

## **To what extent is it accurate to say that there has been a transformation in the nature and location of work in the UK in the past 40 years?**

The discourse surrounding recent historical transformations in the nature and location of work has given rise to two polarised schools of thought, one optimistic, the other, less so. As a fundamental human category, work is represented here not only as an occupation, but also as a stable, consistent source of self-identity and meaning. The former school proposes the UK has transformed progressively into a knowledge-based economy in which weightless goods and services are exchanged by well-rewarded middle class employees; whereas the latter proposes there is a growing, casualised service class, exploited and poorly paid, and excluded from the benefits of a largely deregulated social and economic order. One suggests that the latter predominates, that whilst place has been made redundant by technological advancement, there has been little transformation in the nature of work since deindustrialisation and its precipitant shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of production. This structural shift is evidenced in the rhetoric of those that expound the emergence of a new, post-industrial economy and its concomitant transformation of the worker's life: from oppression to prosperity; direct control to relative autonomy; deskilling to upskilling; narrowly, defined routinised task to reintegrated multi-tasking. One argues such a rhetoric is a false construction based upon a bourgeoisie desire to supercede industrialism and its discontents and to disguise the reality that today's autonomous and flexible worker is, in essence, actually not much metamorphosed from his predecessor. The class-gender hierarchies and power structures of old are still existent, yet manifest themselves in new forms.

Political contextualisation is fundamental in any polemic into the changing nature and location of work. Over the last four decades, a fundamental change in the structure of the workplace and thus the nature of work has been visibly apparent in the decline of UK manufacturing and the rise of the service-sector based, 'knowledge economy' (which now accounts for 71% of male and 90% of female employment) (ONS, 2004). The politics that precipitated such change were formed gradually in the dispersal and accumulation of knowledge, temporally and spatially. As Weber and Beck contend, to say that today is a 'knowledge economy' is misaligned; knowledge predates to industrial society, where it once unravelled itself amidst the marxist endeavour for the 'disenchantment of the world' and the control of both nature and social life. In the sphere of nature, the quest for control became manifest in the accumulation of technical knowledge - within the confines of the non-human mechanisms of production, goods and services - and in the social sphere, in the development of the nation state and its instruments, such as bureaucracy and welfare state. Both Taylorism and Fordism were thus developed at the beginning of the 20th Century as proposed models for the interaction between machines ('nature') and workers ('group'). Institutions exerted a strong homogenising influence on their subjects: they 'rationalised' (Weber, 1968), 'disciplined' (Foucault, 1977), and 'normalised' social life in industrial society in such a way that the cultural diversity inside the nation state and the factory disappeared.

The nature of Fordist work was attainable in the mere image of the uniformly clothed, worked limbs of the factory-worker. Such hierarchical Fordist control was however gradually dissolved by the increasing mobilities of the 1970's neoliberal movement and its hegemonic rhetoric of a new global division of labour. The 'time-space compression' (Harvey) that followed precipitated the end of Fordism's 'spatial rigidities' and gave rise to the dispersal of knowledge<sup>1</sup>. The once monopolised truths of managers, ones that were to be followed and obeyed in a thoughtless way, disintegrated. Traditional forms of authority disappeared and individuals finally began to think for themselves. Our current 'post-traditional' world, Giddens claims, 'is a world of clever people', no longer spatially confined to factories, who actively reflect on their actions and those of others, and no longer take prefabricated rational knowledge for granted. Thus, reflexivisation is also interpreted by Giddens as a process of 'individualisation'.

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<sup>1</sup> The Arab Spring - dissolution and democratisation of once hierarchical regimes - were global, social networks such as Facebook, supposed mediums in the rapid dispersal of knowledge, significant actors?

This process of 'individualisation' is evident in the current modes of work with its flexible and autonomous nature. In the flexible, service society work is undergoing profound change, one Gorz refers to as a 'metamorphosis of work' in which its 'contents and contractual forms as well as the modalities, spaces and times of its execution.' (Gorz, 1997) Employment relationships have changed; new contractual arrangements have emerged and are becoming widespread. In the UK an increasing and significant number of workers perform their job without the traditional open-ended contract, an occurrence evident in the proliferation of atypical and part-time retail work in cities and spaces of consumption. (Peck, 2003) The process of flexibilisation in consequence creates a fluid market, characterised by instability. Zygmunt Bauman contends that the 'dimension of emancipation' continually gives way to a 'dimension of disillusionment'; that the modern nature of work can be regarded as a 'risky freedom', balancing fragile autonomies against uncertainties and anomies (Beck, 1986). The effects of insecurity on people's lives empirically extend beyond the economic (related to the loss of income continuity); to societal relations, community life and even character (Sennet, 1998).

Work paths that become fragmented, losing their uniformity and linearity materialise into episodic work regimes of hyper-employment, underemployment and unemployment, with little in-time to gain transferrable skills. 2. Furthermore the short-termist nature of these regimes are seen as incompatible with the construction of a social identity, rendering the subject as object in a mere succession of work without durable commitment. (Sennett goes so far as to suggest 'the new economy forms are corrosive of character and social relations', that organisational forms are instrumental in producing renewed private troubles, and the further breakdown of a secure, or authentic sense of self.) In the economic realms, the absence of income stability often couples with the experience of a deficit of rights and welfare protection (increasingly so as the New Labour 'benefits' culture is replaced by a fiscally-constrained conservatism<sup>3</sup>). These inherent instabilities created by the 'individualisation' and 'flexibilisation' of modern work reproduce the power structures of the Fordist epoch, aligning today's worker strongly with his predecessor. As such there has been minimal transformation in the nature of work. The hierarchical mechanisms which once enabled bourgeoisie owners to depress the wages of the proletariat by using the grand marxist rhetorics of 'the reserves of the unemployed' are still evident today; one man's unwillingness is replaceable by a flexible, willingness among others. It is ironic thus, that the process of individualisation once significant in the post-industrial movement, now re-emerges, the signifier of a regression back once again to the swelling, disillusioned proletariat masses.

The increasingly flexible nature of work, it is posited, offers an opportunity to challenge the gender relations embedded in traditional, Fordist hierarchies. As Bradley et al. contend, since the 1970's there has been a steady increase in women's employment, 'matched by a significant fall in men's employment, such that women are now over half of the British labour force', 58.9% as of 2009. Flexibility and the no-longer lifelong commitment of work progressively enable women to shape their careers to suit individual and familial needs. However, empirical studies of organisational restructuring show that these potential opportunities have not come to fruition. 'Instead restructuring has contradictory implications for gender inequality in employment, often increasing the quantity of opportunities, rather than qualities' (Hebson & Grugulis, 2005). Thus while there has been an evident feminization of the labour force, the feminization of occupations is less evident, restrained by the patriarchal resilience of institutions. In the City of London, gender discrimination remains with the existence of 'old boy networks'. As Collinson and Hearn (1996) reveal, even the notion of manager is identified with the notions of 'man and masculinity' such that the overt sexuality of the female body is deemed inappropriate for the impersonal, disembodied sphere of bureaucracy. Thus it can be argued the transformation of the nature of female work has occurred but to a limited extent. The transformation from Fordism to Post-Fordism suggests that as a necessary condition: property must be succeeded by knowledge as the primary basis of

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<sup>2</sup> A discontinuity not endemic to non-standard work but rather pandemic affecting all forms of labour. Even for those who are in 'stable' segments of their career trajectory, continuously changing organisational environments (such as those in banking) and the uprooting of career milestones introduce increasing uncertainty about the perception of the future.

<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the current government has maintained that the growth in self-employment and small businesses shows an increase in the 'entrepreneurial spirit of Britain'; a public rhetoric disjunct with its ebbing fiscal support of the very such in mind.

social power (D, Bell 2003)<sup>4</sup> A new class dualism seems to be emerging with this in mind; 'at the top, a closed professional elite stratum and at the bottom, a new servant class, a new post industrial proletariat', who remain there precisely because they are disqualified from the other by their low educational capital. Their lack of social mobility evidences that place is not wholly redundant in the modern workplace, and that the flexibilisation in the nature of work remains engendered class distinctions.

The feminization of the workplace encounters an inter-gender divide in income stratification. In the 1960s and 1970s a gap opened between the 'job class' (estimated then at 60% of the working population) and the 'career class'; the former consisting of low-skill routine jobs and little autonomy; the latter, largely postwar creations of the autonomous young woman. As Phillips (1987) expounds: 'Women's jobs are stratified into what can look like two different worlds: at one extreme, the growing army of part-time workers, disproportionately concentrated in 'women-only' jobs in sales work and cleaning...At the other extreme, the women who have been through higher education, who have full-time and relatively powerful jobs, earning wages that are good if not brilliant even for a man.' Thus, the nature of work in a modern, feminized society reproduces hierarchical structures, suggesting the continuation of class struggle, something of a transformation myth of the end of class. Esping-Andersen even speculates that there is the renewed prospect of a new 'gender-divided stratification order with a male-dominated fordist hierarchy, and a female-biased post-industrial hierarchy...two class structural logics, each being gender-specific.' There have been transformations in the nature and location of work over the past four decades; most notably the flexibilisation and feminization of the workplace. Yet these transformations are slight deviations from the previous Fordist norms, their extents tinted by the reality that supple and pervasive class-gender structures still exist. Within the current political vision of a meritocratic knowledge-based class order, one argues that a swelling service proletariat is implicitly and intrinsically engendered, yet remaining less publicised. In regard of this, the supposed transformation in the nature and location of work over the past four decades is fundamentally less pronounced than was once suggested.

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<sup>4</sup> Bell's central argument was based upon the problem that mesmerised Stalin: Of how to account for the continued existence of relationships of class domination and subordination within Soviet society *after* private property - according to classical Marxism the source of all such domination - had been legally abolished.