

*Stephen Toulmin*

### **Jobs, Human Welfare & Social Production**

The rhetoric of social thought and political practice expresses in part our hopes and dreams. Yet it reveals, even more, the ideas and beliefs we take for granted: that is, our unexamined presuppositions. As the situation changes, and these assumptions are less and less warranted, more and more at odds with our circumstances, this rhetoric, sadly, becomes not less plausible but more heated. We live in such a time today.

This disharmony between fact and perception is a challenge to anyone who has a feeling for history: for the road that took different people to the present situation, and the options open to us not next *year* but in the *decades* ahead. Long term social trends are not wholly opaque: instead, they raise issues beyond the scope of current debate, so allowing us to redefine our future options. In this way, we can escape bewitchment by our presuppositions. To recall the words of Bishop Butler: "Things and Actions are what they are, and the Consequences of them will be what they will be: Why then should we desire to be deceived?" (Butler 136).

Let me bracket off issues like narcotics, firearms and abortion—over which rhetoric and reality long since parted company. The issues I discuss today—work, welfare and social value—call for a longer perspective: "How do we occupy our days?", "What activities deserve to be paid?" and "How should we treat people who have no regular work?" As every social historian knows, these are very old questions—the Poor Law is one of the oldest policy issues of all—but they are none the less topical for that.

My lecture is in four parts. I begin with a thumbnail history of the concept of jobs; next, a critique of our ways of assessing the value of occupations; third, I shall argue that we should see all occupations as generating, not merely a market price, but also a social product. Finally, I will reconsider some of the philosophical terms involved: e.g. welfare—a sadly corrupted word!—and the common good.

\* \* \*

The word job itself has a curious history, caught by the derivative noun, jobbery: this the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines as "the practice of corruptly turning a position of public office, trust etc. to private gain or advantage." Early in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the civil servant Stiva Oblonsky, Anna's brother, is caught having an affair with the children's nursemaid and dreams of additional sinecures, so that he can increase his income and afford a mistress without, as he thinks, shortchanging his family. Stiva's hoped-for sinecures are what people understood 100 years ago by the word jobs: positions of trust capable of being corrupted for private advantage.

Our own use of the word job for "paid employment"—being someone else's hired hand—is recent, and, I will argue, temporary. It came into use in this sense as a result of industrialization, and it threatens to become obsolete as we move into what has been called the "post-industrial" age. Anyone who has lived in a developed country for the last 10 years or so knows, in particular, of a phenomenon that puzzles the politicians: that, after each economic slowdown, employment is slower to recover than production, so requiring prodigies of job creation.

Why does this always come as a surprise? Since the rise of industry in the early nineteenth century, we have aimed at two incompatible things, and our efforts on one front are always frustrated on the other. On the one hand, we strive to increase production—slowly at first, recently much faster. While levels of technical skill remain constant, this means hiring more and more hands, which is good for employment. Yet people also need to make the production process more efficient; so reducing the human toil required to make a unit of product. If the demand for those products is not infinitely elastic, that is bad for employment: with better technology, less hands are required. So the problem of employment

ceases to be quantitative, reflecting qualitative changes in human activity.

I say "human toil" to remind you of one central point. Being a skilled craftsman who lived by his commitment and ingenuity, William Blake understood what burdens early nineteenth century factories placed on those who worked in them. Being also religious, he saw these burdens as ungodly, and denounced the factories as "dark Satanic Mills." And another writer, whose moral subtlety we once again admire since the collapse of the Soviet Union—Karl Marx—foresaw a future in which the daily hours of demeaning toil would be cut as time went on, leaving people free to spend their afternoons fishing, playing music, or in other more rewarding activities.

This is worth recalling because, for a dozen years or more, we have tended to see drives for industrial efficiency wholly as responses to competition: the ideas in Marx's early manuscripts, which inspired social thought in the 1960s, are obscured by narrow arguments of economic advantage. Of course, we cannot overlook issues of economic advantage, but do not let us deceive ourselves that nineteenth century factory work was fun—let alone self-realization.

I visited a steel rolling mill at Gary, Indiana, in the 1970s. An older, dirtier plant, with more than 50 workers, had been replaced by a newer and cleaner plant run by seven or eight more highly skilled workers. Clearly, the technicians who ran the new mill relished not just the technical merits of the new plant, but the emancipation it made possible from heavy, dirty toil. So, in talking about job creation, let us keep in mind not just the number, but also the quality of the jobs involved. Humanly, the need to make factory work less demeaning is as urgent as the need to make it competitive.

Before the rise of factories, people's work took different forms. Country workers were servants of a master, who accepted responsibility for them, so long as they lived on his estate, or in his village. City workers, too, learned their trades with—not for—a master craftsman, and followed a career from apprentice, through journeyman, to master in their own right. Lastly, there was a smaller group called "masterless men" who might be highly productive, yet were open to suspicion for operating outside the accepted social relations. (Charcoal burners and printers were notorious examples of "masterless men": charcoal burners lived in forests out of reach of all authority, and printers were more literate than their

customers, and so hard to censor, or control.) Yet all these groups of people had a sense for their own work: none were radically abused or alienated, as their successors were under the early factory system.

The relations between landowners and their laborers, it is true, sometimes became contentious: peasant uprisings were familiar, and conditions of agricultural work were in continual renegotiation. Yet for people content to live where they were born and go on working where they lived, structural unemployment was no problem: their housing and feeding was the responsibility of their local lord. Those who found life in a village oppressive or limited had other options: they could "go to the Greenwood" with Robin Hood or the charcoal burners, or they could sign up for a crusade. Some of you will no doubt remember the striking film that was made from Natalie Zemon Davies's book, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

In the city, the guild system—of master, journeyman, and apprentice—embodied real expectations of self-advancement, and self-realization. This is something that we academics understand, since we are heirs of that system. Guild craftsmen did not have tenure as universities have known it; but they could normally go on working at a lower grade, until ready to launch onto a higher one. Let me be clear. I am not romanticizing the conditions of life in medieval Europe: I am only reminding you why the problem of the underclass—euphemistically covered today by the phrase "job creation"—did not arise then as acutely it does for us today.

\* \* \*

It is time to step back, and remind ourselves of the longer term processes that define our present situation. The great social change associated with the move to modernity (using the term *modern* as historians do, for the period from the early seventeenth century on) was from a society in which people's position was a matter of status and occupation—the key questions being "Who is your master?" and "What is your trade?"—to one in which people were free to move from place to place, from trade to trade, and ceased to have any permanent status or occupation.

Initially, work was rationalized in the primary industries (mining, logging, farming and fishery) by which matter is produced and transported. Later, the emphasis shifted to secondary industries (mills and factories using machines) involved in transforming matter and energy, so creating new commodities, or old commodities in new forms. But, as the efficacy of the machines increased, the degree of craftsmanship needed to operate them lessened, and with it the satisfaction of the work itself.

This change was gradual. Traditional work relations were unchanged till the nineteenth century: the animus against printers as masterless men was still evident in late eighteenth century France, when Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopedia* was printed across the border in Switzerland, and carried into France by smugglers. Radical change awaited a renewed shift of population from country to city with the mechanization of farm work in the first half of our century. Even in developed countries like Britain and Germany, more than half the work force relied on primary activities—mainly farming—as late as 1900. The most striking social change in the twentieth century, indeed, has been the drop in the agricultural fraction of the work force, from 50% to 5% or less.

For a while, secondary industry expanded fast enough to occupy the workers who flooded from the country into the cities. Aside from fluctuations like the depression of the 1930s, demand for the products of secondary industry expanded fast enough to sustain this expansion. In the process, people fell into a habit of thinking of labor as one more commodity—one more "factor of production" like raw materials: as a result, they concealed from themselves the social meaning of work. One distinctive mark of the late twentieth century is the way in which mechanization of secondary industry followed agriculture, and demand for the raw material called labor fell off, as the efficiency of secondary industry increased. That, of course, is where we came in.

I have a colleague who runs a computer consultancy in the Netherlands, and likes to press arguments to extremes. It is quite imaginable, he argues, that by 2045 all the cars the world needs will be built in a handful of plants—in Indonesia, Senegal and/or Brazil, say—each of them run by perhaps half a dozen skilled workers. My friend likes to say, "All the cars the world needs will be built in *one* plant run by *one* worker." This is rhetorically powerful, if economically and historically implausible: you get his point. At the moment, at the back of their minds, some people

blame those who lack the skills to succeed in today's labor market. But, as all secondary industries approach the final stage of technical development, at which the labor factor is a vanishing, small element in the costs of production, just about all of us—my friend argues—will join the ranks of the "structurally" unemployable. As the shoe begins to pinch middle-class feet, problems that now affect only Them will be seen as problems for Us, too.

We are not there yet, of course; but we are on the way. That, I argue, is the point of the repeated lags between renewed production after each recession, and the recovery of employment. So let us ask: "How can we conceive of the resulting state of affairs? What are the options? And how do these bear on our current attitudes?"

Some of these issues were debated 30 years ago, under the title of automation. One option then was job sharing: spreading the available work around by hiring more people on a less than full-time basis. Some academic colleagues even put the idea into practice: married couples signed on for one-and-a-bit teaching loads, in return for one shared salary. But it did not last: soon, two income families were the norm.

If Samuel Butler had planned a sequel to *Erewhon*, he might have imagined a country where "gross national product" was set against "gross national labor" to calculate the paid hours of work a day each worker was entitled to. In the new *Erewhon*, people would never take more than a fair share of available work: having a paid job would be not a duty but a privilege. Marx's half-day work load would be the "law of the land."

Fantasies about possible futures are not, of course, policy proposals. Their aim is to focus on questions we evade, about those who make up the structurally unemployed. As time goes on, job creation lags behind our hopes and wishes. When this happens, it is less plausible to claim that the people who can find no full-time jobs fail because they are undeserving or ill-trained. At Volkswagen in Germany, for instance, the work week is now less than 29 hours; but, in America, the trades unions defend the interests of the fully employed against those of the fully unemployed. The structurally jobless have no trades union.

Conversely—to introduce the central point of this lecture—as this change continues, doing what is needed to ensure that those for whom industry has no full-time openings are well occupied—not left at a loose end, or dismissed as worthless—is not just doing them a favor. On the

contrary, it is to everyone's good, in everyone's interest, that anyone ready to work has a rewarding occupation: love and work, said Freud, are the poles around which a fruitful Life turns. But the underlying thought is much older. Traditionally, Satan found "evil work for idle hands to do"; and a life devoid of any worthwhile occupation is material for a tragedy.

So much for the first part of my argument: My nutshell history of jobs began with work as a status based occupation, followed the eclipse of status by employment, and the commodification of the labor market, and it ends by foreseeing a return to the concept of occupation, not employment as a central element in any account of work. Still, my argument will stand on its own feet, only if I can say something convincing about two other issues:

By what measures should we value different occupations?; and  
How do occupations contribute to the shared interests of the community?

\* \* \*

How, then, should we value different occupations? In particular, are occupations of value only "in the market"—only if each worker competes for the chance of a job, and is then paid a monetary "wage" by the employer? Faced with that question cold, we may answer: "Of course not!": it is unreasonable to measure the value of work only by the monetary price it fetches in a market. Yet, dig a little further, and we shall find reason to think that much in present-day politics takes such a measure for granted: this is one of the unexamined presuppositions in current debate.

I say unexamined: it is more exact to say too little examined. In the last few years, policy analysts have at last begun to ask if their measures for comparing economic value have not been misleading. Does a transaction generate value, say, only if money changes hands? Not long ago the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) issued a report indicating that the standard indicators need to be rethought. Driving my car, I hit a lamppost and the car is a total wreck. So I make work for the tow truck and the insurance adjuster: I may even buy a new car to replace the one I wrecked. All of these things involve

cash payments, contribute to the "gross domestic product" and add to the country's prosperity. But, if I drive home with care and keep my car in shape, I deprive the national statistics of the contribution I make by crashing. Does this make sense?

Worse, as Arlene Daniels adds, all the work a wife or a couple puts into family or home is unpaid: it makes no statistical difference to the GDP whether this in-family work is creative and productive, or slovenly and demoralized. Our national systems of economic accounting do not cover it, so it doesn't count. Or, to speak more precisely, it isn't counted. (Not counted, in part, because not taxed. From the beginning of time, as the Babylonian cuneiform tablets show, writing and accounting were developed, in part, to keep track of the state's revenues.)

Once we admit that these figures are misleading, it follows that statisticians have been collecting the wrong figures, and our comparisons lack a sound basis. Yet we have inherited "time series" grounded on these indices lasting for generations, and the calculations of economists continue to take them on trust. People who invest their faith in economics are unhappy about this, but what can they do? Like the man who drops a coin in the street, and searches for it close to the street lamp because it is the only place he can see, they rely on misleading calculations, rather than no calculations at all. Yet, we may ask at what social cost? I will return to that question.

\* \* \*

I have been arguing that our ways of thinking about how people spend their time, and earn a living, bear the mark of the Industrial Age: an age whose glory and misery alike spanned the period from, say, 1815 to 1960—to be prophesied by William Blake, analyzed by the young Karl Marx, chronicled by Henry Mayhew, and cast into literature by Charles Dickens. A crucial theme in this period was employment—becoming another's hired hand, and so a unit in the labor market—what Marx called, derogatorily, a wage slave. As a result, a central preoccupation of the political debate has become the employment statistics: the number of people given jobs, or left without, in the national hiring hall. Looking at social economy in these terms, we can foresee a time when the productive capacity of the developed countries, in both primary and secondary



sectors, provides employment for a smaller and smaller fraction of the work force. As my Dutch friend insists, once both farming and manufacturing reach their terminal stage of development, the labor factor will be an ever smaller element in the production process, and we shall all find ourselves on the brink of being "structurally" unemployed.

If we stay within these terms of debate—focussing on employment—one alternative remains: employment in so-called "service" industries. Yet it is a widespread view that such jobs are not sources of self-respect. We all know the dominant story: the skilled worker, laid off from the steel mill in which he worked for 30 years, finds himself with no prospect of employment, except driving a cab or serving in a fast-food restaurant: this destroys the essential experience of work, and damages his dignity.

Equally clearly, this is only one part of the story. In recent years, communication, computing and other information enterprises have created new alternatives to farming and manufacturing; and, as *The Economist* points out in a critique of Jeremy Rifkin's book, *The End of Work*, history gives us reason to expect that technology, now as earlier, will create as many job openings as it destroys. The range of "gainful occupations" in which our grandchildren will spend their lives include some that we can barely imagine: to imagine them is already half way to inventing them.

Still, "cyberjobs" are themselves only a small part of this story. For most people, this alternative does not address the shortage of occupations we face today. Those who succeed in the knowledge industries will be those with technical skills. For the rest of the population—it seems at first glance—McDonald's looms. This, I will argue, is an illusion; but, if we want to arrive at a more realistic picture, we must start by looking again at our presuppositions.

Let me focus here on two issues: ambiguities in the term production, and the nature of self-employment. As a journalist, Karl Marx did not relish the squalor and sweat of mid-nineteenth century factories: for him, emancipating the proletariat included liberating the workers from sweat and squalor. Yet, over the next century, the self-image of factory workers in the industrialized countries generated a perverse pride in the disagreeableness of such work: "Where there's muck, there's brass!," they said: "Dirt makes money." Factory workers stopped wanting to be liberated:

they might complain about excessive overtime, but the very spectacle of their material productivity still gave them a feeling of special virtue.

Indeed, we still tend to see productive jobs—handling or transforming materials for a solid wage in primary or secondary industries—as having not just a price in the labor market, but a unique *social* value. This is one deeper source of the problem of "job creation": if we think of "finding a job" exclusively as hiring your labor for material production, we lay up trouble for ourselves, as the opportunities for employment in such industries diminish; and we deny ourselves entry into the sphere of *social* investment, which can create rewarding occupations for people who have little prospect of formal employment—even at McDonald's.

Ironically, a similar prejudice in favor of material production helped speed the end of the U.S.S.R. Overvaluing the labor of Stakhanovites—workers who overfulfilled their production quotas—Russians lost sight of the need for occupations of other kinds. Factory workers (they thought) gave the products of labor not only value, but virtue; so Soviet bureaucrats despised distribution, as the haunt of ignoble middlemen, who took an indefensible cut from the values created by the toil of noble factory workers. (This resentment of middlemen still infects Russian attitudes toward entrepreneurs.) Ironically, of course, this attitude was foreign to the ideas of Karl Marx himself. Marx would have pitied rather than admired the robust dimwits who earned honor and glory by overproducing unsaleable goods: he himself looked forward to the "withering away of the State" that would emancipate workers from the degradation of demeaning labor.

Replace the idea of productive employment by the idea of worthwhile occupation, and a whole range of new options comes to view—not just the twin poles of low-tech fast food, and high-tech computer programming, but a spectrum of "post industrial" occupations. Life may already have gone, in actual fact, further along the road I am mapping here than our theories suggest.

Picking up a recent issue of *Le Monde* on a transatlantic plane, for instance, I came across a significant report. The French government is embarrassed, because so many unemployed workers, after losing their jobs, have been banding together to set up new businesses, and asking the government for small business grants. Fifteen years ago, this was unthinkable. When, in 1980, Raymond Barre suggested that laid-off

workers start businesses on their own account, he was laughed out of court; but by now one third of all such new businesses in France—75,000 in 1994 alone—are created by the jobless: more than the government is prepared to support.

The idea I want to pick out of this example is that of "self employment." The term self-employed was invented by the revenue authority so as to tax physicians, artists and other professionals whose work leads to income without their being, strictly speaking, "employees." Yet there is a touch of irony in this familiar phrase. Think for a moment: if I am self employed, what is the "self" that employs me? Does my left hand employ my right hand? Does my brain hire my body? This is not just a word game. Basic social and political issues underlie the question. People who are self employed work on their own initiatives. They choose for themselves which of the available lines of work to follow. If job creation is the issue, that is to say, independent contractors create their own jobs.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not praising independent contractors more than other workers; nor I am ignoring the fact that too few lines of work are lucrative enough for people to earn an adequate return on their own. Still less am I deploring the fact that many people still depend for a living on being "employees." I am making quite another point: that the current rhetoric of job creation too easily distracts attention from other possibilities. It is not, as Jeremy Rifkin argues, that we are reaching "the end of work." But we are entering the decline of the "employer-employee" relationship that has been used to define work ever since the Industrial Revolution.

If the young Marx was right, we should be happy about this change, not regret it. When people work for themselves, the products of their labor are not diverted to the advantage of others: in the economic sense, those products are not alienated. So the attention of policy makers might well be directed elsewhere: instead of striving to multiply the jobs in the hiring hall against the whole historical trend, they might better focus on ways to make socially productive kinds of "self employment" rewarding, in monetary as well as psychological terms.

At home in Los Angeles, I have an illustration of this point on my doorstep. Let me quote a remark made to a recent conference by Juanita Tate, a leader in the local organization, Concerned Citizens of South Central L.A. What too few people recognize, she said, is that our

neighborhood would be far less livable, far more of a slum, if it were not for the homeless who go around it pushing shopping baskets, sorting out beverage cans, bottles and other refuse, and carrying them off for recycling. Let me confirm this. For the first few months that my wife and I lived on campus, we tried to persuade the university authorities to join with our students in a thorough recycling program, with no success: the only thing it was economic to recycle, we were told, was white paper. Needless to say, the authorities also prefer not to have unkempt figures wandering the campus with stolen shopping carts, and make sporadic attempts to clear them out. But their attempts, I am happy to report, are half-hearted, and the informal recycling program goes on. We learned our lesson: we periodically leave wine cartons full of empty bottles at the curb across the street, and the homeless, in turn, continue with their self-appointed work.

Here we see how market price and social product diverge. The things that make living in a world of loose refuse more or less obnoxious have little to do with the resale potential of different kinds of refuse. The resale differentials are in any case arbitrary. The low price paid by farmers in the San Joaquin Valley for irrigation water artificially tempts them to grow water-hungry crops in the near-desert of California. Equally, the artificially low deposits on bottles and cans distract institutions like the University of Southern California from serious recycling. (In Ontario, such deposits are nearer fifty cents than five.) In realistic social terms, that is to say, the work of the homeless is not properly rewarded: what they do for, and in, the community generates unacknowledged benefits which other people experience as free gifts.

Is this a trivial—even a sordid—example? Think again. In Cairo, Egypt, much of the waste disposal was until recently the work of a community of rag pickers and waste haulers known as Zabbaleen, who lived *on top of* refuse dumps, in horrible conditions, forming, to quote a current report by Mega-Cities to the UN Development Program on *Environmental Justice*, "a marginalized and undervalued community with little or no organization or power [that] suffered from environmental devastation, little economic opportunity, lack of education, and a host of other problems endemic to urban slums."

The original community of Zabbaleen comprised landless laborers displaced from Upper Egypt, who ended in the city and picked a living

as they could. When the city grew to a point at which its refuse overwhelmed their efforts, a number of agencies, both local and global—from the community's own self-help organizations to the Ford Foundation and the World Bank's International Development Association, as well as Oxfam and Catholic Charities—collaborated on a Zabbaleen Environmental and Development Program, which enabled them to transform their manner of life: rationalizing their methods of refuse processing, building new brick homes, setting up education classes, and raising their whole social and economic baseline.

In the United States, the transformation of the Zabbaleen community and of its environment would be easy to caricature as a "handout": a social outlay economically unjustified in market terms, not a prudent financial investment with any real prospect of solid economic return. Still, two things need to be said. It was not only the Zabbaleen whose lives the program improved. The whole city benefited: not just in pocket-book terms, but in a dozen ways. Even in narrow economic terms, the program transformed the market. The Zabbaleen became consumers. Their new style of life added social value as well as prosperity to the whole city. By helping them to live a decent life, it improved the quality of life for the whole community, and this was in the interest not just of the immediate beneficiaries, but of all Cairo.

\* \* \*

There are more basic reasons, too, why classic equilibrium economics finds it hard to evaluate a change like that in the Zabbaleen project. To make three quick steps: first, economic forecasting itself rests on hidden presuppositions. We can predict the outcome of an industrial process only if we treat the state of technology as being for the moment a constant: economic forecasters have no way of computing in advance the exact effect of a technological change. At a time of rapid technological innovation, this is a serious handicap, but in some ways the point at issue is only common sense: what algorithm could have prophesied the exact consequences of the transistor, or laser technology, or the contraceptive pill? In policy choices—as with the "n-body problem" in physics—this limitation hides the possibility of radically unforeseeable changes: what it is fashionable these days to call "chaotic" phenomena.

Second: what is true of technological changes is also true of changes in the material infrastructure of the economy. When I arrived in Boston 30 years ago, someone in state government had just decided to build a ring road round the city, which happened to be given the number "128." At the time economists and politicians alike greeted this decision with scorn: Route 128, they said, was a road from nowhere that led nowhere. What happened next? An ingenious development firm picked Route 128 as the location for the pioneer science-based industry park. Fifteen years before Silicon Valley, this was the place where scientists at Harvard and MIT tried out the technical applications of their intellectual discoveries—e.g., Townes's new-found lasers. The spectacular success of this decision was again something no economist could compute; and it became an unforeseen source of new prosperity for the Boston area and the whole country.

Third: what is true of the material infrastructure of the economy is also true of the moral infrastructure of the community. When the UN Development Program project raised the level of life of the Zabbaleen in Cairo, it created sound institutions where none existed before, and so created unpredictable benefits for the economy and society of all Cairo and all Egypt. Let me underline the point. If we fail to repair roads and bridges, we let the country's material infrastructure decay: if we fail to maintain the occupations and institutions of all our people, we let their moral infrastructure rot. Sound institutions and rewarding occupations for the people—all the people—are the moral and social infrastructure of a country; and it is no accident if monetarist theories that distract us from the one have disastrous effects on the other as well.

Looking at other countries from a distance, evidently, the idea of a "labor market" independent of social policy and investment, is an economists' myth. There is in fact no such thing as a completely free market. Each national market has its own contours: these embody the country's institutional framework and essential interests. The 1,000 pages of the final General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) agreement are a sign, not of some international decision to free the whole global market, but of the reciprocal horse trading by which balances were struck between the contours of different national markets, as reflecting their interests. If our city streets are full of homeless, we should see that this is in no one's interest, and that programs that help people develop

worthwhile occupations—and not just to "find jobs"—are good investments for us all. At this point, of course, the boundary between wages and welfare in our minds becomes invisibly thin.

Let me return to my suggestion that the future will be a period of self-employment. Consider the lines of work in which the largest incomes are now made: being a sports star, working in entertainment, playing with a successful group of musicians. In these occupations, the boundary between the employed and self-employed is fuzzy. Is being a pitcher a job? Is a pitcher a hired hand?—that depends. One of the keenest negotiated items in sports contracts these days is that of free agency: many truly rich sports stars, that is, value being self-employed, independent contractors as an advantage.

Other older ideas are becoming equally fuzzy. If I play an electric guitar in a group, and share in the takings, am I working in "the music industry"? Read the newspapers—the *Wall Street Journal*, above all—and your eye slides past such phrases without a jolt. I am not objecting: I just remark that they are by-products of historical changes that are taking us from the traditional world of material production, hired hands and quantifiable jobs into the Brave New World of occupations: activities that generate self-respect, or income, or both at once, for people who are no longer "hired hands" in the old sense.

Brought up in a family that treasured the English language, I stumble over phrases like "the health service delivery industry": the word industry suggests to me coal mines or factories—the "dark Satanic mills" of Blake's imagination. Factory work is one thing, medicine another, playing guitar a third. Must we treat all these occupations as different branches of industry? Maybe so: in practice, I will accept the flow of the new rhetoric. Rather than set the world of material production against one of non-material occupation, I am content to widen the idea of production to include non-material products, and also social products—modes of social organization and institutions that serve our interests, personal and shared, as well as if not better than new models of automobile, new styles of pop music, or new kinds of software.

The effective parts of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty—such as the Head Start program to jump start the education of poor children—created openings for community organization that had constructive outcomes in the United States, as did the Zabbaleen project in Cairo. Working in such

organizations accelerated the movement of African-Americans into the administrative middle class, and so gave the country valuable social products. As with the Zabbaleen, what started as community rescue operations ended by creating real and general social assets.

Anyone who moves to the United States from Europe is struck by America's lack of attention to intermediate institutions as compared with, say, the Netherlands, where citizens' shared interests and loyalties are expressed in the formation of political parties with names like "Catholic Workers' Party." In America, individual citizens confront the power of the state without the mediation of such institutions; and some of the weakness of popular political thought—as Robert Bellah argues—is connected with this fact. The continuing pursuit of individual rights, in place of the common good, is another manifestation of the same weakness.

Yet the basic situation remains. The United States Constitution protects individual interests, and its industry has mastered the problems of material production. Now it is faced with the side effects of its success: on the one hand, a steady flow of high quality material products; on the other, a population of disillusioned would-be workers. For the moment, Americans find it hard to admit that creating new social institutions is a legitimate mode of production. Yet, if industry alone does not generate jobs for all who look for work, one public task is to find ways of rewarding collective initiatives, and investing in enterprises, that are the loci of social improvement. When this is done, the activities they have learned to hate under the name of welfare will be stood on their heads, and become the instruments of "human welfare"—in the moral sense of that term: the welfare both of the individual, and of the whole community.

\* \* \*

Finally: a little philosophy—looking behind the hidden presuppositions of political and social thought, to see what they miss. Since 1970, politicians have harped on "the bottom line"; but the philosophical debate in ethics and law has equally concentrated on a need to "take rights seriously." Both concentrations encourage an individualism that makes it sound old-fashioned, even obtuse, to theorize about the interests of the



whole community, let alone a common good. If ten million individuals want the same thing, if they all count the same thing as Good, how can this be anything but a coincidence, or a labile political preference?

Let me note in advance what I shall not argue. I will not question the centrality of rights as one basic idea in moral and legal philosophy: I will simply argue that it is not the only central idea, or even a freestanding, self-explanatory one. Any right is a right to satisfy an interest. Rights are individual: anyone can go to court to have his or her individual rights protected by law. But interests are not so limited. Quite the contrary: some things are in the interest of many people, or a whole community. So understood, questions about the common good cease to be merely out-of-date or obtuse. (On this, I have learned from the arguments of Joseph Raz.)

Nor will I argue in favor of replacing a theory of rights by one of responsibilities. Taken alone, both ideas—"rights" and "responsibilities"—operate on the judicial level. Courts have the duty to protect rights, and can enjoin us to meet our responsibilities; but both ideas involve formal interactions between the individual citizen and the state. The move on from rights to interests, by contrast, focusses our attention not on law, but on a broader range of social activities.

My central philosophical point can thus be stated in a number of different ways. Let me begin by stating it in my least favorite jargon. That way, it becomes:

*Social Life is not a Zero-Sum Game.*

Radical individualism, especially when framed in economic terms, tempts us to assume that any good, any benefit, accruing to one individual does so at the expense of, to the detriment of, other individuals. We can't both spend one and the same dollar. Your gain is necessarily my loss: your good is necessarily my ill. The moral question is then, "Who has the right to spend this particular dollar?" But is this the moral issue? Is it even a moral issue at all? That seems to me open to question.

Certainly, it can be in one person's interest that another person has money to spend: in crass commercial terms, a shopkeeper prefers his customers and neighborhood to be well-off, not poverty stricken. On a more edifying level, one person can take pleasure in another person's good—even, in making the other person's good possible. That—according

to Aristotle, is the highest kind of friendship. Morally, that is, experience of a good is not—like ownership of a dollar—exclusive to the proprietor.

At this point the shift from rights to interests is crucial. In our present day culture, the idea of "rights" refers above all to the rights of individuals. But the institutions in which "rights" can be claimed, and enforced, are collective; and these rights protect us in satisfying what are, or are seen as being, our legitimate interests. (These claims are not unlimited: our rights over our bodies, for instance, do not include selling limbs or bodily organs, whatever monetary return they may bring.) In this respect, the idea of interests is fundamental, that of rights derivative. Any account of the basis of ethics must include the human needs that define our permanent interests; but the institutional mechanisms by which, in a particular society, the pursuit of our interests is protected "as of right" are a secondary matter.

In an age that emphasizes rights, we too easily overlook the things that are in the interest of a whole city or community, and define its common good. This point will ring a bell with people in some countries more readily than others: in the Netherlands, for instance, it scarcely needs making. Absent their longstanding municipal traditions, the Netherlands would barely exist: half the country would still be submerged, and the polders would not have been drained. Netherlanders know that they all, so to say, float in a single Ark, so their shared interests demand policies and conduct that protect them. People in Amsterdam do not need convincing that the idea of a common good after all makes sense: the normal flow of their rivers, 20 feet above the surrounding farmland, is a daily reassurance of this fact. For them, indeed, practice defines the framework within which moral theory needs to be stated.

What is relevant here just is the fact that "interests" differ from "rights" in not being exclusively individual. An executive offered a post in another city, 3,000 miles away, will ask how moving will affect the interest of others in his or her household or family. Things we do "in our own interest"—cleaning up the front yard, say—can also be to the good of our neighbors. Above all, this is true of what I here called social investments: the building up of sound institutions as the infrastructure of our community.