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HOW WE BUILT BUSINESS AS USUAL

Ideas about the roles of women and men at work are intertwined with the meaning of work itself. Where did “work” come from, and how has it developed – or not – over the generations? Is work natural or artificial? Work has a complex and colourful history of its own. This chapter and the next look at where work came from – and why we’re stuck with it.

What we consider today to be work is relatively new. Also, the notion of a job as a separate part of life, or as an identity that individuals inhabit on certain days of the week, certain hours of the day and in certain settings, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The concept of the job is firmly anchored in a complex cluster of significant concepts, such as the political ideal of full employment, the social validation that jobs bring (“What do you do?”), and the organisation of life streams around jobs – training before, pensions and care after.

“Jobs” rush into the space created by the work–life split. They mediate between people and tasks. A new domain of power, control, conflict and opportunity grows in this newly defined space. And eventually we’re all just “living for the weekend”.

Work has never been a simple, single facet of human life nor a neutral topic of study: “work itself has a history, changing in nature and understanding, just as

language, customs and fashions have changed throughout the ages.”¹

Our relationship with work, then, has at best been ambiguous – with work seen as something that has to be endured, if not enjoyed. In ancient Greece, for example, work was carried out exclusively by slaves. Slaves were not part of the city state or *polis*: they did not count as citizens. Politics – the affairs of the *polis* – were valued above all else and anyone who worked was by implication ignoble. The Greeks had no single word for work, but three related words: *ponos*, meaning a painful activity; *ergon*, meaning a military or agricultural task; and *techne*, from which we get our word “technique.” None of these words refers to roles, relationships or rewards, three of the ideas central to our contemporary conceptual cluster of work.

Revealingly, some modern words for work derive from the “painful” portion of the ancient vocabulary. The French word *travail* derives from the Latin *tripalium*, a torture device made of three stakes to which a victim was tied before being burned.^{1,2} The English word “travail” has the same origins. The American spelling of *labor* is identical to its Latin source, which means toil or trouble. Our word “work” can be traced back to the Greek *ergon* and beyond to *varāzem*, a word from ancient Iran.

Our contemporary notion of work as “productive activities” that fill time would have been unrecognisable to people in earlier times, when (what we would call) work stopped as soon as its aim had been achieved. Yet abundance and scarcity of resources do not seem to be the determining factors in the organisational structures of early societies. While the environment dictates what is possible, people design what is permissible.

For us today, “work” can also have connotations of creativity. We talk about the works of great composers, while expressive activities including acting and psychotherapy are often given this creative sense of work. In classical society, craft workers who produced items for other people, or items based on the ideas or requirements of other people, were not seen as creative workers. As Greek society became more consumerist, the craft worker came to be seen more and

more as merely the performer of a labour process, rather than the originator of a product.

Work versus employment

Although they are often used interchangeably – especially by economists and politicians – work and employment are contradictory concepts. Work provides meaning, status and a way of fulfilling oneself. Work can be noble, uplifting and energising. Employment, on the other hand, is a matter of necessity. It can be dehumanising and can abstract us from life.

Our word *employ* means “use”. It ultimately derives, via Latin *implicare*, to proto-Indo-European words to do with folding something inside something else. There is a buried sense, then, that to employ something is to capture it or enclose it – to engulf its independence. In modern language, we can often substitute “use” for “employ” with no loss of meaning. The implication (a word from the same Latin root) is that employees are used. They are useful; they are tools. Today we are less likely to talk about factory or field “hands” but “heads” in “roles”: people fill the spaces defined by nodes on a process chart.

But not all work–life activity is dignified with the name of work. Keith Grint defines work in this way:

Work tends to be an activity that transforms nature and is usually undertaken in social situations, but exactly what counts as work depends upon the interpretation of powerful groups.²

Those with power – the master, the guild or the management guru – decides what counts as work. Since men have the power, “women’s work” has traditionally been regarded as non-work. Domestic labour has long been treated as less important than paid work, and the slogan “wages for housework” is designed to change attitudes to domestic labour – although if this ever did happen it would, ironically, only serve to reinforce the view that a woman’s place is in the home.

Work also has a strong moral dimension. Yet the moral value of doing a job well for its own sake is a relatively recent development. For most of human history, work has been both hard and degrading. Working hard in the absence of compulsion was not the norm in Hebrew, classical or medieval cultures.³ The Judeo-Christian belief system, which had such a huge influence on Western culture and civilisation, took a different attitude to work. Man had been placed by God in the Garden of Eden, according to Genesis “to work and take care of it” – creation being nothing more than a kind of one-person full employment programme. The scheme was ruined when sin entered the garden because of the woman’s weakness, and humans were evicted. Mankind’s punishment was the curse of working to survive. This is the deep background to the standard Western belief that work is necessary to prevent poverty and destitution.

The way to salvation was religion and spirituality but the intertwining of work and belief found further expression with the rise of Protestantism and the translation of the Bible into modern European languages. Access to the text of the Bible via Gutenberg’s newly invented printing press changed people’s attitudes to religion and religion’s relationship to everyday life. While the teaching of the Bible continued to be respected, the guidance of priests began to be substituted by a commonly shared code of ethics based on frugality and hard work.

Attitudes changed in the times of Martin Luther and John Calvin, when the status of work was revised from necessity to moral duty.¹ In a letter to his son, Hans, Luther instructed him “to work hard, pray well and be good”⁴ – the link between religion, morality and work is clear. This line of thought informed the Victorians: Samuel Smiles, for example, taught that “Heaven helps those who help themselves”. The famous Protestant work ethic shaped work structures and practices for many generations to come, to the point where it “is beginning to take on the character of a stranglehold no longer simply colouring our views but choking judgement”.¹ The knot made by the combination of Biblical authority, traditional practice and a common ideology proves to be strong and durable.

For most of human history, most people worked or they starved. Since the Industrial Revolution, for the majority of people work must also be done via employment, otherwise it is worthless. To be without employment is to have a

questionable existence:

Unemployment is not a category that would be recognised outside a very limited slice of space and time; that it is today, and that the label is crucial to the status of the individual, tells us as much about the kind of society we inhabit as about the kind of individual stigmatised.²

Work, then, tells us who we are and how we fit in. It defines our broad moral value – whether we are “strivers” or “skivers”. Work is both our punishment for being alive, and our means of making a living. From its distillation in the mythical mists of time and rise to prominence during the agrarian period, work has come to define people – and to separate people into women and men.

The mists of time or Theory YDD

When it comes to looking far back in time, we know much more about the distribution of different types of pollen or the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere than we do about the thought patterns of our earliest ancestors. Skeletons can tell us about diet, but not about the role of food in everyday life. Grave goods can tell us that status differentials existed, but not the hierarchies involved. Earthworks will reveal where a family lived, but not how they loved.

We humans are categorising animals. We use categories to simplify the choices we have to make, to enable complex thinking and to organise our surroundings. When presented with a new piece of information, we like to pigeonhole it as rapidly as possible. We will make up a category if one isn't immediately available.

Categorisation is closely allied to our interest in stories. Deciding whether something belongs in one category or another, or defining a new category, requires a kind of narrative. Something belongs in a particular category because of some notable feature, some habitual usage, or some authoritative advice. People believe that every collection of events can be made sense of by appealing to a narrative thread. This is, of course, a good thing because it leads to scientific enquiry. But it also leads to what is kindly called folk wisdom – with its embedded superstition, error and prejudice.

Gender is particularly susceptible to the narrative charms of “just so” stories. These stories often masquerade as science, when they are really speculation. The mists of time can be very useful for concocting origins, especially racial ones. The same mists blur the formation of ideas about gender. Just as any ancient tribe of interest seems to have arrived from somewhere else, so “gender” appears to have been always with us. Prehistory – the many thousands of years during which human beings recorded their activities sporadically and by accident – is an area peculiarly open to fabrication, both intentional and unintentional. Where there is no text to read, it’s easier to read a story into the evidence.

Evolutionary stories are interpretations, selective and seemingly as compelling as any brightly-coloured image of a brain scan. They have more or less plausibility depending on the preconceptions of the audience. This means that successful stories – ones that gain traction and repetition – can be designed by selecting features that fit the audience’s expectations.

These apparently scientific arguments from evolutionary processes also tend to be deterministic – we are the way we are because we have always been like this. That is to say, not only are evolutionary explanations for current behaviours or values taken to be inevitable, they are also chosen to promote certain interpretations above the alternatives.

We create a past to explain the present. A BBC radio programme, *Fighting the Power of Pink*, explored why females prefer the colour pink and males blue. One explanation provided by a psychologist relies on evolution: men as hunters had to be able to see objects against the sky and women as gatherers had to pick berries. What’s wrong with this story? Quite a lot. First, we’re asked to agree that women prefer pink. Whether or not women were discovered to favour pink, this wouldn’t tell us whether their preference was natural. Perhaps a preference for pink, where it exists, has been inculcated by the tireless machinations of the Disney princesses. Other contributors explained that the differences between the genders on colour preferences were very small – so by no means do all men prefer blue and women pink. Certainly, pink was regarded as a masculine colour prior to the twentieth century.

Second, we're asked to agree that women would have been gatherers and that the roles are fixed and enduring. And, seriously, when we give this a moment's thought, how hard is it to spot something against the sky? And have you ever seen a pink berry – blueberries yes, blackberries even, nice, ripe *red* strawberries – but pink? This is a back-projection of later gender divisions on to earlier ways of life. Third, the explanation provided excludes other possible explanations and in so doing creates a sense of certainty about something that is eminently contestable.

Evolutionary theory is a marvellous rhetorical tool for explaining away inequalities. Here, for example, is Nigel Nicholson commenting on the scarcity of women in leadership positions: "Domination, competition and patriarchy are biologically encoded as our model of authority."⁵ Can a mental model really be "biologically encoded"? If so, where is this code? Certainly, our inherited model of authority evolved. But it's a product of culture which has to be taught and learned.

The most popular view of the early history of humankind goes like this: males go out and hunt for days or weeks at a time while the females stay home, looking after the children and collecting herbs – waiting for the men to bring home the bacon. This leads us to think it's right that women should be nurses, teachers and carers, while men will be engineers, doctors, lawyers and leaders. We call this Theory YDD – for Yabba Dabba Doo.

For adherents of this view, and there are many, *The Flintstones* isn't a cartoon but a reality documentary. Fred, Wilma, Barney and Betty are us and we are them. Theory YDD, in other words, is a projection of contemporary dominant values on to a distant and ultimately unknowable prehistory. The same agenda is urged less directly when people claim women are (or believe they are) better multi-taskers than men, or say that men have (or believe they have) a better sense of direction. Since these generalisations are themselves false, the evolutionary tale-telling that supposedly explains them is redundant.

It's not true that prehistoric and modern people are interchangeable. Up until the Industrial Revolution, the family worked as a unit. Tribes in prehistory were

often nomadic. Women hunted and men cultivated. In fact, it may be more accurate to describe these groups as gatherer-hunters. We can't picture this way of life, so we say the way we are now is the way we've always been.

Anthropological studies of peoples following traditional ways of life give us an idea of how life might really have been. A portrait of the native American Ojibwa from the 1930s shows that although there were divisions of work by gender, there were also many examples of "women going beyond their prescribed roles". Gender roles therefore existed but were not rigid: "Everywhere there are some women who hunt, go to war and doctor as men do."⁶

Theory YDD then is a very lazy approach to the human condition and tends to telescope vast periods of time into simple continuities. The way we think today seems to us to be the way people have always thought, even though we have no proof that it is.

Work in agrarian societies

When hunter-gatherer societies began to farm, leaving their nomadic habits for part or all of the year, their attitudes towards life and work necessarily changed. Every society creates work in its own image, adding new layers of practice and meaning to its social inheritance. It is at this stage that human society starts becoming patriarchal in some parts of the world.

Men are on average physically stronger and so can assert dominance. Women lactate and are abstracted from the working environment while they are feeding. As a consequence of their superior strength, men are deemed to be of a higher status than women. These physical facts became generalised as the idea that men and women are different. Status, then, ultimately creates gender. Patrolling and reinforcing the gender divide, as we discuss further in Chapter 4 when we consider prescribed stereotypes, maintains inequalities of status – to the obvious benefit of men.

Man may not always have been in charge, despite his greater bulk. Women, after all, were the only real creators: the givers of life. Lithuanian-American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas found evidence for matriarchal pre-Indo-

European societies. These gynocentric or matristic societies, which focused on the worship of female deities, were replaced by invading patriarchal societies in the Bronze Age.⁷ Much early art depicts goddesses, suggesting at the very least a communal respect for female fertility. It is possible also to detect the afterlife of the matriarchal goddesses not only in the classical pantheon, but in the cult of the Virgin Mary (who, by the way, wears blue, not pink). Beyond the Indo-European area, evidence has also been found for matriarchal societies in Africa and China.⁷ Desmond Morris, the zoologist and author, has said that he feels “disturbed and angry” at the way women are treated in our age. He says: “To me, as a zoologist who has studied human evolution, this trend towards male domination is simply not in keeping with the way in which *homo sapiens* have developed over millions of years.”⁸

In Morris’s view, this shift from equality to the domination of men was in large part due to religion:

In ancient times the great deity was always a woman, but then, as urbanisation spread, She underwent a disastrous sex change, and in simple terms the benign Mother Goddess became the authoritarian God and Father. With a vengeful male God to back them up, ruthless holy men through the ages have ensured their own affluent security and the higher social status of men in general, at the expense of women who sank to a low social status that was far from their evolutionary birthright.

A possible pre-patriarchal tradition is visible in the carved figures known as Sheela na gigs, which are found in churches, castles and towers in Ireland and Britain. The figure is a naked woman, opening her vulva. They are usually placed over doors or windows. Comedian Stewart Lee visited one such site in Shropshire:

The priest took me outside to point out a haunting and all but eroded figure above a now bricked-up entrance, her legs wide open to the north wind. “In the old days people liked their coffins to enter the church through this doorway,” he said, “and that way the dead got the blessing of the new God, and perhaps the blessing of the old goddess too.”⁹

The first evidence we have in Britain for an organised society with work-related social roles comes from the Roman period. Roman Britain conjures up an image of unnaturally straight roads and fancy foreign bath houses. The reality for most people in Britain for this period – which lasted more than 400 years – was subsistence farming. Britain's domestic product consisted of agricultural commodities, hunting dogs, timber, precious metals, pig iron and slaves.² The shift to a feudal society after the fall of the Roman Empire led to the addition of security payments to the basic agricultural model. The pain of work was here to stay.

A life of toil

Before the Industrial Revolution, there was little in the way of formal division of labour, by gender or any other criterion. Work was not conducted or imposed by any coercive authority. With all production carried out by hand, most tasks were carried out independently and performed in the family setting. People worked to their own rhythms and sold their goods at market. "Work-life balance" wasn't an issue because work and life were not distinguished from each other. The "nine to five" didn't exist because no one was tied to the clock.

Going further back, hunter-gatherer (or gatherer-hunter) societies made no distinction between work and non-work. The division between these types of activity is socially constructed, rather than natural. Hunting and gathering were certainly fundamental to existence, but neither was regarded as work:

Would the Neanderthal have the same way of thinking as those of us who were reared in households where the nearest thing to hunter-gatherers are those whom we describe as the breadwinners?¹

Women carried out a far greater range of roles before the Industrial Revolution than after it, up to the present day. In agrarian societies, men and women both carried out what is now considered men's work and women's work. Women could look after pigs and chickens, the dairy, manage kitchen gardens and orchards, and keep the proceeds from their sales. Men were responsible for grain and cattle because these were more valuable commodities. The



Fig 1.1: Women building city walls from Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre de la Cite des Dames* (early 15th century).

demarcation doesn't arise from different abilities, but from status. Over time, such informal divisions become solidified as traditional roles.¹⁰

It is true that women have typically carried out the lower-paid, lower-status work, but there was more interchangeability before the industrial age. Men would carry out what could be broadly described as "horsework", including going to market, which might involve travelling long distances.¹⁰ This work was seen as of higher status but when the men were away, women would naturally take over these activities. In the thirteenth century it would not have been unusual to see women employed as carpenters, masons and coopers. By the sixteenth century

they were practically non-existent in these occupations.² An evolutionary, deterministic argument could be found for this change, we are sure, but a social and cultural one, the rise of the guilds throughout Europe, is the most compelling.

Nor have women always been at the bottom of the pile as employees in the workforce hierarchy. Men have always been top and women second, but there was a time when children were last. Families worked together and children were expected to make their contribution. The notion of a “breadwinner”, therefore, and a male one at that, is a relatively new one and did not exist prior to the Industrial Revolution. The “family wage” was all-important and in this simple expression we can see the interrelated and interdependent relationships between members of a household.

For example, the way we view children today is a recent phenomenon. Placing the child at the centre of concern began as a late Romantic fashion:

The childhood of a French nobleman in the eighteenth century was not usually the period of his life upon which he looked back with either affection or regret. The doctrine that parents exist for the sake of their children was not then accepted, and the loving care and hourly attention bestowed upon the children of today would have appeared ridiculous to sensible people. When Rousseau, the first man of sentiment, abandoned all his children, one after the other, to be brought up as unknown foundlings, his conduct was thought odd but not vile.¹¹

At the other end of the social scale, children were regarded as small adults. They therefore worked. “Childhood” is a luxury we have earned with the growth of leisure.

The strong moral imperative that people now identify with caring for children is neither universal nor eternal. But it is real, because we have made it so. We are more than happy to agree that attitudes to children have changed but, when it comes to gender, we prefer to believe that these patterns of behaviour are fixed,

natural and somehow true.

Women may always have run the household but this was a very different role from that of the housewife as we conceive it today. A woman's contribution to the family wage was valued. A saying from Bremen in Germany expresses this: "Where a woman doesn't work there is no bread on the table." The same sentiments were articulated in France: "No wife, no cow, hence no milk, no cheese, nor hens, nor chickens, nor eggs".¹⁰

Specialisms and the status that went with them have existed for some time. The guild system organised trades and crafts around entry conditions and quality standards. The origins of guilds can be traced back to the first century AD and the Collegium Fabrorum – the guild of smiths – in Chichester.² Such organisations live on in our contemporary professional associations. Someone seeking to ply a controlled trade would have to go through the stages of apprentice, journeyman and master.

Guilds developed in many forms throughout Europe, with the common aim of jealously guarding access to skills. These organisations did not just control entry into professions, but regulated wages and set standards for quality. In this way, the establishment of guilds provided part of the foundations needed for regular trade. Within the guild, masters passed on the "mystery" to learners – the original Greek source of this word, *mustērion*, refers to the domain of secrecy into which initiates of a cult entered. Being apprenticed obviously involved being taught the skills, but it also involved creating a sense of inclusion and belonging to something that others were to be excluded from.¹⁰

However, the guild system proved unworkable in the Industrial Revolution. Production centred in factories or mines demanded a different approach to the recruitment, development and control of labour. Recognition of this fact leads ultimately to modern management.

Splitting work, splitting people

The formal separation of work and leisure began with the Industrial Revolution, a

massive and rapid social change which effectively split people's identities between home and workplace. This social upheaval is an important context for the development of gender.

The Industrial Revolution heralded not only changes in production methods but changes in attitudes to work too. Populations had grown, cities had expanded and the number of poor people had increased. Those outside the guild system were to become the new labour force on which the economy would come to depend. The work was deskilled and routine but it also required a different sense of discipline from employees: you can leave your animals for a time, but a furnace needs attention.

Although it is true that women had lower status than men, they were nevertheless involved in a wider range of roles and occupations before the Industrial Revolution than at any time since. As we have seen, before the Industrial Revolution high-status trades were controlled by guilds, which effectively excluded women from the better jobs. But women still had roles to play. So, for example, women were not allowed to do leather work, but they could make buckles. Since buckles are generally made from metal, this meant that women could be metal-workers.

During the Industrial Revolution women were to be found working in four principal areas:

- Traditional occupations such as spinning
- Assisting men in their work
- The less profitable industries where they were used as cheaper workers to keep costs down
- The industries and roles that were less skilled and which needed little training.¹⁰

In other words, the roles assigned to women were not as prescriptive or narrow before the Industrial Revolution as they were after it.

The European pattern was also discernible in the United States. The early settlers had strong religious beliefs and it was because of these that women were expected to work. The Protestant work ethic was such a part of their identity it became known the Yankee Ethic.⁴ As in Europe, the settler females undertook a wide range of roles pre-industrialisation. When looking for spouses both men and women valued physical strength highly. Even during the early years of industrialisation, American women were involved in publishing newspapers, running distilleries and managing inns.⁶ In England at the start of the nineteenth century, more middle-class women were involved in commerce than in any other profession.¹⁰

The Industrial Revolution also led to the systematic removal of women from the workplace. This was achieved by a combination of changed societal attitudes towards the appropriate roles for men and women, new legislation and the role of the unions. This period saw a noticeable shift in attitudes to women, with their role becoming increasingly idealised and focused on the home and family. By mid-century the world had changed to one that is more recognisable to us today.

During the Industrial Revolution “labour” was identified as a category for the first time. Labour then became organised in the form of unions, themselves an evolution of the guilds. By the late 1880s, however, only 1% of women were in unions.² Their position therefore was very weak, with some unions going on strike to keep women out of their areas of work.

Industrial processes need to be coordinated, so it was important that people turned up for their shifts on time and paced their work to the rhythm of the master process. This led to a new attitude towards time. Hours of the day became more important, whereas features of the season receded. People’s behaviour was regulated on a much smaller scale, with the day being structured for them and managed on an hour-by-hour or even minute-by-minute basis. This led to new moral attitudes – or, more accurately, the reinforcement and application of a particular moral code newly enshrined as an ideal. Drinking, for example, was not perceived as much of a problem in purely agricultural societies, since being somewhat drunk didn’t necessarily impede the tasks of

farming. Drunkenness in a factory setting, on the other hand, is potentially lethal.¹²

The moral focus extended to parental roles in bringing up children. The apparently neutral term *parent* comes, for practical purposes, to mean mother, since women are given the responsibility for childcare. Laws were enacted in many countries to restrict the hours women and children could work – and to protect male employment. While such changes were taking place supposedly in support of the family, men's work remained largely brutalised.

By looking at what happened during the development of work, we can see how a new system, and its associated model of thinking, emerged. For example, the systematisation of work created a new distinction between work and leisure. This distinction between work and non-work is important. No longer was work inextricably linked to the direct needs of the family; people worked to earn a wage and were productive. To be unwaged therefore suggested a lower status. Increasingly, the great and the good saw a woman's role to be in the home.

Men in all parts of society became united in the view that women should be at home. Lord Ashley, speaking in the House of Lords, believed that women working was "disturbing the order and the rights of the labouring men by ejecting the males from the workshop and filling their places with females, who are thus withdrawn from all their domestic duties and exposed to the insufferable toil at half the wages that would be assigned to males, for the support of their families." At the same time the Trades Union Congress (TUC) had the very same concerns. "It was their duty," said Henry Broadhurst of the TUC in 1877, "as men and husbands to bring about a condition of things, where wives could be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world."¹⁰

So the concern for women working long hours in factories was also inextricably linked with the concern about men being out of work. In addition, the appalling working conditions and lower wages meant that being at home was a more attractive alternative for working-class women. But there was little concern for the work that women had to do in the home to earn a wage. Factories regularly

put work out to women working from their homes – a system operated in Europe, Canada and the United States.

With women, most notably married women, now at home, the idea of the family wage diminished, to be replaced by the ideal of the male breadwinner. This created a new rhythm to the day, and when combined with ideals about gender roles, led to strictures about men's and women's work. The woman's day is different from that of the man. Typically, the man goes out to work and the woman stays at home – so the world is effectively divided into separate male and female domains. The woman is expected to clean the house, care for the children and feed the breadwinner. The notion of a family income and economy is replaced by the idea that only the man's work is significant or even real.

With the stabilisation of the Industrial Revolution in northern and western Europe, North America and beyond, the attitudes to work established during industrialisation became the new tradition within and against which individuals thought and acted. As fields of employment extended beyond manual labour into service industries and administrative activities, the exclusion of women was carried over from the early industrial model. In Britain and Germany, but not France, marriage bars were introduced: if you were female and you married then you were out of a job. In Britain married women were barred from the civil service between 1876 and 1946. However, many women supported this kind of ban. Middle-class women typically wanted to "retire" to a married life – and not be "left on the shelf" like an unwanted product. Career-minded women supported this situation because it made for reduced competition for promotion.² Working-class women were also encouraged to pursue marriage above work. The financial benefits associated with marriage were necessary for setting up a home.

At the same time there was increased pressure for women to focus on their roles as mothers. The editorial writer of *The Times* in 1907 worked himself up to fever pitch, linking the demands for women's emancipation with their biological role: "The rights of women increase. But what is their greatest duty – to give birth, to give birth again, always to give birth... Should a woman refuse

to give birth, she no longer deserves her rights.”¹⁰ (Our so-called, and totally misnamed, “family-friendly” policies are, it could be argued, merely reinforcing the fact that flexible working is only permissible if a woman has fulfilled her “greatest duty”). If the expectations of women weren’t clear enough, in France and Germany women were given medals for the number of children they produced and in Italy the government granted additional allowances depending on the number of children they bore.⁷

In the United States, debates were taking place in the press as to what roles were appropriate for women to undertake. One editorial, referring to a specific occupation that women wished to enter, began by saying that “[W]e should honor them for their sympathy and humanity.” However, females should not be allowed to carry out this job because any man who has worked with women “cannot shut his eyes to the fact that they, with the best intentions in the world, are frequently a useless annoyance.” Any guesses as to the profession he was talking about? Nursing.⁶ What is now seen as the quintessential woman’s profession was once anything but.

Housework also came in for redefinition and took on the meaning and shape we use today. In France, *le ménage* did not refer to housework but to the management of the whole farm. In Germany, the *Hausmutter* shared her tasks with the *Hausvater*. There was status and standing associated with both roles. But over the years the scope of the *Hausmutter*’s role was steadily restricted until it became the *Hausfrau* of today. In Britain and North America, housewifery, a term used since the thirteenth century, was equated to househusbandry, and involved the responsibility for management of the household in its widest sense.¹⁰ The term “housework” doesn’t appear in the English language until the mid-1800s.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, property delineated distinctions of class. With industrialisation, cleanliness assumed a much higher priority. “Cleanliness is next to godliness” as the old saying goes, and so the type of activity women should be focusing on in the home became more clearly defined.

Gender roles therefore became much more sharply defined in the workplace and in the home. To many, this was as things should be and represented a return to the natural order of life. This was emphasised by popular publications of the time. In Britain, there was Isabella Mary Beeton's *Household Management*; in Germany Henriette Davidis's *Die Hausfrau*; in France an equivalent work by Simon Bloquel called *Guide des femmes de ménage, des cuisinieres et des bonnes enfants*. These all appeared from 1859 to 1863 and today around the world bookshelves and news-stands are full of advice to women on how to carry out and fulfil their natural, predetermined role.¹⁰ A century and a half of human progress seems to have left the ideal of womanhood stranded in a perpetual struggle against dirt and the unsatisfied hunger of her charges.

Working the system: the rise of the professions

Traditional forms of work and ways of working were replaced by new methods and new occupations which organised themselves into the professional bodies we see around us today. In Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan between 1850 to 1920, engineers, accountants, architects, lawyers and so on developed the professional institutions that are still with us today. These bodies served as a means of advancing technical skills and knowledge but also acted as barriers to entry for any newcomers. Formal education requirements were needed to enter these professions, creating another barrier to women, as they were denied access to higher education. These changes took place while women were being removed from the workplace, so it is no surprise that these occupations were, and to a great extent still are, male-dominated.

The development of work since the Industrial Revolution can be seen as a steady process of formalisation and systematisation. The evolving rules about work, about who should be doing what and how, developed in an apparently more objective and "scientific" manner than before industrialisation. The scientific management movement equated employees with tools. The approach, often known as Taylorism after the pioneer Frederick Taylor (1856–1915), aimed to match people, tasks and tools in the most effective manner, so that no time, effort, power or materials were wasted. The time and motion man, with his

clipboard and stopwatch, goes together with the image of Charlie Chaplin becoming a cog in the machine of Modern Times. Today, descendants of the scientific management approach include business process (re)engineering and various flavours of “lean” management.

By the late nineteenth century an entirely new class of profession was being created, and one that is easily overlooked: management. In the fifty-year period from 1880 to 1930 the United States was instrumental in inventing management. In 1880 the shelves of the New York Public Library held no books on management. By 1910, it held 240. The first management school opened in Philadelphia in 1881. But the sociologist Yehouda Shenhav is more specific still: management is the creation of American engineers.¹³

The philosophy behind management as a discipline is dominated by engineering thinking and the rise of management coincides with the rise of the engineer. In 1800 there were fewer than 30 engineers in the United States. In 1880 there were 3,000 and by 1930 there were 300,000. The majority of these, approximately two-thirds, eventually ended up in management.¹³ Not only was engineering – and, consequently, management – male, it was also elitist since the upper middle classes dominated. American management systems appeared rational, scientific and ordered. The rise of this methodology took place during a time of industrial unrest and uncertainty. The creation of systems to regulate all functions, not just production, was seen as a way of ensuring fairness as well as predictability.

Systems thinking is rooted in control – of the production of goods and services, and the people involved. By rethinking people as parts of a system, or a machine, it is easier to deskill them. From an engineering point of view, reducing the need for human intervention leads to greater efficiency and therefore higher profits.

As the systems approach developed and was imitated across industry, so bureaucracy grew in its wake. Organising assets, processes and people requires record keeping and checking. Supervision and reporting are needed to verify that the system is working properly and to provide evidence for ways in which

its performance might be improved. With bureaucracy comes a whole new kind of power: the power to obstruct and delay, to build empires, and to buy and sell favours. This is why bureaucracies tend to grow their own meta-bureaucracies. The checkers need to be checked too.

From the perspective of individual experiences and the social environment, bureaucracy has the effect of not just standardising work but of homogenising it. Jobs in a mill are all physically the same, because the machines demand stylised movements and drive the pace of work. But the jobs also become standardised in their non-mechanical aspects. Employees must conform to the demands of the system: when they show up, when they leave, how they engage with the tasks that fill the interim. The control systems were increasingly elaborate and in some cases included mystifying rules and regulations that sought to ensure that no deviancy from them was tolerated. If the rule said that no books were allowed in the factory that meant no books – not even the Bible. So while work was being linked to morality it could conveniently be decoupled from religion if it got in the way. Reliability, order and control were the order of the day.

This approach did not and indeed could not allow individuality. “Just suppose each man in your book-keeping department had his own way; suppose each clerk in your ordering department had his own individual kind of order blank, and each man in the stock room had his own system of scoring, handling and accounting. And suppose these men told you they had as much right to be individual.”¹³ In effect, the system knows best. Individual expression and variance are not to be permitted as these would amount to an attack on efficiency and the system itself.

The systems built in the industrial age are not just the foundation of our modern economy. They are deeply embedded in the fabric of our lives. We may tell ourselves we live in a post-industrial, postmodern, information age, but we still operate with the engineering mindset that built our world. The systems we invented to scale up economic activities now hinder our ability to change. Goals such as greater agility, or the need to be more customer-centric, or the desire to run more sustainable processes, are obstructed by the system-derived

categories that structure all our thinking.

Systematisation turned abstract ideals into prescriptive norms. That is, what was once thought of as “right” but perhaps unattainable began to be seen as not only attainable but basic to life. So, although there were always ideals about what men and women were supposed to do, the success of systematisation translated these notions into something like social laws. The process of management defines what a job is, how it is to be carried out and when. When this is coupled with societal prescriptions about the roles of men and women, we see that the world we have now emerged at that time.

We trained ourselves to accept these systems and now we are, largely unwittingly, in thrall to them. How can we retrain our brains to make new worlds possible? We need to break the connections that have solidified around gender and behaviour, status and roles.

In a system, an element has one function, and only one function. It has defined relationships with other components. It does not suddenly start performing another task, or helping another component, or taking the afternoon off. Our world today is much more fluid and unpredictable. It is also much more focused on the needs of individuals rather than the production of products and services for the masses.

The system that’s embedded in our brains doesn’t match current reality. It therefore inhibits our functioning. You could say that we are running the wrong software – software created by males with a leaning towards engineering principles. Engineers won the race to define the nature of work. Their successes produced the infrastructure on which we still rely: railways, metalled roads, the electricity grid, potable water, sewerage – and money. Their attitudes infected every other branch of activity.

The First and Second World Wars

The two world wars of the twentieth century introduced total war to the nations involved. Unlike earlier conflicts, which might leave most members of the



Fig 1.2: A woman working on an aircraft propeller World War 1.

community unaffected, these wars demanded the full resources of each country. Throughout Europe, men were enlisted to fight, creating shortages of manpower that had to be filled by women.

This arrangement was seen as extraordinary and temporary. With much of the skilled male population drafted into the services, new sources of labour were needed to produce armaments and fuels for the war effort, and to maintain vital infrastructure including the railways. The trade unions wanted to ensure that any lowering of entry standards was purely temporary. Unskilled workers were given rapid training courses that enabled them to do the skilled work normally controlled by the unions. This was known as “dilution”. The “dilutees” were overwhelmingly female.

The perspective of “dilution” is of course wholly male. The wartime labour situation is more complex when viewed from a more neutral angle. For

example, the outbreak of the First World War actually led to a dramatic rise in female unemployment as short time working was introduced. In some sectors such as textiles, employment fell 43% in the first few months of the war¹⁴. Women, then, were already significantly represented in the world of work and the initial effect of the war was to drive down wages. Dilution and “substitution” – where the skills of the original and replacement worker were equal – referred to the oddity of women performing in male roles, such as heavy labour.

The sudden visibility of women doing “men's work” during the First World War offered a striking alternative model for women who hardly lacked information or advice about their traditional roles. The propaganda of the time emphasised the different and discontinuous nature of this period as there had been nothing like it in the industrial era.¹⁴

Despite assurances that the use of women in male workplaces was strictly temporary, the strikes that occurred during the First World War were often sparked by resentment of dilutees and their encroachment on incumbents' territory. Employers tended to sympathise with the male workers.²

During the Second World War, new provisions were made to ensure women could work in factories. The measures included workplace nurseries and crèches. These were provided to a level not seen before – or since. The British were particularly successful in mobilising women. In 1943, workplace facilities could accommodate a quarter of the children of female war workers.²

However, female absenteeism was high. The duties of childcare combined with the need to queue for food and manage rations competed for women's time. The government encouraged “neighbourhood shopping leagues” and women were often given unofficial time off to shop. When these informal approaches failed to deal with absenteeism, women's working hours were adjusted so they could better combine the dual roles of mother and worker.

The recruitment of women and the redesign of work around women's responsibilities were seen as emergency measures. The competence of women, and the contribution they made to the war effort, did not trigger a general

reassessment of the nature of work. Being bound up with a complex set of social structures, work could not be seen neutrally.

The prevailing character of work had been formed under a patriarchal system, and while the demands of war might cause temporary and partial amendments to the script, the traditional, habitual model was not questioned.

The past in the present

Contemporary work embodies lineages of a past: work today is not a prisoner of the past but its bruised descendant.²

Every institution, every habit and every feature of what we think of as normality has evolved. We are born into a world that has already been shaped. Change continues to modify the social reality we inhabit, but humanity never has the option to start again with a clean sheet. And while social reality has been constructed and modified by the actions of people, it is not a coherent, intentional design. It's the result of uncountable conflicts, arbitrary decisions and mistakes. The ideas of philosophers, religious leaders and kings can be made out amid the noise, but the majority of the culture we inherit is the outcome of complex forces. These are the hardest features of the human landscape to change.

Grint's expression of this truth emphasises that work is something that inhabits us rather than encloses us. Every one of us carries the past within us. We can't shrug this off or wish it away. But, as we will see, it's possible to transcend it.

Beliefs about fundamental differences between men and women remained narrow and fixed for many centuries. The words of a small number of classical authorities were taken as gospel truth. For example, the physician Galen, who had actually been worshipped as a god, advised that women were inferior to men because they are colder. Men used up their heat but women did not, which is why they menstruated and did not go bald (men's energy burned up their hair). Women harboured wandering wombs and were thoroughly damp, making them prone to hysteria and "the vapours".⁷

According to Aristotle, “nature has distinguished between the female and the slave”. He reasoned that, since slaves were also men, they could also have “virtue”. (In this context, virtue means something like consciousness, rationality or intelligence. However, the word itself derives from the Latin *virtus*, meaning manliness.) Women and children might also have virtue, even though they are not men. But slaves, women and children have different degrees of virtue. For example, a slave has no ability to deliberate, while a woman has the ability but not the authority, and the child’s deliberative faculty is immature.

We would see the differences between the deliberative ability of slaves and women to be constituted in their power relationships with (free) men. It is hard to see how a lack of authority is naturally endowed, rather than a consequence of social relations. For Aristotle, however, large parts of the social world are taken to be natural, not man-made. Aristotelians believed that as man was perfect then women were imperfect males, were monstrous and were to be ruled by men.⁷

Aristotle can perhaps be forgiven for believing that the normal state of affairs in his time and place represented the timeless, natural order of things. We all automatically use our own situation as the reference point for normality. Aristotle famously believed that women had fewer teeth than men, but this may be because the women he knew did have fewer teeth – from losses due to dietary deficiency. (Even so, you would think he might have taken the trouble to count.) It’s the use of authorities such as Aristotle, hardened into ideology, that come to distort objective views of reality.

Like Aristotle, we can mistake practice for law. Just as a slave will seem to have no ability to make free choices, so women will seem to be less intelligent when they are denied access to education. The reason that women have been restricted in their education is because it would be wasted on them because they are less intelligent; a classic example, if ever there was one, of a self-fulfilling prophecy in action. Men will seem to be better at stockbroking when women are barred from stockbroking. The idea that women can’t be stockbrokers because they’re no good at it is then a circular argument.

Philosophers and theologians, in trying to understand how the universe was structured, created hierarchies. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century had a hierarchy of professions with agriculture at the top, then trades and crafts, with commerce at the bottom.¹ Aquinas also saw women as inferior, as he says in *Summa Theologica*: “Woman is naturally subject to man, because man in man is the discretion of reason.”⁷

Luther followed Aquinas in this respect. He believed that women were lower than men in the grand scheme of things and that, compared to men, they were:

- Less rational
- More easily led astray
- More talkative (“from which their husbands and fathers should dissuade them”)
- More gregarious
- Less capable of higher development
- Lower in reasoning ability
- Less capable in science and maths.

(Actually, we made the last one up – that was Larry Summers, former president of Harvard University, speaking in 2005.)

For Luther, the size of women’s hips in relation to their skulls showed that their primary purpose was childbirth and not thinking.⁷

These views of the different qualities of men and women affected academics’ thinking too. Emil Durkheim and Edward Thorndike, the pioneers of sociology and psychology respectively, reached similar conclusions about the abilities of women. Durkheim, a Frenchman from Paris, had concluded, via research on skull sizes, that while the highest level of human evolution could be witnessed, rather handily, in Parisian men, women, even French women, were far less intellectually endowed.⁷ Thorndike did not believe that women would ever achieve the greatness of men in areas such as engineering and science.¹⁵

Humans have a preference for natural explanations. It is simpler to ascribe the ways things are to the design of a god, or the blind process of evolution, than to question the broad distinctions and rules of thumb that guide everyday life. It's easier, safer and more rewarding to conform to the opinions, values and customs of your group than to question them. Offloading the shared worldview on to a deity or entity labelled "nature" is an effective means of denying responsibility for the way things are, and the way they should be.

Such arguments are surprisingly persistent, considering their lack of logic. In a debate with Elizabeth Spelke to discuss Larry Summers's comments, Harvard professor Steven Pinker said that, because of their different brains, there would be fewer women in science and maths departments at the very highest levels of academia such as Harvard. In one stroke, then, Pinker managed to combine the prejudices of Thorndike and Durkheim with the latter's self-regard.

At a 2012 diversity conference in the City of London, one academic stated confidently that there would never be more than 5% of women in foreign exchange dealing because of their hormones. This is despite the fact that there are already parts of the world where there is a higher percentage of women in these roles.

And yet, what's natural does indeed change over time. Aristotle's acceptance of slavery seems bizarre to modern readers. Similarly, what is "fitting" for men and women undergoes continual change. At present, the idea that women should have careers seems to be becoming orthodoxy. We may be at an inflection point where one assumption about "the place" of women is being replaced by its opposite.

The deeply embedded nature of the work ethic was first appreciated following a famous series of experiments carried out at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant in Chicago. The experiments were designed to discover whether different light levels affected workers' productivity. Analysing the confusing results some years later, Henry Landsberger concluded that productivity improved during the experiments simply because the workers knew they were being observed. "Organizations are not machine-like constructs; they are social systems,"

Landsberger found.¹⁶

The Hawthorne effect tells us that psychologists cannot discount themselves from the social situations they study. More importantly, it tells us that people have a normative attitude to work. That is, people have internalised a set of standards regarding correct behaviour related to the work situation. They know instinctively what they “ought” to be doing, and being observed by someone in a position of authority or higher status reminds them of this knowledge.

Official codes of conduct are no match for deeply held attitudes – attitudes engrained so deeply that we don’t even know we hold them. Organisations command our attention, exert authority over our actions and operate reward and sanction systems which aim to circumscribe our behaviour. But they cannot override the effects of socialisation or erase the wider culture in which the organisation is situated. People know that it’s wrong to cheat, even when nobody’s looking.

Our moral touchstones appear timeless and universal, but they can in fact be artificial and alien. Time and usage have cemented certain beliefs about gender into our psyches to the extent that we perceive them as naturally endowed. And “there is,” as Marx argued, “no greater power than when what is actually a sectional interest becomes represented and accepted as a universal interest, as common sense.”²

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