

## THE CHANGING MEANING AND VALUE OF WORK IN A GLOBALIZED INFORMATION SOCIETY

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“The pressure today is to *dismantle* the habits of permanent, round-the-clock, steady and regular work; what else may the slogan of ‘flexible labour’ mean?” (Bauman 1997: 112). The key requirement of the so-called global information society is “flexibility” in the workforce, and this has huge ramifications for the “meaning and value” of work. The old “work ethic” that modern industrial societies sought to inculcate in their workers assumed that work was a matter of spending time on a daily, routine, full-time and long-term basis, in paid productive activity, usually in the company of the same group of people, in the same place. Would-be workers today are encouraged to forget just those habits and assumptions in the name of “flexibility”. Work at the start of the twenty-first century is characterized by its mutability in time and space, by multiple careers, or, at the other end of the scale, by casualization. You are more likely to be working on your own, and with less sense of entitlement to payment and acceptable working conditions, and less prospect of continuing indefinitely in the same job, than your post-Second-World-War counterpart in the North Atlantic region.

These are major changes, and it is widely suggested that the turn of the twenty-first century marks a moment within a process of radical transformation of work, relating above all to the adoption of communication and information technologies (CITs) and in turn, closely related with this, to globalization. Work is being decentralized, an increasing proportion of workers experience a growing autonomy – in self-employment, outsourcing, and downsizing – and old organizational structures are being replaced with dynamic processes (LaPointe 1996). Increasingly, at least in the affluent societies, appeals are made to management to aid the process of adaptation to what is seen as inevitable, ubiquitous change. The critical slogan of the 1980s was

“automate or liquidate” (McLoughlin and Clark 1994: 4) but this hardly captures the subtleties and varieties of change that accompany technological changes in the workplace, either then or now. Management, labour unions, and workforces all play a role in determining which “human factors” are held to be important at any given moment. But while the variety of factors involved is often acknowledged, management approaches can deal only with discrete organizational aspects of work. The broader context of alterations in the very culture of work, consequent upon CIT-induced changes, cannot seriously be addressed merely by management-based approaches.

The other major context of, and feature of, changes in the meaning of work is globalization. Work is increasingly organized on an international level. The structure, stability, remuneration, and availability of work is often determined beyond national boundaries. Workers in the least developed countries scarcely have a toehold in the global economy, and those in developing countries are often restricted to work in export production that may mean little for national development. In the highly industrialized countries workers face greater uncertainties in the pattern of work and the expectation that longer periods of time will be spent in training for what employment there is (see Hodson 1997). Capital and labour flows are accelerating in pace and diversifying in pattern, especially as workers move from less industrialized nations to those such as the USA, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia. CIT-affected productive processes are spreading almost everywhere. Women are entering the international labour force in unprecedented proportion, often taking up low-paid production jobs. And organizational systems are in international competition, between for example, German co-determination, Japanese continuous improvement, and American flexibility.

In his illuminating work on the “information age”, Manuel Castells emphasizes the importance of these two factors – the informational and the global – and the ways that they are mutually implicated with each other, in his analysis of the “network society”. He writes that the new economy is

... *informational* because the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents in this economy (be it firms, regions, or nations) fundamentally depend on their capacity to generate, process, and apply efficiently knowledge-based information. It is *global*

because

the core activities of production, consumption, and circulation, as well as their components (capital, labour, raw materials, management, information, technology, markets) are organized on a global scale ... It is informational *and* global because, under the new historical conditions,

productivity is generated through and competition is played out in a global network of interaction. (1996: 66)

The resulting situation is one in which an asymmetrically interdependent world, organized around three major economic regions is “increasingly polarized along an axis of opposition between productive, information-rich, affluent areas, and impoverished areas, economically devalued and socially excluded” (Castells 1996: 145). But because the technological infrastructure of the informational economy is organized in “networks and flows”, one’s position in the international division of labour does not depend simply on region. All countries are penetrated by all four positions in which economic agents find themselves, and these are: “producers of high value, based on informational labour; the producers of high volume, based on lower-cost labour; the producers of raw materials, based on natural endowments, and the redundant producers, reduced to devalued labour” (147).

In the light of the foregoing, it is not surprising that these two aspects of contemporary changes – CITs and globalization – together have huge consequences for the meaning and value of work. Jobs available and the skills needed to do them are changing constantly, as the new technologies are adopted. But the global movement of capital and labour also affects work profoundly. As Hodson observes, “The large-scale migration of production facilities to locations with cheaper labour is dramatically changing the mix of jobs available in both the nations receiving production jobs and in the nations losing these jobs” (1997: xiii). It is one thing for governments to try to generate skilled labour, supportive infrastructures, and efficient organizations, in quest of long-term growth and stability. It is another to explore questions of how the meaning and value of work themselves should be reappraised in a global information age.

Castells argues persuasively that the fundamental transformation is not the growth of a global labour force, or changing employment levels, or even social polarization resulting from the global, informational economy, but rather “the individualization of work and the fragmentation of societies” (1996: 201). This represents a reversal of the historical trend within industrial societies of the salarization of work and the socialization of production. Now management is decentralized, work is individualized, and markets are customized.

New information technologies allow at the same time for the decentralization of work tasks, and for their coordination in an interactive network of communication in real time, be it between continents or between floors of the same building. The emergence of lean production methods goes hand-in-hand with widespread business practices of subcontracting, outsourcing, offshoring, consulting, downsizing, and customizing (1996: 265).

So what the new technologies make possible, namely the flexibility and adaptability of the productive process, meets little resistance from increasingly mobile capital, but this highlights the relative inflexibility of labour. Workers become more and more vulnerable to the system, and though some retain institutional protection, bargaining is individualized. This is why Castells sees the disaggregation of labour as being more significant than its polarization.

Workers everywhere are forced to be flexible. They must be prepared to move geographically, within or even beyond their own country if they wish to keep their jobs or find new ones. And they must adjust to flexible schedules, add time, or reduce time, in what amounts to a “just-in-time-labour” system. As Castells reminds us, life working time is also affected which, given the centrality of work to the structuring of social time, affects in turn social life patterns. Against the long-term international trend towards more similar work times, the flexible network enterprise is producing quite a range of different work schedule outcomes in different countries. Thus, as Frédéric de Coninck argues, while *work* is more integrated at the level of the enterprise, workers themselves are at the mercy of a multitude of different work time-and-space situations, leading to *societal* disintegration (Coninck 1995).

### *Integrated work: fractured society*

The striking thesis of Coninck is that two simultaneous processes are occurring in the global information society. At the level of the enterprise, work is increasingly integrated. At the level of the social relations of workers, breakdown (*éclatement*) is the trend. In the modern world, people inhabit increasingly plural worlds, with multiple places of socialization. The number of social contexts, each with its own logic, and in which the individual finds herself, grows constantly. In each context the bonds of relationship are weakened, for the simple reason that the individual self-investment in each context is spread more thinly. We are all confronted with this variety of calls, interests, and responsibilities, and only in small ways can we contribute to or control each sphere. Even more significantly, suggests de Coninck, what is missing is those “markers” (*repères*) that make sense of each situation.

The story of modernity, argues Coninck, is a story of growing specialization, and of a widening gap between public and private life. Social relationships have become more fragile in all areas. It's not necessarily that there is complete social collapse, as some communitarians fear, but that the

technologically advanced societies have developed what Robert Wuthnow calls “loose connections” (Wuthnow 1998). But all this happens – and here is the irony – at a time when work processes, which for centuries have served to structure social life, are becoming more tightly integrated. Companies control production processes over vast geographical areas – garment makers such as Levi-Strauss or Benetton coordinate all their factories and distribution channels throughout the world – shifting resources like pieces on a chessboard. The enterprise expects a broader range of competences in the individual, leading to a workforce polarized between the knowledgeable salariat and those with relatively low educational and skills levels, and tries to hold these individuals together by means of “human resources” departments. Workers assume that someone, somewhere, knows what is going on, and companies, often without knowing local details, assume that diverse work contexts are orchestrated into an overall pattern.

The sense that someone, somewhere, knows what is going on is reinforced by the experience of workplace surveillance, using techniques that are increasingly dependent on electronics-based communication and information technologies. Forms of workplace surveillance have increased in intensity and diminished in visibility since the introduction of automation and what Shoshana Zuboff calls “informatization” (Zuboff 1986). Although management may be physically absent, if not geographically remote from the workplace, this does nothing to lessen the feeling that the “boss is watching”.

Wherever e-mail, telephones, and the Internet are used in work situations, they are vulnerable to monitoring. Movements are observed by video and CCTV cameras, which may be trained on production sites and parking lots. Keystrokes are counted, emotional labor – such as smiling or being “chirpy” at call centres – is monitored, and active badges or smart cards pinpoint the worker’s whereabouts at any given time in the day. The over-seeing may also be done directly by shareholders rather than managers. One Ontario company has placed a webcam in a call centre so that any interested party may check what workers are up to at any time of day or night. And workers at a midlands (UK) Toyota plant were surprised to discover that washroom urinalysis is a routine way of verifying the health of workers. In a globalized economy, workplace surveillance is also globalized (Elger 1994).

Before one ever obtains employment, it is more and more likely that employment screening methods will be used to pre-check the suitability, reliability, trustworthiness, and health of potential employees. Risk management is practised in many corporations, and in particular the likely health profile of intending employees is of vital interest to employers. This can be

checked using methods that include genetic screening. The mobile worker may well have left health records in another state, province or country. But the capacity to detect and predict disorders that could potentially affect work performance is not limited by geography. All these forms of workplace monitoring and surveillance are tied directly to the increasing integration of work, and flexibilization of labour. Indeed, the more employees are involved in flexible forms of labour, involving irregular schedules or travel and homeworking, for example, the more employers wish to keep tabs on their activities, their condition, and their department.

Depending on the type of workplace then, many employees feel the effects of "global information society" as an impersonal means of coordinating and tracking their paid time and their productive activities. What is less frequently apparent, however, is that rising levels of workplace surveillance do not necessarily arise from the desire of management more tightly to control or discipline their workers. They may be less personally interested in workers than the workers imagine. Indeed, as Rule and Brantley point out, workplace surveillance is often a by-product of computerization for other purposes (cited in Lyon 1994: 132). Just-in-time management or Total Quality Control produce surveillance effects that are experienced by the workers (who will discipline themselves in order to comply) but the purpose of these methods has to do with the flexibility or quality of production, rather than with an interest in how workers themselves perform. It is work that is integrated by these and other means. Whether or not workers are integrated socially within or beyond the workplace is, on present showing, a question whose answer certainly cannot be read off workplace experiences in any direct fashion.

The dominant techno-economic rationality of firms that determines and marshalls the locations and timings of work within the network society simultaneously disrupts the patterns of life of the workers it employs. Temporalities are torn apart, spaces of work are split, with the result that workers are more isolated, individualized, segregated from each other. Yet paradoxically, Coninck notes, as firms seek more fluidity, flexibility, and mobility, they depend even more on those traits that take time – communication skills, and trust, for instance – and that are enhanced by stability and rootedness in place (Coninck 1995: 285). Indeed, for all the talk of informational cities and virtual communities, the evidence suggest that as urban areas become more media-intensive, they also require better transit systems so that those crucial management decisions can still be made face-to-face (Graham 1997).

One of those areas of social life deeply affected by these shifts is the family, and relationships between men and women. The changing location

and timing of work, related to CITs, is especially marked in areas where women are most prominently involved. In Europe and North America, where the emphasis has been on raising the productivity of white collar workers, women have experienced a marked shift towards part-time rather than full-time work, more temporary work, and towards homeworking, moving from urban to rural areas, and beyond national boundaries. Only 50% of the UK labour force, for example, has a full-time, permanent job. And in the European Union, 83% of part-time jobs are held by women. Again, flexibility is the watchword behind these changes. In stark contrast to classic industrial situations, expectations about where work is done are as much subject to variation as expectations about when they are to be done. Within this situation one can also differentiate between the experience of, say, white and black women. Many of the latter are obliged by economic necessity to find full-time jobs, but tend to find themselves disadvantaged within those positions. A qualitatively different sexual division of labour is emerging with the widespread application of CITs in the context of restructuring. The old permanent workforce is dying, says Juliet Webster (1996: 109), and we are "in a period of unparalleled growth in insecure, contingent work in occupations of all kinds".

At first glance, it may appear that flexibility could offer real gains for family life, permitting shared work schedules to match shared domestic responsibilities. However, this promise does not appear to have been realized yet. As Juliet Webster points out, it is not new technologies that somehow bring about innovations such as teleworking. They merely enable it to happen. One has to look at restructuring strategies that lie behind it – and they seldom have the aim of supporting more meaningful and stable family life! When decisions are made affecting "operating units" (persons) from within "human resources" (personnel) departments, often remote from actual work-sites, it is hardly surprising that a sense of what workers actually do with their lives is missing. The overall effect may be as bleak as Sylvia Walby fears. It is to reinforce capitalist patriarchal labour relations; employers gain cheap labour, and men retain their domestic labourers (quoted in Webster p. 103-4).

At present, it does not seem that the flexible work structures emerging within global, informational settings are being used to increase the incidence of domestic work-sharing, economic partnership, and shared parenting responsibilities. And of course, those structures cannot entirely be blamed for this situation either. But what it does show is this. The growing flexibility of work does not automatically support particular kinds of preferred social arrangements. If stable and equitable family relationships are valued, then changes must be sought at the domestic level as well as within

the policies of firms, and through the supporting structures that government can offer through social programs such as child-care and fair pay legislation. Flexibilization may present more challenges than comforts to those committed to secure family life, but this means that the struggle must be engaged on many fronts at the same time.

Another way in which flexibilization has a social impact is in what might be called "life working time". Lifelong working hours have been decreasing in the technologically advanced societies during the past few decades, but growing flexibility has further ramifications. If, as Castells (and others) suggests, "*paid working time structures social time*", then when people do and do not work, and at what points in the life-course work plays greater and smaller roles, will affect how the rest of life is perceived, enjoyed, or endured. Working time and working schedules seem to be increasingly diversified, in parallel with the disaggregation of labour (Castells 1996: 441). Alongside this is the dramatic shortening of the number of years of working life, again in the technologically advanced societies, such that in Germany, the USA, France and the UK, the activity rate of men between the ages of 55 and 65 has dropped by anything from 43%-65% in the last twenty years! (p. 443) This means that of a potential lifespan of 75-80 years, only 30 (age 24-54) might be spent in paid work, thus diminishing – at least in principle – work's centrality to life.

This has implications, already being felt in several countries, for the systems of social support for those not in paid employment. Productivity increases would have to be substantial, as would the willingness to engage in greater intergenerational redistribution, in order to offset the accounting crises consequent on this shift. This leads Castells to propose that new social contracts are urgently required, in order to avoid the clash generated by the shrinkage of valuable working time on the one hand, and the accelerated obsolescence of labour, on the other. Intergenerational conflict, and the further breakdown of social solidarity, could be the result.

### *Work, meaning, and identity*

If the overall trend, consequent on informationalizing and globalizing forces, is correctly construed as the individualization of work and the fragmentation of societies, then how might the meaning and value of work be altering? One thing is clear, work is being decentered from the nodal position it once held within modern industrial societies. In the technologically advanced societies it no longer fills the same amount of available time in either day-to-day life, or over the lifecourse. And while this might yet be as



evident in newly industrialized countries, still less in the "fourth world", the trends towards individualization and fragmentation are already evident in some places. To what extent, then, can work be expected to offer some structure to social life, or a sense of identity to the person? Clearly, if Con-inck is right, work is playing a diminishing role in the structuring of social life. Destructuring or breakdown appears more likely. But what about the realm of work and identity-formation?

Ray Pahl argues (from a British context, but aware of global dimensions of change) that with the radical transformation that has overtaken paid employment, at least in the West, old expectations have crumbled. Whereas once, for most people, work would form a relatively secure feature of social life, for which preparation was made through specialized education or training, and which would remain fairly constant until retirement. Now casualization, multiple careers, unemployment, and the unprecedented incorporation of women into the labour market has led to work being seen as a source of fragmentation, insecurity, and uncertainty. The old parts, that could clearly be played by men or women, that related to roots in place or in kinship, or that formed a connecting thread through a lifelong occupation or career, are far less readily available. As Pahl notes, "many labels, scripts, and narratives that served as boundary markers for identity construction in the past have come to the end of their useful lives" (Pahl 1995: 120).

It is well known that for someone like Daniel Bell, the "cultural contradictions of capitalism" are seen in part at least in the creation of a consumer culture, in which rather than finding identity and purpose in the old industrial work ethic of modernity, these items are sought hedonistically in the gratifications of an "untrammelled self" (Bell 1976). Perhaps it is here that we must look for the ways in which identity is sought in an era when work is losing its power to integrate or to offer identity. For Mike Featherstone, changes in the mode of production, consumption and circulation of symbolic goods do indeed relate to the development of new means of orientation and identity structures (Featherstone 1991: 11) at a time when the older work ethic is in demise. But Zygmunt Bauman takes this far further, suggesting that consuming is actually supplanting work from its older cultural and social role. He argues that consumer conduct is becoming at once "the cognitive and moral focus of life, the integrative bond of society, and the focus of systemic management" (1992: 49).

These ideas fit well with globalizing tendencies of capitalism, now geared to consumption as a social and cultural process, and to consumerism as its ideological support system. As Robert Bocoock says, "capitalism continues to play a major role, but work in industrial organizations is not seen as determining the social, cultural processes surrounding consumption, nor

the construction of identities” (Bocock 1993: 79). Work, too, continues to play a role in identity construction, but now it is a secondary role. Work provides money for purchasing consumer goods that are required for constructing and maintaining identity, and the work role is thus demoted as a source of meaning. This may turn out to be one of the key ways in which work is changing its meaning and value in a global information society.

Of course, if these are thought of as key dimensions of a postmodern condition (see Lyon 1999) they remain only hints, intimations, of the possible shape of things to come. But they resonate sufficiently strongly with what empirical evidence is available regarding the structuring of social life around consumption, the establishment of social bridges and boundaries through consumption, and the intense management – indeed, production of – consumers, to sense that Bauman, Featherstone and Bocock are not entirely missing the mark in their sociological analysis. If they are right, then the decentring of work from its erstwhile position as a key contributor to social structuring and to identity formation may be paralleled by the rising social and cultural significance of consumption as a source of meanings and references that might once have been sought in the experience of work.

### *Inclusion/exclusion*

Of course, the foregoing remarks will no doubt sound rather hollow to those for whom the opportunity to find meaning in work, let alone a chance to consume as many do in the affluent societies, is entirely remote. I refer to those for whom capitalist restructuring processes, including the informatizing of production, has led to marginalization, and even misery. The new international division of labour is split and segmented, such that in all countries, says Castells, one can find a new “fourth world” existing in the “black holes” of the global network society. Informationalism, states Castells, does “create a sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable peoples and locales” (1998: 161).

But it is not only a divide. Informational capitalism tends to relegate whole areas to structural irrelevance. And in those areas, escape from pain and destruction seems a somewhat forlorn hope. The black holes of social exclusion may exist anywhere, but are especially common in sub-Saharan Africa, and certain countries in Latin America and Asia. Those who are excluded may find alternative modes of response in, for example, criminal economies (and Castells documents the rise of some of these). They may also rise against the excluders in some places, perhaps using as justification some form of fundamentalism. Equally, of course, the excluded may

develop their own cultures, in which consumerism scarcely features at all, and in which other sources of meaning and hope compensate for the lack of paid employment or purchasing power. Poor Pentecostal groups in Brazil are a case in point (Martin 1996: 39-40).

What Castells says less about is the possibilities for other kinds of action within the socially marginalized and effectively "switched off" areas of the fourth world. Swasti Mitter, for instance, while she also sees the restructuring process in terms that are very negatively experienced in the fourth world, finds that, ironically, the attempt to create subservient and docile (largely female) labour forces among peripheral workers has become "instrumental in creating the basis for a new sense of social solidarity among women workers ..." (Mitter 1986: 24). Mitter brings examples from all over the world of how, albeit in small and piecemeal ways, alternatives to the fate offered by global informational capitalism are being forged by women's cooperatives, local community initiatives, and so on.

The global polarization of work and employment, enabled by the same processes of informational restructuring, raises challenges of different kinds in different places. For those who see them as challenges, because they fly in the face of some profound commitments to the dignity of labour, or to social solidarity, or to the social responsibility of owners and managers of corporations, there are clearly no easy answers, no simple solutions. It would be particularly odious if armchair academics, who by definition are associated with the affluent, global, privileged parts of the world, proposed programs for change without ever being involved in the pain of poverty and unemployment or the draining demands of drudgery. On the other hand, complacency seems quite out of place as well. The weakest social conscience could scarcely fail to be struck not only by the enormity of the changes currently taking place, but also by their deeply human dimensions.

#### *A "culture of labour" in a global information society?*

In an epigram at the start of his recent book, *Timequake*, Kurt Vonnegut comments that "Any person, alive or dead, is purely coincidental" (Vonnegut 1998). In his wry way, Vonnegut puts his finger on something significant, not unrelated to the effect of some informatized work situations, in both global (mobile) and local (fixed) contexts. Meaning and value is not something necessarily associated with work today. With the growing flexibility, fragmentation, and deregulation of work, it would not be surprising to find more people feeling that they are "coincidental" to the labour process. Alienation, so far from going away, appears to have been augmented by

these processes. Whatever the real gains of flexibility, communicative capability, or sheer safety in some informatized work situations, few seem to deny that work today is becoming more and more individualized, and that this is at least one of the most important trends, if not the most important. Alongside this are the new spatial distributions of work and global, national, and sexual divisions of labour that are, as Pahl says, "creating new tensions and forms of social polarization" (Pahl 1988: 608). The combination of technological change with capitalist restructuring helps to create a world within which the very idea of a culture of labour seems out of place.

For those, however, for whom the idea of a culture of labour (Schasching 1998) is a goal worth seeking, several things may be said that connect this theme with work in a global information society. The culture of labour comprises a personal, economic, social, and spiritual dimension. The first stresses the intrinsically human character of work, and the role of meaningful activity for a fulfilled life. The second relates to a threefold "human right", to work, to a just wage, and to property ownership. The third supposes that work contributes to solidarity and community, through finding appropriate relations with capital, not least through labour organizations. The fourth makes reference to creativity and responsibility, as well as to modes of interpreting the experience of work in terms of a religious world-view that lends overarching meaning and purpose to the task.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how a culture of labour may be sought in relation to item one (though it is relevant), but some comment seems called for regarding the second, third, and fourth items. First, a brief comment on the second. As Bauman astutely observes, current poverty is aggravated by both economic growth and non-growth. Today, economic growth depends upon the flexible labor that I have been discussing, that produces structural uncertainty and reduces the volume of employment. But poverty is also aggravated by economic growth in the sense that the richest – "those paragons of consumer virtue" (Bauman 1998: 41) – get richer, thus increasing the pain, and stigma that go along with the feeling of insufficiency among those who cannot work, let alone consume. This connects with item two. The informational and global influences on work in the present do seem to militate strongly against the desire for solidary social relations. It is clear that, as currently organized in an increasing range of contexts, work does anything but contribute to social solidarity. And at the same time, these processes tend to erode the capacity of labour to organize effectively. To the contrary, as Coninck says, while work processes become more integrated, social relations of work move in precisely the opposite direction.

But while it is true that the informational and global tend at present to create a climate uncondusive to the strengthening of communal and social

bonds, those processes are not immutable or inevitable. The ways in which the “informational” develops does not depend upon some autonomous technology, but at least in part upon the social and economic relations within which it is designed and implemented. And the “global” is not merely something that happens to us – an “intractable fate” – as Bauman says (though, undoubtedly, many do experience it that way). The global is a process of spaces and flows, that is ever dependent upon and imbricated with the local. These observations are not meant somehow to soften the impact of the analysis that suggests that work is becoming more individualized, or to hint that the resolution to some of the most pressing tensions of our time is found in some alternative social analysis. Rather, by opening the “black box” of apparently “closed” concepts, ways of at least addressing the problem may be made visible.

With regard to the informational influences on work, it has become clear over the past two decades that new technologies may be applied in a number of different ways, that may variously enhance or degrade the work situation. New technology agreements, for instance, that flourished in some industries and some countries in the 1980s, showed that alternatives ways of implementing technological change were possible (Lyon 1988: 77-82). The pace was set by the Swedish *Joint Regulation in Working Life Act* which obliges different parties to agree prior to the implementation of new technologies. With the increased pace of change and reduced power of labour unions since then, it is harder to imagine how such agreements could work now, but this is no reason to abandon the spirit of such agreements in today’s industrial relations. Other kinds of agreements are still possible, especially those that appeal less to “quality of working life” or “job redesign”, and more to the value of self-determination, or even privacy, in the workplace. Thus, for instance, debates over modes of workplace surveillance are becoming increasingly central within industrial relations. These can be addressed in ways that speak to the human impact of significant aspects of informational capitalism.

As far as the “global” is concerned, I have suggested that, for a start, the global and the local must be seen in relation to each other. A major feature of much of Ray Pahl’s work has been his insistence that within the new global economy the strategies of employers *and* of households be examined to see how they interact in any given setting. The new divisions of labour are *both* at the global level of the four dimensions outlined by Castells, cited above, *and* at the local level of intra-household dynamics and processes. More than ever before, opportunities are arising for the renegotiation of household relationships, consequent upon the growing flexibilization of work. As with New Technology Agreements, much militates against such renegotiations on the basis of fairness and mutuality, but this does not

reduce their relevance or attractiveness as means of pursuing fulfilling work situations and appropriate sharing of domestic tasks. It also connects with the need for fair pay policies, adequate benefits and childcare, and, in many cases, for a re-emphasis on workplace-based and full-time employment. If conditions are to be improved, men have to be involved just as much as women. As Webster (1996: 188) says, "As long as women the world over continue to hold responsibility for the domestic sphere, because men's contribution remains relatively minimal, they will be unable to benefit in a systematic way from the potential opportunities in the workplace which information technologies might otherwise offer them".

Turning to the fourth dimension of the culture of labour – its location within a world-view – let me conclude by referring to some questions raised once more by Coninck. He finishes his book with some reflections on the relevance to *travail intégré – société éclatée* of the story of Babel. After commenting on the use of Babel by Walter Benjamin (language confusion), Franz Kafka (fragmentation and the assumption by workers that someone knows what's happening), and Luis Borges (the loss of a consensual viewpoint) Coninck proposes that the crisis of work be rethought as a communication problem. Fragmentation may paradoxically point to new opportunities, to deal with otherness, or alterity. While it may be hard to know how anyone can confront a global hegemony of technical and economic rationality, the alterity that makes a common project unviable – because no one speaks the same language, as it were – can be addressed. Communicational work is required at the heart of the processes of technical rationality. But this in turn requires a commitment to the ethical, in this case to seeing work as an aspect of a religious world-view and approach to life.

Coninck shows how alterity is inscribed in the very practices of corporate rationality, that produce fractured and heterogeneous temporalities and fragmented social relations. Some optimists see the chance for an increase in rational communication and a promise of sharing through negotiation. But greater specialization, exclusion, and isolation are equally possible, insists Coninck. The problem, as he sees it, is that in social temporalities older traditions that once provided overarching meaning for many have lost their earlier influence. With social solidarity eroded at several levels, meaning is increasingly sought at the level of the individual self (hence the search for meaning and identity through consuming rather than through working). And while this is true of modernity at large, it is especially true of the world of work. In this world, where techno-economic rationality rules without sharing, questions of intersubjectivity become key. Alterity has never appeared so starkly, or with it the challenge to both respect difference and to discover the bases of commonality through restored communication.

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