



PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

PUBLIC JUSTICE IN REVIEW

Vol. 8 Issue 5, 2018

2018: Families Valued in Review

Rachel Anderson

Rachel Anderson is a Resident Fellow of the Center for Public Justice, leading the Families Valued project.

With [*Temp*](#), historian Louis Hyman, demonstrates his continued knack for making the past compelling by aligning his topics with profound contemporary anxieties. His first two books, [*Debtor Nation*](#) and [*Borrow: The American Way of Debt*](#) followed the economic crisis and recession of 2008. Now, *Temp: How American Work, American Business, and the American Dream Became Temporary* speaks to the cluster of anxieties about the future of work, particularly the fear that new technology will drastically change the number and kind of jobs created in our economy and eliminate a large swath of stable, middle-class jobs upon which many families rely. In their place, we worry, will emerge a fluid economy in which the majority of households gather incomes from a variety of unconnected jobs or “gigs” with few to no benefits or job security.

The Rise of the “Gig” Economy

For many of us, the anxiety of an unreliable economy is a gnawing sensation in our guts or our robot-filled imaginations. But the numbers give us cause for concern as well. According to [*economists Lawrence Katz and Alan Krueger*](#), alternative or “contingent” job arrangements are growing. In the last ten years, contract work, temporary work, on-call work, freelancing, rose by almost half, accounting for 94 percent of total job growth. And advances in Artificial Intelligence, virtual reality, and robotics are, in fact, poised to dramatically change work that once required human hands and minds.

Hyman makes a fascinating contribution to this topic by refocusing our attention from the future to the past. He traces the factors that combined to create kind of stable, breadwinning employment that peaked in the middle of the 20th century, while illustrating that stable work has never defined the whole economy. The economy has always relied upon the labor of those who, themselves, have been economically insecure and sometimes violently pressed into work: enslaved laborers, indebted sharecroppers, low-wage domestic employees, undocumented migrant workers. Their work never ‘counted’ as work in our social contract.

From the mid-1930s to the early 1970s, corporate structure, management philosophies, union negotiation, and government regulation all converged to create significant numbers of stable middle-class jobs. Unions and management struck a bargain. Workers received security and control over their time - a seniority system, a 40-hour work week, an 8-hour day and overtime, holidays and vacations - in exchange for labor peace. Federal law formalized some aspects of this bargain while culture enshrined it as a male breadwinning ideal.

But what is given can be taken away. After describing the specific circumstances that enabled the stable full-time job, *Temp* traces its erosion. Ironically, the bargain that enabled worker stability carried the seeds of its own destruction. As *Fortune magazine* noted in 1968, “one of the paradoxical consequences of the private welfare state that unions and management have created to safeguard the permanent worker has been to make his temporary colleague look increasingly attractive.”

Temp's most unique contribution is its account of two types of firms that aided this process: temporary employment agencies and management consultancies. Temp agencies like Manpower Inc and consulting firms like McKinsey both marketed and modeled a more fluid, contingent style of work - work with fewer benefits, briefer tenure, and diminished commitments between worker and employer.

Manpower, Inc and McKinsey operated, initially, in modest niches within the economy but established patterns of thought and practice that - by the 1970s - became ready tools of corporate and workforce transformation. Temporary workers became a permanent part of an organization's staffing cycle, securing labor during growth seasons and shedding workers during recessions. As the computing revolution took hold in the 1970s and 1980s, temporary and other low-wage workers ran the machines, did data entry and data migration that enabled automation. When, in the 1960s, investors began to lose faith in corporations fashioned as large conglomerates, McKinsey consultants were brought in to streamline and reorganize. Consultants helped firms embrace a leaner, less bureaucratic organization and see full-time employees - industrial workers and managers alike - as an expensive fixed cost to be adopted sparingly. As a result, Hyman writes, “every downturn (since 1991) has meant a loss of permanent jobs” (257).

History helps us make a few predictions about the future of work. First, as many have noted, the future economy may include a more bifurcated workforce: a handful of highly skilled designers, managers, financiers, and engineers who drive automation alongside those who provide services to the super-skilled class. Second, although some job-types will fall to new technologies, the transition to new technologies will require human work, sometimes painstaking tasks. The computing revolution required scores of workers entering, ‘cleaning,’ and reviewing masses of data. Likewise, virtual reality and robots might require human ‘teachers’ to initiate new systems. Finally, the future of work, built from the model of temporary work, will likely involve shorter job tenures, heavy and light seasons of work or of no work at all for many working-age adults.

Unlike domestic or agricultural labor, which were often not considered work, these transformations replaced industrial and office jobs that carried the cultural and economic imprimatur of work and ‘good jobs’ at that. This may explain why ‘gig economy’ has spawned a fleet of think pieces and panel discussions. Some of the loudest worriers are those who feel they stand to lose either income or social status (or both) from the rise of contingent work.

Christian Life in the Gig Economy

A Christian understanding of work provides a more reliable vantage from which to assess the trend toward contingent work and decide what to do about it. Specifically, Christian teaching and practices remind us of two critical aspects of work: calling and community.

In their popular 2012 book, [*Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*](#), Tim Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf describe work as more than a source of income, a social status, or an occupation. Work is a calling, a mission, and a responsibility. Humans work because we are made in the image and likeness of a God who works. Work is knit into our very nature. Work's purpose extends beyond its financial and social rewards; it is an act of service and of worship. "The purpose of work is to create a culture that honors God and enables people to thrive," they write. "Work is the form in which we make ourselves useful to others." When we work, we take responsibility for others, for the care and cultivation of the world and in the bearing of this responsibility, we bear the image of God.

Because all persons were made in the image of God and therefore called to work, *all* work has dignity. No job is too modest, too menial, too short-term to matter to God. Contingent 'gigs' honor God just as well as jobs that are lifetime appointments with benefits. That a greater or different set of work now falls outside the social contract today should not bother us. Indeed, we might even ask: has stable work become an idol? Instead of worrying over the future of work, might we, instead, simply need to cultivate inner resilience, flexibility, and patience in order to adapt to the economic transitions that lie ahead?

But the personal virtues called for in the current and future marketplace are not the end of the story. For Christians, work is not an individual endeavor but a calling that takes place within a community. In his encyclical letter [*Laborem Exercens*](#), Pope John Paul II, wrote: "It is characteristic of work that it first and foremost unites people. In this consists its social power: the power to build a community." All organizations, firms, and business enterprises that brings workers, resources, and customers together have responsibilities by virtue of being communities of work. Alongside the stewardship of wealth and producing valuable goods and services, communities of work have a responsibility to develop the persons within them. Workers are to be treated with dignity, as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. The relational aspect of work, where each contributor takes responsibility for one another and for the whole, is to be honored.

How does the trend toward contingent work affect work as a relational endeavor? In Hyman's view, "[t]emps helped erase the social life of work." Although this claim overstates the loss of social capital in the workplace, the effects of the new economy are worth exploring. Workers who feel weakly attached to a workplace may be less likely to cooperate, to help one's co-workers (with the expectation of reciprocity), to feel and take responsibility for the outcome of one's work. Meanwhile, in contrast to this alienation from responsibility, a fluid-economy can also promote hyper-personalization of work. When each person understands him or herself as a solo practitioner, an entrepreneur, or consultant on the way to his or her next 'gig,' work becomes something that burnishes one's own brand rather than a calling and a contribution to God's purposes.

Indications of the potentially *de*-formative impact of contingent work also appear in *Temp's* brief discussion of the status of family life in the organizations he tracks, starting with McKinsey. Formed

in the 1930s in the mold of a law firm, McKinsey recruited scores of graduates from law and business school with the assumption that only a handful would move into permanent status, partner. New hires would have to prove themselves in order to remain. This promoted a ruthless work environment in which consultants booked long hours and endless miles of travel (82). One associate observes that firm partners, “appear to be on the second marriages, having sacrificed their first in order to become a partner at McKinsey” (259). Hyman suggests that consulting firms’ own cultures impacted the advice they dispensed to other firms. “Spouses, children, and lives needed to sacrifice in this process. The people who reorganized corporations, by this filter, had little respect for stability” (259). A work culture that de-prioritizes and even interferes with family life is evidence of a degraded community of work, one that not only has failed to develop its members but failed to honor their humanity.

Temp’s close attention to the business leaders and enterprises that fostered what we now recognize as the ‘gig economy is consistent with the Christian social tradition, represented in people like Pope John Paul II and Abraham Kuyper, that identify organizations as bearing crucial moral responsibilities relative to work. One such Kuyperian, Bob Goudzwaard, writes, “The enterprise carries its own particular responsibility, precisely as a work community.” Businesses are not value-free enterprises, but rather “spheres of responsibility” in which moral principles such as human dignity and family must find expression and support.

Contingent Labor and the Christian Social Tradition

Looking at a present and future in which work rarely conforms to the mid-century breadwinner model, how should organizations respond? First, as temporary and contract work becomes more common, organizations should contemplate what their community of work (and workplace policies) should look like for all workers, be they contract workers, part-time workers, off-site workers. How do the simple rituals of the workplace - from rituals of recognition for work well-done to the sharing of responsibility - honor the dignity of all who work? Likewise, do organizational policies should set humane expectations and boundaries on work? Freelance and contract work should not become a blank check for round-the-clock work or work that is otherwise inhumane. Finally, how does an organization invest in worker skills and even incorporate the voice of workers with varying employment status - recognizing that the length of a work relationship may be far briefer than in other eras.

As workplaces become leaner - with fewer full-time, full-benefits staff - firms may need to see themselves as part of a wider economic ecosystem rather than a singular operation. If workplaces cannot provide costly benefits like health insurance, child care, or paid time off for family care, they can support systems that do.

Temp doesn’t glamorize the past or underestimate the forces shaping our current economy, nor should we. “Contingent work” is likely here to stay. We can meet the future of work with personal resilience but also by [cultivating faithful institutions](#), starting with workplaces that honor the dignity of work regardless of its title or job type.

To respond to the author of this article please email PJR@cpjustice.org. The articles in the *Public Justice Review* do not represent a consensus of positions on questions of public policy. We do not expect our readers will agree with all the arguments they find here, but we believe that within the broad tradition of what we call public justice we can do more by providing a forum for the debate and exchange of Christians, within those bounds, to work out public policy faithful to God and in service of our neighbors. We do not necessarily share the views expressed, but we do accept responsibility for giving them a chance to appear.