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Superfluous Workers

The Labor Market's Invisible Discards

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It may be time to consider that the United States has fewer jobs than workers and that some will therefore become superfluous. The author says we should categorize and count them and invent new jobs or income sources. Understanding that workers can become superfluous must alter our thinking about the U.S. economy.

EXCEPT DURING THE EXTREMELY RARE PERIODS of truly full employment, there are always more workers than jobs. When the worker-to-jobs ratio becomes too skewed, societies and their sociopolitical structures create superfluous workers: able-bodied people who are permanently removed from the economy. Superfluous workers have probably existed ever since organized economies were invented, and they can be found today, in modern as well as third world countries.

Hard economic times produce more jobless workers who will never find jobs again. If anyone was counting them, we might discover that significant numbers of them are well on the way to becoming

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superfluous. In the United States, currently, more than five people are available for every job, and in some especially hard-hit communities, hundreds are applying for a handful of positions. The average jobless worker has now been out of work for three-quarters of a year; and some long-term jobless are being told they are unemployable—the clearest sign that they will most likely become superfluous.

Although the economy is showing some signs of new economic growth, Dean Baker, Paul Krugman, and others have suggested that the current level of minimal job creation could continue for a decade or more. In fact, the number of superfluous workers could increase even if economic growth speeds up, for example if employers continue to move their firms overseas, outsource jobs to foreign firms, or hire more robots. And global capitalism could invent yet other methods of job destruction in the future.

Consequently, unemployment analysts must figure out how to identify already superfluous workers, as well as potential and likely ones. Concurrently, job creators must come up with new ideas for bringing such workers back into the economy, or else the country must find other ways of enabling superfluous workers to survive.

Dealing with Superfluity

Superfluous workers are not a new problem, but in the past, societies found methods, many of them cruel, to get rid of them. Although some are still practiced, such methods are no longer acceptable, which is why constructive and supportive alternatives must be developed.

We know very little about what hunter-gatherer and agrarian economies did with superfluous workers, or even if they had any. During the medieval period and the beginnings of the industrial economy, brutal working conditions, epidemics, and poverty seem to have killed or permanently injured enough people to keep the superfluous within limits. Prisons and lunatic asylums removed others from the labor market.

The European colonial countries could ship potentially superfluous workers to their colonies, and penal colonies helped further. Other

countries sold the superfluous as slaves. Neither prisons, colonies, nor slavery were invented to deal with discarded workers, but they proved useful for that purpose nevertheless.

Wars syphon off superfluous workers, too, and when wars were labor intensive, infantries, cavalries, and warships put many of them to work outside the regular labor force. The fact that many were killed or incapacitated ensured that the number of superfluous workers would not increase after the wars ended.

Improved working conditions and the welfare state sharply reduced the perils of industrial work, and both slavery and colonialism have been abolished in most modern economies. Wars are becoming capital intensive, and the more they are fought with drones and robots, the higher the likelihood that some of the people who previously served in the military could become superfluous someday. Those who came out of combat with permanent cases of post-traumatic stress disorders might become superfluous immediately, even if they are also described as disabled.

Yet other ways of keeping the potentially superfluous out of the labor force remain. One is the continuing increase in minimal educational requirements. The two-year college certificate will soon replace high school graduation as the minimum for most jobs, and in the long run, more and more jobs might require college and post-collegiate degrees. Even periods of unpaid or underpaid interning may become common. Educating people for the jobs likely to be available benefits them and the economy even as it takes them off the labor market.

One of the remaining cruel ways of coping with superfluity is incarceration. Mostly used against poor young and darker-skinned men, the prisons replace the colonies to which some European countries once sent their convicts. While many banished to the colonies eventually wound up in colonial economies, today's convicts spend long years in prison that keep them out of the economy. When employers refuse to hire them because they are ex-convicts, those who do not return to criminal activity and those who cannot find work in the underground economy stand a good chance of becoming superfluous.

Imprisoning people is expensive, and financially strapped state

economies are now sending some of their prisoners home early. Courts and legislatures may follow by reducing sentences and decriminalizing victimless crimes. In the process, they will, however, raise the number of potentially superfluous workers.

If and when the Great Job Recession finally ends, pent-up consumer demand will result in new jobs, at least for a while. Expected as well as unexpected, and perhaps even currently unimaginable, technological innovation will create further jobs. So will the new products and services they spin off. Rising Asian wages and declining American ones, as well as relevant tax law reforms, may bring some long-departed American manufacturing home, too.

Still, even if Chinese and Indian wages rise significantly, both countries have huge low-wage populations that need work, as do yet other countries in Asia, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere. Thus, new waves of outsourcing could eventually eliminate many of the American jobs initially accompanying technological and marketing innovations. Continuing worker productivity increases, as well as further advances in the computerization and robotization of work, are likely to take place also. Consequently, recruits for superfluity might become more numerous, especially if jobless recoveries continue to lengthen.

Indeed, a number of today's employers have already indicated that they will not hire the long-term jobless, often on the grounds that they are no longer up-to-date in terms of skills. Some employers may believe the long-term jobless bear some responsibility for their condition, and perhaps enough suffer from lack of self-confidence to contribute to that belief. In any case, most employers have so many applicants that they can reduce their number by arbitrarily and immediately excluding the long-term unemployed.

Types of Superfluous Workers

Strictly speaking, no one can ever be identified or counted as superfluous, for an economic miracle, or more realistically a world war, could put all but the actually unemployable people back to work.

Consequently, superfluity is an ex post facto judgment, made with certainty only after jobless workers have been rejected so firmly so often that they know it is useless to keep on trying.

Still, superfluous workers need to be identified, and even if they cannot be counted with certainty, their number can be estimated. They can also be described and classified as already superfluous and potentially or likely superfluous. At least six types of the formerly employed are candidates for one or another category of superfluity:

1. the long-term jobless
2. the unemployables
3. the permanently discouraged workers
4. the damaged or disabled jobless
5. the involuntarily retired
6. the never hired

Probably the largest number of potential superfluous workers are those who have been left jobless so long that their chance of being rehired is low and continues to decline. Empirical studies should show the length of this period under different economic conditions, and the organizations that measure unemployment would have to decide when the superfluous designation should be applied.

Most likely, the long-term jobless who keep applying for jobs are eventually told, or decide for themselves, that they are unemployable and that the economy has discarded them permanently.

Many are actually victims of technological and other changes in the economy, trained in no-longer-wanted skills. They are at the same time victims of structural unemployment, although that concept blames them for obsolescent skills instead of blaming the economic and political decision makers who fail to create alternative jobs.

Others may become discouraged workers and after a while probably consider themselves permanently discouraged. The federal government does not make a temporal distinction between the two, and perhaps no one is willing to admit or officially count those who have in effect given up the job search. When and how people become discouraged, as well as permanently so, can in fact be studied, and

those who have given up the job search are on the way to becoming superfluous.

However, some who have lost hope of ever finding another job are probably invisible, living so far under or outside the social structures reached by the government that they cannot be counted. Yet others have undoubtedly moved into criminal work and do not want to be counted.

A related category consists of the long-term jobless who have been emotionally and socially damaged and even disabled as a result of their job losses and other disappointments in the labor market. We have long known that unemployment itself can cause or worsen depression, mental and chronic physical illness, and other traumatic reactions that could leave people too damaged or disabled to work (e.g., Catalano 2009; Kessler, Turner, and House 1988). They are almost certain to become superfluous.

The involuntarily retired fall into two categories—those who are both discouraged and old enough to retire earlier than planned, and those who cope with their being discarded by interpreting it as retirement. The former may only experience a lowering of living standards, but the latter probably suffer some of the same pain as the damaged or disabled jobless.

The last type of superfluous worker is in some respects the most tragic—the young adults who have not yet found a full-time job and may never do so. They could be sentenced to a lifetime of odd jobs, involuntary part-time ones, and long periods of joblessness in between. Although classifying young people as superfluous workers would be irresponsible, they must be considered, for policy purposes at least, very likely candidates for superfluity.

Some youngsters may decide to avoid this fate, never applying for a lawful job and thereby avoiding the pain of rejection. The more fortunate among them will find steady or part-time work in the underground economy; others in the criminal parts of that economy, notably in petty drug selling. Some poor young people, particularly those associated with drug-selling gangs, may find steady work in that economy before they even look for work in the more law-abiding economy.

Undoubtedly, some not yet hired young adults and even adults can

already be found in the country's poorer urban and rural communities. Studies of their job searches should enable policy analysts to discover at what point the likelihood of never being hired sets in, and what people do then. Ethnographic studies in very poor communities would probably even turn up older adults who were unable ever to get a full-time job.

All the suggested studies must include one other topic: the permanence of the unemployability and superfluity judgments and decisions made by employers and the jobless respectively. Even more important, researchers must find out what economic and other conditions are necessary to reverse them.

Defining and Measuring Superfluity

The first step in dealing with superfluity is to define and measure the condition, not only to understand the nature and extent of the problem, but also to make it publicly visible. Governments are rarely eager to report rising joblessness, and improvements in counting the jobless that could have this result must be lobbied for, sometimes for a long time.

The very notion of unemployment was not invented until the 1880s (Garrity 1978). Data on long-term unemployment, discouraged workers, and involuntary part-timers was first reported only in 1994—and interestingly enough, not by the Bureau of Labor Statistics but by the Current Population Survey.

The first task is to discover empirically the periods after which long-term joblessness leads to declarations of unemployability, permanent discouragement, disability, or involuntary retirement. Subsequently, policy analysts and policymakers need to agree what lengths of joblessness justify the designation of potential, likely, and already existing superfluity.

Until categories and measures of the kinds I have suggested are produced, already available data on long-term unemployment will have to do. Studies of past periods of joblessness and their effects on the variety of job seekers, including discouraged ones, should help government determine when serious labor market conditions become crises, when unemployment insurance and other conventional supports are no

longer sufficient, and when emergency action is urgently required.

In an economy that daily reports minute details about the ups and downs of thousands of stocks, the government and private enterprise should be required to offer detailed measures of long-term joblessness and related information, including its effects, at least once a month.

As noted previously, such measures make unemployment itself politically more visible. This is particularly necessary since the already and potentially superfluous are among the politically least well represented.

Some Possible Policies

Many of the potential, likely, and already superfluous workers I have identified are low in skills, and some are too young or not young enough. Consequently, most will need special kinds of jobs, others require only income support, yet others will require additional kinds of help. Unless private enterprise reforms, the government has to get serious about becoming the employer of last resort.

Although many appropriate jobs for unskilled and semiskilled workers can be found in infrastructure repair and modernization projects, the construction unions will have first call on them. Other such projects can be easily conceived if they are not already on someone's list. For example, a permanently functioning national pothole repair corps is badly needed in the many parts of the country with highly variable seasonal climates.

Another solution is community service jobs that provide support to professionals and semiprofessionals in health and other helping facilities, public agencies, and even private ones that now pay insufficient attention to the community (Gans 2011). Teaching assistantships in public schools, especially those with large classes, would be another option.

The toughest challenge may be to find work for people who have never worked. A modernized revival of President Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps is a natural for younger people, especially if it can be accompanied by opportunities for people to continue their education, including in the trades and other fields that do not require

further academic training. Undoubtedly some people with the right talents who are in the right place at the right time can still be helped to make careers, for example in teaching, nursing, and similar helping and other professions.

Many of the already superfluous and some of the likely ones will probably never go back to work even under optimum conditions. The older ones may need a new preretirement social security program. The totally discouraged and truly unemployable deserve unstigmatized forms of disability pay and social support, although job opportunities should always be near at hand in all nonwork programs.

Needless to say, such policies are currently not politically feasible, and probably not until the existence of superfluous workers is perceived and documented as a national problem. Even then, this kind of policy may not be achievable until all branches of the federal government are controlled by economic liberals, or by politicians who need the votes of the jobless.

If the consumer economy is in dire enough straits, its politically influential firms might demand that the government give the long-term jobless enough income support to shore up that economy.

Superfluity and the Longer Future

If capitalism is going to be destroying jobs in the long term, drastic changes in the world of work will have to be considered. Part-time, at home, independent contractor, and freelance work are already at hand, but in the future, jobs may have to be rationed. In addition, full-time employment may have to be defined as thirty or even twenty-four hours, with workers obtaining partial employment insurance benefits to support their families.

Observers of the social scene and social critics have worried about the future of work before, and others, especially utopian writers, have advocated less work and more play—and education—for centuries (e.g., Bellamy 1888).

Utopian voices are starting to be heard again and once more propose to fill the free time with education and culture, as well as communal

and political activity, but many people would probably find yet other ways to fill that time.

They would also have to find substitutes for the social and psychological roles that work plays in modern society, for example in determining social usefulness and self-respect and in establishing class, prestige, and other social positions.

Conclusion

Whatever the terminology, an economy and society in which large numbers of workers are superfluous or in danger of becoming so is unimaginable. People who are socially declared to be useless will sicken emotionally and physically and before long begin to hurt their families and their communities. Eventually, some will also sicken or attack other and larger institutions, including political ones. Whatever damage they do will be complemented by the damage that society's forces of law and order inflict in defending itself from such attacks.

Even if the former workers were compensated with modest substitute incomes, they would be economically far worse off than the employed. Socially, they would probably be placed below the working poor, and likely to be discriminated against as dependent and undeserving. That too many are likely to have dark skin will only worsen the situation.

Creating a permanent class of superfluous workers must be avoided at all costs.

For Further Reading

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