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A View From Future: The Job-Centre

Danny Dorling



A View From the Future

By Francisco Galarraga
Illustration by Danny Dorling

“Why are you working so much?” The volunteer in the job-center asked me. Do you need something to calm you down, something for your nerves? You’re working too much; you need to slowdown, take more time off. Go out of the city for a month, travel slowly for a year, let someone else take the strain – don’t you know that there isn’t enough work to go round?”

The volunteer meant well. And the job-center was less intimidating than workaholics-anonymous. I knew I should do less paid work; I should get out more and play more. Like normal people do. But I was strangely addicted to repetitive tasks. I wasn’t doing it for the money. Earn twice as much as normal and all your earnings are taxed. That works well for most people, but not for the few of us who find it hardest to kick the work habit.

A century ago it had been so different. Most people worked for too hard then. They made things that people did not really need, things they quickly threw away. High rubber tips were created, and jobs recycling that rubbish. People were even paid to count all this economic activity and to try to increase it – super-heroes-spreaders. Other people counted and managed these people. Others had to advertise the things that were not wanted, to target the garbage. Everything had to be audited, contracted, and controlled.

We had more food than we could eat and three meals a day. Our homes filled up with stuff. We hired storage units for everything we bought, wanted to keep but could not use. There were programs on TV encouraging makers-to-maker your kitchen, yourself, your life. Plastic surgery and cosmetic dentistry boomed. People had their hair cut and beards trimmed every week, their nails painted, their ear-lobes and the hair on their psyche analyzed and their neurones nurtured by a service industry of pampering and grooming. People liked to look fancy and there was always some fancy item to buy.

Money circulated rapidly around the globe. Debt rose, so that was the only way assets could be realized. What was your fortune really worth if you could not use your millions to command the time and labour of others? How could they be persuaded to work for you unless you could convince them that they were somehow in your debt? We gave children a debt as birth. We told them that this was the money they owed for the hospitals we had built for them, the schools and universities they would go to. The homes they would live in.

But the debt grew and grew as the money moved faster and faster until that day that one day when the confidence trick failed to work. People had freeness the day, the day of default. Debt, along with assets, had become an inheritance. And just as a personal trainer in the evening got a commission or they would soon cease to be assets, so too did debt. The default were heard. They wanted you from your home if you did not pay both your rent and the attachment to earning applied to ‘service’ your debt. They took away your freedom to move when they took your travel pass, your freedom to suit the work when they shut down your internet connection, and your freedom to sell your labour when they imprisoned you. They worked with economists, psychiatrists and cognitive behaviour specialists to re-educate you. Get to work therapy was introduced for those called workaholics.

Household budgeting lessons became mandatory for serial shoppers who had amassed too many debt points. The asset rich lectured the debt-burdened on how, if only they survived just that little bit more, they could soon be free of their debt. They started a national lottery to offer that one last chance of hope. For a few years the worked, the debts and assets grew, the numbers in employment grew, there were soon far more jobs than people (as so many had two and then three

jobs). The politicians declared all this as success. They had to as they relied on the asset holders for their funding.

The job-centres were privatized, the tax authorities were privatized, and the schools, universities and hospitals were privatized. The prisons were privatized. All the common land was sold to the highest bidder and what was left of the state rented what little it needed, which was less and less each year. Civil servants worked from their rented homes. The redeveloped parliament was privately financed and political parties became sponsored by companies. Members of parliament wore branded ties, dresses and suits. But even though everyone was working productively well, people were doing less and less of any real use. So they needed to work longer and longer hours and retirement was ended.

There was no time to bring up children. Childcare was privatized. Babies were taken to nurseries in their first few months. Money changed hands. Jobs were created. Those too frail to work were housed in private care homes. The larger a welfare pensioner could be kept alive, the greater the profit of the care home, the more the home’s landlord could charge in rent, and the assets of the investment grew as the debt of the elderly rose – debt to be passed on and down to shantying generation beneath.

People could not afford to have children. They were told that they should only become parents if they could afford to, so many didn’t. They were too busy learning the skills they would need to give them a chance to become valuable, to give a top job managing the assets of those who lent so much to all the rest. And as most adults had fewer children there was less to buy, less need for new clothes, for cars, less need to pay someone to learn how to drive the car you would never own, or fix the home that you rented (and which was slowly falling into disrepair).

People became frugal. Debt frightened them. When people spent less the companies of those with assets began to founder. Crisis emerged. We were told, buy new clothes, become more presentable. The government awarded a huge contract to one employment agency to give everyone in the land a score, from -20 to +20 stating how valuable each person was. The head of the agency awarded himself +20 and a prisoner in solitary confinement -20. The agency would be paid on performance. For every person whose score they could improve their shareholders would benefit.

The skilled workers, those who were well-educated and talented and gained work in the employment agency began to claim great success and great bonuses. The prisoner in solitary confinement was made to work as a stall-cold in a computer terminal. Their prison officer was made to take a second job as a personal trainer in the evenings to get a commission or a personal shopper at weekends. Everyone without assets was assessed annually and then monthly by the army of assessors. Run faster, buy the brand, type quicker they would instruct their clients and customers. That was for the wicked.

People became restless. They were given books to colour and mindless exercises. Many turned to religion again but it was frowned upon and time spent praying was not rewarded. You were told that you extended a profit and benefited to provide services itself. People began to question their scores. They began to ask what they had done to deserve inheriting the debt of their parents, and they began to make-do-and-mend. They began to resist debt. They stopped spending money on things they did not need. They saw advertisements as warnings.

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THE FUTURE

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We had more food than we could eat, threw much of it away or became fat. Our homes filled up with stuff. We hired storage units for everything we bought, wanted to keep but could not use. There were programs on TV encouraging makeovers: makeover your kitchen, yourself, your life. Plastic surgery and cosmetic dentistry boomed. People had their hair cut every week, their nails painted every other day, their star-signs read on the hour, their psyche analyzed and their neuroses nurtured by a service industry of pampering and grooming. People liked to look fancy and there was always some fancier item to buy.

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But the debt grew and grew as the money moved faster and faster until that day, that one day, when the confidence trick failed to work. People had foreseen the day, the day of default. Debt, along with assets, had become an inheritance. And just as assets had to be protected by force and by law, or they would soon cease to be assets, so too did debt.

The debt police were feared. They evicted you from your home if you did not pay both your rent and the attachment to earning applied to 'service' your debt. They took away your freedom to move when they took your travel pass, your freedom to surf the web when they shut down your Internet connection, and your freedom to sell your labour when they imprisoned you. They worked with economists, psychiatrists and cognitive behaviour specialists to re-educate you. 'Get to work' therapy was introduced for those called work-shy.

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In the end there were strikes. Just over a century earlier in 1889, shortly after unemployment was first termed a word, one of the directors of the London docks explained that hunger was a more effective tool than the slave-driver’s

whip to force people back to work. A century later debt, fear and shame had turned out to be even more effective. Starving workers had not make good dockers. But shame only works when it is not commonplace. Spread the shame too far and too fast and it is no longer shameful to be in debt and no longer fearful to be different – because you are just like almost everyone else.

The default began quietly in just one town, but the shares in its debt-collecting company fell quickly, because the most-talented-well-educated spotted the trend early and sold their masters' assets to minimize the loss. Other loan companies began to fold fast. At first the wealthy brought property from each other as a safe home for their money, and prices spiraled upwards, until they too collapsed. Rents were raised, evictions increased ten-fold. People began to be paid in debt, and they slowed down. And all those jobs that the asset wealthy had created to protect their wealth – they began to go. One by one, one thousand by one thousand, then millions of such jobs, until the assets were gone and the debt was no more. And that was when we began to ration work. Because there was so little that actually had to be done.