

Handout 7: Work, Easier or Harder?

Certainly the development and use of certain technologies has made some jobs easier, but it has made others overly **repetitive, boring, isolating, and alienating**. Many technologies and products were once made by individuals with specialized knowledge (glass blowers, machinists, wood workers, et al.). These individuals learned their trade through apprenticeship and made products from start to finish. To some extent, these workers had control over their labor. Now many of the products of these specialists are churned out by machines and / or the work is subdivided among many individuals to increase efficiency. While this has made production easier, it may be making things worse. In addition, modern technologies may be making us work more hours than ever before. We can thus ask the question:

Q0: Does technology make work easier or harder? Does it make the working world better or worse?

One account of the rise of technology might be the following

The Rise of Industrial Technology Model (ITM)

The development of technology has led to (1) increased productivity through various technological and organizational advances, and this has led to (2) a replacement of skilled artisans with machines and unskilled workers and (3) a replacement of workers who create a product with their own tools with a model where the steps in the creation of a product are subdivided among unskilled workers who perform the same task over and over.

Given the above model, we might ask several questions:

Q1. Does the above model make our lives better or worse?

Q2. Does the above model make work easier or harder?

Q3. What relationship do human beings have with work?

Let's begin with **Q1**.

Answer #1: We might argue that the above model has made *our lives better*.

CDQ: What sorts of ways has ITM made our lives better?

Answer #2: It has also made it **worse** for many people.

O1: ITM has led to Wealth Inequality!

Example 1: US *income* inequality is higher now than it has been since 1928.

Example 2: Distribution of Wealth is high (see table below).

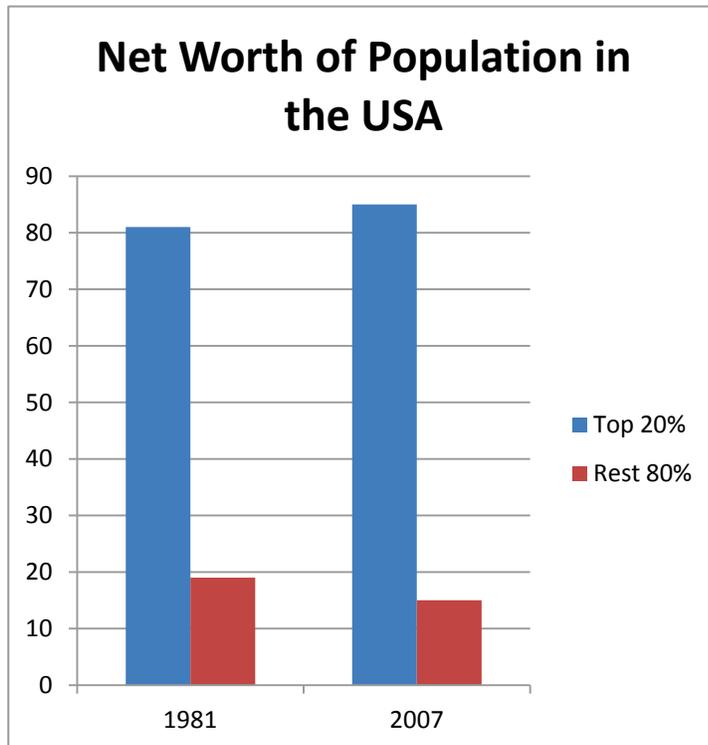


Figure 1: Net Worth of U.S. Population: Wolff, Edward N. 2010. Recent trends in household wealth in the United States: Rising debt and the middle-class squeeze - An update to 2007, Working paper, Levy. Economics Institute, No. 589.

enough to receive a legally entitled meal break, 69% received no break or had their break shorted or interrupted by work.

Stat 4: One in five workers reported a complaint or tried to form a union. Of that 20%, 40% claimed that employers engaged in illegal retaliation (e.g. threats, firing them, cut hours or pay).

O3: Workers as Disposable. ITM encourages us to see workers are interchangeable and disposable parts. If a worker is sick, fire him/her! In previous models where the worker is *skilled* and not easily replaced, managers might be not be so quick to dispose of the worker (see Nye, p.114). Along the lines of **O1** and **O2**, Hughes argued that *slavery was better than the situation brought on by industrialism*.

HUGHES'S² ARGUMENT THAT SLAVERY IS BETTER THAN INDUSTRIALISM

- P1** Slavery guaranteed workers employment, health care, and housing.
- P2** Industrialism did not guarantee workers employment, health care, or housing.
- P3** Any system that guarantees its workers employment, health care, and house is better than one that doesn't.
- C** Therefore, slavery is better than industrialism.

¹ <http://www.nelp.org/page/-/brokenlaws/BrokenLawsReport2009.pdf?nocdn=1>

² Hughes, Henry. *Treatise on Sociology*.

O2: Exploitation! One implication might be that ITM promotes inequality of wages as plant owners *no longer need to pay unskilled workers a living wage*, and historically ITM has involved the exploitation of **children** and **women**.

Example 1: The existence of sweatshops. A **sweatshop** is any working environment or situation where individuals are forced to work in unacceptable conditions for low pay, for long hours, and with limited means to protect their rights.

Example 2: Unsafe and Unfair working environments

Stat 1: A survey of 4,387 front-line workers (not management) in Chicago, LA, and NYC¹ found that 26% of individuals were paid less than the legal requirement. Of that 26%, 60% were underpaid by more than \$1 an hour.

Stat 2: Of the 40% who worked over 40 hours a week, 76% noted that they were not paid the legal overtime rate.

Stat 3: Of the 86% who worked long enough to receive a legally entitled meal break, 69% received no break or had their break shorted or interrupted by work.

This is a startling argument! For it argues that a condition we take to be horrible (slavery) is actually better than the one we currently live in (industrialized life).

Q3. What relationship do human beings have with work?

O4: Psychological Alienation from Work. Despite the fact that ITM has made our lives better in many ways, it appears to have *robbed us of something important*.

(1) We work but we don't get to share in the **profits** of our work. *We just get wages.*

(2) We work but we cannot purchase the product at cost. *We are both an employee and a consumer.*

(3) We work but we have no say in how a product is designed, how it is made, or how our workplace should be. *Our relationship to our work is made mechanical. It is often repetitive and soul-crushing!*

(SUM): In other words, ITM divorces us from a certain natural or ethical relationship we have with our work. It seems to strip the *humanity out of work*. It **robs us of our own role in the creation of a product**. It reduces to machines!

Example 1: Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (Taylorism) proposed that there is one "best way" to do a job and each job could be broken down into *discrete actions*. Managers who adopted Taylorism retrained workers to do a particular job in a specific way. From digging ditches to computer assembly, workers can be trained to do a job in the most efficient and best way. *Reduces individuals to machines, no creative or human contribution to the development of a product.*

Example 2: Ford's assembly line meant that individuals were only responsible for a single action in the production of an item. This made the production of an object *more efficient* but made the work done by individuals was extremely mind-numbing. *Not only is this mind-numbing labor, but we are divorced from the final product.*

CDQ: There appears to be a trade-off between *efficiency / productivity* and *humanity*. The more efficient we make the production of an item, the more it appears we reduce human beings to machines and subject them to soul-crushing work. What is more important here? Is there a way to get the best of both worlds?

CDQ: How would someone who accepts the Industrial Technology Model respond to some of the criticisms posed above? What is your take on whether technologies have made our lives better or worse?

Let's assume that the above is a temporary problem. We might posit that once machines do all the work, things will get better! For instance, machines have reduced certain types of jobs that were once very prevalent.

Answer #1: Technologies seem to eliminate certain jobs.

Example 1: Bank tellers, Cashiers at grocery stores

Example 2: Switch-board operators

Example 3: Musicians and artists



Figure 2: Semi-Attended Customer Activated Terminal (SACAT): <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pinadd/2858659917>

CDQ: What other jobs can you think of that were once done by human beings are now being done by machines? What types of jobs do you foresee being replaced in the future?

Given the assumption above that *ultimately machines will do all of the work that we don't want to do*, we have a situation where there will be very few jobs left (or none at all).

- O1:** the American economy creates an average of a million new jobs a year post 1990
- O2:** the above assumes that human beings won't want more things, consumption goes up!
- O3:** Who will fix the machines? Other machines! But, who will machines that fix the machines that fix the machines?

Let's assume though that machines will drive the number of total jobs down, then many people will be **unemployed**. Given this assumption, we can imagine two different scenarios:

Scenario #1: Mass unemployment, mass inequality of wealth, misery.

Scenario #2: Limited working hours, raised standard of living due to machine production.

CDQ: Suppose that we are able to create machines that are capable of doing all of the work we don't want to do. What would this society look like? How might we have to change how goods are distributed if it is the machines are creating everything? Is this a good thing or bad thing? Work seems like an inevitable part of life, but can we live *meaningful* and *fulfilling* lives without working so much or without working at all? How do we have to reconfigure the distribution of goods and resources? That is, what is your answer to this: **Q3. What relationship do human beings have with work?**

Let's return to **Q1** and **Q2** together.

- Q1.** Does the above model make our lives better or worse?
- Q2.** Does the above model make work easier or harder?

According to Nye, more people are working harder, the work they are doing is not more rewarding, and the reason they are working harder is because **they are being exploited**. And, implicitly, this is a serious problem because any model that contributes to some people using technologies to take advantage of others is **morally wrong**. In considering this complex argument, let's consider each part of the argument and then put them all together.

NYE'S ARGUMENT THAT WE ARE WORKING HARDER

- P1** Average work time from 1970 (40 hours per week) has begun to increase.
- P2** In the 1990s, American laborers worked a month longer in 1970 but felt less secure in their jobs.
- P3** If an individual is working more hours and days than they once were, then they are working harder.
- C** Therefore, Americans are working harder.

O1: In one sense, **P1** is false. In 1995, the average workweek for salary workers was 39.2 hours. In addition, the average hours at work from 1976 to 1993 rose only 1.1 hours.³

³ Rones, Philip L., Randy E. Ilg, and Jennifer M. Gardner. 1997. Trends in hours of work since the mid-1970s. *Monthly Labor Review*, p.3-14.

However, in another sense, **P1** is true. Full-time American workers are working *more total hours* per year, especially women.

O2: P3 may be misleading. Working *more* does not necessarily mean working harder.

CDQ: How might P3 be false? Why does working more not necessarily mean working harder? What might people do at the workplace that causes them to work more hours but not necessarily work harder?

But even though there are some problems with the above argument, let's **assume that we are working harder**. If we are working harder while gaps in wealth are widening, then it appears as though *people are being exploited* because (as the argument goes) they are being coerced to work more without receiving appropriate compensation. Nye's argument is this:

NYE'S FIRST ARGUMENT THAT WE ARE BEING EXPLOITED (UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF PROFITS)

- P1** Americans are working harder (see argument above).
- P2** For 200 years, more efficient production has led to a **grossly unequal distribution of profits**.
- IC** Individuals are working harder but **not** sharing in the distribution of profits.
- P3** To get someone to work harder without paying them more is **exploiting** them.
- C** Therefore, workers are likely exploited.

Money isn't everything, however. We might argue that even if there is a widening gap between the rich and the working middle-class, *more individuals are still better off now than they were before* (of course, this is a strange response because the issue is whether we should be even better off than we already are). However, we might add (as Nye does) that in addition to being paid less, individuals are **less secure** in their work and this is a problem.

NYE'S SECOND ARGUMENT THAT WE ARE BEING EXPLOITED (LESS SECURITY)

- P1** Companies aim to de-skill jobs, codify procedures, outsource labor, and remove competition so as to drive down costs, increase efficiency
- P2** These practices (see P1) make current workers replaceable and expendable.
- P3** If a person can be easily replaced or outsourced, then are prone to being exploited or paid less.
- C** Therefore, workers are likely exploited.

With the arguments above, let's put the whole thing together

NYE'S ARGUMENT THAT WORKERS ARE BEING EXPLOITED

- P1** Average work time from 1970 (40 hours per week) has begun to increase.
- P2** In the 1990s, American laborers worked a month longer in 1970 but felt less secure in their jobs.
- P3** If an individual is working more hours and days than they once were, then they are working harder.
- IC1** Therefore, Americans are working harder.
- P4** For 200 years, more efficient production has led to a grossly unequal distribution of profits.
- P5** Individuals are working harder but not sharing in the distribution of profits.
- P6** To get someone to work harder without paying them more is exploiting them.
- P7** Companies aim to de-skill jobs, codify procedures, outsource labor, and remove competition so as to drive down costs, increase efficiency
- P8** These practices (see P1) make current workers replaceable and expendable.
- P9** If a person can be easily replaced or outsourced, then are prone to being exploited or paid less.
- C** Therefore, **workers are being exploited**.

Nye provides several examples of de-skilling laborers, outsourcing, driving down wages of employees, removing competition, and exploiting worker by forcing them to work through breaks and meals, paying them little, and firing them if they complain.

CDQ: If we are willing to allow these types of practices in the United States (or elsewhere), where do our **values** lie? Are we concerned more about **individual dignity and happiness** or is **efficiency and productivity** more important even if it means subjecting individuals to a miserable existence? Is this necessary? Is it morally right? If not, what can be done to make things better? What sort of corrections would be going too far in the other direction?

Let's consider **Q1** and **Q2** again:

Q1. Does the above model make our lives better or worse?

Q2. Does the above model make work easier or harder?

One answer we found was the following:

A1: ITM **makes work harder** and this is a **bad thing** as individuals are being exploited.

However, there are two other answers to **Q2** and **Q3**.

A2: The above model does not make work easier or harder. Rather, individuals *choose* to work harder because *they want more things*. The fact that people are working more is a reflection of their increased desire to live a more comfortable life. Recall that one way to fix this problem is *attitudinally*. We would be happier if we tried to want fewer items.

CDQ: What kinds of problems might we identify with **A2**? And, are they problems that stem from our use of technology or are they a different kind of problem?

A3: The above model does not make work easier or harder. Rather, individuals choose to work harder because they **love** their jobs. Teachers love to teach. Individuals at Google, Microsoft, Penn State, etc. love what they do and technologies (e.g. computers, email, cell phones) allow them to work more. But, this is a **free choice** and is consistent with respecting human beings and freedom.

CDQ: The answer given in A3 is very optimistic. How does it only select a certain group of individuals? Can you see any problems with this answer?