employers had to keep voluminous records on the race, gender, ethnic heritage, and religious background of prospective employees so they could prove they had not discriminated against those designated by the government as victims. Government agencies expanded their reach to oversee implementation. Those found not in compliance, even innocently, sometimes saw their businesses imperiled.¹

White males started chafing at reverse discrimination right away. Well-known cases such as *Bakke* and *Weber* resolved little, though, and future litigation seems inevitable. Meanwhile, special programs of all varieties not only failed to help the vast majority of those in targeted groups but left them worse off than before; the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action, after all, have not been the economically disadvantaged blacks and Native Americans, but middle- and upper-class women. The welfare state, another legacy of the 1960s, has now produced second- and third-generation dependents with no marketable skills and no incentive to acquire them. Victimology has become the country's largest growth industry—after government, of course.²

The affirmative action umbrella now