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Emerging working classes

There is an old Haitian motto that says: 'If work were a good thing, the rich would have found a way of keeping it to themselves.'

The motto is recalled in a new book, *Licensed to Work* by Barrie Sherman and Phil Judkins. This suggests that we should be questioning the notion of paid employment as an ultimate goal of life, and investigating ways of arranging society so that all people are able to live happily without paid employment at least for some of the time.

Instead, the prospect of life without employment is creating almost unprecedented fear across society, to the extent that it is damaging consumer-led growth. The very companies that have found they can make products far more cheaply with fewer people are confronted with potential customers worried about spending money when they are being told they may no longer have a job for life.

Sherman and Judkins are exploring what is becoming a familiar belief among many employment theorists - that microelectronics, led by the silicon chip has triggered a new industrial revolution as momentous as those arising from the advent of steam power and later of electricity.

This is partly responsible for an estimated 35m people officially unemployed across OECD industrialised countries, and an additional 11m people available and willing to be employed, but who do not show up in government statistics.

The plight of some of these unemployed, the so-called underclass, was recognised during the 1980s when social commentators identified a group of people disadvantaged by unemployment who seemed beyond the help of society. This 'underclass' neither possessed a job nor the means to obtain one.

Sherman and Judkins have highlighted a second and fast-growing group of under-employed or unemployed men, which it calls the overclass. While both groups are divided by wealth, qualifications and in many cases age, they share a common inability to find work.

This newer category of the unemployed is perhaps most recognisable in the US, where the real incomes of the American middle classes have fallen by 15 per cent in the last 20 years and where, because of low welfare payments, there is a real danger without employment of falling from overclass to underclass.

While it has been possible for Western administrations to neglect the underclass without sustaining political disadvantage, the so-called overclass still clinging to its middle-class roots is, argue the authors, a potential force for both political and social instability.

The disillusionment of the British middle classes is spilling over to their children who, the authors argue, need to be prepared for coping with life as well as employment.

They make a powerful case against an education system geared principally towards preparing children for paid work. Dedicated vocational courses should be left to tertiary education and schools should instead concentrate on teaching children how to learn. Education, they argue, should be about ideas and knowledge, the merit of

which is neatly encapsulated in a Chinese proverb: 'If we each have an egg and we exchange them, we each have an egg; if we each have an idea and exchange them, we each have two ideas.'

Applying this fundamental principle, it should be possible, they say, to re-establish the old work ethic of being useful to others and to yourself, embracing voluntary work as readily as paid work.

It should be said that Sherman and Judkins are proposing some radical solutions to a problem which they believe has not yet fully materialised. Comparing the developments in microelectronics with those in manned flight, they reckon we have just about reached the stage where Alcock and Brown flew the Atlantic.

At the same time, many computer-based jobs are moving to areas of cheap but intelligent labour. They point to British Airways, which carries out computer booking operations in Delhi, Swissair, with its accounting department in India, British Telecom which solves some of its software problems in Bombay and IBM's use of programmers in Bangalore. For every £100 earned by a Western computer programmer, these Indian specialists, many of whom are women, earn less than £8. The impact on even skilled western jobs is clear.

The authors are attracted to the idea of a gradually introduced basic citizens' income - a guaranteed payment from the state - as a way of tiding people over financially between periods of part-time or temporary employment. They also toy with the notion of a national social service for young people replacing that which was once the preserve of the military, although they see difficulties if such a service was compulsory.

Additionally, as the title of the book suggests, they advocate rationing hours of employment using work licences: smart cards, each containing a yearly quota of hours eligible for paid employment. Should we dismiss their ideas as scaremongering in order to promote outlandish proposals for a social Utopia, or could any of it ever happen?

Sherman is not new to this field. In the late 1970s, he co-authored *The Collapse of Work*, a book which predicted a 'leisure revolution'. Instead of having more leisure time because of technological advances, however, many of those in work found they had less.

There is no doubt that changes are taking place, but whether they are as fundamental as Sherman and Judkins would have us believe, and whether they will require drastic measures, remains to be seen. Still their observations and ideas make stimulating reading.

Licensed to Work by Barrie Sherman and Phil Judkins is published by Cassell, price £40 in hardback and £13.99 in paperback.