

## working: beyond survival

*Would you work if you didn't have to? Seriously. If you didn't need the money, would you still work?*

We may moan and groan about work—the hours, the boss, the pay, the pace—but the vast majority of us cannot imagine life without it. In fact, we insist we would work even if we didn't need to. What is it about work that is so compelling?

At the most basic level, we work to survive. But if there were ever a time when that was work's only function, it has long since passed. Sure, we labor so that we can have food, shelter, and clothing, but in today's world, even the poorest among us hopes for more from work than

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mere necessities. As Immanuel Kant knew in the eighteenth century, work gives our lives content—not merely a way of *getting* things, but something to *do*. Paid or unpaid, work endows our daily lives with structure, routine, and purpose. Through work, we act on the world around us. We attempt to hammer out a place for ourselves and those for whom we feel responsible. Even in its most modest incarnations, work is

a world-structuring, meaning-making enterprise. Without it, the world portends chaos and threatens meaning.

*Jamaal is a fifth-grader who lives a stone's throw from my office. We meet twice a week to work on his reading. He shares a small rental house with his mother, an aunt, two young cousins, and two siblings in their twenties. No one in Jamaal's family has steady work. In fact, only one person on his whole street has a regular, forty-hour-a-week job in the formal economy.*

One of the most devastating developments of recent years in the United States is the emergence of what sociologist William Julius Wilson identifies as jobless neighborhoods: "poor, segregated neighborhoods in which a majority of adults are either unemployed or have dropped out of the labor force altogether."<sup>1</sup> America's inner cities are rife with these "jobless ghettos," and in them, the absence of work's world-structuring dynamic is dramatically felt. Without the routine, stability, and discipline that work imposes, "life, including family life, becomes less coherent." When one lives not only in poverty but in a world where work has all but disappeared, then one is missing a lot more than money and its products. Says Wilson: "In the absence of regular employment, a person lacks not only a place in which to work and the receipt of regular income but also a coherent organization of the present—that is, a system of concrete expectations and goals."<sup>2</sup> Imagine the consequences for children who grow up without such a framework of meaning and behavior, without an adult population to model and encourage the skills and habits likely to produce positive social outcomes. Without the structure and purpose cultivated by work, the world would seem a strange and unwelcoming place.

No matter where our work falls on spectra of income or social status, and regardless of any other reasons (conscious

or subconscious) we might have, the vast majority of us work to attain life's basic material necessities *and* to live in a world that is coherent and has meaning. To survive in a world that makes sense is something we all desire and, moreover, something we *need*. It was no doubt in recognition of the foundational material and existential role of work in human life that the General Assembly of the United Nations included in its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights the right to work: "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment."<sup>3</sup> A universal right—work is *that* fundamental to human existence.

.....  
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*I'm at a Christmas party at a friend's house, hoping no one notices that I'm camped out by the spinach dip. An unfamiliar person approaches, fixes a plate, and nods. I nod back, swallowing quickly.*

*"Hello, I'm Darby," I say.*

*"Lauren Nichols. Nice to meet you. How's the spinach dip?"*

*"Quite good, actually."*

*"So, Darby, what do you do?"*

Most of us are familiar with this new-acquaintance, "What do you do?" mantra, by which the inquirer means only one thing: What is your work? Knowing one's work, it is assumed, sheds important light on one's real identity. Beyond survival and an often-inchoate psychological-conceptual framework for living, we work because it establishes and sustains our individual identity or sense of self. Perhaps most dramatically in

the United States but also elsewhere in the world, personal identity and social esteem are powerfully grounded in work. This fact helps explain the anxiety felt by so many people as they approach retirement. The prospect of rest is usually welcome, but one fears it will be accompanied by a loss of self. Without our work, who are we? Without our identity as workers, where in the world do we fit?

We might expect that such questions and concerns are the special province of the privileged. After all, it is easy to imagine why people with high-status jobs would identify themselves with their work. However, one need look no further than the garbage cans of cities like San Francisco to see that the work-identity connection is vibrant across social and economic divides.

Meet the underground recyclers—homeless men and women who forage through other people’s trash in search of recyclable items, then haul those items to recycling centers for remuneration.<sup>4</sup> From one perspective, this is desperate, dirty, dehumanizing labor, but from another, it is surprisingly principled work that endows its practitioners with dignity and self-respect against all odds. This work is not for the faint of heart. It involves long hours in the elements, often at night, and requires physical strength, street smarts, and business acumen. A lucky few have vans or cars for storing and transporting recyclables, but most use shopping carts, which they push for miles as they work their routes, digging through unsorted trash in search of neglected recyclables. Homeless recyclers like Dobie, an African American man who works a prosperous San Francisco neighborhood, have clear work territories and build long-standing partnerships with business owners and apartment managers. As sociologist Teresa Gowan tells us, “These relationships are often referred to in formal business language: ‘I try not to default on my schedule,’ says Dobie. ‘I’ve got several long-standing accounts in the Castro area,’ says Jordan,” a former forklift operator who was laid off.<sup>5</sup>

Dobie, Jordan, and others find themselves ousted by the formal economy, pushed out of jobs and homes and onto the streets, but their sense of self is so powerfully connected to work that they find “jobs” in the informal economy, and they work those jobs with discipline and commitment. While the wider society associates homelessness with sloth and other forms of moral deviance, Gowan’s study reveals that homeless recyclers typically embrace normative moral standards and have a robust work ethic. Where others think of them as subhuman social parasites, these men and women define themselves as *selves* by asserting themselves as workers. Gowan’s account of Sam, a middle-aged white man who eventually died next to his recycling cart, illustrates the self-work relationship:

The first time I ever met him he told me a story of an argument with a “resident” the night before. “Hey, keep the noise down, I’ve got to *work* in the morning,” the man had shouted out of a window. “What do you think I’m doing,” Sam shouted in return. “They just don’t think, you know,” he said in retrospect. “They think we do this for fun or something. I work hard, I clear up the neighborhood. Don’t beg, don’t steal, don’t deal drugs. You’d think people could be civil to me.”<sup>6</sup>

For Sam and other homeless people who occupy “an extraordinarily dehumanizing and frightening location on the American social map,” hard work enables self-definition and self-respect. Underscoring the self-defining, dignity-producing power of work, Gowan concludes: “Given their stigmatized social position, recyclers are choosing to concentrate their efforts on using their work to redefine themselves as people with full humanity rather than victims [or monsters]. In this way they not only pull themselves back

into the flows of capital, but also create self-respect in a hostile world.”<sup>7</sup>

So we work because it provides us with the basics we need to survive. Work gives our lives content and coherence. Work is a primary avenue toward self-definition and self-respect. What else does work give us? Why else do we work? We noticed in our discussion of homeless recyclers that work has social value. It positions us in relation to others in the world. For Sam, being fully human meant being a worker, even though his particular work put him near the bottom of the social hierarchy. Still, the homeless recyclers Gowan studied proudly place themselves above “stiffs” and “winos”—the unemployed homeless—and in so doing, they reinforce the social stratification system imposed by work in today’s world. Thus, we see that another basic function of work is to demarcate social roles and, by extension, distribute social power. For those at the bottom of the hierarchy, as for those at the top, we work in part to get onto the social map, to have a place in relation to others. Despite the obvious inequalities of that map, we learn from Sam and his homeless recycling peers that any place is better than no place at all. In today’s world, work more than anything else is what bestows social place.

## Making a Mark

*“I clear up the neighborhood.”*

Work is not only a prime means by which we are positioned

..... within and encoded by society. It is also an important means for shaping society, for making our own imprint. Through work, we are actors

**“I clear up the neighborhood.”**

in and on the world. We make a difference. We leave our mark. While work’s transformative potential is probably most easily accessed by those with work that includes relatively

more autonomy and social value, we should not forget that Sam's self-respect is rooted partly in the belief that his work has genuine social value: "I clear up the neighborhood." Low-wage workers such as garment industry employees in Boston's Chinatown reiterate the importance of making a positive contribution to the larger society with one's work. As one seamstress notes, "There are three things that each person needs—food, house, clothing—and we take care of one of these. The clothes we do are everywhere, keeping the children, the grown men and women, warm and well."<sup>8</sup> Even within the constraints of low-wage employment, work is a primary means of shaping the world we live in.

Of course, even as we can appreciate that work is a vital means for making an impact on the world, we should not ignore that some of us have far more opportunity for constructive engagement with the world through our work than do others. We would like to think that the days of oppressive work routines and conditions are long gone, but they are rampant in today's postindustrial economy and, by some measures, are even on the rise. Thus, while work can be a means for shaping the world we live in and, ideally, making a positive difference, such individual agency assumes a degree of freedom and creativity that many jobs exclude.

Related to this notion of work as a way of shaping the world is the relatively recent idea that work should be a form of self-expression, a means or outlet for personal growth. Increasingly, we assume work should be personally fulfilling. Work should present us with meaningful opportunities to express ourselves and actualize our gifts. Advertising taglines like "It's not just our job, it's our passion" promote everything from health care to beer brewing. A favorite piece of career advice offered to young people is "Find something you love to do, and then figure out how to get paid for it." The message here is that work is where we explore or activate our passions. Work is where we do what we love, where we are engaged and fulfilled. Work is a means of self-realization,

even a “calling.” My mother tells the story of the scruffy young man she and my father hired to do some work on their house. One day the young man called my mother outside and directed her gaze at a small area of cement at the bottom of an exterior wall of the house. When it was clear my mother didn’t know what she was looking at, he said, “Don’t you see the swirls—the movement and rhythm of the stucco? I’m a stucco *artist*.”

No matter what kind of work we do, some of us have work that is genuinely self-actualizing. Others do their best to squeeze drops of meaning and affirmation out of mostly miserable jobs. When we pause to consider this latter group, we might wonder whether the work-as-personal-fulfillment notion that has become a kind of cultural ideal in our time is such a good idea. In a society already powerfully stratified by work roles, pay scales, and benefits packages (or lack thereof), the romanticizing of work via the idea of work as self-actualization may create one more stratifying dynamic. As philosopher Lars Svendsen notes, “The amount of intrinsic satisfaction is clearly not equally distributed among jobs.”<sup>9</sup> The idea that work should be a means to personal growth and fulfillment may actually compound the misery of those whose work does not measure up—that is, the vast majority of workers in the world today.

## The Handmaiden of Consumerism

*consumption (noun)—a progressive wasting away of the body; tuberculosis; the utilization of economic goods in the satisfaction of wants or in the process of production resulting chiefly in their destruction, deterioration, or transformation.*<sup>10</sup>

Thus far, we have recognized work as a means of physical survival, existential coherence, self-respect, social



integration, individual agency, and self-actualization. We conclude this brief overview of work's role in contemporary living by acknowledging that, increasingly, its main function is to enable consumption. Arguably, work's most dominant role these days is to keep the wheels of consumer culture turning. Put simply, we work so that we can buy. Of course, we have always worked in order to procure what we need to live, and since the institution of wage labor, we have worked for money and then spent that money on the things we need. The difference today is that we spend our money at unprecedented rates and on things we don't need. In truth, however, the point is not to buy in order to fulfill a need, but simply to buy. It doesn't even matter if we actually consume or use what we buy; the constant acquisition is the thing. Sam and his recycling peers may be products of an advanced capitalist economy, but they are "old world" in grounding their identity in work. Increasingly, we articulate our humanity less by working than by buying. It is how we participate in today's world. Rich or poor, buying is how we integrate into society, how we express our membership in the human race. "I shop, therefore I am."

Work is still important, but less for its intrinsic value than for its instrumental value. In the new economy, work's big claim to fame is that it is the precondition of consumption. Work earns the money with which we acquire new goods. From this standpoint, the inequalities in working conditions and in the social valuation of different kinds of work are no longer as important as they were even a generation ago because the main thing that matters about work is that it yields money for buying things. Thanks to discount stores, cheap labor, credit cards, and ever-advancing

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production technologies, there is a cornucopia of products even low-wage workers can aim to acquire. Thus, low-wage workers can deflect the negative stigma that once accompanied their devalued jobs by being “good” consumers—that is, by keeping up with the latest consumer trends and fashions, even if in cheap imitation. These days, social shame is caused less by a “low-class” job than by the inability to keep up with the normative buying pace. The pressure to keep up as consumers is intense. For my family, the damaging effects hit home with particular force last summer when a childhood friend of my sister was shot dead, along with her two children, by a husband and father who by all accounts was loving, devoted, and hardworking, but who simply could not cope with a downsizing family economy and the impossibility of maintaining the consumer lifestyle to which he and his family had become accustomed. Rather than face the social shame of a downsized existence, he took his own life and his family’s. Without adequate buying power, life was apparently not worth living.

While work’s primary function today is often to enable acquisition, work is the precondition of consumption in another way, as well. Increasingly, work involves the production and sale of a fast-changing array of consumer goods and services. In other words, more and more of us have work whose very content contributes to a buying-centered way of being. Our work produces something that is intentionally short-term, designed to last only a brief time and then be replaced by a newer model. Whether we are the low-wage pieceworker in the clothing industry, the barely middle-class clerk who sells that clothing in a local department or discount store, the upper-middle-class corporate buyer or advertiser of that line of clothing, or the millionaire designer who developed the fashion trend that inspired the clothing, our work’s real contribution to the world is to stoke the fires of consumption.

## Work's Deformation

*When I ask Jamaal how many books he has at home, he just shakes his head and looks away. A moment later, he glances up with animated eyes: "But I got a new game for my DS last week!"*

This most recent incarnation of work—as the handmaiden of contemporary consumer culture—has consequences for the other functions of work previously discussed. Indeed, it deforms each one of them in worrisome ways. Here, we can gesture only briefly toward these deformations, beginning with the most obvious: If our work is funding an indefatigable consumer appetite, then our ability to secure life's basic necessities (work as survival) is reduced. Especially for those near the bottom of the work/wage hierarchy, this refocusing of work's remuneration from genuine needs to market-induced desires leaves individuals, families, and communities starved of the resources necessary for dignified subsistence living. And so we see tragedies like children who have the latest electronic gadgets or the year's trendiest sneakers but no books at home or food in the refrigerator. A similar kind of deconstruction happens as consumerism's exaltation of instant gratification and short-term commitments undermines the kind of discipline, regularity, and long-term perspective inculcated by regular employment. Here, the coherent framework for purposeful living that in previous generations was cultivated by work comes unraveled under the impress of consumerism's frenetic pace and short-term horizon.

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When it comes to work as a means of self-respect, we find that here, too, today's consumer culture can deaden work's character-building potential. We don't all need to feel as if our work is saving the world, but we do yearn to contribute something real, something worthwhile with our labor. The fact that so much of today's work is connected to products designed to last only a short time, and services that respond to or fuel spurious consumption, means the link between work and self-respect is tenuous. As for the cultivation of social integration and responsibility, we see that what puts one on the social map within contemporary consumer culture is increasingly not work but acquisition. We also learn that one of the key expressions of social responsibility, especially during times of national crisis, is shopping. Love your country? Why, then get to the mall or go to Disney World! Oh, yes, and work hard so you can buy what you want when you're there.

Work's historic role as provider of meaningful opportunities to engage and shape one's world is also eroding rapidly under the weight of consumer culture. If shopping has become an important civic duty, it is because "the world" has been redefined to mean Walmart and Wall Street. Leaving our mark on *that* world is less a matter of working hard than of spending steadily, of investing our money, time, and creative energy in the consumer market. Once again, work's main value is its bankrolling of that investment.

By now, it should be easy to appreciate the ways in which the trend toward work as self-actualization can feed right into consumerism's priorities. Indeed, it is such an easy fit that one wonders whether perhaps this whole notion of work isn't itself a product of corporate America. After all, when one's work is one's "passion" or personal "calling," then one happily devotes ever more time and personal resources to it. It can hardly be coincidence that the class of workers most likely to speak of work in terms of passion, self-expression, and self-actualization—that is, today's "knowledge workers"—are the

same ones who log the longest hours on the job and identify themselves the most closely with their work. They are also, not incidentally, the ones who spend the most time away from home and family. Work as self-actualization, indeed.

## Looking Back on Work

We live today in what scholars call “the new economy.” Although there is strong consensus about what constitutes this new economy—its defining features and driving forces—there is lively debate about just how “new” it really is. The shape and organization of work, as well as the consequences for workers, are at the heart of the debate.

*Now one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type.*

Frederick Taylor

*The Principles of Scientific Management, 1911*

To appreciate what is new about today’s world of work, it helps to understand the “old” against which the new defines itself. When scholars speak of old modes of work, they typically invoke Henry Ford and the modern industrial work methods embraced by the Ford Motor Company (tagged “Fordism”). At the heart of these techniques was the division of labor—the divvying up of complex work tasks to increase efficiency and productivity. For classic proponents of this “modern” technique, the goal of ever-greater efficiency and productivity meant the end of the traditional craft-based, apprentice system of work in which a master craftsman was the master of both conceptual work knowledge and physical technique. This craftsman passed the skill and artistry of the craft to younger generations through sustained mentoring

relationships. Such an arrangement was deemed a waste of time and money by people like Charles Babbage and Frederick Taylor, who argued that complex work tasks should be converted into a series of simplified tasks performed by unskilled workers. Instead of paying highly skilled workers to perform a range of tasks, companies began to assign low-skilled (and low-paid) workers to perform only low-skill tasks, as in Taylor's description of the worker who handles pig iron:

Now one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type. The man who is mentally alert and intelligent is for this very reason entirely unsuited for what would, for him, be the grinding monotony of work of this character. Therefore the workman who is best suited to handling pig iron is unable to understand the real science of doing this class of work. He is so stupid that the word "percentage" has no meaning to him, and he must consequently be trained by a man more intelligent than himself into the habit of working in accordance with the laws of this science before he can be successful.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, insisted the prophets of modern industrial technique, the knowledge of work should not be held captive by the workers themselves but should become the province of a new class of managers. Out with the master craftsman, in with the manager. The thinking was that when complex work tasks are divided by management into simple, discrete steps that require little thought or skill, and when each step is completed with the greatest economy of movement, then efficiency will improve, production increase, payrolls

decrease, and profits grow. The goal of standardization reaches its logical conclusion in mechanization, where the variability of human labor is replaced with the predictability of the machine whenever possible.

Henry Ford's institution of these work innovations led, as predicted, to astonishing improvements in efficiency and productivity. Given the shortage of skilled labor with which Ford was confronted in his day, the standardization and mechanization of work seemed the perfect solution. Workers on his assembly lines did not need to master a craft; they just needed to follow directions and work hard and fast. Ironically, Ford imposed a work style that reduced worker autonomy and individuality even as he (and they) developed a product that has contributed more than any other to the world's staunchest individualism. The mass production of the automobile had the effect of siphoning American political and economic will away from mass transit, fueling a national ethos in which the individual trumps the collective at almost every turn.

Like wildfire, the techniques and logic of mass production spread around the globe and to every industry. The upside was the broad availability and affordability of uniformly produced goods of all sorts—the promise of “a material cornucopia for all,” as sociologist Stephen Meyer puts it.<sup>12</sup> The downside was the deskilling of the workforce, the loss of the versatility and workmanship of the craft ideal, and the growing power, pay, and prestige differential between workers and managers/owners.

In his own treatment of workers, Henry Ford was atypically humane—a fact that incited the ire of his peers. Ford paid his workers what we today would recognize as a living wage—a wage that allows one to live a modest but dignified life—and he instituted a more humane (forty-hour) workweek. A businessman through and through, Ford was motivated not so much by humanitarian impulse as by the conviction that it would improve worker retention and

productivity and, equally important, enable his workers to become good consumers who would buy the very products their work helped create. Ford, however, was the clear exception here. Most owners of production used the fact of a largely low-skilled, disempowered workforce to keep wages as low as possible, workweeks as long as possible, and concerns about workplace safety and environmental impact as marginal as possible. Thus, as Meyer notes, “the new industrial technology” that scholars refer to as Fordism “was a mixed social blessing, perhaps even a curse.” It yielded impressive gains in production, consumption, and profit, but it also contained “incredible social costs.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Work in the “New” Economy**

Today’s “new economy” is arguably a very different world. Gone are the days when a young man followed his father into “company work” and remained there for life, gradually working his way up the pay and prestige scale until retiring at age sixty-five with a modest but livable pension. Gone are the days when manufacturing work was dominated by Fordist regimes of organization, technique, and power. Only a minority of us actually make anything tangible with our work. Instead, the vast majority of us deliver intangible goods or services. Not only is the content of most work different these days, but its organization also has changed dramatically, as has the skill set required to do it and even the “temporality” of work.<sup>14</sup> Still, vestiges of the past remain, for better and worse. In the rest of this chapter, we consider several of the defining features of work in the new economy by engaging specific worlds of work.

We begin with the manufacturing world, where the changes in the past thirty years have been so profound that they have generated a new scholarly school of thought known as post-Fordism. Those who characterize today’s world of work as post-Fordist argue that, thanks to microprocessor



technologies and changes in consumer markets, work has shifted away from the rigid, standardized, and often dehumanizing methods and relationships of the past and toward a more flexible, open-ended, and humane set of practices.<sup>15</sup> According to this school of thought, the world of mass production has undergone a profound transformation. Instead of massive factories that stay in the same location for generations and employ a stable workforce, information technologies and fast-paced consumer demand have made small-batch, flexible production a reality. And where the machine designs of yesteryear lent themselves to a deskilled workforce and rigid worker-management polarizations, today's computer-based machinery requires a reskilled workforce, a return to a certain level of "craft" sensibility and discretion, and the softening of the formerly sharp division between workers and management. In this "kinder, gentler" post-Fordist world of production, workers are purportedly empowered to bring not only their manual skills to work but also their "intellective" skills—to integrate body and mind in pursuit of a holistic and productive work experience. Work in this paradigm, say post-Fordists, is no longer directed primarily by bureaucratic control but by organizational commitment.

*With computerization I am further away from my job than I have ever been before.*

Mill worker  
1998

Too good to be true? When sociologists of work conduct reality checks on these post-Fordist predictions about work, many of them conclude that while massive transformations in manufacturing technique and culture have indeed occurred, many of the negative features of Fordism nevertheless stubbornly persist. The pulp and paper industry is a case in point. Shoshana Zuboff's study of two mills making the transition during the 1980s to a computer-centered

manufacturing environment reveals that for workers, and perhaps in the long run for industry owners as well, the shift entailed profound losses. Most dramatic for workers was the disappearance of work's rich sentience. Where once they had monitored the pulp's progress through sight, smell, touch, and even taste, now they do so by watching a computer monitor from a separate space. As they shifted from physical proximity and embodied engagement to virtual surveillance and data interfaces, workers experienced a new kind of alienation—the loss of tangible connection to one's work, as expressed compellingly by a mill worker:

With computerization I am further away from my job than I have ever been before. I used to listen to the sounds the boiler makes and know just how it was running. I could look at the fire in the furnace and tell by its color how it was burning. I knew what kinds of adjustments were needed by the shades of color I saw. . . . Now I only have numbers to go by.<sup>16</sup>

According to post-Fordist theory, this loss is actually a sign of progress because workers are developing new, higher-order skills that make them more competent to live and work in contemporary society. It is argued that the move from embodied to abstract knowledge enhances the value of workers and reduces the skill/knowledge difference between workers and managers—in effect, flattening out hierarchies of power and prestige that once kept workers subjugated.

In contrast to the theory, however, Steven Vallas and John Beck found that in the manufacturing sector they studied, the old hierarchical logic was still solidly in place, albeit with a new look. At the top of the manufacturing power ladder these days are white-collar workers with computer science or engineering degrees who often view the embodied knowledge of the majority of shop floor workers as backward, prescientific,

and unreliable when compared with their own computer-based knowledge. As one process engineer admits,

It drives me *crazy* when operators say you can't control the whole process with the computers. They'll stand there and scrape the stock with their thumb-nail, and say they can tell me more about the stock than the \$40 million Accuray nuclear instruments we just installed! They're just feeling threatened by us, like all their secrets are being taken away, and they don't like that at all.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of *enhancing* worker discretion and autonomy per the post-Fordist model, those in authority at the mills Val-las and Beck studied worry that workers have too much freedom—that their way of knowing poses a threat to the legitimacy of scientific knowledge and to the company's bottom line, and hence needs to be curtailed by more standardized work regimes. Ironically, engineers tend to assume that if and when computerized systems crash or malfunction, manual know-how will fill the gap until things are back on line; however, the devaluation of the old embodied knowledge is leading to its rapid obsolescence, so the industry may face a permanent loss with unforeseen consequences. Those in the post-Fordist school of thought declare that contemporary transformations of work are good for workers, enhancing their skill base and autonomy and reducing workplace power inequities. However, evidence from the manufacturing sector paints a less sanguine picture. This evidence suggests that as “knowledge work” increases in economic and social value, “body work” and its local, experiential knowledge undergo a corresponding devaluation, creating an ever-expanding chasm between kinds of work and workers.

When we create this kind of bifurcated picture of work, says author Mike Rose, we show our class bias and blindness.

Our trumpeting of the complexity and rigor of knowledge work at the expense of other kinds of work reflects our own myopia, our inability to see the intelligence at work in manual labor and blue-collar work: “The mental processes that enable service. The aesthetics of physical labor. The complex interplay of the social and the mechanical. The choreography of hand, eye, ear, brain. The everpresence of abstraction, planning, and problem solving in everyday work.”<sup>18</sup> Rose offers a thick description of several kinds of blue-collar work, from waitressing to long-haul truck driving, to demonstrate that in spite of the new economy’s narrow definition and robust affirmation of knowledge work, the mind is impressively at work in “lower-class” forms of work as well.

In addition to the shift toward knowledge work, other hallmarks of the new economy are globalization, flexibility, and mobility. We can look to the apparel industry for insight into how these features of contemporary capitalism are reshaping the world of work.

Even if celebrity magazines and hit TV shows aren’t our thing, we are aware of how quickly fashion trends change in today’s world. Especially in women’s apparel, but also increasingly in children’s and kids’ and men’s areas, the pace of change is mind-boggling. To keep up with the market’s insistence on constant consumption, an endless stream of novel trends and products must be brought to market (and advertised, to create demand for them). More than perhaps any other sector of the economy, the apparel industry must be fast-moving and flexible. In this respect, it is on the cutting edge of the new global economy. Apparel is also the most globalized of industries, with fads going cross-continental in a matter of days and production moving around the globe almost as fast.

It is interesting to note that despite being on the economic cutting edge, the apparel industry’s basic method of production is not at all new. A woman bent over a sewing machine—that’s how my mother sewed my clothes when I

was a child, and that's how it is still done today. "In some ways," note sociologists Edna Bonacich and Richard Appelbaum, "the apparel industry is the epitome of free market capitalism because the barriers to entry are so low."<sup>19</sup> With no fixed assets, production can follow the cheapest labor, the lowest taxes and tariffs, and the weakest environmental regulation. Today in Mexico, tomorrow in China, next month in Los Angeles. Instead of establishing a permanent workforce and standardized work schedules, companies contract out work on an as-needed basis. When consumer spending lags or there is a seasonal lull, labor is simply not hired, and production takes a break.

The benefits of flexible production for apparel manufacturers are plain to see: low start-up and overhead costs; cheap labor available on demand and with no long-term obligations; quick response time to fluctuations in fashion and consumer demand; and few regulatory restraints. Perhaps best of all, point out Bonacich and Appelbaum, the contracting system means manufacturers "do not need to invest a cent in the factories that actually sew their clothes."<sup>20</sup> The main benefit for consumers is also easy to identify: a constantly refreshed array of apparel options, including plenty of low-price imitations of high-end fashion items.

By contrast, the benefits for workers and the environment are much harder to discern. Insofar as the apparel industry provides work opportunities for those who would otherwise be unemployed, it is presumably better than no work at all. But the character and consequences of that work are troubling. Contract work is famously unpredictable. One never knows if or when one will have work. Trying to live a normal life in the midst of such economic and emotional instability is an enormous challenge, particularly when the wages, when they do come, are pitifully small. In addition, the labor is repetitive and the hours long. In the United States, most garment workers are pieceworkers, meaning they get paid not by the hour but according to the number of pieces they

actually sew. Hourly wages are the norm in offshore production, but workers must meet steep daily quotas. In either case, the pressure to work as fast as humanly possible is intense. Moreover, because manufacturers do not invest in factories, workplace conditions are often quite bad. We tend to think of sweatshops as a thing of the past or as a practice of other nations, and they were, in fact, largely curtailed as a result of New Deal legislation protecting workers. However, sweatshops are back in full force these days. U.S. Department of Labor surveys routinely find that upwards of 90 percent of apparel firms are in violation of health and safety standards, including disturbing numbers of life-threatening deficiencies. When business is moved offshore in search of an even more permissive regulatory environment, conditions for workers are typically worse.

What the apparel industry models with great clarity is the double-edged character of the new economy's highly touted practice of flexible production. The ability to respond quickly to the demands of the market or of giant retailers is the industry's great strength, allowing it to function quite profitably in a complex, fast-moving, and ever-changing world. The apparel industry's successful embrace of the contracting system, just-in-time production, and as-needed mobility make it a poster child for the new economy. For workers, however, the new economy looks an awful lot like the old one: boring, repetitive work in oppressive conditions for poverty wages.

*The Limits of Flexibility.* We might assume that when the "new" values of today's economy are considered from a white-collar worker's standpoint, they fare much better. Here again, however, we find there are two sides to the story. On the one hand, today's flexible economy offers unprecedented possibilities for the enhancement of white-collar workers' autonomy and quality of life. On the other hand, work for white-collar workers is increasingly "greedy"—outcompeting other institutions, including family, for workers' time and

energy, and hence mitigating flexibility options. Moreover, new-economy terms like *flexibility*, *fluidity*, and *mobility* are sometimes simply euphemisms intended to rationalize and conceal negative characteristics of the economy like its increasing instability. That instability affects those at both the top and bottom of the work hierarchy.

Growing numbers of workers in today's contingent economy, including those with good educations and job readiness, wind up in America's fastest-growing job sector: the temp world.<sup>21</sup> Despite its nomenclature, for an ever-expanding portion of the population, this world is by no

means temporary. In fact, given global capitalism's preference for short-term gain in the midst of constant change, the temp industry is likely to become a permanent feature of the new economic landscape. Ironi-

cally, even as work has supplanted family as the foundation for personal identity in our culture, the temp phenomenon appears bent on undermining work's identity-founding role. In the temp world, workers' individual identities are often invisible, nonexistent. The temporary worker's name is even disappeared in favor of the generalized moniker "the temp." Temps are only temporary, so why bother learning their names? Just ask "the temp" to make those copies or enter that data. In an economy of fluidity and mobility, who has time to learn each other's names or develop anything other than instrumentalist relationships? Certainly, companies that rely on temporary workers have mostly instrumentalist intentions toward them—favoring them over permanent employees because the company doesn't have to provide them with benefits and can, when layoffs are necessary, give them the ax without having to include them in company lay-off statistics. While there are a few who love the freedom that

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temp work allows, the vast majority of temporary workers say they wish they had permanent employment. However, permanent employment is not a favored feature of the new

..... economy.

**Those whose identities have been closely tied to jobs find unemployment to be not only an economic blow but a personal and social humiliation as well.**

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For members of the professional and managerial class who find themselves out of work, today's "fluid" economy can be profoundly unsettling. Those whose identities have been closely tied to jobs find

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unemployment to be not only an economic blow but a personal and social humiliation as well. Some find solace and hope at upscale job clubs like Experience Unlimited in California, where yesterday's expectations about the work world meet today's sobering work realities.<sup>22</sup> In addition to phones, computers, printers, fax machines, and want ads, such agencies offer workshops to help members understand and adapt to the changed economy. A consistent theme is that predictability and continuity are hallmarks of a previous work era and should no longer be expected. Members are advised to downplay and even conceal their work histories and hopes for permanent employment. Instead, they are counseled to play up their flexibility and their comfort level with innovation, change, multitasking, and risk taking.

Work in the new economy, they learn, is not about stability or the long term. The new name of the game is the "project model"—that is, work organized around discrete, short-term projects instead of around the skills of a stable workforce. Because the skills needed for one project may not be the ones needed for another, workers will naturally come and go. Thus, one should prepare to be permanently on the job market rather than permanently employed. At Experience Unlimited, members work to reconstruct their identity and expectations to accommodate the new world. One



reconstructive strategy is what members have dubbed “the Thirty-Second Me”—a thirty-second self-presentation they can mobilize whenever and wherever a job prospect emerges, whether at a subway stop, in the checkout lane at the grocery store, or in the fellowship hall after church. One must be constantly on the watch for job leads, ready on a moment’s notice to perform one’s upbeat, flexibility-focused, innovation-embracing Thirty-Second Me. That kind of always-on job search is advocated by the following advice given in a pamphlet written for job seekers:

Seek every opportunity to meet people. Don’t wait until you actually walk into the meeting room to begin networking. If you arrive at the meeting place by car and notice a group of women in the parking lot, take the opportunity to strike up a conversation. “Are you going to the women’s network meeting? Did you run into that traffic on the freeway?” Whether you are in the elevator, the ladies room, or waiting at the bar, start talking.<sup>23</sup>

If a downside of the new economy is its cultivation of invisible or superficial identities, then surely an upside is the new freedoms made possible by flexible capitalism. More and more of us can work from home for at least part of the workweek, or we can increase our time at home with our kids by working the night shift. “Flextime” promises some control over what hours we work, while “flex-place” lets us decide where we will work. Particularly for those who desire “family-friendly” work, these kinds of policies have the potential to ease work-family tensions and significantly improve quality of life. Interestingly, however, only

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a fraction of workers take advantage of them. Even those who can afford to spend less time at work generally do not. Despite the professed desire of workers for greater flexibility with work and the increasing availability of such flexibility, relatively few white-collar workers use flextime and flexplace programs. Scholars usually point to organizational pressures to explain this paradox, and there can be little doubt that much of white-collar work culture encourages and rewards overwork. However, the anti-flexibility dynamics are not entirely institutional. In one study of the question, researchers found that even those who leave organizational structures and turn to independent contracting in order to have more control over their time nevertheless work as if they do not.<sup>24</sup> Many worry constantly that they will miss important business opportunities if they take time off of work, and many also experience feelings of guilt when taking time off. A similar story can be told about white-collar workers who take advantage of flexplace options to work from home. Thus, for today's white-collar workers, flexibility may promise greater freedom in relation to work, but in reality that freedom tends to be mostly rhetorical.

Where flexibility does come prominently into play for many white-collar workers is on the home front, where commitments to domestic work and family relations are stretched thin by contemporary work habits and pressures. Here we encounter another defining feature of today's world of work: the centrality of "emotional labor." More and more jobs today require voice-to-voice or face-to-face delivery of service, and workers of these jobs are often expected to deliver not only tangible goods such as a plate of food or directions to the nearest available exit but also intangible ones such as a spirit of hospitality, fun, or caring.<sup>25</sup> In addition to physical and intellectual labor, says sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, workers today must increasingly engage in emotional labor, practicing and polishing feelings and attitudes that make consumers feel good. Admittedly, the requirement

that employees aim to please the customer is nothing new; it's called customer service. However, Hochschild points out that more and more jobs depend for their success on interpersonal skills and the display of a prescribed set of emotions that must, to be effective, appear genuine. Consider, for example, flight attendants. Their job includes the delivery of tangible goods like safety information, in-flight beverages, and gate assignments, but at least as important is the pleasant mood they are responsible for creating. Flying involves a lot of noise and tension in a small, relatively uncomfortable space with restricted mobility; an important part of the flight attendant's job is to calm tensions, ease worries, and lift spirits. Toward that end, part of their job training focuses on the art of smiling—and not just superficial smiling, for as one airline boasts in a jingle, “Our smiles are not just painted on.” Today, service sector workers like flight attendants are expected not only to do their job well but to *love* doing their job, because, says Hochschild, “the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself.”<sup>26</sup>

To be able to exhibit a prescribed emotional disposition for a sustained period of time is not easy. One must manipulate one's feelings in order to achieve the expected mood and concomitant behaviors. Yet, in today's economy, the quality of service often *is* the product; “the product,” in other words, “is a state of mind.”<sup>27</sup> While such emotional labor is today part of the wage calculus—that is, workers are paid in part to be upbeat and friendly, or sincere and caring—what has not been adequately considered is the cost to workers. When even workers' feelings are controlled by employers, what consequences might there be for individual identity and integrity and, by extension, for authentic relationship with others?

*Who Cares?* For those who work in the rapidly expanding “care industry,” taking care of those who are too young, too old, or too sick to care for themselves, emotional labor can be the main output of one's work. Because the majority

of working-age Americans today work full-time jobs, the task of caring for the young, the old, and the infirm is increasingly contracted out to others. These others are paid to *care*, to be caregivers. But while they are mustering genuine care for someone else's loved ones, we might wonder about the impact on their own emotional lives and families. As Hochschild's investigation of the globalized nanny industry reveals, that impact can be devastating. Consider this experience of a Filipino woman working as a nanny in the United States:

I love Ana more than my own two children. Yes, more! It's strange, I know. But I have time to be with her. I'm paid. I am lonely here. I work ten hours a day, with one day off. I don't know any neighbors on the block. And so this child gives me what I need.<sup>28</sup>

American parents are increasingly hiring immigrant nannies to care for their children while they are at work. These nannies are usually women who live in impoverished nations where work is scarce. Many, if not most, of these women are themselves mothers who migrate to the United States in

..... search of work, leaving their children behind. Living in a strange country with few if any friends or relations, these women typically shower their American charges with the affection and caring they wish they could be giving their own children. Hochschild calls this heart-wrenching trans-

**"In this sense," says Hochschild, "we can speak about love as an unfairly distributed resource—extracted from one place and enjoyed somewhere else."**

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fer of care a "global heart transplant"—the extraction of love from the Third World to the First, a contemporary version of nineteenth-century imperial extractions of Third World gold,

rubber, and ivory. “Today,” reflects Hochschild, “love and care become the ‘new gold.’”<sup>29</sup> So, to support our work lives, we outsource the care of our children, creating decent work for someone else but at the same time producing a situation in which our child’s care comes at the direct expense of another child’s. “In this sense,” says Hochschild, “we can speak about love as an unfairly distributed resource—extracted from one place and enjoyed somewhere else.”<sup>30</sup> On the one hand, these workers freely choose to leave their families and migrate to another country. On the other hand, they are compelled by economic pressures beyond their control to try to provide for their loved ones, even if it means leaving them. This is globalization’s underbelly, to be sure, and as both workers and employers, we are mired in it.

Many of those of us affluent enough to hire nannies belong to the small minority of Americans who find themselves beset by the challenges of overwork. Where increasing numbers of our fellow citizens are grappling with unemployment or underemployment, we few find our lives overwhelmed by work. When Juliet Schor and others talk about “the overworked American,” they talk not about the majority but about this small but influential minority. For them—for us—work is sometimes wonderfully meaningful and fulfilling, and it is generally well enough compensated, but its grip on our lives is all out of proportion. Some of us clock in excess of sixty hours per week at the office; others of us bring our work home or find ourselves constantly preoccupied with it during “nonwork” hours. When given opportunities to work less or take a break, we frequently refuse. We pour ourselves into our work for a variety of reasons: it’s enjoyable, gives us a sense of purpose, lets us actualize our talents or commitments, allows us to make a difference in the world, grants us access to a desired social or

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cultural world, is less stressful or more rewarding than home life, funds the lifestyle and consumption habits we desire. Regardless of what motivates our work, many of us seem to have lost perspective. As the saying goes, we no longer work to live—we live to work.

This chapter's sketch of work in today's globalized world is admittedly partial, but it does establish that contemporary practices of working take place within a complex historical context and are shaped by multiple fields of knowledge and power. More importantly, it reminds us that work is a deeply important personal and communal practice. It is a person-forming, world-constructing activity that is absolutely fundamental to human existence and community. Work can also be, at the same time, a personhood-destroying, world-unraveling activity. Because it is both these things, and because in this historical moment it is in powerful flux, it is incumbent upon Christians to consider what our tradition has to say about work. What wisdom about working can we offer the world? Are there particular moments in Christian history when the everyday practice of working elicited insight of special note or relevance for our situation today? To these questions we turn in the next two chapters.