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Dignity in the Workplace

Can Work Be Dealienated?

Judith Buber Agassi

ABSTRACT. Many jobs today are alienating: they damage the working person in psychological, mental, intellectual or psychosomatic ways; the psychosomatic damage may be permanent. This ill is due to a disregard for the basic psychological needs not gratified in a large number of work-roles. It can be remedied without revolutionizing either the political or the economic- legal systems of pluralist democratic societies. Rather we should revolutionize the image of the rank-and-file working person and attempt radical experiments in implementing new and democratic structures in the workplace. The feasibility of all this is demonstrated by many successful and viable reforms. These are systematically overlooked by backward-looking social scientists (Taylorist traditionalists, neo-Marxists and technological determinists).

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Introduction and summary

In this paper I will present my view of the current situation concerning work. Many jobs are harmful. The reason for this is the disregard for the basic psychological needs of the common person or, more precisely, the fact that these needs are not gratified in a large number of jobs.

My central point, however, is that this is possible to remedy without effecting a revolution in either the political or the economic-legal system.

Rather, a revolution is required as to the image of the rank-and-file working person and as to the willingness to attempt radical experiments in an effort to implement new and democratic structures in the work place.

I will begin this paper by discussing harm done by alienating work. The damage may be psychological, mental, intellectual, or psychosomatic, which may even lead to permanent physical illness. It is a damage which goes beyond harming millions of individuals; it robs democratic societies of the ability of the damaged workers to participate in the democratic process. In the last decades much was attained both theoretically and practically to illustrate the feasibility of more democratic work organizations employing workers in non-alienating work roles. This fact is systematically ignored by many whose task should be to promote it and further develop and diffuse its achievements.

The reason for this, I propose, is the dead weight of ideas which have been refuted long ago, and which either belittle the problem or declare it insoluble - generally or in the capitalist system. These latter are technological determinism and neo-Marxism. With the critique of these ideas I will conclude while outlining the major differences between them and the new theory or body of theories concerning the restructuring and the democratization of work organizations while replacing fragmented and limited tasks and characteristic bureaucratic hierarchies with autonomous work teams coordinated by democratic networks.

Let me start by clarifying my use of the term "alienation". I confess I find the term very unclear ((1)), yet it is hardly avoidable since it is so very popular. One who wishes to draw attention to one's work in the field can hardly avoid it, but one can use it in a limited and clear meaning. I will use it only in a very clear and '1 limited way as follows.

The term "alienating work" will mean work or jobs which have characteristics which cause mental, psychological and/or psychosomatic damage to its performer. This is still not a good concept. Its abstraction, that is the concept of alienation from work, as well as its concrete bearer, that is the alienated worker, are so vague and are treated with so much latitude, at times in contradictory ways, as to become completely useless. Now, what I want to talk about is not simply the case of being put off, namely of putting a distance between oneself and one's work or of hating one's work; nor will I refer to the mere response which a worker may give to an interviewer to the effect that she or he is dissatisfied with her or his work.

The alienating characteristics of work bring about different reactions, which may take different forms; and the open expression of dissatisfaction with one's job is, indeed, one of them. This dissatisfaction

may result in one's leaving the job and either looking for a better one or training for a better one within or without the same work organization. When such a move is undertaken and it ends with success, then it constitutes the least negative result and even an individual solution to the problem of how to overcome the alienating characteristic of work.

More often, workers who feel constrained by their jobs, especially young ones, bored, limited and frustrated, react by devising artificial variations and challenges, by playing games which may be neutral to the purposes of the work organization or harmful to them, including neglect, sabotage, unnecessary absenteeism and informal collective action for the restriction of output. Other individual responses to alienating work may include drinking and drugs off or on the job ((2)).

A new phenomenon is quite a different alternative, that of the constructive expression of dissatisfaction, of employees demanding change in the content, the tasks, the division of labor, the methods used, the pace of work, the degree of autonomy they might have on the job. The demands may be expressed either through the unions or directly to management. This new phenomenon, I claim, is the promising approach.

Most workers have not reached this new approach. They consider the alienating characteristics of their jobs as a given, as a part of modern technology or of organizational logic. They further consider any changes of any characteristics of their own jobs the prerogative of management.

Another group reacts to certain alienating characteristics of their jobs, such as monotony, with psychosomatic fatigue. Often the monotony of a very narrow and fragmented job is combined with the demand from the worker of a very high pace, which she or he cannot control in any way because it is controlled by the line, by the machine or by strict supervision. In such cases the psychosomatic symptoms worsen and

include insomnia, nervousness, gastric disorders, and out-of-work apathy and/or aggressiveness. They are known as the stress symptoms brought about by under-load, so-called ((3)).

The majority of workers are concerned with the poor characteristics of their jobs and possess the desire for and a vision of a good job with much better characteristics than the ones they have. Yet among workers who occupy the poorest jobs there are some, whether a few or a considerable minority, who develop the so-called instrumental attitude to work or the instrumental orientation to work, or the instrumental adaptation to work: they declare that they consider work in the current job an instrument for earning a livelihood and nothing more; they declare that this does not concern them; and, finally, they also declare that only the pay and the physical conditions of work, perhaps also good social relations on the job are of importance to them in a good job. Most of these will declare, in addition, that they are satisfied with their current jobs. This attitude or orientation is most often the outcome of a process of resignation ((4)).

Most of these, the instrumentally adapted or the resigned, will declare that they are quite satisfied with their current jobs. This, however, should not be taken as an indication that their cases are unproblematic. On the contrary, this adaptation appears together with symptoms of mental stagnation, with low self-esteem, with social passivity and inactivity. It is thus a sign of diminished well-being and choice for the individual and a considerable loss for society - especially for any society which puts value on the citizen's interest and participation in public affairs ((5)).

All this concerns some of the characteristics of alienating work, the under-load characteristic of jobs, so-called, and their ill-effects. Jobs thus

characterizable are usually classified as rank-and-file, as lower-level, as unskilled or semi-skilled. In such jobs there usually is little variety, little challenge, little interest, little room for initiative, judgment and creativity, little opportunity to learn new things, to identify with the completed product or service which one's work organization supplies - indeed there is often no opportunity to use existing skills and available experience, let alone potential intelligence. In many of these jobs, with under-load characteristics, all cooperation and even all communication between workers are severely restricted.

Other negative characteristics of jobs have been identified as stress producing and leading to ulcers and more so to cardio-vascular diseases; these are characteristics not of under-load jobs but of over-load jobs and work-roles. Such jobs are seldom low on the level of skill they demand, and many of them even make exaggerated demands on the worker, such as the demand to make split second decisions, where a mistake may be very costly; or making conflicting demands that cannot be met. Conflicting demands may be built into the occupational or professional work role or they may appear between a worker's occupational work-role and another work-role she or he occupies. The organizational structure may be dysfunctional, may produce friction or destructive internal competition ((6)).

No doubt some individuals are more susceptible to such stress than others. They are sometimes labeled type A, as distinct from the less susceptible, more easy-going type B. Type A people are often offered behavior therapy in order to make them type B. Clearly, what is more urgently needed and what is much more practical is to change the stress-producing characteristics of the job ((7)).

In both the over-load and the under-load cases applied social science can be brought to bear on the situation and help redesign the jobs concerned, and develop work-roles, which are conducive to human wellbeing and growth. In many cases this has to involve also the restructuring of the work organization. The name for this applied science is "sociotechnics". The methods of sociotechnics are often known as change research. Sociotechnics was tentatively included within the framework of the numerous legitimate variants of sociological sub-disciplines of the International Sociological Association only as late as 1978. It is still rather an outsider in academic sociology and only very few educated non-sociologists are aware of its very existence, not to mention its problems, its research programs, its by now substantial practical achievements and their increasing diffusion into and widening acceptance in work organizations not as experiments but as valid methods ((8)).

The absence of public awareness of sociotechnics despite its remarkable achievements calls for an explanation. I propose that the reason is the popularity of several theories, which conflict with sociotechnics. There are two kinds of such theories. First, there are those theories, which deny the very existence of the problems, which sociotechnics comes to solve or which minimize them. Second, there are those theories which claim that these problems are due to factors, which cannot be altered by any piecemeal reform.

There is the theory that the instrumental adaptation of rank-and-file production and service workers is quite innocuous, either because the workplace is not their central life interest or because they are able to compensate for the poverty of their work life with active and stimulating out-of-work life ((9)).

This, however, is more an excuse than a theory. A worker's out-of-work activity is as irrelevant to the matter at hand as the question how central work is among the life interests of a working person. All full-time workers spend a very large portion of their working adult life in the workplace and therefore the alienating characteristics of their work-roles will have a negative impact on them. Moreover, the instrumental adaptation to work and not having the workplace as a central life interest are not co-extensive. The theory of leisure activities as normally sufficient compensation for the shortcomings of the job has been empirically refuted: it has been observed that such basic characteristics of the job as the workers' passivity and dependence or, alternatively, their activity and autonomy tend to spill over into their out-of-work activities. The negative impact of the alienating characteristics of the job thus only intensifies and is not compensated for. Even if there is such a measure as the quality of life in general, first of all the quality of working life is in many ways a major contributor to it. Second, trade-offs within the quality of life, where the quality of working life suffers, are seldom the individual worker's leisure activities improvements, and more often the rise of his or her standard of living, such as the raising of the quality of one's housing and even the mere move to a more agreeable neighborhood, the lessening of one's marital tensions, improved educational facilities for one's children, and so on.

The theory that the instrumental adaptation is innocuous was very influential. According to a variant of it workers compensate for the poor quality of their jobs in out-of-work areas which play central roles in their lives. This, were it true, would eliminate the problem altogether for up to about forty percent of the work force, i.e. for women, since, according to this variant of the theory, the central role of women is the domestic-

maternal one. Allegedly, then, all women, or most women, or all married women, especially mothers, are naturally instrumentally oriented to occupational work, and show no concern for the content of their jobs or with advancement. Allegedly they view their job as a mere instrument for adding to the main breadwinners' income, to improve the standard of living of their families, which constitute their central life-interest ((10)) (and the central life interest of those women who have no family is allegedly in acquiring one). It is thus alleged that women do not suffer from alienation at all as they obtain their emotional satisfaction from their "domestic obligations", namely from their domestic work-role with which they identify. This argument is frequently used for considering women well suited for extremely routine, repetitive work ((11)).

This theory was empirically refuted. I have compared women and men with jobs of the same quality of content and found no difference between them in the frequency of the occurrence of the instrumental adaptation ((12)). Yet, due to occupational segregation and discrimination, women are more often than men saddled with extremely poor jobs. Like men, women yearn for more interesting, meaningful, quality work which might offer opportunities to learn and to use one's skills and experience, though their share of the poorest jobs is bigger. Nor does their domestic work-role offer compensation for what is missing most in those jobs. Much of housework and child-care work is not the production of lasting meaningful products but merely menial, repetitious cleaning: it involves little social recognition, sense of achievement or intellectual stimulation.

There is the theory that the instrumental orientation of (affluent) modern male industrial workers (those who do not live in traditional, working-class communities), is widespread and is combined with

workers' "privatization", i.e. with their preoccupation with the improvement of the standard of living of their immediate family ((13)). Before anything can change, says this theory, they must pass through this phase. This theory was backed by empirical research conducted in Great Britain.

Now the empirical research just mentioned was extremely sloppy. Workers were characterized as instrumentally oriented on the basis of their description of their jobs being low-skilled without adding to it the expression of desire to quit. Most of the jobs in the industries studied were low-skilled but well-paid. Yet most of the interviewed workers had clearly expressed frustration with the limitations of their jobs and nearly all of them expressed the wish that their children enter better kinds of jobs. Most of them were union members but not active ones; this was read as a "lack of class-consciousness", i.e. a refusal to identify with class struggle. The identification with class-struggle, however, was the researchers' main interest. They were looking for an explanation for the absence of such class-consciousness in large sectors of the British working class. They offered such an explanation in their alleged finding as widespread of the instrumental orientation among workers living outside traditional working class communities; the negative consequences of the poor quality of the jobs on the individual worker did not really interest them ((14)). In the meantime the view that class-consciousness levels differ in traditional working-class communities and outside them has been empirically refuted ((15)).

The theory conventionally accepted among members of personnel management claims that there are workers with different levels of aspiration, and the ones with low aspirations are fully satisfied with jobs, which offer no challenge. Problems of alienation or dissatisfaction, the

theory claims, arise only if there is a misfit between the level of aspiration and the level of challenge or content of the job ((16)). A variant of this theory is that the cause of problems with work is "over-education".

This theory needs severe modifications. Though the level of the working person's aspiration certainly influences the threshold of his or her frustration or dissatisfaction with a given job, neither the "fit" between lower aspirations and lower content jobs nor the "fit" between mid-level aspirations and mid-level content jobs produce more than an average level of job satisfaction; nor does a "misfit" upwards, i.e. between lower aspirations and higher content level job produce a lower level satisfaction; indeed, the higher the content-level of the job the higher the level of satisfaction quite regardless of aspirations. On the other hand "downwards" misfit produces the lowest levels of satisfaction with work ((17)). What is most significant is the prevalence of such "misfits", i.e. of persons whose aspirations, education and skills are under-utilized in their work life. The frequency of such misfits, incidentally, is significantly higher among women than among men.

The "over-education" variant is a veiled proposal to lower the general level of education so as to prevent job dissatisfaction. This proposal does not merit any rebuttal.

There is the theory of the work ethic into which the worker was socialized during childhood. One version of this theory was that whereas men, raised in the traditional artisan/ farmer work ethic of the American small town, suffer from unchallenging routine industrial jobs, city born and raised men do not ((18)). Another variant contrasts in the same manner workers originating from middle-class neighborhoods and those raised in slums. Another version of the importance of the prevalent work ethic is that the so-called blue-collar blues of the 'sixties and early

'seventies were due to the temporary influence of the expressive values of the counter-culture and the youth rebellion on American industrial workers. Once the traditional American work ethic has been reestablished, so goes this variant, the problem of worker frustration with their jobs will disappear ((19)). A somewhat more "materialist" variant claims that the critical attitude of working-class youths to routine industrial jobs and of middle-class youths towards impersonal jobs in large corporations was a reaction to the period of private and societal affluence which was sure to disappear during recession and mass unemployment.

Let us first clarify what is meant by work ethic. If we mean the values held by a social group about work, the why and what for and who should perform which work, then it is clear that these values change from society to society and from period to period and in different social strata and occupational groups within the same society. Most groups hold somewhat different work values for its own members and for other groups and certainly for men and women. So to talk about "The Work Ethic" or "The Traditional Work Ethic", "The American Work Ethic" and its decline or re-establishment is simply wrongheaded ((20)).

The question to ask here is does any set of work values prevent the damage done to the working person by certain alienating characteristics of work. Let me mention several sets of work values held by different groups of industrial workers: It is a (working class) man's duty to hold down a job, any job, in order to earn his livelihood and provide for his wife and kids and be a solid citizen. This was (and still is for some) the work ethic suitable for the working class man according to the middle class, especially those involved in employing them, and it certainly

influenced many industrial workers. This work ethic is instrumental but it also puts great emphasis on stability, job security, and respectability.

Another work ethic held by industrial workers includes pride in skill, in workmanship, in a quality product and often also in a firm with a good reputation.

A third set of values is that of some of the young, the marginal and the uprooted: the main thing is to get by, any job will do as long as it pays, a cushy job, one where you don't get grease under your fingernails, is desirable; making a fast buck without regular working hours and physical effort is smartest.

Still other workers have adopted the past middle class values of getting ahead through work, of advancement, promotion, status and career.

Finally part of the young workers accepted the values of the counterculture and the student rebellion, valuing expressiveness and variety and objecting to authoritarian supervision and restrictions in the workplace.

Holding a certain set of values as to work certainly has an impact on a person's attitudes to work. It may also hasten or slow down the process of resignation, of the instrumental adaptation. No set of values will be able completely to prevent the negative consequences of certain characteristics of work, yet through their impact on attitudes or orientations to work they may influence the way this consequence will take, whether it will express itself in apathy psychosomatic disease, stagnation, escape, aggressiveness, or rebellion - and how soon this will manifest itself.

So much for theories, which belittle or deny the very existence of the problem of alienating work. There is, of course, also a large body of conventional opinion which does not bother with theories which deny or belittle the negative effects which many jobs have on the worker; the conventional opinion is that fragmented jobs, rapid pace, close supervision, tension-producing demands in work, isolation or hostile competition and hierarchical organization- that all these are unavoidable if the efficiency, productivity and competitiveness of the economy are to be maintained for the benefit of the relatively high standard of living of the masses. This, rather popular body of opinion embraces many of the tenets of traditional Taylorist work design and organization as both valid and inevitable - usually without much theorizing or critical thinking. Now to theories, which recognize the problem yet discourage doing anything about it on the basis of the claim that the root of the problem lies in factors not susceptible to organizational reform, if not also beyond our control.

The major theory is the neo-Marxist one. For the post-World War II neo-Marxists alienation, or, to use the term of the young Karl Marx, alienated labour is indeed one of the central ills of late capitalism or monopoly capitalism. Yet neither the extent nor the symptoms of alienation, much less its pathogenesis, are clearly stated, not to mention being subjected to empirical research. Neo-Marxists assume that the cause of alienation lies in Capital's drive to maximize profits and extract maximum productivity from the worker. Capitalists, be they owners or managers, are maximizing the fragmentation of tasks, speeding up the pace of work, maintaining close control over the worker - whether personal, technical or bureaucratic - as well as splitting up the working class, all in pursuit of the central goal of profit maximization. They have

to maintain strict control or power in order to prevent a united and class-conscious working class from taking over. Management involvement in seemingly de-alienating reforms of working life are deemed misleading on the ground that the purpose behind this kind of activity is but to manipulate workers into a greater involvement in the goals of the work organization so as to achieve higher productivity without management relinquishing any real power or control. ((21))

Rather than presenting the criticism of neo-Marxism now, I wish to present first another theory, technological determinism, as well as the surreptitious synthesis of the two, since I shall then be able to offer the same critique against all three.

Technological determinism is a theory, which is very popular both within management and in the general public ((22)). It is the view that the state of technology of the day determines the structure of each production organization at that time, so that in order to be efficient and competitive, each branch of production - and recently also more and more branches of services - can be organized in one and only one way. For example one cannot eliminate the continuous, long, fixed assembly line from automotive production industry at the present stage without thereby significantly reducing productivity. In other words, management has no real organizational choice. Both the allocation of tasks and their coordination and supervision are allegedly determined by the level of the best technology available.

Yet even the level of technology and the direction of its evolution are alleged to be determined - historically determined. Whereas the adherents to this view within management usually welcome technological progress, others, especially among ecologists, take the opposite attitude and see technology as necessarily dehumanizing and deskilling and

degrading most jobs - most blue-collar jobs and increasingly many white collar jobs. Recent electronic revolutions are seen as threats to the working person because of the assumption that they necessarily deskill and degrade all jobs as well as destroy many of them. Therefore, the suggestion that it is feasible to solve the problem of alienating work by increasing the ratio of skilled, varied, interesting and challenging jobs or Work-roles, is deemed by the determinists utopian and contrary to the real trend of history.

A surreptitious synthesis of neo-Marxism and technological determinism has recently appeared in the literature of the sociology of work ((23)).

The surreptitious mixing of the two theories is this. First, private owners and their managers aim at maximum profit. Second, technology aims at maximum efficiency. Three, efficiency equals maximum productivity equals maximum profit. Four, any technology prescribes a certain, unique allocation of tasks and of organizational structure in order to be efficient. And private owners must be efficient in order to maximize profit in order to succeed in capitalist competition. Five, private owners thus must use the most advanced technology. Six, the outcome of the introduction of each new wave of technology under capitalism necessarily amounts to progressive deskilling and degrading of jobs plus the loss of many jobs plus even tighter management control over the "labour process". Thus Marxism and technological determinism are merged.

Neo-Marxists envisage the establishment of an alternative system to replace all capitalist and all communist systems extant. They call it complete workers' control. It is, they suggest, the only possible system in which work is humane. Some of them declare that then and only then will

technology be "demystified" ((24)). This may mean that what is wrong with technology up to the emergence of complete workers' control is not its being necessarily predetermined as harmful to the working person but that its having been mystified by capitalism is the cause of this regrettable effect. Is this reading still compatible with technological determinism?

There are, of course, some adherents to this kind of technological determinism, who are still looking for a way to overcome alienating work. Some radical ecologists do, indeed, propose the arrest and roll-back of technology and the return to a work life which allegedly existed before the industrial revolution - that of subsistence farming and handicrafts. They totally overlook the fact that this way of life is only possible for a very sparse population. As to the quality of working life in conditions of pre-modern technology, it is often idealized regardless of the fact that for most people living under those conditions life is that of unrelieved drudgery; the only exception are societies living in tropical paradises.

Other technological determinists emphasize the potential of high technology for the destruction of jobs ((25)). They therefore expect the problems of alienating work to wane with the decline of employment. They recommend the abandonment of "the work ethic", meaning, the abandonment of the following social norms. (1) Healthy adults should earn their livelihood by work. (2) Full employment is desirable. (3) Occupational work is an essential part of an adult's normal life experience. This would allegedly cancel the well known psychological damage caused by unemployment. And, of course, they envisage a situation in which the unemployed would be supported by the state through the levy of a tax on employment and/or economic turn-over. Clearly this scenario is far from today's reality. And though, obviously,

the amount of work required for the production of a given product and given clerical and communication services regularly decline, we may decide both how long the normal work-day should last and what quality and variety of products and services we wish for. Hence the scenario need not even be realistic for any future. Yet the problems of alienating work are pressing now. However, the possibility for a radical reduction of the work-day and for the drastic increase of flexibility of work-time, open up already now a vast variety of possibilities to overcome the conflicts between, demands of occupational work-roles and of family work-roles, which conflicts are responsible for much of the stress and inferiority in women's occupational work life.

The theories of neo-Marxists and/or technological determinists are highly abstract and even their exact meanings are somewhat obscure. Yet, clearly, they have a practical implication which concerns us here, and it is that all attempts to overcome the ill effects of work under modern conditions are doomed to frustration if attempted within the capitalist system if not quite generally as long as technology is not eschewed. Yet the success of the movement for the improvement of the quality of working life is a powerful argument against these theories, even on the supposition that this empirically observed success is only limited. For, it shows that the forces described by these theories do not operate the way they are supposed to.

A critique of neo-Marxist theories concerning the quality of work requires drawing attention to a list of concepts it employs, such as "class", "class interest", "class consciousness", "monopoly capitalism", "world system", "complete workers' control", "the market" and even "productivity" - all these concepts are used in ways which makes it exceedingly hard, if not impossible, to comprehend them. It looks as if

the same word IS used differently in different contexts, even in adjacent pages; it looks as if the use of a high-sounding jargon exempts its user from clarification.

The theories in which these concepts are employed cannot be criticized or empirically tested unless their content is pinned down to some extent. Let me offer examples. I shall present three examples and indicate first how the slippery use of concepts leads to the over-sight of significant facts, and, second, that when the concepts are pinned down, then the weaknesses of these theories become all too apparent. I will examine the concepts of class-interest, productivity and workers' control.

Let us assume that the statement that the interest of Capital or of the Capitalist class in maximizing profit means that all owners of capital invested in production or service organizations aim at the achievement of maximum return on their investments. This begs the following questions. Does this apply to private owners only, whether partners or share holders, or does this apply to public owners as well? If yes, which public owners is the reference to? If state owned organizations are included, who owns them? And who owns Crown corporations or union owned enterprises? Are all managers or only top managers members of the Capitalist class? Or are only those managers capitalists who also own stock? What is the status of managers of non-profit organizations? What is the status of owners who are also employed by their organizations as employees or workers (as is the case in cooperatives and in firms partly or entirely owned by their own workers)? It is obvious that if all these groups are included in the Capitalist class, then their interests cannot be summed up under the rubric of profit maximization. Even when considering only the shortest of short terms, interests diverge in the extreme: a major investor in a conglomerate may easily prefer the closure of a plant which is not

very profitable yet the investor in the local firm which owns that plant and that plant's management, obviously do not share this preference. Indeed, the whole local community, without class differences, clearly has an interest in the plant's continuing to operate despite its below-average profits. Marx observed that the inadequacy of Capitalism lies in the short term character of the profit motive which precludes considerations of stability of the market as a whole. This way he explained observed market instability. Now, in our period, much stock is owned by insurance companies and pension funds, whose, interest in the stability of the market is pronounced and operative. This is not to say that these bodies do manage to stabilize markets by sufficiently counteracting the destabilizing effect of preoccupation with short-term profit. Yet the existence of operative interest in stable markets conflicts with Marx's description. But, in particular, my concern is with the rather obvious observation that due to different interests of different kinds of both owners and managers, policies as to the design of jobs as well as the supervision of workers diverge widely, especially on the contemporary scene.

So much for class interest. As to productivity, neo-Marxist and technological deterministic authors and social critics use the concept of productivity without spelling out what exactly it means, yet apparently it means worker output rate, namely a matter of quantity – something like the amount produced per work-hour, or per dollar invested. This is a narrow meaning of the concept hardly used any more by industrial management. It is, of course, quite inapplicable in most service industries. One can decide teachers' productivity by observing teacher-student ratios regardless of students' achievement. This, however, tells us very little. Even if only the quality of product or service is included as well as the

level of utilization of materials and the careful handling of equipment, then the level of productivity measured and the policy of achieving maximum productivity would lead to different task allocations, training, pacing, and work supervision policies than the mere pursuit of quantity.

Ordinary, progressive or even merely somewhat progressive management includes in its measurement of productivity, in addition to the items mentioned, also comprehensive labour costs, namely the cost of employee sickness, accidents, absenteeism and turnover, and even of strained industrial relations, particularly as expressed in strikes. All this pertains to the so-called psycho-social conditions of work, namely the task characteristics of the job and strain-producing requirements, above and beyond the conventional health-and-safety conditions. Hence, progressive or even merely moderately progressive management aiming at maximum productivity reasonably assessed, nowadays tends to consider to some extent the well-being of their workers, both physical and psychological.

The neo-Marxists argue that Capitalists must maximize profit and so maximize productivity - meaning output - and to that end (1) fragment tasks and minimize training to the point that workers become interchangeable and thus cheaper, (2) maximize pace of work, (3) keep workers under strict control, whether personal, technical, bureaucratic or a combination of all of these, and (4) prevent workers' solidarity, by keeping unions out, by union busting, by union corruption and by dividing and segmenting the working class. Hence, the pursuit of productivity is the root of all these policies, which are all detrimental to the workers and/or the working class. This makes the conflict of interest between management and workers comprehensive and, under capitalism, unavoidable. It is useless, therefore, for workers to cooperate with

management on issues pertaining to the improvement of the quality of working life.

It is true, of course, that conflicts of interest do exist, and are manifest particularly where short-range financial issues are concerned.

Hence, it is very important, indeed, that employees, be represented by independent unions. It is also true that certain issues must be decided between employer and employee through bargaining between the two parties considered as adversaries. As long as the concept of productivity is understood in the narrow sense, the two parties may be seen as adversaries throughout. But when the broad concept of productivity is used, and when in the name of productivity the improvement or alteration of training, task allocation, pacing of work and coordination are sought, then the very structure of the work organization has to be redesigned and restructured. In this context the adversary stance becomes detrimental to both sides and must give way to partnership and joint learning.

The last concept I wish to examine is the neo-Marxist concept of workers' control. Their view is that the partial increase in workers' discretion and autonomy and their partial participation in the process of decision making is doomed to frustration, and is therefore but an illusion which serves capitalism. Hence the demand for workers' control as understood by neo-Marxists, is that the worker should make all decisions, including decisions as to where to invest, what to produce and how to produce it. Then, it is presumed, both technology and the market will be demystified. We see, then, that the neo-Marxist concept of workers' control is synonymous with the concept of complete workers control. Who, then, should exercise the control and how? Unions? The state? The workers within a single enterprise? Since neo-Marxists link control to ownership, as did Marx, the question is, what ownership do neo-Marxists envisage

and how do they see this ownership leading to workers' control? Since the concept is of total control, there is no escape from asking, which unit is the one allegedly to exercise this control? Without an answer to this question the concept is inherently vague ((26)). Any way this question is answered and the concept thereby made reasonably clear, raises then the question of feasibility. Though the neo-Marxists are vague to the last in their expression of disapproval of the absence of workers' control in most socialist countries and of the poor quality of working life there, it seems that they reluctantly do disapprove of state ownership. Some likewise disapprove of having the workers of a factory buy and own it cooperatively in capitalist countries. The turnover of workers, the expansion and contraction of both the capital and the labour force in the firm, and the differential wages and salaries in such work places, all these are quite problematic even in the case of cooperative ownership. Moreover, even when discussing workers' ownership and ignoring its problematic character, the question still remains, what then is total workers' control? Is it achieved through direct democracy? Is it through the election of top management or of the election of an executive committee, which appoints top management? And, in particular, how will the total workers' control express itself where improving the quality of working life is concerned? It is clear that control alone will not by itself translate into such improvement, that improvement calls for new ideas about the restructuring of the work place. Some worker owned firms continue conventional fragmentation of tasks and consequently conventional supervision and hierarchical structure, whereas others undergo the same gradual process of restructuring and transition to autonomous or semi-autonomous work groups and a more fluid democratic structure of coordination and responsibility just as other firms do, whether privately or publicly owned.

Let me now criticize the two theses, which together comprise technological determinism. The first, that technology dictates unique organizational structure, the second, that technology increasingly dehumanizes work.

The first assumption is still widespread in management circles, and is popular also in the general public and even in union circles. Already in the early 'fifties the group around the London Tavistock Institute that formed the sociotechnic A systems school, convincingly illustrated their claim that the British coal-mining industry had the choice to introduce new technology while implementing alternative organizational structures ((27)). They showed that no need was caused by the new technology to increase the fragmentation of tasks. They discovered that the autonomous multi-skilled work groups which were presumably suitable only for the old-fashioned manual method of coal-getting could just as well handle the new technology of modern mechanized drills and conveyors; indeed, they were more productive with the new technology whereas the crews to whom fragmented tasks with the same modern technology were allotted did even poorer than the earlier autonomous work teams from the allegedly more primitive past.

This unusual and unexpected finding was first explained away as due to exceptional circumstances typical of coal mining. The difficulty of supervising coal mining from above ground plus the unpredictable variability of the coal seam were supposed to explain the failure of the introduction of the new technology plus organization. Yet it was soon found out that the whole supposition that maximal division of labour is maximal efficiency is quite erroneous, that fragmentation causes boredom and fatigue and thus lowers the quality of product in general, and that unpredictable variability is much commoner than the advocates

of task fragmentation would allow, so that the most efficient way to handle this variability is through the cooperation of a group of multi-skilled and adaptable workers, who are not supervised in the usual close manner necessitated by task fragmentation but, instead, become increasingly self-steering. The task of the supervisor is replaced by that of a long-term planner, trainer, and coordinator with other work teams. The lower rank of management thus is drastically reduced and at times even eliminated.

The organizational forms allegedly determined by technology thus turned out to be one form - the traditional form - of relating technology to organization, which is the fragmentation of tasks and the imposition of a hierarchy of supervisors to oversee their execution, with all of this planned in advance by production engineers who execute decisions made by management. This complex structure, far from necessary, simply rests on two factors, first an image of the worker as concerned merely with wages while hating all work and shunning all problems the job might raise, and second and subsequent to that, the hierarchical structure of the organization as the only possible means of getting the job done in any large work organization. These two suppositions are self-reinforcing, since fragmented tasks have ill effects which make the worker conform to the worker-image held by management, and since this forces supervision to be kept tight.

It is clear that the second thesis of technological determinism, namely that technological progress necessarily increases the dehumanization of jobs, depends more strongly on the persistence of the false image of the worker and of the hierarchic structure of the work organization. After all, it is the managers whom the production engineers serve, and the production engineer could just as well design the machine,

the robot or the computer system in a manner not complying with the traditional image management has of the worker, with the result that technology should take over the dull routine work and thereby free the worker to deal with the more challenging and interesting tasks ((28)). It is all well and good for the technological determinist to say that this is impossible, yet this has happened, and even without clearly articulating a new image of the worker. Empirical studies indicate that though the change of the image of the worker and the introduction of democratic values into the work organization have not been fully articulated, during the last decade in industrialized countries among workers who have experienced considerable technological change, more report that their jobs are now more interesting and challenging than prior to these changes than those who report no such improvement ((29)).

Of course, the process of utilizing technological innovation for the improvement of jobs may be enhanced considerably when, as it happens with increasing frequency in Scandinavia, for example, employees participate in the very choice and ordering of the available new technology after they help analyze the functions for which the new technology is needed and the allocation of these functions within the workplace. Still better is the case where the engineers in charge of the technological innovations are in house and participate in these discussions.

The concerns of employees and of trade unions with health damage due to the excessive use of visual display terminals (VDT) has already brought about modifications of these screens as well as of the key-boards attached to them but, more significantly, it has caused in some firms the restructuring of white-collar jobs which led to much more varied work roles designed to spread the use of terminals to prevent anyone from

spending more than two hours at a time at the terminal ((30))/ Again, the fact that this can be achieved refutes both the neo-Marxists and the technological determinists, and shows that if we could make the relevant information better publicly known, then we could achieve a much wider diffusion of the de-alienation of work using technology as an instrument to that effect.

The case for the gradual de-alienation of work, thus, rests on the following claims.

(1) The negative effects brought about by millions of rank-and-file production and service jobs are due to the fact that these jobs do not satisfy the psychological needs of the working person for involvement, meaning, achievement, recognition and autonomy in work.

(2) The major characteristics of the jobs, which are responsible for negative effects are the fragmentation and repetitiveness of the task, the lack of control over fast pace and the general lack of autonomy in work.

(3) The major reason for the fact that so many jobs have these undesirable characteristics is the widespread acceptance of three interconnected views: (a) the Taylorist image of the ordinary worker as instrumentally oriented; (b) the view that the maximum of profit is achieved by the maximum efficiency and this is achieved by maximum division of labour, i.e. the principle of one worker one task; (c) the view that the only way to supervise and coordinate a work organization is by bureaucratic hierarchies.

(4) Contrary to these three interconnected views, the characteristics of Taylorist job design and of bureaucratic hierarchical organizations, not only damage the working person, but also are dysfunctional for the work

organization itself in that they lower both productivity and profit regardless of the system of ownership.

(5) Thus there is an area of interest common to both employer and employee, which makes organizational reform by way of partnership feasible.

Notes

1. See Agassi, Judith Buber, 'Alienation from work: A conceptual analysis', *Philosophical Forum* 10 (1978-9), 265-94.
2. All this has been described in the following studies:
Kornhauser, Arthur, *Mental Health of the Industrial Worker* (Wiley, N.Y.). Seeman, M., 'On the personal consequences of alienation in work', *A.S.R.* 32 (1967). H. E. W. Task Force Report on *Work in America*, (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1973). Sheppard, H. L. and Herrick, N. Q., *Where Have all the Robots Gone?* (Free Press, New York, 1972).
3. Walker, C. R., 'The problem of the repetitive job', *Harvard Business Review* 28 (1950), 54-8. Walker, C. R. and Guest, R. H., *The Man on the Assembly Line* (Harvard University Press, 1952).
4. See the discussion and analysis in Agassi, Judith Buber, *Comparing the Work Attitudes of Women and Men*, Chapter 13, pp. 231-240.
5. See Meissner, M., 'The long arm of the job: A study of work and leisure', *Industrial Relations* 10 (1971), 239-260. Parker, S., *The Future of Work and Leisure* (Paladin; London, 1972). Gardell, Bertil, 'Technology, alienation and mental health.

- Summary of a social-psychological study of technology and the worker', *Acta Sociologica* 19 no. 1 (1976), 83-92.
6. The detrimental effects on the worker's health due to specific characteristics of the work-role are presented in the following two studies. Frankenhauser, M. and Johanssen, G., 'On the psycho-physiological consequences of understimulation and overstimulation', Reports from the Psychological Laboratories, The University of Stockholm Supplement Series, Supplement 25 (1974). Frankenhauser, M. and Gardell, B., 'Underload and overload in working life: Outline of a multidisciplinary approach', *Journal of Human Stress* (1976), 2, 35-46.
 7. See Friedman, Meyer and Ray Rosenman, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart* (Knopf, N.Y. 1974) and Friedman, Meyer, 'Type A behavior: A progress report', *The Sciences* 20 (1980). See also Selye, Hans, *The Stress of Life* (McGraw Hill, N.Y., 1956) and Selye, Hans, *Stress Without Distress* (Philadelphia, 1975).
 8. The literature on sociotechnics and change research in the work organization is already extensive. For an introduction consult the following musts: Emery, F. E. and Thorsrud, E., *Form and Content in Industrial Democracy* (Tavistock, London, 1969). Clark, P., *Action Research and Organizational Change* (Harper and Rowe, London, 1972). Davis, L. E. and Cherno, A. B. (eds.), *The Quality of Working Life* (vols I & II), (Free Press, New York, 1975). O'Toole, J. (ed.), *Work and the Quality of Life* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1974). Jenkins, D., *Job Reform in Sweden*

- (Swedish Employers Confederation, Stockholm, 1975).
- Warr, P. (ed.), *Personal Goals and Work Design* (Wiley, N.Y., 1976).
- Bolweg, J. F., *Job Design and Industrial Democracy: The Case of Norway* (Nijhoff, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1976).
- Agassi, Judith Buber, *The Evaluation of Approaches in Recent Swedish Work Reforms* (Department of Psychology, University of Stockholm, 1985).
9. Dubin, Robert, 'Industrial workers' worlds', *Social Problems* 3 (1956),131-142.
 10. Rainwater, Lee; Coleman, Richard R.; and Handel, Gerald, *Workingman's Wife: Her Personality, Work and Lifestyle* (Ocean Pbln, N.Y., 1959).
 11. Crewley, Joan E.; Levitan, Teresa E.; and Quinn, R. P., 'Seven deadly half-truths about women', *Psychology Today* 7 (1973), 94-6.
 12. Agassi, Judith Buber, *Women on the Job* (Lexington Books, Lexington MA, 1979), Chapter 4,77-115 and, 1982, *Comparing the Work Attitudes of Women and men* (Lexington Books, Lexington MA), Chapters 13 and 14, 231-254.
 13. Goldthorpe, John; Lockwood, David; Bechhofer, Frank; and Platt, Jennifer, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behavior* (Cambridge University Press, 1968).
 14. See last note.
 15. See my Comparing, *op. cit.*, 278-9.
 16. See Hulin, Charles C., 'Individual differences and job enrichment - The case against general treatments', in: John

- Mahler (ed.), *New Perspectives in Job Enrichment* (Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., N.Y., 1971), 159-91; reprinted in Jon M. Shepard (ed.), *Organizational Issues in Industrial Society* (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1972), 387-410.
17. See my *Women on the Job, op. cit.*, 77-8, 85 and Table A 90.
 18. Turner, Arthur and Lawrence, Paul, *Industrial Jobs and the Worker: An Investigation of Response to Task Attributes* (Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, Boston, 1965).
 19. Blood, Milton, R. and Hulin, Charles C., 'Alienation, environmental characteristics, and worker responses', *Journal of Applied Psychology* 51 (1967), 284-290.
 20. Agassi, Judith Buber, 'Towards a rational, work ethic', *Crossroads, International Dynamics and Social Change* 6 (1980), 75-108.
 21. Braverman, Harry, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974). Edwards, Richard, 1972, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (Basic Books, N.Y., 1972). Pfeffer, Richard M., *Working for Capitalism* (Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1979). Burawoy, Richard, 'Between the labor process and the state: The changing face of factory regimes under advanced capitalism', *Am. Soc. Rev.* 48 (1983), 587-605.

22. The idea here labeled "technological determinism" is seldom explicitly stated, and then usually by critics. The most influential, even though not himself popular, author, is Martin Heidegger, whose "The Question Concerning Technology" is thoroughly deterministic though very hard to read. See his *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 1977, N.Y.: Harpers, especially pp. 23, 25, and 34-5. All prophets of technological doom, particularly Jacques Ellul in his popular writings, such as *Technological Society*, accept the uni-linear predetermined social course of technology; they take it for granted that technological organization, is determined by the level of available techniques. See, also, Agassi, Joseph, *Technology* (Reidel, Dordrecht, 1985).
23. See Note 21. See also Rinehart, James W., *The Tyranny of Work*, (Longmans Canada, Don Mills, 1975).
24. See previous note.
25. Macarov, David, 1982, *Worker Productivity* (Sage, Beverly Hills, 1982). See my review of it in *Contemporary Sociology* 12 (1983),210-11.
26. One of the more explicit statements I found, is in Richard Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 215: "Once workers raise a challenge to the existing system of control in the firm, they will through their experience be led to see the common content of these struggles. The defense and extension of democracy may ultimately rest, then, on the working class's effort to take possession of the means of production... ".

27. The classic expressions of the Tavistock approach are: Trist, E.; Higgin, G.; Murray, H.; and Pollack, A., *Organizational Choice* (Tavistock, London, 1963). Herbst, P. G., *Socio-Technical Design* (Tavistock, London, 1974).
28. Emery, Fred F., 'The assembly line - Its logic and our future', in Davis, Louis E. and Taylor, James C., 1979, *Design of Jobs*, second edition, (Goodyear Publishing Company, Santa Monica, California, 1979), pp. 85-93.
29. See Yankelovich, Daniel; Zetterberg, Hans *et al.*, *Work and Human Values: An International Report on Jobs in the 1980's and 1990's*. Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, Sept. 1983.
30. Mumford, E. and Sackman H. (eds.), *Human Choice and Computers* (North Holland Publishing, Amsterdam, 1975). Goranzon, Bo *et al.*, *Job Design and Automation in Sweden: Skills and Computerization* (Center for working Life, Stockholm, 1982). Bradley, Gunilla, *Computerization and Working Life* (University of Stockholm, Dept. of Psychology, 1980). Hedberg, Bo and Mumford, Enid, 'Some theoretical ideas of relevance to systems design', in Niels Bjørn-Anderson *et al.*, *The Impact of Systems Change in Organizations* (Sijthoff and Noordhoff, Germantown MD., 1979).

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