

Work

O, dear me, the world is ill-divided
 Them that works the hardest are the least provided
 from the Jute Mill Song by Mary Brookbank

From the perspective of contemporary capitalism work is a necessary requirement for survival. Work is something you perform, generally under the instruction of another, in return for money with which you buy the necessities and the luxuries which the economy provides. As we have already seen in Chapter 3, green economists ask searching questions about the consequences of an economy which has growth and consumption at its heart, and this inevitably influences their approach to work. The essence of work within a capitalist economy is to turn primary resources into more complex goods or to use resources to create services, both goods and services being sold in a market-place. Greens question this view at every point. How can we be sure that this is the best use of the planet's resources? How should the process of transformation be organised? What is the experience of the human beings employed in the transformation and how does this relate to the way their work is managed? And, perhaps most importantly of all, is it right that the ability to provide for one's basic needs without entering into an employment relationship has been continually eroded as the industrial economy has developed and spread?

Many modern democracies have a sometime governing party which represents the interests of Labour; in the UK this party is even called the Labour Party. It has become the historic role of this party to fight for jobs, defend jobs and organise marches for jobs; one of the proudest boast of such governments is that there are higher rates of employment than ever before. However, from a green perspective the issue of quality is more important than that of quantity when we come to consider work. We should ask not only how the job affects the person who is required to carry it out, but also what its benefit is to the wider human community and the planet itself. As I have written elsewhere:

We should not see work as an end in itself, and should do our best to minimize the work needed, rather than creating work. Only somebody who was set to benefit from the work of others would want to do something that would seem so insane to the members of a society we might label primitive.

Since one of the key demands of a green economist is an end to economic growth there has been much discussion about how this is compatible with full employment, and whether there is a dichotomy between jobs and protecting the environment. This debate is the subject of the first section in this chapter. The following section begins to ask deeper questions about what work is and how it forms both the individual and our society. Then we move on to consider recent tangible developments in the world of work, especially the impact of globalisation on the way work is shared between different countries with different levels of wealth—the so-called 'international division of labour hypothesis'. The final section looks at green alternatives to the organisation of work including lessons we might learn from the guild system, the organisation of production and distribution, and a green approach to organising business within the economy.

[a] Will a Green Economy Mean More Work or Less?

The issue of the quantity of work that there will be in a sustainable economy is a contentious one for green economists. Many in the green movement have come from more conventional left-wing parties and bring socialist attitudes towards labour and its organisation. From this perspective, the status of a person as a ‘working man’ (and only latterly working woman) is paramount and the aim of much political activity is to use industrial muscle to maximise the wages of this employed worker and defend or improve his/her terms and conditions. Milani calls on organised labour to play its role in the Green Industrial Revolution that is needed to move rapidly towards a sustainable economy:

Organized labour is unlikely to be a pacesetter in a green transformation. Nevertheless, the role of unions is particularly important in the conversion process. To play an effective role, labor must relinquish its status as ‘cog in the machine.’ It must move proactively to redefine and reorient wealth production and to revive traditions of worker-control and self-management, while extending its long-time concern with the fair distribution of wealth.

However, for other green thinkers, it is work itself that is the problem—or at least work as organised in a capitalist economy. Since it is the nature of the economic system that is problematic, no amount of negotiation and organisation can solve this. A complete structural overhaul is required, a reclaiming of the economy and the planet’s resources for meeting human needs directly. This clearly has significant implications for land ownership (as discussed in Chapter 12). This strand of green thinking has much in common with the utopian and guild socialists, who argued for a return to the land, small self-sustaining communities and self-provisioning rather than employment. While green economists can be sympathetic to both positions in theory, it is important to recognise they are alternative visions. The vision of those who favour self-provisioning and self-reliant local communities would create an economy quite different to that in Milani’s vision of worker control and self-management, which is intended to achieve collective democratic control of the economy, which would still remain structured around larger economic and industrial units. This is a debate that is ongoing within the green movement.

When the ideas of green economics, particularly those about reduced consumption and an end to economic growth, entered the public debate opponents from left and right responded with the suggestion that a green economy would mean high levels of unemployment. Green economists such as Frances Hutchinson responded positively, welcoming the reduced amount of work required in a green economy as the dawning of the leisure age that had been promised with the advent of technological production processes in the 1960s. Much is made of the cultural transition to wage-slavery from the middle ages onwards, as first the bell and then the clock replaced natural rhythms based on the movement of the sun, and as festival and ‘holy days’ were gradually eroded as we moved towards today’s 24/7 work pattern. Others maintained a strong commitment to the quality of working life, suggesting that we should not be forced to choose between ‘jobs and beauty’.

However, some greens have suggested that we are in fact on the brink of a time when we shall be called upon to be very busy indeed, repairing the damage caused by 200 years of industrialism: a million extra jobs may need to be created as a consequence of a Green Industrial Revolution (see Box 4.1). From this perspective we are in the early days of a Green Industrial Revolution, which will require something like a war economy in

order to build all the wind-turbines and adapt vehicles and homes to a low-carbon future, as well as producing whole new areas of employment in sectors such as the mending of goods and the repair of machinery and equipment.. In response to a political debate taking place, at least in the UK, against a backdrop of high levels of unemployment, as long ago as 1994, Friends of the Earth argued that ‘the UK economy could gain in the order of 33,000 to 78,000 additional jobs directly through environmental policy by 2005, the sectors they considered including renewable energy, recycling, public transport and organic farming’.

Amongst politicians, this argument now appears to have been concluded by the understanding that greening the economy will be a labour-intensive process, at least in the short run. Evidence of this shift in official thinking includes the Green Jobs Strategy for Scotland that was first raised by Green MSP Robin Harper in 2002 and since been taken up by Scottish Executive. Their consultation report produced last year estimated a growth in offshore wind production of 185 MW in the UK by 2007 and a near doubling in the waste and recycling sector by 2010.

[!box]

Box 4.1. *Creating a Million Extra Jobs through a Green Industrial Revolution*

- 30,000 UK jobs in wind energy leading to a trebling of employment in the energy sector;
- Unsustainable farming practices have cut farming jobs by two-thirds in 50 years - while devastating the environment
- Organic food production employs 20-30% more people per hectare than chemical- and mechanical-intensive farming.
- Sustainable agricultural practices could create 40,000 new jobs
- Banning throwaway containers for beer and fizzy drinks would create up to 4,000 jobs
- More UK jobs in repair of cars and white goods would lead to more skilled jobs tied to the UK
- Recycling offers to create 14,000 extra jobs in London alone.

Source: Fitz-Gibbon, S. (2004), *Best of Both Worlds: Green Policies for Job Creation and Sustainability* (London: Green Party).

[!box ends]

Where there is agreement is on the issue of what work will be necessary in the sustainable economy. Much of the work carried out today is soul-destroying and wasteful of resources, creating gadgets than can be sold to make a profit for the corporation which controls the brand they are sold under, but offering little in terms of real satisfaction to the purchaser, and equally little in terms of job satisfaction to the producer. The use of resources and energy by workers in this sort of employment is indefensible within a green economy. Some green economists seek to make a distinction between ‘work’, which is useful, sustainable and a valid investment of resources, and ‘employment’, which is undertaken within a destructive economic system driven solely by profit.

—Photo 4.a. Polyp ‘still not happy’—

Green parties have engaged forthrightly in the debate about work. The French Greens, for example, were prime movers in the debate which led to the mandatory 35-hour week in France. This is a typical contrast to socialist parties, most of which are still arguing for an increase in the number of jobs and concerning themselves with rates of pay and conditions; greens would sooner raise questions about the structure of the economy and the meaning of work: 'Ultimately, and in the long term, from a green perspective, informal, non-cash modes of economic activity and work ought to be seen as at least equally important as remunerated formal employment (if not more).' informal, non-cash modes of economic activity. This suggestion is supported by a quotation from green economist Frances Hutchinson

It is possible to argue that the primary purpose served by *paid* employment is financial, to meet the need to obtain a money income. The financial function of *paid* work is its *only* function. The *personal* function of work—its emotional, intellectual, psychological and even spiritual purposes—can be equally well served where there is no financial reward. All that is required is that basic needs are met. Each task undertaken as a paid form of work can also be undertaken as a voluntary or leisure pursuit.

[a]Whose Work is it Anyway?

Several of the proto-greens identified in Chapter 2 were censorious in their criticism of the nature of work within a capitalist economy. Here is William Morris on the subject towards the end of the 19th century:

Most of those who are well-to-do cheer on the happy worker with congratulations and praises, if he is only 'industrious' enough and deprives himself of all pleasure and holidays in the sacred cause of labour. In short, it has become an article of the creed of modern morality that all labour is good in itself—a convenient belief to those who live on the labour of others. But as to those on whom they live, I recommend them not to take it on trust, but to look into the matter a little deeper.

While only some green economists reserve a place of special esteem for Marx, most would acknowledge the importance of his concept of alienation in any discussion about work. Marx considered that work fulfils a peculiar and essential role within human society; when people work for others in situations beyond their control and without enjoying ownership and control over the production process this is psychologically damaging and results in a state of mind for which he coined the word 'alienation'. Labour becomes 'objectified' and not only does the worker lose a sense of the value of his work, his whole concept of reality is distorted. Marx related alienation to our relationship with nature: 'Estranged labour not only (1) estranges nature from man and (2) estranges man from himself, from his own active function, from his vital activity; but because of this it also estranges man from his species. It turns his species-life into a means for his individual life.'

Socialist green economists maintain this critique, pointing out how Marx's concept of commodification is increasingly relevant in today's economy, where more and more goods and services are provided by the market with people losing their ability to perform even the most basic functions, such as cooking and rearing children, for themselves. For some this is a deliberate strategy from an economic system which seeks to encroach into every area of life and open it up for business and profit: 'Capitalism is the first economic system in history that does not give access to resources as of right to

the citizens of a country. Resources, goods and services are available only to those who have money, not to those who live within the boundary of a national economy.'

This sentiment echoes that of Thompson in his history of the growth of the working class in England and links to green views of land as a basic means for subsistence from which people have been excluded, in the case of the UK by the Enclosure movement from the 17th century onwards. The sentiment was also shared by Ivan Illich, who considered the degradation of work to be the primary cause of a society without meaning, 'where individuals, throughout their lives, live only through dependence on education, health services, transportation and other packages provided through the multiple mechanical feeders of industrial institutions.' Without access to land and basic resources to provide for themselves, citizens living in a late capitalist economy are in fact less empowered than many farmers in poorer countries or than their own ancestors.

Many green economists share the philosophical and sometimes spiritual values associated with privileging work as a social, humanising process and not merely an instrumental necessity. Illich considered that economic conditions, foremost among these being conditions of work in the employment situation, as undermining 'the conditions necessary for a convivial life'. Partly in response to this critique, Robertson develops a concept he calls 'ownwork'—'activity which is purposeful and important, and which people organise and control for themselves'—only part of which is in the formal economy. He argues for the revival of the informal economy and the encouragement of 'homegrown' local economies, along with local self-reliance and the expansion of the third sector. 'Ownwork' is explained by reference to a quotation from Khalil Gibran, 'You work that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth. For to be idle is to become a stranger unto the seasons, and to step out of life's procession that marches in majesty towards the infinite'. Robertson's argument for moving from employment to ownwork is partly economic—'because the development of productive and useful work in the local and household sectors will reduce the present dependency of localities and households on jobs provided by the large-scale manufacturing and service sectors of the economy, as well as on goods and services purchased from these sectors or provided by them at public expense'— and partly psychological. He interprets the employment relationship as one of dependency where 'employees lose control of their working time by selling it to their employers, and employers gain control of their employees' time by buying it from them.' In a system of 'ownwork' people take control of their own time.

Robertson's arguments in turn owe much to the thinking of Schumacher, whose own objections to the system of employment under capitalism also had a spiritual dimension. Schumacher took issue with the Calvinist–capitalist interpretation of work as something that must be a sacrifice made in return for the reward of heaven and/or wages for survival. He used the Buddhist concept of 'right livelihood'—a means of achieving subsistence without causing offence to one's own values, to other people or to one's environment—as a substitute for the exploitative work maximising output that characterises our economy. Schumacher drew a contrast between bad work—the repetitive, mindless and soulless work on an industrial production line—to good work, which fulfilled the requirements of right livelihood. Such good work should meet three criteria: what it produces should be useful and necessary; it should allow the worker to fulfil his/her potential; and it should be within a co-operative workplace to allow us to make unselfish relationships. Schumacher considered that 'this threefold function makes work so central to human life that it is truly impossible to conceive of life at the human level without work'.

[a]Deskilling and Reskilling

As long ago as 1974, Braverman discussed the way in which, in the industrialised economies, an increasing number of jobs were being ‘deskilled’, that is to say, craft and specialist knowledge was no longer required to perform them. His was a Marxist analysis, and hence he couched his thesis in terms of the ‘proletarianisation’ of labour, and its consequent reduced power for negotiating a fair share of the exchange value of the product. Globalisation has accelerated this process, as many workers in Western societies have been required to use a limited range of skills and work has become homogenised. In what is called the ‘international division of labour’, corporations are able to maximise their returns from different national economies by honing an appropriate role for their citizens: workers in lower-paid economies are responsible for manual production, especially China; Indian workers, with higher levels of computer skills and the advantage of the English language, specialise in call-centre and software roles; while the workers in Western societies are increasingly important in their consumer rather than their producer role.

—Insert Photo 4.b. ‘Look honey, I bought something today!’ near here—

For a green economist this admittedly simplified picture arouses several concerns. The globalised economy with its extended supply chains, linking producers in low-wage economies to consumers in high-wage economies, relies on international transport of goods on a huge scale (see the further discussion of the trade system in Chapter 11); this is one of the fastest growing sources of carbon dioxide emissions. These long supply chains also leave us highly dependent for even our most basic necessities, in an era when both financial and climatic instability would suggest the importance of sufficiency rather than vulnerability. The UK now imports the majority of its food: food imports into the UK increased by 24.6 per cent between 1992 and 2002 while the balance of payments deficit in food moved from £4.7bn. to £9.8bn. during the same period. Figures from Eurostat indicate that both imports and exports of food by the EU-25 increased by around 16% during the period 1999 to 2004. A Defra report on food miles identified a large-scale increase in transport of food. It estimated the cost of this transport, in social, environmental and economic terms, as more than £9bn. each year, the largest proportion of that being road congestion. This represents a full 34 per cent of the total value of the UK food and drinks industry.

At a deeper level, the international division of labour leaves us disempowered and useless, what Milani refers to as ‘cog-labour’, subject to decisions made by corporations about what we should consume and how it should be made. Within the globalised economy the process of deskilling has continued, with complex operations now performed by computers and more routine work out-sourced or performed by low-paid, part-time staff. The quality of these jobs in the traditional sense of pay rates and terms and conditions of employment has declined radically; but so has their quality in terms of nurture of the human spirit. For reasons of security as well as dignity, green economists call for reskilling and the rediscovery of craft in work: ‘In the era of quality, work must recover its craft dimension’. In the UK ‘reskilling’ is one of the aims of the Transition Towns movement—a community response to economic life in the era of climate change and peak oil. The Transition Towns offer training in skills such as vegetable growing, darning and mending, preservation of surplus crops, spinning and weaving—the skills that will be needed in a sufficient economy. This approach is in tune with the emphasis on sufficiency and self-provisioning that is an underlying principle of green economics:

Who is richer? (1) The person who must pay money out to somebody else to fix the lawnmower, or buy another when the lawnmower has become obsolete? Or (2) the person who is capable of fixing the lawnmower or digging up the lawn to grow safe organic vegetables for their children?

The concern for operating as a rounded person in one's work, and for developing craft and skill, is also addressed by the co-operative form of industrial organisation, where skills are shared and workers take responsibility for all tasks, rather than using a narrow range of skills within a structure dictated by the division of labour. Empowerment is a key concept. The co-operative enables workers to maintain power over their own work, a central requirement for green economists. A co-operative requires a pooling of skills and for everybody within the co-operative to be prepared to involve themselves in all the tasks required. Co-operatives also provide a structure for maintaining all the value of work within the group of workers. As Henderson argues, a sustainable economy requires 'the rise of worker-owned, self-managed enterprises, and of bartering, self-help, and mutual aid'. Such an economy can provide satisfying work and rewarding lifestyles but 'simply cannot provide support for enormous pyramided capital structures and huge overheads' associated with the late capitalist economy.

[a] Greening Production and Distribution

One of the lessons of green economics is that much of what we use in our everyday lives need not have come from a production process of the formal economy at all. Robertson coined the term 'informal' economy to describe the work we have traditionally done, unpaid, to provide for our needs and those of others close to us. This economic sector is increasingly squeezed as the market takes over more areas of our lives, so that children are sent to nurseries rather than being looked after by their grandmothers or neighbours, and we eat ready-meals rather than cooking for our families or sharing meals with friends. This pressure for all adults to be included in a formal employment relationship has been linked to the breakdown of communities, as people who traditionally provided voluntary service to the vulnerable in their communities no longer have time for this. They make a number of proposals (see Box 4.2) which would re-value unpaid but socially valuable work.

[!box]

Box 4.2. *Policies to Encourage Voluntarism and Self-Help*

- focus on volunteering and participation as a vital role that is important for its own sake, rather than just a step towards paid work, and encourage informal, self-help activity
- develop an acceptable way of allowing people on benefits to be recompensed for their effort in the community, so that those outside paid work are given incentives
- to become active contributors to the community – but funnelled as far as possible through local institutions that may be affiliated to or funded by public services, but are independent of central government
- reform Incapacity Benefit regulations so that they stop discriminating against
- rehabilitation develop ways for people outside paid work who are doing useful activity in their neighbourhoods to have sufficient income to maintain some quality of life

- in the long term, this may form some kind of Citizen's Income available to all (for more detail on the this proposal see Chapter 9).

Source: Boyle, D., Clark, S. and Burns, S. (2006), *Hidden Work: Co-Production by People Outside Paid Employment* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation).

[!box ends]

The time-banking movement offers a structure to help to formalise exchange within the informal or co-production economy.

To address the issue of alienation and the poor quality of working roles within the employment situation, several green economists have called for an increase in the proportion of workplaces owned and controlled by their own employees by virtue of being co-operatives. Richard Douthwaite argues for the priority of such a business structure within a green economy, citing studies which show that work satisfaction is highest when a firm is owned and controlled by those working in it. The emphasis on maintaining one's power in the work environment relates back to the work of James Robertson:

The direct way to enlarge people's freedom to change the kinds of paid work they regard as valuable and to organize it for themselves under their own control, is to alter the conditions in which paid work is done . . . The creation of many more co-operatives and community businesses, the conversion of existing companies and other organizations into these forms, and their acceptance as normal parts of the mainstream economy, will bring wider opportunities for people to work together in pursuit of their own shared aims and values.

[!box]

Box 4.3. *The Expansion of Worker Co-operatives in Argentina*

Towards the end of 2001 the developed, sophisticated economy of Argentina entered a devastating financial crisis—a result of tying its currency to the dollar rather than any problem with its own real productive capacity. None the less, because the value of money had eroded and money had been sucked out of the country, the real economy was affected, with wages remaining unpaid, and no ability to buy new inputs to production processes. Although the factories had useable machinery, markets for their products, skilled workers, and in many cases raw materials in stock, their owners walked away and abandoned the enterprises because conditions of trade were so poor. In response the workers took over their own factories, running them as worker co-operatives or *empresas recuperadas*. The reclaiming of factories is taking place on a large scale and in a wide variety of sectors. Some 1800 enterprises are in the process of being reclaimed, with 150 already operating under this system, providing for the livelihoods of over 12,000 workers. Around three-quarters are in manufacturing with the other quarter being in the services sector. Workers found different meanings in the takeovers: 60 per cent considered it as a source of labour, while more than 30 per cent asserted their moral right to ownership based on previous work for the company; slightly less than 10 per cent considered the takeover justified in order to continue production.

Source: Howarth, M. (2006), *Worker Co-operatives and the Phenomenon of Empresas Recuperadas in Argentina: An Analysis of their Potential for Replication* (Manchester: Co-operative College).

[!box ends]

In seeking ways of restructuring the post-capitalist economy green economists have found inspiration in Medieval economics, specifically the idea of the 'just price' and the guild system. The idea of the just price was defined by St. Thomas Aquinas in terms of the labour and costs of the producer. This outlawed the gaining of profits by middlemen, since only remuneration in return for just labour was acceptable, and prices should be sufficient only to allow the craftsman or trader to enjoy a standard of life suitable to his station. The prices of the most significant goods and services were fixed by public officials. Richard Douthwaite cites a statute from Kilkenny in 1376 that requires the mayor to call forward two 'discreet men' to negotiate with a merchant arriving in the town the prices he should charge based on his statement, made on oath, of his costs and expenses.

Operating within a strictly religious ideology, the Medieval craft guilds controlled trade in a particular product, regulating not only standards of production but prices, as just discussed. They also played an important social role, supporting community life, as well as providing representatives to the governing bodies of their cities and supervising apprenticeships in their particular trade or craft. The operation of the guilds was at the heart of the Medieval community, involving educational, social and religious dimensions:

Apprentices and journeymen were taught the craft and all its secrets, being brought to live in the same house as the master, as one of the family, without class distinction. The only distinction was in age and skill. . . Apprentices were trained to progress in their skills in order to become master in their own right, able to set up their own household.

Much of what is common practice in the contemporary economy would have been designated as profiteering and banned by the guilds: 'For example, London had a regulation to prevent anyone buying up cargoes of essential goods in order to corner the market. Thus when a shipment of coal arrived it had to be sold retail for the first eight days, each family being limited to fifty basketfuls. Only then, in order to empty the boat, could any remaining coal be sold wholesale. And naturally, the shipper's retail margin was determined on a just price basis.' The guilds help to hold the community together both by ensuring fair economic exchange but also through deeper cultural and spiritual functions:

Belonging to a guild was connected with a complex of emotions which a man shared with other members: pride in his guild whose reputation and authority he would jealously defend, participation in meetings and general decisions, assertion of his dignity as a fully-fledged burgher vis-a-vis the town patricians and the nobles, and a feeling of superiority vis-a-vis the unorganised craftsmen, the apprentices, pupils, servant—the common people of the town. A master craftsman sought and found in his work not simply a source of material prosperity: his work gave him satisfaction in itself. Hence his work and his product could be a means of achieving artistic pleasure. Perfection in a craft was handed down from generation to generation, forming a tradition of excellence and pushing the productive and the artistic possibilities of the craft to their utmost limits. A craft was a skill, and a skill was artistry. The free work of a master craftsman within a guild was a means of asserting his human personality and heightening his social awareness.

—Insert Photo 4.1. Crests of London livery companies associated with textiles —

While none of these economists is arguing for a return to a Medieval system, which was anyway deeply embedded in a religious world-view and socially static culture which have disappeared since then, it does give a pre-market perspective on the nature of the sharing of the spoils of economic activity. Bearing this in mind, Douthwaite a green economist might argue for a form of community business, recognizing that every business is in reality a collective endeavour and that profits made by businesses with the support of the community do not belong to the business alone but rather to the whole community. In such a business system risks could be shared along with profits; there would be a much stronger commitment to the locality; and a vocation to serve would predominate over the profit motive, leading to a different, more rounded, type of satisfaction. Considerations about standards of service and quality of goods would re-enter economic life. We might see evidence for the emergence of such business forms in some green sectors, such as renewable energy and organic foods, where there is a preponderance of community owned and co-operatively organised businesses.

Green approaches to business have yet to apply the idea about limits to growth to individual businesses, where it is likely to conflict with the conventional idea about the importance of economies of scale. Small businesses, grounded in the local community, tend to show higher levels of responsibility and accountability. As businesses expand they are in a position to accumulate capital, which they can use to build new businesses or for other investment. They have also probably acquired specific and general skills and networks of customers and goodwill. If we consider the expansion of a sole trader or self-employed business person, how should they respond to the pressure to expand? A first step might be to take on an apprentice, to share skills and respond to the growing demand. Another mechanism might be to form a consortium or secondary co-operative, so that work can be shared between those with similar skills, while also allowing those in a similar trade to learn from each other. From a green perspective, these means of expansion are more just than simply taking on more workers and extracting some of the value of their labour as profits for the business.