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Labor History

ISSN: 0023-656X (Print) 1469-9702 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/clah20

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To cite this article: David A. Spencer (2009) The 'work as bad' thesis in economics: origins, evolution, and challenges, Labor History, 50:1, 39-57, DOI: 10.1080/00236560802615236

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00236560802615236

Labor History
Vol. 50, No. 1, February 2009, 39–57

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The 'work as bad' thesis in economics: origins, evolution, and challenges

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This paper argues that in all major of epochs of economic thought – mercantilist, classical, and neoclassical – work has been portrayed as an unloved necessity. Politically, the treatment of work as a necessary evil has created undue pessimism about the prospects for progress in the quality of work and has helped to justify repressive policies to compel the working population to work hard. The 'work as bad' thesis, however, has been challenged by several writers, including Marx and the American institutional economists Commons and Veblen. These authors showed how the costs of work were socially determined and highlighted the possibility for intrinsically rewarding work under a transformed system of work. It is argued that in spite of some efforts to extend the analysis of work in mainstream economics such analysis is still lacking in comparison with similar analysis developed outside the mainstream paradigm. The paper outlines some of the strengths of an alternative economics of work based on insights drawn from non-mainstream economics.

1. Introduction

It has been commonplace in mainstream economics to assume that work is an instrumental activity. Workers perform work, so the argument has gone, because they wish to reap the benefits of consumption. Work is what workers do to earn a living and would be avoided if there was no desire to earn and spend. A key belief has been that work activity contributes negatively to human welfare. It has been assumed that work is a 'bad' or 'disutility' that must be bribed from reluctant workers by the enticement of income and consumption. Human beings supposedly yearn for a life where they can consume as much as they want, without the pain and inconvenience of work.[1]

The 'work as bad' thesis has persisted in one form or another throughout the history of economic thought. It can be detected in mercantilism and classical economics and has also been a key feature of neoclassical economics. The precise reasons why work has been considered a 'bad', however, have evolved over time. Some prominent early contributors (e.g. Adam Smith) painted the actual activity of work as an inherent pain. Following Smith, classical economists including Jeremy Bentham believed that work was devoid of any intrinsic merit and that human happiness was associated with the avoidance of work. In standard neoclassical economics, the resistance to work has been seen to stem from the supposed delights of leisure time and there has been little interest in the intrinsic costs and benefits of work. Only since the 1990s with the emergence of the 'economics of happiness' has attention turned in neoclassical economics to the direct impact of work on human well-being.

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ISSN 0023–656X print/ISSN 1469–9702 online

DOI: 10.1080/00236560802615236
http://www.informaworld.com

Running almost in parallel with mainstream economics, however, there has remained a body of opinion that has opposed the view that work is all about economic gain and is not pursued for its own ends. Karl Marx, to take one notable example, argued that work could be a fulfilling activity. The hardships of work, according to Marx, were not an inevitable fact of life, but rather were a product of the relations of production evident under capitalism. Nineteenth century critics of classical economics such as Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin also highlighted the direct benefits of work and were critical of the form of work present in capitalist society. From a different vantage point, writers associated with early American institutional economics (e.g. John R. Commons and Thorstein Veblen) believed that work could be a source of fulfilment and not an interminable pain. Veblen, indeed, specifically challenged the neoclassical assumption of the marginal disutility of labour as both factually incorrect and conceptually flawed. The critique of the mainstream economics literature on work has been developed by modern writers.[2] Critics stress the importance of the non-pecuniary aspects of work and promote the case for improvement in the quality of work.

This paper examines the nature and development of ideas on work in economic thought. First, it establishes the existence and persistence of the 'work as bad' thesis in mainstream economics. Tracking the evolution of ideas from mercantilism through classical economics to neoclassical economics, it shows how most mainstream economists have regarded work as a costly activity that is performed for ulterior motives. Mainstream economics, in general, has assumed that work is inherently a 'bad thing' and has failed to uncover the social origins of workers' aversion to work. Politically, the treatment of work as a necessary evil has created undue pessimism about the prospects for progress in the quality of work and has helped to justify repressive policies to compel the working population to work hard. Second, the paper considers contributions to the study of work made by several notable critics of mainstream economics. These writers, including Marx and the American institutional economists Commons and Veblen, indicated the potential for an alternative vision of work by showing how the costs of work were specific to the structures and institutions of capitalism. They highlighted how it was possible and indeed necessary to achieve intrinsically rewarding work in the future by the transformation of work.

Since the mid-1990s, efforts have been made to extend the conception of work in mainstream economics. Happiness research, for example, has employed data on job satisfaction to proxy the utility derived from work. Such research has helped to address some longstanding gaps in the mainstream economics literature. Yet, as argued below, it contains several deficiencies. In terms of the understanding of well-being at work, there are suggested to be areas where mainstream economists can learn lessons from the analysis of their counterparts in non-mainstream economics. One purpose of the paper is to outline some of the potential benefits of using insights gained from non-mainstream economics to develop and improve the economic analysis of work. Some brief examples where non-mainstream economics can help the labour researcher are mentioned in a later section.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section considers the contribution of the mercantilists and the classical economists to the conceptulisation of work. The third section discusses the analysis of work in neoclassical economics, both past and present. The fourth section examines the ideas of critics of the mainstream economists' treatment of work as a 'bad'. The fifth section draws together the main arguments in the preceding sections and offers some conclusions.

2. Early perspectives on work in economic thought

It has become an established opinion among historians of economic thought that the transition from mercantilism to classical economics in the mid-eighteenth century led to the emergence of a more 'liberal' attitude to labour in British political economy.[3] This opinion, however, has been questioned by some historians. Hatcher, for example, highlights continuities in respect of the attitude of eighteenth century economists toward wages and worker motivation.[4] This section argues that there was a further aspect of continuity in the debate on labour in eighteenth century economic thought. This aspect relates to the conception of work. Hence, while increasing numbers of economists in the post-1750 period accepted that workers could be motivated to work hard by the carrot of high wages, most continued to believe, like their mercantilist predecessors, that workers had little appetite for work and wished to spend their time idly. This was partly because work itself was seen as a source of pain. The view of work as a 'bad', as we shall see below, persisted in nineteenth century classical political economy.

The mercantilists believed that the 'lower classes' in society were naturally indisposed to work hard. Allegedly lacking any strong material aspirations and being innately lazy, the typical worker was considered to pose a significant threat to national prosperity. The worker had to be cowered by the stick of poverty, or else the nation was doomed to economic failure.[5] When Arthur Young wrote that 'everyone but an idiot knows that the lower classes must be kept poor, or they will not be industrious', he was representing the majority opinion in the mercantilist literature in the period before 1750.[6]

There was also a sense in which the problem of work avoidance was inevitable. An underlying view was that work was intrinsically unrewarding, implying that it would be avoided by all classes in society.[7] At least there was little recognition that work might be entered into voluntarily, say as a means to realise and develop human potentialities. Work, instead, was viewed as a disutility that had to be coerced from people. Adopting a biased standpoint, the mercantilists took the view that the middle and upper classes could overcome the painfulness of work activity, due to their alleged innate ambition and foresight. It was only in the case of the labouring classes that the disutility of work became a cause for concern, since they supposedly had no natural inclination to work, but instead desired to idle away their time. It was the combination of this innate resistance to work and the inherent displeasure of work that necessitated that the worker be forced to work by brutal means.

Mercantilism argued that workers had a 'duty to labour' on behalf of the nation and portrayed the dedication to work as a sign of patriotism.[8] Here work was represented as a 'good thing' on account of its contribution to the economic success of nation. It was also claimed that work helped to inculcate in the workforce sound morals. Drunkenness and debauchery which were viewed as the favourite pastimes of the lower classes could be deterred by imposing on workers long hours of work. A belief was that workers who worked long hours for low wages could lead 'better' and 'happier' lives.[9] In this case, work was not seen as desirable of itself: it was viewed as 'good' only because of the supposed 'evils' that filled the free time of workers.

The mercantilists, of course, had vested interests in the policies they proposed. As owners of property, they stood to gain from the encouragement of low wages for the labouring population. Their arguments were marred by bias in this sense. What these writers failed to recognise was the actual hardships of work faced by workers. While it was true that many British workers in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century

resisted work, this was not because they were lazy as such or that work was intrinsically painful. Rather work resistance was largely endogenously created. Wage-labour, which was growing in importance at this time, challenged the established freedoms of workers to control their labour and was also associated with inferior working conditions.[10] When the supply of labour fell in more prosperous times, leading to loud complaints from the mercantilists, this was due in part at least to the negative qualitative experience of work. The mercantilists observed only the effects of the 'labour problem', rather than its underlying causes, which stemmed from workers' resistance to the form of work evident under the developing system of wage-labour.[11]

The transition to classical economics did not alter in any fundamental way the depiction of work in economic thought. Adam Smith, the founder of classical economics, assumed that work was 'toil and trouble'.[12] He gave the impression that human beings would experience pain in working, regardless of where or how work was performed. Admittedly when Smith turned to the consideration of wages he argued that work might differ in its qualitative aspects. Thus it was stated that in some jobs the work was more 'agreeable' than in others.[13] Smith thought that wages would adjust to take account of the differences in the type and quality of work: an idea that has since come to form the basis of the theory of compensating wage differentials (see below). Furthermore, he claimed that the costs of work were linked to the actual conditions of work. The technical division of labour, for example, was acknowledged to have added greatly to the drudgery of work.[14] Yet Smith remained of the view that work was against human nature and that pleasure came from the realms of consumption and leisure rather than from the realm of work.[15] Thus he wrote that:

> Equal quantities of labour, at all times and places, may be said to be of equal value to the labourer. In his ordinary state of health, strength and spirits; in the ordinary degree of his skill and dexterity, he must always lay down the same portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness.[16]

Here Smith represented work as an unloved necessity. It retained this characteristic 'at all times and places'. Work was to be contrasted with the 'ease', 'liberty' and 'happiness' that could be obtained by workers outside work time. Significantly, Smith failed to set out any clear vision of how work might be made into a positive undertaking. Rather he tended towards the view that the costs of work were a necessary and ineluctable aspect of human life. In this respect at least, his views did not differ from those of the mercantilists.

As far as Smith's recognition of work degradation is concerned, he linked this problem to the technical division of labour and did not make any wider observation about the negative impact of wage-labour on the quality of work. Indeed, from Smith's perspective, the hardships of work caused by excessive job specialisation were a necessary evil required to raise the level of labour productivity. Workers were to tolerate stultifying and meaningless work in return for greater economic growth and hence higher wages. Smith proposed that certain reforms be implemented to deal with dehumanising work, but such reforms were limited to the provision of state funded education. He did not contemplate that direct action should be taken to transform the nature and organisation of work; rather he implied that workers were to accept the fact that work was a source of 'toil and trouble'.

Smith's negative conception of work was taken on board by most subsequent classical economists. Jeremy Bentham, writing in 1817, denied that there was any inherent merit in work activity. He wrote that: '*Aversion* – not *desire* – is the emotion – the only emotion

which *labour*, taken by itself is qualified to produce. . . . In so far as *labour* is taken in its proper sense, *love of labour*, is a contradiction in terms.'[17] Bentham stated that people worked simply to meet their basic material needs and that they had no desire to work for its own sake.[18] The assumption that work was a perpetual 'bad' helped to consolidate the view that workers were meant to suffer pain in earning their living and thus lent important ideological support to the status quo.

Among the classical economists, only J.S. Mill took seriously the requirement for progress in the quality of work. Mill felt that the advance of technology in industrial society had eroded the qualitative experience of work and that change was required in the form of work organisation to curb the human costs of work.[19] Although he flirted with socialism, he ultimately equivocated over whether capitalism should be replaced.[20] He did though see the need for a more democratic system of production and gave his support to the formation of worker-owned firms. Such firms not only helped to increase the incentive to work; they also contributed to:

> the healing of the standing feud between capital and labour; the transformation of human life, from a conflict of classes struggling for opposite interests, to a friendly rivalry in the pursuit of a good common to all; the elevation of the dignity of labour; a new sense of security and independence in the labouring class; and the conversion of each human being's daily occupation into a school of social sympathies and the practical intelligence.[21]

Here Mill implied that work could be transformed into a positive and dignified activity in its own right. Such a view, as we will see below, allies him with non-mainstream economists. Yet, Mill's views on work were not wholly consistent. Despite the sentiments expressed in the above quote, Mill argued elsewhere that work was an inherent pain that was pursued for its extrinsic rewards. Responding to Thomas Carlyle's controversial essay on the slave question,[22] Mill wrote that: 'Work, I imagine, is not a good in itself. There is nothing laudable in work for work's sake.'[23] Mill had good intensions in making this point. Specifically, he wanted to repudiate the idea put forward by Carlyle that work was always a 'good thing'. Carlyle had argued that the free slaves in the West Indies had become worse off due to the lack of regular work and he argued for a return to slavery in order to elevate the quality of their lives. Mill argued correctly that, in the case of slaves, work could not be enjoyed because it was imposed on them.[24] Only freely undertaken work could be regarded as making a positive contribution to human welfare. The problem, however, was that Mill took the argument too far. By portraying all work as a 'bad', he was led to cast doubt on the possibility for improvement in work quality. Ironically his insistence on retaining the idea that work was an intrinsic pain helped to undermine his own arguments in favour of work reform and offered support to those like Carlyle who sought to reconcile the working classes to their fate as the burden bearers of society.

This section has argued that the idea of work as a disutility survived the movement from mercantilism to classical economics. What failed to emerge from the economics literature in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century was any clear and consistent emphasis upon the possibility for making work into a source of fulfilment and pleasure. Work remained for both the mercantilists and the classical economists a painful activity that must be extracted from workers. In political terms, their doctrines were unsympathetic to the cause of the defenders of the interests of working people who argued that the painfulness of work was linked to the actual system of work and who pushed for policies to counter the direct hardships of work.[25]

3. Concepts of work in neoclassical economics

The core of the neoclassical analysis of work is captured in the conventional model of labour supply that is taught to every student of economics.[26] In this model, the worker-cum-consumer is assumed to face a trade-off between income and leisure. On the one hand, the worker is required to spend time at work in order to earn income that can be used to buy valuable goods and services. On the other hand, the worker has a preference for leisure time and this leads him or her to avoid work. Given these considerations, the worker is assumed to make a rational choice between income and leisure that leads to the maximisation of his or her utility.

The above model can be seen to incorporate several key assumptions about work. First, it assumes that work is pursued merely as a means to income and consumption: there is a lack of insight into possible non-pecuniary reasons for undertaking work. Another way of putting this point is in terms of the dichotomy between extrinsic and intrinsic work motivation. Thus, it can be argued that neoclassical economists have focused upon extrinsic work motivation, to the neglect of intrinsic work motivation.[27] Second, there is a view that work is resisted not because work itself is painful, but rather because leisure is a 'good'. The assumption that the marginal utility of leisure time is positive provides the basis for the assumption that the marginal disutility of labour is positive.[28] This clearly marks it out from the approach of earlier classical economists, where the assumption was made that work itself was a direct source of pain (see above). Because the marginal utility of leisure time is taken to be unambiguously positive, it is implied that workers will resist work from the first hour (and indeed first second) of work: there is no allowance for the fact that work might have positive utility (at least relative to leisure) over some range of work hours. Third, it is assumed that workers are indifferent towards *how* they spend their hours at work. On receiving wages that match the opportunity cost of work time, workers are said to give their full consent to the demands placed upon them in production. Here there is the assumption that employers will face no difficulties in motivating workers to work hard. Further and perhaps more critically, it is implied that workers will not be affected either positively or negatively by the conditions and organisation of work.[29] Workers, it seems, will be 'happy' to work under any kind of work organisation, provided they can meet their (given) preferences for market commodities and leisure.

The standard textbook model of labour supply, in short, can be seen to offer a peculiarly slanted view of work. Thus, while it considers the temporal and monetary aspects of work, it takes no account of the actual nature and quality of work itself. Indeed, work as such is completely overlooked in the model: utility is seen to be a function of income and leisure time alone. The focus is effectively on the interests of people as consumers rather than as workers. Ignored is the influence that work itself has on human welfare.

Even extensions to the above model do not fully resolve this bias. Take the example of the theory of compensating wage differentials. It is assumed in this theory that workers adjust their wage demands in accordance with the qualitative features of work. Workers, for example, are suggested to accept lower wages in return for more interesting work. This takes into consideration the impact of differences in workers' preferences for work on their decision to accept available jobs; however, it does not say how work might be changed to advance the well-being of workers. Compensating differentials may offer workers some financial recompense for 'bad work' but they do not in any way alleviate the direct hardships of work. The impression is given that workers are fully rewarded for the costs

they endure in their jobs and there is no direct suggestion that measures might be required to enhance the lives of workers in production.[30] Further, it can be noted that the quality of work is defined in terms of the subjective evaluations of individual workers. It is assumed that workers' valuations of the intrinsic qualities of work are reflected in the wages attached to jobs. There is a lack of attention to possible objective approaches to the quality of work that consider the extent to which human needs (as distinct from subjective preferences) are met by the work that workers perform.[31] The theory of compensating wage differentials, in short, still offers a partial and incomplete account of the impact of work on the welfare of workers.

The neoclassical analysis of work has, in fact, developed through time. The simple income-leisure model of labour supply outlined above only came to dominate in the twentieth century and was contested by some of the founders of neoclassical economics such as W.S. Jevons and Alfred Marshall. Both Jevons and Marshall indicated that the actual activity of work could have a negative as well as positive impact on the welfare of workers and extended the economic analysis of work to include consideration of the qualitative dimensions of work.[32] Marshall, indeed, placed great stress on the importance of work in human life. Writing in 1873, he proclaimed that: 'Work, in its best sense, the healthy energetic exercise of faculties, is the aim of life, is life itself'.[33] Marshall, however, was aware that many workers endured rather than enjoyed their hours of paid work and this led him to propose a number of reforms, such as a reduction in the length of the working day,[34] to enhance the quality of work life.

The insights of Jevons and Marshall on work were not fully incorporated into neoclassical economics. Although the notion of the marginal disutility of labour was inherited from their writings, as we have seen above, the definition of this concept was narrowed to capture the putative benefits of leisure time. How and why did this happen? In part, it was explained by the success of the Austrian-inspired opportunity cost framework. This framework, when applied to the work decision, linked the cost of work to the alternative uses of work time and denied that work itself had any influence on the well-being of workers. Its acceptance can be seen as a key factor behind the eclipse of work in neoclassical economics.[35]

The reduction of the worker's choice to a trade-off between income and leisure suited neoclassical economics in several ways. Analytically, it made the modelling of labour supply more tractable. It avoided potentially troublesome issues regarding the measurement of the intrinsic costs and benefits of work activities and instead allowed for a clear focus on two variables (i.e. work hours and wages) that were readily quantifiable. This particular benefit became more important in the post-war period as neoclassical economics moved to embrace mathematics and econometrics in a systematic way. Ideologically, the focus on the above trade-off also allowed for the distancing of orthodox economics from the controversial issue of 'alienation' that had figured in the writings of several critics of capitalism.[36]

A critical response to some of the arguments made above is that while the standard neoclassical model of labour supply may have issues to confront in terms of the realism of its assumptions, including its adoption of an instrumental view of work, it can still perform well in predicting the behaviour of individual workers in the labour market. Several points can be made here. First, it is not clear how well this model can predict behaviour.[37] Consider the decision taken by an individual worker to move between available jobs and where possible to vary work hours as well as work effort. Here it can be argued that the

actual qualitative experience of work has an important bearing on how the worker behaves. A worker who has freedom over work tasks and is able to enjoy the challenge and difficulty of work thus may be expected to have a higher level of well-being and in turn have a greater willingness to work longer and harder than another worker who is heavily constrained at work and experiences work as a drudge. Prediction on the basis of the assumption that work makes a neutral impact on well-being will not yield meaningful results in the above case. Workers' well-being may also impact on their responsiveness to changes in exogenous factors (e.g. tax rates). It could be argued, for example, that the disincentive effect of a higher rate of income tax is lessened in certain jobs because of the high quality of work offered by such jobs.[38] Also, the 'prediction' that workers are better off in the case of a wage rise (holding work hours constant) may be undermined by the fact that other aspects of work, such as the required level of effort, are getting worse.[39] The point is that workers care about more than just the level of wages and the length of work hours and the conventional neoclassical model of labour supply has potentially less predictive power while it abstracts from the quality of work and its impact on the welfare of workers. Scitovsky is one of the few mainstream economists to have recognised this particular point, although his own efforts to advance the economics of labour supply have been largely overlooked in the mainstream.[40] Further extensions and revisions to the conventional labour supply model have been proposed by several other writers.[41]

Second, the focus on prediction is something of a red-herring. There remains the issue that even if it is true that the standard neoclassical model of labour supply has some predictive power (a highly debatable point) it is still not able to address important questions that arguably it ought to consider. By taking the view that work is a purely instrumental activity, neoclassical theory effectively abstracts from the direct influence of work organisation on human welfare. If all that determines well-being are wages and work hours, then it does not matter how work is organised. Work can be either despotic or democratic in nature, but its impact on workers' well-being will be zero, so long as wages and work hours remain the same. The neglect of work organisation in the evaluation of well-being runs the clear risk of concealing real inequalities between workers. In truth, the well-being of workers is impaired as well as enhanced by the organisation of work and there is scope to raise the quality of work by taking action to reorganise the workplace. This idea, as we shall see below, is central to perspectives on work in non-mainstream economics.

Important additions to the mainstream economic analysis of work have occurred since the 1970s. A notable development has been the attempt to theorise the internal workings of the firm. Building on early contributions such as that of Alchian and Demsetz,[42] increasing numbers of mainstream economists have explored the problems faced by employers in negotiating and enforcing the employment contract under conditions of imperfect and asymmetric information. Key contributions include transaction cost economics,[43] efficiency wage theory,[44] and personnel economics.[45] All these theories assume that workers as a whole have a strong preference to avoid the actual activity of work. Now, previously in neoclassical economics (see above), workers were only assumed to resist the loss of leisure time. The assumption was made that workers would submit to the authority of employers in return for wages that matched the marginal utility of forgone leisure time. Modern economic theories of the firm relax this assumption by claiming that all workers will use their discretion to avoid the responsibility and exertion of work. Williamson, for example, has referred to the tendency for workers to act

opportunistically, which includes the attempt to minimise work effort.[46] As incorrigible 'shirkers' and 'opportunists', workers are assumed to pose an important challenge to employers' ability to increase output and productivity, and must be compelled to perform work in the way required to realise higher profits.

There are obvious problems, conceptual as well as ideological, with this kind of research. First, there is a glaring failure to locate the endogenous roots of conflict at work. While it is evident that workers may resist work this can be seen as the outcome of the social conditions under which they work and not the result of some defective human trait labelled 'opportunism'.[47] As we shall see below, this point has been made by non-mainstream economists. Second, there is a tendency to identify the existence of conflict at work with the errant behaviour of individual workers: there is no sense in which employers might have a role to play in generating resistance to work by enacting policies that are detrimental to the interests of workers. By focusing on conflict as a 'worker problem', contemporary mainstream economic theories of the firm can be seen to succumb to bias.[48] Third, there is a view that employers take actions which benefit not just themselves but also workers. As in the original model of Alchian and Demsetz, hierarchy is regarded as the 'efficient' solution to the problem of shirking by individual workers. Here there is no consideration of the role that power considerations play in the organisation of work. Fourth, based on the view that work is a bad and workers are lazy, support is given to various control mechanisms (e.g. supervisors and threats of dismissal) to ensure that high productivity is maintained. There is no clear role for alternative policies that aim to raise productivity by making work into a more rewarding and pleasant activity.

From the 1990s onwards, there has emerged a new economics literature on 'happiness' that has incorporated a novel perspective on work.[49] This literature goes against the grain of standard neoclassical economics by arguing that utility or happiness is a cardinally measurable concept. It is suggested that economists should look beyond material measures of well-being and towards subjective measures of happiness drawn from large scale social surveys. In mainstream labour economics, there has been increasing interest in the use of data on job satisfaction. Some mainstream labour economists have used job satisfaction data to successfully predict labour market behaviour.[50] Others have seen job satisfaction as a reliable way to measure the amount of utility or happiness that workers obtain from work.[51]

On the face of it, the economics of happiness seems to offer a resolution to the persistent neglect in neoclassical economics of the impact of work on well-being. Closer inspection, however, reveals problems in its conception of the connection between work and human welfare. In particular, it takes at face value the responses of workers to questions relating to the quality of work. If workers say that they are 'happy' in their jobs, this is taken as evidence of their satisfaction with work. What is lacking is an objective assessment of the quality of work that extends beyond the subjective feelings of workers. It can be argued that even if workers report high job satisfaction they need not be seen as truly satisfied with work, so long as they are employed in jobs that objectively are low quality. Workers, indeed, often adapt their expectations and aspirations to fit their circumstances and their reported job satisfaction may not always accurately reveal their real or true level of well-being. To fully understand the quality of work, it is necessary to enquire into the objective conditions of work and to gauge what impact these conditions have on the choices and freedom available to workers.[52] For example, it can be argued that a job is lower quality than another if it offers workers fewer opportunities to exercise

discretion over work tasks. Here, unlike in happiness research, well-being is evaluated in terms of what workers can do or become in their jobs, not merely how good they feel about the work they perform. As we shall see in the following section, a more objective conception of job quality finds support in non-mainstream economics.

In summary, a hallmark of standard neoclassical economics has been the failure to conceptualise the actual activity of work. While Jevons and Marshall sought to integrate into the neoclassical paradigm understanding of the intrinsic rewards from work, later neoclassical economists came to accept that work was a means only. In spite of some attempts to extend the analysis of work in modern mainstream economics, such analysis remains far from problem-free. In order to draw out more fully the problems in the conception of work in mainstream economics, it is useful to examine rival ideas in the non-mainstream economics literature. This is done in the next section.

4. Ideas on work in non-mainstream economics

The view that work is a disutility with no intrinsic benefit has been contested by a number of writers. An important and influential perspective is that of Karl Marx. In Marx's view, work was not necessarily and inevitably irksome. Indeed, he specifically challenged writers such as Adam Smith for painting all work as 'toil and trouble'.[53] Rather he argued that work was, or could potentially be, life-enhancing. People were required to work in order to meet their basic material needs but they also benefited from the challenge and difficulty of work itself. Marx suggested that human beings were drawn to work as a means to realise their 'species being' and he considered the participation in work as the basis for a contented and fulfilled life.[54] He stressed, however, that the form of work varied between societies. In capitalism, work was experienced as an unwanted burden and was the very antithesis of what work could and ought to be like. Being forced to sell their labour power for wages, workers were unable to exercise any control over the product and process of work and consequently were led to experience work as an external or 'alien' activity.[55]

Marx argued that when mainstream economists portrayed work as a 'bad' they were in fact only capturing the reality of work under capitalism.[56] What they had failed to realise was the possibility for converting work into a non-alienating activity by transcending capitalism. With the move to socialism and eventually communism, Marx envisaged that work could be transformed into a source of fulfilment. In a future communist society, people would come to experience work as a free creative activity; as an end in itself rather than a means to an end.[57]

Other nineteenth century writers considered the potential intrinsic benefit of work. These included Charles Fourier, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris.[58] Of particular interest here is the contribution of Ruskin, since he directly criticised the mainstream economists' conception of work.[59] In Ruskin's view, mainstream economics was culpable of celebrating the material advantages of production, without fully considering the human costs of work. There was indeed a necessity to produce in order to meet the interests of consumers but it was also important to safeguard and promote the interests of producers. Ruskin associated work with skill and craftsmanship and he felt that it could and should contribute in a positive way to human happiness. Yet, he argued that capitalism had robbed work of its expressive qualities.[60] Wage labourers valued work merely as a means to income and had no desire to perform work for its own sake.

Ruskin lamented this fact, because it meant that the working population was unable to experience the artistry and beauty of work.

On the surface, Ruskin appeared as a champion of the working classes by showing how the system of work was to blame for the degradation of work and workers, and by demonstrating the need for radical change in the organisation of work, but his proposals for reform proved controversial. Like Carlyle, he wished to return society to the feudal age. He believed that power should be centralised in the hands of an elite group of people and that democracy and equality should be denied to the rest of society.[61] These elements of Ruskin's work have drawn obvious criticism.[62]

Ruskin inspired the economist J.A. Hobson.[63] Hobson was a critic of the standard materialist definition of wealth in mainstream economics. For him, it was important to consider the human and ethical aspects of production and consumption.[64] Hobson believed that the experience of soulless work under industrial capitalism had undermined the quality of human life and he proposed several specific reforms to increase job quality. Thus, he supported moves to introduce a minimum wage, to shorten working time, and to widen democracy at work, although somewhat curiously he remained an opponent of worker-owned firms.[65] Rejecting the call of radicals for the creation of a socialist society, Hobson looked for progress under a reformed capitalism.[66]

Early American institutional economists were similarly hostile to the work doctrines of mainstream economists. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, economists in the institutional tradition dominated opinion in what became 'labour economics'.[67] The birth and development of labour economics as a separate field in economic research owed something to the narrowness of established economic theory. Specifically, institutional labour economists addressed issues that had been marginalised or ignored by most mainstream economists. One such issue was the qualitative content of work and its influence upon the lives of workers.

The institutional approach to labour economics recognised that work was important not just as a means to consumption but also as a direct influence on human well-being.[68] It was argued that if work was experienced by workers as a pain then this was to be seen as the outcome of the institutional environment of capitalism and was not to be treated as a natural state of affairs. On the contrary it was quite possible to convert work from a 'bad' into a 'good' by the implementation of suitable reforms in the workplace. Institutional economists were heavily critical of neoclassical economists for taking the institutional context as a given and sought to demonstrate how it was possible to revise the institutional structure to affect deep-seated change, including within the sphere of work.

Richard T. Ely, one of the inaugurators of American institutional economics, argued that it was important to consider the impact of work on the personal development of workers. It was no sign of progress that the volume of goods and services was increased if the greater part of the population was subject to degrading and dehumanising conditions at work. Ely believed that the ultimate goal to be aimed at in society was 'the true growth of mankind; namely, the full and harmonious development in each individual of all human faculties'.[69] Such a goal could not be achieved, in Ely's view, without concerted action to improve the quality of work.

J.R. Commons, a student of Ely, paid close attention to the hardships of work under capitalism. He was concerned at the failure of neoclassical economics to illuminate these hardships and to offer solutions to them. He believed like Ely that work should provide opportunities for workers to realise and develop their potentialities.[70] Commons, in line

with other institutional economists, proposed several solutions to the problem of low quality work. These included trade unions and collective bargaining, protective labour laws and social insurance programmes, and progressive forms of labour management. Additionally support was given to demand management policies as a way to secure full employment. A key purpose of Commons was to democratise and humanise the workplace, so that workers could come to secure not just higher wages and greater job security but also more intrinsically rewarding work. It was also made clear that the reform of the workplace could benefit employers by adding to productivity and in turn profitability.[71]

Commons was concerned to create an environment at work that was both equitable as well as conducive to well-being. Workers had a need for self-actualisation in work and this need could only be met with reform to the conditions, organisation, and governance of work. Commons embraced a reformist agenda, and was hostile towards socialist schemes. In his view, capitalism needed to be reformed, not replaced with socialism. Here his views clearly differed from those of Marxists and other radical writers.[72] Likewise, while Commons viewed neoclassical economics as deficient, he drew back from calling for its transcendence. He wanted to see neoclassical theory supplemented with greater institutional analysis.[73] In respect of the analysis of work, a more institutional approach entailed the consideration of the human aspects of work and the commitment to work reform as a means to secure improved job quality.[74]

A direct and novel challenge to the 'work as bad' thesis was offered by Thorstein Veblen. Veblen suggested that all human beings possessed an 'instinct of workmanship'.[75] Rather than eschew work, people would relish performing it, for it offered an outlet for skill and craft. He argued, however, that the inherited instinct of workmanship had come to be submerged by a hostile 'pecuniary culture' that accorded high social status to those who could demonstrate an ability to avoid work.[76] Veblen did not disagree with mainstream economists that work was resisted by workers; yet, unlike his mainstream counterparts, he refused to accept that such resistance was a state of nature. Instead he linked its existence to the operation of cultural forces in society.[77] Politically, Veblen hinted at the superiority of a future society in which the instinct of workmanship would be allowed to flourish, rather than suppressed as it was presently under capitalism.

Notwithstanding the insightfulness of non-mainstream perspectives on work, they have failed to have any decisive or lasting impact on the analysis of work in mainstream economics. Marxian theory, for example, has been consistently and persistently sidelined by mainstream economists. The humanistic tradition that includes the contributions of Ruskin and Hobson has been similarly overlooked in mainstream economic debates.[78] Institutional economics, though for a time an influential force in economic debates in the USA, eventually lost out to a resurgent neoclassical economics.[79] Mainstream economics has effectively developed by ignoring the ideas and theories of non-mainstream economists on the topic of work.

Modern research in mainstream economics, in some respects, has overlapped with non-mainstream economics. The focus on the incompleteness of the employment contract under conditions of imperfect and asymmetric information, for example, revives the Marxian conception that what workers sell is their labour power (or potential to work). In a similar vein, the new interest in non-income measures of well-being overlaps with older approaches such as those of Ruskin and Hobson. The advocates of the economics of happiness, as yet, have failed to recognise the links to these approaches.

The above research, however, has succeeded only in bringing into focus the limitations of mainstream economics both in its own terms and in relation to some established alternatives in non-mainstream economics. The assumption that all workers wish to avoid the actual activity of work which pervades modern economic theories of the firm, as argued above, is not just conceptually false but also ideologically suspect. Modern happiness research at least considers the direct impact of work on human welfare, but it is biased towards the consideration of the subjective welfare of workers. 'Happiness at work' is about more than just feelings of pleasure; it is also about what workers are capable of doing and becoming in the work they perform. That is, there is an objective dimension to well-being at work that is linked to the type and quality of work that workers actually do.[80] This point, though largely neglected in the economics of happiness, has been recognised by economists outside the mainstream paradigm.

The non-mainstream economics literature has much to offer the economic analysis of work. One advantage is that it shows how workers' evaluations of work are related to the social organisation of work. Conflict over work is viewed as socially determined, not asocial. There is also the idea that differences in labour turnover, work hours, and labour productivity across workplaces are affected by the qualitative content of work. For example, jobs that offer a wide variety of work tasks, and provide good social relations may be seen as high quality and may be said to have a positive influence on workers' motivation to work. As mentioned above, the effect of taxes and other external factors on the supply of labour can also be suggested to be influenced by the quality of work life. Mainstream economics, in effect, can be argued to miss some of the complexities of labour supply behaviour by abstracting from the social context in which workers' preferences for work are forged.[81]

A point to stress is that in rejecting the 'work as bad' thesis the intention is not to promote a 'work as good' thesis in its place. This alternative view of work as a divine virtue without intrinsic cost creates a new set of problems. Specifically, it acts to condone *all* kinds of work as necessarily good for workers and avoids any critical engagement with the social conditions under which work is organised. Rather the argument made here is that the impact of work on well-being is dependent on the nature and organisation of work. Just as work can be experienced as irksome where workers have little freedom to work as they like, so it can be a source of fulfilment where workers are able to act freely in their work. This is exactly the point that is made by some of the non-mainstream economists mentioned above. For them, the social context of work determined whether work was experienced as a 'good' or a 'bad'.[82]

Further, in Marxian as well as humanistic and institutional perspectives on work, stress is placed on the need to transform work into an activity that is fulfilling. While work is seen to be important as a means for people to secure a livelihood, there is also recognised to be a key role for work in the realisation of human potential. People work not just to obtain consumption goods but also to develop and realise their creative powers. The point is emphasised that improvement in the quality of work is possible and necessary to meet the needs of people as producers. It is indicated too how progress in the quality of work can be used to secure higher productivity by eliminating expensive control mechanisms and harnessing intrinsic work motivation.

In terms of how work should be organised, there are important differences between non-mainstream economists. Marx, for example, suggested that workers (and also capitalists) were alienated under capitalism and he felt that non-alienating work could only

be achieved by the move to socialism and communism.[83] Humanistic and institutional economists, in contrast, have embraced reform rather than revolution in the quest for better quality work.[84] These writers have advocated a number of measures, ranging from higher wages, shorter work hours, and greater job security through to industrial democracy and worker self-management.

The positive message of the perspectives reviewed in this section is that there is an opportunity for 'good work' in the future. Although these perspectives differ (sometimes radically) in their policy and political implications, they nonetheless broadly agree that work can be, and ought to be, made into an activity that enriches the lives of workers. They reject the pessimistic view that work is all about toil and hardship and instead promote a vision of a future society in which work can be enjoyed for its own sake. This vision is one that ought to inspire a radically different kind of economics of work than currently exists in mainstream economics.

5. Conclusion

There have been two competing conceptions of work in the history of economic thought. A dominant conception favoured by most mainstream economists has portrayed work as a means to an end. To be sure, there has been some disagreement over whether work itself or its substitutes (subsumed under the umbrella term 'leisure') is the cause of the human resistance to work. Notwithstanding this, there has been a clear and consistent emphasis in mainstream economics upon the demerits of work. An alternative (minority) conception most closely associated with non-mainstream economists, by contrast, has seen work as a potentially positive and satisfying activity in its own right. This conception has identified the costs of work with the social conditions under which it is performed and has emphasised the need to enhance the quality of work life by the reorganisation of work.

Do these differences matter? The argument of this paper is that they do matter. Non-mainstream economics offers a number of vital insights on the topic of work that have been missed in mainstream economics. One insight is the connection between the quality of work and the preparedness of workers to work. For example, it is recognised directly that low quality work can impact negatively on the labour supply of workers. A related insight is that the evaluation of well-being should be based on the concept of human need. It is emphasised that people have needs that must be met for them to achieve well-being. Here the conception of needs includes not just the requirement for an adequate income to live but also the opportunity for autonomy over work and the capability to develop skills and competences. There is an awareness that workers face problems in meeting their needs under capitalism and the lack of interesting and meaningful work is seen as the main determinant of the resistance of workers to work. However, there is the view that with appropriate change in the structure and organisation of work workers can satisfy their needs and come to secure high job quality.

The above insights are lacking in even the latest research on job quality in mainstream economics. As we have seen above, a growing number of modern mainstream labour economists have used job satisfaction data to gauge how 'happy' workers are in their jobs. This research has created common ground between mainstream economics and other social scientists. However, it has the drawback of being too narrowly focused upon workers' subjective feelings. It fails to offer an objective or needs-based assessment of job

quality and in this sense remains inferior to perspectives that deal with the impact of work on human welfare which exists in non-mainstream economics.

The attack by critics on the 'work as bad' thesis has been partly political in nature. This thesis tends to align with the interests of employers by suggesting that workers should accept the toil of work as both necessary and inevitable. Non-mainstream economists, like Marx as well as Commons and Veblen, went against this view by showing how workers were driven to resist work by the institutional and social environment in which they lived and worked. These writers also highlighted the way in which work could be made into a benefit rather than a cost, and in ideological terms, their ideas helped to galvanise support for policies aimed at protecting and promoting the rights and interests of workers.

At a time when interest in the quality of work is rising in academic and policy debates,[85] it is important to revisit and re-evaluate the contribution of non-mainstream economics in this area. This is especially so given that mainstream economists have now sought to address the issue of job quality in a direct way. Here there are new opportunities for non-mainstream economists to show the undoubted strength of their theories and ideas.[86] While not underestimating the enormous obstacles faced in engaging with the mainstream, it is to be hoped that in the future perspectives from non-mainstream economics can enter mainstream economic debates in an effective way. As this paper has argued, a fuller understanding of work (in its current and possible future forms) requires a strong and vibrant non-mainstream economics.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful for the comments of three anonymous referees on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful for the assistance and support of the Editor of this Journal. Remaining errors are mine alone.

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Notes

1. Lutz and Lux, *Challenge of Humanistic Economics*, 142–3; Lane, 'Work as ''Disutility''"; Spencer, *Political Economy of Work*.
2. Lutz and Lux, *Challenge of Humanistic Economics*, Chap. 8; Pagano, *Work and Welfare*; Lane, 'Work as ''Disutility''"; Spencer, *Political Economy of Work*.
3. Coats, 'Changing Attitudes to Labour'; Marshall, 'Scottish Economic Thought'; Firth, 'Moral Supervision'; Dew, 'Political Economy'.
4. Hatcher, 'Labour, Leisure'.
5. Furniss, *Position of the Labourer*; Hatcher, 'Labour, Leisure'.
6. Young, *The Farmer's Tour*, vol. 4, 361.
7. Marshall, 'Scottish Economic Thought', 313–14.
8. Furniss, *Position of the Labourer*.
9. Ibid., 121–2; Firth, 'Moral Supervision', 47.
10. Hill, 'Pottage for a Freeborn Englishman'; Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline'.

11. Furniss, *Position of the Labourer*, 128–30; Dew, 'Political Economy', 1216.
12. Smith, *Inquiry into the Nature*, vol. 1, 47.
13. Ibid., vol. 1, 116–17.
14. Ibid., vol. 2, 782.
15. Rosenberg, 'Some Institutional Aspects', 557.
16. Smith, *Inquiry into the Nature*, vol. 1, 50.
17. Bentham, *Deontology*, 104.
18. For a similarly negative depiction of work, see Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, 356–7; McCulloch, *Principles of Political Economy*, 7.
19. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 756.
20. Ibid., 207.
21. Ibid., 792.
22. Carlyle, 'Nigger Question'.
23. Mill, 'Negro Question', 90.
24. Mill, 'Slave Power', 147.
25. It should be noted here that the classical economists adopted a highly sceptical attitude towards the nineteenth century Factory Acts that aimed at alleviating some of the distresses of paid work. See Blaug, 'Classical Economists'. Such scepticism hardly endeared them to the representatives and supporters of the working classes in Britain.
26. Pencavel, 'Labor Supply of Men'; Altman, 'Behavioral Model'.
27. Kreps, 'Intrinsic and Extrinsic Incentives'.
28. Spencer, 'Deconstructing the Labour'; Spencer, 'From Pain Cost'.
29. Pagano, *Work and Welfare*; Steedman, 'Welfare Economics'; Spencer, 'Deconstructing the Labour'; Spencer, 'From Pain Cost'.
30. In reality, it is not evident that workers actually receive 'compensating differentials'. Hence many well-paid workers have high quality jobs, whereas many lower paid workers have low quality jobs.
31. Green, *Demanding Work*, 9–12.
32. Spencer, 'Love's Labor's Lost?'; Spencer, 'Deconstructing the Labour'; Spencer, 'From Pain Cost'. Spencer, *Political Economy of Work*.
33. Marshall, 'Future of the Working Classes', 115.
34. Ibid., 110; Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 720.
35. Spencer, 'From Pain Cost'.
36. Spencer, *Political Economy of Work*.
37. The conventional model of labour supply predicts that the impact of a wage change on work hours will depend on the relative strengths of the income and substitution effects. This is as far as the model goes. It does not say under what circumstances the income effect will outweigh the substitution effect and vice versa. Effectively, it is unable to offer any definitive prediction as to the relationship between labour supply and wages. See Altman, 'Behavioral Model'.
38. Kaufman, 'Expanding the Behavorial Foundations', 370.
39. Green, *Demanding Work*, 8–9.
40. Scitovsky, *Joyless Economy*, 89–105.
41. Kaufman, 'Expanding the Behavorial Foundations'; Prasch, 'Reassessing the Labor'; Altman, 'Behavioral Model'.
42. Alchian and Demsetz, 'Production, Information Costs'.
43. Williamson, *Economic Institutions of Capitalism*.
44. Akerlof and Yellen, *Efficiency Wage Models*.
45. Lazear, 'Future of Personnel Economics'.
46. Williamson, *Economic Institutions of Capitalism*, 47–52.
47. Edwards, 'Politics of Conflict and Consent'.
48. Spencer, 'Love's Labor's Lost?'; Spencer, 'Deconstructing the Labour'; Spencer, *Political Economy of Work*.
49. Frey and Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics*; Layard, *Happiness*.
50. Clark, 'What Really Matters in a Job?'.
51. Frey and Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics*.
52. Green, *Demanding Work*, 13–15; Brown et al., 'Job Quality'.
53. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 611.

54. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 68.
55. Ibid., 66.
56. Sayers, 'Why Work?'.
57. Marx, 'Comments on James Mill', 228.
58. Spencer, 'Work in Utopia'.
59. Lutz and Lux, *Challenge of Humanistic Economics*, 38–40; Lutz, *Economics for the Common Good*, 64–7.
60. Ruskin, 'The Stones of Venice', 194.
61. Hobson, *John Ruskin*, 185–9; Spear, *Dreams of an English Eden*, 154–5.
62. Lutz, *Economics for the Common Good*, 67–8.
63. Lutz and Lux, *Challenge of Humanistic Economics*, 40–3; Lutz, *Economics for the Common Good*, 84–97.
64. Hobson, *Work and Wealth*, 32–7.
65. Ibid., 256.
66. Lutz, *Economics for the Common Good*, 100.
67. McNulty, *Origins and Development*; Boyer and Smith, 'The Development'.
68. Kaufman, 'Industrial Relations', 302–3.
69. Ely, *Labor Movement in America*, 3.
70. Kaufman, 'Institutional Economics', 36–7.
71. Kaufman, 'Industrial Relations', 299–303.
72. Ibid., 299.
73. Hodgson, 'John R. Commons'.
74. Kaufman, 'Industrial Relations', 303.
75. Veblen, 'Instinct of Workmanship'.
76. Veblen, *Theory of Leisure Class*, 26–7.
77. A criticism of Veblen is that he treated work aversion as a cultural phenomenon and failed to identify its linkages with the type and quality of work present within capitalist society. Indeed, Veblen adopted a benign attitude to the industry of capitalism and was neglectful of the negative impact of machinery and technology on workers' lives. See Hodgson, *Evolution of Institutional Economics*, 216–21.
78. Lutz and Lux, *Challenge of Humanistic Economics*; Lutz, *Economics for the Common Good*.
79. Boyer and Smith, 'The Development'.
80. Green, *Demanding Work*, 13–15; Brown et al., 'Job Quality'.
81. Kaufman, 'Expanding the Behavorial Foundations'; Altman, 'Behavioral Model'.
82. Spencer, *Political Economy of Work*.
83. Sayers, 'Why Work?'.
84. Lutz and Lux, *Challenge of Humanistic Economics*; Kaufman, 'Industrial Relations'.
85. Green, *Demanding Work*.
86. Spencer, *Political Economy of Work*.

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