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ECONOMIC RECORD

THE ECONOMIC SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA

ECONOMIC RECORD, 2024

Book Review

Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic Against Workers and How Workers Can Take it Back, by Elizabeth Anderson (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2023), pp. xviii +369

There is a steady erosion among economists and in economic education of sensitivity to the normative and historical underpinnings of economic analysis (Coyle *et al.*, 2023). This trend has accelerated dramatically since the 'empirical turn' in the late 1990s, with contemporary causal inference papers commonly making statements about the 'policy implications' of results without ever engaging in explicitly ethical or political argument. In relatively benign cases, this results in economists naively and narrowly advocating for things the discipline always valued: efficiency, growth, openness. In darker cases, it leads to benighted and inadvertent advocacy of problematic political economic systems like punitive welfare programs, carceral states, and toxic workplaces.

Elizabeth Anderson is one of the most renowned philosophers of economics, and so it is little surprise that her latest book demonstrates the importance of taking values and history seriously. *Hijacked* tracks the influence of two closely related but competing ideologies – the conservative and progressive variants of the protestant work ethic – on economic thinking and public policy. She argues that while the classical economics of Smith, Ricardo and Mill promoted the progressive work ethic, economics under neoliberalism (from, say, 1970 to 2016) was a diligent evangelist of the conservative variant.

The preface and Chapter 1 identify and outline the two varieties of the work ethic in Lutheran and Calvinist preachings. Anderson argues that the conservative work ethic (p. xii):

> Tells workers that they owe their employers relentless toil and unquestioning obedience ... tells employers that they have exclusive rights to govern their employees and organise work with the overriding goal of maximising profit ... tells the state to recognise and entrench the authority of executives to govern their employees and their business more generally by laws that treat labour as a commodity ...

The conservative ethic wants control over workers and thus seeks to minimise ways of subsisting through anything other than wage labour. It is thus opposed to the public provision of goods, pro-labour laws, unionisation, and generous social insurance not conditional on work. Culturally, the conservative variant promotes the view that poverty and unemployment are the result of individual failure rather than structural determinants like policy efforts to increase worker precarity so that capitalists can exert more control over them. It also promotes accumulation for its own sake as the goal of society.

In contrast, the progressive work ethic emphasises the emancipatory and expressive power of work. It emerged in antagonism to mendicant monks living relatively lavishly off tithes and debauched aristocrats living idly off taxation. Such parasitism was cast as sinful, whereas the honest toil for the sake of sustenance and self-improvement characteristic of the peasants and artisans was ennobled. Labour rights and democratic self-government are promoted so that workers might keep more of the fruits of their labour and invest further in themselves. The goal of work is virtue and welfare, not accumulation. Poverty is not something to be stigmatised so that the desperate can be press-ganged into shit jobs, but rather healed so that citizens can set about personal growth and living a righteous life.

After this introduction, the book follows these ideologies through their representations in the history of economic thought and policy from the sixteenth century to today in

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doi: 10.1111/1475-4932.12849

a back-and-forth manner. Chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7 trace the progressive strand through Locke, Smith, Ricardo, Mill, and Marx to the social democratic welfare states of the post-Second World War era. While Chapters 3, 4 and 9 track the conservative strand in Priestly, Bentham (a villain), Malthus, Paley, Burke, and Whately to the policy results in the British poor laws and Irish potato famine, then the neoliberal return of these ideas in modern carceral states, work-based welfare reforms like the earned-income tax credit, and neoliberal business ethics that commodify labour and extract its value as unearned rents.

Hijacked is an entertaining and colourful (if also horrifying at times) reminder of how much contemporary social science and policy are path-dependent on history and ideological contestations. What is especially striking in this regard is Anderson's explanation of how some neoliberal phenomena, like asset stripping practices by private equity groups that hang workers out to dry to enrich a few investors, mirror historical practices like the disenfranchisement of peasants using the Enclosures Acts. What is key is the similar political and ethical justificatory arguments deployed by apologists for these practices – the conservative work ethic echoes down the centuries. One of the most striking strands of the book in this regard is the similarities between how the English systematically disenfranchised Irish smallholders, content to subsist off their back yard potato patches if it meant freedom, and how neoliberal governments went about smashing unions.

A disappointment I felt with *Hijacked*, which is an excellent book, is that it does not track the variations of the work ethic through economic models and theories. This would be quite understandable if the book were not explicitly a history of intellectual thought. There is much fodder to work with, especially in economic ideas from the neoliberal turn in the 1970s. There is a striking contrast, for example, between how work is conceptualised in basic labour supply and welfare payment models. When modelling labour supply, we treat work as a bad, assuming nonchalantly that people only put in work effort to earn income. It is leisured consumption that is good, not work. Yet when 'optimising' unemployment payments, as in the earned-income tax credit (EITC), there is an overbearing emphasis on avoiding work disincentives. Why is work a good thing all of a sudden?

There are of course many answers, that is not the issue – it is that we do not problematise them. We might say that work disincentives lead to a less resource-efficient economy. But this is the conservative work ethic emphasis on accumulation for its own sake. Part of why we want an efficient economy is so that we have more money to pay for welfare programs and the like. We might say that it is because work leads to self-respect. This too is disingenuous if the work you are forced into is not self-actualising but rather dehumanising, debilitating and dead-end, which is often the case – that is why welfare conditionality is required to push people into such positions. We might say that work role-models good character traits like fiscal prudence, discipline and effort to others, notably the children of people in receipt of benefits. Yet there is no need to think that *full-time* work is necessary for this, or that the same effect could not be achieved through volunteering, caring, or other non-market activities. Pressing mothers especially into full-time paid employment, as the EITC does, leaving their children with diminished care, soft skills, and ultimately human capital, can only be justified under a conservative work ethic ideology where the purpose of the poor is to be commoditised labour.

What would a progressive work ethic approach to welfare look like? It might look something like 'flexicurity' in unionised Denmark, where looking for work *or* being in education entitles one to benefits (Klindt & Jørgensen, 2018). And where income replacement rather than subsistence payments are provided in any case for 6 months after job loss. Welfare offices would not just concern themselves with work, as in the 'Job Centres' of the UK welfare system, but also offer wider services like career counselling, money advice, and signposting to education providers and mental health support. The unemployed would be treated as people, not underutilised inputs to production. This would help them to find a job that *fits them*, rather forcing them to take the first job that

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is available. This would in turn lead, often, to higher wages as the person can apply their skill set, more sustainable employment because they are good at the job and have some intrinsic motivation for it, and less dependence on the state in the long term through higher retirement savings. This is emancipation and self-expression through work.

If Anderson tracked the work ethic not just through ideas in political economy but also through economic models and associated policy advocacy by academics, she might have more incontrovertibly demonstrated the extent to which our discipline is in thrall to these ideologies. Keynes (1936, c. 4, p. 5) had it backwards when he wrote that:

> The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood . . . Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.

The ideas of economists and political philosophers are in fact often ruled by the ideological vibes of 'practical men', especially politicians and business elites. We must ever be alert to the value judgements that we make in our models and consider how their results might be endogenous to our unconscious ideological priors.

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