

STATE OF THE DEBATE

CAPITALISM, WORK, AND CHARACTER

BY EVA BERTRAM AND KENNETH SHARPE

Does work under today's capitalism corrode character? The very question seems odd because the character issue has largely been ceded to conservatives—and conservatives have studiously ignored the damaging effects of capitalism. But allowing them this monopoly diminishes the debate on character and misses an opportunity to deepen the critique of the transformation of work and markets under the new economy. As used by the right, character has meant primarily a set of virtues associated with personal responsibility—self-control, duty, deferred gratification. Conservatives blame poverty and joblessness on bad character (the poor lack self-control, discipline, and the will to sacrifice) rather than on social and economic conditions or the ground rules of capitalism. The failure to find, keep, and advance in a job is seen as an individual and moral—not a social—failing.

In this view, social welfare programs are not only unnecessary; worse, they give the poor a free pass, encouraging the very dependence and lack of personal responsibility that stand in the way of character and success.

But what if capitalism itself erodes the very qualities of character at the center of this debate? An economy in which everything is marketized is one where relationships become purely instrumental and contingent. Trust, loyalty, and other hallmarks of good character seem old-fashioned and sentimental—precapitalist, you might say. *Homo economicus* is always revising his calculations of how to serve his self-interest. Pure capitalism invites astute investors to relocate businesses to optimize returns, even at the cost of neighborhoods and communities. It invites shareholders to streamline and profit-maximize, even at the expense of loyal workers. It invites consumers to comparison shop for the best deals, even if it means abandoning the corner drugstore for Wal-Mart.

At the center of these transformations is work. Our occupations or professions define not just our economic status but our conception of self and our con-

nection to others. Yet as contemporary capitalism alters the conditions of work, our connection to the workplace becomes more tenuous. As sociologist Richard Sennett observes in *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, a "new capitalism" is turning work from something that was once considered stable and predictable into a source of profound insecurity. As the work force becomes increasingly contingent and people change jobs more frequently, employees are told there is "no long term."

At first glance, this seems well-worked territory. But Sennett's focus is not the familiar effects on workers' incomes and equality, but what these conditions are doing to workers as human beings, to their social relations and values. Against the business gurus who see liberation in such flux and flexibility, Sennett concludes that the new conditions of work are fragmenting and corroding key elements of human character, such as our capacity to build bonds of trust, loyalty, and mutual commitment. We are a society in which people of good character incur fixed obligations (mortgages, tuition payments, high-quality time with aging

parents and young children) but increasingly face variable income streams, frequent relocations, and unpredictable time demands on the job.

In taking a fresh look at the *non-material* dimensions of work in the new economy, Sennett paves the way for a new debate on work, character, and the market, one that builds on the recent work of other progressives who have looked at time, security, stability, and workplace environment. Arlie Russell Hochschild (*The Time Bind, The Managed Heart*) and Juliet Schor (*The Overworked American*) have analyzed shifts in work patterns, particularly the increase in daily working hours (a month more per year than a generation ago) and the profound ethical and personal dilemmas this "time famine" has created for many working families. Sennett moves the discussion a critical step forward by assessing the larger impact of the many small injuries to workers' security, linking this to a collective assault on human character.

THE WORKINGS OF CHARACTER

The moral judgments inherent in any serious discussion of character and virtue raise liberal alarms because they seem to threaten deeply held principles of individual choice and tolerance. Who are we to judge how people live their lives or to embrace a form of conservative social engineering in the name of character? Many liberals also disdain the character debate because the right has so often used the issue to pillory the "immoral" behavior of certain groups (usually poor, usually minority) to marginalize them politically and control their behavior through harsh social policies.

But instead of yielding the character debate, liberals need to challenge the way conservatives have framed it, on two grounds. First, the usual conservative definition of character is itself impoverished. While some versions of a

dole may indeed erode incentive, in a democratic society there is more to character than "personal responsibility." Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) and Theda Skocpol (with Morris Fiorina, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*), among others, emphasize the importance of civility, trust, and civic engagement in combating apathy, withdrawal, and the lack of public responsibility in a democratic society. Some on the right seem not to care about personal commitment to civil society except when its erosion can be blamed on government. Stephen Carter (*Civility*) argues that capitalism undermines civility and "pollutes our souls" because it counsels us to be acquisitive and "as selfish as we wanna be." Michael Lerner (*The Politics of Meaning*) stresses the importance of empathy and caring as antidotes to extreme individualism and materialism. Bill Bradley, in one liberal statement of character (*Values of the Game*), connects classic virtues like discipline, selflessness, respect, and courage in sports to teamwork rather than individual glory-seeking. Among conservatives, a few—such as James Q. Wilson (*The Moral Sense*)—have gone beyond self-control and duty to emphasize the importance of character traits such as a sense of fairness—equity, impartiality, and reciprocity. For these broader thinkers, a person of character is expected to embody a range of social virtues that reaches well beyond personal responsibility.

Second, many conservatives routinely close their eyes to the broader social and economic circumstances that foster or undermine trust, care, loyalty, and responsibility. Progressive critics have long understood that circumstances can severely and unjustly limit the life chances of many people of sound character—and make it difficult to cultivate such qualities as trust and respect. The desire to behave as a responsible person does not

make you personally responsible for the hand dealt you by the neighborhood, class, or social group into which you were born. And programs offering public assistance in difficult times can foster social virtues of trust and empathy as easily as they can threaten "personal responsibility," narrowly defined.

If the conservative position is misguided, what is the basis for a richer understanding of character, one that sheds new light on work and capitalism today? The early theorists of character offer a surprisingly good starting point. The Greeks understood character as social. Aristotle, for example, argued that the purpose of life was human flourishing, which

allowed for true happiness. This was not achieved through personal material gain or the individual pursuit of short-term pleasures and preferences. It was earned through a life lived in community, "not by reference to the 'self alone,' but via relationships "with parents, children, a wife, and friends and fellow citizens generally, since man is by nature a social . . . being."

The particular set of virtues important for Aristotle may be inappropriate for today's democratic society, but the larger principle holds. A person has good character to the extent that she has internalized what makes such human bonds possible: the disposition and ability to be loyal, committed, and trustworthy; to act fairly and justly; to

The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism, by Richard Sennett. W.W. Norton & Company, 176 pages, \$13.00 (paper).

Values of the Game, by Bill Bradley and Phil Jackson. Broadway Books, 96 pages, \$10.00 (paper).

The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads, by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West. Houghton Mifflin Company, 302 pages, \$14.00 (paper).

The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home & Home Becomes Work, by Arlie Russell Hochschild. Henry Holt & Company, 316 pages, \$22.50.

The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling, by Arlie Russell Hochschild. University of California Press, 307 pages, \$16.95 (paper).

Everything for Sale: The Virtues and Limits of Markets, by Robert Kuttner. University of Chicago Press, 410 pages, \$15.00 (paper).

The Market Experience, by Robert E. Lane. Cambridge University Press, 630 pages, \$29.95 (paper).

Falling from Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence, by Katherine Newman. University of California Press, 340 pages, \$13.95 (paper).

The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure, by Juliet B. Schor. Basic Books, 247 pages, \$14.00 (paper).

The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life, by Barry Schwartz. W.W. Norton & Company, 393 pages.

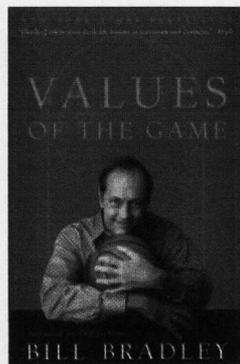
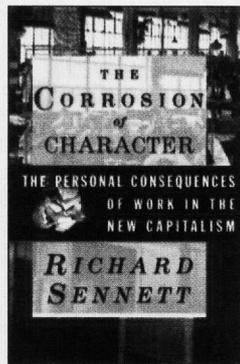
The Moral Sense, by James Q. Wilson. Simon & Schuster, 336 pages, \$14.00 (paper).

The Moral Compass of the American Lawyer: Truth, Justice, Power, and Greed, by Richard A. Zitrin and Carol M. Langford. Ballantine Books, 272 pages, \$24.95.

show self-control and courage; to be civil and respectful; to be empathetic and caring; to exercise good judgment and discernment; and, yes, to be personally responsible. These qualities cannot simply be “taught,” memorized, or mechanically drummed into our heads. They are partly a function of social institutions. We must foster the habits of good character over a lifetime, argued Aristotle, by creating the social conditions for the regular, habitual repetition of good actions. And if we acquire and sustain virtue in small ways—through the regular, habitual repetition of good actions—then routines at work that signal us to treat others instrumentally can have the opposite effect. What conservatives miss is the troubling ways in which the nature of work and the excesses of capitalism today are undermining the habits of good character.

CHARACTER ON THE JOB

The dangers work can pose to human character were once commonly recognized. Changes in production, social relations, and daily life introduced by the industrial revolution seized the attention of intellectuals across the political spectrum from economists such as David Ricardo and Adam Smith to literary figures like Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, William Morris, and Charles Dickens. The Marxist tradition condemned the effects of early capitalist production on all facets of workers’ lives. And mainstream classical political economists remained cognizant of these effects throughout the nineteenth century. The “business by which a person earns his livelihood generally fills his thoughts during by far the greater part of those hours in which his mind is at its best; during them his character is being formed by the way in which he uses his faculties in his work,” observed Alfred Marshall in his classic *Principles of Economics*.



In the postwar years, discussions about the impact of working conditions were largely confined to sociologists and social psychologists who focused on personality development and work satisfaction. They observed, for example, how simple and repetitive jobs involved in industrial production deteriorated cognitive capacities, created profound dissatisfaction, and had negative effects on personality development. Robert Lane’s *Market Experience*, published in 1991, offers a masterful synthesis of this literature.

As the character of work increasingly bears little resemblance to that of the postwar economy, it is time for a new assessment. The beginnings of this critique can be drawn from several recent books on how work today threatens values important to character.

Consider four examples of this dynamic:

Exploiting virtue: Some features of the new economy threaten virtue by turning it into a commodity. Salespeople and advertisers have long faked sincerity and bought trust in order to make sales. The recent emergence of a large-scale mass service sector has created new and more subtle forms of virtue exploitation.

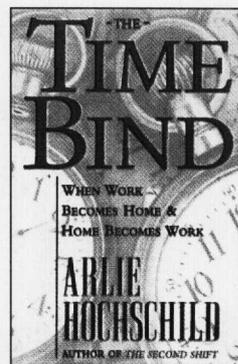
Arlie Russell Hochschild’s study of flight attendants (*The Managed Heart*) documents how sincerity was turned into a commodity once it became a “paid virtue.” In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the major airlines (operating in a regulated environment) began to compete for customers on the basis of “friendly service.” Increased pressure was exerted on flight attendants to show professional niceness. Think of a passenger, trainees

were taught, as if s/he were a “personal guest in your living room.” This analogy taught them to “unite the empathy of friend for friend with the empathy of worker for customer”—assuming “that empathy is the same sort of feeling in either case.”

Employees are thus asked to muster the type of empathy and caring for customers that is properly owed to close friends and family. The “advanced engineering of emotional labor,” says Hochschild, may be important in a modern work world where employees need to learn civility. But this commercialization of feeling risks estranging or alienating the worker “from an aspect of self . . . the margins of the soul—that is used to do the work.” Over time, employees experience the stress of distinguishing what is artificial from what is real; some report periods of “emotional deadness.”

Verizon customer service representatives went on strike this summer in part over just these issues. Constantly monitored by supervisors, reps were expected to follow preprogrammed scripts and to sell new products when customers called with problems or questions. They faced not only “the pressure of always being nice,” in the words of one rep, but also orders that challenged their own moral judgment. “It fights with the inner part of the rep [when she is] thinking ‘Look at this poor 80-year-old woman, what does she need three-way calling for?’ I’m offering her gadgets and she can’t even see the pushbuttons on the phone.”

In the technology industries, many firms exploit the virtues associated with “teamwork.” Advocates of re-engineering, like Michael Hammer (*Beyond Reengineering*), praise teamwork both for increasing innovation and creative problem solving and for boosting morale. The reliance on the “team” metaphor invokes exactly the virtues Bill Bradley sees as integral to sports. Team members must be com-



mitted to the team, have the discipline to do the hard work—and have the selflessness and will to sacrifice immediate pleasure and personal glory. They must be willing to play to each other's strengths and to compensate for each other's weaknesses, and trust that others will do the same. These virtues—selflessness, courage, discipline, cooperation, sacrifice, commitment, trust—are what make a team more than a collection of individuals and teamwork more than the sum of their actions.

Real teamwork, of course, implies continuity. However, in today's corporate world (like today's market-driven athletic world), teams are often temporary affairs. People are brought together, as Sennett argues, for a specific, short-term project and then are disbanded later to be re-formed with new people tasked with different projects. "[T]he team moves from task to task and the personnel of the team changes in the process" so that "strong social ties like loyalty cease to be compelling." In such cases, the firm is effectively exploiting the virtues of team-like cooperation, using the language of teamwork to enhance productivity and the bottom line. Even when firms are not committed to their employees and work teams are ephemeral, employees must go through the motions of mustering trust and sacrifice, knowing their performance as "team players" will be evaluated. Such mandatory "cooperation" is hardly employee/team "empowerment." It is the manipulation of peer pressure to get the job done and keep profits up.

Marketizing virtue: In professions like medicine and law, market-oriented job policies discourage the exercise of virtue when it gets in the way of profit making. In medicine, virtues like trustworthiness, empathy, and caring have long been taught and practiced as integral to the character of practitioners. Yet as the discipline of the marketplace and the logic of profit have entered the medical profession with unprecedented force, cost-cutting measures have squeezed out staff, increased case loads, cut down the time practitioners spend with patients, discouraged doctors from treating the poor, and pressured them not to offer follow-up tests or referrals to specialists. The new daily routines of

work are in constant tension with the ethics of care and trust.

There has long been a tension in the legal profession—between its fundamental virtues of truth, fairness, integrity, and justice, and the temptation to put the interests of one's paying clients ahead of such virtues. Richard Zitrin and Carol Langford (*The Moral Compass of the American Lawyer*) suggest that as firms get larger they "more than ever act like businesses rather than groups of professionals." Zitrin and Langford argue that the changing logic of legal work is mirrored in legal education. For too many, they argue, "the study of ethics becomes learning what behavior they can get away with, without ever confronting the core issue: how to behave responsibly as lawyers." Under these new conditions of medical and legal work, the systematic practice of market-driven behaviors creates a gap between professional incentives and professional virtues, one that threatens to undermine the qualities of character that make doctors into good doctors and lawyers into good lawyers.

Devaluing virtue: The new economy is quietly devaluing what it means to be a good worker, whether on Main Street or on Wall Street. A central premise of the "old work," writes Robert Kuttner in *Everything for Sale*, was that you would "not be fired if you do your job well, even if someone off the street would take the job at a lower wage." The custom of seniority, which rewarded loyal service over time, recognized that older workers were likely to have more costly family obligations, and signaled other workers that long-term commitment to one's employer paid off. This social compact, often the product of hard-fought battles by trade unions, suggested a rough symmetry of virtues: When workers demonstrated loyalty and commitment, their employers owed them security and opportunities for advancement on the job.

But with deindustrialization and downsizing, new jobs offer less security. Employers of the growing "non-

standard" work force owe virtually nothing. Even with "permatemps" (long-term temporary hires), the firm has no legal responsibility for social security, health insurance, or long-term investment in training and professional development. These changes make employee loyalty and commitment irrational. Rather, the new economy teaches workers to be "career entrepreneurs," assuming nothing from their employers, always preparing to move on, seeing co-workers instrumentally as stepping stones to new jobs. *U.S. News and World Report* recently headlined an article "Why It Pays to Quit." The article's subtitle explains, "Loyalty, shmoyalty. In today's frenzied job market, staying put gets you nowhere. Walking out gets you ahead."

Dissolving virtue: Regular employment, as William Julius Wilson (*When Work Disappears*) has written, "provides the anchor for the spatial and temporal aspects of daily life." Today, however, incoherence and unpredictability are not only a hallmark of unemployment, but also are characteristic of many jobs.

In the most extreme cases, work begins to approach an auction market in which "bidders are plentiful, prices actually change from minute to minute, and each transaction is a one-time event that clears the market of the merchandise," as Kuttner puts it. If human labor were purely a commodity (like merchandise) on such a market, employees would find work through daily hiring halls, bidding against each other every morning for assignments and wages. Under such conditions, work—and daily life—would become profoundly uncertain, changeable, and fragmented. There would be no context to sustain the good habits and wise choices that build character; the continuity and coherence needed to build trust, responsibility, loyalty, respect, and a sense of fairness would disappear from work life.

As a temp, it is difficult, even illogical, to form bonds of friendship, trust, and commitment. This is not just a problem for the young and the unskilled. Older

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workers find the value of their past experience denigrated in an atmosphere of constant change. As a result, "in the high-pressure, shifting world of the modern corporation the middle-aged can easily come to fear that they are eroding from within," Sennett writes.

Even those who most embody the corporate ideal of flexibility and change—such as free-lance consultants—are not immune to its contradictions. Sennett describes Rico, a hard-working consultant (and former manager) now on his fourth job in 10 years. Rico "wants to resist particularly the acid erosion of those qualities of character, like loyalty, commitment, purpose, and resolution, which are long-term in nature. He affirms timeless values which characterize who he is." But his experiences do not support the habits or choices that feed loyalty, commitment, purpose, or resolution. His need to constantly change jobs and his daily experiences of work corrode rather than reinforce the habits of good character, undermining his ability to construct a life of human flourishing in a way that becomes painfully clear when Rico takes a hard look at the role model his life provides for his own children.

CHARACTER, FAMILIES, MARKETS

In the end, the politics of work is not just a struggle over distributive justice and meeting basic material needs. It is also a battle over the conditions within which we organize our time each day, much of which is spent on the job. How we structure these conditions will determine our prospects for building lives that are full, meaningful, and flourishing—rather than lives that are as fragmented, uncertain, and contingent as the new economy. By joining the debates on character and work, liberals can add an important new moral dimension to the political dialogue on work—to campaigns for a living wage, job security, adequate benefits, and better family-work policies.

Our work lives deeply affect how we organize our homes and communities, and who we are as parents, friends, and community members. Community institutions are weakened when participants must work long hours, constantly search for jobs, and move frequently to new areas as work requires. Families

often bear the full brunt of changing work conditions. Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West (*The War Against Parents*) agree with conservatives that families need to be strengthened because they are crucial for building character and virtue. But they challenge conservatives' silence about capitalism, arguing that market forces are a major threat to parenting, "the ultimate nonmarket activity."

Work and market conditions not only set limits on time, money, and other resources, but also shape the very ways we think about parenting and home life. Working parents faced with the daily challenges of balancing caregiving and bread-winning are tempted to turn to market-based "models" learned on the job in order to "manage" home life. "Quality time" at home, Hochschild writes in *The Time Bind*, "becomes like an office appointment" scheduling "intense periods of togetherness." Instead of nine hours a day with a child, we hope that "transferring the cult of efficiency from office to home" will enable us to get the same result "with one intensely focused hour." As Hochschild suggests, a domestic version of outsourcing replaces intimate family routines with paid services to match playmates with one another, to allow kids to telephone an adult who will talk with them, sing to them, help with their homework, or organize children's birthday parties. These solutions may be "efficient," but they are troubling for character building. Over time, as Barry Schwartz (*The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life*) points out, "buying" the activities and habits that are meant to express such virtues as commitment or caring risks diminishing the virtue itself.

A final consequence for character lies beyond the organization of work in capitalism's complement to production: consumption. The systematic pressure toward ceaseless consumption—in the effort to constantly expand demand—teaches people perpetual dissatisfaction and the never-ending desire for more and different material goods. Capitalism's efforts to keep increasing consumer "needs" creates what Juliet Schor (*The Overworked American*) calls the "work-to-spend" cycle, which cre-

ates the desire among many people to work longer and harder, exacerbating the "time bind" and other negative impacts of work on character. Barry Schwartz argues that the more time we spend "consumed by consumption"—a consequence of the "thing addiction" nourished by capitalism—the less time we have to pursue the "good things in life" (love, friendship, families, meaningful work) and the less we flourish. Schwartz critically analyzes the penetration of both consumerism and market thinking (self-interest maximization, cost-benefit analysis) into love, friendship, education, sports, law, and politics.

Consumerism also muddles our judgment about what the good things in life really are. Even contemporary conservatives like William Bennett have attacked specific advertising campaigns (like Nike's "Just do it!"), arguing that they undermine self-control and glorify instant gratification—although few conservatives admit that the problem is integral to contemporary capitalism itself. In subtle ways, some lose the ability to reflect on why it is they work and consume—reinforcing the illusion that production and consumption are ends in themselves.

Production and consumption, of course, are the engines of capitalist growth. But human lives dominated by producing and consuming, working and buying, rob people of the time and skills to nurture social bonds and strong characters. Conservatives have thus far demonstrated little interest in looking at how the conditions of work under capitalism—or the consumerism and market thinking that capitalism promotes—threaten human flourishing. By challenging the conservative grip on the character debate, progressives and liberals can both force open the character agenda well beyond the individualistic and moralizing parameters of the current framework, and strengthen the moral lens of their own critique of the new economy. ♦

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