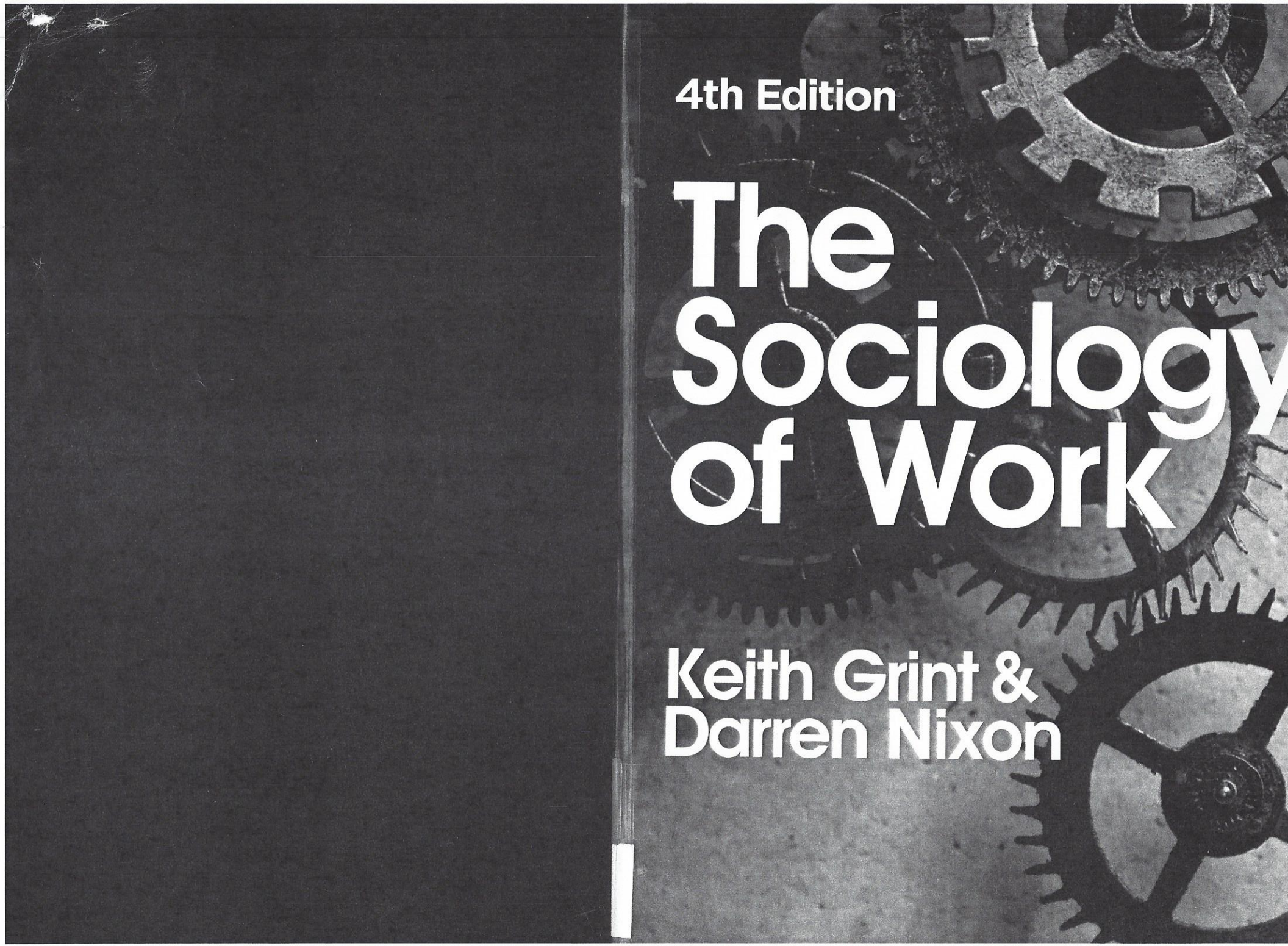
4th Edition
The Sociology of Work
Keith Grint &
Darren Nixon

### Useful resources and seminar discussion questions

Nomis is the official source of UK labour market statistics provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The website (www.nomisweb.co.uk) provides very detailed labour market data. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) provides an annual report assessing the state of the UK economy, which also reviews labour market trends and future employment projections and forecasts. Relatively up-to-date commentary on labour market trends is available in weekly bulletins from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). The ESRC centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organizational Performance (SKOPE), based at Oxford and Cardiff universities, regularly produces scholarly publications on the topic of the knowledge economy, skills policy, organizational performance and the like. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) also provides reports and commentaries on labour market policies and trends and their effects on workers. The Equality and Human Rights Commission is useful for data on equal opportunity issues and policy. Global comparative labour market data is available from the website of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) where country-level profiles are available for comparison. The Journal *Work, Employment and Society* has carried many of the debates regarding aesthetic and emotional labour, while the journal *Gender, Work and Organization* is particularly useful for issues pertaining to gender in the workplace

- Is the UK a 'knowledge economy'? Hasn't work always required knowledge?
- What is informational capitalism? What has driven it?
- What problems are associated with post-industrial theory?
- In what ways is the growth of a 'service economy' changing the nature of work and the skills required?
- How do men and women 'do' gender differently in the service occupations they dominate?
- How might the growing importance of emotional and aesthetic labour create new inequalities of class and gender?

# 10 The Meaning of Work in the Contemporary Economy



## Introduction

In the previous chapter, the discussion focused on Bell's (1973) influential post-industrial theory and its evolution into contemporary theories of the 'information society' or 'knowledge economy'. Post-industrial theory posited a paradigm break in highlighting the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. The most significant features of this new economy were the critical importance of 'codified theoretical knowledge' for productivity and economic growth, the employment shift from manufacturing to services and large-scale occupational transition involving the decline of low-skill manual occupations and the growth of high-skill 'knowledge-intensive' (managerial, professional and technical) occupations. These shifts have been argued to have important implications for the meaning that work has in contemporary society.

Bell (1973) argued that growing areas of service work (by virtue of the fact that they involved greater interaction with people rather than machines) would be more meaningful than the alienating factory work emblematic of the industrial age. However, the work ethic, which supported the development of the early capitalist industrial economy by sustaining the ideology of work as a moral duty in the face of the growth of increasingly alienating industrial work, and thereafter remained a key social norm within industrial society (Bauman, 2005; Rose, 1994a, 1994b, 2005a; Heelas, 2002), would be far less relevant in a post-industrial society characterized by the growing importance of service work and leisure and consumptive activities (Rose, 2005a; Ransome, 2005). The 'economizing' principles of economic growth and profit maximization at virtually any cost that characterized modern industrial society (see also Beck, 1992), were being replaced by post-industrial concerns centring on quality of life measured by the quality of goods, services and amenities consumed (Bell, 1973: 127). Here, there are some parallels with Inglehart's (1977) postmaterialist thesis, which envisaged significant value change due to increased affluence and the growing availability of material goods within post- or 'advanced' industrial societies. Of particular interest is the postmaterialist suggestion of a shift away from instrumental work orientations, where work is primarily seen as a means to an end and valued for the material rewards it provides, towards more expressive orientations, where work is valued for its intrinsic qualities and its ability to provide meaning and satisfaction as an outlet for the expression of skill, creativity

and collective purpose. This shift was seen as reflecting a broader trend within affluent societies towards the prioritization of the increasingly significant values of self-expression, self-discovery and self-actualization (M. Rose, 2005a; N. Rose, 1990; Heelas, 2002; Du Gay, 1996).

For Bell (1973) 'knowledge work' and the 'knowledge industries' were seen as having particular strategic importance for economic growth and future employment generation in post-industrial society. The growth of knowledge work necessitated an increasingly educated and skilled workforce, which in turn required more and more workers to invest in skill development prior to entering work (via educational or vocational qualifications). Workers in high-level occupations and those in possession of high-level skills and educational qualifications have been consistently associated with expressive rather than instrumental work values and orientations (Blauner, 1960; Goldthorpe et al., 1969; Gallie and White, 1993; Gallie et al., 1998; Rose, 2005a). Therefore, the post-industrial workforce can be expected to possess a relatively high degree of career and occupational identification and are likely to anticipate intrinsically meaningful work – or, as Rose puts it, 'work roles built around expressive and self-actualizing opportunities' (2005a: 131). Thus, in its vision of the growth of 'knowledge work' and the emergence of a highly skilled labour force of 'knowledge workers', post-industrial theory suggests both a potentially more meaningful experience in work and the development of more expressive orientations to work.

Similar claims regarding the nature and meaning of work in the 'new' economy have also been apparent in the managerial literature, especially since the 1980s (Baldry et al., 2007; Sturdy et al., 2010; Rose, 1990). It has been suggested that the increasing importance placed on self-expression, self-actualization and self-fulfilment in post-industrial, or postmodern, societies can actually be satisfied in and through work, rather than other activities such as leisure and consumption (see Rose, 1990; Du Gay, 1996; Featherstone, 2007; Ransome, 2005). Within such accounts, workers' skills and subjective well-being are seen as increasingly important to the success of contemporary organizations. In a supposed move away from tightly controlled bureaucratic 'low-trust' organizational forms, it is suggested that, through careful management, job redesign and the adoption of more empowering 'post-bureaucratic' organizational strategies that entail less direct forms of workplace control and increased worker autonomy, more meaningful work can be created and the productive potential of a highly skilled workforce more fully realized. In this 'win-win' scenario, the construction of more meaningful work and the development of a more skilled, autonomous and empowered workforce meshes the interests of the firm with the interests of the worker, creating an increasingly unified, harmonious and therefore successful organizational culture (see Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2008; Collinson, 2003; Baldry et al., 2007: 9; Rose, 1990). Unsurprisingly, these claims have not gone uncontested and have been subjected to heavy criticism. Theorists influenced by poststructuralist insights have highlighted how contemporary organizational culture management discourses seek to 'govern workers' souls' (Rose, 1990; Du Gay, 1996; see also Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Alvesson, 2010), while research inspired by critical management and labour process theory has strongly questioned notions of increased worker autonomy, discretion and empowerment, highlighting both the existence of new (normative and neo-normative) forms of organizational control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Sturdy et al., 2010) as well as the persistence of more 'traditional' bureaucratic and Taylorist techniques – even in newly emerging sectors of the 'knowledge economy' where we might expect 'new' managerial strategies to be most prominent (Baldry et al., 2007; Karreman and Alvesson, 2004).



A further challenge to the idea that contemporary forms of work are more meaningful and fulfilling has come from two other highly influential theories, both of which, in marked contrast to the management literature, suggest that work is actually of *declining* importance in contemporary societies. Bauman (2005) has argued that in postmodern societies consumption supplanted work as the key source of self-identity and social status (see also Ransome, 2005). The fact that the goals of self-actualization and self-expression are increasingly associated with, and achieved in and through, consumption (see Featherstone, 2007; Ransome, 2005) undermines non-financial commitment to work and the values of the work ethic, and is therefore the key source of the declining significance of work and the rising significance of consumption for identities in postmodern society (Bauman, 2005; Ransome, 2005). This is a highly significant shift given the common contention that work has stood at the centre of the life project, as the central orientation point, not just for individuals, but for whole societies since the industrial revolution (Bauman, 2005: 17, Ransome, 2005: 121, Beck, 2000: 10). For Bauman (2005), the decline of work and the rise of consumption reflect a broader transition from 'producer' to 'consumer' society, with citizens now primarily valued for their consumptive rather than their productive activities and roles. Similarly, those writing from a late-modern perspective (Beck, 1992, 2000; Giddens, 1991) have also suggested that work is no longer capable of providing a stable platform on which to build a coherent personal identity or narrative. From both perspectives, work identities, like all structurally derived classifications, are seen as increasingly fragile, unstable and discontinuous.

Such perspectives on the declining importance or 'end' of work (see also Gorz, 1982; Sennett, 1998; Strangleman, 2007) are also underpinned by the idea that work has undergone a radical transformation in recent years - primarily, that it has become significantly more flexible, unstable and insecure. The growth of 'non-standard' employment contracts, which usually refers to the growth of part-time and temporary work, is evidenced as indicative of a broader shift towards an increasingly deregulated economy and more flexible labour markets. Stable, relatively well-paying 'good' jobs are seen as being replaced by insecure, low-paying 'bad' jobs (Doogan, 2009; McGovern et al., 2004). The decline of the modern industrial economy is associated with the demise of 'standard' employment contracts and diminishing job security, protection and entitlements, while the growth of the 'new economy' (however conceived), is associated with the growth of more insecure, contingent and risky forms of 'non-standard' employment which radically undermine the idea of a career or a 'job for life'. In such circumstances, workers are exposed to greater insecurity and risk and are forced to shift their focus away from the cultivation of long-term organizational careers towards the development and maintenance of individual employability, as employment relations become increasingly fragmented and individualized within a broader 'political economy of insecurity' (Beck, 2000; see also Baldry et al., 2007; Standing, 2011).

Deindustrialization, post-Fordist economic restructuring and the growth of the 'service economy' have been strongly associated with the growth of an increasingly flexible and insecure workforce. For most, the emergence of 'flexible capitalism' is an unwelcome development which denies the achievement of meaning in and through work (Bauman, 2005), corrodes trust, loyalty and character, and profoundly disrupts the development of positive self-identity (Sennett, 1998; see also Giddens, 1991) or individualizes a variety of employment-related risks (Beck, 1992, 2000; Castells, 2000). However, in marked contrast to these accounts, others have suggested that the growth of more flexible forms of work can actually be seen as empowering (through increasing choice) and is in fact quite compatible with the growth of the 'knowledge economy', as Forde and Slater explain:

> The argument ran that knowledge workers, no longer restricted to seeking dependent employment in large organizations, were increasingly choosing to sell their labour services to a series of clients either directly or through labour market intermediaries. Thus, an expansion in temporary work arrangements has come to be seen by some as a welcome development. (2001: 1)

Similarly, more flexible forms of employment may also provide new opportunities to combine work, leisure and family responsibilities in more fulfilling ways, and therefore facilitate a better 'work–life balance' (McGovern et al., 2004; Gambles et al., 2006). Interestingly, and in stark contrast to the 'end of work' debates, work–life balance debates have been premised on the idea that work is actually becoming increasingly invasive and encroaches on leisure time due to a variety of developments. These include the emergence of an 'overwork culture' (Bunting, 2004); technological developments that blur the boundaries between home, work and leisure (Lewis, 2003); unsustainable employer constructions of what constitutes the 'ideal worker' (Gambles et al., 2006, 2007); and increasingly demanding 'high-commitment' organizational cultures that seek to affect or control workers' attributes and behaviour in deeper, more insidious ways through 'working on' more aspects of workers' selves, such as their appearances, emotions, attitudes, identities and values (Rose, 1990; Du Gay, 1996; Bunting, 2004; Gambles et al., 2006; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003). Yet, the extent to which the increasing invasiveness of work might be 'imposed' through economic need and employer demands, or whether it might in fact be 'chosen' by workers who increasingly 'buy in' to organizational culture or identify with their occupation to such an extent that they may see work as the 'new leisure', remains unclear (Lewis, 2003; Gambles et al., 2006). The idea that work might be the 'new leisure' appears to be a clear contradiction in terms, as an insightful respondent in Gambles et al. puts it,

> The more post-industrial the workplace gets, the more people go into creative white-collar jobs, then the more the line between what was once work and once leisure begins to blur . . . A lot of the things we used to call leisure, such as talking to others, creating things, writing, reading, etc., well that's the stuff of a lot of people's jobs now. Is it any wonder that white-collar workers are working such long hours? (2006: 51)

Significant disagreements clearly exist within the literature regarding the role and meaning of work in contemporary society. As we have seen, some theorists see work as of declining significance, while others see it as increasingly 'invading' other areas of life. In the remainder of this chapter, we want to explore these apparently contradictory debates in greater depth, with a particular focus on arguments around the declining significance of work for identity, the growing importance of consumption and the consumer, the emergence of the 'cultural economy', the increasing significance of interactive service work and the stronger emphasis placed on organizational culture management – and, in particular, how these developments impact on the meaning of work.

## The declining significance of work

Bauman (2005) has suggested that a key problem in newly emerging industrial societies was convincing a reluctant labour force to work in jobs that were essentially meaningless and lacked the capacity for autonomy, discretion and control that had existed in pre-industrial forms of labour. New forms of factory work were certainly not more intrinsically rewarding or meaningful. Indeed, Bauman saw the factory as a 'panoptical institution' that subjected



the worker to drastically increased surveillance, discipline and control and spelt the end of the 'love affair' between the craftsman and his work (see also Braverman, 1974). Bauman sees industrial society as assuming the form of a 'gigantic factory' where, in order for society to grow and progress, every able-bodied male was expected and required to be productively employed. The task of ensuring a ready supply of labour for the growing industrial economy was seen as a moral problem as well as an economic necessity, and was resolved through a combination of pitiless coercion (through the implementation of Poor Laws) and promulgation of the ideology of the work ethic. While the Poor Laws made poverty unbearable and created the 'choice' of 'work or perish', the work ethic encouraged workers 'to embrace gladly what was in effect an unavoidable necessity' (Bauman, 2005: 19). Bauman highlights the importance of the promotion of the values of the work ethic in establishing the moral value of labour and in constructing work as an ennobling activity. Thus, while work was necessary for the survival of individuals, households and the industrial system as a whole, it was also seen as playing an important role in the broader 'civilizing process' – as a key source of moral improvement.

### *Work and identity*

The significance of production to the development of industrial society and to the lived experience of individuals within it has led Bauman (2005) to label it 'producer society'. Within such a society, citizens were primarily valued for their productive activities and roles, and it was through production that both individual and systemic needs were reconciled and realized. Other social theorists interested in the supposed contemporary decline of work have characterized industrial society as 'work-society' (Beck, 2000), 'work-based society' (Ransome, 2005) or 'wage-based society' (Gorz, 1999). Within these accounts, work is seen as a defining feature of industrial society. Beck suggests that work 'has long been the only relevant source and the only valid measure for the evaluation of human beings and their activities' (2000: 10). However, it is more accurate to suggest that, since the Industrial Revolution, work has been particularly important for the construction of *male* identities. While in the industrial period female identities were primarily formed in the context of powerful discourses constructing femininity through associations with motherhood, domesticity and caring (Humphries, 1977; Lewis, 1983; Honeyman, 2000; Crompton, 2006), it is engagement in paid work that defined men (Betcher and Pollack, 1993: 154; Harris, 1995: 73; Mac an Ghail, 1996: 72). For Bauman:

> The work a man performed supplied his livelihood; but the kind of work performed defined the standing a man could reasonably hope for . . . Work was the main factor of one's social placement as well as of self-assessment . . . in a society known for its knack and fondness for categorizing and classifying, the type of work was the decisive, pivotal classification from which everything else relevant to living among others followed . . . The work career marked the itinerary of life and retrospectively provided the prime record of one's life achievement or one's failure; that career was the principal source of self-confidence and uncertainty, self-satisfaction and reprobation, pride and shame . . . work stood at the centre of the lifelong construction and defence of a man's identity. (2005: 17)

Indeed, it seems difficult to overstate the importance of work for the personal identity and social status of men within industrial society. Engagement in paid work has been so closely associated with men and masculinity in this period that a number of theorists have argued that the key characteristics of 'traditional' masculinity are analogous to the skills and

characteristics required of the successful or 'ideal' worker (Keen, 1992: 65; Morgan 1992: 91; Betcher and Pollack, 1993: 159; Peterson, 1998: 50; see also Gambles et al., 2006). As Tolson suggests: 'In Western, industrialized, capitalist societies, definitions of masculinity are bound up with definitions of work. Whether it is in terms of physical strength or mechanical expertise, or in terms of ambition and competitiveness, the qualities needed of the successful worker are closely related to those of the successful man' (1977: 13).

### *Instrumental work attitudes*

However, for the majority of workers in industrial society the importance of work for identity did *not* primarily reflect its intrinsic meaningfulness. Important theorists of modernity have argued that the nature and organization of work in industrial capitalist societies was in fact deeply alienating and generated a thoroughly instrumental orientation to work. For example, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), Marx graphically illustrated the alienation and brutalization of the worker within the industrial capitalist system (see Simon 1994). For Marx, capitalism commodified and rationalized productive activity, thereby robbing it of its intrinsic meaningfulness. Productive activity – for Marx the essential form of human creativity and expression – was therefore stripped of its empowering and creative capacities within capitalism and reduced simply to a means to an end – the 'cash nexus' – with disastrous effects for the worker. For Weber (1978/1922), it was the rise of rationalization – the application of scientific understanding to the organization of social and economic life personified in the rise of the classic bureaucratic organization and the increasing significance of measurement, quantification, calculation, rules and regulations – that defined and shaped our experience of work in the modern industrial world. Instrumental rationality or cost–benefit calculations increasingly guide judgements, decision-making processes and behaviour, rather than meaning, values or emotions (for full discussion, see chapter 3). According to Gabriel:

> Eventually we all become trapped in the bureaucratic mechanism, which turns us into impersonal functionaries or cogs, passively following rules and procedures and relating to each other without feeling or passion. This mechanism, housed in solid concrete buildings with partitioned offices, represents a hallmark of modernity at least in the sphere of work and production. (2005: 11)

In factories, rationalization in the form of the increasingly specialized division of labour and the application of the principles of scientific management served to further reduce the intrinsic meaning available within work. F. W. Taylor explicitly designed work on the basis of his belief that workers were instrumental in their orientations to work and primarily motivated by monetary reward, failing to recognize that such orientations may themselves have been a response to the emergence of alienating and intrinsically meaningless forms of work within the industrial period.

In their famous affluent worker studies, Goldthorpe et al. (1969) vividly describe male affluent workers in highly instrumental and (for Marxists) alienated terms. These were workers who had forsaken the hope of intrinsically meaningful work and accepted boring and monotonous work that offered little in the way of intrinsic satisfaction purely on the basis of the wage on offer. The instrumental orientation of these workers was argued to reflect the nature of their work and market situations. Goldthorpe et al. (1969: 56–60) noted that for white-collar workers higher wages were usually associated with increased autonomy,



responsibility and complexity, all of which provided the basis for the achievement of intrinsic work satisfaction. However, for the affluent manual workers the reverse appeared to be true – higher wages in effect compensated for the lack of intrinsic meaning in the work they did. Affluent manual workers did express dissatisfaction with the nature of their work tasks, but traded this against the relatively high wage on offer. According to Goldthorpe et al. this was an increasingly common 'dilemma' for working-class manual labourers – affluence at the price of intrinsically meaningless work. In such circumstances, work became purely the realm of the necessary and was significant only to the extent that it facilitated more meaningful and expressive non-work activities. Thus, for the 'privatized instrumental' affluent manual workers, the importance of work was primarily the wage it delivered, which allowed the men to provide for their families' needs through increased consumption and raised living standards.

### *Expressive work attitudes*

Goldthorpe et al. (1969) contrasted the work attitudes and orientations of their affluent manual workers with those of a small number of white-collar workers who took part in their study and other contemporaneous research on the work attitudes of white-collar workers. They suggested that white-collar workers held more expressive orientations to work, were therefore much more inclined to prioritize the achievement of intrinsic satisfaction in work and had considerably more chance of achieving it than manual workers. These findings supported previous research that had highlighted the link between high-level occupations, skills and qualifications and the attainment of satisfaction at work (Blauner, 1960). However, it has since been suggested that the extension of Taylorist principles to the organization of (particularly lower-level) white-collar work has served to reduce opportunities for the attainment of intrinsic meaning within areas of work that have historically provided relatively high levels of intrinsic satisfaction and meaning (Braverman, 1974; Kumar, 2005; Castells, 2000).

More recently, Tilly and Tilly (1998) suggested that hitherto no study on job quality has ever found workers prioritizing expressive values, such as the achievement of satisfaction and meaning in work, over instrumental ones such as the material rewards that work brings. Large-scale British survey data covering the period 1985–2001 seems to confirm the continued prominence of instrumental orientations to work and the prioritization of extrinsic dimensions of work amongst workers (Gallie and White, 1993; Gallie et al., 1998). Rose (2005a: 140) shows that the majority of workers say they work primarily for instrumental reasons (mainly to earn money) rather than for expressive ones (such as to achieve satisfaction). Men were more likely than women to say that they worked in order to provide necessities, while women were more likely than men to say that they worked in order to provide supplementary income, although this gap has been narrowing over the period with increasing numbers of women saying that their work was a key means to obtain necessities (2005a: 139). More generally, a greater proportion of workers prioritized extrinsic work features (such as level of pay) over intrinsic ones (such as the job being challenging, meaningful and rewarding). Furthermore, the proportion of workers who prioritize extrinsic work characteristics has been increasing since the 1980s, a period in which the qualifications held by the workforce also increased significantly, suggesting a weakening of the relationship between level of qualifications held and expressive work orientations (Rose, 2005a: 142). This also clearly questions the notion that the growth of an increasingly educated post-industrial 'knowledge workforce' might lead to a significant growth in more expressive orientations to

work. Nonetheless, highly educated workers continue to be significantly more likely to hold expressive orientations to work, and are therefore also more likely to prioritize intrinsic job features than poorly educated workers, who remain the most instrumental in their orientations and priorities.

However, it would be incorrect to suggest that work is therefore purely an instrumental activity devoid of any intrinsic meaning, or to claim that workers are merely 'income maximizing' and solely concerned with obtaining as much money as possible from their work to the exclusion of any other aspect of the job. It is hardly surprising that most people say they go to work primarily because they need the money that a wage provides. Indeed, that over a quarter of men and women surveyed in 2001 said that they worked primarily for expressive reasons is more surprising. This indicates that a substantial minority of workers see paid work primarily as an opportunity to apply and develop skills and achieve a sense of accomplishment (self-actualization) and satisfaction (Rose, 2005a: 136–9). Furthermore, while an increasing majority of workers did prioritize extrinsic work features such as pay in 2001, fully 40 per cent still said they prioritized intrinsic elements of work and thus placed greater importance on the nature of the task and opportunities for the application of skills and initiative than on level of pay. Thus, while pay may be the most important work consideration, the meaning that work can provide is also important for workers and it is the *primary* consideration for a large minority of workers when evaluating job characteristics.

Non-financial commitment to work is also measured in surveys through what is known as the 'lottery winner question'. Here, workers are asked whether they would continue to work (not necessarily in the same job) even if they had no financial imperative to do so – in other words, if they could afford to live without working. A consistent finding in Britain is that around two-thirds of workers say that they would continue to work even if there were no financial need to do so (Gallie et al., 1994; Rose, 2005a). Such data suggests strong non-financial commitment to work amongst the British workforce, although there are quite significant differences according to the level of qualification held – 53 per cent of those with no qualifications say they would continue to work despite the lack of a financial imperative, compared to 78 per cent of those possessing at least a degree-level qualification (Rose, 2005a: 137). Indeed, non-financial commitment to work rises steadily according to the level of qualifications held, reminding us of the important impact of qualifications, skills and education on work orientations and experiences (Gallie and White, 1993; Gallie et al., 1998; Rose, 2005a). Thus, while survey data does continue to highlight the prominence of instrumental orientations to work, more expressive work orientations are expressed by a significant portion of the workforce, particularly highly skilled manual workers, managers and professionals (Gallie et al., 1998: 202). Non-financial commitment to work is also evident (albeit to a lesser degree) amongst those without any qualifications at all, many of whom are engaged in the most alienating and unrewarding jobs at the bottom of the labour market, which testifies to the strength of the work ethic amongst such workers and the non-material rewards that even alienating work can sometimes bring.

### *Gender and work identity*

Even though instrumental values appear to have prevailed within the work orientations of modern workers, work as a means to an end has still been critical for the construction and confirmation of male identity. The clearest expression of this is found in the 'male breadwinner model' which describes the male as the primary earner and the female as the primary carer and has been a key social, institutional and ideological form within industrial society (see Crompton, 2006; Crompton et al., 2007a; Scott et al., 2010). Lewis, for example, suggests that 'the family reliant on the male breadwinner was regarded as the bedrock of society' (1983: 20). The breadwinner role required men to internalize the values of the work ethic, to see work as constitutive of what it meant to be a man and providing for 'dependants' as fundamental to their duty and responsibility as husbands and fathers (Betcher and Pollack, 1993: 139; Harris, 1995). Work may often have had little intrinsic meaning, but the role it played in enabling men to meet the expectations and social obligations embodied in the 'breadwinner' role has been of absolutely critical importance to their identities in industrial society. This is reflected in decades of research that has highlighted the ways in which men experience unemployment (see, for example, Jahoda et al., 1971/1933; Jahoda, 1982; Bostyn and Wight, 1987; Warr, 1987; Gallie et al., 1994; Nixon, 2005).



In a study based on two years of living in an ex-coal-mining community, Bostyn and Wight (1987) show how for men who have no expectation of carrying out intrinsically meaningful and rewarding work, money is key to how they understand themselves and their masculinity. Providing a 'respectable' level of consumption for themselves and their families was central to their identities. Unemployment and the loss of the wage was thus experienced as a loss of self-esteem and self-respect as the men's masculine status was so strongly tied to their ability to earn money and provide for their families. Even younger men without dependants had internalized the provider role, although money and the ability to consume were also important for this group because they were the means through which masculine identity was expressed – they enabled young men to take part in important social rituals such as going out with their mates, taking girls on dates, drinking and buying a round. Thus, as Wallace very neatly puts it, 'the loss of a wage undermines both the material and social basis of masculinity' (1987: 90). It is worth noting that orientations to work impact on the way unemployment is experienced (see Nixon, 2005). Therefore, men who prioritize gaining intrinsic meaning from work may experience unemployment as a loss of meaningful and purposive activity, as well as the loss of the wage and social status (see Jahoda, 1982; Fryer and McKenna, 1987; Nixon, 2005). Nonetheless, the importance of work for the identities of men within the industrial period, whether in terms of the wage or the intrinsic meaning it provided, is undoubted. As one craftsman suggests: 'The messages I received from my environment were that men were only important as providers, that work came first, and work was where one's true identity as a man came out and was judged' (quoted in Harris, 1995: 73).

Yet, if the importance of work, the influence of the work ethic and the prominence of the male breadwinner has defined modern industrial society, the emergence of the contemporary post-industrial or postmodern economy has been strongly associated with their decline. As we saw in the last chapter, in Britain deindustrialization and the continued growth of the service sector in recent decades has been associated with the large-scale loss of male-dominated jobs in manufacturing and generally stagnating overall levels of male employment. According to some writers, these shifts have precipitated a 'crisis of masculinity', particularly amongst low-skilled and poorly educated manual workers whose economic activity rates have plummeted in post-industrial labour markets dominated by low-level, female-dominated service work (see Mac an Ghail, 1996; O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; McDowell, 2003; Nixon, 2006, 2009). Combined with very significant increases in female employment and economic activity rates and women's increasing representation in high-level occupations (Hakim, 1996a; Walby, 1997; Crompton et al., 2007b; Scott et al., 2010), these trends have served to both challenge the reality of the male breadwinner thesis