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"The Labour Force" is an Ideological Structure: A Guiding Note to the Labour Economists[1]

Lorna R. Marsden
University of Toronto

Labour market economists have developed a variety of ways of measuring the working population in Canada including participation rates, employment and unemployment rates and refinements by age and sex on those. In addition, statistics are available to describe the occupational and industrial distribution of the working population.

Labour market economists would be the first to declare that there are weaknesses inherent in their measures of the Canadian working population. Not only are there intrinsic problems of measurement of large populations and problems of estimation, but the continually changing nature of the labour force makes it difficult to capture the subtle variations in the labour force while retaining comparability over time.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that there has been a rather fundamental error in the basic conceptualization of the Canadian labour force which has obscured some of the main economic and sociological issues we face. In what follows, a proper definition of the working population will be suggested. The definition of terms and the precise numbers are difficult since the labour force statistics have been created according to a limited conception in the first place. If the reader will take these as approximations, however, and concentrate on the conceptual issues at hand, this paper will have served its purpose.

At the present time in Canada there are about 18 million people considered to be of working age, that is, over the age of 15 years (Statistics Canada, 1978). We will assume that about 95 per cent of those people suffer from no handicapped sufficiently severe to make them totally dependent upon others. This gives about 17,200,000 people in our working age population.

Labour Force Activity

As we all know, not all those of working age are in the labour force or working, in the true sense of the word, in Canada. In fact, there are two main categories of workers in our society. The majority of people fall into the category

which we will call "main workers". In the category of main workers fall approximately 11 million people or 60 per cent of the working age population.

It is this group of people which contributes most substantially to the society in the true productive sense. They contribute both through the production of goods and services in the traditional way measured by economists, and fulfil the sociological definition of work "producing something of value for others" (Hall, 1975). The characteristics of this group of people set them apart from secondary workers in the society. The contribution to the Canadian economy of secondary workers is far less than that of the main workers although they are of considerable social and political significance. We will describe first the characteristics of main workers and then examine the characteristics of secondary workers.

A main worker is, by definition, over the age of 14. This person can be said to make an economic contribution which is recorded in two gross measures—GNP (gross national product) and FNP (future national product). The main Canadian worker spends an average of approximately 70 hours a week (often more) at work. Although both sexes can be found in the main worker category, by far the largest proportion of main workers is female and this ratio is increasing.

Whether it is because of the amount of time spent in main working activity or whether it is for reasons of tradition or custom, main workers tend to be found less in those activities associated with the overall decision-making of the society such as politics and management. It may be that Canadian society bears some cultural relationship to that described by Margaret Mead in her famous study *Male and Female*. She describes a society (Tchambuli) in which the main workers till the fields and look after the children and do all the cooking and work while the others sit in huts by the lake gossiping and making deals and "running" the society (Mead, 1949 & 1972).

The vast majority of main workers are married (almost 80 per cent) although any worker with a dependent child may be said to be a main worker whether married or not. In occupational terms, the main workers are concentrated in the service industries and in some professions in health and education. In 1971, 31 per cent of main workers were in clerical occupations in Canada and 14 per cent were in service occupations. In terms of industrial sectors, approximately 15 per cent were in manufacturing, 17 per cent in trade, and 38 per cent in community-personal services.

Partly because main workers contribute to a remunerated form of work (GNP) and as well contribute to an unremunerated form of work (through FNP) the average direct wage for main workers tends to be lower than that of secondary workers, approximately 60 per cent of that of secondary workers. This, too, is part of the cultural tradition and may be viewed in a speculative way as a form of compensation for the relative uselessness of secondary workers in the society. (Others, however, view the higher average wage of secondary workers as a means of social control to prevent their rebellion against their lack of productive importance.) Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the main worker earns on average less than the secondary worker but contributes on average 40 per cent more to the economic well-being of the society.

The Work Life of the Main Worker

The typical main worker enters main work after the completion of his/her education and, throughout life until death, combines main and secondary work sometimes exclusively in

one or the other but always, potentially, in both. The worker typically begins as a secondary worker only, perhaps as a secretary, teacher or skilled worker. Shortly after, at marriage or co-habitation, this person becomes a main worker contributing both in secondary labour for about 40 hours a week and in the domestic and community sphere about 30 or more hours per week. These work responsibilities are often not at all of the same nature and require the acquisition of entirely separate sets of skills. Perhaps the most important contribution of the main worker's life is the preparation of the next generation of workers. This used to be considered main work on its own but increasingly, largely because of the demand for secondary work and the inability of secondary workers to meet demand and increase their productivity, main workers are also picking up the load of secondary labour. The typical main worker, however, (and this is one of the chief distinguishing features between main and secondary workers) has a clear set of priorities when it comes to contribution to the society and concentrates for several years when children are young on their proper socialization to our society. The main worker always maintains responsibility for food care, basic hygiene and other necessities. The nature of this work (which may be done by either sex but is customarily done by women) is highly specialized and crucial work for which no one has ever been able to develop a proper valuation scale.

Unlike the secondary workers, main workers are the only fully independent people in Canadian society contributing both to the creation and maintenance of their future as well as to the goods and services which are largely redistributed through markets. While society might well continue without secondary work (and especially without secondary workers) it could not continue without main workers who work in both the main and secondary markets.

The Secondary Worker

Let us turn now to a description of secondary workers and their role in society. A not insignificant proportion of the work activity is performed by this other 40 per cent of the population. These workers have some peculiar characteristics which make their work of less value to the Canadian economy although highly important in their own eyes. There are distinctions to be made among secondary workers. First, secondary *work* (defined as work for a direct wage) is carried out by both main workers and secondary workers. Secondary workers are those who earn only a direct wage and do not contribute value to others in the main work market. In general terms one might describe these workers as parasitic since both before and after their secondary work activity the largest proportion are incapable of making a contribution to the economy. The term parasitic will be used here to refer to this group.

Characteristically, although this is a slowly declining trend, these workers are unable to manage main work activity and are confined to secondary work activity. Through historical experience they are excluded from the main work child-rearing activities. Their work is confined to an average of 8 hours per day or a mean of 40 hours per week and generates approximately two-thirds of GNP. To the extent that their labour helps to produce the next generation they contribute to FNP (about 5 per cent), but it is well understood that the next generation could be reproduced with the help of only approximately one twentieth of the available parasitic workers.

Their labour force activities are characteristically different from those of the main group of workers. Entering secondary labour

at the average age of 19, these workers carry out secondary labour with apparent indifference to the main work activity throughout their lives until the average age of 65 when they stop working altogether and become totally parasitic (with individual exceptions of course). Because of their lack of integration into main work activities and community life in general, they are more susceptible to certain diseases such as heart disease, cancer, hypertension and related conditions which mean that they often lose years of even their secondary labour for society for health reasons. These are known as "stress related". The stress arises from the attempt to supress conciousness of their parasitic status.

Because of the public fear of massive popular uprisings from this group, governments tend to provide them with generous benefits including pensions, sickness and health benefits, tax breaks and incentive plans. This maintains their commitment to the secondary labour force throughout their adult life and prevents their militance in old age. Many attempts have been made both by governments and by the main work force to train them in the elementary skills of main work activity so as to make them less of a drain on the society, but it has been discovered that the vast majority are untrainable.

Fortunately for the economic future of Canada, main workers are available in larger numbers than secondary parasitic workers. However, this marginal edge for fully productive workers is not large. Recent years have shown high rates of parasitic worker unemployment, but current worker forecasts show a very high demand beginning to emerge for secondary and parasitic workers.

When insufficient secondary labour is available, major social problems arise. Main workers are forced to add secondary labour to their activities in large numbers and the secondary labour force often resorts to drinking, dependency and violence because of their inability to integrate into main work activity or community life.

Social Problems Associated with Secondary Workers

It is always difficult for a society to absorb and integrate a group of people who are unable or unwilling to participate fully in the community life. First, their contribution is only partial, and, second, they remain as a constant reminder of the unsuccessful socialization of a large segment of the population and a drain on the economy.

In Canada, many social programmes have been devised to control and maintain these people. Many of these programmes have become established in law. First, these parasitic workers have not been allowed to concentrate in one part of the country, nor, with some exceptions, at one place in the community. (Where they are concentrated in the community, as in camps for the armed forces, they are under strict discipline, training and guards. The same is true for prisons, some private clubs and any other places where they tend to congregate).

Indeed, the law requires that a main worker takes on as part of her adult responsibilities the care of a parasitic worker in the custom of marriage. Increasingly, main workers are avoiding this social responsibility which interferes considerably with their main and secondary work activities. Refusal on the part of main workers to undertake this added burden has been shown to lead to a higher rate of suicide and early death among secondary workers. The consequences for the parasitic workers in the form of malnutrition, depression, drug and alchohol dependency are

not well known but will unquestionably become a major social problem in future years.

It is not only social programmes and economic issues that one should be concerned about in this matter of course. One has also to be conscious of the issues of human dignity. Minority group defenses, so well described by social theorists, in this case involve the parasitic secondary workers referring to themselves often as "breadwinners", a term which envokes an old and venerated society with an entirely different form of production. But, it generates respect. In fact, it is not clear whether the respect accorded to these parasitic workers is the same sort that is accorded generally to the crippled or handicapped, or whether it is because these workers tend to form relationships with other workers slightly younger than themselves to assert age authority.

Ideological systems are maintained by specialized occupations and here, too, a group of workers has developed to lend substance to the claims of the ideology. Just as religions have priests, or their equivalents, and other religious workers to maintain and develop the ideas and tend to the flock, parasitic workers have economists. These workers, like priests, study long and hard to develop their skills and knowledge. They fill their eight hour days "massaging" numbers with the aid of computers and embroidering "models" to rationa-

lize the importance of secondary work and workers. One of the more extravagant of these is the so-called "labour-leisure" model. It is believed that Jonathan Swift described it in one of his early works. This model would have one believe that main workers "choose leisure" at home with small unsocialized workers over "labour" in the secondary labour force. Of course, common sense tells us that it is quite the other way around, but economists by cloistering themselves inside such ivory towers as universities and the Economic Council of Canada, and by charging a very great deal for their services, have convinced policy makers that they have the truth. Just as the religious eschew carnal relations, so economists are, in their own fashion, chaste. They live unsullied by any observation of human social behaviour. From the most rabid sect (which believes that all human production can be carried out in the secondary work sector leaving plenty of time for revolution) to the most bewildering sect (which posits a curious idea called "free markets" to which they pray incessantly) all are convinced that their food and clean socks arrive out of thin air and that children can be modelled by computer. They have large followings amongst the most powerful in the land and dollars, people and social values are offered up on their alters daily.

While programmes such as marriage and official ideology are traditional ways of maintaining control of these workers, the most significant for the economy has been the public expenditure in Parasitic Pacifiers—an enormously expensive programme for the country in terms of foregone taxes and earnings as well as direct expenditures. Indeed these programmes prevent the most efficient and effective progress of main work activity. While it is clear that every parasitic worker should have a second job in order to prevent social disorder, increasingly main workers are questioning the incentive and pacifying programmes attached to these secondary jobs. Major tax write-offs for "executive travel and expenses;" expensive training programmes; community facilities designed to amuse and consume the time of these parasitic workers such as restaurants, hotels and amusement centres called "convention centres" and "sports clubs." Increasingly main workers are having to spend their time overseeing and administrating these places. The expectations of the secondary workers are rising more rapidly than the nation can afford, contributing heavily to inflation in wage demands and benefits.

Perhaps more pernicious is that the secondary workers have banded together (albeit only inside the structure of their secondary jobs so that no real threat to the society is presented) and built up a large sector best described by Franz Kafka as "the castle" but which we will call "bureaucracy." This bureaucracy creates, for its own amusement, a description of the outcome of the secondary labour. Rather like a complex game of monopoly, rules are created and adhered to which determine how counts are made and who may move where and when.

Recently, however, adding to the public expenditures but devoted entirely to these games, new offices have been established such as that of the Auditor-General, and publication of the results of these games in the most minute detail, has begun. Since there are major categories of secondary workers who are prevented from playing in the same game as others, new demands for freedom of information have succeeded in increasing the size of the bureaucracy.

Having created a larger bureaucracy, the secondary parasitic workers are unable to mount a sufficient number of workers or machines to cope with their self-created demands

and have had increasingly to call upon the services of the main workers. Both the main worker activity, which is crucial to the next generation and the maintenance of the present generation, and the secondary worker activity which creates goods essential for survival, diminish as workers are drawn into the games sectors. This is having seriously deleterious effects not only on our own economy, but that of developing countries who must pay more hard currency for primary and industrial goods while being unable to export their surplus population. (It should be noted here that the main workers in developing countries are, for the most part, more efficient at main work activity, including increasing the size of the population, since their attention and energies are not drained off in support of secondary activities and parastic workers).

Conclusions

It becomes apparent that a proper analysis of the work activities of Canadian society would have the effect of changing social and economic programmes to attempt to stem the rising tide of inefficiency as a result of growing dominance of secondary workers.

It is suggested that the creation of a sensible index of workers and their relative contribution to the economic well-being of the country would result in a more equitable sharing of work and rewards. It would also enable the governments to cut back on forms of

extravagant subsidies such as executive write-offs, conference fundings, amusement parks and prisons, alcohol rehabilitation programmes and other forms of social control. Instead, the use of funds to integrate secondary parasitic workers into the community and main work activities would enable the government to reduce the various forms of social control and spread the main work activity so that both main workers and secondary workers could participate in main and secondary work activity.

It should be noted here that some societies have made an attempt to do this. Sweden, for example, has through its employment and family policies taken the position that all workers should be both main and secondary workers. Swedish commentators note, however, that the vast majority of men prefer to remain in the shelter of secondary work activity and thus remain parasitic workers despite legislative and financial inducements to do otherwise.

It is clear therefore, that the current situation is serious and that change will need to go well beyond the modest proposal for conceptual change presented here.

NOTES

1. Dorothy Smith's seminal paper, "Ideological Structures and How Women Are Excluded," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 12 (4) Nov. 1975, played no small part in causing the scales to drop from the eyes of the author.

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