



Peter C. Newman

A philosopher's dream of making work fun

As more and more jobs disappear along with the companies that once provided them, the idea of being employed by a large organization suddenly seems risky, if not obsolete. The alternative—working at home for yourself—is an attractive choice for those who can master the prevailing technologies.

But the majority of Canada's three million-plus unemployed and underemployed fit neither category, and it's that group that finds itself not knowing where to turn, or how to help itself. Now, an Austrian-born American philosophy professor named Frithjof Bergmann has come up with a practical notion of how to reduce our reliance on the overly politicized concept of jobs and extend and inspire our biological need to work.

"People have become so desperate that they're even willing to listen to a philosopher," he quips, his accent a mixture of Sigmund Freud and Brooklyn twang. Bergmann opened his Center for New Work in Flint, Mich., where he did most of his research in the early 1980s, after he began helping General Motors deal with the thousands of laid-off workers from 1981 to 1986. He now runs the Center for New Work in nearby Ann Arbor, and his timely gospel has spread to Wolfen, East Germany, where Bergmann is advising Gös, a large film manufacturing company, on the most humane way to displace 15,000 workers so that they will be able to keep some part-time employment and also have time to pursue a "calling" of their choice. And in Canada, he is working with inner-city youth in downtown Vancouver, where his progressive ideas are being implemented on an experimental basis.

Bergmann resembles a mad scientist in a Mel Brooks movie who has discovered electricity, but can't quite master it. But the intensity of his discourse somehow discharges through his theatrical mannerisms. "The job system is just that: a system—we invented it, we can change it," he told me during a recent Vancouver interview. "With wisdom and foresight, we can fashion from the historic disintegration of the jobs culture a more cheerful, humane, vigorous and hopeful approach that will combine material abundance with human fulfillment. For more than two centuries, The Job has been a kind of tyrant that has reduced human beings, curtailed their potential, exhausted and discouraged them. Now, thanks to advancing technology, we stand on the threshold of being liberated from that tyranny and, instead of fearing it, we should be dancing in the streets and celebrating."

That's easier said than done, but Bergmann advocates a revolutionary new approach that reaches far beyond the standard work-sharing and work-extending remedies. He believes that what ultimately counts is how we live, not how we work. He advocates periodical sabbaticals tied to specific plans for personal and profes-

sional growth. These intermissions throughout workers' careers would be tied to both the prevailing job market and the stage of each individual's development and financed through direct corporate contributions, taxes, and quasi-public foundations.

At GM in Flint 15 years ago, his innovative idea of allowing some of the laid-off workers to be put on a six-month on, six-month off schedule, receiving nine months' pay a year—was accepted by the company on an experimental basis. Most of the men and women who went on these paid sabbaticals started up small businesses, returned to school or grew their own vegetables. "Given the chance," the professor concludes, "people work hard and happily at things they deeply, passionately want to do. The right kind of work—as opposed to jobs—gives people more energy, instead of draining it."

Instead of fearing work, people need to be liberated from the 'tyranny of jobs'—and be 'dancing in the streets'

Bergmann is convinced that his new approach is the wave of the future. He sees workers and employers co-operating in mutually beneficial pursuits. The bosses will be free to use cost-saving, productivity-boosting automation techniques to their maximum. In return, they will agree to parcel out the remaining jobs on a rotating basis and encourage, and sometimes help finance, their employees to follow meaningful activities of their own choosing.

Interestingly, this would be a return to some of Henry Ford's initiatives when he first invented the mass production line to build his Model-T cars in 1913. During some of the next decade's down sales cycles, the workers he temporarily laid off were offered free farm lands to help feed themselves. Whenever he needed them again, Ford had a trained workforce at his disposal. (Bergmann's urban version is having people plant roof gardens and other self-sufficiency activities.)

The New Work approach doesn't fit all problem areas, but whatever its shortcomings, Bergmann is convinced that the alternatives are much worse. "If we don't make some fundamental adjustments in the work scene," he predicts, "the prospect is for an increasingly wealthy elite oppressing a growing, embittered mass of impoverished workers fighting like dogs over fewer, increasingly unrewarding jobs. We face the prospect of a rapid increase in violence that could easily escalate into some apocalyptic confrontation between the rich and poor. Fortunately, the corporate world has come to see it cannot go on like this. If they lay everybody off, they'll lose their own markets. There won't be anyone left to sell to."

Bergmann freely admits that his scheme for a new, enlightened work ethic will come true only gradually, with people slowly opening themselves up on a million different fronts to being liberated from their "job servitude." His line in the sand is simple and persuasive. The only sure way to make the job market even worse is not to try your damndest to improve it.