

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Re-working the Work Ethic. by Michael Rose; Democracy at Work. by Tom Schuller

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1930s and the more recent past. Whereas in the earlier period the problem had been one of fitting the worker to the workplace, the question of whether or not the workplace should be fitted to the worker has now arisen. The reasons for this, and the debate on what should be done about it, are the subject of this succinct and readable study.

The first half of the book deals with the Soviet sociological literature of the 1960s and 1970s on attitudes to work. Concern about this issue developed out of a recognition that the workplace problems associated with fitting peasants into the industrial labor force were continuing, even though recruits were now coming from workers' families. Research began to suggest that the problem was that the educational levels and expectations of workers had changed more quickly than the kinds of jobs available. Moreover, not only were relatively unskilled jobs not declining fast enough, but mechanization and automation were adding to the number. Thus, many researchers concluded, low levels of job satisfaction, poor work performance, high levels of absenteeism, and high rates of turnover could be traced to the "over-education" of Soviet workers for the jobs available. For others, however, the issue was not one of expectations brought to the job, but rather one of responses to the nature of the work itself.

The last half of the book deals with responses to workplace problems. These have included talk of "humanizing" work and allowing workers to have greater participation in the organization of the workplace. This "participatory current," as Yanowitch calls it, has produced a voluminous literature but precious little real change, greater attention having in practice been given to increasing worker discipline more directly. Innovative programs have generally been limited to small-scale "experiments," and the only "participatory" effort to be introduced on a wide scale (the work brigade system) has meant not greater control *by* workers, but greater control *of* workers.

Recent developments in the Soviet Union show that the issues raised by the books under review are of central importance for the future of Soviet society. The educational reforms of 1984, attempts to tie wages more closely to effort, and suggestions that unemployment may become a permanent feature of the Soviet economy all have implications for relations in the workplace. For those wishing to follow these developments, the work of Filtzer and of Yanowitch provides a good place to begin.

*Re-working the Work Ethic*, by MICHAEL ROSE. New York: Schocken, 1985. 160 pp. \$17.50 cloth.

*Democracy at Work*, by TOM SCHULLER. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 190 pp. \$13.95 cloth.

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Although each of these books is concerned with the role of values in the workplace, one belongs to the tradition of anomie, the other of alienation. Michael Rose's study could only have been written in the contemporary atmosphere of economic crisis and perceived breakdown in values. Its purpose is to provide a critical assessment of the commonplace assertion that the current economic difficulties of Britain and the United States can be traced to a decline of the Protestant work ethic; in addition, Rose questions the closely related claims of self-proclaimed "conviction politicians" like Margaret Thatcher that working people are finally beginning to respond to the call for a restoration of Victorian values by adopting a "new realism" in their expectations about labor and its rewards.

Such views, Rose acknowledges, are not based on any serious scientific assessments, but are largely a byproduct of "editorial Weberianism," emphasizing the voluntaristic basis of working life that has been widely disseminated in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Britain ever since Weber wrote his classic work. Still, the issue of the work ethic and its possible decline is seen to be of such great importance as to demand systematic treatment. Rose accomplishes this by exploring three "common-sense hypotheses about the work ethic": (1) "general disenculturation," or the notion that the protestant work ethic is being abandoned by a majority of the population; (2) "constrained recommitment," or the idea that, having been largely abandoned previously, the protestant work ethic is on its way back in the form of a new working-class realism—despite all the hindrances of late liberal ideology; and (3) "differential reconstruction," or the hypothesis that there was never any clearly defined work ethic and that commitment to work, rather than declining, is undergoing a complex process of transformation and reconstruction.

It is the third of these "common-sense hypotheses" that Rose adopts as his own. Relying in part on Herbert Gutman's argument in *Work, Culture and Society* he argues that even in the United States the role of the Protestant work ethic was enormously exaggerated. Both the "general disenculturation" and "constrained recommitment" hypotheses are therefore seen to be based on a doubtful

presupposition. And although each of these first two hypotheses seemed to draw support from the literature on "post-industrial society," Rose calls this type of analysis into question as well, emphasizing continuity in the organization of work relations (if not in final products) and substituting the term "post-fabricative economy."

Yet there is, he contends, an element of truth in the argument on a declining work ethic, to be found in the rise of "post-bourgeois protest" in the late 1960s, involving such values as "imperative self-actualization," "hedonism," "entitlementalism," "anti-productivism," and "anti-authoritarianism." Rose seems to believe that major changes in value systems began at this time, based in the youthful counterculture, but left an uncertain legacy. On the one hand, no general denial of a commitment to work can be ascertained; on the other hand, what presents itself is a society in a state of almost perpetual anomie—thus, "differential reconstruction."

Beyond the foregoing, little of substance is to be found in Rose's analysis. Throughout his study he is openly contemptuous—despite his reliance on Gutman at a critical point in his argument—of "materialists" and "roughcast Marxists" (pp. 30–31). But what we are left with is a largely impressionistic account of changing value systems cut off from any meaningful historical or structural argument. "Britain," we are informed, "is . . . archaic in socio-cultural terms in comparison with other western European countries, let alone with the United States." Nevertheless, the attempts of the Conservative party to inculcate a restored Victorian ethic are unlikely to be effective. "Here," Rose suggests,

the lesson from totalitarian societies is instructive. The Bolsheviks made pitifully slow progress after 1917 in their attempt to inculcate a quasi-"Protestant" attitude to work amongst sleepy Russians; Mao Tse Tung encountered similar recalcitrance when he sought to transform Chinese work values during the cultural revolution; and these initiatives were backed up by totalitarian state power and exemplary executions. (pp. 129–30)

Although such arguments may conform to crude common sense, they also convey some of the inadequacies and inevitable prejudices associated with the analysis of value systems in what are essentially voluntaristic terms, and without the benefit of a strong materialist (or even structuralist) methodology.

Tom Schuller's book begins with the "basic premise . . . that we should be actively exploring ways of achieving a more equitable distribution of power at the workplace" and

goes on (after a long definitional discussion) to examine various specific issues and developments related to the larger theme of worker participation (p. 3). These include: profit sharing, financial participation and worker cooperatives; participation in the management of pension schemes; occupational health and safety; democracy in the public sector; and worker representation on the executive boards of corporations. His discussion of each of these issues contains useful information on existing initiatives by workers designed to increase their control of their work environments through direct participation in decision making at various levels. The picture that emerges is obviously not one of dramatic change but of slow and uncertain (even contradictory) progress—the most hopeful signs, it would seem, being found in schemes involving wage-earner funds (such as pioneered by the Swedish economist Rudolf Meidner), and attempts to define the issue of health in terms of the entire work environment.

Nevertheless, sociologists reading his book may find themselves somewhat uneasy, as a result of Schuller's attempt to examine such issues without a prior discussion of the fundamentals of the division of labor, class, and power. Only at the end of the book are we introduced to the problem of the labor process as such, and then only in relation to the quite specific issues of deskilling and segmentation. Although Schuller thus demonstrates some knowledge of the work of Harry Braverman and Richard Edwards, and the importance of skill-related issues, it does not clearly fit into his argument as a whole. In fact, at this point, if not before, the astute reader becomes conscious of the fact that Schuller would have produced a very different, and probably a far more useful, study if he had started with a thoroughgoing analysis of the labor process as a prelude to an analysis of the democratization of work. As the book is presently constituted, such core issues as the alienation of labor and the degradation of work are dealt with only implicitly, rather than forming the explicit point of departure for a discussion of conflict and participation in the contemporary workplace.

*The Training of Primary Physicians*, edited by STEPHEN J. KUNITZ. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986. 428 pp. \$34.50 cloth. \$18.50 paper.

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The comprehensive analysis of "how" and