After the Long Boom: living with capitalism in the twenty first century[1]

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Introduction

In 1977, my friend Theo Nichols and I published a book called *Living with Capitalism: Class Relations in the Modern Factory.* At that time we were aware of the long drawn out crisis in British capitalism but neither of us expected that in the book we would be documenting industrial life at the end of an era: an era that would come to be called 'the long boom' or the 'golden age of capitalism' and more ubiquitously as 'Fordism'[2]. In 1987 there were seven million people employed in manufacturing industry today the figure is below three million, a decline more severe than other advanced economies apart from the USA [3]. Trade union membership peaked in 1979 and declined sharply though the eighties, stabilized and then falling again to a new low to 23% of the work force in 2017 [4]. It is a world turned upside down .

At the time however our concerns were more prosaic, and tied up with the fact that there were strong tendencies within sociology that emphasised the effect of affluence of

[1] This article is based on a paper that I gave at the ERU Conference in Cardiff University on 6 September 2000. That it has re-emerged in this form is due to the e persistence and encouragement of Paul Smith

[2] See R.Brenner (2006) *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn*, Verso, 2006; S.S Marglin, and J.B. Shor , *The Global Age of Capitalism: Reinterpreting the post-war experience*, Oxford University Press 1992, A. Lipietz,. 'Towards Global Fordism?' New Left Review, 1982' I/132, pp. 31–47.

[3] P. Nolan and Slater, : "Visions of the future. The legacy of the past: demystifying the weightless economy" *Labor History*, 2010, 51:1 7-27)

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workers and the potentially ameliorative impact of new technologies upon working life. In our view these accounts under-played or played down the painful nature of the

work process as well as the potential for conflict to develop systematically at "the point of production". The study in Luton by Goldthorpe, Lockwood and their colleagues had emphasised the workers' "orientation" to the work-place rather than the work place itself

as being of central importance[5]. On the other hand Robert Blauner in Berkeley had written an account of historical change that was discussed along the dimensions of alienation and freedom. This was the title of his book that traced industrial development though textile manufacture, car assembly and the production of chemical products through process technology. In this he maintained that historically the alienating experience of work could be represented as an inverted U, peaking with the assembly line stage, reducing toward contemporary times where process technologies became more centrally involved. . We found the account of historical change unconvincing and were unsure of his accounts of the work experience in chemical plants and others that employed these new technologies.[6]

The emphasis upon new technology as a liberating source had emerged more generally in the 1960's, and made most clear in the speech made by Harold Wilson as Prime Minister at the Labour Party Conference in Scarborough in 1964. There he talked of "the white heat" that need to engulf the country as it went forward with a "technological

[4] BEIS, *Trade Union Membership 2017: Statistical Bulletin,* London, Department of Business Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2019

[5] J.H. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, F. Bechhoher and J. Platt, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968

[6] For a full and critical account see S. Edgell , *The Sociology of Work: Continuity and Change in Paid and Unpaid Work,* London, Sage (2006) Chapter Four

revolution". A Minister of Technology was established in this image, first the leader of the TGWU Frank Cousins and later the energetic Tony Benn. Within industrial sociology automation – especially as represented by the continuous process technologies of the chemical industries - was seen as heralding fundamental changes to the working environment for manual workers. In 1971 petrochemicals was marked out at the moist advanced form of capitalist manufacturing in the UK. At that time while a worker in the motor vehicle industry worked with £3,000 of capital; added £2,3000 of value in a year, the capital stock of the chemical sector stood at £400,000 per operative with each adding £120,000 of value.

These were the reasons that led us to ChemCo: a large international chemical corporation that had opened a new site in the South West of England at Riverside[7]. At rthat time it was one of many heavy industrial installations stretching along the estuary of the River Severn. . There, amongst other things, the company produced large quantities of industrial fertiliser.

Technology at Work

On our first visit to the Riverside site we were deeply impressed by the complexity of the plant and the enormity of the technical achievements involved in the manufacturing processes that we observed. What struck us even more forcefully however was the number of men involved in heavy manual labour. At that time half of the pay-roll

[7] This name was to endure confidentiality and this lasted successfully until the shop steward Combine Committee at ICI launched its newsletter entitled *Chemco News.*

employees in the chemical industry were classified as "unskilled ". On the Riverside site these men spent their days and nights humping hundredweight sacks of fertiliser in a manner that fitted well with descriptions of the Liverpool docks in the nineteenth century. When we raised this apparent paradox with managers, the talk was about the progressive emergence of two kinds of work: "scientific work" and "donkey work". When discussing the unfairness of this, and the possibility of feelings of resentment, one manager joked of the need to produce a "special race of worker". One of the "donkeys" reflected in this way:

> When I came down here I was sadly disillusioned I can tell you. You talk about technology an d all the technical bods they have working here. Well damn all that. Here we are – in the technical age - still doing jobs in 1900

This coexistence of advanced technologies with backward work was striking. We saw it as more supportive of Marx and Braverman[8] than of any account of human liberation through technical advance. The polarizing tendencies seemed important too and it was something that occurred elsewhere. At the time when *Living With Capitalism* was published I was working with Hilary Wainwright in an "action research" project with the shop stewards' committee at the Vickers Corporation. In 1978 we watched German engineers install a massive computer numerically controlled (cnc) machining centre at the company's Michels Bearings factory on the Scotswood Road in West Newcastle.

[8] H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: the Degredation of Workin the Twentieth Century*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1974

Workers spent their breaks watching and talking about the new machine: how much it cost; its weight; the diameter of the table. The apprentices were particularly engaged with this new development because it was an amazing piece of equipment and it represented the future. .So, alongside the awe went a concern that came with the knowledge that the operator of the machine

> Would be just a button pusher – that's all he'll be, because that's all he 'll be asked to do. All the skill will be in the programme that's fed into the machine . He'll just push the number on the buttons[9]

They said this with the understanding that "you have to have these machines. In a capitalist society you have to have the equipment if you are going to compete". They also knew that these were the machines that would affect their lives. We talked with the Chairman of the Company, Lord Robens about this and he explained:.

> We are pushing more and more qualified technicians into the back rooms. We will require more and more of these people in the design rooms and the jobs on the shop floor itself will be pushing buttons. This is where the slow starters or those who don't make it will be employed

Here then a similar theme and with a similar managerial justification embellished with the emphasis of social categories – from donkey work to slow learners. This theme of a developing polarization being created through the labour process was a strong one I was

reminded of this when twenty years later when as part on project in Manchester I went to ChemCo once again with Jill Rubery. By this time the company had been restructured into a large pharmacological producer with a high profile employing over a thousand

highly qualified scientific workers in a large number of laboratories on one site. It was explained to us how this scientific development took place internationally with teams

liked up through the internet. The results of this work was fed into the creation of new pharmaceutical products also manufactured around the world. We visited one such plant in the local area where tablets were produced, packed and inspected.. There we met , the plant manager, who had previously managed at the Halewood factory of Ford. and we talked about the nature of the work in the factory and their recruitment policies. He was quite blunt and to the point. He explained that the nature of the work demanded that " We are looking for people who are as near as possible to robots while remaining human beings".

By this time, of course, many other things had changed.

Another Utopia: Participation at Work

[9] For details see H. Beynon, *British Workers and the New Technology: Reflections on some empirical investigations,* University of Durham, SSRC Working paper 5, 1983 available on www.huwbeynon.com/publications

At Chemco the company had introduced a new national agreement on working practice emphasizing that it was to be "something done together with people not as something done to people". This involved a developed form of human relations policies that emphasized participation, team working, job rotation, job enrichment and so on. As such it contained much of the language that was to proliferate in the nineteen eighties and largely attributed to the inculcation of Japanese working methods, sometimes described as "lean production" and also of a new "post-Fordism". Here, again, our observations at ChemCo seemed prescient. There we observed that the new, more civilized, techniques of managerial engagement with the workforce were combined with an intensified labour process. So much so that one man described his experience in this way:

> You ,move from one boring dirty monotonous job to another boring dirty monotonous job. Ando somehow you[re supposed to come out of it all "enriched". But I never feel "enriched" – I just feel knackered.

I heard echoes of this on many occasions in the eighties as the new participatory techniques were introduced across industry and in plants like GM's assembly installation at Elsemere Port One man there explained to me the reality that

> there's one thing they can't take away with these new management techniques- the job. If the job is hard; its hard.

These views were translated into direct experience by a reporter from the consumer magazine *Car,*. Stephen Wood[10] . visited the Sunderland Nissan factory with the view to working for one shift on the assembly line. He described a meeting with his team leader:

> 'it's boring work and its hard', he told us 'I had a rugby player working with me who thought he was fit - and he's lost a stone since he came here. He reckons working on
>
> the line is the best sleeping pill he's ever had'. It was a depressing statement. Such is the demand for work on Tyneside, that Nissan doesn't need to sell the jobs. On the contrary, the team leader stressed how undesirable they were.

Wood soon discovered this for himself. Like Orwell in a previous generation he "had little idea then of how hard the work would be, or that, at 36, I was really too old for it".

I raised these points with the Personnel Director of the plant when I visited in 1989. He agreed that "it would kill" people in their mid-thirties to work on the assembly line at Nissan; and for this reason they employed men in their early twenties. He was less convincing (and convinced?) when I asked about the position of these workers in fifteen years time.

The experiences of Wood are echoed by Rick Delbridge who in the 1990s had a much longer period of of intense participation in two factories – one in the valleys of the old

[10] S. Wood , "On the Line", *Car,* July 1987 , 140-147

coalfield in South Wales, the other in Plymouth in Southwest England. When he set off on his investigation he thought that he knew what to expect. He expected the jobs to be boring and laborious:

> ut it was more mundane, more repetitive and harder than I had expected, more soul-destroying to work on a line in a dreary factory for hour after hour, day after day, than I can really articulate[11]

The theme is a common one. It is repeated by Ruth Milkman in her study of a General Motors' factory in the USA where [12],. She explains how many of the foremen found their training in the new psychological skills quite liberating, encouraging them to reflect upon their lives and their relationship with their families. On the factory floor however it proved difficult to implement the scheme. Here the pressing demands of production remained and with it the disillusionment of the assembly line workers and the foremen. She quotes one of her respondents as saying: "I hated working for GM. The way they were running the plant". In her view many were glad to leave and try something (anything) else.

Perhaps one of the lessons for management to be gained from these study is not to promise too much. It raises expectations and leads to distrust and lack of interest in future schemes. Perhaps the same can be said for academic social scientific research. Salient

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[11] R. Delbridge *Life on the Line in Contemporary Manufacturing: the Workplace Experience of Lean Production and the 'Japanese Model'* , Oxford, 1997 Clarendon Press

[12] R. Milkman, *Farewell to the Factory*.

texts like *The Second Industrial Divide*[13] and the related discursions of post-Fordism and the rise of a new flexible work place raised expectations about the possibility of a dominant work regime that was both creative and involved the workers in on-going processes of innovation. Comparatively few studies have in fact talked with and considered the way in which workers understand and experience changes in manufacturing industries. Those that do have failed to convince.

I have thought of this as I have watched the advertisement for the Citroen's Picasso automobile. Here the supervisor regulates the robots, controlling their creativity, restricting them to reproducing the autograph of one twentieth century's most creative artist. Here in the almost mocking irony we can perhaps detect a change in capitalist culture. For some this would indicate a new "playfulness" for others seeing this parody of their own working lives would have been hard to take..

Capital Moves

When Chemco moved to Riverside it was part of a major shift in the planes of manufacturing in the UK. Up to that time in the decades that followed the war it had been assumed that work places had a spatial fixity, that the factories and the offices and docks would be there forever. It was that way in Ebbw Vale, the town where I was brought up in South Wales, the "jobs" available were clearly outlined and understood. There were "jobs" in the steel works and in the coal mines. Boys who left school at fifteen or sixteen went into either of these workplaces and became coal miners or steel

[13] Piore and Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide*,

workers. Those with academic qualifications became apprentices and were prepared for jobs as skilled maintenance workers in these industries. All of them understood their job to involve a powerful occupational identity and to be a "job for life". At that time (the late fifties) the steel works in the town employed over 13,000 workers and the coal mines 3,000. Nationally these industries, between them employed one and a quarter million workers. There were comparatively few manual jobs for women. The girls who left school at fifteen worked as machinists in the one garment factory in the town; alterative employment was offered in local shops and, for those with some academic qualifications, in the local "council offices During this period, those who passed examinations and went to University, looked forward to employment in management or in one of the professions away from Ebbw Vale.. Their world mirrored the world of manual work in two main respects: it was regarded as a long term commitment, often based in the public sector; and it was strongly marked by gender. For the men these were jobs for life with a strong occupational identity and the security of a pension. In the professions, as with manual work, women tended to be segregated into particular activities (like school teaching) and generally experienced marriage and childbearing as major obstacles to career advancement. While this place where I grew up was different in some respects from others (eg. textile belts where women had employment in the mills throughout their lives) it helps to highlight certain characteristics of a set of social arrangements which have been variously identified as welfare statism, Fordism, and "smoke stack" industrialism.

At this time too studies of “work” focused upon paid work in factories and offices that were assumed to operate within relatively stable regional economies. This changed

remarkably in the sixties. There, under the threat (or promise) of cheap oil and under the direction of Robens and then the governments of Harold Wilson, almost 400,000 mining jobs were lost. High tech mining was seen to be the future, with a strong concentration in the midlands. Elsewhere, in the North in Scotland and Wales new jobs would be found in manufacturing and service industries directed by government to those areas often offering the people a "new way of life" . This was also facilitated by redundancy payments introduced through the *Redundancy Payments Act 1965*. Before that time highly unionised work forces had resisted redundancy and had been able to impose their own controls through the system known as Last In First Out (LIFO). While often presented as offering financial benefits to workers as they changed jobs[14], the main aim of the Act was to break this area of control – which became known as "labour market inflexibility". As Fryer made clear its purpose was to aid the breaking down of:

> 'non-rational' resistance to the demands of technical rationality and 'unreal' opposition, to the realities of economics[15]. (1973:241-242)

Reflecting on this twenty five years later, Turnbull and Wass concluded that with the passing of the Act:

> Statutory redundancy pay was to be an instrument of management, a means to circumvent organised resistance to job losses and dispense with 'non-rational' selection criterial such as LIFO[16].

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[15] R.H. Fryer, 'Redundancy and Public Policy' in Martin, R. and Fryer, R.H. (Eds.) *Redundancy and Paternalistic Capitalism*, London, Allen and Unwin pp 241-242

[16] P. Turnbull and V. Wass . "Job insecurity and labour market lemons: The (mis) management of redundancy in steel making, coal-mining and port transport". *Journal of Management Studies*, 1997, 34(1), p.31.

Assisted by the Act a swath was cut though the jobs in the old coalfield regions, as coal mines, railways and steel mills were closed down. In the years between 1958 and 1970 350,000 jobs were removed from the coal industry alone. The impact of this was significant and far-reaching. To begin with, the fact that such a run-down could be achieved in the coal industry without serious trade union opposition through strike action, gave confidence to a view that such transformations were relatively easily achieved. Equally significant was the change that took place in the old industrial areas that had once cohered around a regionally integrated economy. These areas never fully recovered from the loss of these stable sources of manual employment for men[17] (Mackay and Davies 2015). Moreover jobs in the new economy, transplanted through the branch factories of large multinational corporations, created a very different regional working class fragmented by the organisational structures of the new firms[18] . Also, by providing employment opportunities for women – often on part-time contracts – the changes opened up a large "labour reserve" of female workers. As Streek commented:

> The movement of women into the labour market vastly added to the labour supply of capitalist economies at a time when labour and the demands of workers for higher wages and better employment conditions had become a bottleneck for continued capital accumulation[19]

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[17] R. MacKay and R. Davies 'Collective Learning, Effective Demand, Loss of Work and Loss of Direction: The Growing Regional Divide within the UK' *Regional Studies,* 2012. 46(7) 859-871

[18] T. Austrin and H, Beynon, *Global Outpost,* University of Durham, Discussion Paper, 1982 available at , huwbeynon.com/publications

[19] W, Streek, *When Will Capitalism End?* London Verso, p. 217

In providing thee new jobs the firms also offered and publicised a "new way of life" to the local people. However they often lacked the capacity to fulfil the commitment long term, for these changes, above all else, had broken the link between place and employment. This became clear in the late seventies when a new sweep of closures took place this time affecting manufacturing industry as branch pants moved on to other more profitable locations. This began under the Callaghan government and was pushed aggressively by Mrs Thatcher as she (with Ronald Reagan) implemented a new neo-liberal approach to the economy. Something which one of her supporters described as "capital; strikes back"

Perhaps the city of Coventry provided the clearest example of the scale of industrial change and its affects. In 1976, 186,000 people worked in the city, by 1982 the figure had dropped to 150,000. While manufacturing had provided 57.4% of jobs for the Coventry workforce after the collapse it had reduced to just 29% as across the area workers and managers were made redundant[20]. Gerry Read and Robin Wilson were managers with W & T Avery which was taken over buy GEC and then threatened with closure. They attempted to salvage the operation by taking it over themselves, but to no avail;. Read put it like this:

[20] See D. Massey and R. Megan, *The Anatomy of Job Loss: The How, Why and Where of Employment Decline*, London, Methuen, 1982; On Coventry see *Fighting Fit? How Job Loss is Affecting Coventry*, Coventry Workshop Factsheet, 1982

> It broke my heart when we had to tell the lads that that was it. We put everything in that place, it was my whole life. But that was it. I've finished with engineering[21]

At this time workers across all sectors of the economy felt under attach. A lodge official in South Wales speaking in 1980 compared the contemporary condition with the nineteen thirties when he argued ."there was hope"

> There were hundreds of pits working two, three or four days ands week. There were little steel works and fairly lathe ones dotted up and down the valleys. Now we are talking about the *total closure of industries in South Wales* [22]

In the manufacturing sector a journalist from The *Financial Times* journalist talked with a shop steward

> Who (having) spent his working life in a factory near London protested recently that employers no longer play by the rules. He and his fellow workers had been told that if they tightened their belts and rolled up their sleeves their factory would make a profit and continue to provide jobs and prosperity for the catchment area. They did and the profits duly materialised. But not long afterwards the company announced that the factory would close. It was explained that the plant was in the

[21] For discussion see H. Beynon, *British Manufacture and the New International Division of Labour*, University of Durham, SSRC Working Paper, 2, 1983 www.huwbeynon.com/publications
[22] Alan Baker, quoted in "Where are we Now? A RoundTable Discussion" *Marxism Today*, September 1980, p4

> working place…the work would be move to mainland Europe., Probably for the first time it was brought home to workers what the investment strategy of a multinational company means, and how powerless his trade union is to oppose it (21 January 1981)

It was a time of tremendous upheaval when, and in spite of this assessment, there were many attempts to arrest the decline. John Sterling was involved in many of these and in 2017 reflected that

> The twenty years roughly between 1965 and 1985 saw a ferment of ideas and actions within the trade union movement that were cross pollinate with ideas from outside and had organisational outcomes funded by national and, more commonly, local government [23]

The last throw of the dice of course was the miners strike of 1984 and its defeat in 1985 had long-lasting effects. As Chris Mullin[24] observed in Sunderland in 1998

> What my constituents need is work, but in the eight years I have represented them we have lost the ship yards, the pit and a large slice of our engineering capacity, and I cannot think of a single job that has been created or saved as a result of my efforts. To paraphrase John Garrett, 'Britain has been in decline for the last

[23].J, Sterling, "That was then and this is now: trade unions and plant closures" *North East History*, 2017, *Vol 48, pp167-179*

[24] C. Mullin, *A Walk-On Part: Diaries 1944-1999,* London, 2011, Profile Books, p375

> hundred years. The role of Parliament has been to provide a running commentary'.

He continues later

> Marks & Spencer is putting pressure on its suppliers to relocate to cheap labour economies … Bad news for Dewhirst workers, of which I have about 1,000 in my constituency. It comes on top of the proposed closure of Grove Cranes, Fujitsu and Siemens. If this process goes on all the progress of recent years will be destroyed, along with our hopes for the future.

In New York, Ethan Kapstein, Director of Studies at the Council on Foreign relations wrote of the break in the "post-war bargain" built around the Bretton Woods agreement and how:

> Rapid technological change and heightening international competition are fraying the job markets of the major industrialized countries. ….Just when working people need the nation state as a buffer from the world economy, it is abandoning them[25]

In his talk to the CBI in 2000, Labour Prime Minister , Tony Blair made it clear that this view was a thing of the past. In opposition he had worked to remove from the Labour Party's constitution a commitment, under Clause Four, to take large parts of the economy into state ownership. In government he spelled out that this policy needed to be replaced one that saw the modern state as facilitator for inward foreign investment, providing

[25] Ethan B. Kapstein, "Workers and the World Economy", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, 1996 p. 16

the necessary infrastructure and labour force. This he saw as a necessary feature of globalization and something that confirmed the new portability of "work" and the increasingly transient nature of working relationships. He reemphasized this in 2002 at the conference of the Labour party where he explained how:

> Globalisation and technology open up vast new opportunities but also cause massive insecurity. The values of progressive politics - solidarity, justice for all - have never been more relevant; and their application never more in need of modernisation. … it means taking the great progressive 1945 settlement and reforming it around the needs of the individual as consumer and citizen for the 21st century. What we did for the Labour Party in the new clause IV, freeing us from outdated doctrine and practice, we must now do, through reform, for Britain's public services and welfare state

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In these ways the UK declined as a manufacturing power. At Ebbw Vale the steel plant after many cuts backs finally closed in 2003. By this time Chemco's Riverside Site, after the disruption of a corporate merger final closed along with the other large manufacturing that occupied the large tract of land adjacent to the river estuary. When we wrote the TGWU office responsible for the area that included the docks, dealt with over 20,000 members. Today it has less than a thousand as the factories have been replaced with warehouses of which the largest is owned by Amazon.

Retailing Services

In South East Wales people remember the factory of British Nylon Spinners, a joint enterprise between ICI and Courtauld, that had in the sixties the largest floor space of any factory in Western Europe and employed 4,000 workers. Three miles to the East at Glascoed British Aerospace's armament factory (known locally as "the Dump") employed a similar number. The roads from both factories led to one roundabout which needed to be avoided at all costs when there was a change of shifts so overwhelmed was it by the fleets of buses taking the workers home to the various valley towns. People stop and ask "all those jobs – and in the steel and then the mines. Where did they all go?" In the absence of new similar large installations it seemed that there were no new jobs but oddly enough the new jobs were all around in daily life, at the supermarket, on the roads as white van drivers now clogged up the highways, in the hospital's and the restaurant's and fast food outlets that had taken over some of the kitchen tasks, at call centre that now dealt with all our telephone enquiries and on line orders. . Manufacturing had been replaced by services.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, over 80 per cent of employment in the UK and the USA involved the provision of *services* with retailing playing a central role as was made clear by the fact in 2010 the two largest private employers in the world were the supermarket giant Walmart (2.1 million employees world-wide) and the fast food franchises of McDonald's (1.9 million). For some this shift away from manufacturing had utopian possibilities. As Robin Murray put it:

> the groundwork for the new system was laid not in manufacturing but in retailing … the revolution of retailing reflects new principles of productivity, a new

> pluralism of production, and a new importance of innovation. As such, it marks the shift to the post-Fordist age[26].

The reality was rather different. and others were more sanguine yet clear in the importance of the shift to what they saw as a new system. Ritzer in fact saw the development of the fast food industry with hamburgers being 'assembled and sometimes cooked in an assembly line fashion' as a 'truly revolutionary development'.[27] The revolution, related to the *extension* of the Fordist labour process, with the assistance of lean principles, into the field of restaurants and catering. Here, however, and unlike manufacturing, the jobs (while similarly repetitive and with low skills and little discretion) are low paid, often part-time and not unionised. Furthermore, as Esther Reiter explained, the fast food industry entered "the private realm of the family/household and transformed the work there into business opportunities" pressing on to establish new markets and further force down the price of labour.[28] At the same time, supermarkets also expanded. In Walmart (which dominates retailing in the US and has a powerful presence in the UK with its ownership of Asda), we saw the most radical development of subcontracting with large retailers exerting their economic power over their myriad suppliers, pushing down wage rates and tightening job controls. Here we have a circle, of a less than virtuous nature, with a lean retail sector providing cheap food, ready meals

[26] R. Murray, "Life After Henry Ford" *Marxism Today*, 1988,p.11

[27] G. Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1993: 484.

[28] E. Reiter, *Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan into the Fryer*, Montreal and Kingstone, McGill-Queen's University Press,(second edition) 1996 p. 164

and goods for time-strapped households whose real wages and free time were being squeezed [29]

With a high proportion of its costs tied up in labour, the 'supermarket' revolutionized the grocery trade. Relocated in low-cost sites away from town centres, the new self-service shopping emerged as one way of both reducing labour costs and rationalising the relationship with the customer. The sales-person became the check-out operative and the "deskilling of the labour force facilitated, accentuated and reinforced another key development – the growth of female, part-time labour'[30]. Here many work as shelf-stackers, and Barbara Ehrenreich shared their experience when she took a job at the Walmart store in Minneapolis. There she found that the management and their 'spies' patrolled the store, searching for workers who were talking about something other than work. New recruits are warned about 'time theft', defined as 'doing anything other than working in company time: anything at all'[31]

Shopping is coordinated electronically in the self-service supermarket. , The bar code reader positioned in the check-out area provides a permanent link to the central ordering department through a system known as EPOS (Electronic Point of Sale). The worker glides the produce over the reader, which works out the customer's bill and enables senior management to analyse sales figures in detail. Deliveries to the stores are organised through a series of regional distribution centres (RDCs) that rationalise and

[29] See for example N. Lichtenstein, *Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty First Century Capitalism*, New York, New Press, 2006 and G. Parker, *The Unwinding: The Inner History of the New America*, London, Faber and Faber, 2013

[30] P. Du Gay, '"Numbers and Souls": Retailing and De-Differentiation of Economy and Culture', *British Journal of Sociology*, 44(4), p.572.

mechanise the complex logistical process associated with securing and distributing a wide range of produce. Some of these RDCs are owned by the supermarket chain itself, mostly they are outsourced to large independent logistics companies like Exel and Wincanton. An average sized RDC will deal with between 500,000 and 1 million cases of produce a week, with between 1000 and 2000 lorries being loaded and moved off each day. This loading is achieved by workers ('pickers') travelling around the warehouse on fork lift trucks locating and picking the cases required; all to the demands of the clock. As one manager explained:

> The coordinates of each pick point are measured. So it [the scanner] knows how far you are travelling to each assignment. A picker will go along and pick up a set of labels on a pallet, and he'll know that he's got eleven and a half minutes to do that product, do that pallet. (Harvey et al., 2002: 222)

The revolution in retailing outlined here was taken one step further with the application of digitalisation to the (once conventional) mail ordering business. Here the Amazon corporation has been the main driver, with its aircraft-hanger-like warehouses now dwarfing many RDCs. Carol Cadwalladr joined one of these in South Wales, as an agency worker, and heard it described as a 'fulfilment centre', within which she was an 'associate'. She explains that on her second day 'the manager tells us that we alone have picked 155,000 items in the last 24 hours. Tomorrow … that figure will be closer to 450,000'. To this, he adds 'We didn't just pick and pack …we picked and packed the right items and sent them to the right customers'. In the next week, they learned, the

[31] B. Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dined: On (Not) Getting By in the USA* New York,.Metropolitan Books,

hours would be longer, with compulsory overtime each day as well as an additional shift[32].

Amazon describes itself as 'earth's most customer-centric company'. Its workers, in contrast, seem to be less of a priority. During a shift, pickers will walk 15 miles, often starting their meal breaks five minutes away from the canteen and toilet block, always 'picking'– minute by minute. This is far away from the anticipated freedoms that new technologies have been associated with. Furthermore it dispels the myth that the rapid decline of manufacturing employment would be synonymous with the end of manual work . As Nolan and Slater explained:

> The absolute and relative numbers of carers, cleaners, caterers, pickers, packers, drivers and dishwashers has increased rapidly in the 1990s, slowing the rate of decline in low skilled manual labour [33].

These authors demonstrated further the emerging polarities that we identified at ChemCo. At the level of the national labour force they discerned that the continuing salience of manual work and low-status (often routine) manual jobs force had produced in Britain "a 'pear-shaped' economy propped up by millions of low-status manual and non-manual jobs[34]..

2001, p.146

[32] C. Cadwalladr, . "My week as an Amazon Insider", *The Observer*: Review, 1 December, 2013

[33] P. Nolan and Slater, : "Visions of the future. The legacy of the past: demystifying the weightless economy" *Labor History*, 2010, 51:1 p.20

[34] P. Nolan and Slater, : "Visions of the future. The legacy of the past: demystifying the weightless economy" *Labor History*, 2010, 51:1 p.7)

3. Time and new Labour Contracts

As we learned from Benjamin Franklin, time is money and it seems that in this phase of capitalism time has been increasingly calibrated, measured and pressured. This was made clear in the introduction of "just in time" systems. This has been extended in the use of logistical modeling in all branches of industry.. As the supermarkets increasingly operate beyond the natural seasons of time and deliver all fruit throughout the year the transportation of these and other perishables becomes critical. Regional distribution centers operate like airports and wagon drivers (with various liveries) work to time slots and suffer penalties for late arrival..

Working time and its payment has always been a critical feature of modern systems of industrial relations. This was emphasised by Edward Thompson in his account of the shift in the late nineteenth century from a labour force that resisted capital's definition of "time" to one that bargained over time and a half [35] What was made clear here was that negotiations over "time" and its meaning came to be at the heart of modern industry and its regulation though collective bargaining. In this way Harvey has referred to the idea of "changing temporalities" within contemporary capitalism and the need for these to be investigated as a critical feature of modern studies of work.

Time and working time has been renegotiated in many different ways. Most obvious, and commented upon, is the ways in which labour contracts have become increasingly part-

[35] E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism" *Past and Present,* 1967, Vol.No 2 "The first generation of factory workers were taught by their masters the importance of time; the second generation formed their short-time committees in the ten-hour movement; the third generation struck for

time or of a fixed time duration. The introduction of "zero hours" contracts in some work places perhaps expresses most dramatically the nature of the change. Here working time is exacerbated by uncertainty: of not knowing when you will be called in and for how long More widespread are the ways that the workings of the clock have invaded daily life and the operation of households. At ChemCo and in the steel plants, production continued around the clock and men worked through a cycle of three shifts and one set of days off calibrated across groups of two and three. It was known as the continental shift system and we observed how this affected the workers' temporal senses and often made communication across the work force difficult. However this is as nothing compared with the some of the new forms of working.

"Zero Hours" contracts became newsworthy at the turn of the millennium and over time figures began to be collected on their spread. For many reasons, some of them obvious, it was difficult to keep track on these arrangements but by 2015 the ONS put the figure at 744,000, still just 2.4% of the work force. However the reports from employers differed and suggested that the number might be higher at 1,5 million or 6% of the labour force and affecting more women than men, many students, all working on rates of pay that were generally low.The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that "one in five zero hours workers said they were penalized if they were not available for work when the call came and almost half said they received no notice at all or found out at the start of an expected shift that work had been cancelled"[36]

overtime or time-and-ahalf.T hey had accepted the categories of their employers and learned to fight back within them. They had learned their lesson ,that time is money, only too well" p.86

[36] R. Bennett "Soaring Number of workers on zero hours contracts", *The Times* , 3 September, 2015

"Zero hours" is but on example of a more general arrangement that has been called "flexible scheduling" which involve workers having shifts with ever-changing start and finish times is now an increasingly common employment practice in the USA and the UK; across Europe around 35% of workers report facing changes in their work schedule[37]. This form of labour contract is prevalent amongst what have been called "low end" service work". Recent analysis of European Working Conditions Survey shows that the number of workers experiencing manager-controlled flexible scheduling increased in the UK by 7percentage points to 24% of the labor force. between 2005 and 2010[38]. This supports the contention of Rubery and her team that we are witnessing the emergence of a new flexible capitalist temporality[39].

Wood's empirical investigations of supermarkets in the UK and US confirm that these new developments are emerging as part of a new disciplinary system. He quotes one San Francisco worker to the effect that:,

> you go to work and they change your day off that means that they own your life already because they let you work any time they want, any day they want and you know you can't even plan for your life.'

Likewise, Tony a workers' representative in the UK commented:

[37] A. Parent-Thirion et al. *Fifth European Working Conditions Survey,-Overview Report,* Brussels, Eurofound, 2012
[38] A, J. Wood and B.J. Burchell "Zero Hours Employment: A New Temporality of Capitalism?" *Reviews and Critical Commentary (CritCom)* 16 September, 2015)

> If I challenge [managers]… I might not get the overtime… or might not get my Sundays, or the hours I'm doing at the moment are perfect I can finish at two, I can go home and pick up the kids... if I make a fuss I might have that taken away or I'll have my hours changed, so if I keep my head down and do as I'm told I'll keep those hours. [40]

This confirms the view of Ester Reiter who worked for 10 months at Burger King in Toronto where she learned that, for the franchise, obedience was the most valued attribute of a fast food worker[41]. Wood has called this system of managerial control "flexible despotism" and it gains its strength though the changes that have taken place beyond the work place.

In Ebbw Vale in the fifties steel workers and coal miners could provide for a family and educate their children on the basis of their wage. So too the car workers interviewed by Ruth Milkman; and they took a pride in this. Undoubtedly the confinement of women to

the domestic sphere brought with it serious imbalances of power in a way that could make access to the labour market seem liberating. Certainly these changes have involved benefits to women in all spheres of their life. However there was a down side. The removal of the "family wage" has brought with it the operation of the twenty four hour, seven day economy. And, as Streek observed:

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[39] J. Rubery, K. Ward, D. Grimshaw and H. Beynon, "Working Time, Industrial Relations and the Employment Relationship[", *Time and Society*, 14 (1): 89-110

[40] A.J. Wood, "Powerful Times: Flexible Disciple and Schedule Gifts at Work", *Work Employment and Society*, 2018, Vol 32. No.6:, 1067-1068

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> In the course of the liberation of both markets and social life, the abolition of the family wage coincided with increased precarious family relations to make paid employment, even at deteriorating conditions ,an economic necessity for women.[42]

Today workers recognise the household's need for two wages and with it the process of managing time; in work and in between work became an increasing feature of modern societies, accelerated by the mobile phone and email. In this way capitalism as a form of economy, persistently invades social relationships making *society* itself capitalist, and run like a business.

German visitors to Manchester in the late nineties observed workers on the Salford Quay working on a Sunday. This surprised them greatly but they were more surprised when they were told that this was now a general practice in the UK and that with it went the removal of Thompson's premium payments. As more and more hours are worked in greater numbers of permutations a minute becomes a minute, no different from any other and all paid at the same rate. It is an ongoing process. In April 2019 the General and Municipal Workers Union was in dispute with Asda over its plans end paid breaks during the shift as well as most premium payments while to consolidating the wage at £9.00 an hour (from £8.21).

[41] E. Reiter, *Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan into the Fryer,* Montreal and Kingston, McGill, Queens University press.

Capitalists without Capital: Workers without employers

This paper began with an account of ChemCo and the capital intensive petrochemical sector. It contrasts enormously with Walmart and MacDonald where the fixed assets are in real estate and computing. com

4. The end of Capitalism?

This paper began with a discussion of technology and it has been a persistent theme. . The rationalisation of production processes and the extension of the divisions of labour made possible by the production of more and more sophisticated machines is clearly identifiable in manufacturing factories around the world. More significant perhaps has been the extension of these principles into the office and a wide range of service industries accelerated by ICT and the digital revolution. In assessing the implications of these developments it is difficult to find extensive support for the optimistic views being expressed in the 1980s. While there has been a significant shift in management style, notably with the emphasis on team working, the evidence for a major shift in the value systems of the major corporations as suggested by Boltanski and Chiapello in their account of the *New Spirit of Capitalism* is thin at best.[43] This book, was published in 2002, before the crash and before the full extent of the new applications of the digital economy had become clear. Subsequent accounts have been bleaker with Stephen Head's book *Mindless: Why Smarter Machines are Making Dumber Humans*[44] and Graeber's account of *Bullshit Jobs* more in line with the spirit of the times. Added to this

[42] W, Streek, *How will Capitalism End?* London, Verso, 2016: 218
[43] L. Boltanski, and E. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2002

[44] S, Head, *Mindless: How Smarter Machines are making Dumber Humans*, New York, Basic Books, 2014, D. Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Allen Lane, 2018

has been awareness of the ways in which new technologies facilitate off-shoring strategies to maintain profit margins often based on de-skilled and speeded up jobs. Urry in fact begins his account of this process with a quote from Warren Buffett, the successful US investor, to the effect that: "There is class warfare alright, but it's my class, the rich class, that is making war, and we're winning" [45]

Given the (not uncommon) use of the war metaphor it is worth asking questions about the other side – those that battle against capital or at least want to control its worst excesses. At ChemCo the workers were members of a trade union as this was virtually compulsory and their union dues were deducted though the check-off system. Their wages were established though national collective bargaining machinery and they all knew that the union was there to support them in case of an accident or unfair dismissal. Yet, we wrote, that they evoked no feelings of the union being *theirs* or that their membership involved them in a trades union *movement.* We attributed this to a process of bureaucratization associated with a corporate form of capitalism. What we didn't anticipate was the removal of legal immunities from trade unions combined with an aggressive anti-union politics and how vulnerable the trade unions would be to such an attack.

In his tribute to the responses made to these attacks in the North East at the end of the seventies Sterling comments that "in 2005 the last coal mine in the region closed followed in 2012 by the Alcan works at Lynemouth. This time there were no marches, alternative strategies or conferences[46]. This is not an unusual lament. "Old timers" are wont to reflect that "we didn't win but at least we had a pop – we put up a fight". All of this is completely understandable, but it underestimates the scale of the changes that

[45] J. Urry, *OffShoring*, Cambridge, Polity Press. 2014, p.1
[46] J. Sterling *op.cit.* p.167

have taken place and how these have been reflected in trade union member ship patterns and in the capacity for organized resistance. As we have seen, the comparisons with the nineteen seventies are stark, with new work places and labour contracts combining with neo-liberal economic policies underpinned by radical anti-union legislation. In assessing the impact of these developments Croucher and Wood make a negative comparison with conditions in the late nineteen thirties . Then, they argue "in sharp contrast to today, organized labor's role was legitmised by the state as a counterweight to employer power"[47]. In their view, the oppressive weight of contemporary employment is such that trade union action in itself in unlikely to produce a renaissance. However :

> The last 1930s experience shows the possibilities of wider alliances and suggests how political activists can potentially impact upon events if they are sufficiently supported by pro-labour forces, Construction of a wider- pro-worker political ecology therefor appears important if contemporary union revival is to be achieved[48]

While contemplating thios possibility it is worth reflecting that I the 1970's it was not common, in writings on the sociology of work place relations, to include "capitalism" in the book title. For decades after the war the persistent reference was to the "mixed economy" and to the "logic of industrialization". It was this dominant mode that earned the wrath of E.P. Thompson in his account of "time" as a critical aspect of "industrial capitalism". Now in a period of *deindustrialized* capitalism it has come more into common usage. Braverman's book and the focus it gave the capitalist labour process was

[47] R. Croucher and G. Wood, "Union Renewal in Historical Perspective", *Work Employment ad Society,* Vol. 31 No. 6:1016

pivotal, as was the collapse of the soviet union and then the great financial crash of 2008. It was this which led first to a reinvigorated investigation into the nature of capitalist crises and then to the underpinnings the led to the process of globalisaion. It also gave scope to questioning as to a world beyond capitalism.

In these discussion the new technology once again becomes a focus. Bauwans, at his most optimistic sees it having huge potential for change as revealed in the emergence of cooperative peer- to – peer (p2p) working. He adopts Marx's analysis of the *transition* from feudalism to capitalism to demonstrate the emergence of a new cooperative economy/society developing within the body of capitalism. Paul Mason adopts a similar approach in his accounts of "post-capitalism" enabled by the sharing of intellectual property and collective working[49], Others have seen potential for positive change to lie within an analysis of the new firms themselves. For Phillips and Rozworski, Amazon is "as much a complex planning mechanism based on human ingenuity as it is an inhuman place to work." Borrowing from Fredric Jameson they ask; "could Walmart be a secret socialist plot"[50] seeing in this new gigantic organization the strangulation of market capitalism and though its spread and its sophisticated planning system (on a scale which exceeds the USSR at its height) the potential for a new democratically planned socialist society. However they don't anticipate an easy transition. For them:

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[48] *Ibid* 1018

[49] M. Bauwens, "Peer to Peer Prodcution and the Coming of the Commons" *Red Pepper*, July, 2012
P. Mason, *Post Capitalism: A guide to our Future*, London, Allen Lane 2015

[50] The Marxist Jameson had a view of Walmart's potential contribution to a future socialist society akin to Lenin's view of Ford: He points out that" The literary utopists have scarcely kept pace with the businessmen in the process of imagination and construction" and argues that Walmart could be seen as the "anticipatory prototype of some new form of socialism for which the reproach of centralisation proves historically misplaced and irrelevant. It is in any case certainly a revolutionary reorganisation of capitalist production, and some acknowledgement such as "Waltonism" or "Walmartification" would be a more appropriate name for this new stage" quoted in L. Phillips and M.Rozworski,

> One of capitalisms great contradictions is that it increases the real connections between people at the same time as it encourages us to see each other as monadic individuals[51]

This is a theme developed by Wolfgang Streek. Engaged by the ways in which capitalism has *occupied* .society he poses the question *How Will Capitalism End?.* In this he envisions that we are in the middle of a "final crisis" but one that will see capitalism replaced not by socialism or any other defined social order but "a lasting *interregnum*-…a prolonged period of social entropy or disorder" characterized by unpredictability[52]. .He sees this as the political and cultural challenge deriving from the need to resist the pervasive encroachment of capitalist as a way of life. In framing it in this way he also challenges established sociological and industrial relations thinking: pointing to the need to study economic relations not just at work but in the whole, and help tackle the problem of living *within* capitalism

People's Rep[ublic of Walmart: How the World's Biggest Corporations are Laying the Foundations for Socialism, London, Verso, 2019: 18

[51] Ibid p.239

[52] W. Streek, *op.cit.* p.13