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Abstract

The identity and meaning people obtain from their work is a central issue in contemporary sociology. There is a debate between those suggesting that we have witnessed either great rupture or continuity in the way employees engage with their jobs. This article reframes the question posed, developing a critical theoretical framework for understanding narratives of change derived from a range of theorists using concepts of nostalgia, tradition and generations. This framework is then used to read a set of work/life history interviews and autobiographical material from mainly older male workers in the UK railway industry who lament the erosion of their workplace culture and the sustainable moral order of the past. The article seeks to move beyond dismissing such accounts as simple nostalgia and instead suggests that these narratives can be understood as valuable organic critiques of industrial and social change emergent from work culture.

Keywords

attachment and loss, generations, memory, nostalgia, tradition, work identity and meaning

Introduction

There is a tension at the heart of contemporary debates about employment in North America, Europe and the UK. Put simply, some argue that work has fundamentally changed in nature over the last three decades; conversely, others claim that in the 'real world' little is different and that employment is marked more by continuity than change. These ideas are examined here by reframing the question posed, namely why are portrayals of work which suggest massive upheaval and flux so attractive, and why do they strike a chord in academic and popular commentaries? Equally, the essay seeks to explore how we might understand the lived experience of work and, in particular, interview material from an older generation of workers in the UK.¹ Do we simply dismiss their

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ideas that the past was better as nostalgia, or can value and explanatory power be found there, and if so how? Above all, the article places work experience in its historical context while being alive to the sociological richness and complexity of life. In doing so, it uses the notion of a sustainable or endurable life, by which is meant the way in which people carve out meaning and identity from their work, are socialized into and through employment and how they in turn pass on these values. What the workers interviewed here recognize is the complexity of traditional social structures which allowed them to enjoy a sustainable life. They describe an intelligible moral order of the workplace that, they feel, is gradually being lost. It is the quality of this moral order and how we might apprehend it that is the focus here. The article contributes to literatures within the sociology of work, in particular around questions of identity, as well as broader sociological ideas about loss, nostalgia and memory in the context of industrial change. It begins with a review of some of the claims made about contemporary employment. Drawing on debates about nostalgia it suggests a framework for thinking about these issues before discussing the methods and the material on which the article is based. The central part listens critically to narratives of older railways workers and their reflections on work before placing these accounts in a theoretical framework drawing on ideas around memory, nostalgia and tradition.

Work in Crisis?

Since the 1990s there has been a growing body of literature that suggests that in some shape or form employment is in crisis – structurally in the way work is organized or in the way it is experienced. Where once work was central to individuals, groups and whole classes, now it has been eroded or ‘corroded’ to such an extent that it holds little or no meaning for people. At the popular journalistic end of this spectrum were the likes of Jeremy Rifkin (1995) with his Jeremiah-like pronouncements in *The End of Work*. In his wake a number of leading sociologists and social theorists have written on work and the values that attach to it. Whereas sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s lined up to explore the way employment shaped identity, latterly debate has been marked by a series of claims which suggest the detachment of meaning from work (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 2000; Gorz, 1999; Sennett, 1998; Standing, 2009).

Catherine Casey (1995: 2), for example, states that ‘... work is declining in social primacy. Social meaning and solidarity must, eventually, be found elsewhere.’ Casey’s influential account, which drew heavily on psychological and sociological theory, was based on empirical research in a high-tech corporation that made ever-greater attempts to ‘engineer’ the subjectivities of their staff. Her conclusion was that there was little space for self or collective identity at work other than that manufactured, or designed by the firm. Others took up this theme of a loss of work identity in what is variously described as the ‘new economy’ or the ‘new capitalism’. Bauman (1998), for instance, suggested that, traditionally, economic activity shaped individual identity as well as collective social norms and values. As he notes ‘... work was the main orientation point, in reference to which all other life pursuits could be planned and ordered’ (1998: 17):

A steady, durable and continuous, logically coherent and tightly-structured working career is however no longer a widely available option. Only in relatively rare cases can a permanent identity be defined, let alone secured, through the job performed. (Bauman, 1998: 27)

Instead – so the argument goes – identity is now secured through what one *consumes* rather than what one *produces*. Employment for Bauman has become destabilized, uncertain and subject to constant change. For, as much as one might wish for certainty, it is no longer an option for the majority. Beck again reflects on the acceleration of this trend: ‘The “job for life” has disappeared’ (2000: 2), and continues:

Paid employment is becoming precarious; the foundations of the social-welfare state are collapsing; normal life-stories are breaking up into fragments ... (2000: 3)

Such views are not isolated and are echoed in the work of the late French theorist Andre Gorz (1999) and in the influential writing of American sociologist Richard Sennett, most notably in his book *The Corrosion of Character* (1998). Sennett is particularly important, as he has developed his central thesis through a number of subsequent pieces (2006, 2008). In them he suggests that the ‘new capitalism’ has accelerated to such an extent that it can no longer provide meaningful space for people to develop both as workers and as human beings. Its expectations are increasingly short term, creating a class of flexible, malleable individuals who are forced to look at employment in a highly instrumental and short-term manner. People cannot embed themselves in their jobs as they traditionally did and crucially this denies them the ability to form character, or narrative, in and through their work. Relationships between people become fugitive, and this has profound implications both for individuals and the societies in which they live (Sennett, 2008; see also Crawford, 2009).²

While this type of discussion is useful in setting up a series of questions about employment identity, it also, in some cases, provides a rather negative account of that identity in the past. Writers such as Bauman, Beck and Gorz all suggest that positive accounts of work identity from an era before the ‘new capitalism’ were always romantic myths, which attached themselves to what these theorists saw as nothing more than degraded and alienating labour. This is in contrast to the nature and content of work in the past evoked in Sennett (2008) and Crawford (2009). In the more negative reading of history of Beck, Bauman and especially Gorz, the widespread contemporary realization that work cannot underpin social identity is something to be celebrated as:

Even in the heyday of wage-based society, that work [modern work] was never a source of ‘social cohesion’ or integration, whatever we might have come to believe from its retrospective idealization. The ‘social bond’ it established between individuals was abstract and weak, though it did, admittedly, *insert* people into the process of social labour, into social relations of production, as functionally specialized cogs in an immense machine. (Gorz, 1999: 55)

Therefore to find value in that past is itself problematic and invites the charge of being nostalgic either as a worker voicing such opinions or as an academic making sense of them.

While these general narratives of crisis have a popular resonance, within and outside the academy they have not gone unchallenged (Doogan, 2001, 2009; Fevre, 2007; Strangleman, 2007). In an article that contested some of the more alarmist warnings of the end of work writers, Doogan (2001) noted that job tenure had actually increased marginally, in the UK at least. He points out the way in which such ideas have power in part as they offer convenient explanations to contemporary issues. In his later book he suggests:

... a substantial gap has emerged between many public perceptions of change in the world of work and a more objective assessment of change and continuity in the labour market and the wider economy. (2009: 5)

So what are we to make of contemporary employment and more directly the question of whether workers can find meaning and form identity from the work they do? On the one hand, we have an influential set of accounts that are united in suggesting that we are living through a watershed moment where work is no longer central to identity. Where this group is in disagreement is over the status of work identity in the past; did it sustain and build character or was it simply false consciousness? On the other hand, it is argued that little has changed and that the economic sphere is marked more by continuity than by change. Therefore, if there has been a shift in worker attachment, meaning and identity in and around work, it is again the product of a type of false consciousness, with workers, academics and media commentators talking up instability, flux and chaos. Graham Crow (2005) has written a perceptive summary of what he labels 'Sociological Endings', the continued appeal of seeing dramatic ruptures in various aspects of social life. The attraction of such narratives of change has resonance with the literature on nostalgia where it is often noted that nostalgia tells us more about the experience of contemporary life than it does about the past.

Rather than offering an interpretation based on an 'all-change' or 'no-change' dichotomy, what is suggested here is that we need to frame these accounts in a slightly different way, one that may tell us rather more about identity than either of the former positions. In making sense of these often abstract debates and the empirical material presented later, the article draws on the ideas of a number of theorists who in different ways explore issues of nostalgia and tradition, developing a more complex understanding of the narratives people offer about their working lives.

The classic sociological study of nostalgia is Fred Davis' *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979). Davis suggests a taxonomy for studying this elusive emotion, identifying three orders of nostalgia – *first order* or *simple nostalgia*; *second order* or *reflexive nostalgia*; and *third order* or *interpretive nostalgia*. The essential point to note is that almost all nostalgic reflection questions memory in a critical way. We have, therefore, to be careful not to dismiss memory as 'simply nostalgic', rather we have to be far more attentive in interpreting what that critical account of the past and present represents. In recent years there has been a welcome expansion in our sociological understanding of nostalgia (Bonnett, 2010; Boym, 2001; Strangleman, 1999). Each of these interventions builds on and develops Davis' insights about the complexity of remembrance of the past. Boym, for example, makes the distinction between a *reflective* and *restorative* nostalgia – one a

critical but passive position, the other implying a greater sense of engagement with the meaning of the past. Equally, in Bonnett (2010) and Strangleman (1999) the radical or oppositional aspects of nostalgia come to the fore – where knowledge of the past makes a dialectic intervention in debates about the present. Taken together, through these interventions we can see that nostalgia becomes a far more complex and potentially critical emotion than is usually allowed for in popular and even academic usage. Often the label ‘nostalgia’ is a pejorative one, suggestive of at best sentimental attachment and at worst falsification of history.

Other tools for trying to understand memory and nostalgia can be found in Raymond Williams’ writing, much of which explores concerns around transition, change and the ambiguity inherent in modernity. In *The Country and the City* (1973) for instance, the continual tension between the rural and the urban is apparent with nostalgic sentiment associated with the former. In particular, he reflects on the idea of a lost ‘golden age’, which is always seen as having *just* disappeared within living memory. Williams notes this is a problem of perspective, likening this constant appeal to a lost arcadia to being on a moving escalator with successive generations stepping on while casting a backwards glance to their own warmly remembered past. He stressed the importance of recognizing the continuity within accounts of the recent past, and what this tells us about the structure of feeling in those who produce it. Williams argued that this recurring appeal to a golden age could be seen as a reaction to the unfolding development of capitalism and the perceived erosion of autonomy, creativity and authenticity in people’s lives. The notion of structure of feeling is important for our purposes in terms of the purchase it offers in understanding the changing nature of ideas and their influence on successive generations. Williams talks of three forms of the structure of feeling – *emergent*, *dominant* and *residual*. In many ways this last category, residual, is obviously related to notions of remembrance and marking of a past. This residual category is one that is marginal, or is in the process of being superseded by newer forms and patterns. It is a way of seeing and being in the world that is gradually being eclipsed, but nonetheless still provides an interpretive framework for those who still value it.

John B. Thompson (1996), writing on the relationship between tradition and the self, draws a distinction between formation of individual and collective identity. Here self-identity refers to the sense of oneself as an individual situated on a certain life trajectory, while collective identity refers to notions of belonging, a sense of being part of a social group that has a history of its own, and a collective fate. Tradition shapes both individual and collective identity by providing a set of resources on which current identities are produced and reproduced. While he acknowledges that tradition is marginalized within the modern world it nonetheless continues to have significance in providing a means of making the world intelligible and by creating a feeling of belonging and attachment.

Taken together, these themes allow us to think through critically ideas of memory around occupational identity. With this set of resources in mind, this article provides a framework for reading the interview material examined below while also exploring the issues that were highlighted above. It makes sense of these debates by listening to and reading the accounts of working life given by older workers from the railway industry in the UK. It attempts to understand their perception of change and the ways in which they articulate a sense of loss. It asks questions about what if anything is being lost in the

context of labour market change. In doing so it goes beyond the rather reductive debate as currently conceived. It uses the notion of sustainability in the sense that the older workers interviewed here examine their working life in a reflective style that sees them articulate an appreciation of the subtleties of complex social processes. They recognize that these structures have allowed them to enjoy a more meaningful connection with their work, and that they fear these structures are now being eroded.

The empirical material for this article comes from a three-year research project funded by the ESRC.³ The aim of the project was to test the ideas of some of the so called 'end of work' theorists, who suggested that employment was no longer a significant site of meaning and identity formation for contemporary workers (see Strangleman, 2007). In contrast, this project sought to examine how people in a range of jobs felt about their work, what it meant to them and how they felt it had changed. Three occupations were selected – teachers, bank employees and railway workers.⁴ The study used a mixture of qualitative methods including oral histories, semi-structured interviews, archive material, auto/biographic material as well as a range of visual approaches. In each of the three sectors, actors were interviewed across three generations: early or relatively new entrants, 18–35; mid career workers, those between their late thirties and fifties; and a final group of retired workers. In all, 110 interviews were carried out with both men and women across these sectors in the UK. In addition to these interviews an older cohort of workers were accessed through auto/biographical material. The objective was to try to access ideas about what work meant to people now and in the past and to understand how these identities were manifested in action and in verbal accounts of their lives. It achieved this by listening carefully to the ways in which individuals talked about their working life; their socialization; how employment had changed for them over time; how they attached or detached themselves from work; and what they felt about other younger or older colleagues at various stages in their careers. Interviews were open-ended semi-structured in nature, lasting from 90 minutes to over three hours, and framed through the natural history of their career (Dex, 1991). The interviews were fully transcribed and coded. Rather than viewing these accounts as representing a simple 'truth' about a working life, they were seen as offering access to a set of understandings about the world. This approach was heavily influenced by much of the current thinking about oral history techniques exemplified in the writing of Portelli (2006), where what is valued is both the content and the structure of what is being said. Interviews, therefore, take on the role of what Plumber (2005) has described as 'documents of life'. This article draws on anonymized interview material as well as published autobiographical material from the railway industry. The published autobiographical accounts are used to supplement interviews, offering slightly different ways of seeing a working life (Strangleman, 2005, 2011). Most, though not all, of the material reported on here is from male workers in the industry and therefore reflects a particular gendered pattern and experience of socialization.⁵

Work Identity on the Railway

In the section that follows the article examines identity through some of the major themes emerging in interviews when railway employees discussed their work and what it meant to them. It focuses on ideas of change and loss to highlight the strategies people adopt in

trying to carve out a sustainable life, or more precisely on reflection what they recognize are social structures which have facilitated a sustainable or endurable work life.

What then were the values that had helped shape retired and older interviewees when they had begun their own working life? This group started work during the 1950s and 1960s, and while this is often portrayed as an era of radical change it was still powerfully marked by an older legacy of traditional assumptions and attitudes. What appears time and again in these narratives is the legacy of the war and the age and seniority of those who trained the interviewees. This experience was often seen as a positive one marked by a clear sense of discipline and structure for younger workers who may have begun their working life at 15 or 16. As Ralf explains:

There was a whole load of guys with 1946/47 seniority on the railways, who came out of the army, came out of the services at the end of the war, onto the railway, and it was an inbuilt discipline. You had to have discipline in the services and those people brought discipline with them. Ways to, the way to behave, how to behave, how to treat people, which we haven't got this day, this day and age ... (Ralf, retired signalman)

This reminds us of Mannheim's point in his essay 'The Problem of Generations' where he notes different generations do not simply succeed one another but have co-existence, and this is more than:

... mere chronological significance. The same dominant influences deriving from the prevailing intellectual, social, and political circumstances are experienced by contemporary individuals, both in their early, formative, and in their later years. (1997: 27)

The relationship between workers of differing generations is complex with shared experiences understood and interpreted sometimes differently, and sometimes in a similar way.⁶

We return to questions of decline later, but for now it is worth reflecting on this notion of discipline, which is very common in interviews, particularly with railway workers and can be seen directly as well as in more nuanced accounts of occupational culture. For young men working in the environment of a signal box, discipline was enforced and reinforced through the routine pattern of daily shift work. Junior staff worked late and early turns with a working day beginning at 6am and ending by 10pm, depending on the shift. Apart from the discipline of an early rise, often just after 4am, once in the box the boys would have to settle down to a regular set of duties including writing out booking sheets, keeping the train register and a wider variety of cleaning duties. Discipline can be thought of in terms of the rhythms of the working day, week or year. In his seminal work, Baldamus (1961) attempts to conceptualize *efficiency* and *effort*. He writes of inurement, the getting used to hard work and coping with it. In this model, repetitiveness can be thought of as 'traction' (as opposed to tedium) – the effort spent helps to pull the worker through their shift. The result is a sense of contentment rather than weariness and this helps in understanding the process of identification with one's work.

Often a close bond would develop between the signal workers and their juniors and many talk of older signalmen being significant influences on their lives. As Ralf explained, he thought of his older colleagues as 'father figures', '... because they taught

us how to behave as railwaymen ...' (Ralf, retired signalman). What is being described here is a process by which workers become embedded in their work and the discipline is less enacted by force than out of a structure of respect. There is a wonderful account in the autobiography of retired railway worker Roy Bradshaw where he describes what workplace discipline meant for him:

At fifteen and a half years of age, I was quickly to learn the meaning of maturity and manhood, for here I was a lone teenager thrown into a world of adult working men, without a single person of my own age group for companionship or consolation. (1993: 25)

Bradshaw also describes the process of this socialization. Here he discusses being taught the role of booking lad during the 1940s:

By the eighth day that hitherto impenetrable barrier had been conquered and Ted Cox's face broke down into a satisfied smile. With a pat on the back he announced 'You'll make it lad. Now we'll show you how to write. Your script is appalling.' ... Up to then, I had secretly feared him; now I felt a conversion to almost hero worship. (1993: 21)

This illustrates the way social structures play on the individual and the way that discipline helps to form character and attachment. Many narratives of railway work pick up on this sense of wanting to *be* and to *become* railwaymen; this kind of training represents both a socialization into a junior role and anticipatory socialization into an adult one. While the 'almost hero worship' of Bradshaw's autobiography may seem unusual, it speaks to a regular respect for a set of values and identities around work and occupational cultures. The older workers in some ways are embedded in and embody the railway and therefore obtain the respect of younger workers. As another retired worker put it, talking about a very experienced manager who qualified him at his first signal box, '... these were people who'd had a whole career on the Underground. They knew everything and you couldn't pull the wool over their eyes ...' (Fred, retired signalman). This respect was often mutual between workers and their supervisors and managers who themselves had worked their way up through the grades. This mutual respect is often encoded in elaborate narratives about work; here Phil relates being taken into his first signal box:

I was sent, on the following Monday, to Hainault to the signal box ... and I got duly got taken up to the signal box by the station manager, master, as they was then, and again the snow was still up to my knees, the drift, because Hainault is very high, the station's very high from the surrounding area, so all the snow just blew against the cable runs and that and I walked into this ... Oh, I remember it, first of all. The stationmaster, as high as he was, knocked on the door and asked for permission to enter. And when he was beckoned in, we came in, wiped our feet, went in there, and as soon as I walked in ... It was like walking through that door into a room like this and it was just full of lights, diagrams, levers and I was smitten immediately. It was like falling in love at first sight. (Phil, signal operator)

This passage highlights both the station manager and the technically lower grade signalman as worthy of mutual respect and that this was reinforced by the action of the

manager in his dealings with the apprentice and the signalman. There was a respect for the formal office of the employee (in this case signalman), for the person occupying that office (the signalman himself) and for the space in which that worker operates (the signal box). Fundamentally, what seems to have been at the root of the respect was the sense in which people knew their job – they were both the embodiment of, and embedded in, their work. Authority, in other words, was legitimized around notions of qualification, office and experience. One interviewee talked at length about his own early experience of working to high standards and the way these were reinforced:

... as I say, there were some that were more stricter than others but they ... generally they were very experienced people on the railways and it didn't matter what went wrong, not like today. You know, they *knew* what you did; you *knew* what they did and, you know, everything was done [correctly]. (Ernie, signalman)

What is being described in many of these accounts is a relatively stable workplace culture that is intelligible to both its established members and those being socialized into it. What is not being claimed here either by the author, or, I think, the interviewees is that this was a static or indeed perfect world. Rather, that relative stability and order gave the workplace a predictability that allowed a certain moral order to emerge and be reproduced. Also very clear in the interviews is the way in which such a moral order allows the space for the development of what Sennett (1998) labels 'character'. This stability enables the creation of a critical autonomous space for workers which has a number of implications, some of which are explored below. These issues have recently received attention within and beyond the sociology of work through the related concepts of dignity, respect and morality (Hodson, 2001; Lamont, 2000; Sayer, 2005). Clearly these are themes that reflect a Durkheimian perspective as set out in *The Division of Labour*, or the more neglected work *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (Durkheim, 1964[1893], 1992). In the latter particularly, Durkheim tries to understand the basis for autonomous moral regulation within work groups. As Durkheim says, professional ethics and morals exist outside 'the common consciousness' and he adds:

It is this very fact which is a pointer to the fundamental condition without which no professional ethics can exist. A system of morals is always the affair of a group and can operate only if this group protects them by its authority. (1992: 6)

While moral order is often portrayed as a conservative constraining structure, one can read this in a far more progressive and radical light insofar as moral regulation is only accepted as having force over the group if it is the product of and emergent from the group itself. One of the features of work identity is the sense in which it is an ongoing project. It takes time for people to feel part of their work and a careful attentiveness to the voices and writing of older workers allows us access to this process. What develops through this process is a moral ownership and responsibility for their work. Change and management reform is often felt as a personal insult because it is interpreted as an affront, or disrespect to an established culture with its own moral order (Strangleman, 2004).

What is also clear is that while there is a common feeling of occupational culture amongst older and retired workers there is a collective sense that this is not necessarily

shared by a younger generation of new workers. In fact, many of the interviewees critically juxtaposed their own sense of embeddedness against the absence of this feeling in younger workers. Here are some examples from the interviews:

... it's not long before they say to you, 'well how long have you worked on this job', so when you say forty-odd years, they're absolutely astounded, and again, you see, I think it's the culture now that, you know, people don't belong to jobs any more. They're just sort of ships sort of passing in the night and that's expected of them. I don't think they want allegiances in the same sense that we used to be encouraged. (Male train guard)

The thing people may not understand, why do people stay forty-seven years in a job; thirty odd years in a job. You'll never see that in these youngsters' lifetime. They'll never see it. They live in a disposable world. We joined a company, a railway company; British Rail became your family. They were an extension of your family; you hurt one, you hurt them all. And it's still in the old, middle and older end today. (Female train guard)

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of these types of accounts of the workplace and in many ways they do buttress, superficially at least, the type of claims about modern work being devoid of meaning and identity. But this would be an oversimplistic reading; the reality is always messier and more complex. This can be seen in the interview with Ernie, a signaller in his fifties. His narrative is peppered with accounts of work now as compared to the past. He talked at length about the professionalism and pride he experienced in those who trained him and the regret that this seemed to be an era now passed. He regretted a loss of a moral link between generations. Ernie was in a fascinating position and one that troubled him. While he lamented a lack of commitment and professionalism in the newer recruits, he conceded that there were some 'good ones' who did care. He also understood, and I think at times almost applauded, the fact that the majority of younger workers did not seem to be engaged with the job. Ernie was pulled between a long-ingrained sense of pride and a daily frustration with management who he related did not 'know the job'. Thus Ernie's resentment was in part based on the contradiction that it was his professionalism that was masking the mistakes of others – he was caught between wanting to expose the reality of what management had created while simultaneously wanting to be professional, to live up to an older ideal.

This feeling of a lost work ethic in new members of the occupation was widespread and was illustrated in a number of ways. Some talked of the lack of mess room political banter, or general industrial discussion; lamenting the rise of mobile phones and mess room television. A common theme was the idea that new recruits were not *interested* in the railways. Here Phil discusses the problem:

We're also the last interested people ... It is now because those that work in [the control room he works in] there now have now got no interest in the job whatsoever. It's only money. They come in, do what they have to do and go home. There's nothing wrong in that but there's no incentive to learn. They don't want to learn. If there was somebody ... If you say, oh, I'll tell you how this works ... Oh, it's working. Out comes the newspaper and the trains are all going up and down. They're not interested. (Phil, senior signal operator)

While widespread among older workers, this view was shared in younger workers in their thirties. Jim, for example, a signal operator in his late thirties, noted:

It's, how can I explain, they're not really interested in doing the job, it's the money to them ... there doesn't seem to be a sort of pride in the job any more. Me, myself, I make a cock-up, I feel foolish, I thought, bloody hell Jim, 22 years on the job and you make a mistake like that. (Jim, signal operator)

Interestingly, what counts as a 'real' worker subtly shifts between generations of workers with a man in his thirties more readily identifying with older and retired staff in their fifties and sixties than with those perhaps less than a decade younger than himself.⁷ But what of the experience of the even younger workers themselves; this was the group most difficult to contact across the three occupations, which may tell us something about how important this group consider occupational identity. For those that were interviewed, work and the way in which they were attached to it did seem to be distinct from the accounts of older interviewees. Some of these issues can be explored through an interview with a man in his late twenties who had already been on the London Underground for eight years.⁸ What was so fascinating was just how different his worldview of work was. Jason's father had worked on the Underground for most of his life but had retired some time before. Where many of the other interviewees talked fondly about the 'railway family', Jason's narrative was marked by a far more negative portrayal, describing his introduction to depot life as:

... listening to old farts waffle on about how much they'd seen and what they've done and who they didn't like and who they did like ... (Jason, technician)

Jason talked at length about what he took to be the nostalgic aspects to many of his older colleagues' accounts of work. Jason's narrative was, by contrast, a highly personal and individualized one, and passages read in isolation would lead the casual reader to think that he represented a casebook study of the type of worker now who derives little or no meaning from their work. Where older workers talk in collective terms, their reflections contextualized in terms of workmates, Jason reads himself as isolated and self-contained. But it would be wrong to place Jason so neatly in such a box for his story is also leavened by long passages where he discussed his commitment to public service and a pride in doing his job well. This tension is also apparent when we talked about political activity and trade unionism. Here Jason described his lack of interest in the tradition of trade unionism but felt morally that he should be taking some kind of role within the union. He felt a responsibility to be involved in organizing other workers.

Discussion: Nostalgia and Change, Beyond the 'End of Work'?

All of the narratives about work from the material presented here could be read as supporting the type of declinist accounts which were explored earlier. There is a general sense that the older interviewees feel that they are the last generation to really know what

railway work was, that there are no characters any more and that, further, there is a fundamental lack of commitment among younger workers. This is reinforced by evidence from the younger generation who may be seen as taking an instrumental and pragmatic approach to employment, one where identity is no longer bound up with work – a neo-instrumental orientation. We could also dismiss the accounts of the older generation as being ‘simply nostalgic’, their narratives sometimes romantic, sometimes bitter reflections on a working life. This strand of thinking would certainly support those writers who argue if not for ‘no-change’ then for a greater sense of continuity in employment than in the past.

We have a tension in our discussion of older workers’ perspectives between a strong narrative of decline and loss and the very real problem that such tropes can be seen to recur on a regular basis. Indeed, Williams (1973) was able to demonstrate the appeal to a golden age stretching back centuries. How does one explain this tension, or at least make sense of it? There are several distinct but complementary ways in which we could look at this problem using the ideas discussed earlier. Taking Williams’ account first we could see narratives of decline as telling us about a certain structure of feeling which people experience at a certain stage of their lives. Here it is important to add to this discussion the literature on nostalgia, where Davis and others often make the point that nostalgia almost always tells us about the present condition of the person rather than the past, which superficially at least is the object of discussion. People look back on the past as settled, fixed, rounded, and intelligible and compare that to the incomplete, flux, chaotic, unstable now. The past makes sense, even though we may not have liked every aspect of it. So one could read accounts of memory which stress loss as a lament for the intelligibility or fixity of the past in the present, and in this sense they are more akin to passive reflections of the past – in Boym and Davis’ terms, reflective nostalgia.

In another register these accounts can be read as representing a residual structure of feeling; what is being lamented is the very process of a set of values being rendered residual. The actor’s lamentation is the explicit recognition of the marginalization of their own set of ideas, beliefs and norms that have helped to shape their identity and the way in which they live their lives. Their sense of loss is part mourning for the eclipse of their own structure of feeling and the sense that it now provides no, or at least little, value for subsequent generations. What is captured here is the content of that residual structure of feeling, recognizing differences across age, place and occupation. Nonetheless, it is possible to detect within an older group of workers a general sense of commonality, of attachment to work in the past as being valued. This is manifest in narratives in many ways but illustrates the way workers felt themselves in the past to be embedded within their work and that this produced a set of bonds and ties to a wider community.

There are another set of values around worth, value and respect whereby workers felt that less recognition was being offered to them now as compared to the past. This was manifest in many different ways but it is usually associated with management action or inaction and especially around the active devaluing of a traditional workplace culture. Connected to this was the impression of younger workers as not valuing a traditional culture. This has two aspects. First, there is the direct issue that younger workers were not placing importance on a set of norms and values that had sustained an older workplace culture. But second, and clearly related to this first point, was the idea that this next

generation was going to miss out on a set of resources that still had value in a changing world. This echoes Thompson's point that traditions still have relevance in the modern world but had to be re-embedded within new circumstances. To return to the theorization of nostalgia we could read older workers' accounts as a more active intervention – Boym's restorative nostalgia, or Davis' critical interpretive nostalgia.

What the older generation of workers were reflecting on then was the erosion of a set of values and norms which had helped to humanize work, and had helped them build and sustain a working life both individually and collectively. Their concern with the younger generation was in part that the scope for enjoying a sustainable life in terms of work was being eroded, that there was a diminution in the collective capacity to humanize work. To use Durkheim's ideas, there was recognition of the prerequisites for a sustainable moral order at work. Their evocation of a better past was not therefore simple nostalgia, or false consciousness, but rather a more critical attempt to understand what was happening to their work now. For the younger workers there was equally a sense that the model offered by traditional values was no longer attractive, or rather that it failed to connect with the ways in which they wanted or had to live their lives.

Conclusion

For younger workers then the idea of a sustainable life in the context of work now is perhaps more problematic than for their older colleagues. However, there is also a sense that they have to be the ones that decide for themselves what counts as a sustainable life – what is to be their moral code. The model being offered by an older generation seems to offer at best only a partial map for life in the 'new capitalism'; just as older workers made a sustainable life after the Second World War in the context of the post-war welfare state, so too younger workers make sense of their world using different values and moral orders. In doing so they throw down a challenge and a set of questions about the changing nature of occupational identity and work itself. Durkheim was at pains to point out that a sustainable moral order within work groups is predicated on the autonomy of that group and cannot be imposed from outside.

The article started by placing ideas of work identity and industrial change into the context of dichotomous accounts of the nature of employment – all change verses little or no change. This article has tried to avoid either apocalyptic sweeping generalizations or neglecting the recurring accounts within the narratives of older workers that voice concern about the changing nature of work. The task for sociology here is to understand what lies behind these narratives of decline and not to dismiss them as either nostalgic false consciousness or as private troubles which statistics do not recognize as public issues. The framework suggested here, drawing on classical sociology and a more recent set of literature on nostalgia, aims to think more critically about the changing nature of work and how that process is experienced.

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Notes

- 1 The majority of the workers quoted here are in their fifties and sixties, with another in their late thirties. I have drawn on one worker in his twenties to act as an illustrative critical foil to the older workers. This has been done to allow a more complex understanding of the older workers' accounts. It is the author's intention to focus on the younger worker cohort in further papers in the future.
- 2 While the empirical material on which this article based is UK centred, the debates with which it engages reflect concerns across the developed economies of Europe and North America.
- 3 'Does Work Still Shape Social Identity?', RES-148-25-0038.
- 4 Railway workers have been selected here as the material from this group was very rich and could be paired with autobiographies from the industry. The other occupations exhibited similar themes although in a less pronounced way.
- 5 There are a couple of things to note here. While acknowledging fully that this article is largely concerned with male-dominated workplaces, the females interviewed within this age group often talked in similar ways about railway culture. While not uncritically idealizing masculine workplace culture, this article echoes some of the positive aspects of masculine socialization found by Faludi (1999).
- 6 In addition I am making use here of Vincent's (1995) conceptual distinction between age, generation, historical period and life course.
- 7 This is a perfect example of Mannheim's point about the co-presence of generations and the transmission of ideas from one generation to another, and how it is perceived to have failed in the current context.
- 8 See Note 1.

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