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Street and Office: Two Sources of Identity

Identities and Narratives

'My what, young man?' an elderly Boston matron replied when I asked her to describe her identity, point-blank over tea in the Somerset Club. I was still of so inexperienced an age, as a man and as a researcher, that I believed frontal ambush was the best way to elicit information from others. It was 1966, and the sociologist David Riesman had just sent me on my first research job, interviewing members of Boston's upper class about their identities in the city.

My informant had a clear image of herself and other Boston Brahmins, and equally clear images of people lower down the social ladder. These would be called in Latin *personae:* that is, images of self and other, which are instant markers; her own persona was a mask she donned without hesitation. An identity involves a life-narrative rather than a fixed image of self, I kindly explained to her, citing Erikson and Freud - and a recognition that others' lives intrude into one's sense of self. Equally kindly, she wasn't having any of it: 'We go our separate ways, dear.' Nor did I do much better with a senior banker at the Harvard Society of Fellows, who declared, 'I know just what you mean by "narrative".' He patiently took me through his family's genealogy - implying, as we neared the present, that references to various living kin were to persons I had inevitably met. In fact, I had grown up on a public housing estate in Chicago, but he had taken a liking to me.

Modern culture is flooded with identity-talk, particularly about marginal, subaltern, transgressive, or oppressed identities, but this chatter tends to be about *personae,* those images and masks - or of crude stories about 'how I discovered the person I really am'. Such identity talk isn't much use for making sense of personal life today in the global

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economy, because an ever-shifting, external market reality disturbs fixed pictures of self. The new capitalism has radically changed, for instance, people's experience of work. Corporations are shifting from being dense, often rigid, pyramidal bureaucracies to be more flexible networks in a constant state of inner revision. In flexible capitalism people labour at short-term tasks, and change employers frequently; lifetime employment in one firm is a thing of the past. As a result, people can't identify themselves with a particular labour or with a single employer. They are frustrated, as I have found, in scripting a sustained life-narrative from their labours.

The new capitalism has also disturbed identities based on place - that sense of 'home', of belonging somewhere particular in the world. The disturbance occurs particularly in the places where the new sort of work gets done, cities which are increasingly homes to the global elite as well as lower-level migrants. An investment banker in New York will identify far more with peers in London and Frankfurt than with other New Yorkers; the janitor cleaning his office is likely to have a mother in Panama and a brother in Buenos Aires. Where do such people belong, where is home? Like Odysseus, they need some orientation for their life-journey. As traumas go, globalisation does not rank with war; so far no one seems willing to die for it. Yet any great change is disturbing. Some analysts believe people will seek to defend themselves by asserting seemingly stable cultural values against the chameleon indifference of the economy: the conflict will be between an idealised home and the realities of labour, place versus work. Here's how the sociologist Manuel Castells evokes that conflict: 'This is a defensive identity, an identity of retrenchment of the known against the unpredictability of the unknown and uncontrollable.' Suddenly defenceless against a global whirlwind, people stick to themselves: whatever they had, and whatever they were, becomes their identity. The janitor dreams of his abandoned farm in Panama, the banker perhaps of Yorkshire, where people seemed more rooted. I think people's actual experience is likely to be just the reverse. The complexities of globalisation will prove easier to digest in the city than on the job. While modern cities are becoming more cosmopolitan, people are still looking for some version of 'home' at work.

The Importance of Edges

Since we so commonly think in pictures, it would be foolish simply to rule out self-images in understanding identity. As an unfolding story, an

identity originates precisely in the conflict between how others see you and how you see yourself. The two seldom fit, and people are seldom indifferent to that lack of fit, so comfortable in themselves like the old Boston Brahmins. Instead, people tend to focus on what could be called the edges of an identity, how those two images might fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

Imagine, for instance, a poor woman in Boston declaring, 'I am a black lesbian mother.' Here, 'lesbian mother' might be a more active element in her identity than 'black mother'; she would concentrate more on the two aspects of experience which, conventionally, did not fit neatly together. She would attempt to explain herself. Self-explanation is one thing people seek to accomplish through constructing life narratives.

In real life people lack the control over events and other characters that a novelist possesses. A person's life-narrative therefore has to be continually recast in the course of experience; you need continually to make a fresh explanation of yourself. Far from plunging into a subjective abyss, the capacity to recast your life-story is a sign of strength in attending to the world outside.

Correspondingly, a weak identity means clinging to a rigid image of self, a lack of capacity to revise when circumstances require it. Despite themselves, even my Boston Brahmins were so obliged: upwardly mobile Jews and Irish immigrants in the city were joining their clubs, marrying their children and taking their jobs; the WASPs in fact continually recast the meaning of these disturbances to themselves; they had to fit these pieces of the puzzle together. How to narrate what happens at the edge, when you try to fit unlike pieces together? That's the challenge for modern fiction writers from Joyce to Salman Rushdie, who have pieced together stories out of events which have no forward thrust and characters who have no logical relation to each other. I was surprised to find something akin to this among manual workers as well as among younger members of the elite whom I began interviewing in Boston forty years ago. They evinced what might be called a capacity for 'cross-referencing' disparate experiences.

One budding lawyer, for instance, recounted the leading characters in his white-shoe, old-school Boston firm; he displayed pride in the family pedigrees of his elders, but retailed in equal measure their professional incompetence. I found members of the Boston working class shoving up similar incongruities in their own families, boasting about the achievements of the sons for whom they sacrificed their small savings to put them through university, even while complaining that these jumped-up

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youngsters often became ashamed of their family origins; sacrifice and betrayal were inseparable in their life-narratives. Such cross-referencing is like scanning the index of a book and finding under the entry 'memory' the direction 'see incompetence', or under 'sacrifice' the pointer 'see eclipse'. By making cross-references of this sort, people set about welding dissonant experiences together.

From the psychological point of view an important, if unexpected, thing about cross-referencing is how it can strengthen a person's sense of self Interview sessions in which cross-referencing becomes important usually begin, during their early hours, with the subject keeping unlike people or events categorically apart; as the interviews proceed, and the subject becomes engaged, people and events are shoved ever closer together. The act of compression creates the 'edge', in the sense I'm using that word, and imparts weight and density to the life-story. A janitor who feels both pride and class anger at his son has a density of self; so does a young lawyer who feels affection and solidarity for elders he does not professionally respect. Such transactions have a simple but important consequence. Over the past fifty years, psychological studies of the phenomenon of 'cognitive dissonance' have documented ways in which higher mammals become attached to precisely those challenging experiences which lack symmetry and fitness. People, like chickens or hamsters, return again and again to scenes or problems which are puzzling: ambiguity and difficulty breed involvement.

The 'edge' is a zone of engagement - but by no means inevitably. In the psychologist's laboratory, how the experimenter rigs conditions in the environment determines whether mammals will engage or withdraw. The human question is: what are the conditions of social life which might similarly make the edge a zone of engagement? It would seem that the mobility and uncertainty of the current political economy ought to provide just such a human laboratory, spurring people to constantly revise their life-stories, to refresh their self-explanations. Indeed, global capitalism ought to be a compelling breeding ground for cognitive dissonance; you withdraw from attention and engagement in this dynamic milieu at your peril.

Yet the modern world doesn't work this way. 'Attachment' is not a operative category in the labour market; employees feel little loyalty to chameleon corporations, and little collective involvement with each other; more largely, the workers I've interviewed in flexible, leading edge companies have a great deal of trouble creating viable work narratives, or recasting these stories as their circumstances change. Here precisely a divide has opened up between work and place. The act of

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forging a fluid narrative of place is often much stronger, particularly among urbanites caught up in the global jet stream, interpretative acts focusing on the 'edges' of experience in the city, involving a great deal of cross-referencing among puzzling phenomena. Such narratives breed strong attachments to the city itself.

The Theatre of Struggle

To understand why this should be so requires us to look askance at another cliché, rootedness. The image of putting down roots in a place is a common way of measuring communal identity, but it is inherently misleading; plants do not walk, and people do. The cliché confuses immobility with the sense of belonging somewhere particular in the world. Instead of coming to rest, people orient themselves in both space and time by thinking of cities as necessary stages on which to do combat with both the opportunities and the difficulties of the new economic order.

I can best explain this by a prosaic example. For several years I've been going to a laundry in New York run by a Korean family. From washing shirts and socks, they in time expanded to dry-cleaning, then to the addition of a resident tailor - surprisingly, a well-turned-out young man dressed as though for the office; now the laundry has begun selling cuff-links, bow-ties, and women's scarves. It would seem the Koreans have come to rest in New York; however, they don't think so. The patron confided to me: 'We are not immigrants.' Why not? The middle aged couple who started the laundry were once middle-class; they came to New York as political exiles from Korea in its **bad old days.** As Koreans, they have suffered in New York. The city's black and Asian communities famously do not get along; the Korean family could at first find a place to live only in a black slum where they did daily battle with their neighbours.

Their white, middle-class customers disturb them for other, less violent reasons. Added to the usual complaints about American individualism and lack of family coherence, there is a surfeit of material goods in the city and a negligence of possessions that disturb them - men careless of their cuff-links, women who buy scarves only for a season, these appear signs of a people spoiled by abundance, to these once impoverished foreigners, for whom possessions remain scarce objects carefully to be conserved. If ethnically their experience has

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rough edges, the narrative of their own struggles also doesn't seamlessly cohere.

For instance, the wealth they've accumulated has been dedicated to putting their children through university; the well-turned-out tailor turns out to be a son studying electrical engineering at night. He intended to go back to Korea as soon as he finished school; now he has graduated but remains in New York. Similarly, his parents frequently tell me they intend to close the business and return home to retire, but they've just bought two other stores and are working harder than ever. Their very struggles are, I think, partly the reason why they have stayed. They've done combat against an alien culture and, as combatants, in time have become deeply engaged in it.

For the same reason, the father refuses the identity of 'immigrant' because that label suggests a trajectory of absorption, it denies the battle that they've waged while maintaining their separateness. New York is the stage on which the great drama of their lives - exile, poverty and renewal - has been played out. If they left, their life-narrative would cease; they are 'rooted', if we must use that word, in their struggle.

When the globalisation of the political economy began, it was often said that place would lose its importance. Yet despite modern information technologies, leading-edge firms are crowding into cities like London and New York. There are some simple reasons why. Density and compression on the ground sharpen both comparison and competition. Chance social encounters in bars or at parties probably generate more opportunities than do formal business plans disseminated over the office intranet. But global cities are not just about high-flown global business. They are places open to poor economic migrants, people who, as Saskia Sassan has shown, were usually entrepreneurially minded, and so restless in their countries of origin. Even the Koreans who were political exiles showed themselves so minded, by taking advantage of a crack in New York's service economy. In a way, the very term 'globalisation' keeps us from connecting the tide of economic migrants to the massive expansion of the service economy at all levels which has taken place in cities like London, Berlin, New York, Sao Paulo, or Tel Aviv - in such mundane activities as plumbing and electrical work in construction, or in the supply of goods and services to the tourist industry, which in both London and New York is the single largest category of urban labour. The urban service sector is anarchic, plunged into constant turf battles, niches and the search for new markets; these competitive dramas, Jane Jacobs has argued, are the lifeblood of cities, and the service-based city open to migration has indeed

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sprung back to life. Moreover, the competition which open cities foster is not just economic. People contest with each other for places in schools, use of street space, the imprint on leisure spaces like parks and pubs. These are the city's raw social edges, but they have a defined class character. The realm of the city where such dissonances and conflicts are played out among strangers has been 'abandoned' to the middle and lower classes.

I use the word 'abandoned' because the signal feature of the new elite in these cities is that it has withdrawn from the public realm. This abandonment is most evident in the transformation of the urban centre, the geographic place in the city bearing the brunt of the new economy. Massive income gains for people at the top have pushed the middle and lower classes out of the centre of cities like London and New York; neighbourhoods, no matter how decayed, can be quickly evacuated and refilled thanks to the piston of gentrification.

That change is daily evident to me in London's Clerkenwell, where I now live. Once home to printers and small manufacturers, Clerkenwell is now becoming a neighbourhood of lofts, sold to young financiers working nearby in the City, or to the officer class in the army of graphic design, fashion, and advertising which has occupied London. What's happened to Clerkenwell is not quite the repeat of the gentrification which occurred in New York's Soho, another former manufacturing district where I used to live, close to the Wall Street colossus: Clerkenwell passed from desolation to chic without an intervening era of poor-artist habitation as occurred in Soho.

Still, both places bear the impress of a new global elite living in the city but withdrawn from the public realm. New money uses the city but makes little effort to run it. This elite therefore looks nothing like the new men of Balzac's Paris. In the *Comidie Humaine* we are shown driven new men (and women) who want to wrest power over the city from the entrenched ruling class. They want to rule the place in which they live. Though Rastignac or Vautrin imagine themselves free of the past, in fact theirs is an old story: fealty, submission, obedience. This was the story of power and the public realm in the Italian medieval communes; it was the essence of *Burgherlich Gesellschaft* in the Hanseatic towns of the north. And in America, it was the story of the Boston Brahmins, who sought to leave their imprint on the city's schools, libraries, hospitals and parks, as well as on its businesses.

If the new elite of London or New York reigns over restaurants and flats, it has shown little desire to govern those hospitals, schools , libraries, or other public aspects of the city. Indeed, one of the great

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dramas currently unfolding in New York is the financial crisis which has resulted from the new elite's withdrawal from the public realm; the new monied classes, particularly in the information and high-tech sector, have failed to continue just that kind of civic domination, one that stretched out in New York's history from the time of the Dutch in the early seventeenth century up to the arrival of **Italians, Irish and Jews into** the city's elite 250 years later.

And this, I fear, will also be London's fate as a global city. Money **from the global cornucopia will not diffuse if the captains of that money** do not feel connected to the whole city. The contrast between a privatised elite and a mass of citizens below, struggling for both economic and social goods in the public realm, also establishes the class character of the kind of urban identity I wish to describe.

It is indeed working-class or at best petty bourgeois, immigrant based. It has coped well with drastic change in life-circumstances, often with little government support or charity from above. Neo-liberal ideology has found a certain, perverse virtue in that lack of assistance; individuals and social groups have been forced to confront one another in public, rather than become supplicants like the clients of ancient Rome who fed parasitically on their masters - though competition does nothing to remedy the scarcity of social services or public goods. Whether for good or ill, the rough edges of social life in the public realm mean that differences have had to be negotiated every day.

Identities in the city form not in a grand scheme but in seemingly microscopic social exchanges, negotiations that divide between how others see one and how one sees oneself. Last year, for instance, I informed the Korean cleaners that my son had married; the next time I went in - to replace yet another set of lost cuff-links - the mother gave me a little package of sweets she had made. In the holiday season, however, when I brought her a jar of caviar in return, she accepted the jar across the counter but looked at me with what I can only describe as fear - as though my reciprocal gift made a demand she might not be able to handle. It is the principle of the potlatch; he who makes the gift remains in control. But now it was applied to a situation in which the boundary between customer and friend had become blurred, and that by her own initial, generous impulse. This little incident underscores how unrealistic are images of urban community based on reciprocity and mutuality, a legacy of nineteenth-century thinking about *Genleinschaft.* Like rootedness, *Gemeinschaft is* a cliché that gets in the way of understanding the unbalanced relations between self and other in places like New York, with its extreme mixtures of class, ethnicity, and race.

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People may draw towards one another, but not in order to consummate the union by erasing boundaries. If it is true that globalisation is creating cities with an ever greater mix of peoples, still the definitions of

identity lie in the negotiation of those borders, particularly in determining those lines that cannot be crossed, evinced even in so trivial a detail as the unequal exchange of gifts. This detail helped to maintain an important sense of self-control and refusal to 'melt' in a city long considered the world's melting-pot. Negotiation of dissonance is the plot of identity, the city its necessary stage.

The Narrator at Work

Early writers on capitalist labour, such as Adam Smith, believed work narratives would disappear in the industrialised world, since unchanging routine would ever more dominate the labours of men. This has proved not so. just as we learn skills through repetition and routine, so in the work-world even the most numbing routine can be used to construct a cumulative life-history. I've interviewed a janitor who composed a dramatic work-story from slow and steady wage gains earned through routine work; now as an unemployed street-sweeper he felt deprived of anything significant or honourable to be recounted about his life, since he had lost what more favoured people might consider deadly dull work.

   The labours of the modern, flexible workplace pose quite a different challenge to the task of narrating one's work: how can one create a sense of personal continuity in a labour market in which work-histories are erratic and discontinuous rather than routine and determinate? In one way, what has recently happened to global capitalism is quite straightforward. After the Second World War, the capitalist system solidified into large, pyramid-shaped bureaucracies tied to the fortunes of nation-states. These pyramids began disintegrating in the late 1970s. Today the cord between nation and economy has been cut, and businesses have replaced their bureaucratic solidity with more fluid and flexible networks connected around the world. These historical changes in bureaucratic form have altered the way people experience the passage of time inside institutions. In old English, a 'career' was a straight and well-marked roadbed, while a 'job' was a load of coal or wood that could be moved about indiscriminately. In that sense jobs are replacing careers in the modern work-world. Few people now labour for life for one employer; a young person in Britain or America with a few years of university can expect to work for at least twelve employers in the course

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of a lifetime; his or her 'skills base' will change three or more times so that, for instance, the computing skills learnt in school will be out of date by the age of thirty-five.

The shortening time-frame of employment coincides with the shortened institutional life of employers, companies merging and restructuring themselves at a rate unthinkable a generation ago. Though the publicity for these institutional changes invokes an aura of precision as 're-engineering', the majority of company make-overs are chaotic: business plans appear and collapse, employees are fired only to be rehired, productivity falls as the company loses sustained focus. Workers can hardly be expected to make more personal sense of this chaos than their bosses. Even in well-disciplined firms, work itself is shifting from the steady-state repetition of tasks envisaged by Adam Smith to short-term tasks performed by teams, the content of the task-labour changing in flexible corporations in quick response to changes in global demand. The shifts in task-labour are, again, beyond the individual's or the team's control. All these material changes challenge the effort to forge a sustained work-narrative. Indeed, I've found that the employees of leading-edge, flexible businesses have a great deal of difficulty in doing so, or in deriving a sense of personal identity from work. This blanket assertion needs one immediate qualification: the lack of a sustained work-narrative doesn't bother many younger employees. Once, however, a man or woman marries, begins to have children, takes on the burden of a mortgage and the other accoutrements of middle age, the aimlessness of labour begins to tell; with advancing age, people need to make more sense of their lives than seeing them simply as a random series of events. This is a practical need, because a work-narrative is more than a mere report of events occurring on the job; it serves a critical and evaluative function.

The judgement of work usually falls in three parts: the narrative defines long-term purposes, it prospectively measures the consequences of risk, and it orchestrates the pace and extent of family consumption. 'My job history', a computer technician said, 'is moving from one thing to the next, paying attention to today.' This seemingly innocuous remark proved, in the course of interviews, to be the source of real unease.

'I lost my own professional goals,' he later said, under the pressure of responding to the demands of four different employers; his job continually on the line, he had trouble evaluating whether he ought to leave before he was fired; as to pacing his consumption, which in his case means shouldering a larger house mortgage for a growing family,

'I'm afraid of being trapped by responsibilities I can't manage.' The work-world seems illegible to him - and it is in fact illegible. But simply leaving the matter there would 'make me feel stupid, and I'm not'. Interpretative acts do not, of course, master social realities. But interpretations do provide people with a sense of personal 'agency' - a cliché, though admittingly only to sociologists, which needs to be made concrete. The phenomenon of agency in a real-life narrative resembles what novelists call 'voice'.

Flaubert once succinctly defined voice by declaring: 'The author should be everywhere present in his story and nowhere identified.' In literature, the phenomenon of voice makes us aware of someone telling us about people or things, clipping and editing and organising what is told. We feel that presence even in accounts like Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table, a* story of the *Nazi* concentration camps in which the author is totally subservient to his guards. 'Agency' works the same way in ordinary life. Take what happens when people must confront traumas at work such as redundancy, a frequent event for middle-aged employees in the new work order. Here agency consists in stepping back, in creating some space between oneself and the event. Even the trivial act of telling can help people step back: for instance, a secretary recounted to me, 'As X was explaining why they had to let me go, I noticed the wart on his nose seemed darker.' In evoking the wart, she signalled she wasn't overwhelmed by the rejection.

This is narrative agency. Agency must follow Flaubert's command rather strictly. That is, the ordinary story-teller weakens himself or herself, becoming vulnerable to events, by intruding his or her 'I' as a protagonist. A file-clerk made redundant, for instance, said to me: 'Suddenly a machine did my job better and they let me go, and the first thing I thought was, "What a fool I was those days I stayed at the office extra time just to get the job done." ' The loss of work constitutes a moment of betrayal; her long hours, her self-discipline meaning little in constituting her work-history. Moreover, she tells about the event in a way which accentuates her vulnerability - while her 'I' is nakedly exposed, her sense of agency is weak.

Some analysts, like the Harvard Business School guru John Kotter, believe such experiences of betrayal signal the failure of workers to adapt to a work-world which admits of no narrative, at least of the long, three-decker Victorian-novel sort. His view implies that the file-clerk erred in imagining her work identity as a sustained story with a denouement - she invests time and effort, she receives at least the minimal reward of keeping her job. This, Kotter argues, is an outdated

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story; she should have harboured no such expectations. But very few people can put in the hours and cope with the stress of the modern economy by simply believing themselves chameleons, their work promising no more than a disconnected series of jobs. The operations of personal agency, clipping and shaping experience, standing back and resisting, judging practically, are missing in many modern work-narratives. The reason has to do with the work itself, rather than emotional or cognitive failure on the part of employees.

An identity, as we have seen, takes form through the social interaction of people at the edges of their personae, those boundary negotiations between self and other. But in the modern workplace, the other - embodied in the person of an authority figure - tends to be absent. As in the city, the people at the top of the corporation seek to absent themselves from daily interaction with the mass of their employees; in the office, this flight from engagement leaves employees without a necessary antagonist.

Working without Recognition

An absence of authority in the office is one consequence of changes in the bureaucratic form of the new capitalism. The modern corporation has sought to eliminate layers of bureaucracy, to operate via work-teams and work-cells, but very few such reformed businesses become flat playing fields. If anything, the effort to create a more flexible organisation centralises power at the top. Thanks to the way information technologies are currently deployed, it is possible to transmit orders from this inner elite core quickly and comprehensively, with less mediation and interpretation down the chain of command than occurred in old-style pyramidal bureaucracies. The top can also reckon results instantly and for itself, thanks to the computerisation of corporate information.

In such flexible corporations, a split opens up between the command function and the response function. That means an inner core will set production or profit targets, give orders for reorganisation of particular activities, then leave the isolated cells or teams in the network to meet these directives as best each group can. Those outside the elite corps are told what to achieve, but not how to achieve it. The split between command and response often appears at the moments when an enterprise is trying to remake itself, feeling its way towards another structure.

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At Microsoft mid-level programmers were suddenly told in 1995, 'Think Internet,' without much indication of what 'thinking Internet' might practically entail. This command expresses an intention rather than an action; at Microsoft, the burden of responsibility was thus shifted downwards, the middle ranks trying to figure out what exactly to do about their bosses' intentions.

Today, corporations like IBM practise this division between command and response, shifting responsibility downwards, as a permanent fact of institutional life; the practice marks a stark contrast to the paternalistic, tightly organised chain of command which orchestrated the corporation for most of its history. The economist Bennett Harrison characterises the split as a concentration of command without centralisation of execution. The polite phrase for this in New-Labour-speak is 'deregulation of the workplace'. In reality, it amounts to a regime o indifference. Commands have not disappeared, nor has the stringent assessment of results. Engagement in the actual work process has diminished, as has that cornerstone of authority, the willingness to be held accountable for one's orders. The necessities of the flexible economy, it should be said, often force the boss to act as a *deus absconditus.* 'We are all victims of time and place,' a consultant said, observing the chaos of a business in the throes of reorganisation.

Of course, as one of the architects of change, in so saying he ducked being held personally accountable. But deregulation is a more apposite term than many of its apostles realise; the consultant understood that most flexible enterprises teeter on the brink of disorganisation, barely stable - and so he protected himself by disappearing down the Nietzschean rabbit-hole in which the **ruler does not pretend to be the**

master of Fate.

The same disappearance occurs in flexible management's favourite image of collective effort, the team. Teamwork engaged in flexible labour is the creation of Japanese auto and electronics manufacturers; in its exported form, particularly into Britain and the United States, it often changes complexion. Whereas Japanese managers are usually on the shopfloor, arguing with (or, to Western ears, shouting at) the workers in various teams, in export form the team experiences much less interaction with the manager. He is a 'coach', as in sports, urging the worker-players on but not playing himself. In Anglo-American forms of teamwork, each group holds each individual responsible for collective results, usually with one exception: the manager-coach. Nor are these teams really self-determining: the group puzzles out how to meet production or output demands often set purposely too high by

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management; their immediate coach does not translate these into action - and seldom, in my experience, risks defending orders from on high as legitimate - but rather 'facilitates' discussion about how the workers themselves will obey. As a result fraternal recrimination marks Western style teamwork much more than it does Japanese team-labour.

For workers on the receiving end of the split between command and execution, what most disturbs them, I have found, is that they lose what could be called a work-witness. The employee labours in a vacuum, even in Western-style teams, and the burden of making sense of his or her work becomes internalised. It might seem, logically, that this would free up the individual to contrive whatever meaning for work he or she wills, But in fact, without a witness who responds, who challenges, who defends and is willing to take responsibility for the power he or she represents, the interpretative capacity of workers becomes paralysed.

An essential quality of productive cognitive dissonance has gone missing: interaction with others in the environment, so that difficulties, dissonances and differences can be renegotiated. As a result, employees often contrive an idealised version of 'home' in their heads: what they would do, if they were really free; the perfect job, which would make use of their abilities. A split in time-consciousness occurs so that on the one hand there is a sheer chronicle of events and, on the other, an image of what ought to be.

This idealised ought-to-be image of work does not interact with the chronicle. It retreats into the realm of 'if only'. The computer technician told me, 'If I could just get a hold of some start-up money, only a few million, I could start a great company.' But he knows the chances are slim.

In point of fact, only 4 per cent of start-up firms in the USA find outside investment capital, and of these firms, over 90 per cent fail within three years. So the dream of a work identity in which the individual comes into his or her own becomes the employee's secret.

Put in sociologese, the lack of a witness diminishes the power of agency. I revert to this bastard diction in order to emphasise that it is a social breakdown that causes the weakening of agency, not psychological weakness. Recognition, we might think, is a matter of acknowledging results: the promotion, the raise in wages.

But the actual work process - the time spent working - has quite another logic of recognition: the employee needs to be in contact with someone who embodies institutional power and is willing to speak in its name, particularly when things go wrong or the demands are

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impossible. Yet the split between command and execution means that power is retained while authority is surrendered.

Conclusion

My argument therefore comes down to this: you can do without authority in your sense of place, you cannot do without it in your sense of work. The eagle-eyed reader will no doubt object, but this abstraction mixes up two different kinds of people.

The Korean immigrants owned a very traditional kind of small business; the computer technician lives in a suburb. But this objection only sharpens the issue I wish to raise: what is personally at stake in global, flexible capitalism? It seems a truism that all people have compound identities - that is, different kinds of stories they tell to explain themselves, depending on what they want to explain.

My elderly banker, who happened to be gay, forged a very different narrative of exclusion and inclusion in Boston society once our discussion turned to sex; the Koreans told another story of personal conflict when we talked international politics, one in which New York life was a side-bar. The truism of compound identity becomes weightier when identity is distinguished from self-image *per se;* identity is the process of negotiating in the world one's self-image, however internally fixed, and diplomatic activity of this sort usually occurs simultaneously on many fronts.

In modern capitalism these negotiations have broken down on the labour front. The regime of power and time in the modern corporation puts serious obstacles in the way of deriving an identity from work. When employees succumb to this regime, they find it hard to integrate work experience in the compound of identity.

In a way, distinguishing place and work might serve the defenders of globalisation, at least partly. The promise of globalisation is a deregulated, mobile, ever renegotiated life-course. This evokes an indubitable contemporary reality with genuine personal value - but not in the social sphere where it is supposed to occur.

What neo-liberalism wants to achieve in the realm of work is more possible in the places, particularly the cities, in which globalised people live. To me, however, making this contrast helps sharpen the critique of globalisation. The struggles of globalised people to make a place for themselves in work point out what is missing at the economic heart of the global system.

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On the Edge

There is a regime of power operating on the principle of indifference to those in its grip, a regime seeking to evade, in the workplace, being held accountable for its acts. The essence of the politics of globalisation is finding ways to hold this regime of indifference to account. If we fail in this political effort, we will suffer a profound personal wound.