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Introduction

In *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism*¹ I described how corporations have used their financial resources and power to counter the gains made by environmentalists, to reshape public opinion and to persuade politicians against increased environmental regulation. Yet this is only part of the explanation for the failure of nations to deal with environmental problems adequately. In this book I examine the way capitalist culture gives power and influence to these corporations and at the same time promotes and reinforces lifestyles and behaviours that are damaging to people and to the environment, particularly in English speaking countries. Of central importance are the underlying cultural imperatives for production and consumption.

As we begin the twenty first century work and production has become ends in themselves. Employment has become such a priority that much environmental degradation is justified merely on the grounds that it provides jobs. And people are so concerned to keep their jobs that they are willing to do what their employers require of them even if they believe it is wrong or environmentally destructive. The social benefit of having the majority of able-bodied people in a society working hard all week goes unquestioned, particularly by those who work hardest. Few people today can imagine a society that does not revolve around work. They never stop to consider why they work and whether they want to work. How did paid work come to be so central to our lives? Why is it that so many people wouldn't know what to do with themselves or who they were if they did not have their jobs?

As Dominique Méda observed in *International Labour Review*, work “has come to be regarded as an inherent feature of the human condition, as the only means of fulfilling all individual and social aspirations.” It “has come to dominate the entirety of individual and social time and space” and to be the “main vehicle for the formation of social relationships and for self-fulfilment”.²

Employers have gone to a great deal of trouble to ensure this is so and they have been aided in their endeavours by governments, preachers, teachers, social scientists and others. To make sure there is no social identity outside of employment, the unemployed are stigmatised. They tend to be portrayed in the media as either frauds, hopeless cases or layabouts who are living it high at taxpayers expense. Work is seen as an essential characteristic of being human. No matter how tedious it is, any work is generally considered to be better than no work.

An ideology of work has been promoted in Western societies since the early days of modern capitalism. Those who don't have to do manual labour have extolled the dignity and nobility of manual labour.³ A. R. Gini and T. J. Sullivan observe in their book on *Work and the Person* that the work ethic "has often been used as a means of masking the drudgery and necessity of work.... the tradition of the work ethic glorified and legitimized work and gave it a teleological orientation—a sense of purpose or design—which helped to both sustain individual effort and ameliorate its temporal brutishness."⁴

The work ethic, which has been at the heart of capitalist culture, has evolved from a religious principle originating in the sixteenth century, to a success ethic advanced by writers, businessmen and teachers in the nineteenth century. Today the work ethic is promoted primarily in terms of work being a responsibility, both to family and to the nation. The hard work of citizens is advocated as being necessary to national prosperity. For half a millenium hard work has been seen as an indicator of good character.

The work ethic however is based on assumptions and premises that are fast becoming outdated. Those pushing the work ethic today claim that every person needs to work, and work hard, if productivity is to increase. All progress, it is argued, depends on increasing productivity. The fallacy of this assumption is becoming clear as fewer and fewer people are required in the workforce and more and more products are being forced on consumers.

But the call to ever increasing productivity is seductive. Even when dissidents challenge capitalism they are usually loathe to advocate the dismantling of the ethical foundations and institutions that underpin national productivity, particularly the work ethic. Robert Heilbroner noted decades ago:

The striking characteristic of our contemporary ideological climate is that the 'dissident' groups, labour, government, or academics, all seek to accommodate their proposals for social change to the limits of adaptability of the prevailing business order....⁵

This is particularly true of modern environmentalists in their search for solutions to the environmental crisis. It is for this reason that sustainable development has become so popular as a solution. Sustainable development

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embraces the idea that economic growth and environmental protection are compatible. Sustainable development seeks reforms that do not challenge the political, institutional or cultural status quo and as such the doctrine has been unsuccessful at achieving the sorts of significant changes that are necessary to protect the environment.⁶ National and international sustainable development policies leave power in the hands of the corporations that are responsible for some of the worst instances of environmental degradation and avoid any measures that might reduce rates of production and consumption that are clearly unsustainable.

The compulsion to work has clearly become pathological in modern industrial societies. Together with the compulsion to create wealth and consume, it drives the imperative to go on producing goods at the expense of everyone's quality of life. Millions of people are being encouraged and coerced to work long hours, devoting their lives to making or doing things that will not enrich their lives or make them happier but will add to the garbage and pollution that the earth is finding difficult to accommodate. They are so busy doing this that they have little time to spend time with their family and friends, to develop other aspects of themselves, to participate in their communities as full citizens. And the best brains of a generation are engaged in persuading them to go on doing this without question.

Escalating production and consumption are degrading the environment at rates that undermine any improvements that can be achieved through technological and legislative change. Lester Brown notes in his introduction to the Worldwatch Institute's well respected *State of the World 1998*:

While economic indicators such as investment, production, and trade are consistently positive, the key environmental indicators are increasingly negative. Forests are shrinking, water tables are falling, soils are eroding, wetlands are disappearing, fisheries are collapsing, rangelands are deteriorating, rivers are running dry, temperatures are rising, coral reefs are dying, and plant and animal species are disappearing.⁷

Similarly the *Human Development Report 1998* stated that: "Runaway growth in consumption is placing unprecedented pressures on the environment through pollution, waste and the growing deterioration of renewables: water, soils, forests, fish and biodiversity."⁸

But despite the international efforts to do something about this degradation, development and economic growth have such priority that changes are minor and no real change can be affected. The European Environment Agency found in 1998 that in the 44 countries it surveyed there had been little progress on environmental improvements since its previous assessment in 1995. The loss of

species had not been halted and waste from manufacturing, mining and urban centres had increased by 10% since 1990.⁹

The international conferences and agreements that have taken place in the last decade have failed to address the key cause of the problem, the ever increasing production and consumption of the world's most affluent nations. Surveys show that the majority of people in most countries are not only concerned about the environment, they think environmental protection should be given priority over economic growth and they believe governments should regulate to protect it.¹⁰ Yet this public concern is not translating into either cultural change or government action.

Unless the work/consume treadmill is overcome there is little hope for the planet. History has shown that the values underlying such compulsions, such as the work ethic and respect accorded to those who accumulate wealth, are socially constructed, and temporal (see chapters 2 and 3). They are not inevitable, they are not an essential part of human nature, they are historical and they are shaped and reinforced by corporate interests and by all of the major institutions in modern societies.

It is time to reconsider our unquestioned submission to employers and the value we accord to work and wealth creation. We need to recognise the historical roots and modern underpinnings behind industrial culture, and to consider alternatives. This book sets out to clear the way for that task, by exposing some of the key cultural foundations and myths supporting the capitalist value system and the way those foundations and myths are constantly reinforced in the face of a different reality. The chapters that follow will uncover the part played by ideas, values and beliefs in the rise and dominance of capitalism in modern societies and the conditioning of the community to the authority of employers, and in particular, corporations. They will examine how certain ideas and beliefs served business interests and were adopted and promoted by those interests so successfully that they became widely held beliefs and values in the wider community.

It is time to question the priority we give to paid work, wealth generation and consumption of material goods and the influence that those who provide these things have over our decision-making. Cultures can change and we need to recognise that industrial culture has become dysfunctional and is in need of a major overhaul.

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NOTES

- ¹ Sharon Beder, *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 1997).
- ² Dominique Méda, 'New Perspectives on Work as Value', *International Labour Review*, Vol. 135, No. 6 (1996), p. 633.
- ³ David Bleakley, *Work: The Shadow and the Substance* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 36.
- ⁴ A. R. Gini and T. J. Sullivan, 'A Critical Overview', in A. R. Gini and T. J. Sullivan (eds), *It Comes with the Territory: An Inquiry Concerning Work and the Person* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 9.
- ⁵ Quoted in Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Quartet Books, 1969), p. 193.
- ⁶ Sharon Beder, *The Nature of Sustainable Development*, 2nd ed (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 1996).
- ⁷ Lester Brown, 'The Future of Growth', in Lester Brown and et al (eds), *State of the World 1998*: Worldwatch Institute, 1998).
- ⁸ 'UNDP: Runaway Consumption Widens Gap Between Rich, Poor', *Go Between* (October/November 1998), p. 16.
- ⁹ 'Bearing the Brunt of Pollution', *News Direct* (9 June 1998).
- ¹⁰ Riley E. Dunlap, George H. Gallup Jr and Alec M. Gallup, 'Of Global Concern: Results of the Health of the Planet Survey', *Environment*, Vol. 35, No. 9 (1993).