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1

Introduction: rethinking the future of work

There are many visions of the future of work. Indeed, there seem to be as many visions as there are commentators. For some, the future of work is rosy; for others, full of despair. For some, radical changes are about to take place; for others, the future will be much like the present apart from a few changes at the margins. Some visions of the future are portrayed as scientifically rigorous descriptions, others as prescriptions of what ought to be.

With such a cacophony of competing voices and styles of writing, one might think that somebody would have attempted to review the multitude of claims about the future of work, not least so that those new to this subject could gain an overarching appreciation of it. In any other social scientific topic, after all, undertaking a review of the previous literature is the necessary first step taken before putting forward one's own new insight so that it is grounded in what has gone before. When writing on the future of work, however, this process appears to be more the exception rather than the rule. Similarly, in any other subject in the social sciences, re-packaging previous ideas and re-labelling them so that what is being propounded appears 'new' is wholly unacceptable, especially if one fails to acknowledge what has gone before. Yet this approach is far too often the norm when studying the future of work. The outcome is that those reading on this subject are too often left marooned with no compass, swept along without bearings in a torrent of apparently 'original' insights.

The first intention of this book, therefore, is to provide readers interested in the future of work with an understanding of the range of competing perspectives so that they can, on the one hand, locate previous literature when reading yet another supposedly 'new' vision and, on the other hand, escape from travelling round and round the same island reading similar texts and instead venture out across the whole ocean of thought available to them. Although others have indeed attempted to fill this void before by providing sketches of the competing visions of the future of work (Nolan and Wood, 2003; Ransome, 1999; Thompson and Warhurst, 1998; White *et al.*, 2004), on the whole, these have tended to be detailed charts of particular continents of thought. This book, in contrast, seeks to map the whole world and, in so doing, to provide a more comprehensive tour of the multiple perspectives than so far attempted.

In the process of mapping this diverse array of perspectives, my second intention is to make some significant advances in how the future of work is thought about. Until now, as will be shown throughout this book, it has too often been the case that commentators have employed a very similar mode of reasoning when thinking about the future and, in doing so, have produced over-simplistic stories of what is occurring in lived practice. Once one begins to analyse the multifarious visions of the future of work, that is, it becomes apparent that a very similar storyline is commonly adopted across many of these contrasting perspectives. To begin to gain an insight into the nature of this storyline, consider for example the following visions, some of which are more widely believed than others:

- Products and services are increasingly being produced and delivered by people in formal jobs meaning that informal work (e.g., subsistence production, unpaid exchange) is disappearing almost entirely from the economic landscape (i.e., henceforth referred to as the ‘formalization’ of work thesis).
- Capitalism is spreading its tentacles ever wider and deeper to colonize the few remaining vestiges of the world that remain untouched by its grip (i.e., variously called the ‘commodification’, ‘marketization’ or ‘commercialization’ thesis).
- There is a rapid movement towards an open world economy with businesses increasingly operating in a de-regulated seamless global marketplace (i.e., the ‘globalization’ thesis) as regulated national-level economies disappear.
- Industrial society is being replaced by post-industrial societies (i.e., the ‘post-industrialism’ thesis).
- Post-Fordist flexible work practices are increasingly replacing Fordist mass production (i.e., the ‘post-Fordism’ thesis).
- Post-bureaucratic work organization is steadily replacing bureaucratic work organization (i.e., the ‘post-bureaucracy’ thesis).

What, therefore, is the common argument or storyline being adopted across all these perspectives? The first step in constructing their story in each and every one of these visions is that they marshal most, if not all, economic life into one side or the other of a dichotomy which is deemed crucial for understanding the future of work (e.g., Fordist and post-Fordist work practices, bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic work organizations, informal and formal work, non-commodified and commodified work). Second, and having squeezed all of economic life into this dualism, the two sides are then ordered into a temporal sequence whereby one side is seen as universally replacing the other. Finally, and to depict this one-dimensional linear trajectory of work, some label is created which usually involves using some ‘-ation’ (e.g., formalization, globalization, commodification), ‘-ism’ (e.g., post-industrialism, informationalism) or ‘post-something-or-other’ (e.g., post-capitalism, post-Fordism, post-bureaucracy).

This narrative structure is a popular device. It is used not only in most of the best-selling ‘pop-futurism’ written by seer-like management gurus, but also in much of the serious academic writing presented in a fastidious manner as accurate scientific

portrayals of the changes underway. It is also a very powerful device. As evidence of the persuasiveness of such a storytelling technique, one has only to consider how some of these dualistic either/or visions are often taken to be facts or descriptions about the future of work with few doubting the yarns that they spin. Indeed, it is precisely this recognition that some such stories have achieved the status of ‘facts’ about the future of work (as if such a thing could exist) that this book is being written.

When most dominant visions of the future of work, that is, are based on pinpointing a dichotomy and then ordering the two sides into a temporal sequence in which one immutably, inevitably and universally replaces the other over time, and such narratives achieve the status of facts about the future, then the need for a critical text that cuts through such simplistic visions becomes apparent. Rather than pay homage to tales about a universal linear trajectory towards some ‘-ation’, ‘-ism’ or ‘post-something-or-other’, as is the case in so many texts that seek to portray the future in instantly understandable terms, I instead wish to show here that these over-simplified narratives need to be transcended.

By evaluating critically each of these narratives in turn, the intention of this book is to unravel how these are not universal but particularistic trends. These one-dimensional ‘stairway to heaven’ (or hell) views of ‘development’ and ‘progress’, so commonly adopted by futurists – whether of the pop-futurist or serious academic variety – will be shown here to result from looking in particular places in particular ways and universalizing the trends identified. The outcome, it will be shown, is that a gross injustice is done to the complex and multiple directions of change that are occurring in lived experience. In consequence, rather than reproduce what Thompson and McHugh (2002: 169) call ‘The basic pattern . . . of stereotypical polarization, limited evidence and neglect of diversity, [which] tends to be produced in each new generation of macro arguments’, the objective throughout this book will be to display the need for a more kaleidoscopic view (c.f., Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997) in which there are no universal linear logics but instead many fragments moving in different directions in various parts of the picture.

For example, in some particular nations, sectors and occupations, it is possible to identify a shift towards post-bureaucratic management practices, such as in some Western nations, the advertising industry and the higher echelons of management. In other nations, sectors and occupations, however, such a trend is notable by its absence. This is similarly the case with other trends. In some nations, sectors, occupations and places, post-Fordist practices can be identified as taking hold. In others, however, there is the continuing dominance, even resurgence, of Fordist and Taylorist practices, as witnessed in ‘burger flipping’ service occupations (e.g., Ritzer, 1998). In some places and population groups, similarly, products and services are increasingly produced and delivered through formal employment but in others subsistence work, unpaid exchange and informal employment are growing. And although a commodification of work is occurring in some populations (e.g., amongst Western women), de-commodification is apparent amongst others (e.g., Western men), always assuming of course that all

work can be crammed into such dichotomies. Throughout this book, therefore, it will be shown that once one evaluates critically each of the one-dimensional linear visions of the future of work that commentators assert are occurring (e.g., from Fordism to post-Fordism, informal to formal work, non-commodified to commodified practices, bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy), it becomes apparent that divergent trajectories are being pursued in different populations.

The consequent argument developed in this book about the future of work is that there are no universal linear paths being pursued but, rather, multiple and divergent trends depending on where and how you look. Although this might not superficially appear so earth-shattering as the visions conveyed by the best-selling futurologists with their simplistic one-dimensional linear storylines, such a portrayal is perhaps more in keeping with the changes in lived practice being experienced by different people in varying places. With no linear trajectories, no immutable forces, no inevitable tendencies, but instead heterogeneous development paths, numerous questions arise that have so far received little attention and will need to be addressed about the degree to which the future is open. There is a lot of ground to cover, however, before reaching that point.

Structure of the book

To understand the full range of contemporary perspectives towards the future of work, this book is divided into three parts. Part 1 introduces three narratives (often treated as ‘facts’) concerning the trajectory of work that hold considerable sway over how the future of work is envisaged. These are the stories of a supposedly universal shift towards formal work (formalization), capitalist endeavour (commodification) and an open de-regulated world economy (globalization). Taking each in turn, Part 1 will reveal the complex and multiple directions of change in different populations and places so as to paint a more multi-dimensional picture of the trajectories of work than these dominant narratives convey. Part 2 then turns its attention to some of the major trajectories propounded so far as the future of employment is concerned – namely the shifts from an industrial to information/knowledge economy, Fordism to post-Fordism, and bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic management – while Part 3 explores a range of commentaries on the future of work that have so far received little coverage in management and business studies texts. These are the visions that provide counter-narratives to the dominant formalization, commodification and globalization theses by discussing post-employment, post-capitalist and localist green visions of the future of work respectively.

In Part 1, therefore, the dominant narratives concerning the future of work will be introduced and evaluated critically. Chapter 2 commences this process by introducing three grand narratives that have an over-bearing influence on how the future of work is envisaged at the present juncture in history. To depict how the configuration of economies is changing, commentators commonly differentiate three modes of delivering goods and services, namely the ‘market’ (private sector), the ‘state’ (public sector) and

the ‘informal sector’. Viewed in these terms, this chapter reveals the current widespread consensus that most nations are witnessing a common trajectory of work (where the future is seen as a linear extrapolation of a perceived past trajectory rather than in cyclical or dialectical terms).

First, the future of work is popularly seen to involve an ongoing ‘formalization’ of work in the sense that goods and services are increasingly produced and delivered through the formal (market and state) sphere under the social relations of formal employment rather than through the informal sphere (termed the ‘formalization’ thesis). Secondly, this formal production and delivery of goods and services is depicted as increasingly occurring through the market sector (rather than by the state or informal sphere) by capitalist firms for the purpose of profit; in other words, there is what is variously called a ‘commodification’, ‘commercialization’ or ‘marketization’ of economic activity. Finally, this formalization and commodification of work is seen to be increasingly taking place with an open (de-regulated) world economy (i.e., the globalization thesis). Despite all three narratives being widely accepted as accurate accounts of the direction of change, this chapter starts to put question marks against them by revealing that despite (or perhaps because of) their near universal acceptance, evidence is seldom provided to corroborate them.

The next three chapters then evaluate critically each of these supposed descriptions or ‘facts’ about the direction of work. The widely recited storyline of a linear and universal demise of the informal economy and a concomitant growth of the formal economy (i.e., the ‘formalization of work’ thesis) is the focus of Chapter 3. Until now, this narrative of ‘progress’ and view of the trajectory of economic development has exerted a firm grip on how the future of work is envisaged. Indeed, so strong is its hold that the degree of formalization has been taken as a measuring rod and used to define the Third World countries as ‘developing’ and that of the First World as ‘advanced’. In this vision, the persistence of supposedly ‘traditional’ informal activities is a manifestation of ‘backwardness’ which it is assumed will disappear and be replaced by formal work with economic ‘advancement’ and ‘modernization’. As such, the future of work is cast in stone; there is a uni-dimensional and linear trajectory so far as the future of work is concerned and it is one in which there is a natural and inevitable process of formalization. In Chapter 3, however, reviewing a wide array of evidence from the Western ‘advanced’ economies, the transition economies of East-Central Europe and the majority (Third) world, little evidence is found of any universal linear progression towards formalization. Instead, heterogeneous development paths are identified not only across but also within these different regions of the world. There is even evidence within the advanced economies that although some nations have witnessed formalization, others have witnessed an informalization of working life over the past four decades. The outcome will be to raise strong doubts over this meta-narrative until now portrayed as an immutable fact about the trajectory of work and which has closed off the future, not least by its adherents castigating visions of alternative futures as prescriptive utopianism.

Chapter 4 then turns its attention to a second widely held narrative that has similarly curtailed the scope of what is deemed realistic and feasible so far as the future of work is concerned. This is the discourse that there is no alternative to capitalism. In this vision, a universal process of what is variously termed ‘commercialization’, ‘marketization’ or ‘commodification’ is seen to be taking place, whereby capitalism becomes evermore powerful, expansive and totalizing as it penetrates deeper into each and every corner of economic life and stretches its tentacles wider across the globe to colonize those remaining areas previously left untouched by its powerful force. Indeed, for many, this vision of the future has taken on the semblance of an indisputable and irrefutable fact. This is the case not only amongst neo-liberals who extol the virtues of, and celebrate, such a future but also amongst the swelling ranks of those heavily opposed to its encroachment into every crevice of life where a certain fatalistic despondence prevails about its inevitability. This unstoppable transition towards a commodified world is so widely held and felt that it is perhaps difficult today to consider any other future. There really does seem to be ‘no alternative to capitalism’. Analysing whether capitalist firms rather than the state and the community increasingly produce goods and services, however, Chapter 4 will reveal not only a much shallower penetration of capitalism than often assumed but also how this is far from a universal trajectory. Again, different trajectories are identified in various areas and amongst different populations, suggesting that the direction of change is rather more heterogeneous and divergent than assumed by adherents to this thesis.

Chapter 5 then evaluates critically the third dominant pillar that has acted to close off how the future of work is envisaged. This is the widely recited story about the advent of an evermore open world economy (i.e., the globalization thesis) and how people, organizations and governments have no choice but to bow to the power of this inevitable force. Reviewing the evidence of the degree of economic, financial, cultural and political globalization, this chapter finds that the imagined economies of globalization are very much a product of a particular way of looking at the world and a result of only looking in particular narrow confined spaces, and that once one interrogates this phenomenon, a very different picture emerges of the shallow and uneven contours of globalization.

Having contested these three dominant grand narratives that have closed off what is considered valid regarding the future of work and displayed the heterogeneous and diverse directions of change occurring in different places, Part 2 then turns its attention to some visions regarding the changes taking place in one type of work, namely employment. Once again, these perspectives delineate a dichotomy of organizational forms and then depict a linear temporal progression from one opposite to the other over time. As Table 1.1 displays, these visions are of three broad types. First of all, there are those that represent the future of work organization primarily in terms of a shift from an industrial society to a post-industrial, information or knowledge economy. Secondly, there are those depicting the future of work in terms of a shift in employment practices from Fordist to post-Fordist practices, and, finally, those portraying the shift in work organization as being from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy, or what is sometimes

Table 1.1 Dichotomous visions of futures for employment

Nature of change	Old	New
Sector-based	Industrial society	Post-industrial Knowledge economy Information economy
Employment Practices	Fordism	Post-Fordism
Organizational	Bureaucracy Compliance Direct control Hard human resource management	Post-bureaucracy Commitment Indirect control Soft human resource management

referred to as from direct to indirect control, compliance to commitment, hard to soft human resource management, or industrial relations to human resource management. In Part 2, each is evaluated in turn so as to display the very real dangers of conflating present-day differences across space, sectors and occupations into some temporal sequence where one side of the coin (e.g., Fordism, bureaucracy) is viewed as being supplanted by the other side of the coin (e.g., post-Fordism, post-bureaucracy).

In Chapter 6, the various visions that view ‘industrial society’ as being replaced with a post-industrial/information/knowledge economy are first reviewed through the eyes of both those who view this transition as a positive move and those who view such a transition in more pessimistic terms. Following this, the degree to which this can be viewed as a universal trend is evaluated critically. This will reveal that for all of the talk of the advent of post-industrialism, the knowledge economy or the information society, there is little evidence that it has penetrated either as deeply or as widely as many of the ‘exagger’ authors associated with this perspective suggest.

Following this, Chapter 7 turns attention to an alternative popular dichotomy used to depict the direction of change in the employment place and which has perhaps had an even wider purchase on how scholars envisage the future of employment. This is the perspective that envisages a transition to be taking place in work practices from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of economic organization. Similar to the previous chapter, here, this thesis is again outlined, along with its optimistic and pessimistic variants, followed by a critical evaluation of the degree to which it can be identified as occurring.

Chapter 8 then discusses the idea of a transition from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic management practices in a similar vein. This again will reveal the limitations of attempting to squeeze the future of work organization into such a dichotomous and one-dimensional linear transition. Although this will be shown to be increasingly recognized, as displayed in recent discussions of the emergence of ‘hybrid’ managerial practices that display both bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic managerial styles, the argument of this chapter is that these are not new hybrid forms but rather have perhaps

always existed and it is simply the case that the dualistic thought of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic management was incapable of recognizing such hybrids.

Common to all these post-industrial, post-Fordist and post-bureaucracy theses is an implicit acceptance that a process of formalization and commodification is taking place in the nature of work. Indeed, if this were not assumed, they would not focus upon the employment place, and the employment place alone, when considering the changing nature of work, nor would they focus their attention within the sphere of employment on the commodified realm. In Chapter 9, however, a vision of the future of employment that accepts the formalization thesis, but questions the commodification thesis, will be reviewed. This is a perspective towards the future of work that envisages the future of work organization where non-capitalist employment comes to the fore. Until now, due to the dominance of the commodification thesis, this vision has been seldom discussed in business and management texts, and when it has been, it has been portrayed simply as a form of prescriptive utopianism. This chapter, nevertheless, reveals that such a vision is far from being more prescriptive than any other vision so far discussed. First, this chapter introduces those visions that depict a shift from capitalist to non-capitalist employment; secondly, it discusses those which envisage this future of work in a positive light; thirdly, those which view it in a more negative light; and, finally, the extent to which employment practices appear to be moving in this direction is evaluated.

In Part 3, attention moves away from perspectives solely discussing changes in the employment place and towards those visions that reject either descriptively or prescriptively the meta-narratives of formalization, commodification and/or globalization and, in so doing, construct alternative views of the future of work (Table 1.2). Indeed, it is the incorporation of such literature into this book that marks it out as distinct from other business and management texts.

In the opening chapter of Part 3, the ‘third way’ vision of the direction of change is evaluated. To review this vision of the future of work, this chapter first of all outlines the first way (neo-liberalism) and the second way (socialism) thought so as to reveal how the debates between them were (or are) about the best way of achieving

Table 1.2 Dominant visions and counter-visions of the future of work

Dominant visions	Counter-visions
Formalization	Informalization of welfare: third way visions (Chapter 10) of work: post-employment visions (Chapter 11)
Commodification	De-commodification of employment: non-capitalist visions (Chapter 9) of work: post-capitalist visions of work (Chapter 12)
Globalization	Localization of work and welfare: green visions (Chapter 13)

formalization, commodification and globalization. Following this, attention then turns towards depicting the advent of ‘third way’ thought and the ways in which this expands out visions for the future of work to incorporate work beyond employment. This will reveal that even though the third way visions recognize work beyond employment, a key, if artificial, distinction is made between its relevance to ‘economic’ and ‘welfare’ policy in this approach. The outcome is that it is in the sphere of welfare provision and this realm alone that the third way exponents believe that not only private and public sector provision but also a third prong of the ‘third sector’ or ‘civil society’ needs to be harnessed (e.g., Giddens, 2000). In the realm of ‘economic’ policy, however, its vision of the future of work remains entrenched in an employment-centred ideology. This starkly contrasts with the subsequent approaches that will be outlined in Part 3, which variously view informal work as becoming a complement or alternative to formal employment (see Chapter 11), non-capitalist economic practices as an alternative to commodified work (see Chapter 12) and locally oriented work beyond employment as a palliative to neo-liberal globalization (see Chapter 13).

Chapter 11, therefore, explores those visions of the future of work that contest the meta-narrative of formalization on descriptive and/or normative grounds. In ‘organizing work in a post-employment world’, those perspectives that envisage the future of work to lie in the development of informal work as an alternative and/or complement to the formal realm will be reviewed (e.g., Archibugi, 2000; Aznar, 1981; Beck, 2000; Delors, 1979; Gorz, 1999; Greffe, 1981; Lalonde and Simmonet, 1978; Laverse, 1995, 1996; Mayo, 1996; Rifkin, 1996; Sachs, 1984) along with their reasons for advocating a reduction in the hegemony of the formal economy, and the initiatives being pursued to implement such an organization of work.

Chapter 12, meanwhile, explores visions of the future of work that have contested the narrative of commodification. In these ‘post-capitalist’ visions of the future of work, as will be displayed, the argument is that there is a need to cease mapping an evermore commodified world because of the performative effects of such a discourse. In other words, such a mapping is viewed as creating what is then seen, and for these analysts there is a need to recognize, value and create non-capitalist economic practices that are already here and emerging so as to shine a light on the demonstrable construction of alternative possibilities and futures (e.g., Byrne *et al.*, 2001; Community Economies Collective, 2001; Escobar, 1995; Gibson-Graham, 1995, 1996; Gibson-Graham and Ruccio, 2001; Williams, 2005a,b). For these analysts, a discursive analysis of the commodification thesis is advocated, coupled with the articulation of alternative regimes of representation and practice in order to imagine and enact alternative futures for work.

Chapter 13 then explores those visions of the future of work that contest the narrative of globalization by arguing for greater localization in order to foster a future of work which is environmentally sustainable (e.g., Dobson, 1993; Ekins and Max-Neef, 1992; Fodor, 1999; Goldsmith *et al.*, 1995; Henderson, 1978, 1999; Hoogendijk, 1993; Mander and Goldsmith, 1996; McBurney, 1990; Robertson, 1991; Roseland, 1998; Trainer, 1996; Warburton, 1998; Wright, 1997). An important facet of this chapter will be to distinguish

between the 'environmental-lite' approaches that foster business-as-usual and the 'deeper green' perspectives that promulgate a radically different future for work grounded in localization and self-reliance.

Finally, Chapter 14 synthesizes the previous chapters to draw together the arguments and evaluate critically the diverse ways in which the future of work has been envisaged. Displaying how common to nearly all visions is some dichotomy that concocts in a temporal manner a linear transformation from some 'old' to 'new' form of work organization, this chapter then summarizes how such single linear trajectories are too simple to capture the diverse trajectories taking place. All these perspectives towards the future of work are the product of looking in particular places at what is taking place and extrapolating from these places wider trends, none of which wholly capture and reflect the heterogeneous directions in which work is moving in the contemporary world. Although in some nations, sectors, occupations or population groups, shifts towards formalization, commodification, globalization, information society, post-Fordism, post-bureaucracy and non-capitalist employment practices can be identified, once the lens is widened and other nations, sectors, occupations or population groups examined, shifts in the opposite direction can be marked out, namely informalization, de-commodification, localization, industrialism, Fordism, bureaucracy and capitalist practices. There are multiple, often contradictory, trajectories being pursued in different places. This concluding chapter then explores the various issues that arise regarding how the future of work is thought about from this more kaleidoscopic view where there are many fragments moving in different directions in various parts of the picture.

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