BOOK REVIEW:

HIJACKED: HOW NEOLIBERALISM TURNED THE WORK ETHIC AGAINST WORKERS AND HOW WE CAN TAKE IT BACK BY ELIZABETH ANDERSON

REVIEWED BY

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There are few American traditions as old as grumbling about people not wanting to work anymore. As I write, the unemployment rate sits at under 4 percent, low by any historical comparison, yet the complaint persists. These laments about a work ethic lost are inevitably understood as products of a reactionary sensibility. After all, who else but employers (and perhaps incessant customers) could make this charge of people who they think should be at their disposal?

And yet, the work ethic wasn't always perceived in this way. Elizabeth Anderson's new book, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic Against Workers and How We Can Take It Back*, makes the case that, despite its contemporary conservative connotations, the work ethic's roots are progressive. While primarily a work of philosophy, Anderson's approach is broadly historical, tracing the battle over the meaning of the idea of the work ethic from its 17th century "pro-worker" Puritan roots to its current neoliberal iteration. The progressive view—encompassing thinkers as diverse as Puritan priest Richard Baxter and John Locke (and later Smith, Mill, and Marx, among others)—posits a work ethic that values the dignity of all labor and seeks to constitute a polity that honors this dignity by ensuring that those who labor do so freely, under just conditions, and are granted social respect and the material means to flourish.

In Anderson's interpretation, Puritan demands for ascetic discipline elevated labor's status from a begrudging necessity to a tribute to God, transforming it into an honorable activity. Given work's exalted status, Puritan thinkers then demanded employers pay and treat workers fairly. But the progressive work ethic did not merely counsel employers not to be tyrannical. It denounced those who undermined this ethic, rich and poor alike. In John Locke she finds not an abstract and absolute philosophical claim that mixing one's labor with nature creates an entitlement to private property, but rather a historical figure writing amid a wave English land enclosures that enriched and empowered ever-larger property owners and left countless farmers landless.

Here is where Anderson's class analysis comes into play. "Locke's argument clearly specifies the class basis of threats to people's property." Crucially, "[in] contrast to libertarian interpretations, these threats come not from the poor, but from the privileged." To bolster her claim, she points to Locke's support for anti-usury laws, to his explicit distinction between "industrious" landowners who were entitled to advantageous tax laws and interest rate policies compared to those who were merely rent seeking, and to Locke's insistence that, upon entering civil society, a person relinquished "as much of his natural liberty in providing for himself, as the good, prosperity, and safety of the society shall require." Anderson's Locke did not worship at the altar of absolute property rights but rather perceived hard work and productivity as acts deserving not only moral praise but also governmental favor.

Capacious and nuanced as Locke's work ethic might be, Anderson nevertheless runs into some trouble with him. When discussing Locke's view of North America, Anderson notes that Locke advocated "[giving] away small parcels of land to settlers in the colonies" which "would…help to establish an independent yeomen class – although at a grave cost to Native Americans, whom Locke mistakenly believed did not practice agriculture." This is quite the mistake to acknowledge in a dependent clause. It becomes an even more curious issue when coupled with what Anderson believes to be the most valid critique of her portrayal of Locke as "pro-worker": his advocacy of whipping children as young as 3 years old and sentencing them to

hard labor for the crime of "idleness." Rather than seeing these as unfortunate aberrations from an otherwise commendable progressive work ethic, these shortcomings should have perhaps provoked Anderson to consider how notions of idleness relate to the construction of historical meanings of work—"independent" or waged, "productive" or reproductive. This kind of consideration could shed light on how particular kinds of labor by particular historical subjects—say, white men's agricultural or waged industrial labor—become worthy of attachment to a work ethic in the progressive imagination while other activity by other subjects is deemed inaction, if recognized at all.

Anderson sees Locke's view of toddler idleness as a key vulnerability that provided a philosophical opening for the conservative "hijacking" of the work ethic in the 18th century. For those who espoused the conservative work ethic, Locke's seemingly more minor punitive proclivities are given broader social application. In the conservative imagination, people's status and place within society reflects the quantity and quality of their labor. The poor were poor for no other reason than that they did not work sufficiently or the work they performed was of menial social value, which was also a reflection of their failure to develop their faculties through work. For Anderson, figures like Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Malthus are not only exemplars of the conservative work ethic, but also precursors to neoliberalism. In Bentham, she finds an antecedent to neoliberalism's enthusiasm for "outsourcing state functions to private, for-profit enterprises" and generally "punitive workfare for the poor." Bentham was adamant that "[employers], husbands, and fathers" had every right to force the poor—be they servants, wives, or children—to coerced labor in private prisons (his "panopticons" of legend) "to work off considerably more than the costs of their maintenance," enjoying no privacy, no pleasure, and, needless to say, no freedom. Bentham's vision was in its own strange way utopian, but, more importantly, it was scientific: these institutions would be self-sustaining and profitable, they would make children, women, and the poor useful but treat them in accordance with their social station as (in Bentham's words) humanity's "refuse," as "that part of the national live stock which has no feathers to it, and walks upon two legs."

Hardly a moral outcast, Bentham was joined by others like Malthus who promoted a conservative work ethic in similar vein. Unlike Anderson's progressives who saw idleness as something that plagued the privileged as much or more than the poor, conservatives were single-minded in insisting that insofar as the lack of work ethic was a social problem at all, it was one exclusively confined to the poor. Yet to call it a "problem" within the conservative vision is to short sell their instrumental view of punishment for "idleness." After all, as Anderson shrewdly argues: "If the threat of misery is needed to spur learning and virtue, shouldn't we think the idle rich, insulated by their property from such threats, are stupid and vicious, and undeserving of property they merely inherited?" The aim of conservatives was not to save the souls of the poor but to preserve power and privilege.

While these conservatives "highjacked" the work ethic in the 18th and early 19th century, their victory was hardly final. New generations of progressives reclaimed the work ethic, or at least attempted to for a brief moment in time. Anderson highlights Adam Smith's reversal of conservatives' assumption that wealth was the product of virtue, poverty the product of vice. For Smith, the opposite was the case: "The labour and time of the poor is in civilized countries sacrificed to maintaining the rich in ease and luxury." From this assumption flowed various "pro-worker" positions such as the lauding of high wages and advocacy for universal public education as a remedy for the deadening monotony of manufacturing labor. Following Smith, Anderson assembles a variety of progressive work ethic traditions espoused by Ricardo, Mill, and Marx,

and ultimately culminating in Eduard Bernstein. In Anderson's history, the progressive work ethic found ultimate expression in the social democratic politics of the post-World War II period, but, as with the conservative work ethic, this triumph was only momentary. However forceful progressive arguments might have been, it was ultimately neoliberals who claimed the work ethic by the late 20th century, giving it the conservative and worker-hostile hue with which we associate it today.

All of Anderson's scholarly virtues are displayed in this book: rigor, subtlety, and commitments to both historicism and confronting present-day political dilemmas. She is careful to note how the work ethic emerged amid pivotal historical episodes of profound political and economic change, with dutiful references to historians as varied as Holly Brewer and Robert Allen. She has also mastered recent contemporary policy debates on issues ranging from private equity's impact on employment and welfare reform's effects on poverty. All of this is accomplished with her trademark clarity and moral urgency.

The book's methodological assumptions, however, leave open to question if it is up to the task of its subtitle: explaining *How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic Against Workers and How We Can Take It Back.* Early in the book Anderson endorses Max Weber's denunciation of "naïve historical materialism" that suggests that "ideas about how we live are a mere reflection of 'economic situations.'" It was through confronting new social problems, Anderson argues, that thinkers reached for and formulated ideas to justify new ways of ordering social life. As a concise critique of a hopelessly mechanical view of the relation between ideas and social orders, this is fair enough. But as an explanation of what ideas are and how they work—to say nothing of how workers might "take back" the work ethic that "neoliberalism" robbed them of—it leaves one wanting.

Anderson writes that in the late 20th century "social democracy began to lose ground to neoliberalism," noting that public policies and "business strategies…dramatically changed." She stresses that "the ideological rationale for these changes is at root a revival of the conservative work ethic." There's a broader lesson here: over time ideologies take hold, attaining such a strong grip on the social imagination that no other way of thinking seems possible. Until it does. But why and how does that happen? Anderson doesn't address this directly, instead opting to draw perceptive parallels between Bentham and Malthus, on the one hand, and neoliberal ideology on the other. She does this not only to condemn the conservative work ethic as needlessly cruel but also to illuminate the fundamental inegalitarianism at the core of neoliberalism.

The value of such a move, however, comes with analytical and political costs: for all its impressive erudition, the book only gestures at explanations for why the conservative work ethic ultimately triumphed when it did. While informed by economic history, *Hijacked* does not pretend to be a work of political economy. Its stated purpose is to "recover [the progressive work ethic's] forgotten resources." Yet those ideational resources can only be effectively deployed if one has a sense of why and how ideas achieve and lose hegemonic status.

Anderson's master metaphor—hijacking—turns ideas into things, objects that can be possessed, lost, stolen, but possibly found again. Yet the social history of the work ethic in the 20th century suggests a different understanding of ideas, one that sees them not as external to historical subjects and thus capable of being plucked from one time and effectively inserted into another, but instead as part of the historical inheritances that help constitute subjects themselves. It's one thing for an individual to believe in the "dignity of labor" in the abstract. It's quite another for workers who ate shit in factories, and whose parents and grandparents ate shit, to feel

compelled in particular historical circumstances to occupy factories and face down the national guard to demand that dignity.

The transition to neoliberalism was not a byproduct of rational arguments over how to conceive of social and political life, but rather the consequence of severe capitalist crisis. In her chapter on the neoliberal work ethic, Anderson briefly mentions stagflation and then, conceding to her imagined critics, states that perhaps government was regulating the economy too much. Whatever else one can say about the nature and importance of regulation, this not only undersells the problem of the 1970s, it also misidentifies its key sources. Neoliberals, as Quinn Slobodian and others have noted, began developing their ideas in the first half of the 20th century in response to the demands of "industrial democracy" and decolonization—that is, in response to freedom's social broadening—but only achieved ideological success in the late 20th century. Why then and not earlier?

The melding of social and intellectual history can help answer this question. In the U.S., the years 1960 to 1965 averaged around 220 major strikes per year. 1966 to 1970 saw an average of 377. The combination of worker insurgency (fueled by a belief in something approximating the progressive work ethic) and increased international competition provoked a severe crisis for capital: manufacturing firms saw their rate of profit fall nearly 41 percent. Non-manufacturing firms' rates of profit likewise fell 23 percent between 1965 and 1973. As historian Tim Barker has shown, Vietnam War spending generated intense labor demand where it was scarce in defense and capital goods sectors, producing not only inflation across the economy but also a capital goods investment boom that would, by the 1970s, lead to excess capacity. Labor militancy continued into the 1970s as oil shocks and historic crop failures drove prices higher. This inflation occurred even as a mid-decade embrace of austerity drove up unemployment. It was these crises of capital that provoked investor runs on the dollar. By the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter appointed Paul Volcker to chair the Federal Reserve knowing full well his commitment to resolving the crisis of capital by restoring the value of the dollar through a severe constriction of the growth of its supply, sending interest rates soaring and inducing a deep recession. Though it was a crisis long in the making, this deliberate creation of mass unemployment to tame labor and save capital created the conditions for the conservative work ethic to flourish.

Ideas are given material force in historically specific contexts. Explaining how constellations of ideas are made and used to make sense of and shape historical change is the hard yet rewarding task of any intellectual history. This is hardly a pedantic methodological quibble. Anderson makes a moving case for history as an emancipatory project. History, she explains, helps "reveal how differently people thought and acted in the past, and thereby demonstrate the profound contingency of how we think and act today." Fusing the careful study of ideas with the study of social, political, and economic forces can help us understand not only that contingency exists, but, more importantly, can also help explain *how* "all that is solid melts into air." Any modern ideology of work is inevitably entangled with questions of power and social stratification. If the progressive work ethic has any chance of revival, then it must be achieved through a fight, through—as one of Anderson's more perceptive interlocutors might put it—class struggle.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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