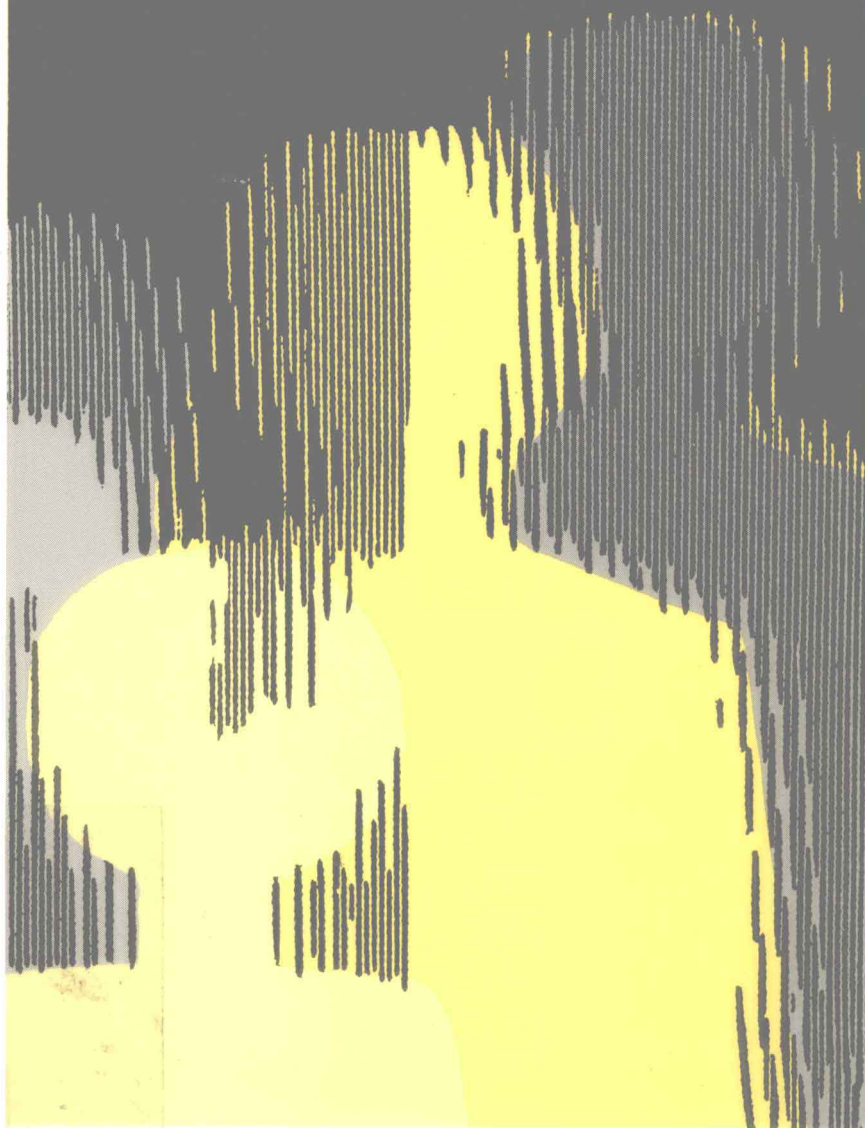


**TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS:
QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AS A
PATH TO EMPOWERMENT**

JOE L KINCHELOE



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Teachers as Researchers: Qualitative Inquiry as a Path to Empowerment

Joe L. Kincheloe



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Teachers as Researchers:
Qualitative Inquiry as a
Path to Empowerment

To Shirley Steinberg

Preface

I am a teacher. I want to do good work. Having attended, worked in, and visited many schools in North America, I believe that at the end of the twentieth century teaching is not good work. As I listen to teachers talk about their jobs or watch hierarchical interactions between administrators and teachers, I sense a crisis in the teaching profession. Never sure that I am characterizing the crisis accurately, I listen intensely to the brilliant teachers who talk to me of resigning, to the brilliant teacher education students who can't get hired or who have trouble in student teaching because of their intelligence, and to the great teachers who have worked invisibly for years, rarely rewarded for their dedication.

The crisis seems to have something to do with a *general* lack of consciousness — a garbled sense of purpose, of direction. What I feel in the schools is not simply a failure of schools and school leaders, but a more general inability of Western peoples to conceptualize a system of meaning — i.e., an ethical sense on which they can build humane and evolving institutions. The only social/educational visions which have gained public attention in the last years of the twentieth century have come from people like Ronald Reagan or William Bennett who offer a misleading vision of a return to a romanticized past, a golden era when teachers enforced rules and students learned the basics. Such an authoritarian vision underlines the crisis I describe; it lays the foundation for educational reform movements that assume that if order can be re-established, if educational leaders can just lay out what it is teachers should do and teachers just do it, schools may return to their previous glory.

Such a socio-educational vision is naive and dangerous, viewing schools as if they had nothing to do with the world that surrounds them. It assumes that Western industrial organization with its bureaucratic, hierarchical structure is the only model available for constructing institutions. In this context it views teachers as blue collar workers, passive recipients of the dictates of the experts. In other words, it disregards, as

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Introduction: Teachers as Researchers, Good Work, and Critical Inquiry

Many modern social scientists have observed a world marked by technicalization (and the technicalization of work in particular), a powerful mass communications industry which helps shape human interests and ideological orientations, and an increasing domination of individuals by groups with excessive power. The notion of *knowledge* has become a source of power in this society, as power is often acquired by those who via their economic position or their professional status announce just what is to be considered knowledge. Professionals in various fields determine 'healthy' child-rearing procedures, 'proper' family life, the nature of social deviance, and the form that work will take. Knowledge which must be certified by professionals results in anti-democratic tendencies as it renders individuals dependent upon experts.

Based on these observations, social scientists have become more and more attracted to visions of social research which are grounded in critical theory. These critical social inquirers are interested in questioning the dominant assumptions in modern industrialized societies, rejecting earlier constructions of meaning and value structures, and embarking on a quest for new meanings and practices (Popkewitz, 1981a:14-15). Ever concerned with the centrality of the individual and the powerfulness of individual endeavor, critical researchers refuse to see the individual as a puppet of wider forces. We must protect the creative, active, meaning-seeking aspects of humans; social scientists in particular must see men and women as potentially free and marked by the capacity to set and achieve their own goals. Thus, the forces which preclude this human agency must be exposed and changed. A social science, for example, which deifies the social scientist as expert and purveyor of truth must be confronted (Gibson, 1986:10).

Personal authority has been undermined by the authority of professional experts who gain unquestioned knowledge through rigorous (methodologically exacting) social scientific research. The family, for example, is subject to state determination of its competence. Parents have

little authority over those experts in the legitimized institutions who make pronouncements about normal child-rearing. The family's dependence on the professional is representative of a larger pattern of dependence in modern industrialized, bureaucratized societies. Individuals depend on organizations, citizens depend on the state, workers depend on managers, and, of course, parents depend on the 'helping professions'. A professional oligarchy of doctors, psychiatrists, welfare workers, civil servants, and social science researchers exert significant influence on the governance of the state and on the 'knowledge industry'.

The professional assault on the autonomy of the family and its members as well as on other institutions and individuals must be viewed in light of its historical moment. The advent of industrialization and its companion, monopoly or corporate capitalism, set the stage for the rise of the expert. As the family was being assaulted by the expert, the advertising industry was persuading people that store-bought goods were superior to home-made items. The growth of scientific management of industry and the expansion of the expert both represent new forms of control within an industrialized, corporate state. The struggle against the destruction of personal authority necessitates a struggle against the general authoritarian trends of the modern industrialized, corporate state. Individuals cannot protect their personal autonomy unless they regain their voice in the workplace and (very important to this work) demand a role in the production of the knowledge on which the modern state and its experts ground their authority. In this context, critical social researchers call for individuals to take the solution of their problems into their own hands. The goal of arresting the erosion of competence will be accomplished, they argue, by ordinary citizens who create their own 'communities of competence'. Thus, teachers, students, and parents must participate in the research act in education. They must help determine what is designated educational knowledge (Lasch, 1979:394-7).

In order to create their own knowledge individuals must understand that such an endeavor is both important and possible. Certain critical theoretical ideas allow for such an understanding. A critical social science is concerned with uncovering the ways ideology shapes social relations — relations, for example, in the workplace, in schools, between classes, races, and genders, as well as relations between experts and ordinary citizens. Critical social science is also concerned with extending a human's consciousness of himself or herself as a social being. An individual who had gained such a consciousness would understand how, why, his or her political opinions, religious beliefs, gender role, or racial perspectives had been shaped by dominant perspectives.

Critical social science thus promotes self-reflection which results in attitudinal changes. The basis of these changes rests on insights into causalities in the past. Individuals, as Habermas argues, thus come to know themselves by bringing to consciousness the process by which their

perspectives were formed. Action which is to be taken by individuals to correct social and thus individual pathologies can be *negotiated* once self-reflection has taken place. Prudent action which proceeds only while asking questions of ethics, morality, and politics does not take the form of rules and precise regulations. Critical theory provides a framework of principles around which action can be discussed rather than a set of procedures. Teachers who engage in critical research are never certain of the exact path of action they will take as a result of their inquiry (Popkewitz, 1981a:15-16).

Thus, critical social science is concerned with the notion of the practical. This implies that it is interested in the relationship of scientific research to society, of theory to practice. Because of this practical concern, critical social science must always examine social relations and social processes historically. Such an examination reminds the inquirer that our traditions, ceremonies, institutions, and belief systems are constructed by human beings. This human construction is often obscured from our sight as we go about the mundane rituals of teaching, administering, interacting, and relaxing. Thus, the dynamics of social change are lost, the forces which have shaped modern educational institutions are forgotten. History dies as we come to celebrate and attend only to that which exists; indeed, that 'which is' seems as if it could have been no other way. Critical social science moves us to uncover the genesis of those assumptions that shape our lives and institutions and to ask how they can be altered (Lather, 1986:268; Popkewitz, 1981a:16).

The notion that teachers as well as research professors and other 'experts' should engage in critically-grounded social inquiry rests on a democratic social theory which assumes that social research is not the province of a small elite minority. John Dewey argued in 1908 and 1932 that though the theoretical knowledge of the sciences is confined to specialists, it affects all persons. Its human effect, he continued, is not so much beneficent as it is exploitive, for those who possess the knowledge of the sciences often use it to take advantage of others. Considerations of private profit limit the social usefulness of scientifically-based research.

The limitations, Dewey maintained, of the hierarchical workplace prevent the non-élite from gaining access to the methods of social inquiry. Thus, they have little chance to develop their capacities. Aware of the worker-control strategies of his contemporary, Frederick Taylor, and his scientific management strategies, Dewey charged that workers, who in the industrial era were becoming merely operators of machines, found their creative and participatory sensibilities deadened. 'The maldistribution of material goods,' he wrote, 'is reflected in an even greater maldistribution of cultural goods.' The greatest form of moral loss which comes from industrialism's worker control, he argued, is related to the effect of this policy 'upon participation in the higher values of friendship, science, art, taking an active part in public life, in all the variety of forms which these

things are capable of assuming'. The democratic ideal is based on the premise that there is an ethical basis on which social institutions are constructed. This conception, as old as Plato, requires that every human counts, regardless of social position. Moreover, whether in the workplace of the factory or the school, leaders must make sure that the wide variety of abilities and interests among individuals must be considered so that the unique potentialities and the contributions of each one may be realized (Dewey, 1908:408).

On these premises rest the concept of good work. If the schools are to become democratic and offer challenges to the anti-democratic tendencies of the industrial era, they must pursue the concept of good work for teachers and individuals in the society as a whole. Many labor and educational theorists have pondered the key characteristics of democratic work. The notion of teachers/workers as researchers certainly fits into any notion of democratic work. Characteristics of good work might include:

- 1 *The principle of self-direction.* Workers/teachers are ultimately their own bosses. Except in unusual circumstances, the worker/teacher should be free from supervisory direction. Teachers operating under this principle would not be subjected to the humiliation of supervision which requires them to submit stylized lesson plans where format takes precedence over purpose. Teachers would be free of control by supervisory forms which use the tyranny of pre-packaged materials, and curriculum guides and supervisors who demand coverage of specific information at specific times, e.g., 'I want you on page 30 at 1:30'. Teachers freed from such constraints would need research skills to conceptualize and carry out the goals of their classrooms.
- 2 *The principle of the job as a place of learning.* Workers/teachers who are encouraged to set their own goals by necessity must view the workplace as a laboratory. Workers are equal partners in research and development, as their 'shop-level' experiences are valued as unique insights to the production process. In schools, teachers with their 'child-level' experiences are viewed similarly. Thus, teachers are encouraged to contribute to our knowledge about the educational act, while at the same time they are challenged (by administrators and one another) to push their knowledge to new levels via new questions involving topics which transcend mere teaching technique. Understandings of psychological theory, socio-economic context, and political outcomes of learning are pursued. The central role of research is apparent.
- 3 *The principle of work variety.* Workers in industrial contexts are plagued by repetitive, boring tasks. In the democratic workplace, workers struggle to provide opportunities for variations of routine

which preclude boredom. Teachers who are learners and thus who are involved with the difficulties of research and conceptualization are rarely bored. A school organization which would allow teachers periodically to perform effectively in these varied roles would be grounded by a research facility.

- 4 *The principle of workmate cooperation.* Industrialization has unfortunately produced conditions where it is not in one person's interest to help another; indeed, one person's gain is often another's loss. Teachers are not unaffected by such impulses, as they hoard materials away from one another and rarely exchange ideas about successful practices. The idea of sitting down together and seriously discussing educational purpose and how it might be achieved is not typically found in the teachers' lounge. The democratic workplace transcends this fractured set of relations. Teachers who are researchers share their findings with one another, discuss interpretations of the findings, and work together to implement strategies based on new understandings which emerge.
- 5 *The principle of individual work as a contribution to social welfare.* When workers/teachers employ this principle, they reconceptualize their work so that it serves the social good. If work is not socially ameliorative then it must be made so. Workers in a factory who produce items that are ecologically harmful contribute to the redesign of the product. Teachers who are faced with school policies which serve to limit children's potential and/or reproduce socio-economic inequality change the policies. Teachers who are researchers are much more likely to recognize the socially deleterious effect of certain educational strategies than non-researching teachers (Emery and Thorsrud, 1976:159).
- 6 *The principle that play is a virtue which must be incorporated into work.* Herbert Marcuse argued that labor in the industrial era has been determined by objectives and functions that are not controlled by individual human beings. The value of protecting the free play of human abilities and human desires is not expected in the rationality which directs the workplace. Individuality in a work context is not a value or end in itself. Play, Marcuse maintained, is basic to human civilization. When such a premise is accepted, labor must be grounded on a commitment to the protection of the free evolution of human potentiality (Marcuse, 1955:195). Once we overcome our adult-centered bias against play as one of the highest expressions of human endeavor, we may incorporate its principles into our work lives. Play principles which may be utilized as means of democratizing work would include: (a) rules of play are not constructed to repress freedom,

but to constrain authoritarianism and thus to promote fairness; (b) the structure of play is dynamic in its relation to the interaction of the players — by necessity this interaction is grounded on the equality of the players; (c) the activity is always viewed as an autonomous expression of self, as care is taken not to subordinate imagination to predetermined outcomes. Thus, in play exhaustion is not deadening since the activity refreshes the senses and celebrates the person. Research can be viewed as a form of play when the teacher is guided by the play principles (Aronowitz, 1973:61–2).

Thus, good work progresses from the pursuit of these democratic principles. The delineation of the democratic principles of good work confronts us with the reality that much of the time in the late twentieth century work is not good — it is not in line with these principles. Based on his reading of Freud, Herbert Marcuse set the stage for our understanding of 'bad work' with his notions of surplus repression and the performance principle. Surplus repression involves the additional controls over and above those necessary for civilized human association and species perpetuation. The performance principle is the prevailing historical form of the reality principle. The reality principle is one of the value systems human beings use to govern themselves in order to perpetuate the species. It embraces delayed gratification, the restraint of pleasure, work, and productiveness. The victory of the performance principle and its accompanying surplus repression in the modern industrialized world has ushered in a period where instrumental rationality (the separation of means from ends and the preference for ends; the disconnection of fact and value and the preference for fact; and the removal of human feeling and human concern from disinterested intellect and the preference for intellect) defines our view of work. In a context shaped by the idea of instrumental rationality the argument that work should be guided by the concept of play would appear silly and outrageous (Marcuse, 1955:12, 35, 37).

If we are to avoid the continuation of the exclusion of teachers from participation in research grounded in the critical social sciences we must expose and defeat bad work. Teachers must be capable of identifying that instrumental rationality which not only shapes bad work but also influences a form of teacher education which promotes an obsessive concern with means (technique of instruction) over ends (critical examination of educational purpose). Leo Tolstoy anticipated a similar manifestation of instrumental rationality in *Anna Karenina*, as he wrote of the artist, Mihailov. Some art patrons are discussing an artist's work in which Christ is a main figure.

'Yes — there's a wonderful mastery!' said Vronsky. . . . 'There you have technique.' . . . The sentence about technique sent a pang

through Mihailov's heart, and looking angrily at Vronsky he suddenly scowled. He had often heard this word technique, and was utterly unable to understand ... a mechanical facility for painting or drawing, entirely apart from its subject (Tolstoy, 1981:62).

This concern with means/technique crushes critical attempts to assess the nature of an education which promotes self-direction while blinding us to forms of labor which fall into the categories of bad work.

The concept of 'bad work' in the modern period is based upon a specific set of ideological assumptions:

- 1 *Social Darwinism*. Every human is out for himself or herself. The strongest and the most resourceful will gain the rewards and privileges; the weakest will fall by the wayside into demeaning situations. The position is inherently naive as it fails to question the forces which privilege certain groups and impede others. Success, thus, is founded not simply on one's resourcefulness but on one's initial acquaintance (often attained through socio-economic background) with the forms of knowledge, the attitudes, and the skills required for success, often called 'cultural capital'. Therefore, undemocratic hierarchical work arrangements are viewed not as anti-humanistic but as natural and just.
- 2 *Nature as enemy*. Ever-increasing material growth requires that nature be viewed as a collection of objects to be acted upon and exploited (Wirth, 1983:10–11). Nature is viewed as an object that is to be used, worked upon, and controlled. It is not intrinsically valuable: to hold significance, it must serve the ends of human beings. Scientific research is the human creation which allows for this — the laws of nature can be known and thus manipulated and controlled. Human beings as products of nature can be known in a similar way and, as a result, be manipulated and controlled. Like the ancients with their myths designed to control nature, scientific man attempts a similar goal. The control of men and women in the workplace is simply a natural extension of the 'control impulse' (Held, 1980:151–6).
- 3 *Science as 'fact' provider*. Scientific research provides humans with indisputable knowledge. Values are subjective opinions which have little role in the world of research and work. Operating from this assumption, scientific managers have objectified the workplace, focusing on measurable factors related to the bottom lines of productivity and profit. The examination of human values as represented by Dewey's assertion that good work must be pursued as an ethical imperative does not fit into a view of work based on such a notion of science.

- 4 *Efficiency as maximum productivity.* The productivity of humans and their machines can be measured only one way — quantitatively. Only in a social context where human beings and nature could be viewed in anyway other than intrinsically valuable could this assumption exist. The notion of efficiency becomes deified in bad work. Worshipping this false god, school supervisors in the school workplace encourage modes of teaching which answer to the goal of efficiency rather than goal of human nurturing. Methods of evaluation are developed on the basis of efficiency rather than on an appreciation of the attempt to learn about the learner, the forces which move him or her, and the possible pathways which might be taken to help them realize their potential. The subtle emotional forces which move teachers and other workers to pursue excellence are crushed by the search for efficiency.
ask: let's
- 5 *The supremacy of systems-efficiency and cost-benefit analysis models.* Such models assume that work goals are already agreed upon by all parties involved. 'Isn't the omnipresent goal of the workplace to increase profits?', the systems analysts ask. 'Isn't the ultimate goal of schooling to increase test scores?', educational systems analysts ask. The systems researchers view the goal of scientific inquiry as the identification of so-called production functions. These entities refer to the effectiveness of certain inputs in the attempt to reach pre-specified objectives. Effectiveness in this context involves the cost-benefit of the production function, as it is examined in terms of its economic efficiency. Thus, the effectiveness of educational methods could be compared in terms of test score results. When researchers combine this measure of effectiveness with an analysis of cost-benefit factors, decisions could then be made on which educational methods to require teachers to use. All teachers, regardless of context, would thus be expected to teach in the same 'efficient' way. Questions about non-measurable outcomes such as the dignity of the laborer in the workplace or student happiness in the educational workplace are irrelevant in systems analysis. Questions concerning the tacit professional knowledge of teachers and the subtle actions they take to connect learning to life, to ground learning in humane and ethical concerns, or to make students feel secure, are suppressed by the research model. Questions about teacher happiness, control of the conceptualization of their work, and their dignity as professionals are deemed trivial and unscientific. Teaching becomes bad work (House, 1978:394, 401; Wirth, 1983:110, 113-14).
- 6 *The purpose of work as the promotion of at least short-term personal welfare and at most short-term national welfare.* Bad work holds no vision of work as an activity which concerns itself

with the long-term welfare of other human beings or of subsequent generations. Little effort is made in the workplace to cultivate the notion of the community of human beings past, present, and future. Such a concept would negate tendencies such as dynamic obsolescence which serves as a symbol of bad work's alienation from human need. Educational researchers too often fail to consider the social and futuristic consequences of educational policy as they examine short-term skill acquisition. The inclusion of concerns with the long-term welfare of the human community into research design is often viewed as frivolous and unscientific. In the rush to conform to the norms of the scientific peer group it is neglected. Labor and teaching and research into them are ethically fragmented; laborers and teachers see little connection between their work lives and the needs and concerns of the human community. Work is further separated from life.

- 7 *The contingency of human happiness on the acquisition of better consumer items.* Industrial progress is viewed as the result of more centralized, more mechanized work. In a well-administered world better consumer items will result from efficiently managed industries and institutions. Education becomes an arm of the ideology which promotes this view of work. Schools are designed to turn out individuals who fit comfortably into the bad workplace. Students are taught (by a variety of teachers who are found far beyond the classroom, e.g., television advertising) to embrace an important commandment. In a sense consumption becomes a ritual of salvation for the modern worker as he or she attempts to regain psychic peace after a forty-hour week of mechanized bad work. It is not unusual that 'Born to Shop' bumper stickers have achieved so much popularity in recent times, as shopping becomes a *raison d'être*. Social and educational researchers concern themselves with studies of how better consumer goods can be produced, how humans can be convinced that their happiness and self-worth depend on the acquisition of these goods, and how schools can contribute to the production of the labor pool needed to produce these items and even these attitudes (Wirth, 1983:10).

No one has to remind us of the psychic, social, economic, and educational effects of bad work — we are confronted with them every day. Bad work produces waste, shoddy products, apathy, hostility, alcohol and drug abuse, nihilism, reliance on 'experts,' and depression. Opinion polls conducted periodically indicate that Americans are alarmed by the poor quality of goods produced in the American workplace. A study published in the *Harvard Business Review* indicates that 20 per cent of all consumer purchases lead to some form of purchaser dissatisfaction — this does not include dissatisfaction based on price. Automobile recalls are

legendary. Obviously, technological advance by itself does not ensure quality of workmanship. Indeed, we honor the label 'hand-made' as an indication of high quality. It implies a sociological relationship missing in modern industries which operate on the principles of bad work. Products which have been hand-made historically emerged from cultures where producers and consumers were the same individuals or close kin. Men made their own spears; women wove their own baskets. Even when technology advanced, material culture grew more complex, and specialization developed, the relationship between consumer and producer remained intact.

Since World War II mergers in American industry have rendered manufacturing corporations more unwieldy than ever before. Even though products grew shoddier and shoddier, horizontal industrial organization allowed large companies to stay in business. Bureaucratization of labor unions and the contracts which resulted from negotiations in the 1950s and 1960s protected incompetent workers from dismissal. Thus, workers who were understandably alienated, bored, and careless understood their immunity from management threats of dismissal. Management's lack of concern about the quality problems which result from the megacorporation's workplace is well-illustrated by the virtual absence of life-cycle data on consumer products. Life-cycle studies follow products from birth to death under actual conditions of use to learn how an item breaks down, the type of repairs it needs, and how long a consumer can use it. There was no need for such data in industries which profited from planned obsolescence. Add to these factors the fact that the conglomerates which emerged from the mergers are not primarily in the business of producing goods — they are interested in buying and selling companies. Most executives in the United States have never been involved with the manufacturing process. Profit-mad MBAs (holders of Masters of Business Administration degrees) are often primarily interested in building empires and good 'quarterly numbers'. The company's reputation for quality is not the concern of these money managers and marketing specialists — they are interested in immediate profits during their short stays with individual companies.

We have been conditioned in the last few years to believe that work is improving both in terms of job satisfaction for workers and product quality for consumers. Management is aware of bad work, we argue, and things are getting better. The service and information-based economy, we are told, with its computerization, is producing more white collar workers who are less deskilled and more professionalized. Such claims do not meet the test of scrutiny. First of all, service and information jobs are primarily low-paying positions. Contrary to popular opinion, even goods-producing jobs demand higher pay than service and information jobs. Secondly, women hold over half of the service and information jobs, and females have traditionally received less money and less decision-making