

## WORK AND ITS NARRATIVES

### EL TRABAJO Y SUS NARRATIVAS

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to Eric Hobsbawm

#### Abstract

When I began writing, my work life divided in two. In one compartment, I wrote novels; in the other, sociology. The novel writing which interested me from the beginning made experiments in narrative -- stories which played with the indeterminate movement of events or created incoherence intentionally. The masters of this kind of disruptive narrative in my youth were Jorge-Luis Borges and Italo Calvino; its great interpretative critic was Roland Barthes. The crafting of such stories exhilarated me, opening up the freedom of the unchartable. As a sociologist, I worked in another realm of time. When I began studying labor in the early 1970's, the life histories of the people I interviewed resembled well-made plots, determinate and constricted rather than experimental. The American manual laborers on whom I reported in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972), for instance, served only a few employers during the course of their lives, and hoped to better themselves by small, incremental gains in salary and status. White collar employees higher up the job scale even more orchestrated their lives in order to a climb up a fixed corporate ladder. These real-life narratives were shaped by big, well-defined institutions: corporations with elaborate bureaucracies, powerful unions, an intrusive welfare state.

Keywords: Work, Narratives, Sociology, Capitalism

#### Resumen

*Cuando comencé a escribir, mi vida laboral estaba dividida en dos. En un compartimento escribía novelas y, en el otro, sociología. La escritura de novelas que me interesó desde el principio era aquella que experimentaba con la narrativa: historias que jugaban con el movimiento indeterminado de eventos, o que creaban incoherencias intencionalmente. Los maestros de este tipo de narrativa disruptiva, en mi juventud, fueron Jorge Luis Borges e Ítalo Calvino. Su gran intérprete crítico fue Roland Barthes. La producción artesanal de tales historias me entusiasmaba, abriéndose hacia la libertad de lo inexplorado. Como sociólogo, trabajé en otro reino del tiempo. Cuando comencé a estudiar, a principios de los '70, las historias de vida de las personas a quienes yo entrevistaba, se parecían a tramas bien construidas, determinadas y restringidas, más que experimentales. Por ejemplo, los trabajadores manuales americanos, a quienes me referí en *Las heridas ocultas de la clase* (1972), servían tan solo a unos pocos empleadores a lo largo de sus vidas, y esperaban mejorar su situación a través de pequeñas y paulatinas subas de salario y status. Los trabajadores no manuales -de "cuello blanco"- ubicados más arriba en la cadena del empleo, orquestaban todavía más sus vidas con el objetivo de ascender por la escalera corporativa. Estas narrativas de la vida real estaban moldeadas por instituciones grandes y bien definidas: corporaciones con elaboradas burocracias, poderosos sindicatos, un intrusivo Estado de bienestar.*

*Palabras clave: Trabajo, Narrativas, Sociología, Capitalismo*

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## 1. Introduction

When I began writing, my work life divided in two. In one compartment, I wrote novels; in the other, sociology. The novel writing which interested me from the beginning made experiments in narrative -- stories which played with the indeterminate movement of events or created incoherence intentionally. The masters of this kind of disruptive narrative in my youth were Jorge-Luis Borges and Italo Calvino; its great interpretative critic was Roland Barthes. The crafting of such stories exhilarated me, opening up the freedom of the unchartable.

As a sociologist, I worked in another realm of time. When I began studying labor in the early 1970's, the life histories of the people I interviewed resembled well-made plots, determinate and constricted rather than experimental. The American manual laborers on whom I reported in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* [1972], for instance, served only a few employers during the course of their lives, and hoped to better themselves by small, incremental gains in salary and status. White collar employees higher up the job scale even more orchestrated their lives in order to a climb up a fixed corporate ladder. These real-life narratives were shaped by big, well-defined institutions: corporations with elaborate bureaucracies, powerful unions, an intrusive welfare state.

In the last quarter century, modern capitalism has changed so that this determinate life-narrative is weakening. Profound forces de-regulate people's experience of time: new technologies, global markets, new forms of bureaucratic organization. They orient economic activity to the short rather than the long term; they challenge continuity and duration as institutional goals. One instance may suffice: in 1960 the "profit horizon" investors used for evaluating corporations was three years, in 1999 it is typically three months.

How this changing frame of time affects work can be illuminated by two early usages in the English language. In Chaucer's day, a "career" meant a well-laid, well-mapped roadway on which to travel; a "job" meant a lump of something, coal or wood, which could be moved around indiscriminately from place to place. Today, in the labor market, Chaucerian jobs rather than careers define work. The young middle-level university graduate can expect to change employers at least twelve times in the course of a working life, and to change his or her "skills base" at least three times; the skills he or she must draw on at forty are not the skills learned in school. Job change no longer flows within the Chaucerian trajectory of a career; without a fixed corporate structure, job-change follows a more erratic path.

Real life-stories are thus moving closer to the experimental narratives of the fiction I've like to write. But, as I began to discover by interviewing workers again in the mid-1990's for my most recent book on labor, *The Corrosion of Character* [1998], the time-freedom so exhilarating to read in the stories of Borges does not quite translate into the life of a suburban middle-aged accountant suddenly made redundant and told he should flexibly move as a consultant from job to job, place to place. Without a clear sense of how to structure work in time, people become confused if not depressed about what they should do. "Everyone tells me to take job risks," a young lawyer remarked, "but I've no cushion against failure." The flexible work-place itself seems illegible; the chameleon character of organizations, for instance, makes it hard for people to calculate what will happen if they change jobs.

There is a social dimension as well to de-regulated time; flexible organizations tend to reduce commitment: how could you be loyal to a fickle corporation? I've found indeed that middle-aged workers who have developed loyalties to particular companies feel betrayed now that these commitments count now for so little. Nor does work experience, or sheer seniority, mean what it once did, given employers' preference for younger, cheaper, and more pliable workers. One way to summarize the conflict between short-term, deregulated time and the human life-course is that, as work experience accumulates, it diminishes in economic value.

In this regard, I'd like to put forward what might seem a paradoxical thesis. On the one hand, in modern capitalism, de-regulated time dis-empowers people in the middle ranks, the loss of an orienting work-story confuses them. Yet the kind of narrative art exemplified by Borges and Calvino might help people understand the regime over which Bill Gates presides. At the very least, the new political economy challenges us as sociologists to explore work history as an experimental narrative. To do so we need to reconsider our own professional practice. As sociologists we have learned better how to describe than to narrate social conditions. It is with that latter problem I'd like to begin.

## 2. Describing

The classical language of sociology is a picture language. Sociologists from Montesquieu up to Weber crafted images of particular social conditions like aristocracy or Chinese bureaucracy or poverty, to make the reader see these conditions. Like an art critic, the sociologist who thinks in pictures is trying to explain what is represented. Sociological images, as Wittgenstein noted about all picture language, can be as abstract as a Jackson Pollock painting. But the sense of time in picture language easily becomes like turning the pages in an album of photographs, moving from one image of social conditions to another -- it forms a sequence of representations.

We can see this picture language at work, for instance, in one of the greatest pieces of all sociological description, Alexis de Tocqueville's account of individualism in American life. He does it by making a contrast between aristocracy and democracy:

As in aristocratic communities all the citizens occupy fixed positions, one above the other, the result is that each of them always sees a man above himself whose patronage is necessary to him, and below himself another man whose cooperation he may claim ... It is true that in those ages the notion of human fellowship is faint, and that men seldom think of sacrificing themselves for mankind; but they often sacrifice themselves for other men...In democratic ages, on the contrary, when the duties of each individual to the race are much more clear, devoted service to any one man becomes more rare; the bond of human affection is extended, but it is relaxed ... not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back for ever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.

In this description we are offered the two images of aristocratic communities and democratic societies as though they are two states of being, as though these two images could be shown as slides side by side. But the content of the descriptions contrasts a community of strong social bonds to a society where these bonds are degrading; we apprehend the second image as the deconstruction of the first. Thus they seem related in time as well as in structure. This historical

change between the two images, however, is an inference we draw from the language of description itself; Tocqueville does not need to cite dates or particular events for us to draw the inference, the contrast of written pictures does it for him. This is sociological rather than historical time.

You may think there is a certain slight-of-hand here, and that problem certainly worried Max Weber. His theory of ideal types is an attempt to make sociologists aware of how they think in picture language, each ideal type corresponding to a coherent, clear image. Weber sometimes claimed that thinking in images was no more than an aid to understanding historical process, like freeze-framing a video. But he also believed there could be no intellectual understanding of sheer flux, no decisive political engagement when men and women experience the undifferentiated flow of events; we need to stop the video in order to analyze and to act. When we do so, what we see is images that are clear but full of contradiction. In contrast to Tocqueville, and closer to Marx, Weber sought to understand how social forms shatter due to these internal contradictions -- due to their particularism, aristocratic communities, for instance, seemed to Weber now weak, divided structures. But still Weber writes as a sociologist; he needs to stop time and to describe an image in order to apprehend the dissonances of lived experience.

### 3. Picture-Work

Manuel Castells has characterized today's political economy as "a space of flows." One of his key arguments is that thanks to new technology the global economy operates in real-time; what happens to stock markets in London or New York instantly registers in Singapore or Johannesburg; on the productive side, computer code written in Bombay can be used at IBM as instantly as code written [more expensively] at the home offices in Armonk, New York. Castells calls this condition "timeless time." The computer screen, which is the great symbol of our era, embodies it, a picture technology par excellence, window piled upon window without temporal relation: pure image.

This technologically-fed "timeless time," this corporate behavior based on now, only now, is a capitalist regime that ought perfectly suit the classical sociological impulse to freeze time, to describe and analyze an image. The modern political economy is a picture language. However, the very immediacy of the image is repressive.

Let me give an example from the computer programs used in hi-tech production. These programs are designed so that their ordinary users can touch very simple icons on screen to perform operations. This suits a work-force marked by high rates of turnover; the learning-curve is short. We say that such computerization makes the work instantly understandable, but that is to judge the present by the standards of industrial machines in the past. The modern systems are "opaque" to low-level operatives in that they can't understand the guts of the program, much less alter it. In my research, I studied this opacity in a computerized bakery; the operatives work by pressing simple screen icons, but these bakers do not know how to bake bread. The bread itself is good quality, but the work is de-skilling and arouses little craft attachment. As one operative told me, "one button is much like the text; anyhow, in six months I'm out of here." Such operatives do not, like an earlier generation of bakers I studied in 1970 in the same plant, derive much sense of identity from their work. Picture-work represses it.

Picture-work, moreover, is out of synch with the working human body, which, like any organism, grows and decays; living creatures are not fixed images. This is why I've found so much frustration among people who have done temp-work for several years [temp-work is the single fastest-growing component of the American and British labor markets.] Unlike temp-workers who have been at it only a little while, and who are initially exhilarated by its freedom, people who spend many years engaged in the disconnected, fixed-character transactions of temp-work feel they are failing to develop their skills, failing to develop social relationships through work. Indeed, despite the fact they are continually in demand, people who do temp-work for more than five or six years feel themselves devalued, unless rescued by the offer of long-term employment, which means a chance to develop a life-history through work.

For such reasons, the picture experience of work -- technologically embodied in simplified screen labor, sociologically in unrelated transactions like temp-labor which establish no sustained human relations -- arouses in workers a sense of detachment and drift. The picture experience of work lacks depth and principles of forward movement. Instead, the experience of working-time in flexible capitalism consists of dissociated, serial events. You might say that work under the aegis of "timeless time" is static -- but this stasis differs in substance from older forms of mechanical routine. The work in the bakery, for instance, changes every day as orders for different kinds of bread come in, just as the temp worker flits from place to place, whereas mechanical routine is unchanging. In both cases, if by different routes, the new world of jobs and in 19th Century factories suffer from lack of direction.

I have, I know, emphasized the negative side of such labor. But I do so because the dominion of picture-work challenges critical sociology to question its own habits of picturing. To deal with the human deficits of work in flexible capitalism requires emphasis on time's arrow. From its origins, sociology has of course grappled with issues of historical change, but narrative is a special category of time, not identical with history.

#### 4. Narrating

In a brief talk I couldn't hope to present to you a full sociological theory of narrative. Let me say only that narrative differs from the sheer unfolding of the life-course or the chronicle of historical events in that story-telling supposes a narrator who comments on or interprets the passage of time. In fiction, the narrative has complete freedom to do so, in real life he or she obviously does not. This is why, in studying real-world narratives, we are interested in the question of the voice of the person who, in an interview, tells us a story: how does this person struggle with events beyond his or her own making to incorporate them into a story which implicates the narrator as an active participant. Technically, the study of real-world narratives focuses on *agency*, in other words on the act of narrating.

Work in flexible capitalism increases the difficulty of narrating, making it hard for people to incorporate their work experience as their own story. To illustrate this difficulty of narrating a work history I'd like to focus on a particular dilemma of modern work.

In my interviews, people's sharpest and most forceful reactions to flexible work experience focused on the issue of redundancy. Workers who have been downsized are obviously traumatized, but among survivors the fear of losing one's work in future is almost strong. "I just wait for the next blow of the axe" one secretary told me. A recent poll in a large American

corporation revealed that only 6% of employees thought their bosses would fight to save their jobs. Loss of work is modern capitalism's ticking bomb. Yet the workers I've talked with don't know how to fit this traumatic event into telling a story about their work histories.

Some experimental novelists in our era have dealt with issues of fragmented time, ephemeral immediacy, and incoherence -- issues similar to the problems real people face in telling a story based on their work histories. There is a gap between the power of experimental writers to narrate incoherent time and the inability of people in flexibly-organized accounting firms, computerized bakeries, or fast-food shops to fashion a life narrative. The very divide between art and life is a revealing gap; it tells us something about life, particularly about the lives of the unemployed. Real-world difficulties of narrating appear in three issues: the sense of personal derailment which occurs when people lose their jobs, the frustration in holding others responsible for losing a job, and the lack of solidarity between the employed and the unemployed.

a. derailment: A distinguished Harvard Business School professor, John Kotter, recently wrote as a blithe spirit about downsizing by counseling his readers: just forget it and go on to the next job; in the flexible workplace you have to expect job loss as a normal event. In one way this counsel borders on idiocy; it assumes people make no personal investment in working and don't care what they do so long as they are employed. In another way, it is wise. When work ends, as in any trauma, people need to fashion some distance between self and event. In this regard, I've noticed in interviews with workers who capably handle rejection one signature narrative ploy: they interpret their work as concluding rather than consummating in dismissal.

Literary narratives illuminate the distinction between conclusion and consummation. In Borges' various short stories about libraries, for instance, there re-appear moments when the librarian closes a book before finishing it. The tale is not so mesmerizing that it crowds out everything else; the librarian doesn't need to know how the story ends. In Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, unlike Burton's *Arabian Nights*, each story the narrator tells trails off at the end; the narrator starts by painting clear pictures of different cities and then loses interest or becomes fuzzy in his telling and so starts again; eventually the narrator gives up on find an all-consuming story. The effect of narrative closure is to draw a line between the teller and the told, and to empower the teller of the tale. In both Borges and Calvino we become ever more aware of the presence of the narrator narrating.

Sometimes one hears in interview a similarly strong narrative voice among people who are coping well with unemployment. They empower themselves by stepping back from the mesmerizing power of events; specifically, they step back by refusing to view everything during their period of employment as moving inexorably toward dismissal. Here's how that can happen in an interview, in even a minute fashion: a secretary told 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 signaled she wasn't succumbing to the event. But relatively few workers react in so measured a fashion -- or so I've found, as have in different ways the sociologists Kathleen Newman and William Julius Wilson. The loss of work feels like a terrible judgement on them, even when rationally they know they may have been simply the victim of circumstances.

The reason why is in one way evident; people who invest themselves in their work cannot act as casually as Borges' librarian closing his book. The larger problem is the cultural storehouse of narrative stories people which draw on to explain their investment in work. These established

stories have no meaning given the realities of flexible capitalism; when people tell them, they lose the sense of self-empowerment.

Let me try to elucidate what must seem an abstract formula by citing the classic work-ethic as described by Max Weber. Here is a story in which each phase of work contributes in cumulative fashion to an ultimate consummation; the worker practices self-discipline for the sake of achieving future goals, like house ownership or promotion. On the face of it, this classic tale, still the most compelling of those in our cultural storehouse, empowers those who believe in it. There is indeed a positive side to the classic work-ethic; it is a long-term interpretative strategy which allows employees to plan, as well as cope with present injustices by working toward a self-defined transformation in the future. The negative side is that this linear work ethic arouses intense anxiety about falling off course; a particular stumble or defeat may mean you can never regain your footing. Calvino's narrator feels he can start over again and again; dismissed workers, particularly the middle-aged, fear they cannot.

The fear is certainly grounded in reality: middle-aged workers fear their skills may be outdated, that they are losing the energy to struggle; they know employers now prefer younger, cheaper, more raw labor whenever possible. And Weber's version of the work ethic addresses a problem in the substance of work which compounds these material fears.

Save for only a few lucky individuals, most labor is not likely to be gratifying in itself. Mundane work like reckoning all day Visa bills or making telephone sales acquires meaning only if it moves to an end, serves a purpose, reaches a goal. Self-discipline at work lacks the playful, interruptible character of those engagements from which, in fiction, a character can withdraw. When people are denied a long-term story with a denouement, when they feel derailed, they wonder what all their self-discipline has been about. A file-clerk remarked 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." Work loss constitutes a moment of narrative betrayal; her presence, her self-discipline meant little in the story of her work.

Making good on self-discipline may seem to require a career, however humble its content. That's the factual pre-condition for this work narrative, yet just that possibility of career is what flexible capitalism weakens. And so the negative side of the story comes forward, the fear of derailment dwells in people's minds. In narrative terms, the Weberian work-ethic, while seeming so self-empowering, in fact makes those who tell it as the story of their own lives entirely dependant on events beyond their own control.

The lack of a work ethic which would strengthen narrative voice leads to my next issue, how people go about assigning responsibility for job loss. The dismissed can simply blame themselves, but that usually cannot suffice; after all, they have been fired by an organization. Again, we could easily imagine the act of assigning responsibility just like attributing authorship to a picture, but workers out of a job can't think this way. Either they want to find out what they did wrong in the past in order not to repeat the mistake, or they want to understand the work circumstances in which they were formerly placed so that they don't enter, if possible, into the same conditions again. Either way, the issue of accountability is set in the minds of workers between jobs in the framework of time, of connecting the past to the future. A narrative thus emerges because accountability is inseparable from starting a new chapter.

Transitions between chapters aren't much of a problem in a traditionally well-made story. The well-made plot is an efficient machine in which every incident contributes to the forward movement of the story. When you write a well-made plot, you foreshadow events and you make sure all the loose ends are tied up by the last page; cause-and-effect are self-explanatory. When your spinster, rich Aunt Jeanette suddenly dies in a car crash, all your problems are solved. In a more experimental narrative, you may inherit nothing but notice at her funeral that you have recently lost weight: you will ask why, what is responsible for your clothes fitting, what is the connection between death and diet? You have to ponder harder on that question than characters do in a well-made tale.

Yet the signal mark of literary modernism is to refuse you an explanation. When a rupture occurs and a character asks, "who or what is responsible for this?" the story does not answer. The model here is James Joyce. When a even a tiny rupture occurs in the day of Joyce's Leopold Bloom, he questions each break, searching for the thread connecting the fragments of his experience, and we read forward, precisely to see how he will be defeated from finding an explanation.

It may seem odd to connect a fine Victorian word like "responsibility" with the practices of experimental fiction. Yet questions of accountability are inherent in breaking the well-made mold. For our present purposes, of greater import is the modern novelist's disposition to frustrate the desire for an answer. This disposition helps us understand how the quest for accountability takes on a much darker hue in the real world of labor. Let me take one aspect of unemployment experience to show why.

It used to be in the United States that when you went out the door, you severed all connection to the corporation. Businesses no longer leave these breaks unattended; employee anger -- in the middle ranks practiced, for instance, by telling a business's secrets to a competitor -- is too great a threat. There has grown up an outsourcing business to make the employee, if not feel good about the rupture, at least use it, as the therapists of the unemployed often say, as a "creative pause."

This may seem Joycean. Understandably, outsourcing focuses entirely on the practical aim of getting the employee back to work. Outsourcing specialists seek to deflect employees from reasoning too much about what caused them to be fired, or acting on the anger and sense of betrayal inspired by their employers -- it would be counter-productive in that effort to get the dismissed a new job.

If the Joycean writer is bent on defeating explanations, so, you could say, is the flexible employer. Flexible businesses seek to avoid being evaluated and held accountable by their employees. Evasion is built into the structure of flexible organizations. Instead of commands passed clearly down a hierarchy military-fashion, modern management practice utilize, for instance, sports metaphors of team-work to disguise the boss's power; the authority of a boss who behaves as though he is only trying to coach you to do your best is harder to challenge than a boss who says "do this or else." More generally, the flexible organization utilizes peer pressure in performing tasks meeting or productivity goals, by punishing an entire team if a particular individual fails; peer pressure tends to deflect people from reckoning the legitimacy of commands themselves. Abstract market forces are equally used to veil authority and so evade responsibility. The most cunning person I encountered in the course of my research, for instance, was a consultant who remarked placidly in the midst of staging a corporate downsizing "we are all victims of time and place."



But employees who suffer loss of work, particularly middle-aged employees, do not forget, neatly filing away questions of accountability as unanswerable. For both personal or institutional reasons, the employee does not want the future to repeat the past. A blank wall confronts workers seeking to evaluate their difficulties in prior work -- this past reckoning which is in turn crucial for making decisions about the future. They cannot afford to be Joycean, yet its hard to narrate a story in which an accounting of responsibility mediates between past and future. Moreover, in Joyce's world, the defeats of explanation have the paradoxical effect of joining the characters together; they stop judging and get on with the business of living together. The defeat of accountability in the real world of work is something, however, which employees face alone.

At present, there exist few effective institutional allies who might help workers hold workplaces accountable, nor forums for workers to explore more intimately loss, injustice, or betrayal. Middle-level managers simply lack such organizations. Lower level workers are poorly served, in my view, by most unions --arthritic and bureaucratic organizations deaf to the actual confusions of work. Concretely, there exists neither in America or Britain a union specifically for the unemployed. Moreover, few modern labor parties have sought to hold employers responsible for their downsizings or redundancies -- it is certainly not part of the "Third Way."

The issue of accountability certainly presents the opportunity for a more vigorous Left politics. I've invoked the matter of narrative connections to emphasize that the experience of past and future time is what makes the politics of accountability resonate personally. But I must confess to a certain unease in invoking this political opening.

Those of us on the Left -- and I do you all the honor of placing you there -- are good at exposing the evils of the Capitalist Monster, but less forthright in acknowledging today a breakdown in solidarity among workers themselves. The economist Stephan Roach has been forthright about this breakdown: given the disorganization flexible capitalism wreaks in people's lives, they should be up in arms, but aren't. The act of narrating helps us understand why.

Solidarity is a much deeper matter than simply sharing the same opinions; it involves sharing a history. In the fleeting world of flexible capitalism, however, people's shared histories are short, too short for the time conditions of solidarity to develop. But more, there is a refusal to recognize this shared plight, and that's where the narrator's voice comes in.

To explain this, permit me for the last time to invoke the writing of fictional narrative. Solidarity has a particular literary meaning; it is a matter of weaving characters together through plot events so that by the end of the story we cannot imagine each character without reference to the others. Even the experimental novelist whose materials are fragments moments, absences, silences strives to create that mutual referencing. In a classic experimental novel of my youth, *The Dead Father*, the writer Donald Barthelme does so by shoving the rough edges of events and conflict between characters to the fore, a father's hostility in one episode succeeded in the next by a husband's betrayal, succeeded by a child's lies. No linear progression orders these fragments, but still the characters begin to knit together in time as the reader moves from one rough exposure to the next. The same procedure marks much of the theatrical work of Harold Pinter today, and the last, autobiographic poetry of Ted Hughes. By the end of *The Dead Father*, as in Pinter's plays, as in Hughes' account of his disastrous marriage to Sylvia Plath, we can't imagine by the end the characters apart.

This is an art of confrontation, and in real work-life that art is not practiced. I've given some reasons why flexible employers try to shield themselves from challenge. Short-term work in itself

has a deeply corrosive effect on solidarity. In general, "it's only for a few months" is a recipe which suspends reality. In particular, there is no time for solidarity based on informal trust to develop. Informal trust is needed, for instance, when a company sets an impossible production target or a crisis develops; you have to know then who you can count on and who is likely to go to pieces. Such knowledge takes time to develop, and short-term workers lack it. Indeed, modern management practice advocates limiting the time teams work together precisely to prevent the growth of bonds of informal mutual solidarity which might lead members of the team to commit more to each other than to the company.

This aborted time lies in the realm of history. As a narrative problem, weakened solidarity concerns the refusal of workers to admit they are characters in the same story, facing common problems. The experience of redundant workers helps us understand why solidarity weakens among workers themselves.

A dismissed engineer described to me returning to his old firm a year after he had been let go thus: "when people saw me in the hall, they dived into their offices and closed the door. It was like I was bad news, I was going to reproach them for still being there." Are these former colleagues just bloody-minded? That would be too moralistic an explanation.

Workers who survive a downsizing do indeed shun contact with their former fellow workers out of fear of confrontation, but do so, I have found, from fear of confronting their own situation. "I can't handle it," one of those engineers diving for the office admitted to me. But what is the "it" she couldn't handle? Downsizings are usually irrational events; survivors know that they've been retained less for their merits than for board-room reasons which have little to do with their work. Their situation precarious, survivors act like cancer patients in remission, living on borrowed time. If they do indeed find contact with those already let go a disturbing reminder of what may lie ahead for them, what complicates this reaction, and makes it of larger importance, is the capitalist culture in which it occurs.

That capitalist culture joins experience in the present to individualism. By breaking ties with the past you can engage in entrepreneurial exploit, but at the price of leaving other behind, breaking your ties to them -- this is the social side of what Schumpeter called "creative destruction." Corporations continually remaking themselves are engaged in collective forgetting; institutional memory seems a drag, and people with long memories of how things used to be done seem deadwood. Or at least this is how it looks from the top downward.

But for people down their in the guts of corporations, the join of present-tense time and individualism is not energizing. Rather, it suspends reality. If you keep your head down by dwelling on the immediate moment, the burdens of memory are lightened, the fear of the future somewhat diminished. The culture of flexible capitalism encourages you to think in the present tense, and individually, but for you, down below, this is a defensive maneuver.

This is what the engineer meant when she said to me "I can't handle it." Solidarity was less compelling, less necessary to her, than self-defense. This trade-off has proved more largely pervasive in modern work relations. In succumbing to the dominant ethos of the present tense and of individualism, you are hoping to distance yourself from work conditions over which you have little control -- and so you forego becoming part of another person's story.

## 5. Conclusion

May I say that had I first announced the theme of my talk thus: the crisis of modern capitalism is a crisis of narrative, it would certainly have seemed pure verbiage. I hope to have convinced you at least that this theme invokes serious and pressing issues.

I have tried to show the relation between time and work in this new political economy: work which is short-term in institutions focused on flexible change, on sudden disruptions and revisions of their structure, on immediate circumstances. To grasp the consequences for workers of this organization of time, I've argued that we as sociologists have to redirect our habits of thinking about social reality; we must focus less on its imagery and more on the orchestration of time. Of course, no one would argue against the proposition that historical experience is important. But narrative is a peculiar organization of time, and narrating a story raises knotty questions about personal agency. I've tried to bring these forward by contrasting experiments with narrating time in modern fiction to the difficulty of narrating actual work experience. In real work, people suffer from their weakness as narrators. The particular case of those who have lost work shows, I hope, larger difficulties the narrating voice encounters in speaking about self-discipline, accountability and solidarity.

To be sure, insecurity is a fundamental fact of all social life, and capitalism for most of its long history has been erratic. The creation of large-scale work bureaucracies in the early part of the 20th century may seem to future historians as no more than a deviation from this norm. But the current ethos of capitalism is one in which disorder appears desirable; continual restructuring of firms, for instance, is taken as a sign of vigor, a necessity for growth. All human beings cope with insecurity as best they can by taking strategic action; in flexible capitalism, middle-level workers in particular have difficulty formulating effective strategies for themselves. My observation is that this is in large part because their experience of lived time is so confused. My argument is that it is also because workers lack the interpretative tools to make sense of the confusion.

Though I've no mastery of social policy, it seems to me that the crisis of narrative defines a political turning point. Labor movements and labor parties have to address themselves to work as it actually now is experienced. That requires a different, less materialistic, more humanistic approach to work than appears in most public discussion today. As sociologists, that's our job.

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