

The social responsibilities of worker-citizens

Paper presented at the fifth annual work/life seminar of the Employee Assistance Institute. Dublin, September 2005

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Introduction

This paper is set in the context of a series of questions that are particularly relevant as we consider the world of paid work in this early part of the 21st century: how can all living things on the globe, including the earth itself, flourish? How do we create sane societies? How do we avoid compromising the natural systems that we ultimately depend on for our well being – human health, earth systems and community systems? How do we create economies -- and the resulting workplaces -- that serve people and societies, instead of economies that dictate our lifestyles and – world-wide -- degrade the environment, human health, happiness and communities in the name of economic growth?

Economic growth has had three results that are relevant to the well being of workers, and to the theme of this paper: a fast-paced world (including the world of paid work) in which we neglect our personal health and energy; a lack of time for and a subsequent decline in the vibrancy of civil society and, third, global warming and the destruction of the ecological systems on which we ultimately depend for our survival as a human species. Attention to these three linked issues is a major responsibility of all of us, including workers, at this time. In short, workers need to view themselves as citizens with responsibilities. A time movement is central to this project.

The paper sets out philosophical or big-picture issues which I believe need to inform any discussions about the welfare of workers. I posit that we need far different tools from those that dominate our thought processes today – namely, production, consumption, and materialism. In order to live well, we need new kinds of knowledge, not just knowledge that can serve the economy. We need a shift in consciousness about the world, which is transformative. In other words, it will dramatically and permanently alter our way of being in the world. The kind of knowledge we require will enhance the collective learning capacity of society. That shift, I argue, includes a move towards social citizenship. At this time in history, it involves two inseparable components: ecology and morality, which are key threads running through this paper.

Morality is about the principles and values that underpin our actions. Ethics refers to the behaviours that result from those values (Tudge, 2003). A moral quest asks us to consider things we would often rather ignore – such

as the place that each one of us has in this world, the extent of the damage that humans have done in the world and the responsibility that each one of us carries for creating a just world: what, in short, are our moral obligations?

Ecology is a fundamental tool for looking at the whole, including the whole person and at the place of humans in the systems of the earth. It differs from environmentalism, which is a way of managing the environment in response to progress, and limiting the destructive effects of progress on the natural world.

Our obsession with growth

Philosophy is about big questions of how we should live, and we currently lack big-picture sensitivity to morality and ecology. This lack can largely be laid at the door of an approach to life that puts economic growth at the top of all agendas in society. Hypercapitalist economics dominate the world at the moment, but capitalism is not the only system that makes economic growth central. All systems that are obsessed with economic growth and expansion of all kinds destroy the natural systems they ultimately depend on.

Growth has brought certain benefits and comfort to humans, but the activities associated with it in the global economic system demand things of us that are morally deeply questionable and ecologically destructive, not to mention suicidal. At the same time, growth creates fast-paced demanding lifestyles for workers, which leave little time for moral reflection.

Economic growth has created great material wealth alongside great poverty, hunger and disease. We factory-farm animals for food, when we could feed ourselves much more humanely and healthily by adopting enlightened agricultural methods. We move capital around the globe with no thought for the effects on workers or communities. We set up the farmers of the world in competition with each other, at the cost of human health and small family farms. Moreover, the markets the farmers are encouraged to join could collapse at any time.

On the biological front too, there are many signs that we have reached saturation point and that growth is now overloading our natural systems and asking too much of the earth, its people and other sentient beings. The recent Millennium Ecosystems Assessment, conducted by 1300 experts from 95 countries and commissioned by the United Nations, shows that the ecological destruction of the last fifty years is greater than all of the damage caused by humans since our time on earth. The destruction parallels a period of unprecedented global economic growth, in which the growth in output of goods and services is greater than at any other time in history.

The work of Elizabeth Cullen (2005) has shown that growth is actually making humans ill. Charles Whybrow's (2005) work demonstrates that the lifestyles associated with growth economies are overloading our neurobiological capacities. Moreover, in the processes of the numerous industries that provide the material goods we use, we are creating monocultures, destroying soil fertility and ecosystems, polluting water and air, and warming up the planet in a dangerous manner.

The growth-oriented economic system is set up so that we are less likely to have feeling and compassion for other sentient beings, and more likely to compete aggressively with them. It dominates our lives, exploiting our fears and our greed, and making us cynical about the possibilities for alternatives. Under this system, we are less likely to cooperate than to compete, although we are biologically capable of both modes of behaviour.

Where social conditions are dominated by the demands of an economy, we are also required to cultivate social and emotional minimalism. In our personal lives, the tendency is for our lives to 'grow' in tandem with the economy. The busyness and rushed nature of everyday activities that so often results requires that we become 'emotional Spartans', in the words of Arlie Hochschild (2003). In other words, we have to repress our gut feelings that so much of what the system requires of us is wrong.

In social and political life, the dominance of economics requires us to reduce citizenship to voting, paying taxes, home-owning, and the freedom to consume. Equality is largely portrayed as the ability to shop on an equal footing with the richest. The emphasis on survival and getting by with a minimum of involvement prevents us from asking serious questions about the system as a whole.

That's how it is in the present. But another sad conclusion is that the system promises miserable futures for us, even though some are currently enjoying short-term benefits. In the bigger picture and in the long term, human well being, global justice and environmental preservation are simply not compatible with this mode of economics.

Workplace reform

Economic growth and the demands it makes on organisations create workplace conditions that are inimical to the well being of workers (Sennett, 1998). Some, though not enough, workers are resisting these conditions and are downshifting. In other words, they are making arrangements on an individual basis with employers, which allow them flexibility and reduced working hours. And some employers are introducing schemes for flexibility.

All workers can benefit from workplace reform in the form of flexible working hours, shorter working hours, a flattened hierarchy, small, decentralized work groups, and increased worker participation in decisions. We also need to raise low wages and limit extremely high wages. Ways need to be found to reduce competitiveness and fear among workers. Employers also need to find ways to share profits, create alternative work schedules, give employees more time and opportunities for learning new skills, and do whatever can be done to reduce layoffs.

Some of these solutions could come from enlightened management, and many organisations are indeed taking their responsibilities seriously. But many of the solutions will have to come from workers finding ways to pressure employers to change, so that the benefits apply to more than just the few who make individual choices to downshift. This means finding ways of bringing people together so that they will begin talking and acting collectively to reclaim their time. Time is crucial to any reflection on the big picture, and on action for change in the moral and ecological spheres. Gaining time for all means supporting unions, joining professional organisations and starting study circles (Andrews, 1997).

If we don't have a time movement, some individuals will be able to get their lives under control and create more well being for themselves and their families. But many workers will be left with little choice. Moreover, the ecological and social problems associated with economic growth will continue. Corporate social responsibility is admirable, but social responsibility is too important to be left to corporations. All citizens need to be involved. Workers are citizens too, and need to take up that responsibility of the nuts and bolts of workplace reform.

A time movement can allow millions to experience the joys of better ways to work, because it can restructure workplace expectations and practices on a much wider basis than we have at the moment. Furthermore, a time movement, by slowing economic growth, can reduce the destructive impact of humans on the planet and its ecological systems. Anders Hayden (2000) makes the case well: we can spare the workers and the planet.

We need different kinds of knowledge

Part of the problem is that few of us – worker-leaders, business leaders or elected leaders – are rigorously educated in morality, ecology, or any of the ways of seeing that take us beyond the immediate future and the current system. Most elected leaders – who have the power to make decisions – are educated in business, or science, which in themselves are fine disciplines, but give only a partial view of the world. Most of society has accepted the conventional modernist wisdom that increase in GDP equals wealth for a society and that progress and appropriate development are made up of ever-

increasing growth and expansion of boundaries. But this short-term thinking serves us very badly. We need to increase our stock of knowledge about morality and ecology.

Such knowledge will need to reclaim the full meaning of the word growth, one of the most evocative and important concepts that exist. It has been hijacked by modernist thinking, to mean economic growth. The deeper meanings of the word, such as the broadening of our horizons of meaning, the deepening of our wisdom and our knowledge of ourselves and our context, our knowledge of the whole of ourselves as persons and the whole planet of which we are part -- have been made largely lost.

Our economic system is effectively suppressing moral, ethical and whole-system ecological thinking. Economics must become embedded in the social context and must serve human and planetary well being. We need to contain economics within a moral framework (Tudge, 2003: 399) and this will be done by means of politics and strong civil society. Markets, money, trade, science, technology, competition or profit are fine activities in themselves, but they are not everything, and they must be kept in their place, as part of an overall system. The ways they are conducted in growth-oriented economies are deeply questionable.

What does social citizenship entail?

Social citizenship involves thinking of ourselves as citizen-leaders, and having a desire to create a strong and vibrant public sphere. We cannot build positive futures without informed and politically literate citizens. It involves reinstating the notion of the common good and the public space in which to consider it.

Citizenship today demands an ability to see the whole, not just our individual lives. Being a citizen is a process of taking full responsibility for ourselves and seeing ourselves as social beings, with responsibilities. This is not to diminish or play down the need for regulation, law and policy, but to emphasise the equal need for personal responsibility. Instead, the current system encourages us to maximise our personal desires and to minimise our responsibilities to other human beings, to nature, to our communities and to global society (Whybrow, 2005: 36, 37).

We have to think of ourselves as a *connected* species, not just as individuals within family groups who can downshift in order to create a better life for our own small circle. A society of virtuous but isolated individuals and family groups is not sufficient. In fact, such groups can actively exclude consideration of other groups. Creating new ways of being has to have a *collective* dimension – we must see ourselves as part of a whole that is greater than ourselves – at community, national and global levels.

Enough: the key question

A key task is to ask, what is enough? This question is not asked in the economic-growth mindset. But it needs to be the central one. The question is directly derived from ecological thinking and is the most important question of our times. Scientific insights into the natural world have made the marvels of natural systems available to us: nature does not waste, it does exactly enough, no more; it ‘elegantly and spontaneously observes limits’, as Bill McKibben puts. The question of enough is also intrinsically moral, insofar as it involves asking questions about how far we should go down a certain road, what is right and wrong, where we should stop. We won’t always get it right, but if we carry on as we are, never asking these kinds of questions, then the future will be extremely bleak. A major responsibility for worker-citizens at this time is to understand how our work practices are related to our economy, and how our economic system of growth is destroying everything that we ultimately depend on – human health, community systems and natural systems.

Personal energy: required for social citizenship

Most people say they don’t have the energy to start thinking about the bigger picture, never mind becoming involved in civic action such as a time movement. They are too busy surviving the daily grind. The crisis in personal energy is one of the biggest factors keeping us from developing the notion of ourselves as citizens (Leadbeater, 2005). Restoring personal energy is one of the first steps on the road to active social citizenship. Restoration creates the conditions within which we can cultivate awareness - - the path of more or of frenzied growth is often followed without awareness, or is foisted on us. We need to get ourselves some breathing space and stop growing indiscriminately in our personal lives.

My workshop experiences suggest that for most people, there are one or two key areas where making small restorative changes make the most sense and provide the most relief, in starting to create personal energy. Asking what is enough, and acting on the knowledge gained from this question in any one area can change the dynamics of a life in small but nevertheless significant and very real ways. Change begins when we make some response – it does not have to be the perfect one. The way opens, options appear that we did not see from the previous position.

Restoring energy is a way to get one’s life back, within an economic system that tries to own it via work and consumption. It helps people deal with the overload they experience concerning decisions, choices, information, speed, availability, the electronic leash, news, possessions and appointments. Developing a sense of enough in one’s own life also restores balance

concerning career, food, exercise, money, possessions and spending. Separating ourselves as much as possible from the need for money is a crucial part of freeing ourselves to critique the system. It is also a way to restore personal energy for social citizenship.

The sooner we reach an understanding of enough in our personal lives, the sooner we can reach that place of detachment from the system based on more, which allows us to critique it and to want to create alternatives to it – we can create alternative ideas of what maturity means, of what growth means. We are less prone to denial, because we have the energy to look at what is really going on around us.

I am not suggesting that we can reach a place of perfect freedom – we are all deeply embedded in the dominant economic system, whether we like it or not. But the less embedded we are the better, and it is possible to lessen its hold over us.

Workers can get some breathing space and at the same time make themselves more available for citizenship by actively putting a philosophy of enough into practice in their lives. Enough is good for us physically, psychologically and materially. For most of us in the minority-affluent world, enough means scaling back and slowing down. There is even neurobiological evidence that overload of the reward circuit can occur within systems that aim to meet desire in unlimited ways (Whybrow, 2005). We are overwhelmed because, neurobiologically, we are not ‘able’ for the system that dominates our lives at the moment. So enough could be said to be a basic survival mechanism. Happily, it ties in nicely with the moral quest also.

What is good for us in terms of our natural biological systems is also good for us in the quest for active citizenship. The precautionary principle is useful in nature and good in our exploration of what is right and wrong. So even if workers feel unable to start with the big issues, if we do what is good for us in terms of health, finances and personal energy, we are automatically restricting the kinds of environmental damage we might be unwittingly doing in the wider world. Enough is a concept that is intrinsically ecological, intrinsically moral and intrinsically healthy. It is also simple, practical and do-able (see, for example, Ryan, 2002 on the practicalities).

A time movement for workers and its centrality to citizenship

I have already referred to the need for a time movement, rather than individual downshifting. Citizenship involves being more than a virtuous individual. It is all very well to scale back on one’s work and to keep it within bounds, in order to devote more time to oneself and one’s family. But this does nothing for the masses of workers in low-wage, dead-end jobs with

little or no control over how they work (see for example, Bunting, 2004). Enough, and the principles of personal energy and restraint need to go beyond narrow and self-interested agendas. They need to be brought together in a collective movement. They need to be much more coherent and strong on social and ecological awareness than they are at the moment. We need a mass movement for change.

Collectivity is crucial because even where individual workers are concerned about the effect of work practices on society and environment as a whole, they cannot be effective in bringing about change, if they remain isolated from others striving for the same things. We need start by debating the issues with others who are likely to be interested. We also need to act together. We have to create a better world together. We need to channel our knowledge about the benefits of personal energy and its relation to the ecology of the planet into public movements that could make the world a better place for everyone.

This, then, is where a shift in thinking, based on new kinds of knowledge, is crucial. We do not make choices just as individual workers or parents, but as part of a whole that is greater than ourselves – at community, national and global levels. And in creating this sense of ourselves as citizens, we need to strive for community that holds together, but without suppressing or obliterating human diversity (O’Sullivan, 1999: 250).

In order to create a really vibrant public sphere, everyone has to be a leader. Leadership is ‘the capacity of a human community to shape its future and specifically to sustain the significant processes of change required to do so’ (Senge, 1999: 16). This public sphere can be expressed through a wide range of institutions, and a time movement will also have strong links with redesigned political parties, church groups, food and transport movements, and conversation and study groups. These can contribute to containing economics within a moral framework and will in turn contribute to a participatory politics and strong civil society.

The need to ask questions

I have put forward the idea as workers as citizens in the fullest sense, as a way to begin to grapple seriously with these questions. Beginning the path suggested here is not always easy, because what we need to do is counter-cultural. But the philosophy is a kind one – it recognizes that small beginnings matter, and that every change has ripple effects. It is demanding too, however: it insists that we think in collective as well as individual ways. There are many points at which one can enter the moral and ecological path: the processes of understanding, questioning, acting (or stopping a certain action) and reflecting are all essential.

Perhaps the most important thing is to ask good questions and to open up the nature of the problem. It is hard to ask good questions, and even harder to stick with them, rather than hurrying to conclusions. The questions that are at the start of this paper and others like them require serious consideration that is complex and long-term.

No society which forgets the art of asking questions or allows this art to fall into disuse can count on finding answers to the problems that beset it – certainly before it is too late and the answers, however correct, have become irrelevant.

Cornelius Castoriadis, cited in Giroux, 2001: 81

You already know a great deal of what is in this paper. I don't say this to flatter or to patronize, but to emphasise that so much of the task is restoring what we know in our hearts to be good, and opposing what we know to be wrong. I am not trying to supply a 'correct analysis' and a blueprint for action. The paper is an affirmation of a kind of knowledge that most people have already, as well as a contribution to developing this knowledge in response to our times.

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