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The fox knows many things,
but the hedgehog knows one big thing.

—Archilochus

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Since 1968, the quarterly journal Telos has served as the definitive international forum for discussions of political, social, and cultural change. Readers from around the globe turn to Telos to engage with the sharpest minds in politics and philosophy, and to discover emerging theoretical analyses of the pivotal issues of the day.
THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK TO AMERICANS IS HARD TO OVERSTATE. MORE than half say they derive their sense of identity from their jobs, and that percentage jumps to two-thirds among those who have annual household incomes of $50,000 or more. While Americans grouse about their bosses and their pay as much as anyone else, they remain surprisingly positive about the work itself. According to one recent poll, an astonishing 93 percent of employed Americans say they like their jobs. How much they like them is also surprising. In direct contrast with leisure-favoring Europeans, Americans who work more than forty hours a week are reportedly happier than those who work less than forty hours.

Work’s importance to the American pursuit of happiness is just one reason we might be concerned about tectonic shifts occurring in today’s workplace, including ones that are putting the very notion of workplace in question. Downsizing, offshoring, flattening, automation, outsourcing, disruption, temping, part-timing—these are just some of the words defining and describing key features of the emerging workscape in America and, indeed, the wider global economy. One troubling consequence of these developments and practices has been a steady rise in the percentage of prime-age Americans who are not working, either because they are unemployed or because they’ve dropped out of the workforce altogether. Another disturbing trend is the increasing rate of underemployment, especially among recent college graduates who find themselves in jobs for which they are greatly overqualified. As The Atlantic recently reported, “The distorting effect of the Great Recession should make us cautious about over interpreting these trends, but most began before the recession, and they do not seem to speak encouragingly about the future of work.”

Those ominous words appear in an article bearing the even more ominous title, “A World Without Work.” The article teases out some of the direst implications of a 2013 study by two Oxford University scholars predicting that increasing automation “will put around 47 percent of total US employment…in the high risk category [of obsolescence]” in the next decade or two. That study may be a little heavy on technodeterminism, but sophisticated computers and robotics are already challenging the job security of workers everywhere from factory floors to professional office suites, whether the collars of the workers are blue, white, or pink.

Automation and technological innovations unquestionably rank high among the factors making the contemporary working world more precarious than the one that emerged and held sway during the decades following World War II, decades when phrases like job security and lifelong career meant something real. But changes started in the late 1970s, when, among other things, arguments for greater labor market flexibility began to gain purchase among corporate and industrial leaders, challenging
the assumptions and guarantees of job security. Strong unions, fixed workplaces, a predictable forty-hour workweek (and overtime pay for those who worked longer), employer-provided health insurance, pensions, and other benefits—these fixtures of a more secure working world began to seem less than assured.

The denizens of the emerging economy would soon acquire a name befitting their insecure status: the precariat. A portmanteau word combining the adjective *precarious* with the class designation *proletariat*, the term was coined by French sociologists in the 1980s to describe temporary or seasonal laborers, but it was soon adopted and modified by scholars to describe a broad, class-transcending spectrum of workers whose employment conditions are, to varying degrees, flexible, part-time, temporary, benefit-less, provisional—in short, precarious. In addition to migrant and seasonal laborers, members of the precariat include many of those above-mentioned underemployed college grads (some of whom move serially from one poorly paid internship to another), the ever-expanding legions of day laborers, temps, part-timers, gig workers, and the assorted fashioners of “self-assembled” careers. Such employment is not necessarily poorly paid; indeed, many high-flying independent management consultants command princely remuneration. But whether low or high, the denizens of precarity live day by day, on the edge, by their wits alone, with little or no institutional support, and often without the solidarity of fellow workers.

And the numbers of the precariat appear to be growing. In his 2011 book, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, British economist Guy Standing acknowledges that precise figures are impossible to determine. Nevertheless, he estimates that “at present, in many countries, at least a quarter of the adult population is in the precariat.” Standing elaborates on his understanding of this status:

This is not just a matter of having insecure employment, of being in jobs of limited duration and with minimal labor protection, although all this is widespread. It is being in a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity and few, if any, entitlements to the state and enterprise benefits that several generations of those who saw themselves as belonging to the industrial proletariat or the salariat had come to expect as their due.

Work in the precarious economy is the theme of this issue. In addition to exploring some of the conditions and factors giving rise to our present situation—see, in particular historian Louis Hyman’s essay on the gradual transformation of corporate practices in America—we examine the social and cultural implications, the costs and possible benefits, of life and work in what Allison Pugh has dubbed “the tumbleweed society.”

Among such implications are changing notions of what jobs and careers mean. Discouraged from seeing their working lives as something lastingly bound to a single factory, corporation, or firm, today’s workers, as Benjamin Snyder shows in his essay,
are being coached to embrace their autonomous condition. In the words of one career counsellor quoted by Snyder, “The day is gone when you can give your career to your employer.”

Some members of the precariat, as Brent Cebul argues, view their seemingly limitless autonomy as a kind of “liberation” from the stultifying ways of “paternalistic” companies. Both Cebul and Snyder invoke the analysis of prominent social critics from the fifties and sixties who decried the soul-crushing routines and conformity that were the price of the security of a “bounded career.” That critique resonates with people who (at least at times) proudly assert their independence, their initiative, and their ability not merely to bounce back from, but also to thrive amid, the ongoing disruptiveness of today’s work environment. A new generation of “disruptables” is forging new conceptions of vocation, as Philip Lorish shows in his look at the work culture of Silicon Valley—a culture that has in many ways become the test case and model for work in an economy of ceaseless “creative destruction.”

As much as precarity may give, it also takes away. The challenge of training future workers for this environment, as Mike Rose makes clear, is anything but easy. The pressures of sustaining a “self-assembled career,” as Carrie Lane calls an increasingly common form of work in the new economy, are grinding, endless, and often deeply demoralizing. Health and family stability become increasingly vulnerable when working hours, income, and even work are uncertain. Among the professional organizers (of lives, homes, and offices) that Lane discusses, the need for support and mutual aid has led to the creation of a new association that provides just that. But affiliations, associations, and institutions are particularly vulnerable in today’s workscape. As psychologist Howard Gardner argues in his essay, the winner-take-all mentality that features so prominently in the new economy has eroded the security and ethical authority even of professionals, including doctors, lawyers, and academics.

The relentless “marketizing” of everything, singled out by many social critics as the hallmark of the neoliberal era, has had deep consequences for how people think about themselves. When a harsh market logic suffuses everything from work to politics to the university, individual human subjects are reduced to units of capital, “rendered” in the words of political scientist Wendy Brown, “as entrepreneurial, no matter how small, impoverished, or without resources” they may be. As the alarming surge in suicides and drug-related deaths among middle-aged working-class whites suggests, many Americans are losing their sense of self-worth.

Yet despair can be cheap. The conditions of precarity can spur new thinking about the character of our economic lives and perhaps give rise to new ways of organizing work in imaginative ways that direct the logic of technology toward the sustenance of institutions—particularly local and humanly scaled ones—rather than their destruction. Charles Heying, in his contribution, reflects on the significance of craft and artisanal industries emerging in Portland, Oregon, and other locales across the country. Such developments may seem wistfully romantic. But to dismiss such imaginative alternatives for the future of work is to resign ourselves to a condition even worse than precarious.
I’ve always had the nagging sense that flying, as a form of travel, is cheating. When I was a boy, travel for me meant one thing: long car trips between suburban Baltimore, where I grew up, and central Illinois, where I had been born and where my grandmother and a great many other relatives lived, many of them farmers in the area around Effingham and Charleston. When you drove even that relatively short distance (about 750 miles), you developed, without even working at it, a surprisingly vivid sense of the land you were passing through: its contours and places, its changing patterns of vegetation and settlement and land use, the various ways its people made their living and ate and drank and worshiped and otherwise passed the time, and the continuities and discontinuities between regions of the country, from tidewater to piedmont to mountains to farmland. This was particularly true in the days of the “blue” highways, before the interstates were built, when travel involved passing through small towns, dodging their speed traps, choosing from among a handful of unpromising motels, and risking the local road food. You felt close to the countryside, just as the driver of a low-slung sports car feels close to the road.

Flying saves a lot of time, of course. And there are often great views out the window. But flying’s instrumental virtues demand a sacrifice of all else, including the satisfaction of knowing that, after having worked your way through the journey piece by piece, keenly aware of the land around you, paying your respects region by region, you have somehow fully earned the right to set foot on your destination. “The soul,” say the Bedouin, “travels at the pace of the camel.” By contrast, there is something almost gnostic, and dematerialized, about air travel. It allows one simply to circumvent all contact with, and most awareness of, what is between here and there, reducing to nil the possibility of serendipity, of some unsought discovery or unanticipated grace encountered en route. The best flight is an uneventful one—though it may leave the soul behind entirely.

It is not for nothing that the land through which we crawled, and by which we felt enveloped in our camel-paced car trips of yore, is today known as “flyover country.” Flying changes our relationship to the land, and reduces travel to a mere transposition—first here, then there—
with only the most minimal attention to anything between. In that sense, it is oddly reminiscent of riding the subway. No one uses the subway for its ambience, only for its speed. Any en route serendipities are usually of the unpleasant sort. And it’s a terrible way to get to know a city, if you are so inclined.

The ubiquity of GPS navigation in driving, and even in walking, has intensified this tendency to be exclusively goal oriented in our travel. Of course, we still have to traverse the in-between spaces, but we do not attend to them as closely. We do not use printed maps, and do not create mental ones, which in the past would place origins and destinations in a larger geographical context, and place them in relation not only to one another but also to the general feel of the city or the landscape, and to all the other potential destinations along the way. We merely rely upon the tactical commands of a female computer voice to tell us when to turn, and when to exit. Travel is all about the destination, the desideratum. And so the qualities of the lands and communities and neighborhoods we pass through become amorphous and undefined gray space.

We assume that we always know where we are going, and what we are looking for. The same assumption informs the way we view other forms of searching. I think of personal ads, or online dating, in which people have the luxury of spelling out exactly what they want in a partner. But what if what they most want, or need, is something that has never occurred to them, that has so far escaped the reach of their self-knowledge and their will? What if the destination they seek, and have punched into their GPS, is not the best for them, and surely not the only destination worth reaching? Where is the room for serendipity, for being blindsided by life and thereby made aware of something you might otherwise never know?

When my son was young and outdoorsy, we loved to hike together, and he would often tell me that what he most wanted was for us to go hiking in a deep woods somewhere and “get lost.” I was startled and fascinated by this way of putting it, and have never forgotten it. I think I understood what he was getting at, and why it might be a particularly strong desire for a young American growing up in the most charted, tabulated, measured, regimented, purpose-driven, digitized, and risk-averse society the world has ever known. “Getting lost” was partly about the frisson we experience when we break free of the everyday tyranny of our constant orientation toward ends and purposes, and get out from under the grid of assumptions and expectations that have been laid like a template over all of reality. But “getting lost” was also the presentation of a challenge—the challenge of finding, or re-finding, one’s destination through one’s own powers, working through the tangles and brambles of what was unknown and unexpected and unmapped, completely absorbed in the presence of the here and now. That seemed to me a wise and interesting way to travel then. It still does now.

— Wilfred M. McClay

PINK PILLS AND ECONOMIC MAN

In his 1982 book Gender, the social critic Ivan Illich made the provocative argument that the prevailing social and economic order, structured as an association of possessive individuals competing for scarce resources (i.e., the Homo economicus of economic theory), creates uniform and interchangeable men and women, who are believed to “perceive the same reality, and have, with some minor cosmetic variations, the same needs.” A system of unimpeded economic competition and commodification, he maintained, requires a “genderless sexuality” in which men and women largely say, do, desire, and perceive “the same thing.”

Just such a deep presumption of basic sameness underlay the recent and aggressive political campaign to win Food and
Drug Administration (FDA) approval for a drug—now commonly referred to as the “pink pill”—to treat “sexual dysfunction” in women. The pressure campaign, “Even the Score,” was orchestrated by a pharmaceutical company with a lackluster product—flibanserin—but the vigorous support of twenty-six organizations, from the National Organization for Women and the National Council of Women’s Organizations to the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals. The pro-pink pill forces claimed that it was “sexist” that men had drugs to treat sexual dysfunction while women did not. It was high time, they argued, that the FDA level the playing field by approving flibanserin, the availability of which would provide some small restitution for decades of prioritizing “men’s sexual dysfunction…over women’s.” Pressing this demand were members of Congress, 60,000 signatories to a petition, compensated thought leaders from the academy and industry, and powerful lobbyists working on behalf of Even the Score.

All of this activism came to a head at the FDA advisory panel hearings in June 2015, which one dissenting member described as “very high pressure” and “kind of an intimidating environment.” The intimidation worked. The advisory panel recommended approval by a margin of 18–6, and in August 2015 the FDA approved flibanserin to treat “acquired, generalized hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) in pre-menopausal women.” Within two days of this triumph of genderless sexual “equity,” the owners of Sprout Pharmaceuticals, whose one possession was flibanserin, sold the company for $1 billion and a share of future profits.

The flibanserin story speaks to our age. For many years now, pharmaceutical companies have raced to win FDA approval for a treatment for the “mental disorder” of low or absent sexual desire in women. But contrary to what Even the Score campaigners allege, “women’s sexual dysfunction” has not been overlooked. There is a whole industry of non-pharmaceutical therapeutic interventions, techniques, and training exercises, not to mention at least one FDA-approved apparatus for treating orgasmic difficulties, the Eros-Clitoral Therapy Device. But ever since sildenafil (brand name Viagra), the impotency drug for men, came on the market in 1998, there has been a fierce industry competition to get FDA approval for a pill, a patch, or a cream for women, with a number of competitors entering and exiting the field. The experience with Viagra, widely used recreationally, suggested the potential for a blockbuster.

One of the competitors was testosterone, the male hormone. Another was Viagra. After some eight years of testing Viagra on women, its manufacturer, Pfizer, gave up in 2004, acknowledging that a drug that enhanced blood flow to the pelvic region after sexual stimulation might not induce women to desire sex in the first place. At the time, a professor of clinical medicine at Columbia University made a troubling suggestion: “What we need to do is find a pill for engendering the perception of intimacy.” She seemed serious.

The German pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim thought it had such a pill in flibanserin. Originally tested in men and women as an antidepressant, the compound proved ineffective and was rejected by the FDA. But unlike most antidepressants, this one did not diminish sexual desire among the drug-trial participants; in fact, female participants scored higher than women on either a placebo or an approved antidepressant when asked “How strong is your sex drive?” Seeing an opportunity, Boehringer repurposed the drug for a different disorder.

In 2010, Boehringer sought FDA approval to market flibanserin, under the brand name Girosa, to treat HSDD. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defined the condition at that time (it has since been changed) identi-
cally for men and women. The key criteria: “A. Persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity. B. The disturbance causes marked distress or interpersonal difficulty.” In an apparent effort to prepare the market for the launch of Girosa, Boehringer also funded an epidemiological study, conducted by researchers with ties to the company, that suggested that 10 percent of women suffered from “desire disorder” (although more than a third of those so labeled suffered from depression, with other problems also present). There were serious profits to be made.

The FDA, however, found Boehringer’s data unimpressive. Two double-blind clinical trials testing flibanserin against a placebo found, in the words of the FDA, that “the treatment effect on [self-reported] desire was neither statistically significant nor clinically meaningful.” Compared with those taking a placebo, women taking the drug reported, on average, less than one additional “satisfying sexual event” per month. Nearly 15 percent of study participants taking flibanserin dropped out because of adverse side effects (compared to 7 percent of those on a placebo). An FDA committee—composed, incidentally, mainly of women—voted unanimously to reject the drug. Boehringer then sold flibanserin to Sprout, which had been formed for the sole purpose of trying again for regulatory approval.

Sprout renamed the drug “Addyi,” sponsored another clinical trial, and approached the FDA in 2013. The new trial showed marginally improved results over those from the two trials conducted in 2010, achieved by shifting the primary endpoints of efficacy on a self-rating scale of questionable validity. Further, as reported in The BMJ, almost all of the named study investigators were Sprout consultants or employees. A public-relations firm helped write up the results. Even then the drug was found to be little better than a placebo. According to the FDA, when findings from the two trials in 2010 and the one in 2013 were combined, “about 10 percent more Addyi-treated patients than placebo-treated patients reported meaningful improvements” in at least one of the primary outcomes—“satisfying sexual events,” or “sexual desire,” or “distress.” More than a third of the women in the 2013 study reported side effects. With such weak results, the FDA again demurred. Sprout appealed the decision and, in February 2014, was again denied.

Despite this track record, in August 2015 the FDA officially approved Addyi for HSDD, though with strong safety warnings. What had changed?

Sprout did no further clinical trials. What it presented to the FDA were additional safety data, including a study showing a lack of next-day driving impairments and a study, which, strangely, was done almost entirely with men, showing that interaction with alcohol was responsible for many side effects. But the big new development was political: the Sprout-supported Even the Score campaign. The Sprout cofounders also started spreading money to Democratic PACs, and members of Congress began lobbying the FDA.

The campaign got what it wanted, but what did it get? The letters and the lobbying presupposed, solely on the basis of claims by Boehringer and Sprout, that flibanserin was a “safe and effective medical option for treatment.” The evidence, however, suggests that it is neither safe—especially if the patient does not completely abstain from alcohol and many common medications—nor effective, and that the FDA had acted with good reason in its previous disapprovals.

But as important as the impact on health is the very question of sexual desire, and what is at stake in conceptualizing it as something that can be chemically regulated. The talk of gender bias and parity, couched, paradoxically, in the genderless language of “sexual dysfunction,” obscures
Talk of a biological lack of desire suggests that there is some normal level of desire in the human body, male and female, and implies that distress might arise directly from this somatic insufficiency. In this view, the pink pill works by mechanistically resetting desire to a more normal level—which also happens to be more in keeping with what is desired—and so the distress disappears. The complex and fundamentally interpersonal nature of sexuality, the differences between men and women, the larger social context of romantic ideals and expectations, standards of comparison, social pressure, and past experience: These issues and more are not so much denied as made irrelevant. Mysteriously, biologically, men and women want, or want to want, “the same thing.”

—Joseph E. Davis

Above all, that attraction appears to have little to do with a detailed program or platform, and far more with Trump’s successfully projected image as a fearless man of action who will, in the words of his ubiquitous slogan, make America great again. To many Americans facing a changing world and fearing that globalization is depriving them of a fair shot at the good life, not to mention basic security, Trump’s promise to do something makes him stand apart from a political establishment, right and left, that seems clueless and adrift.

What’s more, Trump promises to do dramatic things, take drastic steps. He’ll build a wall to protect Americans from Latino immigrants, who, he says, “have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems [here].” In the wake of the shootings in San Bernardino and Paris, Trump called for stern, even unconstitutional measures, from surveilling American mosques to barring Muslims from entering the country until we know “what’s going on.” In short, Trump will build barriers between America and the wider world to protect Americans from the corrosive, debilitating, and dangerous threats posed by people beyond the country’s borders.

Trump’s crude nativism is deplorable, but it is hardly a novelty on the American political scene. Many commentators
have rightly drawn parallels between his anti-immigrant statements and the nativist anti-Catholicism of the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s. In his classic 1964 essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” the historian Richard Hofstadter observed that American politics has time and again served “as an arena for uncommonly angry minds” engaged in “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” Hofstadter recognized the civic component of that paranoid style—that citizens are concerned not only with themselves individually but also with the fate of “a nation, a culture, a way of life.” In the nineteenth century, the paranoid style gained expression among voters who worried about “a Catholic plot against American values”; in his own time, Hofstadter saw that style at work in the Red-scare hysteria fomented by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Significantly, Hofstadter argued that the paranoid style had greatest force and appeal when citizens believed they were unable to “make themselves felt in the political process.”

The Know-Nothings—so called because, when asked about their party, they claimed to know nothing—rose to power by exploiting fear of Irish Catholic immigrants. In addition to winning many local offices, they took the statehouse and almost every seat in the Massachusetts legislature in 1854, while also making strong showings in Pennsylvania and New York. The following year, they gained control of most statehouses in New England. They displaced the Whigs as the Democrats’ primary opposition in other parts of the nation, and elected seventy-five representatives to Congress. They even fielded a candidate for the White House in 1856, former president Millard Fillmore, who won 873,000 popular votes and Maryland’s eight electoral votes.

What is most striking about the Know-Nothing movement was that it was ultimately about much more than anti-Catholicism. As the historian Tyler Anbinder makes clear in his book *Nativism and Slavery* (1992), many supporters of the upstart party voted out of frustration and disgust with the political system. As Trump would do 175 years later, the Know-Nothings promised to do something. They appealed in particular to antislavery voters who felt that neither the Whigs nor the Democrats were willing to address what they considered America’s most pressing problem.

To be sure, the Know-Nothings made good on many of their specifically anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant promises. In Massachusetts, Know-Nothing legislators passed laws requiring the exclusive use of the Protestant version of the Bible in public schools. Thanks to their efforts, Massachusetts and Connecticut disbanded Irish militia companies, while Maine mandated that no more than one-third of a militia company’s members could be immigrants. In Massachusetts, Know-Nothings condemned public support of immigrant paupers, and forced almost 300 immigrants to return to Europe. In various New England states, they barred the teaching of foreign languages, prohibited state courts from naturalizing aliens, sought to limit immigrant suffrage through literacy tests, and proposed waiting periods before immigrants could vote. Violence sometimes broke out between Know-Nothings and their opponents.

But if Know-Nothings focused on immigrants as the main cause of America’s ills, they gained a broad following because they tackled problems and concerns that went well beyond the immigrant question. In Massachusetts, Know-Nothing legislators who sought to encourage unity among Americans mandated racial integration in the same schools in which they had imposed Protestant Bibles. They passed laws to protect working people from creditors and, in Massachusetts, abolished imprisonment for debt and passed child labor legislation. In Connecticut, they passed a law stating
that ten hours was the de facto workday. Know-Nothings also pushed for greater regulation of banks, railroads, and other corporations. Whether successfully or not, Know-Nothings brought working people’s concerns to the legislative floor. They also sought to render government more accountable to voters by making more offices elective, increasing punishment for corruption, and promising to curb patronage.

When it came to America’s “peculiar institution,” Know-Nothing legislators came through on their promise to back US senators who opposed slavery’s expansion, including New York’s Whig senator William Henry Seward, who as governor had proposed offering public funds to Catholic schools. In Massachusetts, Know-Nothing legislators passed resolutions calling for restoration of the Missouri Compromise (to prevent slavery’s expansion) and repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act. And, in 1856, when Know-Nothing presidential candidate Fillmore emphasized the need for national unity, most Know-Nothings instead sided with the new Republican party’s candidate John C. Frémont because they considered the issue of slavery more pressing than Catholic immigration. Despite the party’s previous electoral successes, only thirteen percent of northern voters cast their ballot for Fillmore, and Frémont swept New England.

None of this is to celebrate or even to defend the Know-Nothings. They appealed to some of the darker impulses of the American electorate. They scapegoated and hurt people. But context matters. The Know-Nothings won not only because they were anti-Catholic but also because they appealed to and spoke for a great number of white northerners who felt that the politicians of the major parties were indifferent to their concerns. Opposition to immigration served as a way of bringing focus and galvanizing action on those diffuse issues.

Ultimately, however, the Know-Nothing movement could not sustain itself. As Mark Voss-Hubbard writes in Beyond Party: Cultures of Antipartisanship in Northern Politics before the Civil War (2002), the Know-Nothings came to power on the basis of “their millennial appeal to purify politics and governance,” but found that the real work of change was much harder than they anticipated.

To the extent that Trump’s supporters represent a new Know-Nothing movement, the lesson is clear. Globalization has resulted in significant cultural and economic changes that many Americans feel have been hurtful not only to themselves but also to the nation as a whole. Those same voters feel betrayed by a political elite that seems, in their view, more committed to cosmopolitanism and the international order than to national self-interest.

The loss of jobs and even of whole industries, drug use, violent crime, the spread of terrorism, and the challenges of an increasingly diverse society—all of these can be connected with some of the disruptive and dislocating effects of globalization. Trump’s brand of nativism shifts all of the blame for these and other problems to people and nations beyond our borders. But it would be wrong to see his supporters’ attraction to such nativism as simple xenophobia, though of course it can easily become that. Above all, Trump’s supporters want someone who will do something, almost anything, about problems they think are growing worse.

—Johann N. Neem
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WORK IN THE PRECARIOUS ECONOMY
Temps, Consultants, and the Rise of the Precarious Economy

Louis Hyman

In 1967, the celebrated economist and intellectual John Kenneth Galbraith argued in his best-selling book *The New Industrial State* that “we have an economic system which, whatever its formal ideological billing, is in substantial part a planned economy.” Though postwar American politicians juxtaposed US free markets to the centrally planned economies of the Soviet bloc, Galbraith recognized that the two were more similar than one might have thought. The private planning of corporations, whose budgets were sometimes bigger than those of governments, defined postwar American capitalism, not markets. Markets meant uncertainty, and postwar corporate planners eschewed risk above all else.

After the chaos of depression and war, corporate planners had worked in conjunction with federal policymakers to make a world that promoted stability. None of the top 100 postwar corporations had failed to earn a profit. This profitability was not an accident. Nor was it the result of seizing every lucrative prospect. Rather, it had come from minimizing risk in favor of long-term certainty.

This postwar economy had allowed employees and employers alike to plan for the future, assuring them steady wages and steady profits. Big business had to be big to contain all the functions it would not entrust to the market. Through their own five-year plans, Galbraith argued, corporations “minimize[d] or [got] rid of market influences.” This American planned economy—which had appeared to be the natural future of capitalism in 1967—began to fall apart only two years later, in 1969, nearly twenty years before the fall of the Soviet Union.

The collapse of this postwar economy came from the overreach of its new corporate form—the conglomerate—whose rise was legitimated by the belief in managerial

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Right: *Sudden visible tentacles*, 2012, by Peter Ravn; courtesy of the artist.
planning. But its essential moral underpinnings—stability for investment and, especially, stability for work—took more of an effort to dislodge. Yet in the 1970s and 1980s, this effort succeeded as corporations began to embrace risk and markets, undoing the stability of the postwar period. By the 1980s, the risk-taking entrepreneur had displaced the safe company man as the ideal employee.

Today, scholars and critics are all abuzz about “precarious” work. Instead of a job for life with General Motors or AT&T, we now have many jobs either in sequence or, increasingly, all at once. Freelancers in the US labor force are estimated to number around fifty-four million, as much as one-third of the work force. “Precarious” has become a catchall term that encompasses everything from day labor to temp work to the gig economy, and denotes flexible work that is insecure, temporary, and generally poorly paid. If the worker in this flexible economy is something new, so too is the firm, which, instead of hiring employees, increasingly outsources its labor needs.

Economists especially like to explain this shift to flexible labor in terms of the reduction of “transaction costs” (the costs of finding and hiring someone). One classic argument proposes that firms arose only because it was too expensive for individuals to transact every obligation. By that logic, the arrival of the Internet—with sites such as Craigslist and Upwork—easily explains the displacement of stable, firm-based jobs by the gig economy. But that explanation is too easy. The origins of precariousness in the rise of temp agencies and the fall of the postwar conglomerate run much deeper than the advent of digital platforms. The shape of our economy is made possible by technology, but it reflects a choice determined more by beliefs about the corporation than by lower transaction costs. Before they outsourced their labor, firms had to overcome old-fashioned shibboleths, such as secure employment for their work force, and they did so during the 1970s, long before the Internet arrived.

Since 1970, temporary labor has become part of the everyday fabric of work across all segments of society, from the bottom to the top. Temps we call “day laborers” linger outside Home Depot waiting in the early morning hours for a contractor’s truck while wondering if immigration will be sweeping through. Temps called “light industrial workers” assemble electronic components for Dell or move cardboard packages for Amazon. Temps called “management consultants” fly first-class all over the world to advise CEOs on global strategy. Only the CEO, whose pay has skyrocketed relative to that of frontline workers, has remained essential.

Simply adding up the number of employees of temporary agencies does not do justice to the importance of this new kind of work—the number, even today, amounts to only a small percentage of the work force. Consider, however, that by the 1980s that percentage was already greater than the proportion of workers in private-sector unions—a group we consider central to our economy. By 1989 (long before Craigslist), temps were being used in 97 percent of major US firms. The vast majority of companies
had decided that temporary workers should be part of how they ran their business. Flexibility, not stability, became the new ideal against which all decisions were evaluated. The triumph of this new ideal emerged from a crisis in corporate organization and an opportunity in new computer technology. The intersection of these two events would remake the American corporation and the American workplace.

The Rise of the Costocracy

Manpower was launched in 1948 as a service offering temporary secretarial labor—“secretary” being the designation of nearly 10 percent of all women in paid employment—but it would come to provide temps for nearly every kind of work. Like most innovations, the temp agency emerged from a crisis: in this case, a middle-aged attorney named Elmer Winter who found himself unable to find a secretary to type a “long and exacting brief” for the Supreme Court.9 Winter, who had somehow managed to start a law career in the middle of the Great Depression and then served in the Office of Price Administration during World War II, was by 1948 again in private practice, and he could not type. After calling all the employment agencies (which could provide only permanent staff) and finding no temporary secretaries available, he and his partner, Aaron Scheinfeld, called a “former secretary of ours who had resigned to have her first baby.”10 She came in to type, and the brief was filed. More significantly, Winter and Scheinfeld realized that their need for temporary labor was hardly unique. And so the first temp agency was born.

Manpower’s labor model—according to which the temp worked for Manpower and not for the company—was truly novel. It was not an employment agency but a temporary labor agency. Yet expanding Manpower beyond replacement secretaries proved difficult. The challenge was not the transaction costs of supplying workers, but the fixed ideas of management. Temporary workers of all stripes could be had same-day with the ease of a phone call. If you were an oil company drilling off the coast of Texas, for example, a call to Manpower could secure you “30 engineers, purchasing agents, clerks, and roughnecks.”11 If even obscure skills could be found so easily, why did companies persist in hiring permanent staff?

During the 1958 recession, Manpower attempted to introduce the “controlled overhead plan.”12 It was intended to show firms how to use temps to meet peak demand. The most obvious example was the Christmas shopping rush, although the need for seasonal work also challenged florists at Easter and accountancies at tax time. Larger numbers of staff were needed not just to bring in the harvest but also to perform all kinds of service-sector work. Instead of hiring too many employees, or even part-timers, Winter proposed that firms fill such jobs with temps.

“Planned staffing,” Winter told a room of management executives at a meeting of the American Management Association, would be as transformational to business as “scientific
management.” Manpower’s job, he believed, was to teach firms that they should not “do it ourselves.” But despite the evident savings, few managers were willing to risk their position on some newfangled work scheme when everything worked fine (as it did in the 1960s). Replacing a secretary for a few days when she got sick or went on vacation was one thing; replacing an entire staff was another. Beliefs, not transaction costs, inhibited flexible work forces.

Winter’s plan had been implemented only haltingly. Here and there, firms adopted his methods, but mostly they did not. He lamented his difficulties in convincing corporate executives to renounce what they saw as a moral compact with their work force (especially the white-collar work force). Convincing corporate America to outsource its work required a discovery of just how useful temps could be, and that discovery would take place only with the emergence of a new kind of work for which firms could not easily supply sufficient labor: data entry. Data entry would prove to be the opening wedge toward a larger world of flexible labor.14

Hiring workers for short-term projects such as data migration could violate corporate policies that guaranteed long-term employment. But at the dawn of the computer age, big companies nevertheless needed to switch record systems. When “Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company decided to convert its [paper] policyholder record to IBM [punch cards],” it used Manpower labor to carry out the task. To ask the permanent staff to do it would have drained morale and taken “about one year.” To employ workers just for this task, which was an option, “would have conflicted with a long-established policy of employment security.” Instead, the insurance company “lease[d] a crew of experienced key-punch operators to work in the

Among the “nevers,” the Kelly Girl never asks for a raise and never takes a vacation. “When the workload drops, you drop her.” Advertisement for the Kelly Girl temporary agency; The Office (1971).
evenings” so that the project could be done faster with more people (who didn’t need training). The office space could be used at night so the permanent work staff would not be disrupted. \(^{17}\) Temps made automation possible not only by running the machines at night but also by providing a feasible way to reconcile corporate employee policies that defended full-time labor with the need for one-time data migration from paper to punch cards.

Northwestern Mutual was not unique. For instance, “a large Milwaukee bank” faced the rising challenge of data entry, but the cost of the machines to enter the data—“Comptometers”—was prohibitive. Instead of hiring more people to work during the day, which would have required more machines, the bank hired “several hundred temporaries [to work] during a short evening shift” doing the data entry on the machines that the permanent staff could not. The hours of expensive overtime became hours of cheaper temporary labor. The temps worked at night, and the bank “got double use out of expensive equipment.” \(^{18}\)

Data migrations would not be one-time events. The migration from cursive to bits became an everyday necessity. Yet even as firms realized the ongoing need for data entry, they would continue to rely on large numbers of temps. In the short term, corporate policy might prevent the shift to temps in the name of “employment security,” but such policies could not resist the successful experiences of outsourcing office work. Temps enabled computerization, and Manpower capitalized on the opportunity by offering specialty courses in exactly these skills. Manpower’s “business training center” “specializ[ed] in the principles and techniques of operating data processing and other electronic equipment.” Despite its name, the business training center was more of a data-processing secretarial school than a true business program. Such electronic skills were in desperate demand in the 1960s as even smaller firms embraced the minicomputer. \(^{19}\)

Automation had long been the key labor issue for postwar futurists, but they often posited an artificial opposition between machines and people. Arthur Gager in 1952, for instance, the staff director of the National Office Management Association, framed automation as the choice between flexibility and inflexibility, between people and machines. “Machines should be used instead of people whenever possible,” he said. \(^{20}\) Temps would be a kind of employee that would be neither a person (as defined as a worker with privileges) nor a machine. The automated office, even after the first round of data migration, required “human attendants” for the machines, preferably “around the clock.” \(^{21}\) Temporary labor would “be a way to achieve more economical use of the sophisticated electronic machinery that larger offices already are using for accounting, filing, billing, data-control work, etc.” \(^{22}\) As offices migrated their data, a line was drawn between workers who would receive the pay and status of a good job and those who would, literally, toil in the shadows.

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As the economic stagnation of the 1970s set in, executives became increasingly receptive to Winter’s idea of using flexible labor to contain costs. In the late 1960s, a management consultancy did a study for Manpower that found that “workers were approximately 55 percent productive.”23 “This means,” Winter said, “that about half of the time the employee was at his or her desk there was a productive result.”24 The rest of the time the worker was getting paid for doing nothing. Whether or not this “55 percent” was true, the rhetorical effect was real enough. As Fortune had noted in 1968, “One of the paradoxical consequences of the private welfare state that unions and management have created to safeguard the permanent worker has been to make his temporary colleague look increasingly attractive.”25 Rather than the “I don’t care what it costs” attitude that ruled the 1960s, Winter believed, a new and ascendant “costocracy” would undo the expansion of the corporate bureaucracy.26

Winter envisioned a new balance in the work force in which temporary labor would play an essential part: “Many companies will work out a personnel program which will encompass 75 percent full-time permanent employees, 15 percent temporaries, and 10 percent part-time workers.”27 By the end of the 1960s, temporary labor had proved its worth as an alternative to the postwar promise of secure, well-paid work. But selling this new workplace arrangement required a thorough re-imagining not only of work but of the corporation itself.

Conglomerators and Consultants

At the end of World War II, a generation of executives, entranced by the logistical programs of the military and then of the seeming success of Keynesian economic policies, refashioned the American corporation along lines of long-term planning, long-term investment, and well-defined hierarchies. Control seemed possible, and, after the tumult of the Great Depression, necessary. The management whiz kids of the post-war period, including Robert McNamara, rose to power on the promise of total knowledge and perfect planning made possible through quantitative analysis and universal principles of management.28 The generalists were expected to be able to move from “government agency” to “large corporation” to “university administration” as a matter of course.29 With an MBA and the ability to conduct computer-driven analysis, these executives would be able to manage nearly any enterprise. Building on the computer’s wartime uses, “the new manager” would use it for “planning, control, and financial and personnel management.”30 This ideal of “total management information systems” was the apotheosis of the modernist ideal—at least in business.31

Faith in managerial genius, in turn, undergirded the rise of a new form of the corporation: the conglomerate. The conglomerate grew in importance during the
postwar period, emerging from the defense economy, the rising stock market, and the strict anti-monopoly laws of the period. Neither horizontally nor vertically integrated, the conglomerate corporation was a hodgepodge of different industries, without any overwhelming domination in any particular product line—evading regulators and investing all of those postwar retained earnings. Because conglomerates were big, but not monopolistic, they created both confusion and fear by disrupting traditional American notions of corporate malfeasance. Monopolies had long been how Americans characterized unfree markets. Monopolists were the economic equivalent of monarchs—and anathema to capitalist democracy. But in the 1960s, conglomerates were hailed as the future of capitalist organization. Investors admired the “synergies” made possible by the triumph of these men who claimed they could manage anything.32 Lammot Copeland Sr., president of the Du Pont chemical company, jested that “running a conglomerate is a job for management geniuses, not for ordinary mortals like us at Du Pont.”33 The future belonged to the managers who could run these conglomerates. In only a few years, conglomerators like Charles “Tex” Thornton of Litton Industries and James Ling of LTV had assembled companies that were among the largest in the United States, rewarding shareholders and confounding critics. James Ling, for instance, had needed just a few years to transform his Dallas electrical shop into the conglomerate LTV, at one point the twenty-fifth largest firm in the country.

The best and the brightest flocked to conglomerates to learn their secrets. At the height of the infatuation with them, in 1965, Time magazine reported that it was the “hard-driving Litton management” that boosted the value of Thornton’s acquisitions. Litton was seen as the best place for young executives to learn the most innovative management techniques. By the late 1960s, less than 10 percent of the Fortune 500 corporations remained undiversified. (Standard Oil and US Steel were exceptions.)34

But the conglomerators were revealed, through government investigations in 1968 and 1969, to be little more than accounting flim-flam artists. Although the mystique of their management science may have underpinned the conglomerates’ rising stock prices, it was clever financial dealings—not operational improvements—that enabled their actual growth. While these firms had grown in size, they had not actually grown in profit.

By 1969 these stock market darlings had disappeared, as a suddenly bearish market undid their leveraged financial schemes. Their apparent genius now suspect, the conglomerate innovators had managed to tarnish all of American big business. Denouncing the conglomerate was tantamount to issuing a blanket denunciation of large firms, since more than 90 percent of them had followed the new conglomerate model to some extent. Suddenly, bigness became weakness. In the aftermath, business experts found themselves searching for a new way to think about the corporation, now that the golden idol had been shown to be made of pyrite.
Conveniently, another model of the corporation had been developing during the mid-1960s at a new kind of management consultancy: Boston Consulting Group (BCG). Its founder, Bruce Henderson, like many early consultants, had a background in engineering. He spent the first decades of his career at Westinghouse, where he rose into senior management. Leaving Westinghouse, he spent a few years at Arthur D. Little (a consulting firm), but left to open his own shop in 1963. BCG began its life focused on strategy. Strategy consulting—which stressed revenue growth and corporate reorganization rather than cost cutting—was just coming into its own. Henderson realized that firms really needed help from consultants in thinking about how to organize their structure to maximize growth. Apocryphally, when batting around ideas for his new firm in the early days, Henderson suggested that it specialize in “business strategy.” One of the staff objected that that was “too vague.” Henderson, brilliantly, simply replied, “That’s the beauty of it. We’ll define it.” Although BCG led the way, other consultancies, including McKinsey & Company, followed suit, shifting their business away from the old cost-cutting time studies to new growth strategy studies, and in the process began to redraw the boundaries of the firm.

In the form of the “BCG Growth Matrix,” the redefinition of the corporation would be an idea that would remake American business. Created in 1968 and first published in 1970 in the form of an essay, “The Product Portfolio,” the Growth Matrix redefined basic corporate strategy by combining growth and cash into one easy-to-understand schema. Imagine a 2 x 2 matrix, with growth on the vertical axis from low to high, and cash generation on the horizontal axis, from high to low. Where the growth is low and the cash flow is high sits the now-commonplace term “cash cow.” For Henderson, the cash cow was a mature company that had a large share of the market and generated lots of cash, but whose market was not growing. Henderson’s key idea was that the cash generated by this “cow” should not be reinvested in the cow itself, but in new business areas experiencing high growth. Henderson’s jargony labels for these two kinds of companies—“stars” (the high-growth, high-cash-creating companies just above the cash cows) and the “problem children” (the high-growth, low-cash-creating companies situated diagonally from the cash cows)—mattered less than the new way of viewing them.

Henderson believed that good management was concerned not just with cash creation in a particular business unit but also with intelligently reinvesting that cash in other business units. Corporate leaders were not managers but investors. For the corporation, Henderson’s view demanded that even profitable units should be divested when their capital could be better employed elsewhere. A diversified conglomerate, from this perspective, could have a distinct advantage over single-purpose companies, one that derived not just from being in different sectors but also from operating concerns in different stages of the business life cycle. Postwar conglomerates had reduced risk, but they had not increased profitability, because postwar CEOs had never conceived of their collections of companies as an investment portfolio. They invested for growth,
not returns. When viewed through Henderson’s matrix, the strategic brilliance of many conglomerates’ industrial subsidiaries dimmed. Drawing a 2 x 2 matrix was, nonetheless, easier than reorganizing a conglomerate, which is where BCG and other strategy consultants stepped in.

Corporations reorganized for a variety of reasons, but according to Warren Cannon, McKinsey’s director of staff, the first question that needed to be asked would appear at first glance to be an obvious one: “What business(es) are we in?” For many conglomerates, whose interests could span multiple sectors, the answer was not obvious. Luckily, remaking corporations was the bread and butter of the top management consultancies. In 1972, about a third of McKinsey’s $45 million in profits came from reorganizing large corporations. The gap between strategy and structure was apparent, and firms turned to consultants for help. In just three years at the end of the 1960s, McKinsey reported that “66 of the nation’s top 100 industrial firms reported major organizational realignments.” And the bigger the firm, the more likely it was to be reorganized: “9 of the 10 largest companies, 16 of the top 25, 27 of the top 50,” were in that group of 66. McKinsey alone was responsible for reorganizing 100 firms, on average, per year. In other words, the multinational conglomerates that had overreached were the firms most in need of the reorganizing guidance of McKinsey and other consultancies.

As the 1960s became the 1970s, the common corporate panacea, at least according to the leading consultancies, was to restructure the firm so that it was smaller, more flexible, and clearly aligned with products.
vision of a new workplace. The reprinting of one of the book’s chapters, “The Coming Ad-hocracy,” in McKinsey Quarterly highlighted Toffler’s relevance to “top executives.”45 Toffler’s work was not only a bestseller. It was also a synthetic account of the ideas about flexibility that had been circulating since the mid-1960s, though presented with far more panache. Toffler rejected the idea of a future dominated by a faceless bureaucracy: “If the orthodox social critics are correct in predicting a regimented, super-bureaucratized future, we should already be mounting the barricades, punching random holes in our IBM cards, taking every opportunity to wreck the machinery of organization.”46 Yet Toffler observed that no one was doing this, because corporate bureaucracy was, he believed, already collapsing of its own dead weight. In Toffler’s view, there would soon be a liberation into “a new free-form world of kinetic organizations” that he called, in a horrid neologism, “ad-hocracy.”47 The term didn’t catch on, but his vision of the firm did, set in motion by teams of consultants who brought these ideas, and their own way of business, to the core of the firm. While the bureaucracy maintained the line between inside employee and outside contractor, the ad-hocracy would blur those distinctions.

Instead of jobs, there would be projects. Instead of bosses, there would be project managers. In the 1960s, consultants at top firms like Booz, Allen and McKinsey & Company had similar career paths. On average, 17 percent of consultants with an MBA made partner, while 83 percent left their firm within six years.48 Most of the older consultants, those over thirty-five years old, joined major corporations, while the younger consultants struck out in more entrepreneurial directions. The average tenure at consulting firms was about three years. Few consultants could expect to make a career of consulting. Permanent executives might work on a project for years on end, but consultants measured their projects in terms of days or weeks, only rarely in months. Assembling in teams, they received a problem from the chief executive or one of his lieutenants. Solving this problem, whether by rethinking an organizational chart or re-pricing potato chips, was their only task. These groups might have little specific knowledge of a particular client company or its product, but their expertise, it was believed, consisted in a general ability to ask the right questions and come up with the right answers, filtering the meaningful out of the noise of the known. Management consultants sold themselves as first-rate problem solvers with an institutional memory of the “hundreds, or rather, thousands of companies” they had served, and, as the London director of McKinsey told the BBC, they tried “to make that general experience available to our clients.”49 While consultants had organized themselves this way for decades, for the first time these practices were put at the core of everyday corporate operations.

The company man would soon be dead. The absence of permanent hierarchy, Toffler predicted, would reduce employee “loyalty.”50 Worker identity would become what an employee did rather than where he or she did it. Employees were not “company men,” and they had no commitments other than to their career and the current “problem.”
This ad-hocracy was remaking not just corporate work but worker identity, fashioning an employee who hopped from project to project instead of making a life in a single corporation. Employees who needed to be kept, who needed to be securely held, were those who made decisions in a rapidly changing world—not those that did the same thing, day in, day out. Tasks that remained routine were “such tasks that the computer and automated equipment do far better than men.” Computers might not have been able to predict the future, but they could do repetitive work. In this way, the worlds of temps and consultants converged. For more and more executive jobs, consultants—now determining strategy rather than just conducting time studies—acted like high-paid temps.

The boom in consulting fees came from the widespread restructuring in the aftermath of the conglomeration and resurgent globalization of the 1970s. Business leaders, who had become accustomed to decades of an unusually stable, US-centric way of doing things, now confronted a turbulent world market they did not understand. Consultants offered answers. No computer could replace a consultant, even as that consultant installed computers, and temps, to replace the permanent staff.

Toward the Precarious Economy

Temporary workers were not, as temp Annette Hopkins wrote to her state representative in 1975, luxury-seeking hausfraus, but “the victims of 12 percent a year inflation and 10 percent unemployment, [for whom] working for temporary agencies is an alternative to unemployment checks and/or subsistence lifestyle.” By 1970, as the growth of the male paycheck began to stall, women’s work, even for married women, became less a choice, if it had ever been one. Temporary work was not discretionary, additional income. It was not a flexible alternative to a normal job. Temp work was a job of last resort. Hopkins wrote, “I have been unable to find an entry-level administrative position, and working as a temporary gives me a flexibility in job hunting.” These two facts were intertwined. As more women entered the work force, the number of temp firms likewise increased. Women who wanted a “real job” found that many firms were now relying on temps, especially in growing areas like data entry. Hopkins couldn’t find a permanent job, and she blamed the existence of temporary firms as part of the reason for the lack of secure work. Temps were not a “small lonely band.” In Boston, she wrote, there were more than 100 temporary agencies. Employers had their pick. The flexibility was now one-sided.

While firms had more options, temps did not. “In times of stagflation,” Hopkins wrote, “client-companies find contracting with agencies for temporary workers an attractive alternative to hiring permanent employees.” Just as the agencies advertised, temps required “no costly benefits package, no paid sick time, no paid vacations, not even paid lunch time.” Clients could fire temps at will.
Elmer Winter’s dream had finally begun to become a reality. Manpower had fulfilled his ambitions, and it and its many imitators were beginning to remake American work. For Winter, this transformation created his fortune. He sold his majority stake in Manpower in 1976.54 For the rest of the country, Winter’s dream proved less felicitous. Organizing flexible workers for collective bargaining purposes proved more challenging than organizing regular workers. Reliant on workplace social cohesion, traditional tactics failed. Temps, as second-class outsiders, were never really part of the “family” of a workplace. Even shift work, in which they might be deployed with other temps, was unsteady. As one temp wrote, “I’ve thought about it some & I don’t see anyway you could organize temps—wouldn’t they just shit list us? & I need the work to live.”55 The automated office, backed up by windowless caverns full of data entry clerks seated before glowing green screens, was only rarely unionized.

“The office of the future looks very much like the factory of the past,” Karen Nussbaum, one of the founders of 9to5 (the most successful of the temp-organizing groups and the inspiration for the 1980 film of the same name) would write in Computerworld in 1982. “There’s nothing at all new about shift work, piece work, which is what pay per line of information is.”56 Yet there was a difference between temping and “the cottage industries.” Between the times of those two forms came the decades when factory work became a path to the middle class. The office had long defined the middle class, but now it had become a path leading back to the working poor. Some temps, of course, were hired into the ranks of permanent employees, but even those felt the pressure of knowing that they could be replaced. The temp agency of the 1970s might have formed a buffer between the workplace “family” and the turbulence of the economy, but it also built a bridge to a new kind of economy, where entire segments of work could be outsourced. Casual laborers could be easily replaced in the early factories, but temp workers were, by design, disposable.

Americans today cannot typically rely on just one job anymore, certainly not over a lifetime, and frequently not even at one time. For some of the new temps, notably the consultants, the work is glamorous and well paid; for others, such as office workers, it is a dead end. Some freelancers might revel in their flexibility, but all wonder and worry about the lack of benefits. The uncertainty of work, not just for office temps but for everyone, is both what is new and what has become normal. Although day laborers, office temps, and management consultants—as well as contract assemblers, Craigslist freelancers, adjunct professors, Uber drivers, Blackwater contractors, and every other kind of worker filing an IRS Form 1099—span the income ranks, they all have one thing in common: They are temporary.

Endnotes

2 Ibid., 26.

4 Galbraith, The New Industrial State, 82.

5 Ibid., 26.

6 According to a joint survey by the Freelancers Union and Upwork, two-thirds of freelancers rely on such work for their primary income. Freelancers Union and Upwork.com, Freelancing in America: 2015, 6, accessed December 30, 2015; https://www.upwork.com/i/freelancinginamerica2015/.

7 This line of reasoning began with market theorist Ronald Coase, but his now-famous paper only came to prominence in the 1960s after his later work on the problem of social costs (now called externalities). See Ronald H. Coase, “The Nature of the Firm,” Economica 4, no. 16 (1937): 386–405.


10 Ibid.


12 “To Californian stockbrokers on November 12, 1962,” folder 12, box 12, Elmer Winter Papers (EWP), Jewish Museum of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, 9.


14 An earlier version of this plan was called the “Controlled Overhead Plan.” Manpower had been experimenting with this idea as early as 1960. Through the Controlled Overhead Plan, Manpower encouraged firms “to keep their staffs at a level where they can take care of their normal requirements and use Manpower when the peaks or the emergency situations arise.” Quoted in “Remarks before the New York Society of Security Analysts,” January 26, 1961, folder 5, box 12, EWP, 9–10.

15 Data migration is a stunningly anachronistic term, but it is what we are talking about.

16 Elmer Winter, Cutting Costs through the Effective Use of Temporary and Part-Time Help (Waterford, CT: Prentice Hall, 1965), 6–7.

17 Ibid., 4.


19 Manpower, Annual Report, 1961, folder 1, box 11, EWP, 9.


21 Your Future, 90.

22 Your Future, 126.


24 Ibid.


28 Although a critique of knowledge would not become fashionable in the academy until the 1980s, management consultants such as McKinsey & Company associate Ridley Rhind saw the fissures in this metanarrative in 1968, about the same time as Michel Foucault.


30 Ibid., 8.


37 “The Product Portfolio” is now available at the BCG website; https://www.bcgperspectives.com/content/Classics/strategy_the_product_portfolio/.

38 The curious inversion of the axes has been maintained by writers on management strategy even though it runs counter to how all other graphs are made.


43 Ibid.


46 Ibid., 3.

47 Ibid., 7.


51 Ibid., 10.

52 Interview with Vincent O’Reilly, 3151-1.doc, box 36, PriceWaterhouseCoopers Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY, 1–15.

53 Letter 10.45.28, folder 945, carton 15, 9to5 Papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1; names changed to preserve privacy.


55 Unnumbered survey document, folder 951, carton 15, 9to5 Papers, Schlesinger Library.

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+ what is protest for?
In the early 1990s, Monika Miller was chosen to test-drive the office of the future. An associate media director in the Los Angeles office of the Chiat/Day ad agency, Miller learned she’d been freed of the burdens of her desk, chair, and personal office space. Her boss, Jay Chiat, had had an epiphany while skiing in the Rockies. He would no longer keep his creative workers penned in cubicles. His “virtual office” would be an expression of equality, featuring open, non-hierarchical communal spaces that would inspire creativity, collaboration, and flexibility—even playfulness. Unencumbered workers would sign out the day’s phone or computer from a tech “concierge.” News coverage exalting the firm’s brave new way of work featured photographs of the Tilt-A-Whirl amusement park cars Chiat installed for one-to-one meetings.

For Miller, however, liberation was “like a bad dream.” With nowhere to keep her supplies and files, she bought a Radio Flyer wagon. “Everyone thought it was so cute,” she recalled. “I’d be trudging down the hall,” she said, recollecting the daily search for a free space, “and they’d laugh and say, ‘Oh look, here she comes with that little red wagon.’”

But when their turn came to be liberated, there was little laughing among Miller’s coworkers. Soon, the office was a blur of motion, with staff repeatedly visiting their cars in which they stashed papers and pens. Others hid files around the office. “Every day,” Miller said, “there’d be these frantic email messages like, ‘Has anybody seen my binder? Does anyone know where my files are?’” Chiat soon conceded the need for small lockers. There, he offered with unalloyed scorn, workers could “put their dog pictures, or whatever.”

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employees newly habituated to turf battles, the lockers simply offered more fodder for jokes that they attended Chiat/Day High School.¹

Today, “hot desking” or “hoteling”—the use of flexible office space to enable a firm to employ more workers than its space would traditionally have maintained—is de rigueur, hardly worthy of the attention lavished on Chiat/Day nearly twenty-five years ago. Companies that now require some portion of their work force to reserve space prior to arriving for work include Booz Allen Hamilton, American Express, GlaxoSmithKline, IBM, and the BBC. The US government became a hot-desker, too, when the General Services Administration assigned 3,400 workers to its updated headquarters, which had previously housed just 2,200.² Internet start-ups Sharedesk and Zipcube even offer “sharing economy” desks and cubicles, making it possible for someone to work for one entity from the free space of another.

The casualization of the workplace has gone hand in hand with the rise of the precarious economy, characterized by flexible or temporary employment. “Precarious” workers cobble together a handful of assignments or contracts, working from home, coffee shops, or their car. According to one 2014 assessment, fifty-three million Americans do freelance work, including some 38 percent of millennials.³ In May 2015, the US Department of Commerce reported that the temporary services industry hit a record high, with 2.9 million Americans employed as temporary laborers or office workers.⁴ These workers join millions more who increasingly find their workspace transformed into liminal space.

White-collar office workers, too, more and more engage in piecemeal, project-oriented work. Many of these workers lack traditional office arrangements and, along with start-ups, have driven demand for coworking and collaboration spaces where freelancers or entrepreneurs pay a monthly fee for daily workspace. Often designed with a coffee shop or clubhouse feel, cowork spaces nevertheless require that members claim a new spot each morning and pack up their belongings each night. One estimate suggests that coworking membership may grow by 40 percent per year, passing one million by 2018. A survey of 2,700 coworking businesses found that 70 percent were struggling to keep up with demand, and 60 percent planned to expand.⁵

The hollowing of the traditional workspace, whether blue- or white-collar, and its implications for social provision are the subjects of Guy Standing’s The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class. In this extended jeremiad, Standing mixes a range of cultural assertions, episodic country-level data, and idiosyncratic comparisons and correlations to explain the origins and consequences of our present labor regime. Standing’s main objective is to sound an alarm: An “incipient political monster” is rising from the margins of the “neoliberal” economy. This monster, he explains, is the “‘bad’ precariat,” formerly working class, politically marginalized, “angry and bitter,” and “drawn to populist neo-fascism.” In contrast, a “‘good’ precariat,” comprised of mostly young, well-educated, Western workers, hope to “confront [its] insecurities with policies and institutions to redistribute security and provide opportunities for all to develop their talents.”⁶
Standing’s purpose is to persuade scholars and, one presumes, the precariat itself, that this emerging segment of the global workforce, which includes white-collar consultants, temporary laborers, and underemployed retail workers, “has class characteristics” and should mobilize to win a new category of rights decoupled from its traditional linkage with certain categories of work. A new system of “work rights” would contain a more capacious set of rights claims based on our new realities: modern work is done by people who are not employees; entire sectors of productive work were ignored by the old system (e.g., the caring economy); much work of social value (e.g., volunteer work) “should also become a zone of rights.” To carry out this seismic transformation, Standing urges the precariat, good and bad, to “demand construction of an international work-rights regime.”

As Standing notes, the possibility of “class” formation today is dependent upon many more variables than simply economic position. Yet in his account, the primary characteristics the members of the precariat share are absences: labor security, social security, positive work-based identities, community support in times of need, state benefits, private benefits, labor solidarity, even, he asserts, a future. Precarity, he argues, generates the “four A’s”: anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation.

Standing’s prescriptions for greater security, however, may fail to launch because his diagnoses overlook an important aspect of American life: workers’ evolving attitudes toward the ways, sites, and meanings of work. To understand shifting work regimes and their changing cultural implications, we must examine what work has meant for individuals’ sense of self and social commitments. Asking how older work regimes have shaped our current cultural moment suggests that Standing’s “Four A’s” and Monika Miller’s “liberation” resulted not simply from economic dictates but also from cultural forces that encouraged people to imagine and pursue new ways of work. Understanding these forces will be critical for shaping a new, more equitable regime of work rights.

The Postwar Work Regime—and its Discontents

As sociologist Arne L. Kalleberg puts it in *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*, the two and half decades following World War II constituted “an age of security.” Management, rather than the dictates of shareholder value, structured most firms’ interests. In unionized sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and transportation, labor was generally treated as a fixed cost, and unions negotiated secure and well-paying jobs in exchange for labor peace. Society defined a “good job” as one that offered stability, health insurance, and a pension. Meanwhile, “bad jobs” made up the sector of the economy that had always been precarious, occupied by African Americans, immigrants, and women denied access to “good jobs.”

By 1956, the United States had become a nation of clerks and industrial laborers. That year, more than twenty million Americans worked in blue-collar professions, while the total engaged in white-collar work was fast approaching twenty-seven million. Often forgotten today, these jobs, which included blue-collar work as well as a wide range of white-collar employment, offered little in the way of traditional *intrinsic* benefits—for example, personal satisfaction, or steady accumulation of new skills. Social theorists worried that the bureaucratic, hierarchical white-collar firm and the routinized, blue-collar
factory run according to the dehumanizing principles of Frederick Taylor’s scientific management also threatened to undermine the entrepreneurial individualism they considered exceptionally American. Social scientists turned their attention to “adjusting men to machines” and to discovering ways to nurture individualism in the bureaucratic workplace. The magazine *Applied Anthropology*, for instance, explored “practical problems in human engineering.”11

As Daniel Bell wrote in 1959, “Our emphasis has been on economic growth, increased output, but not on what kind of men are being molded by the work process.” Bell observed that “few individuals think of ‘the job’ as a place to seek any fulfillment…work itself, the daily tasks which the individual is called upon to perform” was something to be gotten over with as quickly as possible. Was “meaningfulness in work any less important” in 1959, he asked, than worker safety had been five decades earlier?12 A generation of sociologists pondered, as C. Wright Mills put it in 1951, what the new “economic and political situation” meant “for the inner life and the external career of the individual.”13

For Mills, in place of the independence, personal satisfaction, and autonomy that characterized the nineteenth-century entrepreneur or craftsman (all of which he overstated), modern work offered perverse intrinsic benefits. In typically acerbic prose, Mills charged that the “fetishism of the enterprise, and identification with the firm, are often as relevant for the white-collar hirelings as for the managers.” The “salesgirl does not think of herself in terms of what she does, but as being ‘with Saks’ or ‘working at Time.’” For office workers, Mills charged, “periodical salary increases and initial salaries were both ranked below such considerations” as “the state of the equipment, the appearance of the place, the ‘class of the people.’”14 (Mills thus anticipated the skewering, in the 1999 film *Office Space*, of a particularly debased worker and his cherished stapler.) Americans were at risk of becoming anesthetized by meaningless work, mindless consumption, and mass society. Mills zeroed in on the psychological roots and implications of the shifting moral order.

Stimulating individual creativity in the workplace was soon considered essential to nurturing individualism and the entrepreneurial spirit. As historian Jamie Cohen-Cole reveals in *The Open Mind*, research into the sources of creativity boomed after 1950. In 1963, John Gardner, president of the Carnegie Corporation, described creativity’s vogue in *Self Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society*. Creativity, he wrote,

> is a word of dizzying popularity…. It is more than a word today; it is an incantation. People think of it as a kind of wonder drug, powerful and presumably painless; and everybody wants a prescription. It is part of a growing resistance to the tyranny of formula, a new respect for individuality, a dawning recognition of the potentialities of the liberated mind.15

By emphasizing creativity in work, perhaps Americans could rediscover within the bureaucratized workplace the sense of individualism that had made the nation strong.

Amidst these concerns that new sites and habits of office work enervated the American spirit, a new species of advice writers emerged. The most influential of these “management theorists” was Peter Drucker, whose Viennese roots cultivated an intimate sense of the threats to individualism posed by the rampant bureaucratization of fascism and
Drucker contended that reforming modern capitalism by improving its signature institution—the corporation—could renew individualism and humanism. By the late 1950s, Drucker completed the heroic, psychological, and meritocratic reformulation of the office worker. Employees, he explained, “expect to be ‘intellectuals,’” and are deflated when “they find that they are just ‘staff.’” He re-labeled white-collar employees, “knowledge workers.” In 1960, Douglas McGregor amplified Drucker’s arguments in *The Human Side of Enterprise*, urging managers to nurture subordinates’ talents and initiative not through discipline but through cooperation, openness, and *merit*, fitting individualism to the modern corporate setting. Borrowing from psychologist Abraham Maslow, McGregor fused this meritocratic ethos to the kind of psychologizing that had vexed C. Wright Mills. Managers, he explained, needed to focus on “the satisfaction of higher-level ego” and encourage workers to meet “self-actualization needs.”

Intellectual rationalization or honorific titles (the 1960s saw organizational charts become cluttered with vice presidents) did little to alter the reality of workers’ struggle to reconcile themselves *psychologically* to the structures and character of the modern workplace. The latent frustration with work and the sites of work that critics had sensed in the 1940s and 1950s found popular, psychologized expression in the 1960s. By 1968, public opinion analyst Samuel Lubell charged, “our society seems to have developed a predilection, even craze, for reading psychological explanations into anything and everything that happens, moving as far toward this extreme as Marxians once did in assigning an economic cause to anything and everything.” One widely cited 1960 article described “talking, fun, and fooling” as a means of “psychological survival” that kept manufacturing workers from, as one put it, “going nuts.”

One instance of the flexible office space is the hotel desk used by employees at Facebook’s Menlo Park campus; David Paul Morris/Bloomberg/Getty Images.
Rather than adapt to the sites of work, the student New Left rejected dehumanizing factory or white-collar work, implicating each in the military-industrial complex, the seeming inevitability of nuclear annihilation, and the immoral prosecution of war in Vietnam. In seeking to “name the system,” as Students for a Democratic Society leader Paul Potter put it in 1965, young people believed that the sites and systems of work offered essential material support for inhumane and immoral developments at home and abroad and simultaneously inured a majority of Americans to those processes. “What kind of system is it,” Potter asked, “that creates faceless and terrible bureaucracies and makes those the place where people spend their lives and do their work…?”

Drawing upon a kindred sense of unease and outrage, in 1967 left-wing artist Ben Shahn published “In Defense of Chaos” in Ramparts, a magazine aligned with the anti-war, student left. Disturbed by his own complicity in allowing his life “to be well ordered for me by benign and unseen forces,” Shahn sought the spark of “freedom,” “the poetic element in a dull and ordered world!” Nevertheless, he closed with a more measured call, an acknowledgment, perhaps, that bureaucratic rationality was here to stay, though it could use a tousling from time to time: “I don’t propose to release Chaos and just turn her loose upon the human race—we still must have banks and plane schedules. But I think it would be nice if we just made a pet of her and let her go free from time to time to get a breath of fresh air and romp around a little among the Planned Society.”

Having earlier pondered the implications of mass conformity, the cult of efficiency, and workers’ discontents, Daniel Bell now puzzled over where such unrest was headed. The “adversary culture,” he posited, “declares in sweeping fashion that the status quo represents a state of absolute repression, so that, in a widening gyre, new and fresh assaults on the social structure are mounted.” Cautiously, he noted that “such disjunctions… historically have paved the way for more direct social revolutions.” Bell was wise to hedge his bets on widespread social revolution. The workplace and its workers, however, were ripe for change.

Toward a Flexible—and Riskier—Regime

As the cultural and radical left worked to name and undermine the system, the majority of American workers by the early 1970s sought simply to manage the seismic shifts wrenching the economy and its institutions. Studs Terkel invoked a bygone era to describe the upheaval afflicting the moral landscape of Western work. “Bob Cratchit may still be hanging on,” he wrote in 1972, “but Scrooge has been replaced by the conglomerate. Hardly a chance for Christmas spirit here. Who knows Bob’s name in this outfit—let alone his lame child’s?”

The 1970s saw workers undertake a range of efforts to humanize the workplace, carve out space for self-expression through work, and reclaim a modicum of control over their work. Unionized manufacturing employees, for instance, demanded greater creativity and independence in their work lives. Striking autoworkers’ “shoulder-length hair, beards, Afros and mod clothing,” Newsweek reported, suggested that employees at GM’s Lordstown, Ohio, plant were building “an industrial Woodstock.” Other factory
workers sought personal satisfaction by creating systems of job rotation, acquiring new skills and meeting new challenges. 

Such trappings and efforts formed the surface of a deep-rooted existential anxiety spreading among a generation of routinized laborers. Increasingly familiar with psychologized notions of the self, workers worried their mechanized work lives conveyed something essential about themselves. “I wanted to be somebody,” said Ford autoworker Dewey Burton. “I wanted to have some kind of recognition, you know, to be more tomorrow than I was yesterday.” But, he admitted, “I realized I was killing myself, and there wasn’t going to be any reward for my suicide.” Another worker lamented, “It takes so much to just make it that there’s no time for dreams and no energy for making them come true—and I’m not so sure anymore that it’s ever going to get better.” As Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset argued, more and more blue-collar workers dreamed of “being one’s own boss.” The ideal of “the ‘individual enterprise,’” they found, had “become by and large a working-class phenomenon.” 

Kindred anxieties found expression in white-collar office towers. In Boston, a group of female accounting secretaries organized to at once unravel the company’s hierarchy and seize greater responsibilities. After being fired for her efforts to democratize andhumanize her workplace, Karen Nussbaum went on to organize 9to5, a Boston “local” reflecting a national push by predominantly female clerical workers to subvert office hierarchies, often by focusing on office layout and design. As one secretary-activist told an interviewer, “I think I’d like to see more flexibility. And I think I’d do away with job levels and just make everybody more equal.” On practical and material levels, especially from female workers’ perspectives, the emergence of “dual-earner families,” Arne Kalleberg notes, made it important for workers to have an increasing degree of flexibility in their schedules. 

Faced, on the one hand, with the felt need to find personal expression through work, while, on the other, confronting sites of work drained of autonomy, flexibility, humanism, or creativity, a majority of American workers expressed themselves in the “psychological themes” Mills had initially located in the white-collar worker. The 1970s became a decade in which an updated self-help industry flourished. Thomas A. Harris’s *I’m OK, You’re OK* popularized the psychiatric practice of Transactional Analysis. The book was a *New York Times* best seller for nearly two years. Robert J. Ringer scored two *Times* number one best sellers with his proto-libertarian version of self-help, popularizing Milton Friedman’s rational, self-interested economics in *Winning through Intimidation* (1973) and *Looking Out for Number One* (1977). As Peter Marin put it in *Harper’s* in 1975, the “new world view emerging” focused squarely on the self, with “individual survival as its sole good.”

Prior to the arrival of a new economic order, then, the moral and cultural orders of work had begun to shift. Against the stultifying and alienating

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structures of postwar work, Americans sought new forms and sites of autonomy and authenticity. In this emergent order, as Charles Taylor argued, “notions like self-fulfillment” and “the ideal of authenticity” commanded the kind of “moral force” that had once characterized earlier cultural orders such as the Protestant ethic. As Taylor described it, the era’s “most powerful moral ideal” granted “crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature.” “Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it,” Taylor argued, “I am also defining myself.”

If the postwar years had been characterized by efforts to reconcile the traditional (mythical?) American moral order of individualism and merit with mass society and bureaucracy, the 1970s saw the tensions between the two explode. True individualism, authenticity, and autonomy were completely incompatible with bureaucracy. Postwar theorists and policymakers sought ways to shape the market and its sites of work in ways that might protect and nurture individualism. In the 1970s and 1980s, Americans turned to the market to create not only new ways and means of working, but also of defining themselves—psychologically, economically, and autonomously.

The values of individualism that flourished at the time offered cultural legitimation for the political project of unleashing markets and undoing collective forms of security. For privileged white-collar workers and tech entrepreneurs, the creative destruction of Silicon Valley and the high stakes corporate raiding of high finance offered many of the intrinsic psychological benefits an earlier generation of management theorists had sought to foster through creativity. The money was certainly good, but “the satisfaction of higher-level ego” was off the charts.

Typifying the new breed of management theorist, Tom Peters spread the gospel of obliterating bureaucracy, not adjusting workers to it. (The title of one of his books, Thriving on Chaos, suggested Peters’s earlier cultural affinity with leftists like Ben Shahn.) As he reported in Liberation Management, one admirable innovator “demolished the corporate superstructure” “in about 100 days”; another company succeeded in “decimating the central staff ranks.” As he gleefully put it, “Could 38 of every 40 ‘staffers’ really be excess baggage? Yup!” Compared to those who labored under the “old standards,” Peters crowed, the workers of the future would be “liberated as hell.”

For many in the working classes, however, the economic forces unleashed by the convergence of their embrace of the culture of individualism, deindustrialization, and the Reagan economy constituted a social crisis. The sociologist Jennifer Silva has documented the working-class transformations that have resulted from the broad diffusion of the therapeutic ethos and the adoption of the ethic of authenticity in the context of mounting precarity. In Coming Up Short, Silva describes, for instance, how “Monica,” a young working-class white woman, rejected traditional, routinized work and “redefined success in terms of passion and creativity.” Following a series of fleeting jobs and relationships, Monica found that depending on family or work to “center her
sense of self would leave her constantly seeking.” “I have a strong work ethics [sic],” Monica said, “but at the same time I’m not going to slave away at a job that I hate.” Her goal was to find work wherever her “passion” took her. Operating firmly within the ethic of authenticity, Monica found that the intrinsic benefits of finding her passions outweighed, for the time being, her interest in material or emotional stability.

This quest for personal authenticity and autonomy in the face of unreliable communities and institutions has become a defining feature of the modern working class. Silva details many cases of working-class whites and African Americans deploying therapeutic metaphors to “make a virtue out of not asking for help, out of rejecting dependence and surviving completely on their own.” As a twenty-eight-year-old line cook explained, “When I start feeling helpless, I just have to make a conscious decision to not feel that way…. No one else is going to fix me but me,” he said. The result is a new cultural “common sense” that rejects structural explanations for racism, sexism, or inequality. Because an older social contract was shredded (or never existed for some), structural inequalities must be overcome individually. As Silva argues, “The cultural logic of neoliberalism resonates at the deepest level of the self.”

**Seeking New Forms of Security**

Guy Standing’s concerns for a new regime of work rights thus sit at the nexus of global economic forces and a longer history of anxieties about the workplace. The class of worker Standing considers “good” has shown flashes of interest in forms of collective security. Coworking spaces indicate a quest for a form of solidarity. One in New York City, Prime Produce, is even organizing itself on the model of a medieval guild. As a founder described it, its “crafted social innovation” was designed to put human interaction first. Guilds, he said, “blocked innovation that dehumanized work” and “were always responsible to people first.”

Cowork spaces might also reflect a further segmenting and segregation of the market and workplace. As opposed to the vertically integrated office or factory that was home to at least a modicum of class, racial, and educational diversity, cowork spaces offer the potential to seal off entire segments of like-minded, similarly cultured, and educated workers who earn enough to afford workspace dues.

Such efforts to create new forms of security or solidarity may end up simply reinforcing inequality and social division. Avoiding this outcome may require rediscovering what working people share, not what they lack (the latter being Standing’s primary way of denoting the precariat). Across the precarious economy, workers identify control over their work and non-work time as a signal virtue. While critics lament that Americans work more for less than at any point since World War II, many Americans find great intrinsic value in working for themselves. Though many workers would prefer steady employment,
many also reject the prospect of repetitive, bureaucratized work. A poll of freelancers, for instance, found that nearly nine in ten would turn down a traditional full-time job if offered one.\footnote{Warren Berger, “Lost in Space,” 
*Wired*, February 1999; http://www.wired.com/1999/02/chiat-3/; Phil Patton, “The Virtual Office Becomes Reality,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1993.} A Florida man values driving for Uber because it allows him to set his own schedule (“I need to be able to drop the kids off at school and…take [them] to appointments”) while also enabling him to devote time to his passion: getting his “photography business up in full swing.” Uber, he maintains, “was the best way to keep from going to the government for assistance.”\footnote{Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 192.}

Today, then, we might pose anew a question Daniel Bell asked nearly six decades ago: “If the slogan of ‘workers’ control’ is raised, the simple starting point, perhaps, is to ask: workers’ control over what?”\footnote{Ibid., 14.} Flexible work arrangements allow workers to control their work and their time spent working. A historically unprecedented valorization of individual autonomy is a core cultural virtue today. Faith in broader institutions is weak. To forge new forms of security and solidarity, we must understand our neoliberal moment as a cultural as well as an economic construct. Until we do, appeals to social solidarity that necessarily form the basis of a critically important new regime of rights and security will fall flat.

\textit{Endnotes}


7. Ibid., 14.

8. Ibid., 283–4.


14 Ibid., 243.
16 Drucker and McGregor quoted in Saval, Cubed, 191.
17 Quoted in Cohen-Cole, The Open Mind, 1.
18 Donald F. Roy, “‘Banana Time’: Job Satisfaction and Informal Interaction,” Human Organization, 1959, 158.
25 Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, 8, 11.
27 Saval, Cubed, 252–55.
28 Kalleberg, Good Jobs, Bad Jobs, 179.
33 Ibid., 138.
Your next job will only last for three years,” says Bill Goldman, a former headhunter for a Fortune 500 company, to an audience of job seekers in a church in Richmond, Virginia.

The day is gone when you can give your career to your employer. He doesn’t want it and he won’t take it. So you need to take control of your career and do it yourself. You can either bumble through life from job to job, or you can make it so that jobs come to you rather than you having to go out and seek jobs.

Goldman’s counsel that we become more personally responsible for our careers is part of a larger discourse about how people should conduct themselves in today’s “flexible” economy. His directive echoes widespread calls for workers to become disruptable—that is, more entrepreneurial, risk ready, resilient, and open to change in order to thrive in workplaces that are more short-term oriented, unpredictable, and unstandardized. His advice, then, is about time—how people should expect their lives to unfold over time through a sequence of employment experiences—and about being—what kind of a person it is good to become in order to thrive in this temporal structure.

Time is political, particularly when it comes to work. We argue over labor policies and management practices that organize workers’ hours, days, weeks, months, and years, and draw on moralized conceptions of the human person—how people ought to be—in order to legitimate these arguments. Advocates of “disruptability” are engaging in a politics of work time that has begun to challenge the old nineteenth- and twentieth-century politics. Previous labor reforms were based on a rigid, standardized, and rationalized set of institutional temporalities—the eight-hour day, the forty-hour week,
and the bounded career—that oriented workers’ lives to a long-term time horizon. These arrangements provided workers with a common system of standardized temporal patterns that gave them some predictability about the future. But they were also deeply problematic for workers in ways that sustained intense debate and activism.

The new politics of disruption, which focuses more on unstandardized work arrangements and do-it-yourself entrepreneurialism, is changing the ground on which this long-standing debate between workers and employers occurs. How do workers today deal with the mandate to make themselves disruptable? What conceptions of the good life must they cultivate? Even the word *disruptable* is ambiguous. A disruptable industry is fixated on established ways of doing things and therefore has fantastic potential for innovation. What, then, is a disruptable person? Is it someone who is likely to be victimized by disruption because of his or her commitment to old ways? Or is it someone who has chameleon-like qualities that allow that person to thrive amid constant change? Or is it, most likely, someone who is a bit of both?

**A Culture of Disruption**

The eight-hour day and the forty-hour week were the result of generations of global unionized labor activism between the late 1700s and 1930s, which, in the United States, culminated in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938. The FLSA made the forty-hour week and overtime pay federal law for dozens of common industries, giving labor a standardized deal that applied across organizations. But labor’s move to embrace the fixed work schedule in the nineteenth century ended up being a Faustian bargain. As much as it gave them a clear language with which to negotiate—hourly wages, piece rates, and so on—it also ceded control over the rhythms of the labor process to a new breed of twentieth-century managers such as Frederick Winslow Taylor, who desired “scientific management.” Taylorism separated planning tasks from execution tasks, and organized the latter with such temporal precision that workers were often just on the edge of exhaustion. Through heightened surveillance and planning, managers extracted the most productivity from each second of a shift. While the steady rhythms of regular hourly shifts and wages made for a more predictable working life, they created a workplace that was simultaneously monotonous and intense. Wage laborers came to be ruled by the clock.¹

Taylorized workplaces, however, did not produce employees who would stick with a company long-term and develop into highly skilled workers.² Figures like psychologist Elton Mayo began to develop the burgeoning science of management psychology, which designed new temporal structures that would make workers *want* to work hard, even if work was still drudgery, and stay with a company long enough to refine their skills.³ The most important of these innovations was the “bounded career.”
Initially developed in manufacturing firms by some of Taylor’s direct disciples, the bounded career encouraged employees to understand their work in terms of an entire life trajectory within a single organization. Managers hoped this idea would create a more predictable and internally driven person who would sacrifice himself (usually only himself) to hard work in the present in order to reap future rewards in the form of status, insurance, pensions, and a secure retirement. Sweat for security—that was the deal.

We often forget just how dissatisfying this deal was in the eyes of many observers. The notion that routine, standardization, and security are goods in themselves sparked a widespread debate about the problem of conformity in America. Books such as Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956) pegged American organizational culture as having created a generation of torpid “yes-men” who were undermining national creativity and innovation.

The twentieth-century politics of work time was a struggle between labor and capital that never produced a truly satisfactory model for either side. Wins for labor, such as limitations on hours, were met with management adaptations that used those victories against workers. Wins for capital, such as the enshrinement of loyalty through bounded careers, were met with public outcries against conformity that delegitimized the big bureaucratic firm. Always clear, however, were the temporal terms of the debate: the hour, the shift, the workweek, and the career.

The stodgy culture of mid-twentieth-century corporations is partly what pushed some of America’s most innovative professionals to move to rural California, of all places, where they developed a new kind of organizational structure—the “start-up” model—that has now become an aspirational norm in many companies. Instead of a culture of orderliness, planning, and predictable hierarchy, this paradigm cultivates a culture of “disruption.”

**The Neo-Taylorist Worker**

A number of epochal processes, such as globalization, the mass entry of women into the labor force, the post-1970s economic decline, deregulation, de-unionization, and the turn to a shareholder value model of corporate governance, have begun to dismantle the temporal structure in which Americans have been debating work. New practices have arisen. Short-term, independent, and temporary contracting arrangements are beginning to replace the standardized, secure, long-term contract. This has placed more emphasis, especially among white-collar workers, on becoming a nimble “entrepreneur” rather than a loyal “company man.”

After decades of deregulation and de-unionization in the wage-labor sector, the standard nine-to-five shift and forty-hour week, which activists fought so hard to achieve, are being challenged by irregular scheduling. Employers rapidly adjust workers’ hours up or down with little advanced warning based on predictive algorithms of consumer demand. The Taylorism of the early twentieth century, which gave workers
one standardized set of instructions for carrying out their tasks, is being revamped by twenty-first-century neo-Taylorism, which employs digital surveillance technologies to track workers’ movements in real time, incessantly overhaul labor processes, and beep at workers when they are falling behind. All of these techniques are meant to produce a worker who, on any given day, can deliver a precise and context-specific amount of labor power according to employers’ needs and then be easily tossed aside.

On a larger scale, these arrangements add up to a downward shift of risk from employers to workers. Workers are expected to manage risks that were once happily borne by employers in the form of regular and secure employment, such as the problem of maintaining steady wages and appropriate levels of output during market downturns. But workers must typically manage these new risks without collective representation and a strong welfare system.

This is having deeply troubling consequences for workers’ health, psychology, and relationships. Many must coordinate multiple part-time jobs that have unpredictable schedules, a situation that often results in work-family conflict and an uneven flow of income. Job instability increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, substance abuse, and mental health problems. Neo-Taylorist labor systems have intensified work, even in many white-collar settings, leading to more complaints about overwork and stress. Independent contracting, while promising more control over work, in reality often results in a worker being at the beck and call of demanding clients and experiencing an inability to switch off. Irregularity is great for some, but for most workers it means chaos.

Disruption is also a powerful cultural narrative. It entails an almost paranoid aversion to the missed opportunity and champions the obsessive pursuit of good timing. Those who stick to a plan based on knowledge from the past, the thinking goes, will be blindsided by innovations from nimbler and more creative competitors. Rather than wait for that inevitable crisis, one should proactively destroy what is fixed and constantly rebuild. Never get comfortable, because in comfort lies blindness to the next opportunity. Disruption culture has filtered out of the boardrooms of the economic elite into management texts, self-help literature, and career development advice meant for the average worker.

All of this amounts to a regime that is different from the twentieth-century politics of time. Rather than pre-planned collective temporal institutions such as the hour, the shift, and the career, workers are focused on their own unique micro-temporalities, which they must often build, manage, and maintain by themselves in order to staff the kinds of fickle, short-term ventures in which companies wish to engage. If companies are going to be producers of disruption in the market, they need workers who are disruptable.
Learning to Love Disruption

Career Transition Ministries (CTM) is a volunteer organization run by a large Catholic parish in Richmond, Virginia, which I observed at the height of the Great Recession in 2011 as part of a larger study on the changing nature of work. It is one of thousands of charitable organizations set up to help unemployed workers navigate the new economy. CTM is the work of a parishioner who has leveraged his connections as an executive at a global insurance conglomerate to help jobless professionals find work. CTM does many things, from redesigning résumés to conducting mock interviews, but its main function is ideological: It teaches the job seeker to become disruptable.

CTM’s principal feature is a series of weekly public talks by experts in the burgeoning change management industry. These speakers attempt to arm job seekers with an emotionally evocative image of the future that is meant to replace the career model with which participants typically arrive. Kathy Kerr, for example, is an executive coach at a large commercial bank and a popular speaker at CTM. Having been laid off twice, moved her family across the country twice, and worked for three years as an unpaid intern in the human resources department of a local university to get to her present position, Kerr knows what her audience is going through. “I’ve been in your shoes,” she tells a group of about fifty CTM participants. “I know how hard it is to be out of work.” On the positive side, she realizes now that “I didn’t really like those first two jobs anyway. I wasn’t happy.” Even though she had to struggle as an unpaid intern, her perseverance has paid off. She is now able to “do what I always wanted to do.” With this story, Kerr draws a portrait of the disrupted life for today’s

Union rally in Washington, D.C.; Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg/Getty Images.
professionals—precarious and unpredictable employment that puts the onus on the individual to carve out her unique path.

While it is true that your employer will no longer watch over your career, CTM speakers argued that this is a sign of liberation rather than loss. Rather than the “death” of a career, one can see it as no longer having to “give your career away” (in the words of Bill Goldman) to someone who will not treasure it the way you do. In an echo of mid-twentieth-century critiques by Wilson and Whyte, the bounded career is thus likened to a prison. It makes people give up the one thing they should have as free individuals: personal responsibility. Speeches like these invite participants to embrace a new image of their long-term life trajectory as a path of never-ending job seeking. They are to become professional job seekers.

In the culture of disruption, positive emotions are the only things that truly propel us forward—not because they allow us to better enjoy life, but because they are strategic. The emphasis on positive psychology provides an important link between the public structure of unpredictable, unstandardized, and short-term work trajectories and the private world of workers’ hopes, desires, and motivations. Portions of several CTM meetings were dedicated to techniques for generating a reserve of positive energy that could be drawn upon at strategic moments. For example, during a talk by Jolene Jenkins, a life coach and therapist, participants were asked to place the tip of a plastic straw between their front teeth and hold their mouths in that position while she gave a short talk on the neuroscience of positive thinking. After a few minutes, we were asked to remove our straws.

“How do you feel?” Jenkins asked. “Can you feel your smile? It’s still there, isn’t it? You might even feel a little happier. That’s because the act of smiling has made your brain think you’re happy. Your brain is saying, ‘If I’m smiling, I must be happy.’” Jenkins explained that numerous “scientific studies” have shown that putting one’s body into states associated with positive moods can actually create those feelings. She then distributed a handout titled “Confidence Boosters,” which included twenty-eight techniques for generating a positive mood that will improve one’s job search. “Dress up every day—you never know who you will run into—people you meet/know need to see your ‘success persona.’” “Write emails with only positive words—eliminate ‘no,’ ‘can’t,’ ‘won’t,’ ‘couldn’t,’ ‘not,’ etc.”

In concluding her talk, Kathy Kerr encouraged job seekers to put most of their energy into networking because “people hire people they know and like.” However, networking was also discussed as a kind of good in itself, as an activity befitting the positive, outgoing, forward-looking professional job seeker. The hallmark of a good networker is one who can give a good “elevator speech”—a ten-to-thirty-second “sales pitch” for oneself to have at the ready when one encounters a networking partner. A good elevator speech, participants were told, “conveys energy,” “leaves a lasting impression,” and, above all, “sells yourself.”
The audience was then asked to break into small groups to present their elevator speeches and rate each other on a one-to-ten scale. Sitting across from me at a table with six other participants, Evelyn began her speech so quietly that it was difficult to hear her over the din of the room. After the others politely asked her to speak up, she nervously said, “I used to be a data analyst for the FAA and I’m looking for jobs as a data analyst.” Then she hesitated, saying, “I’m sorry. I can’t really do this.” The group immediately jumped in to support her. One group member gave some advice. “I noticed you started by saying ‘I used to be’ and not ‘I am’ an analyst. You should say ‘I am an analyst’ because the other way is a bit too rearview mirror.” Others agreed and asked her to try again. Her voice now slightly trembling, Evelyn peeped, “I am an analyst.” Becoming more upset, she started to tear up, much to the group’s horror. Others began to console her, one advising her to “write it down and rehearse it in the mirror until you can give it confidently and without thinking about it.”

**The Dignity of Disruption**

The job seekers I met were being asked to cultivate a particular kind of personhood that is willing to embrace risk, and perhaps even be excited about it. They were encouraged to meet disruptions in their working lives head-on and turn them into opportunities for innovation. I was taken aback by just how accepting of this idea many of them were, and at first interpreted it as a kind of coping mechanism. Over time, however, I began to see that embracing disruptable personhood is something more. It also provides access to new and seductive understandings of the self.

The first time I talked to Linda, a sixty-year-old laid-off administrative assistant, she walked me through the story of her working life, which had involved nearly half a dozen positions and companies over forty years. I interviewed her again a year later and learned that she had been hired by another corporation, this time a midsize commercial bank, and once again let go after less than a year. The company had hired a new CEO and decided to dissolve the department Linda was working in by moving her tasks online. Linda narrated her story of job loss with the kind of calm detachment of someone for whom work crises are a normal state of affairs. She said she was “ecstatic” after first landing the job. It was a “perfect fit” and paid just $2,000 per year less than her previous position. But the excitement wore off quickly. She described an unsettling and all-pervading anxiety: It was “always in the back of my mind that this position may be abolished, and I wondered how I would handle that. I found that I was treading very lightly. I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Linda’s worries were confirmed when her managers warned that they planned to abolish her position in roughly three months. They would not let her tell her colleagues of the plan, however. Nor did they give her an exact date of termination. During those
three months, she was tasked with secretly putting herself out of a job by establishing new online systems that could automate her work. She was still working hard, but now with full knowledge that every hour spent on work was an hour closer to unemployment. “I’d much rather have the immediate layoff or firing or termination or whatever you want to call it,” Linda said, “because it’s done, it’s over with, and maybe I would have blamed the company more then. But how could I blame the company when they told me for three months what they were doing?” Through a kind of planned unpredictable impermanence, the company passed the emotional risk of worrying about commitment onto Linda’s shoulders.

Despite being saddled with worries about the proper level of commitment, Linda was determined to forgive, accept, and remain positive—a determination that appears to be a consistent finding in research on American job seekers. She had, for example, covered her bedroom walls with positive sayings, such as “Dare to try” and “If you risk nothing, you risk everything.” On this level, Linda’s embrace of disruption was a way to cope with her dire circumstances. She had cultivated an emotional life that was defiantly disruption-proof—an almost aggressive positivity that provided inner stability in the face of a constantly changing work identity.

On another level, embracing disruption opened up new possibilities for the self, which Linda felt would have been impossible to achieve under the old careerist mentality of long-term dedication to a single organization:

The number of people I’ve seen now who were in positions that they were not happy in, but that they didn’t know they were not happy in, is staggering. They lose their job…and then figure out that they shouldn’t have been doing that job for thirty years anyway. And it’s those people that are the positive ones.

Disruption allowed her to honor the core self—the “real me”—without getting attached to the outer working self—an assemblage of skill sets, titles, and roles. In this sense, disruption was a liberation from the meaningless security that came with becoming an Organization (Wo)man. Toward the end of our interview, Linda finally confided that even though her most recent job was “probably the best gig I’ve ever had,” she had been getting restless. “I was ready to move on, honestly…. Because I was getting bored with what I was doing. So, instead of moving on, I moved out. So, now I can start all over again.” There can be dignity, even a certain thrill, in becoming disruptable.

**Fragmented and Unsustainable**

The turn to flexibility in America has transformed the grounds of the debate between workers and employers by fragmenting the shared social basis of time. But public discourse—the terms of the debate—has not yet caught up with this fragmentation, and
remains remarkably inarticulate about urgent problems. It is as if everyone is isolated in her own unique, personalized temporality—my schedule, my contract, my latest gig, my brand, my network—and cannot figure out which collective temporal structures to fight for or against. As a result, we are not really debating at all.

Public discourse about work time is particularly inarticulate about the fact that there are clear winners and losers in the politics of disruption. Take the word *flexibility*, for example, perhaps the most frequently discussed quality of disrupted industries, jobs, and people. As *New York Times* reporter Jodi Kantor notes, flexibility has become “an alluring word for white-collar workers, who may desire, say, working from home one day a week.”¹⁷ Scholars, policymakers, and more enlightened employers have developed an entire labor platform surrounding “flexible scheduling” that promotes “balance” within today’s time-hungry professions. But, as Kantor explains, the very same word—*flexibility*—“can have a darker meaning for many low-income workers as a euphemism for unstable hours and paychecks.” Kantor vividly documents the case of a Starbucks employee who struggles to build a stable life when her hours are constantly being changed due to elaborate scheduling software. Among low-wage shift workers, flexible scheduling often contributes to an *unbalanced* life.

This kind of inarticulacy has allowed low-wage employers to pretend that glaring differences in the meanings of flexibility do not exist. Take this job advertisement on the website Jobing.com for the retailer Macys. Headlined “Job: Retail Sales, *Flexible Scheduling Option!,* Part-Time,” the ad begins, “This position uses a scheduling plan that allows an associate to participate in the creation of his/her work schedule….” The position “allows the maximum amount of scheduling flexibility.” Toward the end of the ad, however, the picture looks very different. In a section titled “Qualifications,” it lists “ability to work a flexible schedule, including mornings, evenings, and weekends, and busy events…based on department and store/company needs.” *Flexibility* now has exactly the opposite meaning. When presented with the opportunity to participate in creating a “flexible” workplace, then, what is a worker to think? Does flexibility mean personal customization of time, or does it mean that when the company says “Jump,” the employee asks, “How high?”

Such confusions point to a deeper inarticulacy about risk and inequality in the flexible economy. Within the hyper-positive culture of disruption, embracing risk and becoming more responsible for one’s personal “brand” are treated as being no different for, say, a twenty-six-year-old tech CEO and a sixty-year-old laid-off administrative assistant. But being a “nimble entrepreneur,” as meaningful as it might be in the short term, is simply unsustainable in the long term for people who have little power in the system and lack a financial safety net to catch them when they fall. Not everyone’s embrace of disruption carries the same kind of risk.

The twentieth-century regime of work time was no paradise. Many workers felt ruled by the clock and hollowed out by their career, but at least it was clear what the

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*Does flexibility mean personal customization of time, or does it mean that when the company says “Jump,” the employee asks, “How high?”*
terms of the debate were and that there were distinct sides in the debate. What would it take to inject real debate about different kinds of disruption and their implications for different types of workers into the politics of work time today? There are some encouraging signs that such a debate is now emerging, mainly from efforts to collectively organize low-wage service workers. For example, in the summer of 2015, the Schedules That Work Act was introduced in the US House of Representatives and the US Senate. The bill “would require companies to pay their employees for an extra hour if they were summoned to work with less than 24 hours’ notice,” and would mandate that workers be given “four hours’ pay on days when employees are sent home after just a few hours.” Similar creative thinking, though far less actionable, surrounds efforts to reform the FLSA. Scholars such as Susan Lambert have called for the addition of a minimum weekly hours requirement, which would accompany the continued fight to raise the minimum wage. Other ideas include eliminating loopholes that allow employers to exempt many part-time, casual, and contract workers from the FLSA in the first place, or, even more radically, a guaranteed minimum income tied to citizenship rather than employment.

Such policies would not prevent disruption per se, but they would compensate workers for being willing to lead disruptable lives, catch them when they fall, and honor the fact that sacrificing security, predictability, and regularity is indeed a sacrifice. This agenda, aimed mainly at low-wage workers, needs to expand to also incorporate white-collar salaried workers.

Still, such legal and political efforts, while encouraging, neglect the fact that disruption is a culture with captivating narratives of the good life that champion traditional American values such as personal responsibility, entrepreneurialism, and hard work. Advocacy on behalf of vulnerable workers will thus require an equally compelling counter-narrative to disruption. This narrative must challenge the inequality baked right into flexible temporalities—their capacity to suck productivity from each second of the day and move the risk down to the least benefited workers—while still respecting the fact that becoming disruptable has its seductions.

Endnotes


Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.
Brandon is a twenty-something software engineer who lives in a refurbished moving van that he parks in semi-permanence on one of the lots at Google’s sprawling global headquarters in Mountain View, California. His truck is equipped with only those necessities and amenities that are unavailable on the corporate campus, and since the Googleplex provides laundry facilities, a gym, video game rooms, multiple restaurants and “microkitchens,” bathrooms, and spaces for socializing, that means the truck has no more than the most minimal of appointments: a Dwell house on wheels, you might say, though without the costly chic.

Brandon explained his unusual housing solution in his first post on his personal blog, Thoughts from Inside the Box. Having interned for the company during the summer of 2014, he wrote, he quickly fell into a routine that went like this: “I wake up, catch the first GBus to Google, work out, eat breakfast, work, eat lunch, work, eat dinner, hang out at Google, and eventually take a bus home, pack my gym bag for the next day, and go to sleep.” When he was offered a full-time job at Google after graduating from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Brandon surveyed local housing options and decided that it made as little sense to spend valuable time commuting to and from Google’s campus as it did to shell out so much of his income on a place he would rarely occupy. So a box on wheels it would be.

To the degree that Brandon’s story has gained media attention, it has been used to illustrate the very real effects of a housing crisis in the San Francisco Bay Area. But to view Brandon’s plight (and that of others like him) only as a technical problem in search of a housing-related policy solution ignores a fairly creepy reality. Short of providing a place to sleep, Brandon’s employer meets almost all of his and his coworkers’ basic needs in ways that social critics such as Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault have deemed typical of “total” or “complete” institutions like the prison or the asylum.

Philip Lorish directs Vocation and the Common Good, a joint venture of New City Commons and the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.

Right: Tabula Sacra, 2015, by Rosamund Casey; courtesy of the artist.
Brandon’s choices would seem perverse were they not connected to the heady idealism that suffuses the high-tech culture of Silicon Valley. The founders and foot soldiers of the Valley’s industries claim that they seek not only profit but also a social revolution. In contrast with the rapacious industrial giants of the Gilded Age, whose profit-making enterprises were untethered to their charitable giving, today’s tech titans—Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, Reid Hoffman, and others—proceed on the understanding that they, the companies they have set up, the products they develop, and, increasingly, the philanthropic initiatives they establish are all part of a grand narrative about the power of technology to enhance not only the well-being but also the liberty of common people.

The loudly touted objective of the technological revolution is a kind of devolution and decentralization aimed not just at improving the world but also at remaking it altogether. Silicon Valley promises its true believers more than mere “negative liberty,” a freedom from constraint. It also promises positive liberty: a set of norms and ideals around which a purposeful and fulfilling life can be built. Work in the Valley comes with a powerful sense of vocation and calling—one so compelling that it can motivate someone like Brandon to move to a new city, take up a demanding job, and live like a monk in a truck.

**The Cultural Ecology of Silicon Valley**

The “garage folklore” of Silicon Valley—with its spirit of renegade start-up-ism and innovation—is neatly summarized on California State Historical Landmark 976, at 367 Addison Avenue in Palo Alto. The plaque reads:

This garage is the birthplace of the world’s first high-technology region, “Silicon Valley.” The idea for such a region originated with Dr. Frederick Terman, a Stanford University professor who encouraged his students to start up their own electronics companies in the area instead of joining established firms in the East. The first two students to follow his advice were William R. Hewlett and David Packard, who in 1938 began developing their first product, an audio oscillator, in this garage.

Aside from its grandiosity, the most remarkable thing about this text is its acute self-consciousness about the contrast between the culture of Silicon Valley and that of “the East.” That contrast is central to one of the first definitive works on the Valley, AnnaLee Saxenian’s *Regional Advantage* (1996). Saxenian’s question is this: How is it that, despite
The initial disadvantages of comparatively fewer institutions of higher learning, less defense-related government funding, and a lower concentration of intellectual capital, Silicon Valley succeeded as a regional incubator of innovative tech-dom while Boston’s Route 128 largely fizzled?

The answer is largely cultural.

As Saxenian and others have argued, the differences between Boston’s tech hub and the culture that emerged in the Bay Area are anything but superficial. While it is easy to point to stereotypical markers of differences in status and power (different forms of dress, the relative importance of formal education, the importance of conventional social mores), the fundamental difference between the work culture of Boston firms and that of Silicon Valley firms is as basic as the difference between feudal societies and democratic ones.

In 1983, Tom Wolfe went to Silicon Valley for *Esquire* to profile Robert Noyce, colloquially known as the first “mayor of Silicon Valley” because of his position as an early innovator, his work with Nobel Prize winner William Shockley at Fairchild Semiconductor, and his cofounding of Intel. During his tenure at Fairchild, Noyce was, among other duties, tasked with developing the “new management techniques for this new industry,” techniques distinguished largely by their repudiation of the managerial practices of East Coast corporations. “Corporations in the East,” as Tom Wolfe put it, “adopted a feudal approach to organization…. There were kings and lords, and there were vassals, soldiers, yeomen, and serfs, with layers of protocol and prerequisites.” For the first generation of entrepreneurs and developers who had been trained on the East Coast before heading out for communities like Silicon Valley, “it wasn’t enough to start up a company; you had to start up a community, a community in which there were no
social distinctions, and it was first come, first served in the parking lot, and everyone was supposed to internalize the common goals.”

In these Silicon Valley communities, the fidelity of workers to the corporation was always nested within a grander fidelity to an idealized version of that company. Whether you were an entrepreneur, developer, programmer, investor, or secretary, the skills you developed and monetized were always in the service of an overarching social objective—hence, as Wolfe noted back in 1983, the repeated statements by Silicon Valley CEOs that a corporation was not a corporation, but rather a culture, or a society. A given company’s assets “aren’t hardware,” Wolfe wrote, paraphrasing his unnamed subjects, “they’re the software of the three thousand souls who work here.” Such idealism has, if anything, grown with time, sometimes almost comically obscuring the powerful profit motive behind all the disruption and creative destruction that—lest we forget—have left so many industries downsized and so many people jobless or underemployed.

But the foot soldiers of the revolution pay little heed to such incidental consequences. Their commitment to the higher ends of technological advancement allows them to embrace even their own precarious condition, exemplified by their frequent moves between companies. After all, the Valley’s fiercely idealistic and anti-hierarchical ethos insists that more and more “spinoffs” are not only desirable but also necessary to the production of a new social order. In the early days, before the establishment of massive campuses and draconian non-disclosure agreements, the joke was that, in contrast with the work culture “back East,” Silicon Valley was the place where you could change companies without changing parking lots.

But those were the days before parking lots were used for the semi-permanent housing of employees. What changed? And what kind of society really exists in Silicon Valley? In 2008, Jonathan Nelson, a health-care professional who was trying to get a toehold in Silicon Valley as a developer, and his wife, Laura, realized that what he needed most was a support group, a collection of people who not only understood the reigning work patterns and aspirations of Silicon Valley but who also had some sense of how to navigate them. The result of that insight was “Hackers/Founders,” an international organization that began as a “meet-up” in local bars and evolved into a hybrid organization offering emotional, technical, financial, and legal support for individuals around the world seeking to found technology companies. Today, the organization focuses not only on the work culture of Silicon Valley but also on the myriad “tech hubs” that have emerged throughout the world. Its mission is summed up in the tagline “Making Founders’ Lives Suck 34% Less in Silicon Valley and Around the Globe.”

In describing the work culture of the Valley, Laura Nelson distinguishes between what she calls “human beings” and “human doings,” arguing that “people really do lose...
themselves,” particularly when their ventures fail. For hackers and founders in Silicon Valley, it’s not that work is an important aspect of one’s life, it’s the whole of it. As she puts it,

Whether they’re super busy or at a loss, many people have no idea what they need because work is the be-all, end-all. In my conversations with people, I do my best to delve underneath the pitch to find out what’s going on, because people need connection in a huge way. They need encouragement. They need someone to listen and someone to give advice. They need people around who are genuinely happy for their successes and not threatened by them. They need a safe place. Maybe more than anything else, they need to be reminded that they are human.

If the new social order proposed by Silicon Valley is to emerge, its champions know, it will have to be built on the back of much creative destruction and displacement—hence the near-comical dependence on the language of disruption within the principal Silicon Valley institutions. Whatever the industry or established form of life, the rhetoric of disruption—with its familiar logic of suspicion toward the status quo, its creative destruction of established moral, economic, or social norms, and its promotion of data-derived replacements—needs no justification. As Tom Wolfe observed, Silicon Valley’s work ethic is also destructive of family life. What kind of society can be produced from a work culture that demands so much from its workers without offering them stability in return? And what kind of vocation can be pursued even to the point of self-annihilation?

On Meaning-Making and Vocation

To say that Brandon lives “like a monk” is not merely to invoke a tired metaphor. If we look for other institutions that demand of its members such personal privation in service of a higher goal, the monasteries of medieval Christendom come obviously and immediately to mind. But in what ways can the work culture of Silicon Valley be said to derive from the model of the traditional monastery and the theology of vocation that began within the monastery’s walls and extended into the wider world?

To be sure, like a church, Silicon Valley tells its members that they serve a higher good (the technological revolution). Just as religious vocations grant a total form of life that orders work, friendship, leisure, and play toward the end of glorifying God and his creation, so too does a job within the world of tech give an individual a comprehensive form of life. Silicon Valley tech firms infuse every aspect of their
organizations with reminders about the higher purpose of the firm in the technological project itself.

Google, for instance, has recently decided to reorganize itself in order to separate its more “traditional” functions such as Search and Gmail from a set of “moonshot” projects. One such moonshot is the transhumanist enterprise CalicoLabs, which describes itself as “a research and development company whose mission is to harness advanced technologies to increase our understanding of the biology that controls lifespan.” Following that fairly innocuous sentence is another equally suggestive statement of intent: “We will use that knowledge to devise interventions that enable people to lead longer and healthier lives.”

CalicoLabs’ belief that radical life extension is possible reveals a faith in the power of technology not just for hacking basic scripts of daily existence but also for extending our lives. According to an influential transhumanist, Nick Bostrom, the key is to “view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways.” Once this premise is established, the constraints placed upon what technology can and should do to alter human life are purely provisional and minimally prudential. Here, too, Silicon Valley resembles a religious organization; it even promises its followers the possibility of immortality, or at least ever-extending longevity. The world will become a better place, and we will become better people.

The Fraternal Firm

When Protestant reformers dissolved the institution of the monastery, they hoped to bring the logic of the monastic regimes to the ordering of the whole of common life—to which, about 350 years later, Max Weber would give the name worldly asceticism. Laypeople could also have vocations, if not in religious orders. At the heart of both the late medieval and early modern concepts of vocation is the sense that the daily work of living can both enable participation in the life of God and further God’s purposes in ways that promotes the flourishing of the world. To whatever degree possible and with whatever responsibility one has been given, one enacts one’s vocation precisely by discerning, preserving, and enhancing the goods attendant upon the sphere of human activity one is engaged in.

The internal logic of lay vocations requires submission of the individual will to the collective will. The push to self-actualization is not negated, but submerged. The will of others can overrule the individual’s will precisely because the community is constituted by a commitment to a shared life under God. But vocation in Silicon Valley is constituted by a commitment to shared life in service to a very different ideal: to the logic, or logos (as in “guiding principle”), embedded in technology itself.
Commitment to that logic is evident even in the way tech titans conceive of philanthropy, not as a form of “charitable giving” but as an exploration in “philanthrocapitalism.” As Sean Parker, one of Facebook’s first investors, put it in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, a new generation of philanthropists “wants to believe there is a clever ‘hack’ for every problem.” These tech moguls “want metrics and analytic tools comparable to the dashboards that power their software products,” and, perhaps above all, “want to know that they are having an impact that can be measured and felt.” Parker explained that his most important responsibility was “to leave behind not an unwieldy institution for others to manage but rather a world better off than I found it, one that my children can manage to live in.”

The heroic builder of the new social order is, of course, the *hacker*, who sees through the vast corporate malaise and retains a singular focus on solving broad social problems by technological means. The hacker also embodies the new order’s core values: an anti-establishment bias, a belief in radical transparency, a nose for sniffing out vulnerabilities in systems, a desire to “hack” complex problems using elegant technological solutions, and an almost religious belief in the power of data to help solve those problems.

According to Jonathan and Laura Nelson, the basic model for larger tech firms is not the monastery but the college fraternity. As Jonathan Nelson says, “these companies in large part are modeling themselves after elite schools like Stanford, Harvard, and Dartmouth. Why? Because that’s what the founders of those companies know.” This explains, in part, the jocularity that pervades many tech company workplaces, its manifestations including “rec centers” full of video games, on-site basketball courts, and goofy names for conference rooms.

Just as a college student must learn to coexist with a roommate who plays video games (and even get some studying done in the process), so too must workers in tech firms learn to accommodate the blurring of the line between work and play, blocking out distracting behaviors but also being willing to indulge in them. Not incidentally, a corporate culture built to replicate the ethos of an Ivy League dorm or frat house goes a long way toward explaining the persistent and widely publicized challenge tech firms face in attracting, supporting, promoting, and retaining women or workers with substantial commitments outside of the office.

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**Life in the 1099 Economy**

In 2013, Internet entrepreneur and LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman wrote a *Harvard Business Review* article with Ben Casnocha and Chris Yeh titled “Tours of Duty: The
New Employer-Employee Compact.” The premise of the article is that the habits of “entrepreneurial adaptives” should govern both employees and employers. Rather than simply encourage enterprising employees to assess their value to a company so that they might renegotiate salary and benefits from a position of strength, Hoffman and his colleagues make plain that even though “for most of the twentieth century, the compact between employers and employees in the developed world was all about stability,” the facts of modern labor make this neither possible nor desirable.5

In what some have come to call the “1099 economy,” employers are granted the power to claim almost the whole of an individual worker’s life with almost no commitment of continued employment. Given this arrangement, Silicon Valley may be ahead of the curve but not unique. Employers in a knowledge economy that places “purpose” and “mission” at the center of an organization’s profit-making enterprise may well trade upon traditional conceptions of vocation, recalibrating these conceptions as best they can in order to direct them toward new ends.

The importance of Silicon Valley’s work culture resides most centrally in its imaginative power. As JPMorgan Chase chief Jamie Dimon quipped in his annual letter, “Silicon Valley is coming,” even for Wall Street. And what it brings with it is a kind of techno-optimism that renders the meaning of deeply human work all the more confused. Sure, millennials like Brandon have sufficient liberty to take their skills to market within total institutions that will provide them with nearly all they need for daily life. And without doubt, many benefits flow from the tech revolution—benefits that, however unequally distributed, make human life better for many. But beneath all the well-intended benevolence and philanthropy is the same undeniable restlessness pervading every aspect of work and vocation in our time.

Endnotes


Thoughtful commentary and clear analysis about the burdens and blessings of modern science and technology.

From recent issues of *The New Atlantis*:

**Miss Marple and the Problem of Modern Identity**
“It is not easy to see...how many of the technologies of modernity, from filing systems to postal systems, from photography to fingerprint analysis, have arisen in the service of making us 'legible' to the state. We are all legible people now, and most us see no alternative; thus the quests by so many to have their own sense of identity—who or what they 'identify as'—be officially recognized by the state.”

—*Alan Jacobs*

**Oil and World Power**
“Some commentators have suggested that, if oil prices stay low enough for long enough, autocratic regimes that rely on oil and gas exports—such as the governments of Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, and Venezuela—might be overthrown. Such an outcome, according to this line of thinking, would be in the U.S. national interest and would advance the cause of freedom. But is this claim valid, and will it happen?”

—*Lee Lane*

**Meaning in a Silent Universe**
“Who are we, but wanderers of the heavens, amid an abundance of other worlds? What role is there for us in the vast emptiness of space? These questions are central to our post-Copernican age. They provoke what could be called the ‘Copernican angst’: How are we to find purpose in a seemingly purposeless universe?”

—*Marcelo Gleiser*
Ah, the artisan economy! Such an evocative ideal, expressing the hope, in this time of deep concern over rapacious global capitalism, of a return to a local economy of self-sufficient yeoman entrepreneurs. In the misty haze of our imaginings, we see bearded brewers quaffing pints of a super-hoppy IPA, hipster moms draining raw cheese through pristine white muslin, urban farmers selling dahlias from their front doorsteps, and chocolatiers individually wrapping one-off batches made from cacao grown in remote and exotic places. Such images have sparked both parody (Portlandia, IFC network) and adulation (Those Who Make, Vimeo). In my book Brew to Bikes: Portland’s Artisan Economy, I also celebrate artisans and their embrace of self-reliance. But since its publication in 2010, I have become concerned that the myth of romantic localism is distracting and inaccurate. It distorts the economic significance of artisan enterprise and stifles the discussion of artisans as exemplars of a new way of working and living in the postindustrial economy.

Consider these challenges to the romantic image of small-scale artisans selling handmade goods to appreciative local patrons. Where in this image do we place Portland, Oregon, artisan Ken Wheeler, whose Renovo Hardwood Bicycles will now carry the Audi brand and be sold in Audi’s auto showrooms throughout the world? And how do we think about Jeanne and Dan Carver, who started an artisan yarn business to help save their high-desert sheep ranch and now partner with New York–based Ralph Lauren to provide the yarn for US Olympic Team apparel? As romantic localists, should we have felt incensed with Duane Sorensen, founder of Portland’s iconic Stumptown Coffee, when he quietly sold out to TSG Consumer Partners, a San Francisco equity firm...
known for flipping fast-growing small companies? Did Sorensen abandon his dedication to meticulously sourced, quality-roasted, precisely brewed artisanal coffees that put Portland on the map as a world-class coffee town? Finally, should we be puzzled or fascinated that Portlander Steve Smith is obsessively working his way down to an ever-smaller world of gourmet tea lovers with his new company, Smith Teamaker, after having founded and sold both the Tazo and Stash tea companies?

These examples show that artisans can grow substantial enterprises with national and even global reach, but they do present a paradox. Why, now, is the artisan imaginary of locally based, personally crafted, small-scale enterprise so attractive to a global audience, and how do artisans manage the cognitive dissonance of these seemingly contradictory local do-it-yourself/global entrepreneur identities? It’s a paradox I frame in my public presentations as “localism without parochialism,” and attempt to illustrate with a discovery I made while writing Brew to Bikes. On a website describing life in the Victorian era, I found a list of “200 artisan skills required to make a Victorian town functional.” To my surprise, I was able to count at least 112 of these skills being practiced in contemporary Portland—by everyone from milliners and dry stone wallers to beekeepers, brewers, and cheese makers. While this observation seems to link contemporary artisan enterprise to the romantic self-sufficiency of village life, it elides differences that define artisanship in these two eras. Contemporary artisans share with their Victorian counterparts many work-life characteristics such as autonomy, adaptive design, skill mastery, and responsiveness to local conditions, but they are not limited by the parochial and technological boundaries of the Victorian village.

Contemporary artisans share with their Victorian counterparts many work-life characteristics such as autonomy, adaptive design, skill mastery, and responsiveness to local conditions, but they are not limited by the parochial and technological boundaries of the Victorian village. The materials, tools, transport, communications, and knowledge infrastructure of our era allow contemporary artisans to operate in villages of their own design. Most importantly, that transformative tool loosely called the Internet has become the on-ramp for artisans to find communities of interest, access specialized tools and services, and reach audiences that can grow quickly from local niche to global hit. The paradox of local artisans in a global era is that the reach of technologies that connect us to an unlimited network of possibilities both pushes and pulls us toward our particular place and passion, even while encouraging us to appreciate the same love of place and passion in others.

Consider the following. Several years ago, Claudia Lucero was that romantic hipster mom described in the opening paragraph. She was literally making cheese in her kitchen. She began, as many artisans do, with a DIY impulse. As she noted, “Cheese is something that locals have been making for thousands of years. How hard could it be?” The few tools she needed she found online from specialty suppliers. Soon she was selling her cheeses at Montavilla Farmers’ Market, a community project recently launched in her neighborhood. Her enthusiasm for home cheese making was infectious, and
friends encouraged her to offer classes. Her classes filled up, and soon she was the local authority on homemade cheese. To expand her community, she launched her Urban Cheesecraft blog, and to bridge the gap between the complex professional trade and the novice cheese maker, she developed a simple “DIY Cheese Kit.”

The starter kit was a hit on her site at Etsy (the eBay for crafters). Local press loved the story of the cheese-making mom turned entrepreneur, and so did the expanding network of foodie media. Urban Cheesecraft was profiled in Home Dairy, one of the Ashley English Homemade Living series, and Daily Grommet, a website that shares unique products through video and blogs, also featured her kit. Etsy sent its video team to Portland, and Lucero and her DIY Cheese Kit were the feature video on the Etsy homepage. Her Etsy video caught the attention of Williams-Sonoma, which began offering her goat cheese and mozzarella/ricotta kits starting in the spring of 2012.

Beginning with an intuitive sense of possibilities, Lucero capped her adventure with a marketing triple play. Etsy gave her shelf space in its online store, Williams-Sonoma promoted her kit in its brick-and-mortar stores, and she continued her local connections through direct sales at the farmers’ market. But unlike the parochial Victorian artisans whose domain was limited to the physical needs of their local village, Claudia Lucero, the intentional localist, served the specialized tastes and psychic needs for connection, meaning, and self-reliance in her found village.

What lessons can be learned from these vignettes that might help us understand the changing urban landscape of culture and commerce? The first and most obvious lesson is that the lens of romantic localism distorts what is happening in the artisan economy. Some, perhaps many, policy makers dismiss artisans as a cute sideshow to the real economy. Artisans are those folks who run craft festivals for tourists and do nifty things in their garages that end up on knickknack shelves. From the story presented here, it becomes evident that artisan production can be significant not only for its impact on the economy (craft brewing in Oregon is a $500 million business), but more importantly because artisans are modeling the way to work and live in the postindustrial economy. The mass-production economy is the mature forest that is being overtaken by age and events. Artisans are the pioneering species building the understory of the new economy.

Beyond this, I would argue that planners could learn from the challenge the artisan economy represents to traditional models of economic development. While most people are employed in the service economy, economic development planners have focused nearly exclusively on the production economy. The dismissal of what is inadequately called the service economy is a legacy of industrial-era thinking, when economies seemed to have boundaries, when wealth was built by producing goods for export, and when the service economy was imagined as circular (taking in each other’s wash).

**The paradox of local artisans in a global era is that the reach of technologies that connect us to an unlimited network of possibilities both pushes and pulls us toward our particular place and passion, even while encouraging us to appreciate the same love of place and passion in others.**
and nonproductive because “no area can reasonably expect to expand its economy by developing a higher than average concentration of grocery stores.”¹¹

The story of Claudia Lucero suggests that in the postindustrial era you can grow an economy by “developing a higher than average concentration of grocery stores” or at least by creating alternatives to the traditional production/distribution models that re-articulate where and how food is made and sold. She disrupts that industrial model by selling her homemade cheese directly to her customers at a farmers’ market. She creates a new set of niche products too specialized to find shelf space in a chain supermarket. Through her classes, she opens the black box of a processed food and shows how to make cheese for home consumption. She builds a community of interest, as well as customers, through her classes and blog. And the blog connects her globally to a community of DIY foodies and like-minded entrepreneurs such as the people at the Daily Grommet. She follows these expansions into the producer realm by making a DIY Cheese Kit.

Lucero’s direct marketing, new services, and innovative DIY Cheese Kit have been disruptive innovations that do not fit well into the notion that you can’t grow an economy by “developing a higher than average concentration of grocery stores.” She is growing the economy. From her point of view, it has been a natural, if rather rapid, progression from local niche to global hit. But all of the disruptive innovations of Lucero and other artisans are generally dismissed as trivial or are only seen obliquely by economic development planners because the intellectual blinders of their training do not prepare them to recognize their meaning or value.

It is my sense that artisans are modeling the product qualities, organizational structures, work life, and outlook of our emerging economy. Urban economies in the early part of the twenty-first century will look a lot more like an artisan economy than they will the industrial economy of the century past. And while most artisan enterprises will remain part of the essential understory, some few will find the light and become the vigorous stands of a renewed economy. So nourish the understory, the old trees are falling.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Heying, Brew to Bikes: Portland’s Artisan Economy (Portland, OR: Ooligan Press, 2010).
6 Heying, Brew to Bikes, 269.
For as long as I can remember, I have looked up to individuals who are called “professionals”—doctors, lawyers, and architects, to name a few. I aspired to be a professional, I became a professional, and I continue to hope that young persons of promise whom I encounter will become professionals. But in recent years, I’ve become increasingly uncertain about whether professions will continue to exist, at least in a form that I can admire or even recognize. There are many views about why professions are on the wane—indeed, to put it sharply, about whether the professions are being murdered or whether, to maintain the metaphor, they have been committing suicide. I’ll deliver my interim judicial verdict at the end of this essay. But since my own life so closely parallels the ups and downs of the professions in the last several decades, I begin in an autobiographical vein.

My parents, Hilde and Rudolph Gaertner, escaped from Nazi Germany in the nick of time—arriving in New York Harbor on Kristallnacht, November 9–10, 1938, the infamous Night of Broken Glass. Many of their relatives and friends were not so fortunate. My parents were not themselves professionals—my father had been a businessman, and my mother’s desire to be a kindergarten teacher had been thwarted by the rise of the Nazis. With neither professions nor funds, they soon found themselves living in very modest circumstances in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where I was born five years later.

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Right: *The Dean’s Roll Call*, 1899, by Thomas Cowperthwait Eakins (1844–1916); Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, Barbara and Theodore Alfond Gallery/Bridgeman Images.
Parental aspirations for my younger sibling, Marion, and me were high. As I was the proverbial “bright Jewish boy who hated the sight of blood,” almost everyone who thought about it (including me) assumed that I would become a lawyer. I went to Harvard College, where indeed I took a course in the law with constitutional scholar Paul Freund, who encouraged me to go to law school. But not one to leave any stone unturned, I also took some pre-med courses and, in the summer before my senior year, arranged an interview with the dean of admissions at Stanford Medical School. Only after graduating from college and spending a year in London on a fellowship did I make what was for me a daring decision: to abandon the prototypically aspirational professions and instead pursue graduate studies in developmental psychology. For fifteen years after receiving my doctorate, following a path which in retrospect was quite risky, I pursued full-time research on “soft” (research grant) money. In 1986, I was fortunate to receive a professorship at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. At last, I was a professional—indeed, a professor!—and our family’s ambitions were fulfilled. And so I’ve remained until today.

I’ve allowed myself this autobiographical indulgence because it closely tracks the course of the professions over the last several decades. When I was growing up, at the very time when post-secondary education was exploding in the United States, becoming a professional (which did include becoming a professor) was a very high aspiration. It was not, however, equally open to everyone. For historical and cultural reasons, most professionals were white, Anglo-Saxon males, principally from privileged backgrounds. If you were an immigrant or the child of immigrants, Jewish, female, of impoverished circumstances, and/or nonwhite, your career choices were restricted. Supreme Court justices Thurgood Marshall, Clarence Thomas, Sandra Day O’Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Sonia Sotomayor merit admiration because of the overwhelming initial odds they overcame. Fortunately, by the time I was choosing a career, these barriers were receding, more quickly for the first listed groups than for the latter cohorts.

While I was in college in the 1960s, Daedalus, the publication of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, published an issue devoted to the professions. As the editor, Kenneth Lynn, phrased it, “Everywhere in American life, the professions are triumphant.” And indeed, my close friends and I almost all chose to enter one or the other of the professions. When, recently, at our fiftieth college reunion, we jointly reflected on our career choices, ten of twelve were either doctors, lawyers, or professors—the eleventh had actually completed law school but had not practiced law. (The twelfth had become a movie director.) If we had polled the same individuals, and other of our classmates, about the careers our children (and grandchildren) were pursuing, a far lower percentage would have responded with the traditional professions. Instead, we would have heard repeated references to Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Wall Street, terms like
start-ups, venture capital, angel investors, and hedge funds, and the names of corporations such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon (the latter started, we should note, by young persons who had attended, respectively, Stanford, Harvard, and Princeton). Few writing today, whether in Daedalus or The Huffington Post, would describe the traditional professions as aspirational, with respect to the options considered by the most sought-after graduates of elite institutions. And if young graduates did elect to pursue the traditional professions, they would likely work at one or more of the aforementioned corporations.

The Long Arc of the Professions

As one considers the decline or even the possible demise of the professions, it’s relevant to consider their origins. In one sense, in the West the professions date back to classical times. Then, as now, the prototypical professional was the physician. In the oath that is attributed to Hippocrates and still invoked today, those who chose to become physicians were expected to administer medical attention promptly to whoever needed it, without favor to any particular person or group, avoid covert payments, keep confidences, and, famously, “do no harm.” While perhaps not officially enshrined, certainly the roles of legal councilor, engineer, architect, military leader, religious leader, and teacher were also delineated, and continued in one form or another during the succeeding centuries.

Also forerunners of contemporary professions were the guilds and trade associations of the medieval and post-medieval eras. These were self-organized groups—some connected to the Church, others more or less secular—that practiced technical and artistic crafts. On the positive side, masters of guilds selected promising apprentices (sometimes, but not always, their blood relations); the masters trained these novices assiduously in the requisite skills until, their apprenticeship completed, they were “journeymen” capable of executing pieces of mastery, or “masterpieces.” On a less positive note, the guilds were typically secretive and exclusionary; they did not hesitate to invoke high-stake rewards and punishments to control the work (as well as other parts of daily life) of their members.

In much of Europe and the United States, movements to professionalize certain high-status occupations began in the nineteenth century and came to fruition in the early years of the twentieth. In the United States, owing to the impetus provided by the Progressive movement, occupations like medicine, law, and university teaching first mandated a broad liberal arts education and then delineated specific requirements for certification, at which time the successful candidates received honorific titles (doctor, esquire, and professor, respectively). No longer could an aspiring member of these fields read on his own and hang up a shingle bearing a treasured title (no more “Abraham Lincoln, Lawyer”). Moreover, at least in principle, those professionals who abused the
tenets or the ethics of the profession could lose their license and be barred from practice. As noted, in the post–World War II era, access to these professions gradually expanded, culminating in the high point recorded in Kenneth Lynn’s celebratory remarks.

And what exactly did it mean for an occupation to achieve the status of a profession? According to the experts, among them the sociologists contributing to the Lynn-edited issue of *Daedalus*, a profession consists of individuals who have undergone a standard form of training, culminating in some kind of recognized title and degree. In return for the status accorded the professional, the individual is expected to provide services to individuals and institutions in need, to draw on his or her technical knowledge, and to perform this task in a respectful, disinterested, and professional manner. Other attributes typically cited in definitions of the professions are the abilities to make complex technical and ethical decisions under conditions of uncertainty, to cherish and protect the key institutions and values of the profession, and to nurture, train, and certify younger aspirants, while always keeping the public interest in mind.

I would like to add one feature to the usual list of professional attributes. It is useful to think of membership in a profession as a role to be enacted. In the course of becoming a professional, a person is learning to fill a certain role in society. That role entails the various behaviors and capacities mentioned above. In speaking of taking on a role, I mean neither to glorify nor to critique the budding professional. Rather, when on the job, the complete professional exhibits an entire repertoire of behaviors and attitudes that others come to expect. The consummate professional may be a terrible parent or spouse; she may never vote and may espouse repugnant political or social attitudes. But when carrying out her role, she embodies the best features of that profession.

At their heights and at their best, the professions seemed worthy of approbation. While aware of the temptation to romanticize the past, I feel comfortable in claiming that the majority of professionals embodied—or at least sought to embody—the traits cited above. No doubt the popularity of Marcus Welby, MD, or Atticus Finch, Esq., involved some idealization, but their real-life counterparts in ordinary cities and towns sought to be and behaved like professionals. A key feature was the effort to be disinterested: to act upon the core values of the profession in ways that avoided serving special interests and took into account the broader needs of the society. A 2012 obituary of John G. Brooks in the *Boston Globe* captures well the aspirations of many professionals who lived decades ago:

A quarter century after graduating from Harvard College, Mr. Brooks wrote that he decided to go to law school “in the happy belief that being a lawyer would provide a desirable combination of a modest livelihood and freedom, intellectual and otherwise, in contrast to the shackles of employment in ‘business.’”
At the time when broader access to the professions was being enabled, other trends were also discernible. One entailed an effort to expand professional status to groups that had hitherto been marginalized. Journalists, bankers, and auditors and accountants were among the aspirants. Many observers have singled out the so-called minor or feminized professions—schoolteaching, nursing, and social work. With the passage of time, almost no sector of the work force has been excluded. There are efforts to create educational tracks and certification for business managers, artists, and those engaged in public policy, as well as individuals clearly involved in craft-like enterprises like beauticians, gardeners, or dental hygienists. While labor unions—to some extent, the successors to the guilds of earlier times—have been in decline (especially in the United States), unions for various kinds of educators and public-sector workers have sprung up.

These trends were for the most part incremental; had nothing further happened, the occupational landscape of the middle of the twentieth century might well have endured to this day. It has taken two larger events—one economic, the other technological—to shake the professions to their foundations and raise the question of whether they have a future.

The Triumph and Challenge of the Market

It’s often been observed that, in both the United States and Great Britain, a major political and economic change occurred around 1980. Ending a long string of centrist governments, Conservative politician Margaret Thatcher became prime minister of the United Kingdom in 1979; she guided a regime that cut back radically on nationalized institutions and policies while deliberately seeking to release the engines of market capitalism. In the United States, Republican politician Ronald Reagan, elected president in 1980, similarly critiqued the expansive role of the federal government, instead endorsing individual initiative and the mobilization of entrepreneurial energies. Less widely recognized is that, in 1979, after decades of alternation between more and less canonical varieties of communism, Deng Xiaoping became the supreme leader of post-Mao China. As a youth, Deng had spent some time in France; unlike most of the leaders of the Maoist revolution, he had witnessed a market society firsthand. Endorsing the levers and legends of market capitalism, Deng famously declared, “I don’t care if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice.”

And so, in a trend that would have been unthinkable a decade or two before, three of the leading world powers strongly endorsed the hegemony of market capitalism. (Of course, a decade later, the Berlin Wall fell. And, admittedly for only a brief period, it looked as though there was only one form of political economy in the world—that of market capitalism, more or less unbridled.)
Given the topic of this essay, one can properly ask *why* the form of economy should necessarily affect the status of professions. Indeed, so long as the government does not interfere with professional practice, one should be able to have professions worthy of the name across a variety of political and economic regimes. But the celebration of markets—and one obvious measuring instrument, the accumulation of capital—gradually but inexorably has exerted two major impacts on the professions.

First, the skills of those trained as professionals were sought by institutions that could make use of those services. Large enterprises—primarily for-profit corporations but also medical centers and institutions of higher learning—wanted to attract professionals, especially those exhibiting notable or specialized gifts. As businesses—literally or de facto—these institutions were motivated by the desire to secure the most favorable bottom line. Their leaders were willing to pay high salaries to relevant professionals, while the professionals, in turn, were expected to serve the goals of the hiring organizations—greater profit in the case of business, expanded services and higher prestige (not to mention increased endowments) in the case of nonprofits. And so, for example, General Electric has more than one thousand lawyers in its employ, and the salaries, garlanded with bonuses and stock options, are significantly higher than those typically received by individual practitioners or those who belong to small partnerships.

Second (and not unrelated) was the growing belief that one's success, indeed one's credibility, as a professional was closely and perhaps inextricably tied to the size of remuneration—the powerful acronymic troika of ROI (return on investment). In earlier times, professionals had hardly been self-sacrificing; but they had generally been content to have a reasonable middle-class lifestyle. Recall the obituary for John G. Brooks. Leisure time was as likely to be devoted to community service as to extra billable hours. But in a society moving toward a “winner take all” mentality, many professionals—especially younger professionals—came to value their total salary more than other indices of accomplishment, such as service to the community, mentoring of junior associates, time devoted to friends and family, or sheer leisure-time activities. Indeed, many in their ranks could not understand why anyone would or should apply any calculus other than net worth.

Values once central to many practitioners of the law were far less evident. Admission to the bar in Michigan involved taking an oath that included these pledges:

- I will not counsel or maintain any suit which shall appear to me to be unjust, nor any defense except such as I believe to be honestly debatable under the law of the land.
- I will employ for the purpose of maintaining the causes confided to me such means only as are consistent with truth and honor, and will never seek to mislead the judge or jury by any artifice or false statement of fact or law.2
It’s hard to argue that these considerations currently loom large on the radar screens of lawyers in Detroit—or Denver or Dayton.

**Here Comes Dr. App**

Unlike 1980, with its marked shift in the political winds, no single year can be identified as the beginning of the major technological revolution of our time—the digital revolution. With a nod to the nineteenth-century mathematicians Charles Babbage and Lady Ada Lovelace, future historians may single out the rise of powerful mainframe computers in the 1940s and 1950s, the launching of the Internet (by the US Advanced Research Projects Agency, or ARPA) in the 1960s, the advent of the laptop in the 1980s and ever smaller devices in the 2000s, the creation of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, and the launching of ever more popular social media in the last two decades, Facebook and Twitter being among the current favorites. And then there are the innumerable enabled events such as online shopping, bargaining, blogging, bullying, and even, on occasion, launching or influencing a political or social revolution.

Again, in principle, nothing in the digital revolution itself disables professional practice. One expects professionals to make use of—indeed, welcome—new technologies, without, however, letting those technologies undermine or unduly distort the practice itself. And similarly, those traditionally served by professionals—be they students, suppliers to corporations, or those requiring medical or legal services—might still continue to make use of professionals’ expertise on a regular basis.

In practice, however, when it comes to the lives of professionals, the digital technologies have been at least as disruptive as the market mentality. Traditionally, professionals have been able to present themselves as highly and in fact uniquely knowledgeable individuals. Such experts not only have detailed technical knowledge; they are also able to provide services and solutions that take into account the full complexity of the client’s needs, and to do so in a highly personalized fashion. The notion that these services could be provided in the absence of other humans—even highly trained humans—once seemed the stuff of science fiction.

But over the last two or three decades, this consensus has disintegrated. Thanks to increasingly powerful services and precise search engines, potential clients can be in touch readily with peers around the globe. In engaging with a professional, these pursuers can come to the table as well informed as and sometimes more knowledgeable and up to date than the professional herself. At the least, client and

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*In a society moving toward a “winner take all” mentality, many professionals—especially younger professionals—came to value their total salary more than other indices of accomplishment, such as service to the community, mentoring of junior associates, time devoted to friends and family, or sheer leisure-time activities.*
professional are coming to look at one another as equals. In a parallel set of developments, the kinds of broad services traditionally provided by professionals have been broken down into far finer sets of skills and services. Instead of having trained journalists fashion a comprehensive account suitable for all readers, online reporting systems can customize various linguistic and illustrated versions—often drawing on already posted sources—for readers of different interests and tastes and link the story to other content, including advertisements of interest. Instead of having a trained lawyer draw up a trust that is appropriate for a client, an online system can pose a set of questions to a client and then produce a finished document. Such customized services are increasingly carried out not by humans billing by the hour but rather by apps that are quick, efficient, reliable, and, more often than not, as good as (if not better than) professionals, and at a tiny fraction of the cost.

At present, as far as I know, few digital creations purport to be completely substitutable for a well-trained human professional. And indeed, the more complex the situation, the more likely it is that clients will be willing to pay for the expert who is likely to solve the problems they face—or, as I expressed it earlier, who can make complex technical and ethical decisions under conditions of uncertainty. In the so-called star or winner-take-all system, top-flight doctors, lawyers, and professors manage both to bring home large salaries and maintain their professional credibility. But those judged to have less talent and who amass less imposing incomes are not in demand, and often the tasks they formerly executed are carried out by paraprofessionals. While senior partners at law firms like Skadden Arps or Simpson Thacher bring home millions if not tens of millions, in 2013 the average lawyer in the United States earned about $130,000 (which of course means that many earned far less). These “ordinary” lawyers win neither big bucks nor the esteem of their fellow citizens.

We do not know when, or how, or even if computer applications will be able to replace a super-lawyer like David Boies or a physician like legendary heart surgeon Michael DeBakey. But we certainly know that many of the functions they once carried out are readily downloaded today, that this trend will continue and expand, and that additional hands-on, face-to-face, personalized expertise may well turn out to be supererogatory, or even illusory. Moreover, the information readily available through scans of “big data” will result in scorecards that will evaluate, or at least purport to evaluate, the “batting averages” of Boies or DeBakey, as compared to the scores achieved by a legal algorithm or a medical robot. Just as lab tests of canvases or inks may surpass artistic connoisseurs in discriminating a fake from an original, just as IBM’s Deep Blue was able to defeat chess champion Gary Kasparov, and IBM’s Watson surpassed winning contestant Ken Jennings on the quiz show Jeopardy, so, too, a digital Boies or a robotic DeBakey may outdo the performances of the original masters in whose image these contemporary Golems were fashioned.
Introducing the Susskinds

Surveying this state of affairs, in their new book *The Future of the Professions*, are the British father-and-son team of Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind. Richard has long been a leading thinker about and critic of the legal profession, and his son Daniel teaches economics at Oxford. These authorities firmly believe that what has happened—and what is going to happen—to the practice of law will happen as well to the other major professions. They outline major technological innovations and training regimens for paraprofessionals, which in combination are likely to satisfy the bulk of the needs of ordinary clients as well as or better than the ordinary run of solicitors and barristers. In their considered view, contemporary professions are failing economically, technologically, psychologically, morally, and qualitatively, and by virtue of their inscrutability. Or, as they put it colloquially, “We cannot afford them, they are often antiquated, the expertise of the best is enjoyed only by a few, and their workings are not transparent. For these and other reasons, we believe today’s professions should and will be replaced by feasible alternatives.”

What may surprise most readers—at least it surprised me—is that not only the younger but also the elder generation welcomes these trends. To be sure, the Susskinds do not go quite so far as George Bernard Shaw, who famously quipped that the professions are “a conspiracy against the laity.” But they celebrate the many freeing and empowering facets of individuals taking greater control of their own lives, and they do not hesitate to critique the professions for their less attractive features—their arrogance, their secrecy, and their elitism. The Susskinds counsel young people not to enter the professions, a dying sector; instead, they celebrate cohorts of knowledge engineers, process analysts, designers, system providers, data scientists, and systems engineers. If, as they anticipate, the professions are headed for a single burial plot, or for a whole sector of the cemetery, the Susskinds will shed few tears.

As a professional and an observer of professionals, I certainly discern and often welcome the trends described by the Susskinds. In my scholarly work, I benefit from the tremendous power of search engines and the ability to share and edit documents seamlessly. In my teaching, I communicate constantly with students and exchange all kinds of digital materials with them, and in class, I often use digital materials. Even before the advent of social media, I made all of my lectures available on the university’s intranet. And, of course, I can follow both my areas of special interest and what is happening in the world with great ease—and even comment on this material, as in this essay. I would not want to return to a pre-digital Dark Age.

As thoughtful analysts and skilled debaters (characteristics of the top suite of flesh-and-blood lawyers on both sides of the Atlantic), the Susskinds not only submit a
strong brief in favor of their predictions but also anticipate possible responses to their account. In a section of their book called “Objections,” they list the principal reasons why others might take issue with their analyses, predictions, and celebratory mood. This list of counterarguments to their critique includes the trustworthiness of professionals, the moral limits of unregulated markets, the value of craft, the importance of empathy and personal interactions, and the pleasure and pride derived from doing what they term “good work.” To each objection, the Susskinds give a crisp response.

I was disappointed with this list of objections, each followed by refutation. For example, countering the claim that one needs extensive training to become an expert, the Susskinds call for the reinstatement of apprentices, who can learn “on the job.” But from multiple studies in cognitive science, we know that it takes approximately a decade to become an expert in any domain—and presumably that decade includes plenty of field expertise. Apprentices cannot magically replace well-trained experts. In another section, countering the claim that we need to work with human beings whom we can trust, they cite the example of the teaching done online via Khan Academy. But Khan Academy is the brainchild of a very gifted educator who in fact has earned the trust of many students and indeed of many teachers; it remains to be seen whether online learning à la Khan suffices to help individuals—either professionals or their clients—make “complex technical and ethical decisions under conditions of uncertainty.” The Susskinds recognize that the makers and purveyors of apps may have selfish or even illegal goals in mind. But as they state, “We recognize that there are many online resources that promote and enable a wide range of offenses. We do not underestimate their impact of threat, but they stand beyond the reach of this book.”

Whether or not one goes along with specific objections and refutations, another feature of the Susskinds’ presentation should give one pause. The future they limn seems almost entirely an exercise in rational deduction, and is accordingly devoid of historical and cultural considerations.

Turning to history, in the past century alone the world has witnessed two world wars, the Cold War, and the Holocaust (as well as other genocides), and we live at a time of strife and conflict in many corners of the world. New problems are sure to arise: the possibility of nuclear explosions, cataclysmic climate change, unplanned mass immigrations, widespread religious strife, occupational dislocations, unintended consequences of digital technology, and an ever-increasing population of people who are elderly and disabled. There is every reason to believe that existing and possibly new professions and professionals may well be needed to deal with these situations. But the historical lens has been left in the drawer.

As for culture, the professions have arisen largely in the West, and when they have been adopted in parts of the Far East and the Southern Hemisphere, they inevitably have taken on their own coloration and nuance. We cannot determine whether and to
what extent modern economic development was enabled by the status and disinterestedness of the ensemble of professions. We do know that in many parts of the world the Western approach to professions has been admired and emulated. In fact, research that I carried out with colleagues documents that immigrants to the United States may be critical of the professionals whom they personally encounter, but they appreciate that, at least in principle, American citizens can get a fair trial and an honest report of the news. At the same time, there is hardly universal agreement on how professions should be implemented. Journalism is a particularly vivid example: There is little agreement across nations with respect to issues of privacy, anonymity, and criticism of the government. At a time when nationalism is everywhere on the rise, when religions continue to clash, it is naive to think that a professional algorithm, conceived and fashioned in Silicon Valley or in Britain’s Cambridge Cluster, will carry out its work with equal efficiency and equal effectiveness around the globe. And if each region has its own “apps,” who or what will mediate among them?

Even in the developed world, with its ever-increasing inequities, there is much work to be done with respect to human goals (e.g., social welfare, medical care) and humane ways of achieving them (e.g., nurturing teachers, responsive civil servants, empathic health workers). Moreover, we should note the rise of “countercultural” phenomena. At the very time that digital devices are flexing their muscles, there is the ascent of the “maker movement,” in which hands-on arts and crafts are cherished. Who can possibly predict the ultimate balance between human making, mechanical making, and digital making?

None of these considerations mean, of course, that it can or should be business as usual for the professions. Technologies will alter the professional landscape, and deservedly so. But it is naive to think that an account arrived at largely through reasoned argument suffices for anticipating the many possible futures of the professional landscape.

**A Question of Values**

With respect to the professions, the stakes are high. At their best, the professions arose to meet the most basic and deeply desired human needs and expectations. In much of the world and in much of recent history, professionals have been the chosen means—and the chosen role models—for meeting those needs: aspirations for physical health, mental health, justice, safe buildings, equitable financial institutions, mastery of major scholarly disciplines, and nurturance of the “better” of the inhabitants of the planet. Again, at their best, those who assume the role of professionals represent the competent and humane ways in which individuals carry out these tasks; they serve as models for
at least one kind of person whom we can aspire to be and one kind of society in which we would want to live. May we never have a world wherein the phrases “she is acting” or “he is a true” become devoid of meaning.

One could say that, in theory, these needs and roles could be satisfied in a completely marketized society—but we have seen that they are not. Indeed, as amply documented in 2001 (following the collapse of Enron) and 2008 (following the collapse of Lehman Brothers), the avowedly marketized society does not even prevent economic disaster; we need to regulate markets firmly and fairly. One could say that, in theory, these needs and roles could be satisfied in a completely digital society.

But bits can never yield singular values; like any tool, they can be used to promote harmony or discord, greed or selflessness. There is no such thing as a purely disinterested algorithm—as is dramatically demonstrated in examinations of the algorithms used and regularly modified by major tech companies. Humans create and rearrange the bits—but then the values of those creative human beings become crucial. And as humans we are simply not smart enough to be able to anticipate just how those bits will be arranged. Social media can engender strong friendships, but they can also engender bullying, perhaps even suicides. These media can build community, but, as in the case of the anonymous message delivery system Yik Yak, they can rapidly destroy community. Valid values require constant human construction, surveillance, critique, reflection, and rebuilding, and a commons in which we all have a stake, for which we all care, or, to put it more trenchantly, we all should care.

A folktale is told that exists in several versions: There is an artistic object that is so beautiful and captivating that people come from all over to examine it. One day one of the admiring visitors enthuses, “What a magnificent chalice; it’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen.” A cynic grabs a hammer and says, “You think that’s amazing—I’ll show you something even more amazing.” With that, he strikes the object and it breaks into innumerable pieces, which then scatter to the wind.

It took many years and many people to construct the professional landscape many of us grew up in and took for granted. The disruptive forces in our society—intentionally or simply by virtue of their existence—have the potential to slay, to murder, the professions. Alas, both the greed for money and the belief in the infallibility of the market have contributed to this lamentable possibility—I consider these factors to be suicidal impulses found in too many professionals. It’s high time that those of us who continue to value the professions reinvigorate and, as necessary, reinvent the professions. We need to acknowledge our complicity in the current undesirable situation, embody the principles and values that have enabled professional practice at its best, and work to ensure that these principles and values will be strengthened, not undermined, by the technologies to come, and, insofar as is possible, will exist in harmony with the ever unpredictable winds of history and culture.
Endnotes


4 Ibid., 233.
The Self-Assembled Career

Carrie M. Lane

Much has been lost by American workers over the past half century. Layoffs have become more common. Secure full-time jobs with ample benefits have increasingly been replaced by part-time, contract, and contingent positions offering low pay, insecurity, limited mobility, and few if any benefits. The unions that once advocated on behalf of workers have lost many members and much of their efficacy. Corporate profits have become delinked from job growth. Even economic recoveries are now “jobless.”

There is much to lament in these changes, as many, myself included, have documented. Yet as the historian Bethany Moreton recently argued, “If there is anything to be celebrated in the current jobless recovery, it is this opportunity at last to assess the job as a social contrivance, not a timeless feature of the physical universe.” Moreton shows how the “secure, benefits-laden job” was transformed in about a century from a “disreputable character” into the standard against which other forms of labor were measured, and usually found lacking (particularly when performed by often-excluded groups such as women, minorities, immigrants, and the poor). Rather than mourn the demise of the job, Moreton asks, “How few ‘real jobs’ have to remain before we can admit that most of the world’s work has always been done under other titles, by different rules—and so take this opportunity to re-consider how we organize and reward it?”

Indeed, the solution to the unraveling of the social contract of employment may not be to prop up the ailing traditional job but, instead, to imagine what other forms work lives might take. One alternative that merits consideration is the self-assembled career. Consciously pursued as an alternative to full-time employment, it is created by combining arrangements such as part-time employment, contracting, consulting, freelance work, and “solopreneurship” (running a small business with few or no other full-time employees).

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Right: Messy closet, illustration by Christopher Corr/Getty Images.
The concept of the “flexible career” has gotten a bad rap in recent decades, primarily because it usually advantages employers—who no longer have to provide security, mobility, or benefits—while hurting “flexible” (i.e., disposable) workers. Yet contingent positions need not be “bad jobs.” Some are quite good—better, even, than full-time employment in some respects—and all could be improved through the creation or expansion of policies to support contingent workers and their families. My own fieldwork among self-employed professional organizers provides a glimpse of what such “jobless” careers might look like and suggests some of the changes that would help establish the self-assembled career as a sustainable and satisfying alternative to the traditional job.

Professional organizing, in which practitioners help clients organize disorderly or overcrowded homes and offices, is a relatively young occupation. It was founded in the mid-1980s by female organizers in Los Angeles who created what became the National Association for Professional Organizers (NAPO), which now has more than 4,000 members. From 2011 to 2013, I interviewed more than fifty organizers in large and small cities, attended organizing conferences and workshops, and worked as an unpaid organizing assistant.

The organizers featured here consciously pursued careers in organizing as an alternative to traditional full-time jobs. While their specific experiences are unique, their paths into this profession and the challenges they encountered are representative of those faced by many organizers I met. Their stories document the creativity and effort involved in pursuing satisfying, sustaining work in precarious times.

Networking and Self-Marketing

Over cups of tea in her cozy kitchen in autumn 2012, Lara Leonard (a pseudonym, as are all interviewee names herein) told me about her decision to start her own business. Lara was a petite brunette with a warm smile and a no-nonsense manner. Some thirty years earlier, after a brief stint in college, she had started as a receptionist at a large financial services firm in the Los Angeles area and rose to become a secretary, then a personal assistant, and finally an office manager. After running the office for nearly twenty years, she was laid off in 2010. At that point, she said, “I decided I had to start my own business, because it was now or never.” She’d been unhappy even before the layoff, and being unemployed provided the impetus to try something she’d long thought about. “I was dreading the idea of going back to corporate America,” she said. “I needed to do something that I really loved, and I really wanted to try my hand at my own business.” Most important, she added, was that “I didn’t want somebody else to have control over me for the rest of my life. When I got a raise, if I got a raise, when I went on vacation. I just needed to have some independence.”

Not working was “not an option.” Lara had always out-earned her husband, and they could not survive on his income alone. The regular paycheck had been the only thing tethering her to her job. Once that disappeared, so did the barrier to her dream of entrepreneurship.
Around the time of her layoff, a friend told Lara about NAPO. As a self-described “organizing crazy person,” at first she assumed that the friend was just joking about her compulsive tendencies. But Lara soon realized that she was serious, and attended NAPO’s next Los Angeles meeting. “I could not believe that there were other women that did this,” she told me. The next day, she registered her business name and drafted her first contract. “I basically just hit the ground running,” she said. “I didn’t have time to stop and think, ‘What if this doesn’t work out?’ It was never an option.”

Within two weeks, Lara had her first clients—a friend of her mother who needed help moving, and a physician in whose disorganized files she found more than $30,000 of uncollected revenue, which she then collected for him. These jobs confirmed for Lara that organizing was “something that I could do and do well.” Following advice from NAPO, Lara calculated what she needed to earn annually to pay half her family’s expenses. She set her hourly rate at $100, the midpoint of the $50–$150 range usually quoted by Los Angeles organizers. “I started learning the ropes of networking and self-marketing,” she told me. “And that is how I started getting business.” Lara’s faith in networking is commonplace today, as is her perception of herself as a product to be branded and marketed, whether to employers or clients. Although some organizers reject such self-commodification, others like Lara embrace it as a requirement for professional success.

Since Lara started her business, organizing has been her only source of income. Although she previously made far more money than he did, she and her husband, who also recently started a business, now aim to each provide 50 percent of their household income. Since neither has a regular salary, they cut expenditures, eliminated vacations, and traded in Lara’s car for a less expensive model. “It’s a huge adjustment,” she said, “but I’m getting used to it, realizing what is important, what’s not, and working my way back to that financial security that I need and want.”

Laura calculated what she needed to pay her bills and keep her home. She knew she would not reach that figure immediately, but was thrilled to make a profit her first year and double it in her second. Now in her third year, she is, she said, “on my way. I’m not there yet, but I’m hoping by the end of this year I will be able to breathe.” Lara attributes her success to her work ethic and many hours spent building her business. She is up every day at 6 a.m. and attends 7 a.m. networking meetings twice a week. Lara usually schedules clients in four-hour blocks because it takes that long to make a difference in the space she’s organizing. After seeing one to two clients each day, she makes scheduling and follow-up calls, then answers e-mails. Her day usually ends when she falls into bed around 10 p.m. “It’s a long day,” she told me, “and that goes on six days a week.” Laura claims that this intense schedule “totally suits who I am and what I do. As I said, I’m very, very driven.” She hopes eventually to have more leisure time, but enjoys her work despite its pace. “I like my clients. I like the whole span of it. I like that it’s not always the same thing,” she explained. “You’ll never know what you’ll be doing from day to day.”

The promise of variety has been proposed by advocates of flexible work as fair compensation for the withdrawal of job security, though scholars have rightly been skeptical of this claim. For Lara and other organizers, however, the fact that no two days look
the same is a rewarding aspect of their profession, as is the chance to do meaningful work that improves people’s lives in ways large and small.11 “I love leaving and going, ‘Wow, that’s huge.’ This person can now sleep in their own bed, this person can find their important documents, and this person is relieved. This is not rocket science, but we do make a difference. We really do.”

**The Queen of Side Jobs**

I interviewed Maggie Fee on a rainy afternoon in Brooklyn in November 2012, shortly after Hurricane Sandy ravaged the East Coast. Despite the weather, the small apartment Maggie shared with her partner, Rachel, was warm and welcoming. In her early thirties, Maggie was tall and lean with short, casually tousled hair. She had a calm demeanor and chose her words carefully, pausing often to make sure she was articulating exactly what she meant.

Maggie had been running her own organizing business for about two years, but the inspirational “spark” had been ignited more than a decade before. After earning a BA in painting, Maggie pursued a master of fine arts degree while supporting herself with a full-time job as a researcher at an education nonprofit. The job involved managing information, both on paper and electronically. Impressed with Maggie’s work, someone at another nonprofit asked if she would organize that office’s files, and Maggie was hired as a part-time consultant on top of her full-time job. “I wasn’t seeking a job where I could use my organizational skills,” Maggie explained. “If anything, I prided myself more on my artistic skills…. But other people recognized it in me…[and] it was much more difficult to get people to pay me to be an artist than it was to get people to pay me to be organized.” Although starting her own business took years, it was the first inkling that people would pay for skills that came naturally to her.

The same thing happened in subsequent positions. A self-described “queen of side jobs” while a graduate student, Maggie was a governess (for free room and board) and started her own environmentally friendly cleaning business. One client paid her to organize his closets. Years later, when she was teaching art part-time at a private school, her boss hired her to help sort his mail, pay his bills, and organize his home once a week. After a few years at the school, Maggie was told she had to convert to full-time work or lose her health benefits. Realizing that the only thing keeping her at the school was health insurance, she declined the offer and left. “Well,” she asked herself, “what am I going to do next?” To her, full-time work felt like the loss of freedom. Of course, she told me, “you’re not any more ‘free’ working for yourself,” but to her it felt more freeing than working full-time for someone else.

Maggie spent a few months looking into starting her own business. She enrolled in a free ten-session city program for new entrepreneurs, filed the paperwork, designed a website, and sent the link to everyone she knew. She immediately got two corporate clients, referred by friends. She initially charged $80 per hour, but changed that to $100 for commercial clients and $75 for residential clients. (She sometimes gives elderly clients a discount rate—“I’m soft on them,” she said. “Don’t tell anyone.”)
After those initial clients, business slowed a bit. “I definitely struggled to get clients. I’m not a good salesperson.” It was a stressful time—“terrifying,” she remembered. “I cried a lot.” Maggie had saved $3,000, enough to cover her expenses for three and a half months. She knew her partner would not throw her out if she couldn’t make her half of the rent, but that provided little comfort. For Maggie, who prided herself on her work ethic and ability to support herself, the anxiety was less about doing without necessities than it was about not paying her way.

To compensate for organizing’s unreliable income, Maggie remains “the queen of side jobs,” most of which she finds through friends or websites like Craigslist and TaskRabbit. They include teaching drawing, organizing kids’ birthdays, helping with stage productions, and working as a nanny and personal chef. While Maggie enjoys this variety, her willingness to “do anything for money, anything legal, that is,” reflects her anxiety about money. “I can’t materialize [organizing] clients,” Maggie explained, “but I can pretty much materialize work because of the bucket of different skills that I can pull from.”

Maggie thinks it will take five years to make her organizing business financially sustaining. But after being denied a small business loan, she’s starting to wonder if “maybe the universe is telling me I’m not supposed to grow my business, I’m supposed to do something else.” Recently, she has even considered getting a full-time job, her first in over a decade, but, like Lara, she’s ambivalent about the routine, hierarchical nature of such work. “When I go in and work at [corporate client offices] and I see these people, I do not envy them at all going to the same place every day and having a boss,” she said. “I think that might be something I also don’t want—a boss. They just all seem really miserable.” Yet, she admitted, “there are moments when having that stability seems really, really great. And then there are moments.…”

Making Sense of Assembled Careers

Professional organizing is not, of course, the solution to the decline of secure employment. The career paths described above—pursued by white, female high school graduates in urban areas living in two-income families with no children—are hardly available to most Americans. Even those for whom such work is possible would face significant obstacles in trying to build a self-sustaining career. Neither Maggie nor Lara has yet achieved financial security, although many organizers have. That these two women are still struggling financially makes it all the more significant that both continue to prefer their current work to full-time employment.

Many of the risks and drawbacks described in these narratives—long hours, uncertain income, and frequent anxiety—are essentially the same challenges facing many fully employed Americans. But if full-time secure jobs are actually no longer either full-time or secure, then, as Lara and Maggie decided, perhaps working for oneself is potentially a less risky option—and possibly a more satisfying one. They are not alone in this conclusion. The number of American independent workers (people who have nontraditional, nonpermanent full- or part-time employment and who identify
themselves as consultants, freelancers, contractors, solopreneurs, and on-call workers) is expected to reach nearly forty million by 2019, from approximately thirty million today.13 Some of that growth is fueled by a lack of alternatives, no doubt, but it does present an opportunity to imagine how such workers might be better supported in crafting lucrative and fulfilling assembled careers.

At a minimum, these stories demonstrate the effectiveness of educational and advisory programs for would-be entrepreneurs. The courses Maggie and Lara took (through the city government and NAPO, respectively) provided valuable financial, legal, and business advice. Professional associations such as NAPO can also serve as critical personal and professional support systems, removing some of the burdens of self-employment from the shoulders of individual workers. Many associations provide training, certifications, marketing support, networking and mutual aid, and a valuable sense of professional community. According to NAPO’s website, the group “leverages the power of numbers so that even sole proprietors can have access to essential business services such as liability insurance and credit-card processing.”14 Professional organizations also provide the collective clout that is needed to lobby for the kind of government assistance that is increasingly vital in the precarious economy.

Such political leverage will likely prove crucial in the coming years. For assembled careers to make sense for any but the most elite workers, health insurance, pensions, subsidized childcare, and other benefits will need to be untethered from traditional jobs (where such benefits still exist, that is) and be made available to all Americans. If implemented, such policies could allay some of the anxiety experienced even by relatively privileged independent workers like Lara and Maggie, both of whom keep up a frenetic, perhaps unsustainable pace in pursuit of the security they associate with full-time jobs.

On a cultural level, embracing assembled careers as legitimate, valuable forms of work will require sacrificing the ideal of the “real job.” One might not imagine that this would be such a loss, considering that even “Organization Men” have always complained about such jobs.15 Yet this model has proved difficult to dislodge. Many predict dire consequences from the demise of these kinds of jobs, arguing that only secure, predictable work allows for continuity of self and career as well as the cultivation of values such as loyalty and commitment.16 In Maggie and Lara, however, we see women who have crafted professional narratives for themselves—a driven entrepreneur who thrives on variety and “the queen of side jobs”—that are built around, rather than in spite of, their insecure work lives, albeit not without anxiety and uncertainty. And in organizing, both have found work that is enjoyable and meaningful, the kind most Americans long for but few experience.17

Maggie and Lara, with their admittedly imperfect but in many ways satisfying self-assembled careers, may not show us what work should look like, but they show us what work does look like, for good and for bad, in these precarious times.
Endnotes


7 I interviewed new and experienced organizers, including some of the profession's founders. Most organizers are white women, but I also interviewed male organizers and African American, Hispanic, and Asian American female organizers.


10 Beck, *The Brave New World of Work*.


12 Lara and Maggie are unusual among organizers in that neither has children (although Lara’s college-aged stepdaughter lives with the family part time). Many organizers choose the profession in order to combine paid work with child-care responsibilities.


Vocational Education and the New World of Work

Mike Rose

The current resurgence of interest in vocational education—known these days as career and technical education, or CTE—coincides with a flood of ominous-sounding predictions about the impending transformation of work, a change that may result in the diminishment of work or possibly even in its end. The prospect of such a vast transformation raises the inevitable question: Will there soon be any vocations for vocational education students to enter?

Since the early 1990s, government and private organizations have invested heavily in efforts to reform vocational education, in some cases by increasing its academic content (more math and literacy instruction in carpentry or culinary training, for example), in others by establishing more direct pathways from school to workplace. In line with once-anticipated employment trends, traditional shop classes in the construction trades, automotive repair, and machining were cut back, and programs in health care, computer and green technologies, and certain service industries were expanded.

More recently, economists, social critics, and other commentators have called for an expansion of vocational education, including a return of those old shop classes, though updated and computerized to match the needs of the current labor market. There are good jobs, economists point out, in midlevel technical occupations such as specialized manufacturing. Some educators emphasize that the wide variety of student interests and aptitudes is inadequately served by the typical academic curriculum. And the dramatic rise of the Makers and Do-It-Yourself movements has cast a new, more favorable light on vocational education. Shouldn’t all kids have the experience of applying knowledge, of making things, of tinkering? Finally, chambers of commerce, trade groups, statehouses, and even the president of the United States have been championing community
college occupational programs for technology-enhanced jobs in manufacturing, engineering and design, and health care. It would seem to be a promising time for CTE.

Yet on the same opinion page where you find someone touting the virtues of vocational education, you may also come across a column describing the world of work that is now emerging. At the core of this brave new workplace, we are usually reminded, is the rapidly evolving processing and problem-solving capacity of computer technology. Witness over the last half-century the increased automation of manufacturing and, more recently, the “hollowing out” of seemingly secure white-collar professional jobs that can be broken down into component parts and digitized, from bookkeeping to reading medical images. This increase in computer power and the resulting hemorrhaging of jobs will increase exponentially, the forecasters predict, aided by the postindustrial reorganization of work, the loss of union power and collective bargaining protections, and the rise of new businesses such as Uber that substitute part-time, entrepreneurial “gig” work with no protections or benefits for those more secure career trajectories that came with being a taxi driver, a dispatcher, or a hotel worker. These altered conditions have given rise to a new vocabulary of work, with precarious serving as the ubiquitous adjective.

There’s no disputing the arrival of the first wave of this transformed world of work. What it will yield a decade or two down the line is the much-debated question. But whatever that longer-term outcome is, it will have major implications for education in general and for CTE in particular. Given the uncertainties of what will unfold—including the great uncertainty of how we will respond politically to the challenges—how do we propose to educate young people for these possible futures?

To answer, we might begin by considering the powerful current of technological determinism that shapes some of the writing on the future of work. Though computerization and economic restructuring are changing the workplace profoundly, the way this change plays out in the future will be affected not only by continued advances in technology but also by economic policy, legal decisions, politics, business and cultural trends, and social movements. Technology is a powerful force, but it does not function or evolve in isolation. In fact, the history of technology is replete with examples of technological innovations that either had a short life span or were never taken up at all. Because something is technologically possible doesn’t mean that humans will embrace it.

Similarly, we need to be wary of predictions of human obsolescence. Robots can now perform remarkable acts of dexterity—unscrewing a lid, for example—that were once thought to be impossible. Achievements of this sort lead technology futurists to assume that continued advances will lead inexorably to machines with even greater human-level dexterity. While such predictions tend to overgeneralize from a breakthrough at one level of engineering to quite another level of sophistication, let’s assume that the unlikely happens and robots are developed that not only unscrew lids but also cut human hair, putting the jobs of three-quarters of a million American hairstylists at risk. Would the average person want to forego the touch,
judgment, aesthetic sensibility, and free-flowing conversation a human stylist provides, even if a robot could be programmed to execute a technically proficient graduated bob?

The history of technology also demonstrates that while a new technology (the stethoscope or telephone, for example) can sometimes profoundly affect what we can do in and to the world, that technology usually emerges from previous technologies and practices, and its adoption is affected by them. While the new technology typically requires that its users develop new skills, it also draws on existing knowledge and skills, even as it might alter them. In fact, old-technology knowledge can enhance performance. My friend Mavourneen Wilcox was, as a young astronomer, quite skilled at the use of adaptive optics, a revolutionary method of correcting—through an elaborate system of optical sensors and a segmented, rapidly changing mirror—the atmospheric distortion of the light from celestial objects. She credits her finesse in manipulating the instrument to all the time she spent in old-school electronics labs and machine shops, learning “how to work around things when they don’t go right.” We certainly want a new CTE to be responsive to changes in the nature and distribution of work, but we also need to be historically grounded in our assessment of the work that lies ahead.

The Great Divide

The changes in work we are currently witnessing have several immediate implications for CTE. Quite clearly, some level of computer skill will be necessary for any kind of work, from hairstyling to auto mechanics to medical technology. So-called soft job skills (communication, punctuality, flexibility) have been part of the national discussion about work for decades. More recently, we’ve been hearing a lot about qualities of character such as determination, optimism, and (the big buzzword of the moment) grit. These soft skills and qualities of character will serve a person well in a precarious economy, where, the reasoning goes, resilience, adaptability, and the like become not just desirable but necessary for survival. So, too, will training in entrepreneurship, which will prepare people to seize opportunities and promote their talents and resources.

All well and good. But there are deeper, culturally ingrained questions that need to be addressed, whatever the future holds. And while these questions have been around for some time, the urgencies of a new world of work may finally make us take them seriously.

The first is the long-standing divide in the American school curriculum between the “academic” and “vocational” courses of study, a distinction institutionalized in the early-twentieth-century high school. The vocational curriculum prepared students for the world of work, usually blue- or pink-collar work, while the academic curriculum emphasized the arts and sciences and the cultivation of intellectual life. The separation
contributed to the formation of a caste system within the school—“social predestina-
tion,” in the words of John Dewey.

Another significant problem resulting from the academic-vocational separation
is summed up in a piece of historical analysis provided in a report by the National
Center for Research in Vocational Education: “Vocational teachers emphasized job-
specific skills to the almost complete exclusion of theoretical content. One result was that the intel-
lectual development of vocational students tended to be limited at a relatively early age.” The report
captures a fatal flaw of vocational education as it has been practiced in the United States: its devalu-
ing of the intellectual dimension of common work and of the people who do it. During the past three
decades, school reformers have been trying to bridge the curricular divide, mainly by abolishing
the rigid system that tracked students into either the academic or the vocational curriculum. But
the designation of a course as “academic” still evokes intelligence, smarts, big ideas,
while the tag “vocational” conjures quite the opposite impression.

Related to the academic/vocational divide in higher education is the “liberal ideal,”
which enshrines the study of the liberal arts for their own sake, separate from any con-
nection to the world of work, crafts and trades, and commerce. That ideal has been with
us since Plato and Aristotle. It found full expression in Cardinal John Henry Newman’s
Victorian-era tract The Idea of a University, and it figures in critical discussions of
higher education today, particularly as colleges and universities devote even more of
their resources to fields of study beyond the traditional liberal arts.

In their book Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing
Our Kids—and What We Can Do about It, Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus make a
powerful contribution to those discussions. They rightly criticize the contemporary uni-
versity for a host of sins: soaring tuition, the production of endless esoteric research, the
exploitation of adjunct teachers. But in making their argument for restoring the uni-
versity to something closer to Newman’s ideal, the authors fall prey to the assumption
that anything vocational cannot lead to the liberation of imagination or the stretching
of intellect. How telling it is that this bold critique of higher education uncritically
endorses the existence of an inviolable divide between academic and vocational pur-
suits, a divide that denies the intellectual and imaginative possibilities of any course of
study related to work.

Hand in glove with the crude division of human learning into the academic and the
vocational has been the social construction of the vocational student as someone either
uninterested in or incapable of dealing with topics typically defined as abstract or intel-
lectual. We find this stereotyping in the early deliberations about vocational education
in the United States. Psychologists and educators asserted the limited mental capac-
ity of the immigrant and working-class students for whom vocational education was
created. As opposed to college-bound students (overwhelmingly white and middle to
upper class) who were “abstract minded,” working-class and immigrant students were “manually minded”—their brains functioned differently. The terminology has changed, but there is still a strong tendency among some policymakers and educators to assume such cognitive limitation among vocational students. Those students might be skilled, dexterous, hard working, even resourceful and inventive, but, educators wrongly conclude, they are not good at abstraction or the conceptual and not interested in history or psychology or literature.

For some vocational teachers and programs, such beliefs can translate into a de-emphasizing of the conceptual content of work. Historically, these beliefs have also resulted in a bland curriculum of non-vocational subjects: science lite or history lite. But students who may dread the sight of a history or science textbook can still be interested in history or science—or a host of other subjects, when they are presented in a way that doesn’t conjure up the driest aspects of the schoolhouse.

Several years ago, I sat in on a humanities course at an occupationally oriented community college, a course required for the associate of arts degree. Most of the students were in the construction trades. The class was assigned several essays that dealt with education, sociology, and economics—topics that would seem pertinent to this group. But the discussion went nowhere. Most of the students were disengaged. Some were talking with one another. The instructor was treading water. Fortunately, he had brought in a guest speaker that day, and soon the guest took over. He was in education but, it turned out, had grown up in the neighborhood of the college, the descendant of people who had worked in the manufacturing and service industries. He began by talking about his background and tied it to some of the topics in the essays. Then he asked the students to describe their high schools, and he pointed out connections with the essays. As the class proceeded, it became clear that the students had much to say about the themes in the readings, whether they touched on economics and inequality, race and social class, or the goals of education.

There are so many moments in vocational education when values, ethical questions, and connections of self to tradition and community emerge naturally, ripe for thoughtful consideration. Surrounding such issues, influencing them at every level of working life, are the profound effects of social location, history, economics, and politics—the very factors that contribute to the viability and meaning of a vocation. Unfortunately, the early architects of vocational education eliminated these concerns from the curriculum, and voc-ed has remained fairly anemic in those areas ever since.

Give Workers Back Their Heads

If the theorists of the new world of work are right, then tomorrow’s CTE student will need to be computer savvy, resourceful, and entrepreneurial. But the theorists’
predictions suggest the need for other educational goals as well.

Intellectual suppleness will have to be as key an element of future CTE as the content knowledge of a field. The best CTE already helps students develop an inquiring, problem-solving cast of mind, but to make developing such a cast of mind standard practice will require an excavation of the beliefs about work and intelligence that led to the separation of the “academic” and the “vocational” in the first place. Of course, students will learn the tools, techniques, and routines of practice of a particular field. You can’t become proficient without them. But in addition, students will need to learn the conceptual bases of those tools and techniques and how to reason with them, because future work is predicted to be increasingly fluid and mutable.

We also will need to examine our culturally received assumptions about people who are drawn to any of the pursuits that fall within CTE, from the hospitality industry to nursing to the construction trades. To borrow a phrase from labor journalist William Serrin, we need “to give workers back their heads” and assume and encourage the intellectual engagement of students in the world of work. And more than ever we need to provide CTE students with a serious and substantial education in history, sociology and psychology, economics and politics. What are the forces shaping the economy? Are there any pressure points for individual or collective action? How did we get to this place, and are there lessons to be learned from exploring that history? What resources are out there? What options do I have? How do I determine their benefits and liabilities? Though a curriculum that would give rise to questions like these has typically not been part of traditional vocational education, there is a separate history of worker education programs that blend politics, social sciences, and humanities with occupational education, from early-twentieth-century labor colleges to contemporary institutions like the Van Arsdale Labor Center at Empire State College. We have models to learn from.

These reconsiderations will require a philosophy of education that has at its core a bountiful definition of intelligence and that honors multiple kinds of knowledge and advances the humanistic, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of an occupational as well as more traditional academic course of study. We need such a philosophy now, but we will need it even more in tomorrow’s world of work. Otherwise, the education of future workers will be cognitively narrow and politically passive, adding little more to the current curriculum than additional training in computer skills or techniques of self-promotion. Teach those things, of course, but also educate young workers so that they have multiple skills and bodies of knowledge to draw on, so that they are able to analyze and act upon opportunities to affect the direction of their employment, and so that they can strive to create meaning in their working lives.
What is Thriving Cities?

An initiative of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, Thriving Cities offers important insights for scholars, practitioners, and citizens in evaluating the well-being of their communities. Thriving Cities is committed to turning those insights into action-oriented tools that will empower key stakeholders—including foundations, city officials, city planners, religious leaders, politicians, educators, business people, academics, non-profits, and residents—to ask and answer the question: What does it mean and take to thrive in my city and how can I contribute?

Who is Thriving Cities?

We are a group of unconventional urbanists, coming from many backgrounds and places, who believe that thriving will not be found through the usual strategies and tactics involving technology, money, and policy alone, but rather by situating these critical mechanisms in the context of history, culture, geography, and power. In short, we aim to fill a gap in urban thinking and practice summed up by the question: “What do the humanities have to say to the urban planner?”

Out of this perspective, we are creating a conceptual paradigm for urban assessment and a toolkit for putting that paradigm into action. We believe working for the thriving of our communities is not only an empirical science, but also a moral, civic, and political art.

Where to learn more info:
thrivingcities@virginia.edu
www.thrivingcities.com
Books and Ballots: When Writers Run for Office

Steven G. Kellman

If only Russia had been founded by Anna Akhmatova, if only Mandelstam had made the laws….

—Adam Zagajewski, “If Only Russia,” 1985

Two hundred and eleven members of the 113th Congress listed law as their occupation. The 113th also included numerous entrepreneurs, physicians, engineers, clergy, teachers, farmers, and accountants, as well as a rodeo announcer, a vintner, a comedian, a firefighter, a welder, a fruit picker, a football player, a fisherman, and a mortician. Not a single member claimed a literary calling. Many members of the Senate and the House of Representatives—as well as presidents, governors, and mayors—have written books, or at least pretended to have written them. Ghostwritten memoirs published to coincide with campaigns are the tribute ambitious yahoos pay to literate houyhnhnms. But the office a professional writer seeks is most often merely a space in which to write.

Despite the fact that the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that there were 129,100 writers in the United States in 2012 (a number easily exceeding the populations of rodeo announcers and vintners), it is an extraordinary event when a writer becomes a candidate, and it is almost apocalyptic when one succeeds. Especially in the United States, where Adlai Stevenson was mocked as an “egghead” for being seen with a book and Sarah Palin’s apparent indifference to reading embellished her credentials as a populist foe of “elitism,” bookishness is usually a liability. So alien are books and reading to American notions of political power that Henry Kissinger, an intellectual courtier who himself never ran for office, was astonished to find books not only bursting out of the shelves of Mao Zedong’s study but piled on a table and the floor as well. “It looked more the retreat of a scholar than the audience room of the all-powerful leader of the world’s most populous nation,” Kissinger recalled. According to a survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, a mere 50.2 percent of Americans of voting age read at least one novel, short story, poem, or play in a year, and they apparently do not like to read the names of writers on their ballots.

In America the Philosophical, Carlin Romano makes the hyperbolic claim that “America in
the early twenty-first century towers as the most philosophical culture in the history of the world, an unprecedented marketplace of truth and argument that far surpasses ancient Greece, Cartesian France, nineteenth-century Germany, or any other place one can name over the past three millennia.” In the course of his panegyric, Romano hails Barack Obama as “our most cosmopolitan, philosopher-in-chief president since Woodrow Wilson.” Obama’s Dreams from My Father, published in 1995, a year before he ran successfully for the Illinois State Senate, won the 2009 Galaxy British Book Award for biography and is indeed written with extraordinary passion and grace. Like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, Obama is an anomaly among American politicians in his gift for composing powerful English prose. Nevertheless, although the forty-fourth president might, in another life, have become an important literary figure, he is still, however, an officeholder who writes, not primarily a writer who ran for office. Jimmy Carter published poetry and fiction after leaving the White House, and, even though they have published novels, no one thinks “author” when the names of Barbara Boxer, William Cohen, Newt Gingrich, Gary Hart, Barbara Mikulski, and William Weld are mentioned. Although Calvin Coolidge translated Dante’s Inferno during the courtship of his soon-to-be wife, he is better known for declaring that “the chief business of the American people is business.” No American writer approximating the stature of Victor Hugo, who was elected to the French Senate in 1876, has ever run for public office. The United States may or may not be the “most philosophical culture” in history, but its political and literary cultures are kept quite distinct. In this country, composing poetry is a disqualification for election to public office.

“The only thing I’ve ever really wanted in my life was to be President,” Gore Vidal told an interviewer in 1976. Gore, the grandson of a US senator from Oklahoma, considered politics “the family business.” Despite more than two dozen novels, eight plays, and two political campaigns—for Congress from New York in 1962 and for the Senate from California in 1982—Vidal’s ambition remained unfulfilled. Norman Mailer, a literary rival, also chafed at the role of mere writer. “I have been running for President these last ten years in the privacy of my mind,” Mailer wrote in 1959. The novelist had to settle for the presidency of PEN American Center in 1984. He finished fourth in a primary field of five as a candidate for mayor of New York City in 1969; fellow writer Jimmy Breslin, bidding for the presidency of the City Council, was his running mate. Richard Henry Dana (of Two Years before the Mast fame) ran for Congress from Massachusetts in 1868; Jack London for mayor of Oakland in 1901 and again in 1905; Upton Sinclair for governor of California in 1934; James Michener for Congress from Pennsylvania in 1962; Hunter S. Thompson for sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado, in 1970; and David R. Slavitt for the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 2004. Not one of these candidacies achieved success.

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Poets might be, as Shelley proclaimed, the unacknowledged legislators of the world, or, in George Oppen’s formulation, the legislators of the unacknowledged world. Yet they rarely enter legislatures or executive suites in an elected capacity. One who did was Václav Havel, the poet-dramatist who was elected president of Czechoslovakia in 1989. Explaining his commitment to public service, Havel said that “if the hope of the world lies with human consciousness, then it is obvious that intellectuals cannot go
on forever avoiding their share of responsibility for the world and hiding their distaste for politics under an alleged need to be independent.” The novelist James Michener likewise refused to regard writers as a privileged class exempt from participation in civic affairs. “I consider it insulting for any citizen to think that he is above politics,” the would-be congressman wrote in 1962 while canvassing every square mile of Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

But the finest writers are connoisseurs of ambiguity, the “negative capability” John Keats identified as Shakespeare’s genius. And politics, particularly in our time, dissolves complexities into simplistic fables of good and evil, yes and no, blue and red. When a poet enters the electoral arena, something does not scan. The creed of democratic parity causes many voters to mistrust literary excellence. And Stephen Dedalus’s dedication to a “pure” art that disdains the inevitably compromised realm of politics still shapes much of the discourse about belles-lettres. “You talk to me of nationality, language, religion,” says James Joyce’s haughty young aesthete. “I shall try to fly by those nets.” In proud, Promethean alienation, many artists have disdained distractions from their lofty literary calling. “It’s boring and distasteful” was David Slavitt’s verdict on his experience of running for office when he could have been writing more poetry.

It might seem that because their trade requires collaboration, if not gregariousness, playwrights would be temperamentally better suited to cajoling voters and donors than poets, whose Romantic traditions celebrate impecunious solitude in a garret. It is easier to imagine Arthur Miller than Emily Dickinson shaking hands and kissing babies. But the only significant electoral success among American playwrights was Clare Boothe Luce, whom Connecticut voters sent to Congress twice, in 1942 and 1944.

Despite a rich tradition of littérature engagée, for much of the past two centuries writers have been adversaries of the dominant social values, rendering artistic and political sensibilities as immiscible as oil and Greenpeace. Three years before his election to the presidency of Senegal, poet and professor Léopold Sédar Senghor acknowledged his ambivalence, his sense that literature and politics were pulling him in opposite directions: “I am torn between Europe and Africa, between politics and poetry, between my white brother and myself.” Are artists categorically disqualified from participation in civic life? Or are they merely undesirable except as artists? “All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage. The poetic imagination is not at all a desirable quality in a statesman,” observed W.H. Auden, who might have understood why Lyndon Johnson exclaimed, “I don’t want anything to do with poets” and George H.W. Bush insisted “I can’t do poetry.” In a 1939 symposium for Partisan Review, Gertrude Stein dismissed the entire question: “Writers only think that they are interested in politics, they are not really, it gives them a chance to talk and writers like to talk but really no real writer is really interested in politics.” Or perhaps one life is simply too short to permit excellence in both writing and politics.

Stendhal famously observed that “politics, in a literary work, is like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert,” but the political work of the literati seems more like a blast from a blunderbuss. Writers in politics behave differently from soldiers, lawyers, and stockbrokers. In the United States, they are an oddity. Although Senghor, a major figure in modern French poetry, served as president of Senegal for twenty years, it is hard to imagine Robert Frost or James Dickey serving anything but an ornamental function at a presidential inauguration, and it is ludicrous to envision Marianne Moore or Cormac McCarthy addressing rallies out on the hustings. The Velvet Revolution propelled Havel, whose dissident plays had earlier earned him seven years in a communist prison, into the presidential castle in Prague, but revulsion against McCarthyism did
not thrust Arthur Miller into executive office. And although novelist Benjamin Disraeli became one of Britain’s most notable prime ministers (and continued publishing fiction while in office), the closest Nathaniel Hawthorne came to being president was rooming with a future one—Franklin Pierce—at Bowdoin College.

“Writers should be read—but neither seen nor heard,” declared Daphne du Maurier, voicing a common belief that writers are better off casting ballots but not appearing on them. According to Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, “There is an incompatibility between literary creation and political activity.”

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In much of the world for much of the time, writers are more likely to be victims than agents of official power. Government authorities murdered Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria, David Bergelson in Russia, André Chenier in France, and Cicero in Rome. Forced from power and far from home, the ancient Chinese poet-statesman Qu Yuan killed himself. In his prison memoir *For a Song and a Hundred Songs: A Poet’s Journey through a Chinese Prison* (2013), contemporary Chinese poet Liao Yiwu recalls a failed suicide attempt as the most terrible moment of his harrowing four years of incarceration. Icelandic poet Snorri Sturluson was assassinated in 1241 when his political activities angered Norway’s King Haakon IV. Modern literary culture has often cast the writer as adversary rather than instrument of the state. “An author’s first duty,” quipped Brendan Behan, “is to let down his country.” Robert Crawford concurred: “As far as politics is concerned, the poet’s most important work is to fiddle while Rome burns.” However, as mayor of Fort-de-France and deputy to the French Assembly, Aimé Césaire did not let down his native Martinique; nor did William Butler Yeats betray his nation by serving in the senate of the new Irish Free State; nor did José Echegaray after election to the Spanish Cortes; nor did Lennart Meri during his tenure as president of Estonia. Alphonse de Lamartine flopped in his bid for the presidency of France in 1848, but Luís Muñoz Marín, the first elected governor of Puerto Rico (1949–1964), sustained Plato’s ideal of the philosopher king.

Nevertheless, French intellektuels and Russian intelligentsia defined themselves in opposition to the regnant regime, and, speaking truth to power, literary dissidents including Voltaire, Hugo, Émile Zola, Thomas Mann, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn upheld the role of the writer as rival sovereign. “For a country to have a great writer,” Solzhenitsyn has fictional writer Nikolai Arkadievich Galakhov declare, “is like having a second government. That is why no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones.” The moral authority of Nigeria has resided in Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, not the kleptocracy in the national capital, Abuja. The Liberal Party founded in South Africa by Alan Paton did poorly at the polls, but Paton’s 1948 novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* ultimately exerted more influence than the pass laws promulgated by H.F. Verwoerd and P.W. Botha.

Some of Latin America’s greatest writers, including Julio Cortázar, José Martí, Manuel Puig, and César Vallejo, suffered imprisonment or exile, but other authors have possessed powers beyond the ability to devise startling metaphors and ingenious plots. Rubén Darío, Jorge Isaacs, Gabriela Mistral, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and Alejo Carpentier all served their nations as diplomats, and poet Ernesto Cardenal was Nicaragua’s minister of culture, while novelist Sergio Ramírez Mercado
was its elected vice president. Carlos Fuentes served as Mexico’s ambassador to France, and his death, on May 15, 2012, was first announced on Twitter by Mexican president Felipe Calderón. Fuentes was memorialized in a state funeral attended by his nation’s political elite. But it was another Latin American writer, poet Rigoberto López Pérez, who threw his nation’s politics into turmoil, by assassinating the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza García in 1980. Early in his career as a novelist, in 1945, Jorge Amado was elected to the National Constituent Assembly of Brazil, although his political candidacies ended abruptly when the Communist Party, of which he was a member, was outlawed. When novelist Rómulo Gallegos was elected president of Venezuela in 1948, he considered it “a loan from letters to politics, with no fixed repayment date.” The troubled presidency of novelist Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in Argentina (1868–1874) raised the possibility, ultimately unfulfilled, of reconciling civic responsibility with the life of the mind.

That was also the ambition of Vargas Llosa when he ran for president of Peru in 1990. Although opponents wrenched lurid passages from his fiction to quote out of context, he garnered a plurality of 29 percent in the first round of balloting, before losing the runoff to an obscure agronomist named Alberto Fujimori, who received 57 percent of the final vote. In *A Fish in the Water*, the memoir he published in 1993, Vargas Llosa recalls the arguments Octavio Paz had used to try to dissuade him from entering politics: “incompatibility with intellectual work, loss of independence, being manipulated by professional politicians, and, in the long run, frustration and the feeling of years of one’s life wasted.” Yet Vargas Llosa admits that it was in large part “the decadence, the impoverishment, the terrorism, and the multiple crises of Peruvian society” that drew him to the challenge of seeking “the most dangerous job in the world.” By running for president of his destitute, embattled nation, the author of *The Green House* (1968), *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1975), *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1982), *The War of the End of the World* (1984), *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1990), and other books pursued the grandiose illusion “of writing the great novel in real life.” His noble ambition of using his talents to transform Peru came up against his discovery that “real politics, not the kind that one reads and writes about, thinks about and imagines (the only sort I was acquainted with), but politics as lived and practiced day by day, has little to do with generosity, solidarity, and idealism. It consists almost exclusively of maneuvers, intrigues, plots, paranoia, betrayals, a great deal of calculation, no little cynicism, and every variety of con game.”

“Writers and politicians are natural rivals,” Salman Rushdie has written. “Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory.” However, the fight is seldom conducted on equal terms, and it becomes complicated when a single figure is both writer and politician. “I am a poetician, not a politician,” observed Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who was elected to the Russian Duma in 1989. Is the hybrid species of “poetician” as mythical—and sterile—as a unicorn? A hybrid can be stronger than either of its progenitors, if it is not grotesque.

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With very few exceptions—Blaga Dimitrova, the poet who was vice president of Bulgaria; Clare Boothe Luce; and Halide Edib Adivar, who served in the Turkish Parliament—the only writers who have shown up on ballots have been male. Having gained suffrage in most countries less than a century ago, women have in general been underrepresented among candidates for office, and it is perhaps no surprise that the
women who have pioneered as politicians have come from professions such as law and education rather than literature. Gender is enough of a handicap to women who seek election that the added baggage of authorship might well sabotage a campaign from its outset.

In the United States, the nation with the most elaborate and expensive system of electing its leaders, traditions of frontier egalitarianism and pragmatic Babbittry have combined to make the phenomenon of writers who run for office especially rare, as if literary mastery were in fatal conflict with the leveling culture of electoral democracy. In recent campaigns, “elitist” has been one of the most damaging epithets in the arsenal of political invective, and a literary sensibility has been seen as a symptom of toxic oligarchical tendencies. Although his wife was a librarian, George W. Bush was manifestly uncomfortable with books and, at times, with the English language. His opponent, John Kerry, was forced to disguise his fluency in French, the language of putatively effete aesthetes such as Baudelaire, Proust, and Dominique de Villepin, the poet who became a prime minister. In Edmund Wilson’s famous appropriation of the Philoctetes myth (more applicable to American than Greek culture; Sophocles, after all, served as a general in the Athenian army), the artist and society are locked in a relationship of mutual resentment. When novelist Upton Sinclair, running as a Democrat on the EPIC (“End Poverty in California”) platform, was defeated for governor in 1934, a rival explained that the novelist “was beaten because he wrote books.” During a nasty campaign, lurid passages from Sinclair’s fiction were quoted against him. However, the specific contents were scarcely relevant, since dedication to any kind of writing can be a liability in a political culture that favors slogans over complex thought and personalities over ideas. In exile in Italy long after his last electoral battle, Gore Vidal told an interviewer, “There is also something in the water—let us hope it was put there by the enemy—that has made Americans contemptuous of intelligence whenever they recognize it, which is not very often. And a hatred of learning, which you don’t find in any other country. There is not one hamlet in Italy where you fail to find kids desperate to learn.” After his own disastrous run for office, David Slavitt concluded that “the electorate is invincibly stupid.” To many literary folk, the vox populi invariably expresses itself in an ill-informed rant.

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Asked by the emperor for advice on governing, Confucius is said to have replied, “First purify the language.” Although good writers are constitutionally allergic to clichés, a modern electoral campaign requires formulaic statements delivered several times a day for weeks and months. How do voters respond when a “poetician” attempts to communicate in ways that embody those qualities most valued in literature—innovation, complexity, provocation? What happens to people whose profession demands verbal precision when the pressures of a campaign oblige them to deliver speech after numbing speech and settle for slogans? “It is a low-grade poetry,” Slavitt has complained, “the art of clobbering people over the head.” In democratic cultures in which increasing emphasis is placed on the candidate one would most like to share a beer with, how do voters relate to literary artists? Candidates who choose poetry over rhetoric are not likely to succeed on the stump.
In 2004, Slavitt staged a quixotic quest for a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. The sixty-nine-year-old author of twenty-nine novels, seventeen collections of poetry, and twenty-seven volumes of translation ran as a liberal Republican against a six-term incumbent in a solidly Democratic district encompassing two Boston suburbs, Cambridge and Somerville. Slavitt resented as humiliating distractions the signature collecting, handshaking, sloganeering, and schmoozing required for success in electoral politics. On an occasion when literary inspiration competed with the candidate’s schedule, poetry won: “I took the day off and did absolutely nothing in the way of campaigning,” he reported. “Instead, I wrote a poem with which I am well pleased. All my life, my practice has been to suspend almost any other kind of activity if a poem has presented itself to me.” Slavitt explained his unconventional candidacy in a letter to prospective constituents: “I am a social moderate, a fiscal conservative, and a grown-up. That I am also a person of some intelligence and culture does not, I think, absolutely disqualify me for office in the State House.” Most voters in the Twenty-Sixth Middlesex District of Massachusetts disagreed. Slavitt was routed by the incumbent, Timothy J. Toomey, 87 percent to 13 percent. He derived consolation from the fact that his minuscule turnout, 1,680 votes, would not have been “a bad number for sales of a book of poems.”

Free to resume his career as a prodigiously productive writer, Slavitt immediately set to work publishing translations of Euripides, Boethius, Lucretius, Sophocles, Ausonius, and Ariosto, two volumes of original poetry, a memoir, a book of essays, and a novel. But in the aftermath of defeat, he also produced a sardonic account of his misadventures in electoral politics, *Blue State Blues* (2006). Its pages, he later claimed, redeemed the ordeal of running for office: “The book, very early on, became the purpose, and I got the book written and published. That’s what I accomplished. The account of the effort is much more interesting as a piece of political anthropology than was my actual campaign in this benighted city and state.”

Vargas Llosa likewise returned to writing, prolifically, and expressed gratitude and relief over the decision by Peruvian voters not to burden him with the responsibilities of the presidency. In addition to a steady stream of new fiction, he too published a campaign memoir, *El pez en el agua* (1993; *A Fish in the Water*, 1994), that is suffused with melancholy over the irrationality of an electorate he had hoped to win over by the strength of his ideas. Although Voltaire located *Candide’s* El Dorado, an idealized kingdom of rational citizens, in the vicinity of Peru, the real Peru was resistant to the idea of being ruled by a philosopher king. “They voted the way people do in an underdeveloped democracy, and sometimes in the mature ones as well,” Vargas Llosa complains about his fellow citizens, “on the basis of images, myths, heartthrobs, or on account of obscure feelings and resentments with no particular connection to processes of reason.”

Through his EPIC movement, Upton Sinclair also made his bid for governor a campaign of ideas, an educational effort to win voters over to “production for use,” a plan by which state-owned cooperatives would provide constructive employment for the 700,000 Californians who were out of work. His popularity as the author of *The Jungle* and many other “muckraking” novels drew attention to his candidacy at the top of the Democratic ticket, but it also aroused animosity. “What does Sinclair know about anything?” a hostile movie executive is reported to have asked.
his screenwriters. “He’s just a writer.” Despite the often vicious attempts by powerful interests to discredit him and sabotage his efforts, Sinclair did surprisingly well at the polls. He received 37.6 percent of the vote to Republican Frank Merriam’s 48.7 percent; a third-party candidate got 13.7 percent. Within three days of losing, Sinclair was busy writing what has become almost requisite for writers who run for office—a campaign memoir. In *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (1935), finished in just five weeks, he expresses relief that he is free again to drive his own car, take walks, sleep with the windows open, and get back to writing novels. And, insisting that he ran in order to advance his ideas and not because he particularly wanted to be governor, Sinclair pronounces himself satisfied that he accomplished his goal.

Within days of losing his bid for governor of California, Upton Sinclair was busy writing what has become almost requisite for writers who run for office—a campaign memoir.

After losing by only 17,000 votes to a ten-term incumbent, James Michener also resumed a prodigious—and lucrative—writing career. In a memoir he published thirty years after his 1962 campaign, *The World Is My Home*, he is sanguine about his unsuccessful bid for public office: “Running for Congress was one of the best things I’ve done because campaigning in public knocks sense into a man. He begins to see his nation as a carefully assembled mosaic whose individual pieces require close attention.” Even during the campaign, Michener’s equanimity distinguished him from Slavitt’s bitterness, Vidal’s cynicism, and Vargas Llosa’s despair. Unlike them, he did not resent the sacrifice of time and energy for writing. “If I were found worthy to participate in the government of my country,” he declared, “I would be happy indeed. I would consider the work more important than the writing of another book, more significant than the making of another movie.”

Havel actually won election to the highest office in his nation, serving as president from 1989 to 2003. To Vargas Llosa, he is an inspiring example of the difference a conscientious writer can make to political culture:

I think what he brought to politics in Czechoslovakia is something that a writer or an artist can offer: a moral perspective, more important than the purely political, and a new discourse—a discourse without the stereotypes and the wooden language that is the norm in political discourse. Václav Havel was the extraordinary case of the politician whose speeches you could read because they were full of ideas, and there was something authentic there. He proved to the people that politics is not only about intrigue, maneuvering, and sordid appetites, but also about something in which idealism, ideas, creativity, and authenticity can take place, and that these can produce positive changes in society…. I think it’s a positive example of how not all writers are so ineffective in politics, as I myself, for example.

Like other writers who ran for office, Havel resumed his literary career after emerging from politics. He also wrote with intelligence, candor, and self-effacing wit about the frustrations and satisfactions of running and serving. In his unconventional memoir *Prosím stručně* (2006; *To the Castle and Back*, 2008), Havel recalls the challenges he had to negotiate, ranging from determining place settings at state dinners and obtaining a longer hose for the presidential garden to dissolving the Warsaw Pact and gaining
his country’s entry into the European Union. He credits his success to the contradictory qualities that are assets in writing for the theater:

I’m a sociable person who likes being with people, organizing events, bringing people together; a cheerful fellow, sometimes the conversational life of the party, one who enjoys drinking and the various pleasures and trespasses of life—and at the same time I’m happiest when alone and consequently my life is a constant escape into solitude and quiet introspection.

Havel acknowledges that his foray into politics benefited from the exalted prestige accorded writers under the repressive regimes of Central and Eastern Europe. By contrast, many American writers—e.g., Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Kate Chopin, Walt Whitman, Henry Roth, Zora Neale Hurston—have languished, and flourished, in obscurity. And the changing dynamics of culture are making the success of a “poetician,” in this country and elsewhere, less and less likely. In 2006, in an interview published fifty years after he ran for Congress, Gore Vidal quipped that he was once a famous writer, but that “to speak of a famous writer is like speaking of a famous speedboat designer. Adjective is inappropriate to noun. How can a novelist be famous—no matter how well known he may be personally to the press—if the novel itself is of little consequence to the civilized, much less to the generality?” Literature, once the arbiter of serious culture, if not its center, is increasingly marginalized. Books as printed texts are an endangered species, and book reading must now compete with a multitude of other activities. Authors have ceded their authority to masters of other media, mostly visual. In the present age of endemic aliteracy, a Vidal campaign would have a very different resonance than it had when he ran for Congress in 1960, before the advent of the Internet, cable TV, cinematic multiplexes, DVDs, and iPods. Actors (Fred Gandy, George Murphy, Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Fred Thompson) and athletes (Bill Bradley, Jim Bunning, Jack Kemp, Jesse Ventura, J.C. Watts) are more likely to succeed in contemporary politics than the proverbial ink-stained wretches.

Benito Mussolini began his career as a writer, and the world would have been spared much grief had he stuck to that profession. But the world would have been greatly impoverished had Iris Murdoch diverted her energies to standing for Parliament—as did her fellow novelist Jeffrey Archer. However, writers are among the best and brightest of citizens, and the health of the commonwealth suffers when they are confined to the role of political adviser or are quarantined in academe. It is possible to imagine authors as varied as William Dean Howells, George Bernard Shaw, Margaret Atwood, Carlos Fuentes, David Grossman, and Walter Mosley making constructive contributions as candidates as well as elected leaders without having to banish their muses. Of course, many other writers (Charles Bukowski, Hart Crane, Henry Roth, Henry James, Jack Kerouac, Sylvia Plath, Thomas Pynchon, J.D. Salinger) were temperamentally ill suited to a campaign trail or a government office. They also serve who only sit and write.

Endnotes

1 David R. Slavitt, e-mail to the author, October 27, 2009.
2 Slavitt, e-mail to the author.
3 Slavitt, e-mail to the author.
IS IT BETTER TO BE A COAL-HEAVER OR A nursemaid; is the charwoman who has brought up eight children of less value to the world than, the barrister who has made a hundred thousand pounds?” asks Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own. Woolf comes to no conclusion. But if we wanted to finish her argument, how would we do it?

Woolf herself found certain aspects of domesticity easier to recommend than others. She took pride in her slowly growing knowledge of basic cookery, but doing the dishes she found hard to bear: “I’ve been washing up lunch—how servants preserve any sanity or sobriety if that is nine 10ths of their lives—greasy ham—God knows.”

Woolf’s private consternation reflects the problem with any merely public evaluation of housework. Cleaning is mindless work, we say, and a task we are happy to leave to others; should we have the money, there are maid services or one of the many “Uber for housework” services to take the work off our hands. The repairman, the electrician, the carpenter, and so on, earn our respect because of the intelligent skill they put into their labor; but the sting of domestic work is that it appears to require no particular skill: doing the floors, the dishes, doing the corners, picking up all the things strewn about the house; taking out the trash not once, but again and again, on down into the grave.

Such work, when it is paid for at all, is among the lowest of the low, economically speaking—we have more civic and monetary respect for garbage collectors. But worse, the very character of the janitor or the charwoman is suspect. Their grumpiness and meanness of spirit is catalogued from the fairy tales of the Grimms to the lyrical dialectics of Kierkegaard. In the grip of mindless, endless repetition, the temper and even the soul are said to suffer permanent distortion. The best that can be said for housework is that it is unavoidable, and so someone or other will have to decide to do it.

It’s not easy to speak up for the charwoman. Unless I can argue that housework is more than a utilitarian good or a necessary evil, I doubt whether my arguments will do much to dignify the worker, or to persuade others to pick up the work themselves. Furthermore, the question requires phenomenological honesty. It would be a great mistake to consider Woolf uniquely blameworthy for the disparity between her official inquiry into the worker, and her secret lament at the deed. We can’t afford to leave ourselves out of the argument.

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Left: Electrolux, from the Domestic Goddesses series, 1988, by Edith Vonnegut; courtesy of the artist.
But I’m suspicious of the infamous mindlessness of housework. Having been persuaded that our best thoughts are at their best when most rooted in the world they profess to describe, I find I’m very much interested in it. I suspect we can do more than praise its necessity, and that our inability to make a better case reflects an impoverished understanding of the nature of work, and of thought itself. Housework is a job in which our things and possessions become unavoidably concrete. So why should the work that forces us to reckon with things we usually ignore be mindless? Why would the most concrete work be the most absentminded?

**Heidegger’s Housemaids**

In Martin Heidegger’s later essays, he turns to the notion of *dwelling* to consider the nature of things and houses and work in all their concrete, present glory. For Heidegger, what we are as humans, the way we are in the world, is manifested in our dwelling; we are gathered into being by the houses we raise up for ourselves, and by the things we make and hold on to; these things allow the world to be present to us as world. If dwelling is what we are, then surely the daily care of the houses we inhabit is important.

But when Heidegger has occasion to speak of housemaids, he appears to make the same accusations against them as everyone else. He tells the story of the famous accident of Thales, the first person to philosophize, who, out walking one evening and looking up at the stars, fell into a hole. The Thracian maid standing nearby burst into laughter, because, as she said, “while he might passionately want to know all things in the universe, the things in front of his feet and nose were unseen by him.” Heidegger considers this moment to be decisive: “Plato added to this story the remark: ‘[Her] jest also fits all those who become involved in philosophy.’ Therefore the question ‘What is a thing?’ must always be rated as one that causes housemaids to laugh. And genuine housemaids must have something to laugh about.”

The housemaid, the genuine one, who knows her trade and has all its virtues and vices, is perhaps all too at home in the house. Such a one is forgetful of being, lacking something to jolt her out of the ordinary, lacking the sort of anxiety that would allow the house to become uncanny, and thus a matter of question. The presence of things is old hat, and so the philosopher looks foolish in his childish questions. Thought and housework remain distinct and opposed.

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I have to admit that I’m suspicious of the infamous mindlessness of housework.

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But Heidegger remarks that we can learn from the housemaid this much: When we set out to inquire, we should first “look around thoroughly in this round-about-us.” Instead of looking off into the stars like Thales, we have to recover a sense of both heavens and earth together. We dwell as humans in the very immediate sense of the sort of buildings we put together to live in and around, that mark off the horizon; we dwell with things, the beds and tables and chairs that keep us up off the dirt. We take our fundamental orientation as humans by our residency in the world, between the temptations of the stars and the holes we might fall into. What we are not is something infinite, immortal, limitless; we are mortal, temporary, in the sense that even Achilles is temporary. Our thoughts may leap beyond mere things and dwellings into godlike musing, and so leap beyond our mortal plight; but if we could turn our thoughts back around and give attention to what is near and to dwelling itself we might pause in our restlessness and find some peace in our day.

Now, Heidegger is accused of many things, some justly and some perhaps unjustly. The most
dangerous charge, for our purposes, is sentimentality or nostalgia; that by praising dwelling, he praises old ways of living without a better reason than their antiquity, and so is not a trustworthy source on houses that we, these days, would hope to live in. But Heidegger’s careful attention to language and things can help us refocus our attention on what’s in front of our noses.

Take, for instance, the difference between saying “domestic work” and saying “housework.” “Domestic work” is the official name for what I’m trying to talk about; it’s more accurate in that it encompasses the whole field, albeit in a rather impersonal way. But this impersonal quality—achieved by the substitution of the Latin domus for our English house—is suspicious, because it obscures the problem’s immediacy. Domestic work is something that many people do in and around houses that may or may not be somebody else’s; as such, it turns into somebody else’s problem. Housework, by contrast, is the daily problem I have to solve, either by myself, or by persuading someone else to do it, either out of long-suffering affection or for pay.

To speak of housework as domestic work obscures our dependence on houses: that all of us, unless houseless by misfortune or by choice, have some specific building where our bed sits, right now, made or unmade; the place where we are, at the end of the day, housed. It obscures our dependence on other human beings, the necessity that someone, somewhere, is doing what it is necessary to do (the laundry, the dishes, the floors, the toilets) for all the houses and for the residents who require their houses to be in working order. When both the house and the workers are hidden in this way, our dependence on dwelling is hidden indeed.

You might think that “housework” sounds too much like something women, particularly those long-suffering women, do; to frame the problem as domestic work sounds like an attempt to discuss the work as that to which either sex might turn its hand. But this is just the problem with such abstraction; for beneath our agreed-upon terminology rests the truth that nearly all of the work we officially classify as domestic in America is done by women: the cleaning, the care of the very young, the care of the very old. And so, to have a little Heideggerian attention on hand will not lead us too dangerously near nostalgia; for it’s hard to be sentimental about the fact that someone has to scrub the floors.

The Feminist Dilemma

Perhaps the simplest way to give more respect to housework is to make it a better-paying job, with all the fair-labor standards that give the rule to other professions. But because those who do housework are almost universally women, more is at stake than how better to honor it. The moral of the marriage of second-wave feminism with quasi-Marxist logic is clear: Housework is something to be liberated from, and something to liberate others from in their turn. The house itself is an oppressive structure, from which we hope to be free. Such reasoning certainly influenced the principles on which I was raised: Women can do whatever they want, and so there were certain tasks (traditionally relegated to women) that I shouldn’t have to do, professions I should avoid because my talents and education fitted me for better. The impracticality of these particular principles became immediately apparent once I lived in a place of my own, with dishes to do; there was no escaping the domus after all.

But beyond impracticality, the first and second principles contain a more troubling
contradiction: What do we do about the women who nevertheless find themselves at work in the so-called traditional tasks? And if women can do whatever they want, what if they say they want to do something that looks neither properly liberated nor ambitious? This was a real problem for the second wave, and the contempt for the housewife-by-choice evinced by many of its passionate voices was no less infamous than unsisterly—or rather, all too wicked-stepsisterly, considering the movement’s forgetfulness of the women among the poor and women of color, as well as the poor, at home and abroad, in their own right.9

What do we do about the women who nevertheless find themselves at work in the so-called traditional tasks? And if women can do whatever they want, what if they say they want to do something that looks neither properly liberated nor ambitious?

The “third wave” of feminism set out to amend these troubles with the recognition that even if the desires of other women look foreign to our own, we all must be let to desire on in peace. But the problem remains, just how to navigate this arrangement of mutual respect, and the underlying tension hasn’t gone away. The charge of sentimentality or nostalgia against women who still, in our day and age, claim to enjoy housework looms large, because it looks like a regression simply to praise a choice that looks traditional; and worse, it looks dangerously postfeminist—the danger being, that we can somehow avoid our forgetfulness of the house itself. This forgetfulness is written into all our thoughts about the properly ambitious work outside the house that people are meant to desire; and the most pressing result is that, again, it obscures the simple practical necessity that someone—a human being—did or will do the domestic work that orders the space around you, right now, both for the place you sit to read this, and if you’re lucky, for the place you’ll sleep tonight.

Restoring Honor

But perhaps the oversight or even distaste might be justified. Consider the difference between making a dish and doing the dishes; between making a bed and making a bed, which is to say building it; or even the difference between a thorough spring cleaning and the endless daily picking up of the out-of-place. While a certain hardship is involved, skill, for the most part, is not.

For a floor to be well cleaned, it needs to be scrubbed by hand and not just mopped; but while scrubbing requires the use of knees, the back, the forearm, it does not seem that thought is required. Indeed, thought appears to fly elsewhere after enough scrubbing. And while a certain kind of attentiveness is required—reaching the corners, the baseboards, and nooks—the classic failure is that of laziness; intelligence doesn’t seem to enter into it either way. Nor does housework seem to offer the same satisfaction that skill possesses,
in all its intelligent tasks of making, repairing, shaping, cutting, and placing just so; and in the beauty of and delight in the finished thing itself.

When Mike Rose argues in *The Mind at Work* on behalf of such skills as waiting on tables and carpentering, we understand that these tasks require the intelligence which, given a moment to consider, we immediately recognize as such: the remarkable memory for ever-mounting details, the quick ordering and nesting of tasks that the waitress possesses, or the carpenter’s profound grasp of spatial geometry. Rose succeeds in resurrecting the honor of these professions for us because he can show the familiar intelligence we somehow (appalling) have overlooked.

Matthew Crawford’s argument in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* takes such thoughtfulness a step farther. For it seems that not only do building and fixing require intelligence, these stand to be rather more intelligent than the sort of “postindustrial” jobs we’ve been, probably disastrously, shaping our economy around; more intelligent, in fact, than the flimsy abstractions perpetrated by those who answer to the hideous coinage “knowledge worker.” Indeed, Heidegger’s own thoughts about human house-dwelling and human “giving-thought” often turn to the builder, the poet who makes the poem, the artisan: “All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking. Therefore thinking itself is man’s simplest, and for that reason hardest, handiwork.” But here’s my worry: If we make skill such a far-reaching measure for work, we still stand to forget the house, and perhaps something of thought as well. Whatever the thoughtfulness of housecleaning involves, it is different from skill; but to honor the builder of the house without respecting its maker—that is, its keeper—is to see less than half of the whole.

**Interchangeable and Anonymous**

And so, if we attempt to explain why we pay so little for domestic work, it seems all too reasonable to reply that such work doesn’t require skill—anyone can do it—and so anyone will do. The notion that anyone can do it leads to a certain interchangeability among the potential workers. In the 1980s and 1990s it was maid services—some one woman in charge of many other women who came and went—that gained applause as the prescient business of the age. A recent development of our own decade is housecleaning companies, which, like Uber for taxis, are merely an organizational platform assisted by charming young managers on laptops who put clientele in touch with an ever-changing mass of part-time workers (“independent contractors,” who are explicitly not trained by the company) who drop everything to answer a call to clean someone’s bathroom in some far-flung corner of the city. Needless to say, not only are they interchangeable, their work is highly unpredictable, their time is at the mercy of the algorithm, and they are utterly without security.

Consider the oddity that the worker who walks among your things would be considered largely interchangeable; when you pay for anonymity, you pay for a worker who will never know where things go. Yet those who hire prefer not only to be absent when the cleaner is present, but also even prefer to speak merely to middlemen, so as never to have to speak to the worker at all. We purchase the anonymity in the arrangement of our houses that is already present in the places that are not houses; the workers who clean offices, hospitals, and assisted living facilities tend to come at night, all gone in the morning. In fact, a
complaint of domestic workers in America is that they lack the basic standards that workers not associated with the house find it easier to gain; without overtime, sick leave, leave of absence, or a contract, time is more than unrecompensed, it’s done away with. When a woman or man does stay at home to arrange and marshal the house, they receive less than honor in recompense for their unpaid labor. The irony that only the very rich can afford to pay for a proper housekeeper should not be lost on us. For most of us, if those who live there have other work, often no one is in charge of this most governing task; and so the task itself disappears.

Somewhere between our affection for skill and our aversion to staying put at the house, it seems that even the border cases of child minding and looking in on the aged are threatened by association. While in our better moments, we’d admit that care for the very young and the very old involves a certain skill, or at any rate emotional flair and patience, these professions nevertheless are ones in which anyone will do; the ill effects of which are as obvious as they are overlooked. Among those with more money to spend, infinite care is spent on the choice of worker for children; but national standards for early childhood care are so low as to be nonexistent.

Even knitting a sweater is considered salable or marketable, while the desirable ability to watch children, for which we pay, is not. There’s an analogy, perhaps, between our respect for the centrality of human ingenuity, and our temptation to see the world as made up primarily of adults in the prime of life.

The Grumpy Sisyphus

But perhaps we could still find respect for these domestic tasks—if it were not for the final sting of the business. For not only is domestic work mindless, it also appears to require the absorption of mindlessness; it may even make you lose your mind. It’s not that hard to mop the floor; what’s hard is to mop the floor again, and most of all, when it’s just been mopped. Simone de Beauvoir has it: “few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day.”

Consider the oddity that the worker who walks among your things would be considered largely interchangeable; when you pay for anonymity, you pay for a worker who will never know where things go.

Once you’ve built something, it’s done; at least until it needs repair. But after cleaning the house, you have to witness your work undone in that same day, by the ordinary use of the very things you came behind the other people to clean. All work involves repetition, but cleaning rehearses the doing again and again, without doing anything—except, perhaps, for the state of the house. And not for nothing do people find early childhood work Sisyphean as well: Children in the house don’t merely multiply the work, they constantly undo it; and they themselves require ever-renewed, constant cleaning.

Such Sisyphean motions make the notorious ill humor, grumpiness, personal slovenliness, even the spite of the charwoman intelligible enough; the charwoman being employed by several to do the rough work of floors and lavatories, going in and out of many houses and rooms. Kierkegaard, writing pseudonymously in Fear and Trembling, counsels us to wish always to be more than the charwoman in our posture and words when we attempt to speak humanly of the great; we are to be happy to bow before them, but—unlike, it comes out, that charwoman of the intellect, the scholar—we are always to have dignity, confidence, and freedom of spirit. The
grumpy charwoman, it seems, drags through even the halls of a king without care for man or beast. Needless to say, sufficient pay could soothe but not humor such a worker; as Virginia Woolf implies, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, at least, those who hold these jobs were known to turn to drink.

Women themselves, when they speak these days about housework, either of their boredom or their pleasure, often speak of it as thoughtless or mindless in some sense. “About once a month,” Beth Hersom writes in *Real Housekeeping*,

I have to drag out the carpet cleaner. I get down on the floor with soap and a toothbrush and I scrub. And, here is the secret: I really, really enjoy it. It is quiet mind time. The vacuum is blaring, so I cannot hear anything. (Which means I only do it when someone else is responsible for the kids.) It is just me, white noise, a mindless task and my windy mess of a tangled mind.¹⁸

But what this passage describes sounds to me not like absence of thought, but merely absence of what passes for thought. I recall seeing the look on my cousin’s face, when I came upon her after she’d been picking up fallen branches from the yard for an hour or two. Looking up from her work, she was lost, both rapt and absent; absent, that is, from me. Human beings had receded from her gaze; her thoughts were very much with the branches; or rather, her thoughts were branches.

Some of our thoughts come in moving parts, sentences, phrases we skillfully move around to make a point—in a word, they are discursive. Other thoughts, however, are rapt upon one thing at a time. Best of all, in the phraseology of Heidegger, is the thing we do when we turn our attention to the thingly-ness of things in service of our dwelling. I’d argue that what the lady is really experiencing—the one who works in the house, who governs the house, who keeps the house and perhaps in some sense is the house as it dwells—is thought, or being, in its immediate sense.¹⁹

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**Best of all, in the phraseology of**

**Heidegger, is the thing we do when we turn our attention to the thingly-ness of things in service of our dwelling.**

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Consider again the laughter of Heidegger’s housemaid. In Plato’s story, the maid is not bad tempered at all, but “graceful and witty.”²⁰ What if, in our confusion over the proper task of thinking, in the temptation to behave like Thales and look only at the stars, we have gotten the nature of housework wrong? If we can only really understand ourselves as humans when we think on our dwelling, then the laughter of the maid is perfectly reasonable, because her thoughts were already resident there. The view of thinghood available to the housemaid has the potential to be deeply satisfying; and she laughs because the philosopher displays willful ignorance of what ought to be intuitively obvious. After all, the housemaid isn’t laughing because Thales is trying to philosophize; she’s laughing because he’s doing it wrong, and, notably, is wise enough, and generous enough, to offer advice to the profession in its infancy.²¹ Housemaids and philosophers are not distinct as opposites, but in a sense as rivals; and it is only when we are confused about what philosophy ought to be working at, that we confuse the thoughtfulness of house-minding with mindlessness pure and simple.

But to be present with being in its immediate sense has its dangers. The task of cleaning is, after all, no less immersive than the task of building; in fact, the evidence against it is that it is so immersive one finds it hard to surface again. Beauvoir is contemptuous toward housecleaning.
as such because it “provides no escape from immanence and little affirmation of individuality.” (“Immanence” is her word for the insistent loud silent presence of things.) But it gets worse, for “every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence.” But her hopes for the freedom attainable by the individual, I think, get in the way of her proper evaluation of what she hopes to name by invoking immanence, and not coincidentally, these hopes get in the way of respecting the immanence the house provides.22

**Housekeeping Is Thought**

See before you the messy house, with your possessions and the possessions of all who live with you littered about the floor, piling on the sofas, spoiling the chairs, making the desk invisible. All our human ends, recorded by our things, in all the visible failure of half-done purposes; the book you put down, the toy abandoned, the bill not yet paid; the thing you wanted, lost. To face all this, with the intention of somehow setting all in order, of separating the tangled strands of purpose back out into a working household, brings upon us nothing less than a spiritual terror. Such a terror is not born simply of lethargy, or the anti-momentum of procrastination, but spiritual terror at the spiritual energy required to set things up once again out of the dusty scatter. To clean the thing is to care for the thing; to clean well is neither giving it a flick that leaves the edges obscured in dirt, nor scrubbing the thing away into nothing. All of this work raises up the house out of the confusion of its strands back into one single thing, the bulwark, the thing that makes the rest possible, both leaving and coming back; the sort of place where you could consider resting your head. Housekeeping doesn’t just enable us to dwell; housekeeping *is* dwelling, and also it is thought.

There is anguish in looking at housecleaning as a thing apart from us, something that we’d rather not do, a task that from the outside looks almost infinite in scope. I suspect that much of it is born of the distance that comes simply from paying (or getting) others to do it. This is the very distance we put in place in order to busy ourselves with the centrality of the adult world; the life that is after all interesting, the places where we have all the clever arguments with each other about the public affairs of the day. I think our sense of the mindlessness of housekeeping comes about because we see it as that which makes these so-called important life-things recede before the immanence of our daily tasks like eating and sleeping—not to mention the immanent reminder that children and parents present, that we once were very young, and only with luck will be decently old.

My own grumpiness, I suspect, comes from the sense of being half in, half out of the adult world, that I’ve been distracted needlessly from my proper work and proper thoughts. Putting an end to spite and recrimination involves understanding just what it is that I am doing: allowing the world hell-bent on worldliness to world. My hopeless devotion to thought comes to light as something of a tragic flaw. It’s not a coincidence that in our attempt to liberate ourselves from houses and indeed from all bounds, we have become, if less careworn, more anxious and depressed. In depression, we become careless of things, and lose our rapport with them, Heidegger writes; in anxiety, we no longer feel at home in the world.23 When I recover my respect not simply for domestic work but also for the task of keeping a home, I have taken a step...
toward ending my homelessness, not as modern, as thinker, or as woman, but as mortal.

The danger of sentimentality, however, at this point is real. For while I could counsel you to take up a craft, if not as a profession but at least more than a hobby, I can hardly advise you to become a janitor, in order to take on this sort of thought for your own—unless you already professed the desire for a hermitage. Nor can the wistful nostalgia that might counsel you to stay at home without desire, interest, or cheerful goodwill to do so, offer sound advice. That most human beings over our history have paid or guilted other people to clean house if they possibly, possibly could, should be enough evidence as to the limits of human goodwill.

When I recover my respect not simply for domestic work but also for the task of keeping a home, I have taken a step toward ending my homelessness, not as modern, as thinker, or as woman, but as mortal.

Kierkegaard, writing as “S.K.” in Works of Love, eloquently describes the attempt and projected failure to point out to the charwoman that although she works for wages, she could do her job carefully for the sake of the duty of conscience alone; well might she grow indignant, Kierkegaard writes, for “no one wants to listen to such talk.” The first important practical discovery, outside of sentiment, is that housecleaning, when it’s not the house where you sleep, and worse, when none of the inhabitants are known to you, and worst of all, never even talk to you, as a job, is a terrible job.

The special ugliness of this arrangement ought to strike us the more, considering that until the Revolution or the Last Judgment, as long as we are dividing the labor, everyone will be putting some of their care into the hands of others. Such arrangements are part of why we live in cities rather than villages, in villages rather than alone, somehow, on a one-man farm, at all. It therefore particularly behooves us to care for domestic workers and allow them the sort of standards allowed for professions in which the workers are able to look into the eyes of those who employ them—standards such that they would be able to pay for, and have time for, houses of their own.

This is what we have gained with an economy that gives preference to daycare workers, over the nanny who lives with you, devoting even her final days to your care; the women who care for your children at daycare don’t live for your convenience, but get to go home to their own place, to children of their own. Likewise, some sort of acknowledgment in the tax code that a spouse who stays at home is doing a job, and, as such, ought not to destroy the household economy, would not be amiss. As an antidote to our native restlessness, housecleaning is easier to take up than carpentry, if more spiritually difficult—always keeping in mind the danger or temptation of too much immanence.

But thinking of the ladies and men of Bloomsbury, who never lived a day without others arranging those little but crucial things of their lives, I think they missed something, perhaps the very thing they sought—something of life, something of freedom. To leave the ordering of our house to others, I think, is not merely to leave behind an interesting opportunity for reflection, but to abdicate the very ground of thought. It risks leaving behind our thoughts’ very integrity. And so I for one counsel you to take up the mop, or at any rate to make your bed, not as nostalgia or from sentiment but, lest you in the rush of days lose your mind, the thing you wanted, after all.

Endnotes

1 Alison Light, Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2010), 233.
In what follows, I’m largely dependent on and inspired by two of Heidegger’s later essays, “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1951) and “The Thing” (1950), both found in the collection Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1971). My particular thanks and gratitude go to Richard Velkley, who was kind enough to hear me out about housemaids; his suggestions helped me think through the tension between Heidegger’s aporetic mode and the mode of thoughtful, grateful dwelling.


On the jolt out of the ordinary, see What Is a Thing?, 2; on anxiety, see Heidegger’s discussion in Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1968), 233, first published 1927. In Heidegger’s later work, there remains a need for some kind of philosophical re-orientation if one is to begin to reflect at all (“Building,” 146).


In 2014, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 95.5 percent of childcare workers, 88.6 percent of maids and housecleaners, and 85.5 percent of health care support aides for nursing, psychiatric, and home health care were women (“Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” February 12, 2015; http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm). A nonprofit advocacy organization, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, reports that 95 percent of all domestic workers are women, based on a study done in 2012 (Home Economics: The Invisible and Unregulated World of Domestic Work; http://www.domesticworkers.org/homeeconomics/).

David Bornstein notes that the current precarious state of basic job protections for domestic workers has its roots in the “concession to Southern lawmakers” that caused domestic work to be omitted from the original 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act; most domestic workers in the South were black women (“A Living Wage for Caregivers,” New York Times “Opinionator,” July 10, 2015).

For the radical second-wave perspective, see Silvia Federici’s charming article “Wages against Housework” (Bristol, England: Power of Women’s Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975).


“Discourses proclaiming the advent of ‘post-feminism’ are in danger of yet again putting men ‘centre stage’ and diverting the attention of feminism from more pressing matters” (Ingrid Richter, Vicki Coppock, and Deena Haydon, The Illusions of Post-Feminism: New Women, Old Myths (London, England: Routledge, 2014), 184. Fiona Tolan attempts to steer clear of such dangers in “Housecleaning Gives Me Pleasure; House Cleaning and Feminism in Carol Shields’ Unless,” Australasian Canadian Studies 28, no.1 (2010): 1–15; Tolan’s interest in praising the love of housework without praising it for the wrong reasons was particularly helpful to me.


That the invisibility of the household art is not merely our problem, but a perennial human problem, is why Aristotle takes such trouble, in Book I.8–10 of his Politics, to argue that household management is prior in honor and sovereignty to mere acquisition of wealth. The length of his argument speaks to the difficulty he had in persuading his audience; nor would he find an audience composed of members of the American middle class any more sympathetic. I’m very indebted to Aristotle for my own first sight of this problem.


Consider the sharp-tongued Mrs. Blockson in Charles Dickens’s Nicholas Nickleby (1838), the downright cranky Mrs. Gusterson in A Glimpse of London Labour and London Poor, proud of all the “gin and beer she used to get” and quite nasty to her tenement roommate (Toronto, Canada: Methodist Publishing House, 1891), 197, or the housekeeper who refused to clean Allen Ginsberg’s Columbia University dormitory windows and reported him to the dean for writing something shocking on the dust-covered windowpane (The Letters of Allen Ginsberg, ed. Bill Wood (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008).


“ Dwelling, however, is the basic character of Being in keeping with which mortals exist” (Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 158.)

21 Plato’s insistence on the gracefulness, the elegance (χαρίεσσα), of the Thracian maid, as well as his record of her insight, offers a clue to why Socrates asserts that some of the very few things he claims to know were learned from a pair of women, Diotima and Aspasia.

22 Beauvoir perhaps depends too much on the Hegelian narrative of *Aufhebung* (“sublation”) here: I would argue that the presence of things is not something to transcend neatly in confidence of ultimate sublation and a reasonable share of the best of immanence once we know better; “immanence” itself is an abstraction from the thingly-ness of things.

23 Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” *Being and Time*, 155. In Heidegger’s earlier writings, anxiety is a boon, but eventually it becomes a part of the problem to be solved.

Conservatism by Other Means
Ronald Osborn

Christian Human Rights
Samuel Moyn

When it set to work in New York in 1947, the nine-person committee selected to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights included individuals from very different cultural, philosophical, and religious backgrounds, including Chinese, Middle Eastern, Hindu, Latin American, Islamic, Jewish, Christian, and Marxian traditions. This fact, along with the committee’s decision to exclude any references to God or religion from the document’s preamble, has led some scholars to claim that the concept of human rights was framed in strictly secular terms in the immediate postwar era.

It is increasingly clear, however, that religion—and, more particularly, Christianity—played a central role in the genesis and early promotion of the Declaration as a statement of putatively universal values. More significantly, between 1939 and 1947, Protestant theologians and church leaders—working through the World Council of Churches, the Commission for a Just and Durable Peace, the Federal Council of Churches, and other bodies, in close ecumenical partnership with the American Jewish Committee and the bishops of the Catholic Church—campaigned vigorously for the creation of the United Nations and “a new world order” dedicated to human rights. “In fact,” theologian Max Stackhouse writes, “the more this history is dug out, the clearer it becomes that [religious thinkers and leaders] supplied much of the intellectual and ethical substance that formed these so-called ‘secular’ documents.”

In his latest book, Christian Human Rights, Harvard historian Samuel Moyn—building on The Last Utopia (2010) and a group of essays collected in Human Rights and the Uses of History (2014)—seeks to excavate the importance of Christian social and political thought to the rise of human rights as a compelling moral concern in the twentieth century. Unlike Stackhouse, Moyn presents this story not in a celebratory but, rather, a deeply skeptical key. He aims to uncover the origins of “our premier principles” by taking an approach of “tough criticism rather than unreflective admiration.” The result is a work of critical scholarship that is by turns illuminating, puzzling, contentious, and flawed.

It was only in the 1930s and 1940s, in Moyn’s telling, that Christians for the first time embraced the vocabulary of “human rights” in any notable way. He asserts that whatever “percolations” of rights talk we might find in earlier sources are too murky, diffuse, and inconsequential to be credited, even partially, for this flourishing of human rights speech. If anything, he says, “Christianity had mostly stood for values inimical to those we now associate with rights.” Historians who seek to show otherwise, Moyn charges, are advancing a “fictitious” and selective teleological reading of the past that he brands “tunnel vision.”

What is most striking about Christian appeals to “human rights” in the thirties and forties, Moyn contends, is that they emerged not in defense of individual emancipation, following in the secular Enlightenment tradition of “the rights of man,” but as an “epoch-making reinvention of conservatism.” Order, not freedom, was the true goal. The emergence of human rights advocacy was not so much a progressive political movement as it was a retrenchment of bourgeois values under the banner of “personalism”—the Catholic “third way” for saving European civilization from those...
two perils of secular modernity: relativistic individualism, on the one hand, and authoritarian collectivism, on the other. “This liberation,” Moyn concludes, “was for the sake of subjugation: so that men and (perhaps especially) women could conform to God’s will and moral order.”

With the creation of the heavily Catholic-influenced Irish Constitution in 1937—which for the first time linked the vocabulary of “rights” with the notion of “dignity” in constitutional theory—the discourse reached the heights of Christianity.” Pope Pius XII’s 1942 Christmas address, in which he championed “fundamental personal rights” before a wide audience, marked another “unprecedented” moment in the spread of rights talk. The same year, with the publication of *Natural Law and Human Rights*, Jacques Maritain would emerge as the period’s most important human rights theorist, arguing—in “a stroke of a master, or a sleight of hand, or both”—that rights find their true grounding in Thomistic natural law. “Thanks to Maritain, above all,” Moyn writes, “the older view that Christianity’s political and social doctrine could not be reformulated in terms of rights was dropped in exchange for the claim that only the Christian vision placing the personal entitlements in the framework of the common good afforded a persuasive theory of rights.”

It would take another three decades, in Moyn’s genealogy of rights, before “human rights” proper could finally “take off,” as secular leftists wrested the idea from the lexicon of reactionary (albeit in some ways noble) Cold War Christian thinkers, transforming its meaning into a more progressive forthright defense of personal liberties and placing it at the center of international law. Yet, the Christian origins of human rights still “haunt politics” in our “regrettable” preference for moderation and the maintenance of order over more radical “bids for secular progress.” We live in an age of “guarded centrism,” Moyn laments, in which “human rights” has as much to do with “policing the borders and boundaries on which threatening enemies loom” as it does with advancing the cause of justice. He ends his book suggesting that the idea of human rights might now need to be abandoned “in the name of its own ideals or some better ones.”

The richness of *Christian Human Rights* lies in Moyn’s recovery of forgotten events and characters in all of their complexity and frequent moral ambiguity. Yet ultimately Moyn presents not so much an iconoclastic retelling of the history of human rights as a surprisingly conventional and historically questionable narrative about the meaning of secular modernity. It is the narrative of “Enlightenment” that is based on the assumption of a clear secular/religious divide. For Moyn, Christianity in some ways advanced but ultimately thwarted the forward march of history, and it has been left to radical thinkers to overcome the lingering effects of Christian personalism on our political landscape, presumably by pressing beyond dignity, and even human rights, if necessary, to arrive at new and as yet uncharted shores.

Moyn’s project is problematic in at least two additional ways. First, theoretically, he insists upon a highly stringent but seemingly arbitrary definition of human rights. Second, empirically, he fails
to do justice to significant historical evidence that cuts against his thesis.

Many of Moyn’s statements about the recent origins of human rights are bewildering until one realizes how he is employing the term. “True,” he concedes in The Last Utopia, “rights have long existed.” However, he continues, “they were from the beginning part of the authority of the state, not invoked to transcend it.” Apart from “essentially random uses,” he argues, the phrase human rights gained “its first serious circulation in the English language” only in 1933, with the introduction of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal reforms. But “the phrase meant different things to different people from the beginning,” and so “meant nothing specific” when it was first deployed. Further, even though the language of human rights was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the late 1940s, “no international rights movement emerged at the time.” It was not until the 1970s “that human rights came to define people’s hopes for the future as the foundation of an international movement and a utopia of international law.” Hence, according to Moyn, we cannot speak of human rights as existing in any meaningful sense prior to the past half-century.

Following Moyn’s logic, when Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) marched on Washington in 1963, they were not marching for human rights, merely civil rights—which is perhaps why Christian Human Rights does not contain a single reference to the SCLC, King, or any other leader of the civil rights movement (unless one includes this single sentence: “Liberal Protestants were indeed some of the most committed to civil rights for African Americans”). Is this way of delimiting human rights strictly a matter of historical record, or a contentious theoretical and definitional choice?

Moyn’s claim that Christians embraced the language of human rights in any significant way only during the 1930s and 1940s is, in any case, demonstrably false. Google Ngrams, which can be used to chart trends in language usage over time and which is particularly accurate for the period 1800–2000, shows that the original breakthrough in references to human rights occurred not in the twentieth century but in the first half of the nineteenth. Between 1830 and 1850, human rights saw a leap in usage as dramatic as the burst in references to humanitarian interventions (to cite a single example) over the past twenty years. Indeed, during the 1840s, the phrase human rights was more popular in English-language publications than it was in the 1930s. Throughout the entire nineteenth century, human rights had a far more robust presence in English-language print than a host of words and phrases that are part of our current everyday speech (e.g., police brutality, green energy, hip-hop, affordable health care, nuclear proliferation, or Native American).

Who were the individuals appealing to human rights with such surprising frequency and directness a full century before the events Moyn describes in Christian Human Rights? The original breakthrough in explicit appeals to human rights was led by abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic, the most radical of whom were, virtually to a person, devout Christians fired by a distinctly Christian moral imagination. To cite perhaps the most prominent example, in 1831 the first issue of William Lloyd Garrison’s newspaper The Liberator—predecessor to The Nation, where many of Moyn’s own articles have appeared—was published beneath the motto “Our country is the world, our countrymen are mankind.” In his inaugural editorial, Garrison wrote that he would be “as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice [in] the great cause of human rights.” Over the next three decades, The Liberator would include nearly 1,000 references to human rights. In 1835, the deeply religious lawyer Lewis Tappan (famous for his defense before the US Supreme Court of the slaves of the Amistad revolt) meanwhile cofounded an antislavery journal that was titled Human Rights. Over its four-year run, hundreds of thousands of copies were mailed to communities all across the nation.
As for Moyn’s assertion that nineteenth-century rights advocates thought only in forms “wholly compatible with the spread of national sovereignty, rather than imagining rules or rights above it,” we find counter-evidence not only in the audacious universalism emblazoned across the masthead of The Liberator but also, for example, in the 1844 abolitionist hymnal Anti-Slavery Hymns Designed to Aid the Cause of Human Rights. The work includes among its remarkable stanzas this chorus: “My country! ‘tis of thee, / Strong hold of slavery, of thee I sing: / Land where my fathers died, / Where men man’s rights deride, / from every mountain-side, Thy deeds shall ring.” On what moral basis were abolitionists penning such deeply subversive indictments of the nation-state and its pretensions to sovereignty if not precisely by “imagining rules or rights above it”?

One would unfortunately not learn any of these facts from reading Christian Human Rights. Abolitionism is mentioned only once, as one of several “uplifting backstories” that, Moyn insists, have little if anything to do with human rights. Undoubtedly, the ways in which abolitionists used the term human rights differ from current uses in significant ways, but important differences do not erase basic continuities. Thousands of references to human rights, including those in a journal bearing the title Human Rights, represent no inconsequential or “essentially random” “percolating” of the idea that can be brushed aside as mere trivia in the telling of the story of Christianity and human rights. It is at least worth considering that when Catholic thinkers began to appeal to human rights in the 1930s, they were appropriating not the “rights of man” of Voltaire, Robespierre, or other figures of the French Revolution, but a grammar as well as a vocabulary of human rights that had been important parts of the Christian social and political witness (even if only as the “minority report”) for at least a century.

The fact that the abolitionists claimed the biblical narrative of the God who “sets the captive free” as the warrant for their activism raises the question of what “deep background” means in Moyn’s criticism of the work of other historians. In a recent issue of Boston Review, Moyn wrote that neither Jesus nor Paul had “any truly political vision.” The radical abolitionists apparently failed to understand their New Testament as well as Moyn does—although they did continually read, quote, and preach from the Gospels as well as from the Hebrew prophets in the name of human rights and justice for the oppressed. Slaveholders obviously quoted from the Bible as well, and according to Moyn, if a religious tradition is marked by different legacies, it is simply “unbelievable” to credit its founding texts for giving birth to contemporary morals. This is a non sequitur. Any particular set of contemporary morals might be precisely one such legacy of ancient sources, among others.

These problems with Christian Human Rights notwithstanding, Moyn drives home a vital point: The explosion of interest in human rights in the 1970s was one of staggering magnitude. That fact alone calls for a better explanation than just-so stories about the final blossoming of secular rationalism in the highest humanism. The best explanation for the breakthrough to contemporary human rights, Moyn suggests, is “the collapse of prior utopias and the search for refuge elsewhere.” These older utopias included those posited by Cold War political ideologies as well as Christianity, which in the 1960s “entered freefall” in terms of adherence in Western Europe. The language of human rights was embraced because it filled a moral and spiritual void that opened with the death of other idealisms. Radical Orthodoxy theologian William Cavanaugh provides a helpful term for such moral and spiritual transferences: “migrations of the holy.”

Ironically, the success of human rights as a secular religion has proven remarkably short-lived, at least judging from the elegiac tone of several recent works, including Moyn’s. His final verdict on contemporary human-rights regimes—that they represent an “exploding variety of rival...
political schemes” rather than the self-evidently pure and transcendent moral visions they clamorously claim for themselves—is absolutely prescient. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), there is Moyn’s hope for a “utopianism of the future” that will be emphatically not Christian or religious and that might somehow save us from the internal contradictions of human rights as we now find them in both theory and practice. To hold out hopes for such a future secular utopia may require the greatest leap of faith.


Uncharitable Giving
James K.A. Smith

The Philanthropic Revolution: An Alternative History of American Charity
Jeremy Beer

“Politics would be a hell of a good business if it weren’t for the goddamned people,” grumbled Richard Nixon to young attorney John Sears. Sadly, this quip came to mind while I was absorbing Jeremy Beer’s analysis of contemporary philanthropy. One could imagine similar carping from the boardrooms of our leading “charitable” foundations.

Beer’s brief in this taut little book is illustrated by a stark anecdote: Even though it sits on $42 billion in resources, and despite the fact that homelessness is one of its strategic areas of concern, the Gates Foundation will not provide direct assistance to any of the displaced people sleeping outside its $500 million Seattle headquarters. Instead, the foundation’s resources are entirely devoted to “upstream” systemic problems. Don’t come to the Gates Foundation looking for alms. And don’t expect charity from this foundation. Philanthropy is about metrics, not mercy.

Beer, a philanthropy consultant and president of the American Ideas Institute, cites this as one of the “absurdities” of modern philanthropy—a word whose etymology suggests “love of mankind”—that is more in love with problem solving than with people, more invested in “high modernist ideology” than in particular human beings. It brings to mind an ancient insight into disordered love. Looking back on his younger self in the Confessions, Saint Augustine recognized this perennial phenomenon: “I was in love with love.” Similarly, contemporary philanthropy seems more enamored of a generic anthropos than of the flesh-and-blood poor we encounter face-to-face. Indeed, twenty-first-century philanthropy seems allergic to charity.

Actually, Beer shows that it's even worse than that: Philanthropy is directly and staunchly critical of charity as wasteful, misguided, inefficient, and, above all, ineffective—the cardinal sin in our utilitarian age. This is the “revolution” Beer describes: a radical retooling of charity from almsgiving and works of mercy to Philanthropy, Inc., the progressivist behemoth that is confident in the capacity of human rationality and technology to “end poverty,” “end homelessness,” “end hunger,” and more.

It wasn’t always this way. That’s why The Philanthropic Revolution is billed as a “history.” But the story is also theological. Charity in Jewish and early Christian traditions was historically a means of communion with God that also required communion with the poor. Charity was, in Beer’s account, “salvific,” earning heavenly merit. No one imagined that charity would end poverty. (“The poor you will always have with you,” Jesus said.) The Protestant Reformers criticized such salvation by works (recall Martin Luther’s tirade about indulgences), although they still extolled charity
as an act of obedient love. But this Reformation shift became a revolution in the wake of the Enlightenment. Giving was then enlisted by a utilitarian focus on consequences and a progressivist confidence in human ingenuity.

So the “scientific” charity of the early twentieth century was, despite its secular claims, still theological, still rooted in faith—in the messiah of progress. Even the most ardently “secular” philanthropists were believers. Beer likes to cite the assessment of Orestes Brownson, a nineteenth-century American convert to Roman Catholicism: Satan’s “favorite guise in modern times,” he said, “is that of philanthropy.”

While I think Beer’s history (and theology) could use some nuance, and is both unfair and incorrect in its characterization of the Reformation, the sweep of the story he tells is illuminating. In one of its chilling chapters, he recounts how an overconfident progressivism led philanthropists to endorse eugenics, sterilization, and residential schools for Native children, all in the name of a “love of humanity.” When the functional “theology” of philanthropy is faith in human rationality and technological power, then the power to realize “kingdom come” is in our hands. When that happens, watch out: Bleeding hearts can be ruthless.

In telling his story, Beer tends to posit a dichotomy between charity and philanthropy. But his conclusion is more nuanced: “We must look to inject the logic of charity into the modern practice of philanthropy.” Such charitable philanthropy will refuse any either/or on this front. (On this score, there’s not much difference between Jane Addams and Dorothy Day.) We can both attend to systemic issues and attend, mercifully, to those downtrodden by “the system” today. We can both address the “root causes” of homelessness and feed, clothe, and comfort those who camped outside the front door of the Gates Foundation.

Beer extols what he (inelegantly) calls “philanthrolocalism.” We might better describe it as philanthropy with a human face, philanthropy that remains close enough to the poor and downtrodden to remember mercy and learn their names. Philanthropy with a charitable heart will embody what St. Vincent de Paul, Dorothy Day, and even Jane Addams emphasized: the unique grace that flows, the author writes, quoting the scholars David Lapp and Amber Lapp, from “deeply personal encounter’ between would-be helpers and sufferers.” Such “charitable” philanthropy should be oriented toward “authentic communion.” Beer rightly emphasizes, prizing “personalist goods” in a way that rebuilds American civic life, whereas “scientific” philanthropy seems content to let us all go “bowling alone” (to borrow Robert Putnam’s alienation trope) and leave us “coming apart,” as Charles Murray has put it.

Charitable activity bent on fostering community has to be scaled to the local. Whereas the technocratic machines of Big Philanthropy need to be as abstract as possible—and hence “global”—communion philanthropy can only be realized in particular places, with particular people, who share a place and a story. As I was reading Beer’s description of such “philanthrolocalism,” I began looking around my own city of Grand Rapids, Michigan—only to find that he cites it as an example at the end of his book.
While the wealth of local families could have easily “liberated” them from this midwestern city for the supposed glory and excitement of the coasts, they stayed put and committed themselves to this place. As I scan the city, I see institution after institution founded and sustained by these patrons that contribute to the common good and foster communion. I’m not sure they’ve ever thought of themselves as “philanthrolocalists,” but may their tribe increase.

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What, We Worry?
Joseph E. Davis

Worrying: A Literary and Cultural History
Francis O’Gorman

Worry, anxiety, nervousness, freaking out: These common and interrelated states have been puzzled over and analyzed for a long time. As early as 1950, psychologist Rollo May could write of anxiety, “For the past hundred years…psychologists, philosophers, social historians, and other students of humanity have been increasingly preoccupied with this nameless and formless uneasiness that has dogged the footsteps of modern man.”

Worry and anxiety had their own diagnoses, from George Beard’s nineteenth-century neurasthenia to Freud’s psychoneuroses. They were the subject of literary and philosophical reflections, from Kierkegaard’s dread to Sartre’s anguish to Auden’s anxiety, and of numerous self-help books, from Haydn Brown’s Worry, and How to Avoid It (1900) to Dale Carnegie’s How to Stop Worrying and Start Living (1948). Around the time May made his observation, new classes of sedatives for everyday worries were about to burst onto the market, and in subsequent years the literature and treatments would multiply beyond counting. We now have scientific papers, books, workbooks, memoirs, eight types of anxiety disorder, Xanax, cognitive-behavioral therapy, mind-body relaxation techniques, and chamomile tea.

Given all this, can anything new possibly be said about worry? Francis O’Gorman, a professor of English at the University of Leeds, thinks there can. He claims that worry, as a subject of reflection and as an everyday experience, has actually been neglected. It is, he argues, a “hidden, resistant topic that’s kept itself largely out of print.” “To think about worry now,” he continues, “is to be an investigator of the known-yet-almost-unknown, of the paradoxically familiar but almost undiscussed.”

Although the subtitle of Worrying indicates that it is a history, O’Gorman actually does not think a true history of worry or its pain is possible. The territory as he defines it is too uncharted, even uncharted. He offers instead a “meditation.” Drawing on literary sources, philosophy, and his personal experience as a worrier, he reflects on the meaning of worry and the “mundane, subterranean, and persistent condition of the frowning, fretful modern mind.”

O’Gorman comes at his subject from different angles, writes in a very informal style, and presents his reflections in no particular order. He describes the lack of organization as deliberate. The book is “not quite history” and “not quite philosophy,” he writes, but “takes its approach from its subject. Worrying worries at worry.” That sounds vaguely profound, art imitating life, but is probably better understood as a post hoc justification for the ad hoc nature of the book. (The slapdash quality is reinforced by the lack of proofreading.) O’Gorman never quite gets a handle on his subject. In conceiving of worry as uncharted territory, he makes a sharp distinction between “worry” and any sort
of anxiety disorder and suggests that worry is a phenomenon that only certain types of people—“worriers”—actually experience. These idiosyncratic distinctions allow him to ignore most of the developments cited at the beginning of this review. But they don’t hold up, and his discussion of worry—a “set of anxieties about an unknown future”—vacillates throughout the book: Sometimes worrying is a feature of the worrier personality, instanced by his own fretfulness; sometimes it is a more debilitating and ritualized condition; sometimes it may be blameworthy, a “species of self-indulgence”; sometimes it is a response to particular cultural conditions of freedom of choice.

Despite these shortcomings of the overall project, many of O’Gorman’s specific reflections are quite illuminating, especially his thoughts on the relation of worry to the modern liberal order. He observes that “worry,” as the term is now normally used, emerged only in the mid-nineteenth century, and eventually began to figure in novels and turn-of-the-century self-help books, and as a feature of modernity in the work of T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and other literary modernists. The timing, he believes, is significant and supports his contention that a deep connection exists between worry and the modern myth of secular self-sufficiency: “the great Western story of our coming-to-ourselves; the capacious myth of the birth of the individual; the consoling story of our own importance and the legitimacy and integrity of our ‘right’ to think for ourselves.” For O’Gorman, with the myth, and its preoccupation with reason and choice, worry enters the world.

At the same time, O’Gorman sees the experience of worry as challenging that myth, along with key political and philosophical assumptions on which it is based. He observes, for instance, that in On Liberty John Stuart Mill expresses a “sturdy…almost incredible, belief in human progress through the wonder of the reasoning mind.
Free discussion of opposing views will, naturally, result in agreement…. And what’s generally agreed is, in Mill’s terms, truthful.” However, O’Gorman argues, the unhappiness of our actual experience puts this belief in question:

The liberal dream is of society’s gradual advance through open discussion where everything is tolerated except intolerance; where everything is discussed in the belief that rightness, released by thought, will eventually prevail. But the worrier knows all too well that reason, trying to evaluate options, isn’t a reliable guide to certainty or agreement… that the expression of the contrary opinions doesn’t always lead to greater clarity, let alone accord…[and] that continually thinking about things does not result in unambiguous ways ahead.

For O’Gorman, the ascendency of worry complicates the modern promise of liberation through reason and choice.

Further, in a discussion of popular strategies for managing worry, O’Gorman notes that “worry breeds ritual,” those private superstitions and practices that worriers use in their modest efforts to control the future. Even though they live in a rationalistic world, one seemingly rid of “invisible and punitive forces,” he argues, worriers “seem to be trying, without saying as much, to placate great and dangerous Gods that have no names, no forms of communication, and very little mercy.” What or whom the worrier thinks he or she is placating, O’Gorman can only guess, but as they were for the ancient builders of barrows and stone circles, these placatory gestures “are indicative of the unknown nature of the world… and the lack of real control we have over a future in which uncertainty is assured.”

With these fertile thoughts, O’Gorman, seemingly unknowingly, is elaborating on the work of the major existentialists, including Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre, on freedom and choice as the sources of a pervasive, free-floating anxiety in modernity. He is also touching directly on the related notion of “risk consciousness” that the late German sociologist Ulrich Beck identified as a key experience in our reflexive, technological society. Beck helps illuminate what O’Gorman presupposes: that people in the past as well as those in different class positions define hazards and uncertainties in different ways. O’Gorman does not say one word about the things most people worry about most of the time: crowding, hunger, poverty, illness, and other miseries. The people he is writing about are well educated, affluent, and socially aware, men and women like himself who are dealing not with any direct afflictions but instead with an acute consciousness of threatening possibilities. This type of “worry,” which O’Gorman sees as always going beyond what is rationally appropriate or proportionally reasonable, prevails among wealthier and more protected groups, Beck suggests, because their troubles are cognitive. In an environment of pervasive and often intangible risks and insecurities, worries have a defensive purpose, imputing a prognosis that risk-conscious worriers hope will not occur.

This worry amid prosperity is in no way limited just to “worriers,” as O’Gorman (sometimes) recognizes. It is inescapable in our cultural situation. There is, for instance, an immense commerce alerting us to hazards and problems, demanding that we constantly put new concerns on our agenda. The marketing promises peace of mind, but attending to these concerns only makes us more risk conscious, more mindful that possible hazards are nearly infinite. Risks are not like needs that can be satisfied; they are like the dangerous and nameless gods that, as O’Gorman observes, we try to propitiate and from whose wrath we seek to be spared.

O’Gorman ends his book with reflections on positive aspects of being a worrier and suggests some forms of coping. It is all conducted in a language of “we worriers” this and “we worriers”
that, with worry again portrayed as an internalized feature of the individual. He even throws in a little evolutionary psychology. But many of the positive aspects he notes are precisely the virtues required in the risk society (or what O’Gorman might call the choice society): an orientation toward the future, an openness to options, respect for expert advice, readiness and vigilance, a keen sense of individual responsibility, and realism.

Throughout Worrying, O’Gorman seems to be proposing a third category of worry, one that is both distinct from everyday experience (that is, a feature unique to “worriers”) and distinct from a pathological state. Worrying, he contends, is “almost completely nonmedicalized.” But his own observations about the way we live now suggest that there can be no stable line between normality and what would “interest a doctor.” In the choice society, the desirable virtues are on the same continuum as the unwelcome problems. O’Gorman writes at a high level of abstraction, but hints at these in some of his examples, as his “worry” and its rituals are not easily contained. They move beyond the pain of fretfulness and minor inconvenience to insomnia, obsession, an “endless appetite for reassurance,” paralyzing indecision, and the like. O’Gorman is right when he says that “worrying isn’t a disease.” But in the choice society, the problems he identifies are impediments to freedom and to the optimization of preferences, and therefore are “conditions” that might need to be treated—not just with self-help books, as he notes, or with his book, for that matter, but with a vast industry of professional interventions. Worrying is not just a personal problem; in the choice society, it is also a social issue.

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Separate and Unequal
Andrew Lynn

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis
Robert Putnam

Robert Putnam’s enduring legacy in American social science will almost certainly be his concern for community. His important earlier work on social capital and civic engagement redirected research agendas across several disciplines, even while attracting the attention of politicians, city planners, and international development organizations. The work that followed his influential Bowling Alone (2000) provided significant addenda to that book’s animating concern with civic practices and social solidarity. In 2007, in an important public lecture, the Harvard University political scientist explored the complex—and in some cases inverse—relationship between ethnic diversity and intergroup levels of trust. In 2010, he and coauthor David Campbell released American Grace, a landmark work that expanded knowledge of how religious associations contribute to civil society and democratic citizenship. Putnam has unquestionably become America’s leading public intellectual on what Bowling Alone’s subtitle names the “collapse and revival of American community.”

How Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis fits into the Putnam corpus is revealed in the first word of the book’s title. This is about the collective well-being of our next generation. Putnam’s concern for the collective is grounded in the personal: To write this book, he set out to track down all 150 people who had graduated with him from his Port Clinton, Ohio, high school in 1959. Investigating this group’s career trajectories and life opportunities provides the starting point for Putnam’s empirical project, which is supplemented by ethnographic observations of families from all over the United States. Although a
political scientist by training, Putnam borrows many pages from cultural sociology to provide a close look at the experiences and personal narratives of families trying to live out the American dream in postindustrial America. These in-depth personal accounts of growing up and raising children across the social strata are recounted to illuminate the larger social and economic factors affecting our shared well-being.

Putnam clearly intends his book to challenge those Americans who are committed to the ideal that “everyone in America should have equal opportunity to get ahead”—a group that, surveys suggest, includes about 95 percent of us. Each chapter moves from interview accounts to a deluge of data to lay out the case that we are falling well short of our idealism. These data lead ineluctably to confirmation of Putnam’s thesis about our current “crisis”: that growing class segregation and polarization across multiple institutions (neighborhoods, schools, marriages, workplaces, civic associations) mean that “rich Americans and poor Americans are living, learning, and raising children in increasingly separate and unequal worlds,” while the steppingstones between those worlds seem to be eroding.

With no shortage of careful qualifications, Our Kids resembles Bowling Alone in historicizing the contemporary social landscape by tracing its origins to a twentieth-century “golden age.” The result is a plethora of “scissor charts” revealing statistically significant divergences—usually beginning in the 1970s—between upper-class (typically, college-educated) and lower-class (typically, non-college-educated) Americans.

Readers familiar with the established research of social scientists like Annette Lareau, Sara McLanahan, Robert Sampson, and James Heckman will find that Our Kids follows a well-worn path to some familiar-sounding conclusions. America’s class divides are complex and likely getting more so. They can be traced to some combination of diverging patterns in family structure, parenting, early childhood development, neighborhood effects, and educational resources. These factors manifest themselves both culturally and structurally. Educational institutions themselves, while clearly structured in ways that make these divergences more visible, are just as much products of the divides as they are contributors to them. Studies of early childhood development reveal that children find themselves on particular class-based trajectories at disturbingly young ages in terms of cognitive, emotional, and social skills mastered (or not mastered) before the first day of kindergarten. Interventions seem to be most effective at early life stages.

Our Kids makes its most original contributions in the domain where Putnam has established his reputation: its treatment of the civic and communal relationships that shape the social fabric across America’s various social divisions. Putnam not only addresses critics of his “collapse
of community” thesis from *Bowling Alone* but also fleshes out the previously underdeveloped moral and political ends toward which “social capital” might be applied. These goals go beyond those of his earlier communitarian-oriented agenda of promoting civil society “associationism” and “celebratory sociality” as defenses against alleged threats of materialistic individualism, “lifestyle enclaves,” and rising television consumption. Instead, in the American society presented in *Our Kids*, social capital becomes less about membership numbers than about life-shaping relationships that can save people pulled downward by the rip tides of class polarization. This updated account of social capital recasts it as more of a tangible asset or resource, not unlike financial or human capital. And Putnam presents evidence that this asset—in settings where it is particularly scarce—has increased in value in relation to intergenerational mobility. A working-class high school quarterback gets to college because a football coach guides him through the application process. A high-achieving but alienated minority high school student finds educational support in an older white woman whose house she cleaned every week. A single mother with multiple sclerosis receives medical and emotional support from an inner-city youth pastor.

But these “help up the ladder” social ties are the exceptions to what *Our Kids* finds in poorer areas, where these connections are not only rarer overall but also less frequently helpful. Kids from such environments suffer a significant “mentoring gap,” finding few formal and informal advisers who can guide them through unfamiliar or potentially perilous situations that bear directly on life outcomes. While lending support to the “It takes a village” mantra of earlier communitarian and progressive-left thought, *Our Kids* foregrounds the disadvantaged status of those with few ties to college graduates, trauma counselors, health specialists, or people in high-prestige occupations. Clearly, it doesn’t just take a village; it takes a certain kind of village.

While *Bowling Alone* and *American Grace* left an enduring mark on multiple disciplines, the heavy reliance of *Our Kids* on previously published research constrains its agenda-setting potential. This book joins a long line of earlier works charting the “big sort” or “coming apart” or “great divergence” of American society along class lines, and a cursory Google search reveals that we are already in the midst of more than one “national conversation” on inequality and social mobility. But there are two very good reasons to believe that *Our Kids* stands to move the conversation forward. The first is, appropriately enough, Putnam’s own considerable social capital. The book’s release prompted a star-studded panel discussion at Georgetown University featuring distinguished sociologist William Julius Wilson, American Enterprise Institute president Arthur Brooks, *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne, and President Barack Obama. Republican representative and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan has openly acknowledged Putnam’s influence on his social policies. The director of the National Economic Council, which advises the president on national and global economic policy, once called Putnam “Obama’s [Thomas] Piketty.” Putnam fills this public intellectual role well, making social science findings engaging and accessible.

The other way *Our Kids* stands to move the conversation forward is through the disciplinary “division of labor” this work embodies. It was research by Harvard economists—led by Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren—that in 2013 generated new attention to social mobility and opportunity. Their project, “The Equality of Opportunity Project,” drew on data from thirty million tax filings to map out the various factors associated with a particular metropolitan area’s rate of “intergenerational mobility”—a child’s chances of moving up the income ladder relative to his or her parents’ income. The use of community-wide characteristics and their respective correlation with particular outcomes left many of their conclusions open to interpretation.
Place matters, unquestionably, but it is difficult to untangle the various correlates of mobility: tax expenditure on schools, concentrated poverty, family structure, and racial segregation all seem to play a role. Something is going right in Salt Lake City. Something is going wrong in Atlanta. Comparing coefficients of aggregate, community-wide measures takes us only so far.

Enter Putnam. In *Our Kids*, he adeptly incorporates the mobility studies of his Harvard colleagues but then goes deeper: What have the last several decades of social science told us about the processes, strategies, and resources that make mobility possible or impossible? What do theories of intersectionality tell us about interacting factors of race, class, gender, education, and human capital? What sorts of institutions seem capable of disrupting class-structured patterns of life trajectories? Certainly, at times Putnam could afford to incorporate more theoretical thinking to compliment his charts and stats, but *Our Kids* takes steps toward sketching out the most likely causal mechanisms lurking deep within those thirty million tax filings. An “extracurricular gap” keeps poorer kids from the skills, social ties, and stability accessible to well-off kids. A “mentoring gap” leaves poorer kids with no one to advise them on college and careers. An “airbags gap” structures the consequences of drug use and other poor decisions differently for poor kids than for rich kids. Even more fundamentally, a “friendship gap” reveals that as lower-income parents traverse modern life, they are far more socially isolated and alone than higher-income parents. Such gaps are the puzzle pieces that social scientists can assemble to evaluate how social class—more than race or ethnic origins—has come to shape and constrain life opportunities in American society.

*Our Kids* puts a moral test to its readers: What level of opportunity does our society owe to those represented in Putnam’s interviews? Are we caught in a moral contradiction in which so many of us who profess a belief in the American dream are complicit in a social arrangement that thwarts its realization? How does a country accustomed to navigating crises of GDP, housing, health, and the Middle East now come to navigate a crisis so central to our national identity? And what sorts of interventions are warranted should we see mobility worsen as future cohorts reach adulthood in postindustrial America? The best hope for discerning a path forward demands the insights of not only social scientists but all scholars attuned to the historical and moral dimensions of the American dream and its viability for Americans at all levels of society.

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The Wrong Fix
Johann N. Neem

*Designing the New American University*
*Michael M. Crow and William B. Dabars*


Arizona State University is now one of the largest public research institutions in the country. To its new president, Michael Crow, in a book cowritten with historian William Dabars, ASU offers “a new model for the American research university.” The current model has been undermined, they write, by “obsolete institutional design, lack of scalability, and residual elitism.” Crow and Dabars would save the research university by redesigning it for a new era. What they’ve produced is indeed one model for the future, but it’s one in which almost every problem in higher education has become worse.

Crow and Dabars are committed to the basic purposes of research universities—teaching and research. Both require money, and the question is how to get it. Although the authors acknowledge
that the greatest challenge universities face is public disinvestment, they quickly turn to blame university culture for the widening gap between state appropriations and college costs. Universities chase prestige rather than try new things to make education accessible to the greatest number of people, Crow and Dabars charge. As a solution to this problem, they offer growth. All that needs to happen to increase access to degrees, they suggest, is to open the doors to all comers, by untraditional means if necessary. ASU hopes to enroll 100,000 online and distance education students by 2020.

Crow and Dabars frame their expansionary ambition in egalitarian language, but one cannot help but wonder if this is also a way to pay the bills by tapping into students’ wallets (or federal financial aid). What ASU students get for their money is the opportunity to attend college on a massive, anonymous campus, if they’re lucky. For those who must attend online, the university has outsourced much of its teaching, or, in Crow’s words, formed “partnerships to expand and improve the online learning experience, utilizing over one hundred third-party tools and services.” Instructional designers work with faculty to design online courses that faculty once taught. The students who once had access to professors are now taught by “coaches,” teaching assistants, and adjuncts. (According to ASU’s website, just a smidge more than 50 percent of its faculty are on the tenure track.)

One positive result of ASU’s massive expansion has been that, unlike other institutions of its kind, it has achieved socioeconomic diversity. As enrollment expanded 40 percent between 2002 and 2013, ASU brought in and graduated more students from diverse backgrounds. But degrees are only one of the goals of college education. It’s not clear whether minority and first-generation students are well served if, in return for their degree, they get to be part of America’s largest public institution, while more privileged students can attend smaller schools with access to real faculty, brick-and-mortar libraries and labs, and intellectual community.

Teaching is more than providing access to degrees. A research institution should foster in
faculty and students alike “the intrinsic impetus to advance new knowledge,” as Crow and Dabars put it. But this disposition requires more than access to courses; it requires students to spend substantial time immersed in campus communities that cultivate the intellect and imagination. Students, especially first-generation students, deserve meaningful access to professors. In short, the scale of ASU’s expansion might itself threaten the ideals Crow and Dabars espouse.

The second way to fund basic research is to sell it. Traditionally, universities were careful about how they accepted funding from corporations in order to insulate academic research from the profit motive and to protect academic freedom. But not ASU, which Crow celebrates as “the central node of an integrative knowledge discovery and commercialization network.”

Only one thing stands in the way of Crow’s dream for the new American university: university culture. Crow and Dabars simply dismiss all criticism as academic traditionalism. Crow has little patience for faculty members who “deliberate while shifts in policy, culture, and technology flash by at warp speed.” Although the authors spend an entire chapter extolling breakthroughs achieved by basic academic research, they then inexplicably turn around and condemn the academic disciplines. Champions of interdisciplinary scholarship, they rightly point to the importance of “epistemic communities,” where scholars can engage in shared conversations. But the disciplines themselves are deemed irrelevant. Yet the very notion of epistemic community leads to the opposite conclusion. Crow and Dabars rely on a caricature of moribund disciplinary research. Basic research often appears arcane to outsiders because it is meant to push the boundaries of knowledge outward. Cutting-edge research requires communities of scholars who work in the far reaches of what is known. Interdisciplinary work, while vital, depends on the health of the core disciplines. Crow and Dabars offer no convincing arguments for why research universities should not be investing in chemistry or physics or math or English or history.

Instead of tradition, Crow and Dabars embrace pragmatism, “our nation’s most significant contribution to philosophy.” They define pragmatism as the idea that “thought and action are indivisible and that ideas should lead to practical action.” For the authors, the “abstract truth-criterion becomes less important than its effectiveness in solving problems.” Although they reluctantly acknowledge some tradition as necessary, the authors emphasize tradition’s “dark side”: that “we have no choice but to accept the status quo because that is just the way things are done.”

However, pragmatism also has a dark side. Crow and Dabars’s pragmatism naturalizes change—in this case, the economic forces reshaping American society, to which universities must adapt or die. But markets are cultural, political, and historical, and so are universities. Both are human creations, and both exist to organize human activities for the pursuit of human goods. What if we need to think of change as a two-way street, where the university need not match up with a market-driven external world, but instead interrogate it, perhaps even reshape it?

What we need is more academic traditionalism. Academic traditions have not been strong enough to prevent the university from straying from its central teaching and research mission. Across the nation, basic research is being commercialized; the liberal arts are being marginalized; institutions are hiring fewer tenure-line professors. While the authors accuse America’s research universities of being adrift, in reality the authors embrace drift and confuse it with mastery. Crow aspires to disruptive innovation, but what is needed instead is a revolution—in the old meaning of that term, a return to core purposes.

Michael Crow’s ASU is not so much innovative as opportunistic, using declining public funding and students’ desperation for college degrees as an opportunity to embrace a market model of higher education—with all its attendant
inducements toward compromise—to underwrite its activities. Call it pragmatism, if that’s what one must do to redefine capitulation as courage. All three of Crow’s concerns—institutional design, scalability, and access—could be resolved by the university’s returning to its roots. Research universities should focus once again on basic and applied research in the arts and sciences. Public funding should ensure that all American students have access to high-quality higher education. Elite privilege will not be challenged by offering subpar education to the masses but by expanding access to the real thing. We’ve done it before. A lack of political will, not failures of institutional design, keeps us from doing it again.

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### Chronicle of a Decline Retold

**David Bahr**

**Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society**

*Mario Vargas Llosa (ed., trans. John King)*


The Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, one of the most talented writers of his generation, is getting cranky. But even if this collection of essays and other writings could be filed under the category of “Complaints by Aging Intellectuals,” Vargas Llosa, now approaching his ninth decade, remains an incisive critic who sees more deeply into the problems of our times than most of his peers.

*Notes on the Death of Culture* is a slender volume of both new and previously published work, unified by one common concern: the death of culture and its replacement by the “civilization of the spectacle.” That phrase, borrowed from French philosopher Guy Debord’s essay *La société du spectacle,* serves as Vargas Llosa’s touchstone:

What do we mean by civilization of the spectacle? The civilization of a world in which pride of place, in terms of a scale of values, is given to entertainment, and where having a good time, escaping boredom, is the universal passion…. It leads to culture becoming banal, frivolity becoming widespread.

The concept of the civilization of the spectacle helps Vargas Llosa elucidate the well-known rogue’s gallery of problems facing the West. And
while he is not wrong in his assessment, his book at times can read like a litany. *Literacy*: “Today’s readers require easy books that entertain them.”

*Politics*: “As banal as literature, film, and art.”

*Journalism*: “Blurred, full of holes, and has in many cases disappeared.”

*Art*: “No longer any objective criteria that make it possible to qualify or disqualify something as a work of art or situate it within a hierarchy.”

*Eroticism*: “An organic activity, no more noble or pleasurable than drinking for the sake of drinking, or defecating.”

While Vargas Llosa may not be incorrect in despairing—at least in the short term—that “what we used to call the humanities” will become “little more than secondary forms of entertainment,” it is impossible to shake the sensation that we’ve heard these arguments before. Tocqueville comes primarily to mind, given his preoccupation with the impact of democracy on the mores of the West. Bacon, Descartes, and Swift anticipated many of the problems of technology, while Plato and Aristotle wrote enduringly about eroticism, aesthetics, and piety. What sets Notes on the Death of Culture apart, however, and what makes it a nice companion volume to the works of these foundational authors, is Vargas Llosa’s ability to trace contemporary ills back to their origins in a lively, even punchy manner.

In “Forbidden to Forbid,” for example, Vargas Llosa takes on the influence of the French postmodernists, whose ideas, he believes, led to the degradation of education, which in turn has become one of the leading causes of our current cultural crisis. His argument runs something like this: Postmodern philosophers, the deconstructionists in particular, propounded a philosophy that became quite popular (and arguably remains dominant) in the humanities, holding that language is incapable of truly expressing reality. Words, in this account, are subjective and deceptive tools used by those in power to control society. And the effect this teaching has had on the authority of our teachers has been, in Vargas Llosa’s view, devastating:

Teachers, stripped of credibility and authority, often singled out, from a progressive standpoint, as representatives of repressive power that had to be resisted and even shot down in order to achieve freedom and human dignity…lost the confidence and respect of their pupils, without which it was impossible for them to fulfill effectively their role as educators: to transmit values as well as knowledge.

Once this approach to knowledge infected our educational institutions, the confidence that had allowed earlier generations to distinguish “good” from “bad” was lost. In this environment, it is easy to understand how “some of the ‘monsters’ that we thought we had destroyed forever after the Second World War…have revived and are at large once again within the heart of the West, threatening once again its values and democratic principles.”

The main problem I have with this collection of essays is Vargas Llosa’s conviction that the civilization of the spectacle “cannot be rectified because it already forms part of the way we are.” This radical resignation leaves Vargas Llosa with “little curiosity for the future.” He feels, instead, “very interested in the past and extremely interested in the present.” But if the past is prologue, why not take heart? The West has weathered brief (and not so brief) periods of cultural collapse before—the Dark Ages come to mind—and though it can take time, wisdom has a way of reasserting itself. Had Vargas Llosa stopped to consider that possibility, he might have written a different sort of book asking a different central question: What are the conditions under which wisdom, once lost or abandoned, reasserts itself? Such a line of inquiry would have enabled him to use his considerable intellect to chart a way forward rather than sink into unmanly despair.

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I rise to embrace that most unpopular of causes: linguistic prescriptivism. Unpopular in every sense, for it asserts that the vox populi should not be the ultimate authority to which every knee should bow and every tongue confess in matters of diction and grammar. Instead, it takes the unfashionable view that standards of usage exist, and exist to be observed and enforced, not merely for propriety’s sake but for the sake of elegance, precision, and clarity.Stubborn blue-nosed grammarian types, such as your average heroic copyeditor, rise each morning, put on their armor, buckle their scabbards, and sally forth into a relentless and often losing battle to defend the ramparts of civilization, policing the distinction between that and which, or between and among, or shall and will, and a great many other such problem spots. They are always busy, for the legions of mischief are almost as extensive as language itself. The ever-proliferating confusions related to pronoun gender and number—“If a criminal is sufficiently versatile, can they do the work of two?”—are almost as bewildering as the general societal confusion they signify. Which of course is just what language is supposed to do, in the view of the anti-prescriptivists: Language is to be a mirror rather than a lamp, to invoke M.H. Abrams’s classic distinction between literature that merely reflects the world and literature that seeks to illuminate it. Language in this understanding is life’s obedient servant rather than its guide and preceptor.

Certainly there is truth in this. It would be absurd, not to say futile, to argue that languages and words should never change. But there is also a great deal to be said for the idea of language as a lamp, an instrument for the promulgation of ideas and ideals, one that does not merely take its bearings from the things it seeks to illuminate, but in fact reverses that set of relations, and brings its light to bear on a world that badly needs its guidance. Old words in old books convey meanings that we are often much the poorer for having lost, and much the richer for having worked

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to recover. When the language of the Bible or the prayer books is revised to be brought into conformity with present-day usage, what is lost is not easily expressed, since it was precisely the discarded older words that were needed to express it. When the Episcopal Church revised the Book of Common Prayer in 1979, a portion of the wording of the liturgy was changed from “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty [to give thanks to God]” to the saccharine and upbeat “It is right, and a good and joyful thing.” This change did far more than make the wording more familiar, if unduly prosaic. By eliminating unfamiliar words that one might have to struggle to understand, it closed off access to unfamiliar meanings that one might need to struggle to appropriate. For instance, what does it mean to have a “bounden duty” to something larger than oneself—and when and why did it cease to be “meet” to acknowledge that duty?

So it is often true that translation is betrayal, and no less so when the translation takes place within the same language, because words are so rarely interchangeable. In addition, a word may remain superficially unchanged but manage, over time, to lose its meaning, like the salt that loses its savor. My favorite example of this, one that drives me to distraction, is the almost complete loss to our discourse of the word disinterested, which is now generally used to mean “uninterested,” even by highly educated and fluent individuals. To point out that this is an error in usage is to draw anti-prescriptivist fire and scorn, and mark oneself as a petty and pedantic twit.

But hold on, because there are some high stakes here. Disinterestedness in its original acceptation was a powerful, even visionary word, which meant something very different from boredom or world-weariness. To be “disinterested” was to approach a conflict or dispute with the fair-minded neutrality of one who took the larger view, and had no vested interest in the outcome. The Progressive reformers of a century ago, such as Herbert Croly, John Dewey, and Theodore Roosevelt, all believed in the possibility of a new science of politics, and a form of democratic governance that would be grounded in the truths of this science, enabling its practitioners to be disinterested leaders making disinterested decisions—meaning that they would be capable of standing above the collision of “interests” that made democratic politics such a disappointing melee, and could instead discern and pursue something called “the public interest,” and could make the pursuit of that common interest a reality. In short, a statesman was “disinterested” who had the temperament, the intellectual wherewithal, and the probity to put the common good ahead of any particular good.

The Progressive vision of disinterestedness was both naive and smug, unresponsive to the full range of genuine democratic sentiments, and doomed to be dashed against the rocks of human nature’s incorrigibly self-interested propensity. But there is no denying its high-mindedness, its aspiration to be a lamp rather than a mirror, a source of moral elevation rather than a license to ignore the larger good. What does it mean that we have entirely lost the use of this once powerful word in anything resembling its former sense? Does that mean that we have lost a way of imagining and expressing what it would be like to govern with the common good foremost in our minds?

It might. But that is all the more reason to keep alive a sense of the original meaning of disinterestedness—just as it is worth keeping alive what it means to have a “bounden duty.” When you think about it, there may be a connection between these two undertakings.
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