

'An Anthropogenic' Approach to Labor Economics

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The usual approach, in economic modeling, is to treat something called "labor" as simply another commodity, subject like any commodity to the forces of supply and demand, with the balance between the two equilibrated through a market. The human capital concept which has come to dominate discussions of "labor" supply in recent years merely builds on this standard approach, the refinement being to take into account time-related costs of and benefits from education and other forms of "investment" in human beings.¹ The purpose of this paper is to outline an alternative approach, which because it focuses on the cumulative acquisition of competences over time rather than on commodity-type transactions, can be termed the "human developmental" or "anthropogenic" model.²

The use of a somewhat different terminol-

ogy is necessary and deliberate. The reason is that the usual commodity approach to the human factor in economic activity succeeds in explaining only certain facets of the role played by human beings in providing for their material needs. The commodity approach is not wrong in the sense of being unsupportable by empirical evidence. It is, however, limited in the types of problems on which it can throw light. To avoid the limitations of the language, and thus of the concepts employed in the conventional commodity approach, a somewhat different set of theoretical constructs, reflecting the broader perspective of the anthropogenic model, is required.

It should be pointed out that what is meant by the "conventional commodity approach" to labor economics is the implicit conceptualization which permeates economic theory in general and which then serves as the analytical skeleton around which more detailed discussions of labor economics, emphasizing institutional factors and other complications, are organized.³ Thus, the fact that the commodity approach is seldom found in its purest form within the specialized literature is beside the point. It still dominates more general discussions bearing on labor matters,

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¹Although the emergence of the human capital approach is usually associated with Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), it actually goes back at least to Marshall (1920, Bk. VI, chs. 4-5) and can even be traced to Petty. For the most recent critical survey of human capital theory, see Blaug (1976) while for the history of the concept, see Kiker (1968).

²Though it is based primarily on the writings of Eli Ginzberg, director and founder of Columbia University's Conservation of Human Resources Project, other members of the Conservation's staff, both in their own writings and as contributors to the internal dialogue within the group, have played a key role in helping to shape this alternative approach.

³Wachter (1974, pp. 641-2) seems to agree. At the heart of the "neoclassical theory" to which Wachter refers is the marginal productivity theory described by Thurow (1976). See also Eichner, 1975; 1976; ch. 5; Cain, 1977, especially p. 1216.)

all social activity in terms of the exchange (or trading) process.⁷

The anthropogenic model does not deny the importance of exchange, especially with respect to supplying the material needs of the population under the economic systems that have evolved in all but the Communist countries. However, it sees exchange as only one of four processes that may characterize any particular social activity. Exchange is, to be sure, the process quintessential to the economic dimension of society, but the economic dimension itself is but one of four such dimensions, each with its own characteristic process or dynamic. The other three dimensions besides the economic which need to be taken into account in any comprehensive analysis are 1) the normative; 2) the political, and 3) the human developmental, or anthropogenic. The normative dimension encompasses all the values, or beliefs, upon which individual activity is predicated. The dynamic process unique to this dimension is the dialectic by which various paradigms, or systems of belief, come into being, are then undermined by their inability to explain certain empirical phenomena and eventually are supplanted by a newer, more general paradigm. The political system, meanwhile, encompasses all the mechanisms which exist for making conscious social choices among alternative courses of action. The dynamic process unique to this dimension is the formation of coalitions in order to gain control over decision-making bodies.

What is novel about the conceptual framework upon which the human resources approach is based is the delineation of the human developmental or anthropogenic dimension of society. This specification derives from the conviction that human competences,

defined as the ability to utilize various skills in a social setting, are no less important than norms, societal decisions (including laws) and material goods in the functioning of societies; and that, furthermore, these competences evolve as a result of a process quite different from that which produces the other three building blocks of social organization—values, group decisions and material resources. The anthropogenic process involves successive, or complementary, affiliation with developmental institutions, beginning with the family, continuing through the various levels of schooling and then consolidating around the experience gained through employment, whether that effort is remunerated or not. Indeed, the three sets of institutions, the family, the schools and employing organizations, are the separate components of a distinct anthropogenic system which are linked together by the career developmental path which each individual member of society pursues over his life time. Affiliation with one of these developmental institutions is the process quintessential to the anthropogenic dimension.⁸

The human resources model, since it takes into account three other processes besides the one of exchange emphasized exclusively in the conventional economic analysis, is thus a generalized approach to the study of social dynamics. However, more than just the question of generality is involved in dealing with the human factor in economic activity. The subject matter of labor economics reflects the congruence between the economic and anthropogenic dimensions.⁹ On the one hand, it is the economy which, as a result of the level of activity generated, creates the employment opportunities whereby most competences are utilized and—even more important—further developed. Yet, it is the anthropogenic system

⁷Thus even when economists as broad in their interests Kenneth Boulding and Alfred Kahn have attempted to provide an integrated model of the social sciences, they have tended to translate all social processes into exchange relationships. Boulding (1970); Kahn (1963).

⁸See Ginzberg (1966; 1971, ch. 19; 1976); Eichner (1973a, 1973b); Eichner and Brecher (1979, especially ch. 3).

⁹Eichner, 1973a; Lewin *et al.*, 1974.

goals pertain to the satisfaction of material needs. Moreover, while human beings may be required to spend the better part of each week engaged in activities organized around the task of satisfying those material needs, even during the time they are so occupied they are not unmindful of their other goals in life. Finally, in attempting to achieve these goals, human beings do not merely follow simple and direct lines of action. They are, in fact, capable of executing quite complex strategies, sometimes by themselves and sometimes in conjunction with others. Both the multifarious goals which human beings set for themselves and the complex strategies they follow in pursuit of those goals profoundly affect the nature of the employment relationship.¹¹

The analysis of what happens on the job is complicated by more than just the fact that human beings, unlike inert physical goods, can be perverse. It is also that the use of human beings in the production process raises unavoidable teleological, and hence moral, issues. Take the case of the barrel of oil that is supplied through the market. Few would question that, once removed from the ground, it should eventually be used to serve some human end. But what about the individuals who must give of their time and energy if that barrel of oil is to be delivered as heating fuel at the point of consumption? Are they merely a means to the same end, that of providing the consumer with warmth? Or do they have interests, in terms of the conditions under which they must work and the compensation they will receive, which are no less deserving of protection than those of the consumer? The usual treatment of labor in economics, by viewing the human factor in the production process solely in instrumental terms, avoids

these questions. That is why it can accept the notion of a trade-off between unemployment and inflation when, in fact, the consequences of the two are in no way commensurate with one another. But this sole concern with the consumer interest, to the virtual neglect of producer welfare, is arbitrary. By attaching significance to individual preferences only insofar as they influence what goods are produced, and not with respect to how they are produced, the conventional analysis predetermines the very conclusions it reaches; and thus it is something less than the value-free scientific inquiry its proponents like to believe.

The anthropogenic model is more open on this point. Starting from the premise that the basis for judging social institutions is the extent to which they serve to increase the options open to individuals, it weights the economic system's ability to deliver material goods against the number and types of employment opportunities which the same economic system is capable of providing. The latter consideration is no less crucial to individual well-being, and this is so for three reasons: 1) It is primarily through employment that, as long as the human input remains critical to the functioning of the economic system, individuals will continue to obtain the income necessary for purchasing goods and services. 2) Since individuals spend most of their waking hours on the job, the conditions of employment are critical to the quality of the everyday life experience. 3) It is largely through employment opportunities that, subsequent to their formal schooling, individuals continue to develop their capacities, and acquire further competences. The emphasis, then, in the anthropogenic model is on the different ways in which individuals are able to increase their options in life, with the availability of physical goods being only one of them. It is for this reason that the anthropogenic model, unlike the more conventional

¹¹This, of course, is the starting point for the fields of personnel management and industrial relations, both of which Ginzberg has contributed to. See Ginzberg and Reiley, 1957; Ginzberg and Berg, 1963; Ginzberg, 1976, Part 4.

time of a contractual arrangement that is henceforth binding on the two parties. For the important point is that the process may come to an end before it is fully completed, during any one of the successive stages. By so terminating the process, neither of the two parties can be said to have violated its obligations to the other.

Within the last few years a good deal of attention has been directed in conventional treatments of labor to the process of search (though not, interestingly enough, to the parallel process of recruitment).¹⁶ The interest in search behavior has derived chiefly from the need to offer some plausible explanation of why wages have continued to rise, during recent recessions, even in the face of declining demand. However well this concession to realism may serve to salvage the larger body of standard economic theory, the fact remains that it still ignores two subsequent stages in the attachment process. It also continues the mistake of focusing on the rate of compensation as the sole determining factor in the attachment process. Both of these are oversights which the anthropogenic model seeks to avoid.

The anthropogenic model does not deny the importance of the size of money payment in determining whether individuals become attached to a particular employing organization.¹⁷ What it rejects is an exclusive concern with that one factor alone. In an earlier era, when labor was performed primarily by farmers seeking to supplement the earnings from their own insufficient holdings, and even somewhat later, when a landless proletariat provided little more than "hands" for the new types of factory production, this emphasis on the "wage bargain" was perhaps not unwarranted. Human beings worked for others primarily because of the income it afforded

them. But in a modern economy, when even those in the highest positions of authority in effect work for someone else and the types of jobs available are so diverse, requiring as they do such a variety of skills, other factors become important. Human beings become attached to a work force, even aside from the income it provides, because a) it offers a milieu for social interaction—a place to meet people and make friends; b) it provides a certain degree of autonomy—freedom from the arbitrary command of others; and c) it enables them to develop further as human beings—to increase their skills and competences. Employers, in turn, accept individuals as members of their permanent work force, despite the money outlays involved, because the individuals a) are able to take over a position within the organization and carry out some essential task without disrupting the flow of output, and b) have the potential for later assuming an even more demanding or responsible position within the organization.¹⁸

It is because neither employees nor employers can be fully assured at once on all these points that the attachment process takes a while to complete. Only time will tell what type of social milieu, how much autonomy and what opportunities for personal growth a particular job offers. And only time will tell if the individual selected as a result of the recruitment effort will measure up to the standards of the job. It may, in fact, be necessary for either the individual or the organization to bring the process to a halt and start anew, not just once but several times. Once the process of attachment is completed, however, the result is an affiliation, at least for the individual, different only in kind from the affiliations by which he has gained his antecedent level of competence. This means a commitment by the organization to the individual and by the individual to the organiza-

¹⁶See, for example, Phelps, 1970; Whipple, 1973.

¹⁷Cf., Freedman, 1969, pp. 117-9; Ginzberg, 1976, p. 180.

¹⁸Ginzberg, 1976, part IV.

Theory for a devastating attack on this view of how the labor "market" operates. *The General Theory*, in fact, offers two separate explanations of why labor markets are unlikely to clear, that is, assure "full employment"—neither of which depends on the power of trade unions to prevent wages from falling. The first argument is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to arrange matters so that wage reductions apply across the board to all workers simultaneously. This means that, at any one point in time, only some workers will be under pressure to accept lower wages, and with those lower wages a decline in their standard of living relative to other workers. As a result, the wage cuts are bitterly resisted—and not without justification. The fall in the wages of just some workers is unlikely to solve the general problem of unemployment. It should be noted that the argument implies either that there is no such thing as a single labor market or, alternatively, that there is no such thing as a single price—that is, wage rate—or structure of prices which prevails in that market. The second line of Keynes' attack is even more damaging to standard economic theory. Even if wage reductions could be negotiated across the board, full employment would still not be restored, for the very fact of the wage reductions would so discourage business investment that, operating through the multiplier process, the economy would wind up even further below the full employment level of income. In other words, the income effects arising from the wage reductions would far outweigh the substitution effects taking place within the firm.²³

The anthropogenic model accepts these Keynesian arguments as valid, but points out an even more fundamental reason why the so-called labor "market" cannot effectively carry out its clearing function. It is because a

key element in most commodity markets is missing. This is the presence of a "speculative interest"—or forward market—to prevent sellers from pushing prices up too high and to prevent buyers from forcing prices down too low. The speculative interest—brokers, other middlemen, even the buyers and sellers themselves—in effect acts as a secondary factor in the market, stepping in to purchase stocks that would otherwise go unsold and holding them for release until prices have again risen. Most markets clear only because the speculative interest sees to it that they do clear. In labor markets, however, there are no speculative interest because the input which human beings uniquely contribute to the production process cannot be stored. The time, together with the energy and competence, that individuals have to offer is lost forever once it is allowed to go unutilized. Not even those who provide the laboring time can store it. The most they can do is use it for their own private purposes.²⁴

For this reason, labor markets are more appropriately viewed as imperfect market-clearing mechanisms. When employing organizations have a need for additional workers to fill entry level positions and even when they have a need for experienced workers to fill higher level positions, it is true that the temporary gap between "supply" and "demand" is likely to be quickly closed by what appears to be the labor "market"—though not necessarily as a result of the wage rate rising. However, in the opposing situation, when both new workers and experienced personnel are seeking positions in greater numbers than are currently being opened up, the gap—in this case arising from excessive supply—will not be closed. The job seekers will find themselves queued up, with no demand for their services and thus the time, together with the energy and competence they

²³ Keynes, 1936, chapter 19.

²⁴ Eichner, 1973a. See also Friedlander, 1972.

inputs varies inversely with the rate of compensation. This relationship follows logically from the presumed technical conditions of production, in particular, from the diminishing returns that set in when, beyond a certain point, more variable inputs, like production workers, are used in combination with the same fixed amount of plant, capital equipment and managerial personnel to expand output. The key assumption, of course, is that production is possible with flexible technical coefficients, that is, with differing amounts of the variable input relative to the fixed inputs.²⁷

The anthropogenic model does not deny that the negatively sloped demand curve for "labor" may hold in certain cases—particularly in smaller enterprises using relatively unsophisticated technology. More generally, however, it holds that production is carried out as part of a complex social process, one in which the individual's unique contribution is necessarily submerged in the overall group effort. Each worker has a clearly delineated role to play—a job slot—in an organizational structure based on the following relationships:

- a) between workers and the capital equipment;
- b) between workers and the supervisory staff; and
- c) among different types of workers.

For the most part, these relationships are fixed ones, arrived at as part of the organization's long-run search for optimal efficiency.

The more sophisticated the skills or equipment required in the production process, the less flexible these relationships are likely to be.²⁸ This has two implications. First, it means that adding more human inputs in the form of additional workers, rather than being the means of increasing output, simply imposes on the organization the burden of altering its internal structure. It is for this reason that new workers are seldom hired except to fill

already existing slots in the organization, ones that have either been recently vacated or are about to be vacated by other workers. Second, it means that there is no way of determining the incremental contribution to the goals of the organization, whether those goals be profit-oriented or not, for any one worker alone or even for any one type of worker. The output depends on the functioning of the organization as a whole. Thus it is not possible to establish any direct relationship, negative or otherwise, between the number of workers employed by the organization on the one hand and either the productivity of the organization or the rate of compensation received by the workers on the other hand. That is, the negatively sloped demand curve for "labor" does not generally hold under modern conditions of production.

By carrying out the analysis as though the negatively sloped demand curve did apply, the conventional models miss what are the far more significant determinants both of productivity within the organization and of the compensation received by workers. The productivity of the organization depends on the capacity of those in executive positions to deal with the most critical fact of organized work activity: that the goals of the individuals who comprise the organization, even in a managerial capacity, are not identical with those of the organization itself. Effective management requires both a positive and a negative response to this inherent conflict of interests. On the positive side, the individual's role within the organization needs to be structured so that, in meeting the imperatives of his work assignment, he is also moving closer to the realization of his own personal goals. In this way, the organization can harness, to the maximum extent possible, the individual's own drive and energies, the only source of dynamism for the organization itself. Still, since the goals of the individual and the organization can never be wholly reconciled, a

²⁷Eichner, 1976, pp. 28-37, 145-46.

²⁸Eichner, 1976, pp. 146ff.; Ginzberg, 1976, chapter 11.

determining the overall level of wages throughout the economy. The pattern established in one industry or sector is likely to be followed in others. The government itself, through Presidential intervention in the key industry's negotiations or through some form of "incomes" policy, may also have a hand in shaping the pattern.³⁴ Rates of compensation, then, depend on the internal wage structure as increased in money terms over time by the changing standard of what constitutes a fair wage in a particular region, industry or the nation as a whole.

The Supply of Manpower—The conventional analysis, however, not only misperceives the nature of the firm's demand curve for "labor," it also incorrectly specifies the supply curve. In the standard economic models, work is presumed to give rise to disutility. For this reason, in order to persuade individuals to make their services available, they must be paid a wage, the income compensating them for what they are giving up, their leisure, by working. The anthropogenic model recognizes that work is all too often distasteful to those who must perform it. Indeed, this has been true for the great majority of people throughout most of human history, and it is still true for too many people in the world today, even in developed and relatively affluent societies like that of the United States. Still, this is not an immutable condition. As the experience of at least some people demonstrates, and not just in advanced societies, work may also be a source of great satisfaction. And this is the case quite aside from any income it brings.

The limitation of the conventional economic analysis is that it recognizes only the need of society to have certain types of tasks carried out and the need of individuals to have access to income through employment. What it leaves out is the equally important need of

individuals to have purposeful activity, a need attested to by the energy devoted to hobbies, sports and other leisure-time pursuits. The purposeful activity is essential, not just for maintaining whatever level of physical and mental competence has previously been attained but also, for enabling the individuals to continue developing as human beings. In responding to this need, individuals may even be led to perform socially useful tasks without insisting upon money compensation in return, their reward being enhanced abilities and self-esteem. In fact, were this not the case, the society would lack philosophers, artists, political activists, volunteer workers and parents.

The need for purposeful activity, then, is a powerful force inducing individuals to make themselves available to organizations having a need for their services, regardless of the compensation to be received. When the need for on-the-job training as a follow-up to formal education is taken into account, the willingness of individuals to work, whatever the pay, emerges as even more significant a factor. Still, it is unlikely to be powerful enough to guarantee that all of society's necessary tasks will be carried out, and this is so for two reasons. On the one hand, individuals must first be assured that they will have sufficient income to satisfy the material needs not only of themselves but also of the other persons dependent on them. On the other hand, some of society's necessary tasks may yield so little intrinsic satisfaction—indeed, they may be so distasteful—that no one would voluntarily carry them out on his own if he could possibly avoid doing so. The strength of these two other factors depends, of course, on how equitably both income and work tasks are distributed.

In the conventional treatment of manpower, it is usually assumed that society's need to have the less intrinsically satisfying tasks performed is met by playing on the desire of some individuals for differential income. Thus

³⁴Eichner, 1976, chapter 5.

one of the factors that influence the choice. For the majority, work is the only source of income. On the other hand, employing organizations can usually count on all the manpower they need of a relatively unskilled sort at the prevailing wage rate. The long lines of individuals in need of a job assures that. Thus it is not so much the size of the wage payment but rather the availability of employment opportunities, both in the sheltered core of the economy and on the periphery, which determines the supply of manpower.³⁹

In summary, then, the human developmental, or anthropogenic, approach involves a considerably broader view of the role played by the human factor in economic activity than is to be found in the conventional models upon which economists generally rely. This alternative conceptual framework encompasses, not just the single dimension of an economic system producing goods and services, but three other dimensions as well, including a quite separate anthropogenic system which supplies the economic system with all its manpower inputs. Within this conceptual framework, human beings are viewed, not just as the means by which more goods and services are produced, but also as the ends which the entire set of social institutions, including the economic, are meant to serve by increasing individual options. Thus employment is important, not just because of the greater output it makes possible, but also, even more critically, because of the effect it has on the well-being of those who are thereby given a meaningful economic role to play. Moreover, the employment obtained represents, not just a contract confirming some transaction but rather, more broadly, an affiliation. This means that it occurs, not at a single moment in time but instead, as part of a process taking place over time.

³⁹Eichner, 1973a; 1976, pp. 226-33.

Contrast this view of the human factor in economic activity with that reflected in the conventional economic analysis. Both are, to be sure, concerned with one of the two factors determining the total wage bill. But the conventional analysis, with its almost singular concern over the wage rate, seems, from a human developmental perspective, to place the emphasis on the wrong variable. First of all, the wage rate's supposed market-clearing role is greatly exaggerated, if it is of any relevance at all. How else can one explain the excess of workers seeking employment which exists as almost a permanent feature of modern life? Indeed, *The General Theory* should long ago have disposed of that argument. Moreover, because of the institutional manner in which it is determined for most workers, together with the fixed technical relationships which govern most of modern economic activity, the wage rate tells us hardly anything at all about labor's "productivity."⁴⁰ The significance of the wage rate lies entirely in the effect it has on the relative distribution of income among wage and salary recipients and in the role it plays in the wage-price inflationary process.⁴¹

In its preoccupation with questions of resource allocation under equilibrium conditions, the conventional analysis gives short shrift to the critical importance of employment in determining individual and family well-being. It is more than just a matter of being able to earn income—though, in a society in which earned income is the primary determinant of a family's standard of living, that factor is not unimportant. It is rather that an individual's entire sense of personal worth, especially during the adult years,

⁴⁰It is this point which provides the linkage between the human resources approach and post-Keynesian theory. See Eichner and Kregel, 1975; Eichner 1976; Appelbaum, 1979.

⁴¹Eichner, 1976, chapters 5, 8.

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