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Series editor: Tim May



**WORK, CONSUMERISM AND THE NEW POOR**  
Second Edition

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It is one thing to be poor in a society of producers and universal employment; it is quite a different thing to be poor in a society of consumers, in which life projects are built around consumer choices rather than on work, professional skills or jobs. Where 'being poor' was once linked to being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer. This has a significant effect on the way living in poverty is experienced and on the prospects for redeeming its misery. *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* traces this change over the duration of modern history. It makes an inventory of its social consequences, and considers how effective different ways of fighting poverty and relieving its hardships are.

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**Zygmunt Bauman** is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds, UK. He is recognized worldwide as one of the foremost commentators on the postmodern condition. He is the author of many books on social thought, including *Freedom* (Open University Press), *Modernity and the Holocaust*, *Globalization: the Human Consequence*, *The Individualised Society* and *Society under Siege*.

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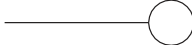


# Work, Consumerism and the New Poor



Second Edition

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## Issues in Society

Series editor: Tim May



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Work, Consumerism and the  
New Poor



Second Edition

**ZYGMUNT BAUMAN**

**OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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## Series editor's foreword



The social sciences contribute to a greater understanding of the working of societies and dynamics of social life. However, they are often not given due credit for this role and much writing has been devoted to why this should be the case. At the same time, we are living in an age in which the role of science in society is being re-evaluated. This has led to both a defence of science as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and an attack on science as nothing more than an institutionalized assertion of faith with no greater claim to validity than mythology and folklore. These debates tend to generate more heat than light.

In the meantime, the social sciences, in order to remain vibrant and relevant, will reflect the changing nature of these public debates. In so doing, they provide mirrors upon which we gaze in order to understand not only what we have been and what we are now, but to inform ideas about what we might become. This is not simply about understanding the reasons people give for their actions in terms of the contexts in which they act as well as about analysing the relations of cause and effect in the social, political and economic spheres, but about the hopes, wishes and aspirations that people, in their different cultural ways, hold.

In any society that claims to have democratic aspirations, these hopes and wishes are not for the social scientist to prescribe. For this to happen it would mean that the social sciences would be able to predict human behaviour with certainty. This would require one theory and one method applicable to all times and places. The physical sciences do not live up to such stringent criteria, while the conditions in societies which provided for this outcome, were it possible, would be intolerable. Why? Because a necessary condition of human freedom is the ability to have acted otherwise and to imagine and practice different ways of organizing societies and living together.

It does not follow from the above that social scientists do not have a valued role to play, as is often assumed in ideological attacks upon their place and function within society. After all, in focusing upon what we have been and what we are now, what we might become is inevitably illuminated. Therefore, while it may not be the province of social scientists to predict our futures, they are, given not only their understandings but also their equal position as citizens, entitled to engage in public debates concerning future prospects.

This new international series was devised with this general ethos in mind. It seeks to offer students of the social sciences, at all levels, a forum in which ideas are interrogated in terms of their importance for understanding key social issues. This is achieved through a connection between style, structure and content that is found to be both illuminating and challenging in terms of its evaluation of topical social issues, as well as representing an original contribution to the subject under discussion.

Given this underlying philosophy, this series will contain books on topics which are driven by substantive interests. This is not simply a reactive endeavour in terms of reflecting dominant social and political preoccupations, it is also proactive in terms of being an examination of issues which relate to and inform the dynamics of social life and the structures of society that are often not part of public discourse. What is distinctive about this series is an interrogation of the assumed characteristics of our current epoch in relation to its consequences for the organization of society and social life, as well as its appropriate mode of study.

Each contribution will contain, for the purposes of general orientation as opposed to rigid structure, three parts. First, an interrogation of the topic which is conducted in a manner that renders explicit core assumptions surrounding the issues and/or an examination of the consequences of historical trends for contemporary social practices. Second, a section which aims to 'bring alive' ideas and practices by considering the ways in which they directly inform the dynamics of social relations. A third section will then move on to make an original contribution to the topic. This will encompass possible future forms and content, likely directions for the study of the phenomena in question, or an original analysis of the topic itself. Of course, it might be a combination of all three.

With the above structure, content and ethos in mind, I was pleased to be able to launch the series with a contribution to an important social issue by a leading social commentator. Zygmunt Bauman has distinguished himself, through numerous publications, as a leading analyst of contemporary conditions and social practices. His work represents an all too rare combination: a concern to point out the likely consequences of current trends while refusing to abandon himself to idle speculations concerning the future, accompanied by a methodical, yet passionate, approach to his subject.

The first edition of *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* was no exception to those themes that are evident in his work. In this second



edition he has added new material on security, vulnerability, the effects of capital flows on different countries and changes on the shop floor through, for example, business process re-engineering. As new policies are devised, in seeking to reduce poverty one must ask in whose name, with what consequences and for what reasons? The settlers and the nomads link to issues to do with affluence, unemployment and redundancy. When we cease to ask those questions that are ignored through indifference as much as by their challenge to the powerful, the plight of the excluded by the relatively affluent inevitably grows, and we have seen this through the increasing gap between rich and poor.

Where Zygmunt Bauman is disconcerting for some to read, he is at his most challenging. His analysis refuses to employ those ideas and practices that are characteristic of what many have defined as modernity, as solutions to contemporary problems. Western societies, he argues, are no longer societies of full employment based on the productive capability of labour. As a result, people are now judged in terms of their abilities to be part of the consumer society. No longer seen in terms of productive potential, the poor are excluded on the grounds of being what he terms 'flawed consumers'. This creates new sets of social relations with different consequences for society and the organization of its social policies. Where social policy once sought to address these issues in the communities of which people are a part, they are now often addressed through the penal system as the justice model of punishment perpetuates the separation between people and the environment of which they are a part.

Tracing this history via the work ethic and changes from production to consumption and its effects on the organization of welfare states, he looks at the consequences of this for the poor and concludes with a look at possible futures in relation to past and current trends. He writes with an appeal to those who 'have' in their considerations of those who 'have not' and of the indifferences and deafening silences which surrounded the most atrocious acts in history. Thus, a complacent world view is to be guarded against by those who find moral indifference to the plight of the excluded to be unacceptable.

New solutions which require a questioning of the ways in which societies are ordered are needed. Growth for its own sake without due regard for the overall good of humanity, and the forward march of policies which individualize blame for social ills, are not the answer. In contemporary debates over poverty in which such perspectives are marked by their absence from 'official' deliberations, Zygmunt Bauman's work deserves serious discussion and consideration.

*Tim May*

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## Introduction to the first edition



The poor will be always with us: this much we can learn from popular wisdom. What popular wisdom is not as confident and outspoken about is the tricky question of how the poor are made to be poor and come to be seen as poor, and how much the way they are made and seen depends on the way we all – ordinary people, neither rich nor poor – live our daily lives and praise or deprecate the fashion in which we and the others live them.

This is a regrettable omission: not just because the poor need and deserve all the attention we may give them, but also because it so happens that it is in the image of the poor that we tend to invest our hidden fears and anxieties, and so looking closely on the way we do this may tell us quite a few important things about our own condition. This book attempts therefore to answer these ‘how’ questions, and so to tell the often overlooked, glossed over or wilfully concealed part of the story of modern poverty. While attempting to find such answers, it may also add a bit to our self-knowledge.

The poor will be always with us, but what it means to be poor depends on the kind of ‘us’ they are ‘with’. It is not the same to be poor in a society which needs every single adult member to engage in productive labour as it is to be poor in a society which, thanks to the enormous powers accumulated by centuries of labour, may well produce everything needed without the participation of a large and growing section of its members. It is one thing to be poor in a society of producers and universal employment; it is quite a different thing to be poor in a society of consumers, in which life-projects are built around consumer choice rather than work, professional skills or jobs. If ‘being poor’ once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer. This is one difference which truly makes a

difference to the way living in poverty is experienced and to the chances and prospects of redemption from its misery.

This book attempts to trace this change which took place over the duration of modern history, and to make an inventory of its consequences. On the way, it also tries to consider to what extent the well-remembered and tested means of fighting back the advancing poverty and mitigating its hardships are fit (or unfit, as the case may be) to grasp and tackle the problems of poverty in its present form.

The first chapter recalls the origins of the work ethic, which from the beginning of modern times was hoped to attract the poor to regular factory work, to eradicate poverty and assure social peace – all in one go. In practice, it served to train and discipline people, instilling in them the obedience necessary to make the new factory regime work.

The story told in the second chapter is of the gradual yet relentless passage from the early to the later stage of modern society: from a 'society of producers' to a 'society of consumers', and accordingly from a society guided by the work ethic to one ruled by the aesthetic of consumption. In the society of consumers, mass production does not require any more mass labour and so the poor, once a 'reserve army of labour', are re-cast as 'flawed consumers'. This leaves them without a useful social function – actual or potential – with far-reaching consequences for the social standing of the poor and their chances of improvement.

The third chapter traces the rise and fall of the welfare state. It shows the intimate connection between the transformations described in the previous chapter, the sudden emergence of public consensus in favour of collective responsibility for individual misfortune, and the equally abrupt emergence of the present consensus against that principle.

The fourth chapter is concerned with the consequences of all that: a new way in which the poor are socially produced and culturally defined. The recently fashionable concept of the 'underclass' is scrutinized and found to act mainly as a tool of the 'power-assisted' condensation of widely different forms and causes of deprivation into the image of one inferior category of people afflicted with faults common to them all and therefore presenting one 'social problem'.

Finally, the likely futures of the poor and poverty are considered, as well as the possibility of giving the work ethic a new meaning, more relevant to the present condition of developed societies. Can poverty be fought and conquered with the help of orthodox means, made to measure for a society no longer in existence? Or should we seek new solutions, such as the 'decoupling' of the right to livelihood from the selling of labour, and the extension of the socially recognized concept of work beyond that recognized by the labour market? And just how urgent is it to confront such questions and try to find practical answers to them?

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— ○ PART I

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## The meaning of work: producing the work ethic

What is the work ethic? It is, in a nutshell, one commandment with two outspoken premises and two tacit presumptions.

The first outspoken premise is that in order to get something which one needs to stay alive and happy, one must do something which is seen by others as valuable and worthy of being paid for; there are no 'free lunches', it is always *quid pro quo*, 'tit for tat'; you need to give first, in order to be given later.

The second outspoken premise is that it is wrong – morally mischievous as well as silly – to be satisfied with what one has already got and so to settle for less rather than more; that it is unworthy and unreasonable to stop stretching and straining oneself once what one has seems to be satisfying; that it is undignified to rest, unless one rests in order to gather force for more work. In other words working is a value in its own right, a noble and ennobling activity.

The commandment follows: you should go on working even if you do not see what that could bring you which you do not have already or don't think you need. To work is good, not to work is evil.

The tacit presumption without which neither of these premises nor the commandment would seem as obvious as they do is that most people have their working capacity to sell, and indeed may earn their living selling it and getting what they deserve in exchange; whatever they possess is a reward for their past work and their willingness to go on working. Work is the normal state of all humans; not working is abnormal. Most people fulfil their duty, and it would be unfair to ask them to share their benefits or profits with others, who could also fulfil their duties but for one reason or another fail to do so.

The other tacit presumption is that it is only such labour that has a value recognized by others – labour which commands salaries or wages, which

can be sold and is likely to be bought – that has the moral value the work ethic commends. This is, albeit a simple, summary of the form which the work ethic assumed historically in our kind of society, registered under the name of ‘modernity’.

Whenever you hear people talking about ethics, you should be pretty sure that someone somewhere is dissatisfied with the way some other people behave and would rather have them behaving differently. Hardly ever has this advice made more sense than in the case of the work ethic.

Since it erupted into the European consciousness in the early stages of industrialization, and in its many avatars throughout the twisted itinerary of modernity and ‘modernization’, the work ethic served politicians, philosophers and preachers alike as a clarion call to, or an excuse for, attempts to uproot, by hook or by crook, the popular habit which they saw as the prime obstacle to the new brave world they intended to build: the allegedly widespread inclination to avoid, if one could, the ostensible blessings of factory employment, and to resist docile submission to the rhythm of life set by the foreman, the clock and the machine.

The morbid and dangerous habit that the work ethic was meant to fight, destroy and eradicate at the time it entered the public debate, was rooted in the traditional human inclination to consider one’s own needs as given and to desire no more than to satisfy them. Once their habitual needs had been met, the ‘traditionalist’ workers saw no rhyme nor reason to go on working, or for that matter to earn more money; what for, after all? There were so many other interesting and decent things to do, things one could not buy but could well overlook, neglect or lose if one was running after money from dawn to dusk. The threshold of decent life was set low, was fixed and forbidden to cross, and there was no urge to climb higher once that threshold was reached. This is, at any rate, how the entrepreneurs of the time, and the economists who zealously made sense of their troubles, as well as the moral preachers eager to improve things, painted the picture.

Historical memory is held in safe keeping and history is written by victors. No wonder that this composite painting entered the classic canon of history telling, becoming the official record of the valiant battle waged and won by pioneers of modern reason against the irrational, ignorant, totally unreasonable and completely inexcusable popular resistance to progress. According to that record, the stake of the war was to make the blind see light, to force the silly and retarded to use intelligence, and to teach people how to wish for a better life, to desire things new and improved, and by desiring them to self-improve, to become better persons. Or, if need be, to compel the recalcitrant to act as if they had such desires.

As it happened, the true course of events was exactly the opposite to what the early entrepreneurs implied in their complaints against shiftless and laggard factory hands, and what the economists and sociologists took later for the tested truth of history. It was in fact the advent of the factory system that spelled the collapse of the love affair between the craftsman and his work which the ‘work ethic’ postulated. The moral crusade recorded as

the battle for the *introduction* of the work ethic (or as the training in the application of the ‘performance principle’) was in fact an attempt to *resuscitate* basically pre-industrial work attitudes under new conditions which no longer made them meaningful. The moral crusade aimed at the re-creation, inside the factory under owner-controlled discipline, of the commitment to the wholehearted, dedicated workmanship and the ‘state of the art’ task performance which once upon a time came to the craftsman naturally when he himself was in control of his work.

### Getting people to work

When John Stuart Mill complained that ‘we look in vain among the working classes in general for the just pride which will choose to give good work for good wages; for the most part, the sole endeavour is to receive as much and return as little in the shape of service as possible’,<sup>1</sup> he bewailed in fact the too rapid conversion of the craftsmen-turned-workers to the market’s unemotional, cost-and-effect rationality, and the too fast shedding of the last remnants of pre-modern workmanship instincts. Paradoxically, the appeals to the work ethic seem in this context to cover up the erstwhile drive to *exempt* factory employees from the rule of market rationality which seemed to have a deleterious effect on their dedication to the task. Under the guise of the work ethic, a discipline ethic was promoted: don’t mind pride or honour, sense or purpose – work with all your strength, day by day and hour by hour, even if you see no rhyme nor reason to exert yourself and are unable to adumbrate the meaning of the exertion.

The true problem which the pioneers of modernization confronted was the need to force people, used to putting meaning into their work through setting its goals and controlling its course, to expend their skill and their work capacity in the implementation of tasks which were now set and controlled by others and hence meaningless for their performers. The way to solve this problem was a blind drill aimed at habituating the workers to an unthinking obedience, while at the same time being denied pride in a job well done and performing a task the sense of which escaped them. As Werner Sombart commented, the new factory system needed part-humans: soulless little wheels in a complex mechanism. The battle was waged against the other, now useless, ‘human parts’ – human interests and ambitions irrelevant for productive effort and needlessly interfering with the parts deployed in production. The work ethic was, basically, about the surrender of freedom.

That true meaning, which the moral preachings masqueraded as the ‘work ethic’ had for the people on the receiving end of the crusade, was vividly portrayed in a statement left by an anonymous hosier in 1806:

I found the utmost distaste on the part of the men, to any regular hours or regular habits ... The men themselves were considerably

dissatisfied, because they could not go in and out as they pleased, and have what holidays they pleased, and go on just as they had been used to do; and were subject, during after-hours, to the ill-natured observations of other workmen, to such an extent as completely to disgust them with the whole system, and I was obliged to break it up.<sup>2</sup>

For all intents and purposes, the work-ethic crusade was a battle for control and subordination. It was a power struggle in everything but name, a battle to force the working people to accept, in the name of the ethical nobility of working life, a life neither noble nor responding to their own standards of moral decency.

The crusade was also aimed at detaching things people did from what they saw as worthy of doing and thus as sensible things to do; detaching the work itself from any tangible and understandable purpose it might have served. If fully implemented and absorbed by the logic of life, the work ethic would have replaced all other human activities, such as reflecting, evaluating, choosing and goal-setting, by 'going through the motions'. The motions, moreover, were dictated by rhythms not of one's own making. No wonder that the critics of up-and-coming modernity, in the name of the preservation of what they conceived as the truly human values, spoke in support of the 'right to laziness'.

If implemented, the work ethic would have also separated productive effort from human needs; for the first time in history, it would have given priority to 'what can be done' over the 'what needs to be done'. It would render the satisfaction of human needs irrelevant to the logic, and most importantly to the limits, of productive effort; it would make possible the modern paradox of 'growth for the growth sake'.

... a result of the introduction of machinery and of large-scale organisation was the subjection of the workers to a deadening mechanical and administrative routine. Some of the earlier processes of production afforded the workers genuine opportunities for the expression of their personalities in their work, and some of them even permitted the embodiment of artistic conceptions affording pleasure to the craftsmen ... The anonymous author of *An Authentic Account of the Riots of Birmingham* (1799) explains the participation of workers in the riots by saying that the nature of their employments is such that 'they are taught to act, not to think'.<sup>3</sup>

In the poignant summary by J.L. and Barbara Hammonds:

... the upper classes allowed no values to the workpeople but those which the slave-owner appreciates in the slave. The working man was to be industrious and attentive, not to think for himself, to owe loyalty and attachment to his master alone, to recognise that his proper place in the economy of the state was the place of the slave in the economy of the sugar plantation. Take many virtues we admire in a man, and they become vices in a slave.<sup>4</sup>



Indeed, in the chorus of exhortations to submit, placidly and unthinkingly, to the impersonal, inhuman and mechanical rhythm of factory work, there was a curious blend of such an essentially pre-industrial and anti-modern mentality of slave economy and the new bold vision of the wonderful, miraculously plentiful world which once the fetters of traditional ways were broken was bound to emerge as a result of human invention, and above all of human mastery over nature.

As Wolf Lepenies observed, the language in which 'nature' (that is, all things already shaped through divine creation, things 'given', unprocessed and untouched by human reason and skills) was talked about from the end of the seventeenth century on was saturated with military concepts and metaphors.<sup>5</sup> Francis Bacon left nothing to the imagination: nature ought to be conquered and set to work hard so that it could serve human interests and comfort better than it ever could when left alone. Descartes compared the progress of reason to a string of victorious battles waged against nature, while Diderot called the practitioners and the theorists to unite in the name of the conquest and subjugation of nature; Karl Marx defined historical progress as the unstoppable march towards human dominion over nature. No difference of opinion here, whatever their other disagreements, with Claude Saint-Simon or August Comte.

Once the ultimate goal had been spelled out, the sole significance ascribed to practical undertakings was the shortening of the distance which still separated people of the time from the final triumph over nature. The authority of other criteria could be successfully contested and gradually yet relentlessly rendered null and void. Among the progressively dismissed criteria of evaluation, the precepts of pity, compassion and care figured most prominently. Pity for the victims weakened the resolve, made the compassionate slow down the pace of change, and whatever arrested or slackened progress could not be moral. On the other hand, whatever served the ultimate conquest of nature was good and 'in the last account' ethical, serving 'in the long run' the improvement of mankind. The craftsmen's defence of their traditional rights, the resistance to the rational, effective and efficient regime of mechanized work which the pre-industrial poor had shown, were seen as another obstacle among the many which nature in its bland stupor had stood in the way of progress as if to stave off its imminent defeat. That resistance had to be broken with as little compunction as all nature's other shrewd contrivances had already been broken, debunked and defused, or merely swept out of the way.

The leading lights of the glorious world which was to be built with human wits and skills – the designers of machines and the pioneers of their use – had no doubts that the real carriers of progress were the creative minds of the inventors. James Watt argued in 1785 that all the others, whose physical exertion was needed to make the inventors' ideas into flesh, 'are to be considered in no other light than as mere acting mechanical powers . . . it is scarcely necessary that they should use their reason'.<sup>6</sup> While Richard Arkwright complained that:

it was difficult to train human beings ‘to renounce their desultory habits of work, and identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton’. To be efficiently used, the complex automaton required to be constantly watched; and few countrymen or women relished the idea of spending ten or more hours a day shut up in a factory watching a machine.

Their resistance to join in the concerted effort of humanity was itself the oft quoted proof of the moral laxity of the poor and the moral virtue of a tough and rigid, no-punches-held factory discipline. Getting the poor and ‘voluntarily idle’ to work was not just an economic, but a moral task. The enlightened opinions of the time, differing as they might have been from each other in all other respects, had little to quarrel about on this point. *Blackwood’s Magazine* wrote that ‘the influence by the master over the man, is of itself a point gained in the direction of moral improvement’,<sup>7</sup> while the *Edinburgh Review* acidly remarked, about the ongoing cultural crusade, that:

... it is not in [the charity] spirit that the new schemes of benevolence are conceived ... They are celebrated as the beginning of a new moral order ... in which the possessors of property are to resume their place as the paternal guardians of those less fortunate ... to extinguish, not indeed poverty – that hardly seems to be thought desirable – but the more abject forms of vice, destitution, and physical wretchedness.<sup>8</sup>

P. Gaskell, the author and social activist who went down in history as one of the most philanthropic, warm-hearted and compassionate friends of the poor, held, despite this, little doubt that the objects of his compassion ‘differ but little in inherent qualities from the uncultivated child of nature’<sup>9</sup> and that they needed other, more mature people to watch their moves and take responsibility for their actions. Among the contributors to the learned opinion the agreement was common that the present or would-be labourers were not capable of managing their lives on their own. No more than silly, unruly children were they able to govern themselves, to tell what was right and what was wrong, what was good for them and what harmful, let alone to see what might prove in the long run to be ‘in their best interest’. They were but a raw human material to be processed and given the right shape; at least for some considerable time to come they were bound to remain on the receiving end of social change – to be the objects, not the subjects, of the ongoing rational overhaul of human society. The work ethic was one of the pivotal items on the sweeping moral/educational agenda, and the tasks it set for the men of thought and action alike constituted the core of what came to be dubbed later by the eulogists of modern departures the ‘civilizing process’.

Like every other set of ethical precepts for proper, decent, meritorious conduct, the work ethic was simultaneously a constructive vision and a prescription for a demolishing job. It denied legitimacy to the habits,

preferences or desires entertained by the human targets of the ethical crusade. It painted the pattern for the right kind of behaviour, but above all it cast suspicion upon everything that the people earmarked for ethical training might have been doing while unschooled and unforced. Their inclinations could not be trusted; free to act as they wished and left to their own whims or predilections, they would rather starve than make an effort, wallow in filth rather than care about self-improvement, put a momentary, ephemeric diversion above more distant yet steady happiness, and all in all prefer doing nothing to doing work. All these morbid, uncontrolled impulses were part of the 'tradition' the emerging industry had to stand up to, fight against, and in the end exterminate. As Max Weber (in Michael Rose's apt summary) was to point out, looking back on the job already performed, the work ethic 'amounted to an attack' on the 'traditionalism of ordinary workers' who 'had operated with a fixed image of their material needs which led them to prefer leisure and to forego opportunities to increase their income by working harder or longer'. Traditionalism 'was disparaged'.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, for the pioneers of the brave new world of modernity, 'tradition' was a dirty word. It stood for the morally disgraceful and condemnable inclinations that the work ethic rose up against: the inclinations of the creatures of habit to settle today for what they had yesterday, for eschewing 'the more' and neglecting the better if getting it called for an extra effort (in fact, for surrendering to a crude, cruel, off-putting and incomprehensible, alien regime). The officially named enemies in the war declared by the work ethic against the 'traditionalism' of the pre-industrial poor were ostensibly the modesty of human needs and the mediocrity of human wants. The actual battles – most ferocious and merciless battles – were waged against the reluctance of would-be factory hands to suffer the discomfort and indignity of a work regime they neither desired nor understood, and most certainly would not have chosen by their own volition.

### **Work or perish**

The work ethic was meant to kill two birds with one stone: resolve the labour-supply problems of burgeoning industry, and dispose of one of the most vexing nuisances the post-traditional society had to encounter – the necessity to provide for the needs of those who for one reason or another could not catch up with the change of circumstances, make ends meet and eke out their own existence under the new conditions. Not everyone could be pushed through the treadmills of factory labour; there were invalids, the weak, sick and old who by no stretch of imagination could be envisaged as coping with the harsh demands of industrial employment. Brian Inglis portrayed the mood of the time:

... the case gained ground that the destitute were expendable, whether or not they were to blame for their condition. Had there been any way simply to get rid of them, without risk to society, Ricardo and Malthus would certainly have recommended it, and governments would equally certainly have given it their favourable attention, provided that it did not entail any increase in taxation.<sup>11</sup>

But no such method 'simply to get rid of them' was available, and in its absence another, less perfect, solution needed to be found. The precept of work – any work, on any condition – as the sole decent, morally passable way of gaining one's right to live went a long way towards finding it. No one spelled out this 'second best' strategy in more blunt and candid terms than Thomas Carlyle in his 1837 essay on Chartism:

If paupers are made miserable, paupers will needs decline in multitude. It is a secret known to all rat-catchers: stop up the granary-crevices, afflict with continual mewing, alarm, and going-off of traps, your 'chargeable labourers' disappear, and cease from the establishment. A still briefer method is that of arsenic; perhaps even a milder, where otherwise permissible.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, in her monumental study of the idea of poverty, unpacks this view in the following fashion:

Paupers, like rats, could indeed be eliminated by this method, or at least driven out of sight. All that was required was the determination to treat them like rats, on the assumption that the 'poor and luckless are here only as a nuisance to be abraded and abated'.<sup>12</sup>

In the efforts to cause the paupers to 'decline in multitude' the contribution of the work ethic was indeed priceless. That ethic asserted, after all, the moral superiority of any kind of life, however miserable, providing it was supported by the wages of labour. Armed with such an ethical canon, the well-wishing reformers could proclaim the principle of 'less eligibility' of all 'unearned' assistance which society might have offered its poor, and consider that principle a deeply moral step towards a more humane society. 'Less eligibility' meant that the conditions purveyed to people relying on relief instead of wages must make their life yet less attractive than the life of the poorest and the most wretched among the hired labourers. It was hoped that the more the life of the non-working poor were degraded and the deeper they descended into destitution, the more tempting or at least the less unendurable would appear to them the lot of those working poor who had sold their labour in exchange for the most miserable of wages; and so the cause of the work ethic would be helped and its triumph brought nearer.

These and similar considerations must have been high in the minds of the 'Poor Law' reformers of the 1820s and 1830s, who after protracted and at times acrimonious debate came to a virtually unanimous decision to

confine all the available assistance to the indigent part of the population (the part which Jeremy Bentham preferred to call the 'refuse' or the 'dross' of the population) to the *inside* of the poorhouses. This decision had a number of advantages, as far as the advancing of the work-ethic's cause was concerned.

First and foremost, it sorted out the 'true paupers' from those who were suspected of merely masquerading as such in order to avoid the discomforts of regular work. No one but the 'true pauper' would choose confinement to the poorhouse if the conditions inside were made sufficiently horrifying. The limitation of assistance to such as could be obtained in the drab and squalid interior of the poorhouse made the 'means test' redundant, or rather self-administered by the poor themselves: whoever agreed to be locked up inside a poorhouse must indeed have had no other way of staying alive.

Second, the abolition of outside assistance made the poor think twice before deciding that the requirements of the work ethic were 'not for them', that they could not cope with what regular work demands, or that the stern and in many ways abhorrent demands of factory work were a choice worse than its alternative; even the most niggardly wages and the most gruelling and tedious drudgery on the factory floor would appear bearable – even desirable – in comparison.

The principles of the new Poor Law also set a clear and 'objective' dividing line between those who could be reformed and converted to abide by the precepts of the work ethic, and those who were fully and truly beyond redemption and from whom no service for the benefit of society could be squeezed, however ingenious or unscrupulous were the measures taken.

Finally, the Poor Law guarded the working (or potentially working) poor from contamination by the hopelessly idle, separating them from trouble with the help of massive, impenetrable walls, soon to be duplicated by the invisible, yet no less tangible for that reason, walls of cultural estrangement. The more terrifying the news leaked from behind the poorhouse walls, the more the slavery of factory hands would look like freedom and their wretchedness like a stroke of luck and a blessing.

It can be guessed from what has been said so far that the project of sorting out once and for all the 'true paupers' from the merely pretending, malingering and counterfeit ones, and so setting apart the hopeless from the hopeful objects of working drill in order to stave off the danger of morally morbid contamination, was never to succeed in full. The poor of the two legally distinguished categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' did influence each other a lot, though not necessarily in the fashion which the reformers declared to be the main reason for the construction of poorhouses.

True, the establishment of new and particularly appalling and repulsive conditions for those who had been administered the plight of the paupers (or, as the reformers preferred to say, 'had chosen' it) made the poor more

receptive to the doubtful attractions of hired labour and so warded off the much publicized threat of contaminating them with idleness, but it *did* contaminate them with poverty, and so contributed heavily to the perpetuation of the same bane which the work ethic was meant, once triumphant, to eliminate. The dreadful ugliness of poorhouse existence, which served as the reference point for assessing the quality of factory life, lowered further the depths to which employers could push their employees' endurance without fear of either rebellion or withdrawal of labour. In the end, there was little to distinguish between the lot of those who embraced the instructions of the work ethic and those who refused to do so or had fallen by the wayside while trying to embrace it and to live according to its commandments.

The most insightful, sceptical or cynical among the moral reformers of early modernity did not in any case entertain the illusion that the theoretically elegant distinction between the two – genuine and pretending – categories of the poor could be expressed in two distinct strategies. Nor did they believe that such bifurcation of strategy would make much practical sense either in terms of economy of resources or in the form of a tangible ethical benefit.

Notably, Jeremy Bentham made no distinction between the regimes of 'houses of industry': workhouses, poorhouses and manufactories (as well as prisons, lunatic asylums, hospitals and schools, for that matter).<sup>13</sup> Whatever their ostensible purpose, he insisted, all faced the same practical problem and shared the same concerns: all of them had to impose one, uniform pattern of regular and predictable behaviour upon a variegated and essentially unruly population of inmates. All of them, in a nutshell, had to neutralize or cancel out the variety of human habits and inclinations so that one standard of conduct could be attained for all. The same task confronted the supervisors of industrial plants and the wardens of poorhouses. In order to obtain what they desired – a disciplined, repetitive routine – both kinds of inmates, the 'working' and 'non-working' poor alike, had to be subjected to an identical regime. No wonder that the differences in moral quality of the two categories, given such close attention and assigned such a crucial importance in the arguments of the ethical preachers and reformers, hardly ever appear in Bentham's reasoning. After all, the hub of his strategy was precisely to render such differences totally irrelevant to the stated purpose, and sufficiently impotent so as not to interfere with the outcome.

In taking such a stance, Bentham spoke in unison with the economic wisdom of his times. As John Stuart Mill was to write shortly after, political economy is not interested in human passions and motives, 'except those which may be regarded as perpetually antagonizing principles to the desire for wealth, namely aversion to labour, and desire of the present enjoyment of costly indulgences'.<sup>14</sup> Like all scholars searching for the 'objective', impersonal, will-independent laws of economic life, Bentham stripped the task of promoting the new social order of evangelical adornments so common in the work ethic debate right down to its hard core, which was

the entrenchment of routine, regular behaviour based on unconditional discipline aided and guarded by effective supervision from top to bottom. He had no time for worries about spiritual enlightenment or mind reform; he did not expect the inmates of a panopticon-like establishment to love their work (he took their incurable aversion to work virtually for granted) and did not bother to eulogize over the work's morally ennobling impact. If the inmates were to behave in line with the precepts of the work ethic, this could happen not so much thanks to their moral conversion, as to their being cast in a situation of no choice, one containing no alternative to acting *as if* the commandments of the work ethic had been embraced and absorbed into their consciences. Bentham did not vest his hopes in the cultivation of the choosers' virtues, but in the simplicity of the choice they faced, or the complete absence of all choice. In the panopticon, be it a poorhouse, a workhouse or a factory, 'if a man won't work nothing has he to do, from morning to night, but to eat his bad bread and drink his water, without a soul to speak to . . . This encouragement is necessary to his doing his utmost; but more than this is not necessary'.

Promotion of the work ethic inspired a lot of preaching from the church pulpits, the composition of many moralizing tales, and the mushrooming of Sunday schools which did their best to fill young heads with the right rules and values; but for all the practical intents and purposes it boiled down – as Bentham with his characteristic straightforwardness and sobriety of mind revealed – to the radical reduction of choice that the present and the intended factory hands were facing. The principle of no relief outside the poorhouse was one manifestation of the thrust to establish the 'no-choice' situation. The other manifestation of the same strategy was the induction of the hand-to-mouth existence – keeping wages at a level low enough to allow for no more than physical survival until the dawn of the next day of hard work, and so make another day of hard work a 'no choice', a necessity.

Both expedients entailed, though, an element of risk, since in the end they appealed willy-nilly to the rational faculties of their objects, in however demeaned a version: to be effective, both needed thinking, calculating persons at the receiving end. But thinking could be a double-edged sword; or, rather, a dangerous crevice left in an otherwise tight wall, through which troublesome, unpredictable and incalculable factors such as the human passion for dignified life or a motivation towards self-assertion, could crawl back from enforced exile. An additional insurance needed to be taken up, and none promised more security than physical coercion. Corporal punishment, cutting the wages or food supply below the subsistence level, and above all a continuous and ubiquitous surveillance and prompt penalty for the violation of any rule, however trivial, could be trusted to bring the plight of the poor yet closer to the situation of no choice.

This made the preaching of the work ethic look suspiciously duplicitous. Indeed, counting on moral integrity of the human objects of industrial drill

would have to entail the expanding of their realm of freedom – the only soil in which moral selves can grow and moral responsibilities can come to fruition. But the work ethic, in its early history at least, opted for the cutting down, or a complete elimination of, choice.

Duplicity was not necessarily intended, nor always conscious. There is no reason to suppose that the promoters of the work ethic were indifferent to the moral consequences of their actions, let alone that they were immoral themselves. The cruelty of the proposed and applied measures was honestly viewed as an indispensable part of a moral crusade, itself a powerful moralizing agent and so by itself a highly moral act. Hard work was praised as an uplifting experience – a spiritual enhancement which could be achieved only by the all-brakes-released service of the common good. If inducing people to hard work and making hard work their habit called for the affliction of pain, then this was a reasonable price to pay for future gains, not least for the moral benefits which the life of hard work would secure. As Keith McClelland pointed out, if ‘manual work was seen by many as a necessary, burdening, compulsion’, it was ‘also seen as an activity to be celebrated’,<sup>15</sup> on account of the honour and wealth it would bring to the nation, and not least for the moral improvement it would bestow upon the workers themselves.

### **Producing the producers**

Societies tend to hold an idealized view of themselves which allows them to ‘keep on course’: to spot and locate the scars, warts, and other blemishes spoiling their present look, as well as to conceive of a remedy sure to heal or smooth them up. Going to work – taking up employment, having a master, doing things which the master must have considered useful since he is prepared to pay to have them done – was thus the way to become a decent human fellow for all those whose decency or indeed humanity had not been assured in any other way, was doubted and had yet to be proved. Giving work to all and making all into workers was commonly seen as the recipe for all ills and troubles society might have endured because of its (transitory, as it was hoped) imperfection or immaturity.

Neither on the right nor on the left of the political spectrum was this historical role of work questioned. The dawning realization of living in an ‘industrial society’ went hand in hand with the conviction and the confidence that the number of people transformed into industrial workers was bound to grow unstoppably and that the ultimate shape the industrial society was obliged to assume would be a sort of gigantic factory, in which every able-bodied male was productively employed. Universal employment was the norm not-yet-fully-met, but represented the shape of things to come. In the light of that norm, being out of work appeared as *unemployment*, *abnormality*, a breach of the norm. ‘Get to work’ and ‘get people to work’ were the twin exhortations/conjurations that it was hoped



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