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Is the 'Better Job' Still Possible Today?

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In the title of this article I am clearly expressing my doubts about the likelihood that we will observe the emergence of a 'better job' for most employees in the near future. My understanding of the 'better job' is work that permits employees to 'blossom', work in which employees, in particular operators, have greater autonomy, more responsibilities and more control over their time and space, in other words a high level of control over the organization of their work. However, I am not defining the 'better job' as one that is impossible to attain in our capitalist societies, some kind of absolute that is only possible in utopia or when pigs can fly. The 'better job' is a real possibility, a compromise that can be reached in our societies despite the contradiction inherent in the capitalist employment relationship (capital's purchase of the worker's labour time and legal right to organize the work and the working time worker as it sees fit). When I speak of compromise I am emphasizing the fact that despite this legal power (born of the employment relationship), capital may leave the workers, and employees more generally, to organize their own work - although in its own interest, that is in order to increase labour productivity and productivity in general.

And yet - and this is the thesis that is advanced here - while better jobs are theoretically possible (hence the challenge of participation, codetermination or the 'excellence' thesis) they are unlikely to emerge in the near future. To support this contention I intend to re-examine the historical conditions of some of the situations in which better jobs have emerged. I then compare these situations to the current period which is characterized by a particular crisis of capital accumulation. Following this I show how the partial resolution of this crisis, particularly through the generalization of the just-in-time system, is working against the emergence of the better job, including in types of work that would otherwise appear favourable to it.

Conditions Under Which Better Jobs Have Emerged in the Past

The first point to be noted, a pessimistic one but also a sad reflection of reality, is that without exception it has not been the general membership of the unions, or the workers and staff in the office, who have demanded organizational transformation. Nor has it been shop-floor union representatives, who have been aware that this demand was not widely shared among union members and that therefore there was little chance of mobilizing them around this theme. Rather, the day-to-day reality of the employment relationship has been comprised of demands for better wages, longer breaks, the modification of work stations to facilitate work, the demand for various bonuses (in exchange for the discomforts or risks to health associated with the job), respect for the worker's dignity in the face of authoritarian supervision, and so on.

Historically, it has initially been union staff further removed from the workplace and intellectuals with an interest in working conditions who have demonstrated in their writing

how the same production outcomes could be arrived at by more humane methods (for France, see Coriat, 1976; Mallet, 1979). Yet these scientific results have had little direct impact on those most directly concerned, in particular because they have not had sufficient influence over the overall production process since they have had no contact at all with the engineers who alone are able to modify their labour process. Indeed the results published by labour sociologists and economists have tended to have a greater impact on managers and white-collar staff. If the crisis of Taylorism was invented by intellectuals, the popularity of the idea results from the way it has been taken up and diffused by organization consultants and by managers themselves.

It is in this overall context, and in particular national and historical situations, that better jobs have been developed: at the initiative, it should be stressed, of managers supported by union organizations. The necessary national conditions have generally included a shortage of labour, an unwillingness to encourage permanent immigration (Japan, Sweden, Germany) and a clear lack of interest among young people in jobs believed to be difficult, uninteresting and repetitive (assembly line work in the automobile industry, for instance). The managers of some companies have believed that the quickest solution is a radical rupture in the organization of work leading to a wholesale recomposition of manual work. Besides the well-known cases in which work was organized in semi-autonomous groups at Saab and Electrolux in the late 1970s, it is P.G. Gyllenhammar's initiatives at Volvo that come to mind. Whether at the opening of the Kalmar factory (1974) or at the opening of Uddevalla (1989), there were obvious difficulties: a short age of assembly workers and high labour turnover that caused quality problems. Recall that Metall, the union for Volvo workers, was initially against these projects, believing that the principal aim of the new concept was to increase the pace of work and that it was 'an attempt to divide and individualize the participation in the companies, directed against worker interests' (Auer and Riegler, 1990). Metall came round to support it, and would later support and drive the Uddevalla project. Yet when the closure of the two factories was announced, union leaders at Volvo-Torslanda sided with company managers against the local unions, arguing that their size, geographical location and costs of transporting painted bodies from Göteborg made closing those two factories rather than a part of Torslanda a better solution for the company.

More generally, researchers and commentators have tended to attribute responsibility for the improvement of working conditions and humanization of work to the unions.¹ Historical reality, however, suggests that as in the Swedish case these initiatives originated with the employers. These latter had encountered personnel problems (absenteeism and slowdowns, in particular) due to tensions in the labour market, as well as production problems rooted in the extreme segmentation of tasks and an exaggerated Taylorism (production rigidities). According to Thomas Sandberg (1983), LO (The Swedish Workers' Confederation) was too preoccupied with wages issues during the 1960s to involve itself in the organization of work. It was the Technical Department of the SAF (Swedish Employers' Association), closely followed by the Social Democratic state, which imported principles of rationalization, humanization and participation from Norway. Of the three actors involved in transforming work (the Technical Department, the joint Development Council for Cooperation Questions and the Industrial Democracy Delegation), it was the SAF's Technical Department that played the determining role, especially through the medium of its consultants, who launched multiple local initiatives at the request of employers (up to 500, it is reported). As Thomas

Sandberg (1983: 18) reports, laconically, 'the programs offered an opportunity, nationally and locally, for the unions to participate in the organization of work. They also exposed the structural limitations to an alternative organization of work'.

In the mid-1970s, the SAF Technical Department launched a programme of organizational technical reforms of work situations called 'New Factories'. When invited to participate in these, the unions, advised by some radical researchers, refused, arguing that changes in power relations at the workplace could not come from sociotechnical reforms. Union uncertainty and debate lasted for a good part of the 1970s. Finally, after the neo-liberal right wing took control of the SAF and dismantled the Technical Department, Metall held its 1985 Congress on the theme of 'solidaristic work policy' (Metall, 1985), which proposed an active strategy to reorganize and improve work conditions in the face of the rationalization of work and the adoption of information technologies.

Hence, the unions were invited to participate - which they did as far as possible and with the success that we now recognize after the early 1970s - but they did not initiate the movement to improve working conditions or to humanize work. The purpose of this discussion is to show that the humanization and transformation of work was in the first place a concern of company managers, when they became obliged to focus on it for reasons related to the efficiency of work and production; accordingly, if this requirement or preoccupation were to disappear, the *raison d'être* for, and research on, the 'better job' would evaporate.

A similar situation prevailed in Germany. In the first place, the 'Agreement for Protection in Case of Work Rationalization' (1 July 1968) which followed the recession of 1966-7 was essentially a defensive agreement, the purpose of which was to offer a certain compensation to workers who lost their work, found themselves transferred within the company, and so on (Goetschy and Loos, 1986). Moreover, while the purpose of the government programme 'Humanization of Work' (May 1973) was to preserve the social equilibrium, from the employer perspective it sought to rationalize work and capital over the long term and sought to counter the 'refusal to work' (Nashold, 1980). While this programme reflected a constellation of interests, such as those of the reformist SPD/FDP government which sought to get rationalization accepted through a 'gentle' approach, and those of the unions which sought to gain control over the rationalization measures, none of these changes the nature of the programme; it was initiated by the state to satisfy the requirements of rationalization (and later the introduction of new technologies). Further proof can be found in the strong criticism made by IG Metall of the 'Humanization of Work' programme: the domination of rationalization strategies over an interest in the humanization of work (not to mention considerable job losses), increased workloads, little or no improvement in autonomy or skills, marginalization of works councils, and so forth. According to W. Pölher, all these faults were written into the very design of the programme since the initiative for new projects was up to the employer (Pölher, 1980).

Under conditions that were admittedly rather different, it was difficulties in recruiting young workers for assembly lines that led Nissan and Toyota to locate their new factories in rural parts of the island of Kyushu and to modify the organization of work compared to the old factories. Even if the changes were not as radical as claimed by Toyota's management, this did not prevent widespread publicity throughout the world about the segmentation of the

main production line, small in-process stocks, artificial house-plants in the factory, brighter and more spacious work areas and modifications to the suggestions and remuneration systems (Durand and Durand-Sebag, 1995, 1996).

In short, the emergence of work humanization and trends towards the improvement of work posts has generally been due to management or state-led initiatives linked to a shortage of labour. Even if the unions and employees were supportive, the better job was never the fruit of union struggle, for the reasons advanced above. And today more than in the past union struggles are focused on defending employment. The labour shortages that led to managerial initiatives in favour of the better job are no longer a driving force. In my view this will continue to be the case for many years, given the nature of the current crisis of capital accumulation and the paths that are being followed in the attempt to resolve it. As I have argued elsewhere (Boyer and Durand, 1997) the current crisis is largely due to the impossibility of revitalizing consumption norms with mass produced products that would support accumulation. Information technologies cannot, now and perhaps for decades, replace durable goods such as the car and household appliances within the Fordist cycle of accumulation. The new model of accumulation in industrialized countries is characterized by weak demand (the replacement of durable goods but not investment) combined with considerable productivity increases due to information technologies and especially the rationalizing reorganization of work. The consequence of this imbalance is a surplus of labour in a juridico-political system that is very unfavourable to work sharing. Hence there is a labour force employed full-time and also working overtime (mostly blue-collar workers but an increasing number of white-collar workers and executives)" while 15-20 percent of the population that is capable of working cannot find work. This situation creates strong pressures on working conditions, the pace of work and actual hours worked for those who have a job, and does not appear to lead 'naturally' to a better job: all the more so to the extent that unions do not place this issue high on their agenda.

And yet, as a result of technological and organizational change there are some conditions emerging that favour the creation of better jobs, at least in certain economic sectors. This is the paradox to which I now turn.

Sociotechnical Change and the Character of Work Posts

The general tendency towards automation (defined as the production of a good or service without human intervention) is leading to the reunification of parts or segments of production in a single entity. This is what I call the tendency to generalize the production flow. The flow draws segments of production into a single unit that can be controlled by information technologies that keep a supervising group informed of its state (stoppages, bottlenecks, etc.). Under capitalism, and following the innovations of Toyotism, stocks are eliminated, both to reduce the wasteful immobilization of capital and to reveal all the dysfunctions previously camouflaged by the presence of buffers: there is a transition from a traditional Fordism flow to a tightened flow. Hence we are witnessing the phenomenon of a generalization of tightened flow into the vast majority of market and non-market activities. The concept of just-in-time and the tightened flow has diffused out of automobile assembly lines to invade all industrial activities. Indeed the buyer-supplier relationship is but a slightly more subtle way of creating a tightened flow between the

activities of partners in different positions by organizing the quality of the flow (no stoppages, consistent quality, no stocks, and so on).

Just-in-time and the tightened flow have also conquered service activities like banking and insurance so that money circulates faster. Supermarkets and hypermarkets - at least in France with the Carrefour, Auchan and Continent chains - are nothing if not a just-in-time flow between suppliers and consumers. Fast food is the most striking example of the emergence of the flow in a previously traditional sector. Mass tourism (guided visits, buffet-style restaurants) is simply a long pipeline with docile consumers entering and leaving. Finally, the universities think increasingly in terms of the flow of students, and hospitals 'manage' their patients like a flow of clients that cannot be allowed to cease or to become seized up. In other words, if the principles of just-in-time are widely diffused, this will imply more than the organization of material flows, but also a concept which defines a new way of producing goods and services (Womack and al., 1990). In many cases (buyer-supplier relations, services management) the production flow is only 'virtual', but the organizational principles and constraints of the flow, and their impact on work, are nonetheless very real. If capitalism was initially a search for control over time, just-in-time has become one of the best ways for achieving this. From this perspective, the Fordist principle of the conveyor has not been surpassed but, on the contrary, has been systematized and generalized to production as a whole.

Within this generalization of the tightened flow can be observed a profound division of employees into two main groups. There are those whom I call the core of production who are responsible for organizing, controlling and supervising the continuity of the production flow and who generally do not touch the materials involved, and there are those who, in the interstices of the flow or within the flow itself, manipulate matter (direct work) because the automation of these tasks is not possible or is too costly.

As far as the complexity of production and the flow is concerned, there are core employees in both buyer organizations and in the cascade of different suppliers and sub-contractors. Hence each company contains both a core of flow controllers and servants of the flow (direct workers). The core remains a minority, and the real issues related to the better job are posed by direct work, where conditions remain difficult. In the engineering, electronic, textile and other sectors, there are tasks of loading and unloading machines which force the workers to adapt themselves to the rhythms of the machines. There is also the assembly of complex objects (automobiles, electronic products, clothing, household goods, etc.). Finally, there are the tasks of information processing in the tertiary sector (banking, insurance, etc.).

It is in these jobs that pressure on the intensity and pace of work is greatest, because methods of measuring work are well tested and the rationalization of work has impacts that are directly visible. In a context of global competition and significant unemployment, the likelihood of seeing the emergence of a 'better job' appears slim, as indicated by most of the research currently being published on the automobile industry."

The core of employees can be organized in various ways, and different economic sectors and national (or company) traditions share and delegate responsibility in their own ways. In some cases, the organization and control of the production flow may be in the hands of a

minority who supervise indirect workers to whom they delegate highly codified responsibilities. Elsewhere, control over the flow may in practice be shared within a group that is more homogeneous and less hierarchical. It is here, not surprisingly, in this work of organizing, controlling and supervising the flow, that it is possible to observe tendencies towards a better job. And yet, within the core, while descriptions of many situations may give an impression that good jobs are involved, the reality falls far short of the potential.

Of course most of the core employees are skilled, even highly skilled, and have the benefit of good pay and security of employment. On this basis, they willingly participate in their work and are prepared to be flexible (in both work content and hours of work). The work is interesting and enriching because it is varied and there are permanent links with the services adjacent to production: planning, quality, supplies, improvement (kaizen, total productive maintenance). It is possible to speak of an intellectualization of blue-collar work (hence the emergence of the *medarbetare* in Sweden) that involves relational work between peers and between services. Communication between people or with information systems has become the principal occupation, and the goal is to resolve problems with the appropriate methods. Yet closer observation reveals a strong dichotomy within the core of tightened flow supervisors (the new guardians of the temple). In practice the workers and even the technicians who are closest to the material flow have to follow extremely precise procedures. Sometimes it is information systems that dictate their roles and how they perform them. ISO 9000 norms, even though they may be established with employee participation, become constraints and procedural channels that eliminate all creativity at work. The autonomy at work that had been won during the period of rapid automation (the years around 1990) is eaten away, little by little, by the increasing formalization of work, sometimes based on the 'memoprospective' functions of information systems.

Even more seriously, many company managers in Sweden and Germany deliberately confuse group work and teamwork. While the aim of the former is to increase the autonomy of the worker and the group (see the earlier discussion on the conditions for the emergence of the better job), the latter, which is of Japanese origin, attempts to increase labour productivity. IG Metall's acceptance of lean production, albeit under constraint, has contributed to the confusion (Roth, 1992, 1996). However, the more fundamental problem is that managers have introduced the whole set of Japanese work organization principles (kaizen, total productive maintenance, statistical process control, suggestions) that give the group autonomy through a contract agreed with management either under the inaccurate label of 'group work' or linked to the notion of 'teamwork'. What I have observed at ABB (the T50 programme especially, the goal of which is to reduce air design, development and manufacture times by 50 percent) is not related to the search for a better job - except in discourse - but to the systematic search to reduce costs by organizing emulation within the group (which appears in the form of peer pressure). In the factory that builds robots, and it is the same in the factory where electrical relays are made, the introduction of a 'coach' above the working group, even if, according to management, he or she is not there to command but to support the group, appears to the workers to be a measure to introduce a certain transparency in the social organization of work; which is not so different from the Japanese organization of work, and kaizen in particular. Similarly, the 'Saab Parts Professional Programme', run by the Saab unit responsible for distributing parts at Nyköping, significantly improved its work process (45 percent increase in productivity, reduction of errors from 1.0

percent to 0.1 percent) by transferring activities from white-collar employees (who have partly disappeared) to blue-collar employees. Within the working groups, the team leader advises rather than directs work. In reality, workers have had to adapt themselves to new work norms, and tensions within work groups appear to be very high. Otherwise put, even if the employees at the supervisory core of the flow initially saw their situations improve through the automation process, nowadays they are placed under the same constraints as the workers who have direct contact with the material in the flow. Hence, little by little, via a process of borrowing from teamwork à la japonaise, conditions of work for all employees are converging towards the situations described by Parker and Slaughter (1988) in the Japanese transplants in the USA, characterized as 'management by stress'.

Both sets of employees find themselves far removed from better jobs as we have defined them above. Moreover, a recent study published by INSEE shows that shift-work is gaining in importance in most sectors of the French economy. Since shift-work generally involves work in a production flow, under just-in-time constraints, the conditions necessary to encourage better jobs are not being met. Another study, undertaken by the French Ministry of Labour in 1991, concluded that 'in 1991, 29.5 percent of employees declared their work to be repetitive, compared to 19.8 percent in 1984, a rise of 50 percent in seven years; moreover, in 1991 23.2 percent indicated that their pace of work was imposed by dependence on a colleague, compared to 11.2 percent in 1984' (cited in *Alternatives économiques*, 1996: 36-7).

Hence even if appropriate conditions have almost been met in the upper echelons where the flow is supervised (the organizers and controllers of just-in-time), it is important not to succumb to the laudatory discourse and belief that these special conditions have become the general conditions for employees involved in the production flow. There are techniques that accompany the production flow (total quality management, total productive maintenance, kaizen, problem-solving methods) that have ideological functions which must be revealed rather than simply submitted to.

Conclusions

There are therefore two illusions to guard against: that of believing that labour market tensions and the technical problems of productivity encountered during the 1960s and 1970s will return and lead to employer initiatives to promote better jobs, and that of thinking that the complexity of the production flow enriches the majority of work posts.

Moreover, unionism, which during the 1970s and 1980s supported projects to humanize and improve working conditions, is now less of a force. On the one hand, the unions are currently preoccupied with the elimination of jobs due to all kinds of rationalizations. On the other hand, the very character of the unions is changing (Durand, 1996), as revealed by the weakening of their capacities to mobilize the labour force in recent decades (fewer members, growing competition between unions, reduction of militant behaviour, reluctance of employees to join new offensive social movements).

All this brings us back to the conclusions of the French sociologist of work Georges Friedmann (1963), who argued that little can be expected from efforts to improve the

working conditions of frontline workers, whether blue- or white-collar. Improving the lot of the workers therefore requires reducing the length of time spent at work. Do we not perhaps stand at the threshold of a major historical jump in the reduction of working time, like the reduction of the working day to eight hours at the turn of the century and the introduction of the 40-hour week in mid-century? It remains to be seen how the time thus freed would be occupied: would it be in the consumption of market goods and services? That, however, is another subject.

Notes

1. Two exceptions are Friedman (1977) and Mendner (1975), both of whom argue that job enlargement, job rotation and humanization of work should be interpreted as management strategies to control workers, especially when there is worker resistance towards Taylorized regimes. For instance, Friedman uses concepts not dissimilar to those employed in this article when he refers to 'central' and 'peripheral' workers as well as 'responsible autonomy' as a strategy used by management to control the latter. (I am grateful to one of this journal's reviewers for bringing these similarities to my attention.)
2. 'The research basis on which LO built up its competence was somewhat more narrow, in that it did not mark a clear departure from the conventional individually-based organization of work. Therefore, it may be said that by 1966 the necessary preconditions were met by SAF but not by LO' (Sandberg, 1983).
3. See the conclusions of the 13th Congress of IG Metall, Berlin, 21-27 September 1980.
4. According to Rifkin (1995), working time has increased by 3.6 percent in the USA since 1981.
5. In the service sector (banking, insurance, etc.) the 'material flow' may itself involve information ('data'), alongside an 'informational flow' made up of the software which manages the data and the databases.
6. See Babson (1995); Garrahan and Stewart (1992); Stewart (1996); Lehndorff (1996). Paul Adler, who thought he had only revealed the advantages of the Toyotist organization of NUMMI (the General Motors/Toyota joint venture in California), has now recognized the significance of discontent at this factory and its underlying causes in the intensification of work (Adler et al., 1995).
7. I use this term to designate the capacity to memorize and treat information automatically through information-processing systems that permit better planning for the future (prospective) on the basis of a precise record of the past: frequency and duration of breakdowns, stoppages and also seasonal fluctuations in the market.

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