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Book Review

Anderson, E. (2023). *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic Against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK. DOI: 10.1017/9781009275422, US\$ \$29.95, UK £25.00, CAN\$ \$33.95

Chitranjan Greer-Travis

John Dewey Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Elizabeth Anderson, has written a delightful book. She offers a philosophy of work ethic. Following up on an earlier book, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)* (2017), Anderson offers a history and exploration of the erosion of workers' rights and the rise of the Protestant work ethic. Much of the work was written during the pandemic (2020-2021) when workers were required to place themselves in harm's way if they were designated as "essential" workers.

Anderson claims that there was a split in the idea of the work ethic in the Eighteenth century between what she calls the *progressive* and *conservative* forms of the work ethic. The progressive form of the work ethic is more emancipatory, while the conservative form ultimately vilifies people experiencing poverty and praises the gains in wealth made by the more opulent.

Upon delving into the book, I was struck by the sheer depth and rigor of Anderson's research. She meticulously examines how Puritan ethics, utilitarianism, and neoliberalism have all contributed to the exploitation of workers in favor of the super wealthy, establishing the book's credibility, timeliness, and authority.

In the preface, Anderson notes:

...I aim to criticize the work ethic, for what it has become: an ideological rationalization for the stigmatization and deprivation of the poor, the precarity of the working classes, and the dominion of capital interests over all other interests of humanity, including the future habitability of the planet. (Anderson, 2023, xvii)

In Chapter Four, "The Ideology of the Conservative Work Ethic," Anderson discusses how the conservative work ethic was systematically reformed through the workhouses. The Workhouse Test Act of 1723 in England and Wales is referenced. The valorization of the rich over the poor was a product of such reforms, as Anderson notes:

By abolishing outdoor relief and offering relief only to the destitute, the Poor Law Commissioners' reforms made the working poor materially worse off. But it is claimed to raise them above the destitute by casting disgrace on the latter. In reality, the reforms stigmatized all the poor through their virtual criminalization of poverty. This reinforced the presumption of the conservative work ethic that one's level of virtue could be inferred from one's wealth. (Anderson, 2023, pp. 104-5)

This model of classism and stigmatization of the working poor also reinforces social hierarchies. Throughout the book, Anderson discusses the role that positional esteem plays in shaping the conservative work ethic. The smoking gun for Anderson is neoliberalism, as well as Jeremy Bentham's views on the panopticon and other poor relief acts, which erode work more than they fuel the economy. For Anderson,

Neoliberalism is not only degrading work. As I argued in Chapter 9, it is also degrading the autonomy and capabilities of people in its design of welfare policies, its reliance on carceral institutions as a means of addressing poverty, indebtedness, addiction, homelessness, mental illness, and other social problems, its dismantling of democratic state capacity through outsourcing, and its support for oppressive, negative value-added business models. (Anderson, 2023, p. 288)

In contrast to the current model of work ethic, Anderson advocates for a more global society founded on equality, the development of capabilities through educational opportunities, and meaningful work.

Anderson's insightful critique of the conservative work ethic does what she set out to do. She unpacks the damaging effects of the hijacking of the Protestant work ethic and the subsequent Poor Law reforms that followed on the working class. It is essential to understand the historical roots of our current state of democratic backsliding and the erosion of human rights. Demonizing poverty and equating virtue with pecuniary wealth, these ideologies not only entrench social hierarchies but also strip people of their dignity and humanity.

It is very clear, from my reading, that Anderson's vision for a more just society demands a radical rethinking of our work ethic. Perhaps it's time to abandon the hijacked work ethic. We should champion the development of human capabilities and meaningful employment for all who seek it; after all, it *is* a human right.

References

- Anderson, E. (2023). *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic Against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK. DOI: 10.1017/9781009275422
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