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ABSTRACT

In the recent social revolution, rebellious middle-class youth attacked and rejected, among other values, the American middle-class belief in the worthwhileness of work. Although this recent humanistic revolt hardly affected the patterns of working life in America, it influenced attitudes toward work not only among middle-class adolescents and youth but also among blue-collar workers. One of the needs made apparent by the humanistic revolt is the need for meaningful work roles, through which youth can actualize their humanistic ideals in practical ways. The next era of history should be concerned with providing, for liberal middle-class youth as well as for the poor, satisfying work roles that do not require prolonged and expensive college education. (Author.MK)

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# Humanism and the American Work Ethic

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**W**ork has been the lot of most of mankind always, at first to wrest survival from nature and since then to improve the conditions of life. While a minority of people have acquired the means to forego a working life, the vast majority in the developed countries are dependent upon the benefits of work.

For the middle classes in America, work became a value that was incorporated into the character of decency, respectability, and moral rectitude. The benefits of a work ethic in a middle-class value system were the attainment of future security and social status better than that of one's parents and a life-style of self-reliance rather than familial dependency.

Even though efforts to escape work have been present here as elsewhere, nonetheless, Americans have acquired the worldwide, often unenvied, reputation of being the hardest working people on earth. The attainment of this productive capacity in society and its members is not easy, for it requires a huge educational system and a social value system geared toward training youth away from the primacy of the pleasure principle and toward the "work personality."

While the common assumption

again, "in revolutionary times . . . often reach out to each other, both being marginal to the vast consolidation of the compact majority."

Most of the unquestionable values of the dominant society came under attack: education, technology, industry, government per se, capitalism, the war, science, money, comfort, security, the worthwhileness of work—indeed, the worthwhileness of effort at all and even the worthwhileness of keeping sane.

In place of an ethic of reason and responsibility, there was substituted the ethic of pleasure and responsibility only to oneself. Nothing of the past had any relevance. All models of adulthood were unworthy of imitation, for they represented a life-style of slavery to empty materialism in the service of a depersonalization of the human being under the heel of an ever-growing bureaucratic-technological monstrosity.

The violence of the social revolution has abated, perhaps because of the counterviolence it provoked, the aging of its leaders, and the ineffectiveness of its methods. The relative calm at present permits us to survey the scene with less perplexity and to sort out a little better what was racial, what was economic, what was affluence, and what was purely political, and what was sheer adolescence.

The whole movement was not without its effects, however. Witness the influence it has indeed had upon the educational system, the religions in America, minority rights, women's rights, the freedom of greater choice in individual life-styles, and perhaps even politics and government indirectly. Although it has hardly affected at all the available patterns of working life to which it took such ob-

the American work ethic. Undoubtedly, those with the best ego integration will in the future adapt in some ways to reality, while those who are too damaged will join the population of chronic patients and welfare-dependent unemployed.

The winding down of the war in Vietnam and the subsidence of violent militancy have not changed the social issues these adolescents reflected: the fragmentation of life (of which working life is a prime component) into dehumanized and demeaning processes not worthy of a lifetime of effort; the separation of man from the product of his work.

Moreover, it is not only the affluent middle-class youth who now rebel against this life. There has also been an awakening among the masses of blue-collar workers, whose financial responsibilities to family tie them to their meaningless jobs. The dissatisfaction with the endless rat race is now surfacing more and more. We believe that the present quietude is illusory, born of a temporary relief from the conflict of the past six years.

It is said we are at the end of a historical period and that the character of the next period is not yet discernible. The humanistic revolt attempted to point the way by announcing the needs: the next era *should* be concerned with re-humanizing the quality of life in the post-technocratic society, rather than allowing the mere proliferation of the techniques of the possible to dictate what human beings shall become. The problems of work need to be looked at within this context.

Young people need adult models whose lives are examples of

manistic ideals in practical ways. President Kennedy grasped some of this need and deployed it constructively in the Peace Corps idea, but this has been useful only to college graduates. VISTA does not seem to be broad enough to make a dent in the problem.

Yet so many unmet needs cry out for organized effort to fulfill them. Despite our concerns about the energy crisis, still, our cities must be regenerated and beautified; parks must be provided and maintained and kept safe; streams must be cleaned and made into recreational resources; forests must be preserved and rebuilt.

Our human resources must be cared for too. In fact, with the needs of society moving less toward the consumption of even more unneeded goods and more toward social services, we will approach a time when half the society will need to be employed taking care of the other half. Fortunately, these caretaking occupations provide just the kinds of fulfillment of humanistic ideals that both youth and society need.

Manpower development in the country is now entering an era when the needs of society and of youth will no longer harmonize happily with the needs of private industry. The calls from the White House to solve our problems by simply having everyone return to the good old American work ethic show no recognition of what the trouble is all about. As we see it, the economic and professional frontiers of opportunity are no longer expanding. The "developed" society has now closed in upon its young and makes them superfluous unless they aspire only to continue the status quo.

The role of the work ethic must change as society changes. We