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Bicycle Couriers in the 'New' Economy.

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Abstract: Bicycle Couriers in the 'New' Economy.

Recently there has been much discussion around changing patterns of employment. An increasingly globalised economy: demands for a flexible labour force and the increase in part time employment: the shift from manufacturing to service industries: a time, some argue, of increasing individualisation and risk all contribute to a social and economic period being understood as the 'new economy'.

There has been a large body of work undertaken to study recent trends in employment in the new economy in certain sectors of the service industry. Call centres have been an area of increasing scrutiny, as have fast food outlets, notably McDonalds. Most of the literature on young adults concentrates on the transition from school to work. However other groups of workers, especially young workers - are largely absent from the literature. It is in this context that the study will be an analysis of a relatively new occupation serviced by relatively young adults, specifically in the 20 – 40 age bracket – bicycle couriers. Bicycle couriership has developed as a major part of messenger/parcel transportation in Britain, with firms operating in most major cities. Despite bicycle couriership being a legitimate service industry, those working as bicycle couriers contradict the image of traditional employment legitimacy. Bicycle messengers often operate outside of traditional formal employment. They rarely, if ever, have contracts; they have no pension, and are on low commission based pay. Risk of injury is a significant component of many occupations, but the question needs to be asked, what is it that makes bicycle couriership attractive to those that work in the industry when the pay and conditions are poor and the risk of injury high? Much of the literature concerning 'new economy' labour markets highlight features such as flexibility, lack of long term tenure and 'risk' as being indicative of a wholesale shift from one labour market paradigm to another. This paper uses the bicycle messenger industry to interrogate the 'new economy thesis'.

Bicycle Messengers and the New Economy

Introduction to the New Economy.

The nature of work and employment has undeniably changed over the last 30 years. Globalisation, flexibility, precarious employment, the 'knowledge economy' and the recognition of a fundamental change in the organisation of labour are abundant in literature concerned with defining the 'new' economic era (Handy 1994, Leadbeater 1999, Castells 1996, Beck 1992). The underlying premise of this literature is that there is something about the current labour economy that is so distinct it can be described as 'new', implying a wholesale practical and conceptual shift from a previous era. It is argued that the advent of post-fordist modes of production has brought about changes in the organisation and structure of the labour economy. A shift, as Crompton, Gallie and Purcell say, 'from the predominance of economies driven by manufacturing industries' and the homogeneity commonly associated with the semi-skilled industrial working class to 'a more heterogeneous, fragmented workforce' (Crompton et al 1996: 3). The increasingly flexible nature of production systems has led to 'organisational 'delaying' and the decline of the long-term, single organisation, career.' (Crompton et al 1996: 3). The implications for the British workforce of such changes are argued to have been dramatic. The end of a 'job for life', an increasing need to train and re-train in order to keep up with the ever changing demands of the labour economy, increasing individualisation – coupled with a decline in the power, or relevance, of collective bargaining and the advent of new forms of employment brought about by the introduction of information technology are thought by some to have transformed the working landscape.

At the heart of the 'new economy' proposition is the idea of flexibility. From the global to the local, the ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment is seen to be essential for economic success. The trans-national corporation must be able to change sites of production to the areas of the world where costs are lowest. This in turn means that populations must be able to adapt to the production requirements of these corporations in order to attract investment in their labour infrastructure. In the UK the rhetoric surrounding the 'knowledge economy' and 'high skills' demands that workers are prepared to enter into 'lifelong learning' in order to continually be able to meet the demands of C.21st industries (DfEE, 2000). As Doogan says, the emergence of this 'new' economic paradigm, especially the emphasis on flexible labour markets 'is said to have engendered a sense of precariousness in the world of work and undermined the notion

of the career and heralded the end of 'jobs for life' (Doogan 2001: 420). The impact of such understandings resonates throughout the education systems of states operating within the new economic reality. In developing a rationale for preparing young people for work, Packer explains the underlying principle for providers of education.

Employers, it turns out, now judge "attitude" the most important factor when they consider hiring a nonsupervisory or production worker, and the attitude now most valued is *flexibility* - a willingness to accept the terms of the workplace and demand nothing better.

(Packer 2001: 6)

Ironically, this is the very same attribute that is applied to the successful 'knowledge workers' of the 'new' economy, but unlike the non-supervisory or production workers of Packer's study, the 'knowledge workers' adapt to the needs of the economy rather than accepting the 'terms of the workplace' and demanding 'nothing better'.

When counterpoising Fordist modernity with flexible postmodernity David Harvey provides a rich synthesis of a debate that appears to be little changed since the mid 1980s (Harvey 1990: 340-1). Although in 1990 he himself highlighted the contentious nature of strict social and temporal categorisation (Harvey 1990: 342) it seems as though others are not so cautious. Perhaps the postmodernist position of the early 1990s is seen increasingly as the economic and cultural reality of the 21st century. In a paper presented to the World Congress of Colleges and Polytechnics, Robin Shreeve attempts to posit the tertiary and further education sectors in Australia at the centre of a world vastly changed from the one in which the sector was formed. He asserts that 'Contemporary Society Australia' and 'other advanced nations are now often described as postmodern and postfordist.' (Shreeve 2002: 3). Every facet of modern life is permeated by processes of globalisation such that 'cultural systems undergo a continuing process of reinvention and, ultimately, all forms of identity are rendered unstable' (Shreeve 2002: 3). He quotes Peter Scott who suggests that post-Fordism is

...more than simply a dominant shift in the dominant mode of production, the result of a quantum leap in innovation-induced productivity. Rather it suggests an accumulation of abandonments - of undifferentiated mass production, of linear careers (indeed of 'work'), of hierarchical (and deferential) social structures, even of personal identities as traditionally determined.

(Shreeve 2002: 4)

Of particular interest for the study of bicycle messengers are the two following assertions Shreeve makes about characteristics of the 'new' economy.

The post-Fordist world is characterised by an increasingly contingent and part-time work force who are connected to their work places through casual and sub-contractual arrangements, rather through conventional, long term employment contracts.

The labour market for graduates, from all segments of the tertiary sector, has also changed and is now characterised by both 'uncertainty and variety of work and employment experiences in what are becoming increasingly flexible and truncated careers'.

(Shreeve 2002: 4)

Bicycle Couriers - A new economy industry?

a. Brief summary of the evolution of the industry in the UK.

The modern bike courier became established in the UK in the mid 1980s. These original firms operated along similar lines to those in the United States with the important historical exception that they tended to be set up as dedicated bicycle only services - unlike the early 1970s model in the US of bicycles being a subsidiary wing of motorised messenger companies. These established American companies realised that they could make money in congested cities by hiring bicycle riders as 'independent sub-contractors'. This arrangement also suited the types of people who were becoming interested in couriers. The 'no contract', 'no credentials' nature of the industry attracted people for whom a 'no contract', 'no credentials' lifestyle suited. In 1985 Bob McGlynn, a veteran courier who had worked since the mid/late 1970s, wrote

In general many of us do fit the outlaw-counter culture-street person image (with no apologies from us), that we're either romanticized or condemned for. A lot of us wouldn't be caught dead working in an office or a factory (that's our preference-we ain't the snobs!) and biking is an easy place to find work. The scene is extremely transitory, companies are incessantly hiring, plus they overhire "to keep themselves covered" which fucks everyone, especially the newcomers because there's less work to go around. On the other hand it's often the only gig in town - no one else is hiring - so we end up in a crowd of poor types trying to make a buck and also some arty and intellectual types who can't make any bread at their own profession.

(McGlynn, 2001)

This description of couriers could probably be applied today to messengers in the UK, with the important addition, I would argue, of social class.

Currently there are firms operating with bicycle messengers in cities all over the UK and Ireland, each with its own localised scale and identity. For example Purple Cyclone in Leicester have two bikes and are the sole bicycle operator in the city, Eagle Couriers in Edinburgh operate with fifteen people on their books and are in competition with two other firms in the city and Creative Couriers, London, have thirty at any one time with an estimated 200 other operators in the city employing between 1 and 50 people (IFBMA statistics, 2001).

It might be assumed that advances in telecommunications mean that the need for bicycle couriers is diminished. The British experience has, to some extent been mirroring developments in the United States. An American website, Transport Alternatives, records

As the 1980s ended, the recession hit, along with the proliferation of fax machines, making it difficult for the companies to pass these extra costs onto customers. This led to a significant shake-out, with many small companies going out of business or merging. (There is little data available on current numbers of companies and individual bicycle messengers.) Despite a perception that bike messengers are becoming obsolete, the industry has stabilized somewhat in the early 1990s, but with incomes and profits significantly lower than in the boom times of the 1980s.

(Transport Alternatives, 2001)

Moving into the C.21st a process of stabilisation has been consolidated by the corporatisation of the industry, in metropolitan areas at least. In March 1999 the London Evening Standard ran a report on the state of the messenger industry in the UK capital. Under the headline 'A New Kind of Wheeling and Dealing: Just the Job' the report assessed the impact of new technologies on messenger firms, and profiled the contrasts between pushbike, motorcycle and foot messengers. The increased use of ISDN, email and faxing, says the manager of one of London's largest courier firms, has meant that the industry has had to develop, but the 'biggest change in the courier industry is professionalism' (Rouse, 1999). This is an interesting observation as 'professionalism' is a word I have not often heard associated with the common perception of bicycle couriers. Bicycle messengers seem to be proud to be good at what they do, but I wonder whether they themselves would associate a word from corporate parlance to themselves. In fact

this tension between the business aspirations of managers and the maintenance of the 'courier' image - propagated to a large extent by couriers themselves - has surfaced in interviews with courier firm managers, working messengers and my own participant observation.

Despite the proliferation of new technologies, the short-term outlook for the industry appears to be relatively healthy. Rose Rouse wrote in the London Evening Standard

Another big change for couriers, especially motorbikes is the worsening traffic. Push-bikes, it seems, have the edge over motorbikes in terms of fast deliveries in the City. "There's been a subtle growth in pushbik-ing." Says Bob Doughty [Chair of the Dispatch Association], "because they can get around so fast. Motorbikes get stuck in the traffic." The traffic situation is described as a nightmare by Tony Marson. "Seven years ago, motorbikes wouldn't get stuck in traffic but if you're coming down Marylebone Road at 4.30pm, it could take you two hours to travel six miles. Seven years ago it took 25 minutes.

(Rouse, 1999)

a. Case study - The establishment and evolution of a bicycle messenger firm in the UK.

Hermes Messengers was established in 1997 and was Cardiff's first dedicated bicycle messenger service. I worked for Hermes on and off from between 1999 and 2003, and in that time have worked through three distinct phases of the business - establishment and independence, consolidation and growth and buy out and incorporation. In interviews with key figures in these three phases of the maturing of the business a clear picture of the organisation of a non-traditional, supposed 'new economy' industry emerges, and raises questions about the accuracy of the 'new economy' thesis.

Establishment.

The idea for the firm came from the experiences of its founder, Simon Eastcoat. After completing a degree in philosophy, he headed off to Europe with his bicycle. Whilst in Munich, Eastcoat answered a newspaper advertisement asking for bicycle messengers. He was given a job and worked in Germany for a year. He then travelled to Australia and found work as a messenger in Sydney. The ease with which he found employment as a

courier was in part due to the fact that he had experience of riding elsewhere. This realisation, that there is a floating population of people who could work as messengers in any major industrial city, motivated Eastcoast to establish a firm in Cardiff. Once back in the UK Eastcoast set about raising funds for his business idea. The initial funding came from a business initiative sponsor, the Prince's Trust, and a bank. Within 6 months the business was ready to start acquiring customers. The first couple of months were not as easy as Eastcoast had assumed, as he explains.

I didn't know what was realistic...I went about it the wrong way 'cause I said what do I need to do to make this money. Not what do I need to do. Let's assume I'm making this money, can I feasibly achieve this many jobs. I was along the line of 'I wanna make this money therefore I need to do this many jobs'. It was sort of the reversal of the way it should have been. I was just convinced that it was definitely gonna work and I was gonna be the one who made it work and whatever I had to do, I'd do it.

(Simon Eastcoast Interview Transcript - 19.03.2002)

The first months of the business relied heavily on family members and friends. The volume of work was very small with a major problem being how to attract clients.

We had one rider...well people knew we were opening, because I'd done this market research and spoken to people, and I think...I presume we phoned all of them on the first day and said 'look we're open ...

(Simon Eastcoast Interview Transcript - 19.03.2002)

With so little work there was little opportunity to employ any more than a couple of riders. This had two consequences for Eastcoast. The first being that it was impossible to raise the profile of messengering in Cardiff – and attract customers. The second was that the work was erratic often requiring Eastcoast to control and ride.

I had an interview in my 'dress up' clothes and by the time I left the office, they'd called and I had to run back here[the control office], get changed into my lycra and then go back and pick up the job. ***** [prestigious law firm] not a good drop at all. Peter [the regular rider] was off...he had to go to the dentist or something. So as soon as he..he left as soon as I came out of the meeting, so I had to run back here, get in the lycra, get back down there...It was not pro at all. But that was always..you know he'd hang out at home when he wasn't working and you could..you know we were having like 3...started at 3 jobs a day, 5 jobs a day.

(Simon Eastcoast Interview Transcript - 19.03.2002)

There were often times when there was no work for the lone rider, Peter, to do.

you could guarantee as soon as his kettle boiled another call would come in. Because he'd take a trip out to Roath, put the kettle on, just get settled and then he'd be out again. Every time.

(Simon Eastcoast Interview Transcript - 19.03.2002)

There is a sense of a lack of expertise and dogged determination when talking to Eastcoast about the establishment of Hermes. After about 3 months, a young rider who eventually took over the management of the business, Dan Paulen was employed. He recalls the rate growth at that time.

I joined Hermes 4 1/2 years ago. The set up then was a 2-man crew on the road. 1 rider doing all the collection and deliveries and 1 person in the office, actually dispatching, so it was just the 2. And when it was busy the despatch would then actually leave the office and do some work while taking calls on the road and dispatching at the same time[

(Dan Paulen Interview Transcript - 15.05.2002)

The ad hoc nature of the business at the time is highlighted by Paulen, when talking of how he got involved with Hermes:

DP - I stopped 1 of the riders on the road, Christen, and er then I asked him where was the office? Were they looking for any couriers and they were. Went to see William, 'cos he was in the office at the time, Simon's Dad, and William said to pop back and then I got to see Simon just after I'd rode into a wall, and had blood pouring from my knee, and told Simon that I rode 200 miles a week, that I was fit and he gave me the job there and then and I started the next day.

BF - *And what sort of money were you earning?*

DP - 10 to 17 pounds a day. Actually no, 5 to 17 pounds a day.

BF - *For how many miles would you say?*

DP - For about 60 to 70 miles a day.

BF - *...that was when the business was very, very young. Did you feel that it was growing at a rate that was manageable? Or did you feel that it was growing very slowly or very quickly? Because obviously within a year you had 3 or 4 riders...*

DP - Yeah, it was growing at a very slow rate. That was manageable (laughter)...you know what I mean? Very slow rate and that was manageable. More than manageable.

BF - *At what point did you think, as a rider, that it was going to be a success? I mean that sounds a bit tenuous to me as though[*

DP -

[I never thought where the future lies. I just wanted to ride. I just wanted to ride and I didn't really give a regard to what company policies and what company aims and prospects were. I just wanted to ride a bike. So regardless of how much money I made I still rode.

(Dan Paulen Interview Transcript - 15.05.2002)

The way in which the business was expanded was very much to Eastcoast's prescription. It evolved from a loss making to a profit-making venture at the same time as the community of couriers in Cardiff was beginning to establish a coherent sense of working identity. The practice of employing people – initially his father, then friends and finally like minded people - was developed as the number of riders needed to cover the jobs in the city grew. This kind of employment practice was very important for the evolving profile of bicycle messengers in Cardiff as it meant that Eastcoast exclusively controlled it. When asked about whom he employed Eastcoast said

Erm...Well we get all sorts. There's a lot of students and a lot of people who've just graduated, and a lot of people who are looking to fill in for a couple of months. A lot of people who are thinking of travelling come in. Then you get the people who just haven't really got a line and just want something to do...get a bit of money in. But I do...you know who's working here and it tends to be people with degrees, people who are intelligent and nice, middle class lads really. And that's not because they're the people that always come in, that's because they're the people we select. So it's a far broader cross section of people that are coming in.

(Simon Eastcoast Interview Transcript - 19.03.2002)

And when asked about the selection procedure he talks about the 'interview'

...I don't look at C.V.s and you can't really judge how well someone's gonna find their way round the city, in fact you don't even ask, normally, if they know the city particularly well, because it's not an issue. Anyone can do the job, but what you are looking for is someone who is prepared for the job and who will actually stick at the job because they fit into the team. That's what you're looking for. And because I've chosen everyone...what I'm looking for is someone I get on with. So there's no point with someone getting on with everyone else but not getting on with me. I'm thinking how easy is this gonna be if they're in the office and I'm in the office and no one else is here and I just have to see how they are and chat and get on with them, and am I gonna be able to get work out of them.

(Simon Eastcoast Interview Transcript - 19.03.2002)

The level of business had increased sufficiently by 1999 to keep 5 riders on the road per day – all earning between £25 and £40 for each day worked.

Despite Hermes obviously being Eastcoast's project, the lines along which he established the firm are almost identical to firms around Europe, the USA and Australia. The fight for work, when in competition with motorised messengers is keen, so the need to keep costs low is of paramount importance. This starts with the organisation of the pay. There are a few London messengers who are on a salary, but the vast majority of messengers in the UK are on commission-based pay. This means that riders will receive a certain amount of money per individual 'pick up', and the level of the pay is determined by the distance travelled and urgency of the job - many firms operate a premium service which will guarantee delivery within a certain amount of time. The other major saving for the messenger firm operators is that riders are predominantly hired on an individual sub-contracted basis. This means that the firms do not have to pay for the sorts of employment benefits afforded to other workers who are contractually employed - such as tax, sick or holiday pay.

This arrangement appears to be highly exploitative. Hiring workers to undertake a particularly hazardous job with very low wages and very few employment rights - accentuated by the employer's lack of responsibility for the people that they employ by way of hiring on a sub-contract basis, seems to benefit the employer alone. Interestingly there is very little resentment to this arrangement on the part of riders within smaller messenger firms, this does change as the firms become incorporated into larger, more general operations, as I shall illustrate presently. At the time of Simon Eastcoast's ownership of Hermes the riders hardly ever discussed the questions of contracts or employment rights. I think that the reasons for this are that firstly, everybody in the firm knew that Eastcoast was making barely enough money to keep operating, secondly that there was an appreciation that Hermes had provided them the opportunity to earn money as a bicycle messenger and, perhaps most importantly, this contractual arrangement actually suited the types of people working as messengers. Eastcoast's view is one that I have encountered throughout the fieldwork, namely that the level of flexibility afforded by having no contract or obligation is a two way process. The flip side of the employer taking no responsibility for the rider, the rider has no obligation to the firm. They can come and go as they please, do as many days as suits them and negotiate with the employer their own level of work. This is often equated with freedom, as Chris a messenger from London, says '...we're out on the road, we don't have a boss. It's like

we've got no fences. Very free to do what we want to do.' (Chris - London, Interview Transcript - 5.6.2003).

For a small operator, such as Hermes in the first couple of years of existence, there is a heavy reliance on the availability of young people willing to ascribe to the positive view of individual sub-contract status. Obviously the employment status and pay was not enough of a disincentive for any of the riders. Dave started working for Hermes a year after it had opened

BF - ...other people have said that they felt as though there was something quite romantic about it and that that was one of the things that attracted them to it. But that wasn't it for you.

DE - No, it became that. You know I started...the first year I loved it you know. Being outside all day. Because everything's new and it's just...and it was a real good laugh. And kind of that whole ethic of Pete's about trying to build a community of people and it wasn't just the job, you know we'd all go for a beer and it was great without a doubt... But the money was shocking at the start as well. You definitely didn't do it for money. I mean I remember coming home and earning 9 quid and stuff...and spending 8 on pasties or whatever. But it was such a laugh.

(Dave Edwards Interview Transcript - 19.02.2003)

The recruitment of young, relatively highly educated workers into the industry is not just the preserve of Cardiff's courier community. This is a demographic trend that is reflected across Europe. The thing that most have in common is that they are aware that they are working for a finite amount of time in an insecure industry. There are very few messengers who continually work for over ten years and the average time worked is about 3 years. In this respect there appears to be a corroboration of an emerging industry as following a 'new economy' model.

The informal nature of the relationships between those working within various businesses amplifies the informal nature of the sector. There is a feeling that bicycle messengers celebrate the informal nature of their industry. The idea of being 'outside' extends as far as traditional labour markets.

Consolidation and growth.

By the time that I joined Hermes messengers, the business had been established for about 2 ½ years. Although the money was still poor – an experienced rider would earn

between £20 and £35 a day – there were enough clients in Cardiff to keep 5 riders on the road each day. Importantly the business began to emerge into profit. After the initial phase of starting up, the work became known by some people as a means of gaining occasional employment, that is to say a regular stopgap for those whose other forms of employment provided a sporadic income. The profile of the employees broadly reflected the pre-conception that the work attracts predominantly ‘arts’ orientated people. This was explained to me in interviews as being for one of three reasons. The first was that bicycle messengering, because of it’s flexible nature, is ideal for artists, musicians etc. as these are people who find it very difficult to achieve a regular income for their trade, with messengering the rider can come and go almost at will – for example when they need to concentrate on their other form of income. The second is that there is a certain mindset required to be a bike messenger and that this mindset is most often found within artistic, educated, liberal people. The third is that because of the informal nature of the work people tend to get introduced to it through specific social or cultural networks, this - allied to the employment strategies of managers – maintains the predominant stereotype of bicycle messengering being populated by people from ‘arts’ backgrounds (this would include the academic arts).

The most striking thing about this second phase of the business was the realisation that it was working. Eastcoast was making enough money to employ Dan Paulen as a kind of second manager. They shared the controlling duties and the day-to-day running of the operation. After a while it became apparent that the customer, jobs and pay systems were not efficient enough. It was Paulen who set up the new systems, and essentially paid everybody. The next stage of the operation actually set Hermes apart from many of the other operators I have encountered. Eastcoast and Paulen started introducing contracts – with the benefits of sick pay and holiday pay. The incentive for introducing this scheme and the associated difficulties are explained by Eastcoast

- BF** – *That kind of coincided, remembering all this stuff is confidential, with do you remember all that National Insurance stuff? All the tax stuff? Did you deliberately do that all at once or was there a pressure from the revenue to get you to sort riders out in terms of tax? Or...*
- SE** – Errrrm there wasn’t...I felt a pressure but I was never had anything pushed on me by the revenue...er...but it was about the same time that riders went onto PAYE [Pay As You Earn taxation] that we changed to monthly because it introduces a lot more book work when you’ve got to do PAYE, so rather than do it twice a month we just shifted.

competitors and wound down. The fight for work in London is fierce and some traditional motor despatch operators are quite happy to see bicycle courier firms becoming extinct - it means less competition.

The reason it was so important for Hermes to be legitimised was to make it an attractive proposition for any potential buyer. There had been interest shown from several national multi interest courier firms who did not have a foothold in Cardiff and would have benefited from the client base – and good reputation that Hermes had in the city. Finally, after 5 years, Eastcoast sold Hermes as a going concern to Relay Couriers – a national organisation specialising in vans and motorcycles.

Buy Out and Incorporation.

Hermes was bought from the independent owner by Relay, a national courier firm specialising in motorcycle and van despatch in April 2002. The deal struck by Eastcoast saw him paid instalments for the firm for a year after the sale and a limited period of security for the riders. There was to be no change to working conditions to those agreed in the sale. The impact of the transfer of control was immediate. The ‘control’ office was moved from the centre of the city into an industrial unit, where the van and motorcycles were based, and the day to day management of the bicycles fell to Dan Paulen. I interviewed Dan one month after the takeover. At that time he was very optimistic about the future.

I’m free-er with Relay than I am with Hermes. Basically I’m free with Hermes in the Relay group, in so much as when they bought the company they gave me the whole aspect of the managerial part of the company...because Relay don’t know anything about bikes. They can only trust you to give you the responsibility and they trust what your ideas and views are, so they give you the ability to make your own decisions. I don’t have to go and ask Pete, I don’t have to go and ask another rider. I can make the decision and I can carry it out by myself. But with Hermes...Hermes before the merger there’s not the finances to expand and make changes in one day, when you should really take 6 months to make any big changes. In Relay you can do it within a week.

(Dan Paulen – Interview Transcript 15.05.2002)

Despite this optimism there were cultural as well as structural changes. I started the ethnographic stage of the study a month after the take over. When I had previously worked for Hermes there was very much a laid back, hippie feel to the control room -

reflected in the attitude of the other riders. The change in atmosphere was evident on my very first day. I noted in my field diary:

This was my first day at Hermes Couriers for 18 months or so. I was quite nervous and consequently decided that I would wear a crash helmet. The office/control base had moved since I had last worked and was now in the same building as the motorcycle and van courier firm that had bought Simon Eastcoast out a month ago. It was with some trepidation that I went through the East Tyndall Industrial Estate to the offices of Relay Couriers. I was met at the door by a stocky man with a variety of tattoos, smoking a fag who I assume thought that I was looking for work. I asked whether Hermes Bicycle Messengers' offices were anywhere near to which he replied that they were in this building but warned 'don't go in there, they're mad. They'll all die the way they ride.' I walked through a very smoky, grubby lounge area with three van drivers waiting for jobs sat chatting. They all said hello as I walked into Dan, an ex-rider who has been made operations manager of Hermes for Relay. He introduced me to the operations manager of the vans and motorcycles side of the business, Bear. Bear is a large woman, covered in tattoos who enjoys smoking and, I have since discovered, is not easily shocked. Dan decided to resurrect an old nickname and announced to the Relay people that 'This is Bender.' He told me to lock my bike up outside as they have been known to be stolen, and, as I was making my way outside, I overheard him telling the Relay people that I was 'alright' and that I was 'straight'. Dan obviously felt as though these were two criteria that needed to be fulfilled for a functional and functioning relationship with our motorised colleagues.

I have noticed that since the take-over of Hermes by Relay that the language over the air has really deteriorated, as has the level of homophobic and sexist banter. This is particularly curious as I know that at least two of the people using such language have got gay friends and have relatively liberal attitudes outside of work (I know that having friends who are gay does not prevent a person from having homophobic attitudes, but I wonder whether the language is part of the parlance of work, and that the couriers' *working* identities are more distinct from their *social* identities than I had thought).

I feel that the relationship between Relay and Hermes is still being established, and although people appear to be perfectly friendly towards each other, there is an undercurrent of pejorative humour that could be read in several ways - banter, explorative, boundary or territory marking. For example, at the end of the day it turned out that Hermes had had one of its busiest days ever, prompting the days controller, Garres Balles, to declare 'We're the dog's bollocks, we are!' I overheard one of the Relay controllers mutter 'Bag of bollocks, the fuck ups you've had today.'

(Field Diary 25.04.02)

This disquiet is reflected in an interview with Dave Edwards, who took on controlling duties after the takeover. The main bone of contention for Edwards centred around the

lack of knowledge Relay had about the way in which bicycle messengers worked. This was highlighted by the second move of the control room to an industrial unit at the bottom of one of the most dangerous roads in Cardiff.

It's a shame that it isn't the same organisation now with the amount of work that we've got now. Because we would...I think our standards have slipped since Relay, that's what annoys me most probably. Because our standards...we don't get things done as efficiently as we should do...

(Dave Edwards Interview Transcript – 19.02.2003)

Later in the interview Edwards mentions the deterioration of an often celebrated aspect of the work.

It has become more...before it was much more friends related, to me it has just become a job now. But that's probably just as much to do with the fact that it has deteriorated as a company.

I thought that it was inevitable that Pete was going to sell to someone, but I don't know. It's such a shame, because I'm sure that if Pete had got the opportunity he would have sold it somebody, just somebody. So it didn't matter who he'd have sold it to, it's just a shame that it was Relay because they're crap. No, but the courier business is shit anyway. There are such tiny margins of money and Relay are constantly cutting costs, I think that as a company, from what I can see they buy a lot of companies and they keep them on for that year and they don't care what happens after that year. I think that their incentive with Hermes was never to...you know they've got no interest in bikes, they've got no interest in anything. They wanted the client base to bolster their business, get that work out of it and we can see that with the way they've behaved with Paul and me. They don't class us as important, but that's got really nasty.

(Dave Edwards Interview Transcript – 19.02.2003)

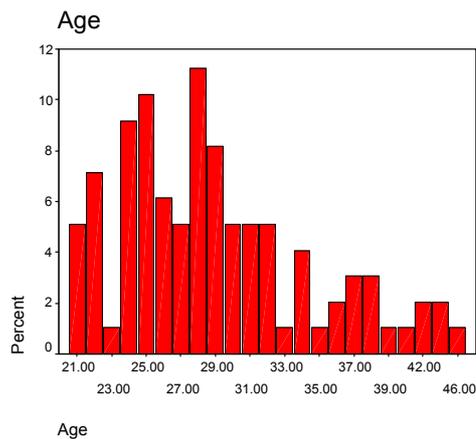
Since this interview there does appear to have been a stabilisation of Hermes within Relay. Having said this the earnings have slumped for the riders. People who were earning £50 to £60 per day are currently earning £40 to £50 per day. This may be to do with the summer months that are notoriously slow, or it might be to do with a slow down in the business. I was working during the summer of 2003 and noticed that some of the longer distance jobs that had been done by bicycle were now being handed over to van drivers. For the time being at least Cardiff still hosts a small population of bicycle messengers.

b. *Bicycle Messengers - 'New Economy' Workers?*

The place of bicycle messengers in the labour market might be more easily ascertained by looking at who is actually doing the work, and how that work is organised. The data for this section has been gathered in a survey conducted for this study over an 15 month period between the spring of 2002 and the summer of 2003. There have been a total of 154 responses. 98 of these are from people working in the UK and Ireland, 52 are from Europe and 4 are from the USA. The average age of the sample in the UK and Ireland is 29 years old, with a median and mode value of 28. This is maybe a little higher than many people might expect, and this does suggest that couriering is not an occupation populated entirely by young people new to the job market or by younger undergraduate students. The European and US average is slightly lower at 26 years and 9 months, still quite high.

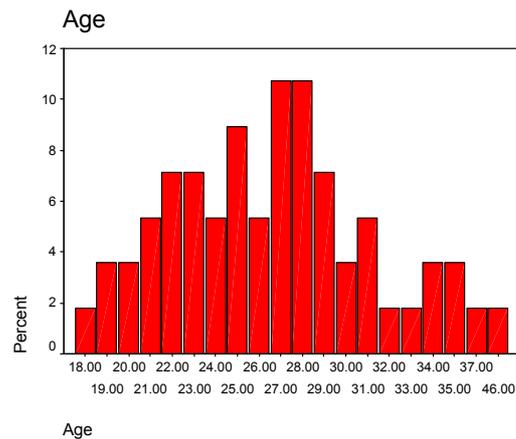
UK and Ireland - Age Profile

n=98



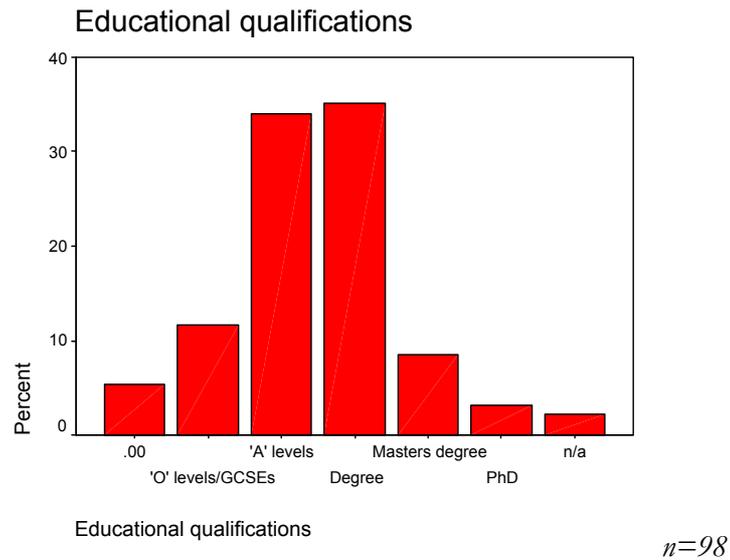
Europe and USA - Age Profile

n=56



The physical demands made on the body are an obvious reason for the age profile of the workforce, and it is interesting to note that in both of the figures above the majority of riders are between 25 and 31. There are very few people who work for over ten years, and those that do started working as messengers in their mid to late 20s. The length of time people in the sample have spent as messengers ranges from 1 month to 13 years, with the average being 3 years and 6 months. The average in London is about a year higher than in the rest of the UK. The reasons for this will be discussed in the section concerning culture and identity.

With the average age of messengers being around 28 and the length of time working being around 3 1/2 years there is a lot of time from school leaving age unaccounted for. The educational profile of the bicycle messengers shows a highly educated workforce. 35% of the sample have a degree, 8% have a masters degree and in total 80% are educated to 'A' level standard and above. This indicates that many messengers have spent an amount of time in post 16 non-compulsory education.



A breakdown of the previous employment records of the sample display an array of occupations and professions. On the survey respondents were given the opportunity to either tick 10 boxes listing areas of work, or accurately describe their former jobs. Many people have had more than one job before cycle couriering or have never had another job. It would appear as though an amount of people went straight to messengering after college. These elements are reflected in the figures in the following table:

Previous Occupations of Bicycle Messengers

n=215

<i>Retail/Service</i>	48	<i>Cycle Trainer</i>	2	<i>Scriptwriter</i>	1
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<i>Construction/Building</i>	28	<i>IT Design</i>	2	<i>Architect</i>	1
<i>Manufacturing</i>	18	<i>Civil Servant</i>	1	<i>Film Director</i>	1
<i>Art/Craft</i>	15	<i>Photographer</i>	1	<i>DJ</i>	1
<i>Teaching</i>	14	<i>Personal Trainer</i>	1	<i>Guitar Teacher</i>	1
<i>Sport/Recreation</i>	14	<i>Art Technician</i>	1	<i>History Tutor</i>	1
<i>Music</i>	12	<i>Physical Therapist</i>	1	<i>Software Development Technician</i>	1
<i>Finance</i>	6	<i>Dental Technician</i>	1	<i>Art Dealer</i>	1
<i>Agriculture</i>	5	<i>Barrister</i>	1	<i>Market Researcher</i>	1
<i>Catering</i>	4	<i>Courier Business Owner</i>	1	<i>Operations Manager</i>	1
<i>Social Worker</i>	4	<i>Aircraft Mechanic</i>	1	<i>Advertising</i>	1
<i>Barwork</i>	4	<i>Motorcycle Courier</i>	1	<i>Bookkeeper</i>	1
<i>Chef</i>	3	<i>Printer</i>	1	<i>Medicine</i>	1
<i>Armed Forces</i>	3	<i>Nutritional Counsellor</i>	1	<i>Promoter</i>	1
<i>Journalist</i>	2	<i>Landscape Architect</i>	1	<i>Bike Mechanic</i>	1
<i>Environmental Scientist</i>	2	<i>Mother</i>	1		

The age, education and previous occupation data describes a relatively young working population, highly educated and with a wide variety of previous occupations. In terms of the idea of flexibility these workers would seem to be conforming to a kind of 'new economy' model of various jobs, no fixed careers, possibly victims of creditation and perhaps a population of creative entrepreneurs. This last point is highlighted by the levels of self-organisation and peripheral activity that typifies, for many, the 'bike messenger scene'.

In an article entitled 'Kings* of the Road - *and queens too' Cass Gilbert summarises the popular perception of bike messengers:

The flexibility in couriership attracts a diverse range of recruits, including post-grads, art students, professionals and immigrants, as well as a whole host of European neighbours keen to spend a season or two in London.

(Gilbert 2003: 61)

This cosmopolitan mix is bound together by a cultural unity that is expressed through the work. The importance of this working cultural identity is that it establishes networks that are exploited by messengers in several ways. As has been said, the example of the establishment of Hermes Messengers illustrates the global nature of the culture. Peter Eastcoast's experiences in Germany and Australia inspired the establishment of the firm.

The ability to find work in most major cities in Europe, Australia, the United States, Japan and elsewhere – without having to adhere to local/national employment regulations – is celebrated within the community. This cultural identity also serves to consolidate networks within countries. During my fieldwork in London my status as a researcher was viewed with suspicion until it became clear that I had worked as a messenger. This informality simply accentuates the fluidity of the couriers' working environment. In this sense bicycle messenger work could be viewed as being a prime example of new systems of work and contemporary strategies for surviving in the 'new economy'. There has been a long-standing suspicion of traditional employment practices in bicycle messengering. The status of an independent sub-contractor is individualistic, and this individualism has long been resistant to organisation in the form of conventional unionisation. There have been attempts made, and the only successes have been established from within the community. The celebrated London Messenger 'zine', Moving Target, recently documented a brief history of bike messengers in London. This piece captured the essence of the attempts to organise.

1987 ...First rumblings of unionisation start led by Mark Covell AKA Sky who proposes the formation of the London Bicycle Couriers Union, and others who propose a more inclusively titled but also independent, Dispatch Industry Workers Union.

1989 Joe Cooper, the first London bicycle messenger known to have been killed whilst working, dies after a collision with an HGV on Pentonville Road. Hysteria and hype surrounding bicycle messengers (or cycle couriers) reaches it's height: leading a push by the Transport and General Workers Union, aided by seemingly inexhaustible interest from the media, Mark Covell AKA Sky whips up a storm of interest in the working practices of the courier business: airtime is jammed, column inches groan, questions are asked of ministers in the Houses of Parliament. The dreaded 'l' (for licensing) word is mentioned...Paralleling the development of Sky's more 'charismatic leader' style of union push, the hard core syndicalists of the DIWU build a membership base, and while T & G officials twiddle their thumbs up in their HQ on Green Lanes, the DIWA organizes branches, a rule book, subs and even some (relatively) successful strikes.

(Moving Target 2003: 6)

After a while the DIWA falls by the wayside.

1994 ...Adrian James, ex of the DIWA, starts a couriers' branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (AKA the Wobblies). Despite inspirational promotional material, and some funding from the IWW, the organization fails to get the support it deserves.

(Moving Target 2003: 11)

The latest attempt to organise messengers into a collective has been with the formation in 2002 of the London Bike Messenger Association (LBMA). It might be assumed that the failure of bicycle couriers to become involved with unions, or other representative associations, is indicative of a general lack of interest in collectivity. This, however, is not the case. The success of events concerned with the activity of messengering is ongoing. The number of large events, such as bike messenger championships, various Critical Masses and, on a more local scale, 'Alley Cats' illustrate the willingness of bike messengers to be involved collectively if there appears to be a direct connection between organisation, work and culture. (It should be noted that not all couriers would be involved with all or any of these types of events, but may be involved with other types of representative/political/recreational activities where their job is an integral component). It is no surprise that the 'Transport and Workers' Union were unable to get a foothold within the courier community, as they are part of something perceived as compromising the messenger world. The idea of 'counter culture' that McGlynn refers to is deeply entrenched within the culture and identity of bicycle messengers.

The bicycle messenger industry is serviced by relatively young people, who are statistically highly educated when considered against other manual labour occupations. This is a mobile workforce who have been employed in a variety of sectors, and for whom the trappings of 'traditional' employment have little relevance. Most are employed as independent sub-contractors, have very few employment rights and work for low, commission based wages. Rather than relying on formal channels of organising they tend to organise themselves. As an exemplar for a 'new economy' industry bicycle couriering appears to come close.

3. Challenge to the 'New Economy' Thesis.

Changes in the nature of work as part of rational historical contingency.

The assertions of proponents of the 'new economy' thesis have led some to look again at the evidence to support such a view. As has already been mentioned, it would be churlish to suggest that some aspects of work have not changed in the last thirty or forty years. The introduction of 'new technologies' have undoubtedly influenced working practice in various sectors, some might argue that the decline in the trades union influence has profoundly altered the labour market in the UK since the 1970s. However, some commentators have challenged the extent of change, suggesting that the 'new economy'

chronically over emphasises the degree of change in several key areas of the current labour economy. The ESRC 'Futures of Work' study has produced some results that demand a reappraisal of the 'new economy' as an accurate assessment of current trends. In one of the 'Futures of Work' seminar series, Robert Taylor says:

The most startling overall conclusion to draw from the material is that many of the commonly held assumptions about today's world of work need to be seriously questioned. In fact a disturbingly wide gulf exists between the over-familiar rhetoric and hyperbole we hear daily about our flexible and dynamic labour market and the realities of workplace life. The evidence simply doesn't sustain the view that we are witnessing the emergence of a "new" kind of employment relations, seen in the "end of the career" and "the death of the job for life". The shift away from permanent and full-time jobs to temporary, short-time or part-time work is exaggerated.

(Taylor 2002: 7)

This fundamental challenge to the 'new economy' orthodoxy is a natural extension of the conceptual scepticism illustrated by Anna Pollert in the early 1990s. She was concerned that the term flexibility was beginning to be misapplied as a catch all for changes in the labour market. The 'amorphous' nature of the term flexibility conceals, for Pollert, the real changes in 'the management of labour', 'effort intensification and cost controls, by conflating them into flexibility' (Pollert 1991: 3). It is the blanket assertion that there has been wholesale shift into a new economic paradigm that, for many, is troubling. As Taylor says 'No other subject arouses so much unsubstantiated generalisation, dogmatic assertion and sweeping prescriptions for change as does the world of work.' (Taylor 2002: 7). The Future of Work programme has discovered a high degree of corroboration with certain key findings in the 1992 Gallie and White 'Employment in Britain' survey. In many areas of work there has been little change, especially in parts of the labour market that are often written about by the espousers of the 'new economy' proposition. The influence of class, so often derided as increasingly irrelevant, is still of 'fundamental importance' as are 'occupational differences' (Taylor 2002: 8). Despite the undoubted changes in the manufacturing sector, and the diversification of the service economy, Taylor maintains that this

...shift in the composition of our labour-market has not altered deep-rooted occupational differences between manual and non-manual workers. Even technological innovation and the emergence of new forms of work organisation during the past ten years have only modified but not eradicated the saliency of class, which continues to play a crucial role in the evolution of work.

(Taylor 2002: 8)

The most compelling findings concern two cornerstones of the 'new economy' proposition - flexibility and job tenure.

As many as 92 per cent of workers held permanent employment contracts in 2000, compared with 88 per cent who did so eight years earlier. By contrast a mere 5.5 per cent said they were working on a temporary work contract of less than twelve months in 2000, compared with 7.2 per cent in 1992. There was even a correspondingly significant decline in the proportion of employees working on fixed term contracts (defined as lasting for between one and three years) with an actual drop from 5 per cent to 2.8 per cent when 2000 is compared to 1992. Such startling figures do not suggest Britain is rapidly developing a more flexible labour market when measured by the extent of employment stability. Indeed, the permanent job remains very much the overwhelming norm and this is true across every occupational category.

(Taylor 2002: 12)

Taylor also found that more people travel from home to a place of work, maintaining the traditional idea of 'a place of work' - home or tele-working is not becoming the norm.

We are led to believe that there is no longer such a thing as a 'job for life', and although the obvious question to ask is 'was there ever such a thing as a job for life?', there is a widely held perception that there has been a dramatic decline in length of job tenure over the last few years. But, as has been demonstrated by Kevin Doogan, this simply is not the case. Throughout the 1990s there 'has been a significant and widespread increase in long-term employment in the UK' (Doogan 2001: 422). Taylor reasserts this position with his survey findings.

The average length of job tenure recorded in different occupational categories reveals convincing evidence that British workers are actually experiencing longer and not shorter periods of employment in the same job.

(Taylor 2002: 13)

Other major findings of the Future of Work survey are that the British worker is much less satisfied in their job than ten years ago and that levels of stress and hours worked have risen across the workforce since 1992 (Taylor 2002: 10). Also that there has been a 'serious deterioration' in the sense of personal commitment' workers have to the

'company that employs them.' This is despite the perception that there is an emphasis from management on learning and skills and, as Taylor puts it, 'enhancing human capital'. (Taylor 2002: 11).

The overall conclusions of the Future of Work survey provides an unambiguous debunking of the new economy myth and 'bring into serious question many of the fundamental assumptions that lay at the heart of our current labour market strategies.' (Taylor 2002: 21). The obvious conclusion to be drawn from the work of Taylor and Doogan is that some have overstated the case and ignored evidence. This mirrors Pollert's work on flexibility. She provides an explanation that applies not only to flexibility, but to the new economy thesis as a whole:

The implication of a radical break from the past, in the pre-occupation of newness and change and the absence of a historical perspective on the significance of a historical perspective on the significance of work and labour market flexibility in previous periods, has consolidated a nostalgic picture of past stability and harmony and future stability and growth based on flexibility, compared with present flux and instability.

(Pollert 1991: 4)

Doogan insists that the feelings of insecurity amongst the general workforce should not distract research away from 'the social level' and the 'economic, political and institutional environments in which work takes place.' (Doogan 2001: 439).

Where does this leave the bicycle messenger industry?

It would appear, then, that the 'new economy' proposition is not an accurate reflection of the current labour economy situation, so where does this leave a prime example of the 'new economy' at work - bicycle messenger industry? A clue lies in Doogan's work in relation to the hotels, restaurant and catering industry. He highlights the anomalous nature of that industry in terms of the average age of its workers. He points out that the 'juvenescence' of the catering workforce runs against the age orientation in other industries and is 'quite untypical of broader demographic trends in the workforce.' (Doogan 2001: 430). The fact that hotels, restaurants and catering are not typical does not alter the general trend. This is also true for bicycle messengers. There have always been sectors that do not conform to 'normal' patterns of employment. During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s there were always people who worked with short-term contracts, or

were involved with areas of work that could not conform to ‘Fordist’ modes of production, especially in the arts. Doogan also points out that the ‘expansion of part-time employment has disproportionately drawn in younger age groups, particularly with the rise of student employment’ (Doogan 2001: 431). Bicycle messengering is notoriously flexible in terms of the ability of couriers to work as little or often as they please. The capability of the labour market to accommodate a degree of diversity is well known, there are many ways of organising work. However, the development of various facets from this diverse range is simply a process of historical contingency, not a wholesale separation from the past.

Bicycle messengers and the firms they work for are less ‘new economy’ than they appear at first glance. Although it is an unusual occupation in many ways, the economic reality is that they are generally brought into the mainstream labour economy by the van and motorcycle firms that have been buying them out over the past fifteen years. The example of Hermes, for instance, is that the cyclists actually work for Relay couriers. By absorbing the bicycle messengers into their workforce the motorised courier firms dilute the demographic make up of those working in the courier industry. The cyclists, when looked at in isolation conform to a particular set of characteristics associated with bike messengers but they are, in fact, a small number of workers in a much larger industry – an industry where the work is *not* determined by age or lifestyle. The process of corporate buy-outs introduces the bicycle messenger industry into the fold of ‘traditional’ employment, where it survives as an anomaly.

Conclusions

As has been previously mentioned, there have undoubtedly been big changes in the work that people do and the equipment they use to do such work, but the extent to which these changes can be justifiably described as totally distinct from previous periods is highly contentious. I would argue that changes in the labour market are perfectly understandable in the context of ‘traditional’ descriptions, and no more – or less – dramatic than at any other time since the industrial revolution, consider, for example, the influence of the telephone on the work of people in the 1940s and 1950s. There is a continuity that is always underpinned by capitalist modes of production and ownership of the means of production. Just because practices and commodities have changed does not mean that the underlying principles have changed.

This begs the question - why do so many people invest time in defining a 'new economic period'? I believe that there are two primary answers to this question. The first is that it is simply a question of degree. The amount of change required for some to consider the justified use of the sort of language that defines a paradigm shift from one set of economic principles to a new set is less than for others. The other reason is a little less obvious. In an article for the New York Times, Suzanne Kapner reported on the findings of the ESRC study:

The research, conducted by the Economic and Social Research Council, a government-financed agency, debunks several work-force myths, including the notion that gold-watch employee who spend their entire careers with one company are a dying breed, and that the new economy has created a transient work force made up of professional freelancers who jump from job to job.

Policy makers in Britain have promoted the idea of a more flexible work force, in which people held more part or temporary jobs and often worked from home, as one benefit of the new economy. The new type of employee even got a new name – the portfolio worker – and was supposed to benefit from a more flexible schedule and shorter hours.

(Kapner 2002: 11)

The key point from this quote is the role of 'policy makers' in the production of these ideas. Kapner's claim that there has been a promotion of these concepts is telling. Rather than there being an objective reporting of the contemporary nature of work, governments have been actively marketing certain 'realities' of employment in the C.21st. Doogan is equally sceptical of the part played by government in the maintenance of ideas which exacerbate feelings of insecurity:

In the absence of individualisation and destandardisation, the role of politics and ideology deserves scrutiny. The research findings considered in this article suggest the critical role of government intervention to bring about the marketisation of public services, the withdrawal or weakening of social protection system, and the opening of national economies to international competition. This perspective seeks to reconceptualise insecurity as 'manufactured uncertainty'. Insecurity is the outcome of a conscious strategy of government that arises from attempts to increase the productivity and competitiveness of the economy.

Expressed differently it serves to discipline the workforce through a variety of means, by altering the atmosphere in which wage negotiations take place, by changing the environment in which the

terms and conditions of contracts are specified, and dampening public expectations of what the state should provide by the way of social protection.

(Doogan 2001: 439)

In terms of the general state of employment in the UK, bicycle messengers are an unusual workforce, and that is the point. They are an anomaly embedded within current trends rather than indicative of radical change. The interesting point is that there survive industries containing pockets of workers who would appear to be examples of the 'new economy' in action. Although there have been huge changes in the labour economy over the decades the fundamental principles still apply (Harvey 1990: 343). As Doogan points out there is a political dimension to accepting the 'new economy' thesis, which is perversely used as a tool of regulation and control. It seems counter intuitive to claim that flexibility and 'upskilling' - so often touted as free-ing up the worker - are cynical methods of managerial control, but if workers are convinced that their place in the world of work is insecure, then what is the impetus for demanding more?

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