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Return to the Garden of Eden? Learning, working, and living

William Greider: *One world, ready or not. The manic logic of global capitalism.* New York: Touchstone, 1997, 528pp., \$15, ISBN 0-684-81141-3 (pbk)

Jeremy Rifkin: *The end of work. The decline of the global labor force and the dawn of the post-market era.* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995, XVIII+350 pp., \$15.95, ISBN 0-87477-824-7 (pbk)

William Julius Wilson: *When work disappears. The world of the new urban poor.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, XXIII+322 pp., \$27.50, ISBN 0-394-57935-6 (hard)

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It is an old dream of humankind to return to the Garden of Eden and live a life of abundance free of all work and pain. Desires would be satisfied immediately without any effort. However, when all wishes get fulfilled, how would that change the nature of wishing? Would thinking of anything outrageous remain possible? Would some screening agency carefully check for good conduct and decent morality? Or would we become incapable of even thinking of anything off track?

To some it may seem as if communist propaganda always promised such a wonder. Humans would regain a heavenly state on earth if only the living generation tried hard enough in their fight against the evils of class society. But communism, we are told, has had its attempt and it failed miserably. This puts an advantage on a different approach toward an effortless state, that of machine over human. Developing, and properly harnessing, high technology should help us return to Eden, some now make us believe.

Partly true in a mundane way: if the surplus value produced by the workers of high-tech societies were distributed in a different, just way, working hours could be cut down for everybody to something like 20 hours per week or less. Everybody would be engaged in some sort of work, much of it rewarding and creative, only some repetitive and boring and therefore evenly distributed among members of society. The price to be paid for such a dream could, however, be beyond the reach of Western societies: capital would no longer be allowed to collect the surplus value in the form of profit, rent, or interest.

The return to Eden remains a dream, an idealistic ideology at best. It is an ideology insofar as it promises a state of affairs that sounds wonderful at first sight but turns out to be undesirable at second.

But returning to Eden is identical with renouncing the process of knowledge. Absolute abundance of material goods may turn out to be identical with absolute absence of cognition and invention.

Nevertheless, the idea of a workless society has a realistic background. It is the double experience of millions of working people with the drudgery of paid labor and the even more miserable experience of losing their jobs. Day by day, those deprived of jobs seem to survive somehow. Since frequently it is high technology that sets people free, shouldn't an even stronger effort toward development and implementation of high-tech systems help to raise productivity to such a high level that eventually nobody would have to work more than a minimum, but all would lead beautiful lives of leisure — perhaps with the exception of artists, designers, lawyers, doctors, professors, and a few more who would refuse to give up their creative jobs?

If there is good reason for the dream of a new Eden, and if high-tech plays an important role in it, enlightenment is needed to explain the contradiction of a miserable situation that is (mis)taken for the nucleus of a great dream. The explanation is that the heavenly dream mistakes jobs, or labor, for work.

The purpose of education is to prepare the next generation to grow into a society that *eventually will* be theirs, but *is now* still their parents'. Therefore, educators are called upon to make sense out of the alleged end of work, and the drive for lifelong learning that has become almost a panacea worldwide. What is their connection, if there is one? Do jobless people have plenty of time for learning and therefore joyfully filling the ranks of all sorts of "How to master something you never wanted to, quick!" courses? Are they happy about this situation? Or are they rather persuaded into believing that they could again find a job if first they paid for some brush-up course?

Is lifelong learning the trick to make people think they were unqualified in the face of new technology when, in fact, technology was used to render people's qualifications obsolete? Does repeated training secure jobs? Or does it rather increase merciless competition with the predictable result of lower wages and fewer jobs? To which extent do people want to learn permanently, and how much does training for a job differ from learning for knowledge?

The discrepancy between the educational system of a society and the job system has taken on a new form. If you get kicked out of the job system, you are enticed to go for a round of retraining. If you then do not find a job, the inner logic would blame it on you. Perhaps your learning effort was not strong enough, or you were not dedicated to learning the same way as your competitor. Mishaps on the labor market would be your fault and not a systemic outgrowth of a societal condition.

The ideology in this relation of educational effort to chances on the labor market is obvious. The relation is that of supply and demand. If advanced information technology provides working conditions that turn the individual knowledge worker into an organ of a globally supplied body of labor then the odds are heavily in favor of demand and against supply. Books such as the three announced here are often criticized for drawing bleak pictures of the future. But they might depict reality as reality *is*: bleak! Could it also be that educators are asked to change the bleak situation, and lifelong learning is what they come up with? People have always learned throughout their lives, or else they would not have survived. Now it seems as if they were forced into lifelong learning in institutions of all sorts.

Brief summary of the three challenging books

The three books serving as a background for this discussion are about changes occurring with the global reorganization of labor. They pose intriguing questions for educators. By no means are they pessimistic. We would rather recommend them for their realistic analysis and quite optimistic suggestions. Very briefly we summarize their main orientation to give an idea of their contributions to our discussion.

Wilson's "When Work Disappears" is a painful portrait of neighborhoods in US cities where the majority of adults are without work (Chicago is the case studied). It reminds us, with the words of the residents themselves, that the meaning of work is more than the economic importance of the paycheck a

job brings. And it shows, through careful empirical studies, how the fabric of society – the institutions of family, home, and neighborhood – is ruptured when the societal importance of having a job to do is removed from individuals in a community. Wilson’s work gives meaning to Camus’s “without work life stifles and dies.”

We can debate the reasons why “work disappears,” but we cannot quarrel with the effects of the disappearance of steady jobs in a community. But it is this message – the reality that steady jobs can in fact be pulled away from communities, regions, and indeed a country – that needs to be taken seriously. The simple media-based mantra in America states that low-wage jobs are no longer needed, so why not “retool” people with more education and training? This misses the fundamental point that we live and experience life locally, and no rhetoric of global capital movement is going to make us into equally mobile units of humanity. Our experience, and that of our children, is based on some fundamentally human needs for security, which, at least for the last century of capitalism, have been grounded in seeing people prepare for and plan around the act of going out and working at jobs.

Moving beyond the community level to the national level, Rifkin’s “The End of Work” is an analysis of how information and communication technologies will be responsible for the displacement of a major part of the labor force. Starting with technological advances in agriculture, and mass production in manufacturing, Rifkin gives a historical account of how technological developments have led to the displacement of large labor pools. Previous major transitions have succeeded in replacing “old” by “new” work, but Rifkin does not see this as a solution for the next round of technological innovation.

He predicts that the emerging *knowledge sector* will create new jobs for highly qualified people, but the number of these jobs will be far smaller than the number of jobs lost due to information technology. He shows the futility of retraining workers for non-existent jobs. As a possible cure for a post-market society, he argues for the importance of the *third sector* (the independent or voluntary sector) of the economy as opposed to a market-oriented economy.

Greider’s “One World, Ready or Not” is about the process euphemistically referred to as globalization. The text relies on many sources, data, personal experience, and a thorough knowledge of the critique of political economy. Greider tells authentic stories that he analyzes for their inherent contradictions, thus putting them into a perspective of historical developments. He argues that capital’s hunger for profit is limitless, whereas everything on earth is finite.

Our century has seen extreme success around the world in spreading capitalist production, democratic ideas, and the accompanying ideology. Individuals have come to believe that industrial expansion will eventually give them their chance to participate in material affluence, if only they tried hard enough. The ideology of the free market promises an endless process of success. Those who do not make it are themselves to be blamed for becoming victims. Against such strong ideological chains, Greider optimistically propagates the idea of owner-workers: working for a company and owning part of it at the same time.

Work and labor: an important distinction

The common theme of the three books is *the end of work*. This slogan and the social processes behind it put forward a tremendous challenge for education. Although none of the books directly addresses educators, we feel that their messages bear important implications for the end of education – in the double meaning of “end” as in Neil Postman’s work (Postman 1995).

The debate about the end of work is marred by neglecting the fundamental difference between *work* and *labor*. Societies throughout history have reproduced themselves through production, that is, through the combined work of their members. Human life cannot exist without work. A phrase such as “when work disappears,” makes sense only if we read it as work was disappearing from some country because it became cheaper to buy elsewhere. Society in the first country does not cease to reproduce itself. What is disappearing is, in fact, not *work*, but *labor*. How are they different?

Work needs to be done in *any* society for it to reproduce itself. This is independent of the particular form of a society. Work is the perennial natural necessity of humankind by which we remain humans (Marx 1992).

Labor, on the other hand, is a particular *form* of work. It is work for which one gets paid, work that entrepreneurs want to buy and workers offer in the market. Historically, work took on the form of labor only in capitalist societies. Viewed economically, in capitalism, only work that gets paid counts. Viewed culturally, there is no capitalist society that pays for *all* the work spent to reproduce society. Quite to the contrary, huge amounts of necessary work do *not* get paid in capitalism: e.g., much of women's work done at home goes unpaid.

Working and learning

Work at all times implies learning, hidden or overt. Learning always requires some kind of work. If it were true that work disappeared, would learning disappear also? Or, if work disappeared generally, would a conscious learning effort enable some individuals to find niches where work had not disappeared yet? If this was true, lifelong learning would emerge as a way to beat the system for a while, as long as there were such niches, or as long as not all competitors for jobs had discovered their lifelong learning chance.

The reproduction of society has a natural dimension in biology and a cultural dimension in economics. The cultural dimension includes, of course, many more aspects. One of them is education. Education is the complex process by which a society prepares its young members to become full members. In the end, education is a political affair (Bruner 1996). It transcends and preserves: its end is to enable new generations of individuals to act independently and creatively; it also has to preserve what society as a whole needs for its functioning.

This is an extremely basic view, and thus one that does not even touch upon the intricate processes of organizing an education for everybody in coping with the rapidly changing necessities of society. Basic as such a view is, it is tellingly pointing at the ever lasting importance of education. This importance has its roots in the absolute necessity of work for the reproduction of society. Here we see the decisive distinction of work and labor: labor may change, it may even come to an end, and therefore all educational acts that are related to labor may come to an end. But because work does not cease as long as a society exists, an education geared at work does not cease either.

Working implies some kind of immediate and subconscious learning, education can rely on it and must provide environments for rich and differentiated activities. But education, as a societal effort, must go one step further. It cannot be content with the learning that is taking place as soon as any activity happens. Education must lead to a conscious level of learning, one that makes learners aware of their learning processes and procedures.

Are the necessities of societal reproduction really changing as rapidly as we are often made to believe? We doubt it. Certainly, there are many so-called facts that change with technological innovation. But such "facts" should not bother educators. They are bits and pieces of professional knowledge. As such they have their place in training on the job or shortly before. Educated people, however, have learned to learn, know of the intricate relation between their activity and their learning, and can quite easily adapt to new job requirements.

So we see how learning as an implicit ingredient of working helps us concentrate on some essential orientation in all educational efforts. We started out by claiming that there is no learning without work either. Let us briefly elaborate on this.

Learning is not labor. Usually, people do not get paid for learning. To the contrary, they often pay for their education. The fact and level of payment depend on the kind of education and further societal

decisions. But learning is definitely an activity. It is a holistic activity that always inseparably contains manual and mental parts, an observation that defines the starting point for many pedagogical considerations.

As an activity, learning entails working. It also transcends working. The purpose of learning is not the production of something that remains as a separate object when the learning person leaves the scene, but it is rather the production of something that goes with the learning person: an internal state has changed, a subjective product has been created, tied to the learning person.

Even though the work of learning transcends work, it starts out with work. If work could ever end, learning would end, too. The biblical state would return – alas, exactly that: a *biblical* state, one that humankind created in order to have something to think about as a *Gedankenexperiment*. The Garden of Eden is itself an educational invention. Rather than striving for it in an attempt to put work to its end, we should cherish work as essential for humankind. We became humans when we were kicked out of Eden. We were, at the same time, forced to start working. Viewed this way, work greatly bears on education.

Learning and living

A good place to examine the relationship between work and labor is on the local level. Wilson studies poor African American neighborhoods in Chicago. He tells us what it means when a diminishing number of jobs are withheld from people who live in already impoverished communities. Like Rifkin's book, it is not about the end of work, *per se*, but about the end of secure jobs. Wilson focuses on the effects on people's lives when companies withdraw jobs from the communities where these people live. He paints an appropriate starting point for educators to reexamine the role of higher education in providing both a stable base and a secure bridge for individuals and communities in the face of the increasing instability induced by the flights of capital.

Both the meaning of work and the concrete experience of going to a job provide a means of rooting people to communities—making them feel and act in a connected way—to institutions such as schools, churches, clubs, and community-action projects. When they “lose their feeling of connectedness to work in the formal economy” they not only lose their place in the community, but adults also see a whole set of expectations ripped away from their children. The taken-for-granted act of leaving home at a fixed time each day, and going off to “the job,” are markers of stability that gave rise to whole sets of expectations that we know as the foundation of belief in education. The statistics are quite clear: children of people without jobs have much higher school drop-out rates and rarely have the expectation, let alone privilege, of going on to college. Is lifelong learning a perspective for them?

The *third sector* of society plays an eminent role in Rifkin's book. It has always existed besides private and public enterprises, and has decisively shaped the United States. It was developed as a theoretical concept by French sociologists in the 1980s. Social economy, as they called it, is based on use value, and built around the concept of volunteer work in solidarity. Activities in the third sector are *work* and are tied to the existence of the community, and this is what makes them so attractive. People feel that alienation from their activity disappears if that activity is work of the third sector kind instead of labor for some distant profit purpose.

The economic categories of use value and exchange value build another basis for the distinction of work from labor. Work is tied to use value, whereas labor reflects exchange value. Use value cannot disappear. An immediate consequence of this would be to resist attempts at commercializing schools and commodifying education. To the degree that people started to believe they can buy an education, rather than work on it, they would fall victims to the alienating forces of the market.

Do people learn because they want to increase their “market value,” or do they learn because they care for a sustainable communal life, and for their personal development? To which extent are they motivated by extrinsic forces as opposed to their intrinsic desires? In a market society, both motivations

hold true. It is up to educators to strengthen the second type of motivation by providing opportunities to engage in self-directed learning (Fischer 1998).

Greider's book implicitly carries a strong and simple message for educators about the *contents* of education: Be bold and radical in your analysis of society; do not give in to those that claim a theory was wrong just because it was one hundred years old; be unforgiving in your effort to educate for a democracy attempting to control big capital, even if it now moves at almost the speed of light; contribute to supporting regional differences against globalizing and equalizing tendencies.

The old confrontation of labor against capital has become so complicated that working people are confronted with other working people. Education could face a rewarding task, the old task of enlightenment. To become ready for less without giving up – how else but through a humanistic approach in education could that be realized?

The emerging global marketplace cannot serve *all* needs. A powerful global ideology might help in organizing people: a *global humanism*. Wouldn't an education oriented toward a merger of the forces of a free market and the liberating and equalizing solidarity of true democracy carry with it some hope to beat the seemingly unbeatable thrust of global capitalism? If learning processes, over repeated periods of time, helped people develop the positive, nondestructive forces of competition by understanding competition as a form of solidarity, much could be gained toward a full emergence of democracy.

Education should always strive for enlightenment. In a civic society, it should strengthen the forces of democracy (Dewey 1966). Democracy needs work by many— in fact, by all — to sustain. A democratic society with direct involvement of people in their own affairs needs much more work by all of us than we now imagine. Current educational debate is to a large extent tied up with matters of form, particularly with introducing digital media into learning processes. Important as this may be, the three texts reviewed here carry some simple messages for educators:

Think in categories! Give up thinking in single issues! Don't search for single reasons! Identify your interests as human beings who exist only through society. Act collectively in solidarity against division and competition. Become ready for limits on consumption. Do not accept without skepticism official, even so-called scientific, explanations or declarations; look for alternatives. Ask, always ask the next question!

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