

Book Review of

*Blood, Sweat, and Tears: The Evolution of Work*

Richard Donkin

New York: Texere, 2001

Reviewed by John Budd

We often take work for granted. Nearly all of us will spend most of our lives working. But rarely do we question how work is structured, and how it came to be how it is. Richard Donkin, a British journalist, is a refreshing exception and his *Blood, Sweat, and Tears: The Evolution of Work* does a great service by helping us consider the evolution of work back to the Stone Age and before. After noting that the earliest worker—at least 500,000 years ago, and perhaps 2.5 million years ago—was a hunter-gatherer who used basic tools, Donkin spells out the main theme of the book: “So how did he ever come to be carrying a briefcase, following a dress code, and pushing buttons on a keyboard? And was it for the best?” (p. 9).

To answer these two very important questions, Donkin considers a number of interesting episodes in the history of work. These episodes range from Stone Age axe makers to the beginnings of the Iron Age and the modern employment relationship in 18th century Great Britain; from slavery in ancient Greece and Rome to the forced labor camps of Nazi Germany; from the anti-technology Luddites in the early 1800s to the quality disciples of Deming and Juran in the second half of the 1900s; from the de-skilling scientific management of Taylor to the worker empowerment of McGregor and Drucker; from the development of the Protestant work ethic to the development of modern theories of work motivation through the Hawthorne experiments and the theories of Maslow; from George Pullman’s company town in the late 1800s to the benevolence of the English retailing company John Lewis which continues today.

Through these episodes, it is impossible for the attentive reader to not learn a great deal. Each one is often rooted in a personal story—such as Abraham Darby’s perfection of cheap iron

cooking pots, Robert Owen's quest to create utopian worker cooperatives, and Frederick Winslow Taylor's ideal worker Henry Noll—rather than discussed in the abstract. Key events in the evolution of work are thus richly brought to life. Moreover, the coverage of these episodes is not only impressive, but is also comprehensive and balanced. The episodes are not selectively presented in order to champion a specific agenda; rather, we see numerous competing visions of work. Such balance is critical for developing a robust understanding of the nature of work.

At the same time, it is easy to get distracted. In the 15 pages that comprise chapter 16, for example, the discussion of Peter Drucker's management theory includes brief discussions of logistical strategies in World War I, Hitler's refusal to use nerve gas in World War II, the formation of U.S. business schools, the founding of McKinsey consulting, Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, Scanlon plans, and Mary Parker Follett, among other things. Such distractions aside, the book is at its strongest in presenting its diverse episodes.

So, “how did [we] ever come to be carrying a briefcase, following a dress code, and pushing buttons on a keyboard? And was it for the best?” The second question is easier than the first. Donkin is clearly skeptical that this has been for the best. We might be tempted to say that civilization has clearly progressed since the Dark Ages, the Stone Ages, or before. But Donkin notes early on that contemporary anthropologists do not necessarily believe in this ethnocentric vision of constant progress. As such, we should not assume that work has evolved in a manner that we would all label as progress. In the words of the author, our ancient ancestors thousands of years ago “developed something beyond the need simply to survive...they were handy men and they moved with a sense of purpose (pp. 12-13).” This leads directly into Donkin's litmus test for the evolution of work—“If anything drives our organization today it must be a similar sense, that

what they are doing has a common purpose to improve the lives of all those involved with the endeavor” (p. 13).

And in Donkin’s view, where work has evolved to today fails this test—“Today we are damned if we don’t work, drained if we do. To balance our lives in this new century we need nothing less than a new ethic. We need to take the old [work] ethic, dismantle it, analyze it, then reconstruct something which makes more sense” (p. 335). So the evolution of work has perhaps not been entirely for the best. This conclusion is further revealed by the book’s title—the trilogy of “blood, sweat, and tears” omits any positive rewards of work such as income, fulfillment, pride, creativity, and the like. Can these all really be missing from contemporary work? I doubt that Donkin would go that far, but the point reinforced by the title is well-taken—blood, sweat, and tears appear to dominate the positive aspects of work today.

But how did it evolve to this contemporary state? This is Donkin’s first question, and it is a hard one. Unfortunately, on this account *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* ultimately comes up short. Are there more blood, sweat, and tears in work today than throughout work’s evolution? Donkin doesn’t say. Moreover, the negative developments in the evolution of work—such as Taylor’s scientific management that reduced workers to machines—are ultimately blamed on an underlying Protestant work ethic. In fact, the Protestant work ethic seems to dart in and out of many chapters. But why this particular work ethic evolved to dominate the world of work is never fully explained. This is a major omission. So while the book is at its best in describing important episodes that make up the evolution of work, it is at its weakest in pulling them together.

Nevertheless, *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* has a lot to offer. It is hard to think of another place in which the reader can encounter so many important and diverse thinkers and

developments in the world of work in such an accessible fashion. Donkin's insight that "the association of work with the restriction of individual freedom is a recurring theme throughout human history" (p. 201) is also a very important one. This dark side of work is something that contemporary scholars, students, and practitioners tend to overlook, much to the detriment of our understanding of the full range of the nature and evolution of work. This insight further reinforces the need to heed Donkin's warnings about the current state of work. If we're not careful, we run the risk of becoming slaves to our work. But as Donkin emphasizes, work should be "part of life, not life itself" (p. 327).