

“Skilled” discourses and the future of (un)employment: Technology, work, and  
“third sector” employment policy

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RUNNING HEAD: “SKILLED” DISCOURSES

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Abstract

In this paper we analyse a 600,000 word corpus comprised of policy statements produced within supranational, national, state and local legislatures about the nature and causes of (un)employment. We “map” these onto explicitly “third sector” proposals and propositions produced within the same policy domains. Our method of analysis synthesises approaches by Fairclough (1992 2000), Halliday (1994), and Lemke (1995 1998 1999 [1987] in press) to provide a ‘critical systems’ (Graham 1999) perspective on third sector discourses about the nature of being “skilled” and its relation to future opportunities for (un)employment. Informing third sector discourses are assumptions that life (time) is labour, and that, therefore, those aspects of life (time) not subsumed under the logic of the labour relation – those life-moments not formally rendered as labour – are wasted. We develop Lemke’s (1999 [1987]) notion of rhetorical formations as an analytical tool to highlight intra-Organisational variations and links between Orientational and Organisational aspects of meaning.

**Keywords:** Employment policy • Third Sector • Discourse analysis • Globalisation • Rhetorical formations • Critical theory

## Introduction

In this paper, we identify rhetorical and linguistic devices that provide functional force for third sector (un)employment policy discourses, or what we call more briefly here, *third sector discourses*. The terminology of the 'third sector' is mostly widely attributed to Jeremy Rifkin (1995: 239-43), although the 'volunteer' or 'not-for-profit' sector, which is roughly equivalent to Rifkin's third sector, is clearly a far older phenomenon (1995: 243). The terminology of the 'third sector', as it applies to (un)employment policy and 'welfare reform' in general, found resonances with the 'Third Way' movement that proliferated during the mid-1990s among traditionally progressive and leftist political parties throughout the west (see, e.g., Giddens 1998; Latham 1998; Marshall 2001). Regardless of how closely third sector discourses are aligned to the Third Way's approach to welfare reform, we leave the aside the broader contradictions of Third Way political movements here, except to note that they are adaptive responses by the traditional 'left' of western politics to the imperatives of 'globalisation' and 'neoliberalism', and are thus infused with all the contradictions and paradoxes associated with any attempt to adapt to those forces (cf. Fairclough 2000; Giddens 1998).<sup>1</sup> Our focus here is on functional aspects of third sector discourses deployed in redefining what it means to be *skilled*; what it means to be *unemployed*; the meaning of *welfare*; and the meaning of *work* in general. More broadly, by identifying these elements of third sector discourses, we also identify their historical roots and political significance.

Our analysis is organised around Lemke's (1999 [1987]) notion of 'rhetorical formations' (RFs), which we explain more fully in the following section. The organising RF of the corpus we analyse here takes the form of a **problem<sup>^</sup>solution** construction. But it should be noted that this

construction is closely linked to the social function of the policy genre more generally. Policy is the most overtly powerful genre of ‘the language of action’; its rhetorical features are oriented towards ‘moving us to act in the name of the good’ (Lemke 1995: 178). To move people to act in certain ways, contemporary policy makers are constrained by the conventions of our modernist political institutions, which are ostensibly bound by the tenets of ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’ (1995: 179). Put differently, today’s policy makers cannot merely command people to act in accordance with an overtly moralistic value system, as could, for example, the ‘divine right’ monarchies of mediaeval Europe (Ranney 1976). Our “modern” policy institutions are the product of a 400-year-long process which began with an adverse reaction to ‘divine right and royal prerogative’ (Ranney 1976). Throughout that process, the axiological (evaluative) tenets of rationality and reason have supplanted those of divinity. Consequently, successful legislation now depends upon legislators having a good reason for making new policy. And, according to the tenets of rationality, there is no good reason to make policy without identifying a particular problem that needs solving.

Unemployment is such a problem. Q&A?

In our economic system, people of working age who are not formally involved in wage labour of some sort, specifically those who depend on State welfare systems for their subsistence, are generally defined as being unemployed. Unemployed people are considered to be political and economic problems—they are treated by policy makers as a burden on State funding, a wasted economic resource, a threat to social stability, and a threat to themselves (Rifkin 1995: ch. 12). Paradoxically, throughout the global policy field, new technologies are presented as both a cause of increasing unemployment and a generative source of new employment opportunities (e.g. OECD 1997). Third sector discourses attempt to reconcile these two directly opposed assumptions. The

political implications of such efforts are most evident in the third sector discourses which turn upon definitions of what it means to be 'high-skilled' in a high-tech, '*global* labour market' (OECD 1997: 18).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines 'administrative' and 'managerial' personnel as 'highly-skilled', while agricultural, manufacturing, and clerical work are 'lower-skilled' (1998: 4). Trades people are defined as 'elementary workers' and are not considered to be skilled at all (1998: 4). A common assumption throughout the corpus we analyse here is that assumption. Consequently, most of the multilateral and national policy in OECD countries concerning trends in employment emphasises an increasing need for people to fill '*high-skill* occupations such as administrative, managerial, and professional workers' (OECD 1998: 3-4).

By focusing on the deleterious effects of new technologies on traditional employment patterns, while at the same time promoting their and how volunteerism, education, and other third sector activities can help to build national, local, and individual 'skill sets'.

#### A critical systems theoretical approach

Our perspective is informed by a 'critical systems' approach that assumes human communities are living systems situated in historically specific relations of production and power (Graham, 1999). We also assume that human meaning-making is material action with material

effects, and is ultimately and most overtly coordinated in language, by which we mean written and spoken words (Graham 1999). In language – as with other sociocognitive processes (like images, music, and dance) – people render their ‘ecosocial systems’ (Lemke, 1995) socially meaningful. However, in our view, it is language that ultimately coordinates the entire network of interactions and processes through which humans produce, reproduce, and transform their dynamic systems of meanings (Graham 1999). Such meaning systems also define and delineate specific social domains, or discourse communities.

Here, we highlight a dynamic social “map”, or ‘topology’, the contours of which are thrown into analytical relief by way of a specific ‘rhetorical formation’ (RF), taking the form of **problem<sup>^</sup>solution** (Lemke 1999 [1987]). Policy authors deploy this RF to legislatively subsume and conflate disparate and ostensibly “distant” social domains (e.g., family and state; mental health services and child care; coastguards and nursing mothers). The **problem<sup>^</sup>solution** RF draws its force from intertextually derived (and globally inculcated) assumptions about the nature and value of the (un)employed; presuppositions about the respective moral, intellectual, and social predispositions of employed and unemployed people; an unmitigated and uncritical enthusiasm for new technologies; the meaning of what it is to be “skilled”; the imperative in the current climate to subsume all human activity outside formal systems of production as some form of productive labour; and, as a corollary, an added impetus to the current tendency to subsume the most fundamental and intricate aspects of human experience under the formal relations of commodification (Graham 2000).

A note on method: The relationship between RFs, Orientational, and Organisational meaning

Our analysis draws most directly on methods outlined by Lemke (1995 1998 1999 [1987] in press) which are organised around the concepts of Presentational, Oriental, and Organisational meaning (1995: 41-42). To briefly reiterate the broader method: Presentational meaning is concerned with how a specific community typically describes and relates elements of its world—their ‘explicit descriptions as participants, processes, relations and circumstances standing in particular semantic relations to one another’ (Lemke, 1995, p. 41). Oriental meaning is concerned with how a discourse community evaluates its world—how it orients itself attitudinally to other discourse communities, and to the Presentational content of its own meaning-making systems (p. 41). Organisational meaning is concerned with the ‘relations between elements of the discourse itself’ (p. 41), or that which provides a text with coherence.

Of course, these different aspects of meaning “happen” at once in any given instance of meaning-making, and are best seen as interdependent conveniences for analysis. But difficulties arise in the analysis of “third sector” and “skilled” discourses because they are the same ‘text-types’ and ‘text formations’ (Lemke 1999 [1987]) as “globalisation” policy discourses—they are produced within the same registers and deploy the same genres (policy production institutions; technocratic “globalisation” policy statements); presented in the same modes; deploy fairly much identical lexico-grammatical resources (cf. McKenna and Graham, 2000; Weiss and Wodak, in press); and are thus fairly much indistinguishable in their Presentational and Oriental aspects.

An Organisational perspective will reveal that textual coherence derives from more and less enduring complexes of ‘intertextual thematic formations’ (ITFs) (Lemke 1995: 42-48). An analysis thus focused aims at grasping how a discourse community’s ITFs about a given aspect of the world are historically inculcated, reinforced, and elaborated whilst comprehending that discourse

communities typically draw upon an array of “submerged” ITFs to provide coherence for the meanings being analysed. For that reason, it is the least “visible” aspect of meaning. But because the Presentational and Orientational aspects of “third sector” discourses are practically identical to “globalisation” discourses generally, this least “visible” perspective provides us with the clearest picture of “third sector” discourses, which are “about” solving unemployment in the context of “globalised” nation-states. Intra-Organisational variations are, we argue, most readily explained in terms of RFs. The difference in Organisational analyses from the level of RFs, as opposed to ITFs, can be viewed in terms of temporality (Lemke, in press): “third sector” and “skilled” discourses are quite impossible without the pre-established, longer-term inculcation of globalisation discourses.

RFs link Organisational with Orientational meaning, as well as with genres (Lemke, 1999 [1987]). They appear to “do” a lot of work in the ‘hybridisation’ (Fairclough 1992 2000) of smaller and larger “units” of meaning made within smaller and larger social units across shorter and longer ‘time-scales’ (cf. Lemke in press). In the context of “third sector” policy discourses, the time-scales, meaning “units”, and social contexts being discursively manipulated and hybridised are quite massive. Predictably, if not by necessity, what appear as Organisational ITFs of coherence in “globalisation” discourses are also resources from which “third sector” RFs draw Organisational and hybridising force.

RFs are not genre-specific, and although certain forms are more likely to “show up” in certain genres they can ‘occur in texts of many, very different’ types (Lemke 1999 [1987]).

Rhetorical formations are semantic structures of the sort identified by Mann and Thompson, 1983, as ‘relational propositions’ ... They include such structures as: Cause-Consequence, Instance-Generalization, Thesis-Evidence, Thesis-Example, Proposition-Evaluation,

Proposition-Contradiction-Alternative, Action-Motivation, Problem-Response, Problem-Solution, Preview-Argument, Argument-Summation, and many others. (Note that rhetorical formations commonly are, but need not be, binary, two-part structures.)

[...]

Rhetorical formations constitute an intermediate level of semantic structure in texts between generic structure and lexicogrammatical structure. The semantics of genre elements and their relations are specific to one separately defined genre or another. Lexicogrammatical resources enable us to make semantic distinctions which are potentially relevant in all text-types. The elements and relations of rhetorical formations are neither, though clearly which rhetorical formations are likely to occur as realizations of a particular element in a genre structure may be more predictable than are its grammatical structures. (Lemke 1999 [1987])

Such a feature is not without the suggestion of paradox: semantic devices which are far more stable than lexicogrammar, less reliant on genre for semantic salience and coherence-generating capabilities, and less predictable (in terms of the genre in which any given RF might “appear”) than are genre-specific ITFs. But it is precisely these paradoxical features that give RFs their analytical and practical force.

By analysing RFs in the policy field, we can see that they not only function as devices to ideally link and de-link ‘action genres’—for instance, those pertaining to the institutions of education, “civil society”, and business—they actually function, by legislative coercion, to link and de-link the institutions within which particular genres are produced, reproduced, and transformed (cf. Lemke 1995: 31-32; 1999 [1987]). Further, not only does a focus on RFs highlight dynamic, ‘hybridising’ links between genres and their social contexts, it also highlights how RFs forge linkings

and de-linkings of genre-specific Organisational and Oriental meaning systems (Lemke 1999 [1987]).

The main Organisational ITF which pervades the corpus (new technologies, free trade, and a global knowledge economy create new forms of work and destroy old ones) becomes – in all cases – the central explanatory theme for the (un)employment **problem**, as well as the source of its **^solution**. Once it has been established (or presupposed) that a lack of skills in relation to new technology is the main **problem**, the doors of society are thrown wide open to an imperative for the **^solution** of “upskilling”. It also becomes evident that the very nature of policy-making institutions, i.e. as technocratic ‘problem- solving, - identifying, and -brokering’ institutions (Reich 1992: 183), provides a functional and generic imperative which, by definition, draws upon the **problem^solution** RF as a basic Organising principle. As technocratic institutions embedded in “globalised”, “democratic” societies, solving problems like unemployment is a process which is heavily constrained by generically Oriental imperatives (objectivity, value-free scientific explanations, etc). Thus **problem^solution** functions as a kind of macro-RF which is “reinforced” by the other RFs we identify in our analysis below.

### Analysis

#### Inside the discourses of Globalisation: Contextualising the “third sector”

We begin our analysis by situating “third sector” and “skilled” discourses within ‘globalisation’ discourses (cf. McKenna and Graham 2000; Weiss and Wodak in press). Our annotation system follows the broader analytical method: elements which foreground significant Presentational aspects, particularly significant ‘thematic condensations’, (Lemke 1995:

61) are underlined; Orientationally "weighted" elements are double underlined; and Organisationally "linked" elements are marked in **bold**. Often, as might be expected, these intertextually "weighted" and "linked" elements overlap, and in such cases our annotations reflect this. Here is an example:

[1] There is an urgent need for **us to** draw on our skills in developing online educational tools and to **collaborate** across State borders **with business** to reflect business needs. [au\_7: 4,199]<sup>2</sup>

In [1] we see the typically panicked Orientational tone (urgency, Necessity) that accompanies legislative exhortations, typical of globalisation discourses, to realign education systems to commercial needs (Graham forthcoming). We also see a **problem^solution** RF linking Orientational with Organisational meaning: an urgent need compels us to collaborate with business, implicitly to "cure" unemployment, by catering to business needs.

Similar Organisational elements can be seen in the following UK text which promotes a 'third sector' (or 'social economy') for London:

[2] **Globalisation, technology, demographic changes, the rise of social, ethical and environmental considerations** and **changes to the nature of work are creating new patterns of wealth creation** where successful economies of the future will be radically different from those of the past. In particular, the emergence of the 'weightless' economy means that people are increasingly purchasing services which might best be described as "relational services". **The trend towards the knowledge economy will**, as the DTI points out, **require us to focus on** 'future' thinking for continued prosperity. This requires moving beyond simply addressing **challenges of today** and taking action now **to deliver future prosperity for all**. We already know that the skills needed for work are changing, that the shape of work is changing, that the composition of the workforce is changing and that the contours of careers are **changing**. [uk\_1: 736]

Text [2] clearly displays typical features of technocratic "globalisation" discourses

(McKenna and Graham 2000). Presentationally, very broad and abstract ‘thematic condensations’ (Lemke 1995: 61) are attributed with Agency in relation to other such condensations [Globalisation, technology, demographic changes, etc, ARE CREATING new patterns of wealth creation; successful economies of the future; etc]. Orientationally implicit and explicit evaluations for the Inevitability, Significance, Necessity, and Desirability of certain elements [wealth creation; radically different; require us to; continued prosperity; etc] are propagated at varying levels of abstraction, drawing heavily on the intertextual ‘evaluative patterns’ of neoliberal theory for Orientationally and Organisational coherence (cf. Graham forthcoming; Lemke 1998). Organisationally, we see an age-old, although unstated, ITF, a deeply embedded mythico-religious ‘cultural narrative’ (Lemke, 1999 [1987]). An authoritative We [legislators], urgently compelled by visionary premonitions [we already know] and immutable and exogenous forces, presented as technocratic “matters of fact”, urge sacrifices now in order that humanity is delivered into the promised land at some indefinite point in the future [Conditions require us to go beyond challenges of today to deliver future prosperity for all].

Within the contemporary policy register, these are familiar, recurrent, well-documented, and, by now, somewhat unremarkable features (cf. Fairclough 2000; McKenna and Graham 2000; Weiss and Wodak in press). We reiterate them here to acknowledge their continued and growing predominance, but also to situate “third sector” and “skilled” discourses within this overarching set of features. Our approach in the following is to define and foreground an Organisationally, Orientationally, and Generically salient complex of RFs in “third sector” and “skilled” policy discourses. The RFs are deployed in such a way as to warp the social “distance” and relations between institutions and other social domains, conflating what were formerly disparate aspects of

social space. The effect is to bring more and more dimensions of human experience under the auspices of bureaucratic control and formal subsumption.

### Defining the third sector

Policy definitions of the third sector are typically vague and often patronising. It is a sector which first appears as an expression of passionate emotions, civic sentiment, or sheer idealism. However, the very vagueness of the "sector" and its idealistic motivations provide more than sufficient rationales for formalising what were previously informal relationships:

[3] The third sector is large and amorphous, is driven by passionate social concerns, **does not** necessarily **speak with one voice**, and is mostly dependent for its existence **on government funding**. As many third sector managers have a limited understanding of government process, **they need to be trained** before they can establish and sustain an ongoing relationship. Also, because of the imbalance in power, agencies are more likely to shift their goals and objectives in order **to meet government funding criteria** rather than engage government in a debate **to achieve common policy goals**. Therefore, **governments need to "invite the third sector to the table"** when programs are developed, **provide support to agencies** to make government more transparent, and be proactive in developing collaborative relationships. [ca\_2: 25,220]

This Canadian text [3] presents a complex of **problem^solution** RFs. The "third sector" (which is part of the **^solution** side of the macro-RF in the corpus!) is firstly defined as a complex of **problems**: it is large and ill-defined (amorphous); emotional and impractically oriented (driven by passionate social concerns, intertextually opposed in the policy register to more "practical" economic issues); incoherent (it has no singular or identifiable opinions and thus does not necessarily speak with one voice). Worst of all, it runs on government funding, but its managers are ignorant of government process. Here, the "skilled" **^solution** side of the RF is introduced: third

sector managers need to be trained to achieve common policy goals "with" government. This is a matter of experience for the policy authors: if governments simply "invite the third sector to the table", "it" becomes "part" of the government process, even whilst being formally and actually separated from the sphere of government responsibility.

For the most part, though, the third sector (otherwise called the 'civil', 'voluntary', or 'non-profit' sector, or, more vaguely, 'the social economy'), is little more than a euphemism for people who are not formally employed for whatever reason:

[4] **We do provide an alternative to unemployment, and we have called it Working Proudly. We are suggesting that we ought to be creating a third sector for the third millennium. We have a pie graph which shows that as people move in and out of the traditional public and private sectors, they will move into a third sector. In other words, as restructuring and reform take place in both the private and public sectors, people will move into some other—something new. And that is what we need to create. [au\_carr1: 905]**

As is often the case in discussions of neologisms and euphemisms concerned with the neoliberal "restructuring" of global human relations, the more precise the explanation, the less plausible the whole concept becomes. The speaker, a local government "CEO", defines the third sector as that which people move into when they move in and out of the traditional public and private sectors. The best alternative to unemployment is Working Proudly: a euphemism instead of a job; doublespeak and cheap labour programs in place of a liveable social safety net or "real" employment. This is also a clear example of the formalising function of bureaucracy: we need to create something a pie graph shows as already existing.

History and heteroglossia: Today's "third sector" and some precedents

Today’s orthodoxy claims that State-funded welfare programs (at least for non-corporate “persons”) are not the answer. As in the wake of the Elizabethan Poor Law, welfare programs are construed in policy circles as being detrimental to the welfare of people, and to society as a whole (cf. Marx 1976: 882-883). Such programs provide no feasible **^solution** to the **problem** of unemployment. They only encourage indolence and deviance. Work is the only possible **^solution**:

[5] **The participants would receive the allowance** under a community award. They would get **training**. They would get **real life skills**. They would get **social interaction and higher self esteem**. They would have **career opportunities, mentoring** and, potentially, graduation to either the public or the private sector.

I come to the funding of such a scheme. Currently, **there are direct costs associated with unemployment, such as the dole**. There are also indirect costs: the **extra pressure on our health and welfare and on law and order**. [...].

Our conclusion is: growth alone will not solve unemployment. The choice for Australia is to continue with the same—that is, unemployment—or look for an alternative. I would like to quote from Jeremy Rifkin. In 1995, he said: As for the increasing number for whom there will be no jobs at all in the market economy, governments will be faced with two choices:

- ? finance additional police protection and build more gaols to incarcerate **a growing criminal class OR**
- ? finance **alternative forms of work** in the third (civil) sector. [au\_carr1: 1,409]

Here, in the fully-foregrounded Orientational dimension of third sector discourses, RFs clearly “work” to link Organisational and Orientational meanings, in this case by “chaining” **benefit^cost—problem^solution—cause^consequence** RFs. Working Proudly provides the “unemployed” with potential **^benefits**: money, training, real life skills, social interaction, higher self-esteem, career opportunities, mentoring, and graduation to a “real” job. But there are already actual costs—direct costs, such as the dole (what welfare payments are called in

Australia). But there are far more sinister indirect costs. Here, RF “chaining” is deployed to activate one “side” of a **problem^solution** RF. The authors splice the **cost^benefit** construction by recasting indirect costs as social problems. They do so by drawing on the Orientational un-Desirability and un-Acceptability of the indirect costs (cf Lemke 1998: 36), and by “activating” a **cause^consequence** “link”: there are increased **costs** to health and law and order systems, implying that unemployment (**cause**) inevitably leads to increased levels of sickness and criminal behaviour (**^consequence**). Health is left aside, as the **cause^consequence** link between unemployment and crime is foregrounded. That supplies Organisational coherence for the proposed **^solution** by an Orientationally derived imperative: Governments are left with only two possible **^solutions** to unemployment. In fact, there is only one. One “**^solution**” is actually (Orientationally) a **^consequence**—because it **causes** criminality, unemployment requires us either to pay for additional police protection and more gaols (**^consequence**). Thus the only real **^solution** is to pay for alternative forms of work: either we put the unemployed to work in the “voluntary” sector or lock them up. Organisational coherence derives from the fundamentalist Protestant axiom: “the Devil makes work for idle hands”.

From this obdurate ethic, one could argue (as Carr implicitly does) that economic growth actually creates unemployment, poverty, indolence, and crime. Third sector discourses – those which essentially euphemise a program of forced, low-wage labour in the guise of social welfare – draw most overtly on late-17<sup>th</sup> – early-18<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Orientations. To exemplify: in order to avoid the Elizabethan Poor Law, an early form of “the social safety net”, a group of wealthy English farmers

devised a skilful mode by which all the troubles of executing this Act might be avoided. They

have proposed that we shall erect a prison in the parish, and then give notice to the neighbourhood, that if any persons are disposed to farm the poor of this parish, they do give in sealed proposals ... of the lowest price at which they will take them off our hands; and that they will be authorised to refuse to anyone unless he be shut up in the aforesaid prison. [...] you are to learn that the rest of the freeholders of the county ... will very readily join in instructing their members to propose an Act to enable the parish to contract with a person to lock up and work the poor; and to declare that if any person shall refuse to be so locked up and worked, he shall be entitled to no relief. This, it is hoped, will prevent persons in distress from wanting relief, and [thus] be the means of keeping down parishes. (Blakey 1855 cited in Marx 1976: 882) <sup>3</sup>

In other words, the “reformationist” authors are proposing that a “third sector” agent take the poor off the hands of the Parish, put them to work them, and lock them up for the benefit of society.

Third sector discourses are mediaeval in content and origin. They are also utterly Puritanical in Organisational and Orientational terms, whilst being definitively technocratic and up-to-date in their Presentational aspects. For example, a recent initiative of the Australian Federal Government calls for ‘Community Work Coordinators’ to act as “third sector” agents in the current Work for the Dole scheme. The idea is that people ‘are contracted to develop Work for the Dole projects/activities and manage the placement of eligible job seekers into those projects/activities’ and are ‘contracted through a competitive tendering process by the Commonwealth to manage work experience opportunities’ (DEWRSB 2001). Anyone who refuses such work (which is somehow not “real” employment) loses their welfare payments. The archaic Orientational logic finds its apotheosis in Third Sector Recycling (TSR), a Canadian company that specialises in recycling human rubbish, both metaphorically and literally. It promises ‘to provide life skills training,

job search training, academic upgrading and work experience to individuals receiving Social Assistance’, all this while “processing and diverting” ‘approximately 27,700 tonnes of garbage from landfill’ per year (TSR 2000).

“Skilled” discourses: Technology, education, and the “third sector”

In the following [6], the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) formally defines the meaning of “high skilled”:

[6] **“High skilled” workers** are defined here as those in the following occupational groups: Legislators, senior official [sic] and managers (ISCO-88 Group 1); professionals (ISCO-88 Group 2); technicians and associate professionals (ISCO-88 Group 3). **All remaining occupational groups are** classified as **“low-skilled”**. [oecd\_9: 11,133]

This chain of mutually supporting, though quite distinct, RFs (**general^particular** and **generalisation^attribution**) defines “skilled” in such a way as to set up an impenetrably circular logic. There is no room for inept legislators and managers or gifted gardeners and carpenters. By default, the former are “high skilled” and the latter are “low-skilled”. The **general^particular** taxonomising RF deployed here is typically technocratic (McKenna and Graham 2000: 231-234). It shows how Orientational and Organisational meanings can reinforce each other through the chaining of RFs. The definition starts with a nominalised Attribute^Carrier construction (semantically dominated by the Attribute) as a **general** category, as if it were a Token (a Thing to be defined) rather than a pre-defined Thing. It then sets nominalised, ostensible **particulars** (those in particular occupational groups) in subordinate relation to the **general** category. The occupationally stratified definition of “high-skilled workers” deploys taxonomic strategies of social hyponymy (class superordination) and a socially exhaustive meronymy (class composition and

constitution) at the same time.

With such a definition in place we can say that “Legislators are a kind of high-skilled worker” (hyponymy); or, we can say that “Legislators, senior officials, managers, professionals, technicians, and associate professionals compose the entire class of high-skilled workers” (meronymy). This conflation is reinforced in the second sentence, which deploys the quite different RF of **generalisation^attribution**. A **generalisation** derived from the particularisation of high skilled workers (i.e. all other occupational groups) automatically carries the residual and opposite **^attribution**: All remaining occupational groups <Carrier>/are/<Attribute> low-skilled. This combination of **general^particular** and **generalisation^attribution** achieves a seemingly self-evident, symmetrical definition which is circular from the start.

The semantically circular, self-serving mode of classification evident in [6], so typical of technocratic discourse (McKenna and Graham 2000: 240), provides Organisational coherence for the following:

[7] When **new technologies** are introduced into production processes, it is generally thought that, overall, they **reduce** the **demand for low-skilled workers** and **increase** the **demand for high-skilled workers**. This complementarity between technology and high-skilled workers at the level of the firm can be explained by reference to three intuitive arguments. The first is that high-skilled workers adapt more easily to technological change than low-skilled workers. The second is based on the observation that many new technologies perform repetitive tasks traditionally carried out by low-skilled labour, or workers without extensive training, such as routine assembly operations. The third is that computer technologies increase the **productivity of high-skilled workers** more than low-skilled workers, **so that firms match high-skilled workers with new technology**. [oecd\_9: 5,302]

New technologies are cast as the active entity in this complex of **cause^consequence** and **cost^benefit** RFs. New technologies appear (from nowhere) as the **cause** of reduced

demand for low-skilled and increased demand for high-skilled workers. Those increases and decreases in demand are presented as a **^consequence** of technology. They are also a **cost** to low-skilled workers and a **^benefit** to high-skilled workers. Later, we are told it is firms that match high-skilled workers with new technology. But that is construed as a natural **^consequence** of new and advanced technologies because the authors take for granted that computer technologies increase the productivity of high-skilled workers more than low-skilled workers because the technologies “act” to replace the “low-skilled”. In other words, if a machine can replace a person who performs a given set of tasks, that person is definitively “low-skilled”. Not surprisingly, the productivity of the low-skilled is lowered by new technology because they are suddenly outside the production process. The **^consequence** and **cost** sides of the RF chain in [7] links Orientationally with the central **problem^solution** RF of the corpus: namely, the un-Desirable **^consequences** and **costs** of (un)employment for the “low-skilled”, and, via welfare **costs**, for society as a whole.

“Education, training, and lifelong learning”: **^solutions** for “skills shortage” problem

The more complete the discursive conflation of technology, “the global knowledge economy”, the meaning of being “skilled”, education levels, unemployment levels, and society in general, the further policy authors can extend the logic of their **problem^solution** RFs to encompass larger aspects of society, most notably via the shibboleths of education, training, and lifelong learning:

[8] In the longer-term, **meeting demand for high skilled workers will require sustained investments in S&T [Science and Technology] education**, not just in **compulsory education** but also **on-job training and life-long learning**. Improving the adaptability of the public research sector to changes in research and employment is also important. In all these areas, governments must increasingly partner with industry, social partners and civil society if

they are **to provide workers with the right S&T skills for the knowledge-based economy**. [oecd\_4: 611]

Here, the **problem** becomes part of the corpus's macro-**^solution**: meeting demand for high skilled workers. The **^solution** (to a **problem** presupposed in the "technology creates new types of employment" macro-**^solution**) is compulsory education, training, and life-long learning, under which government, industry, social partners and civil society are conflated as partners (as if these were ever discrete categories!). The **^solution** is far-reaching and pervades the corpus. As the term and its usage suggests, lifelong learning encompasses most of human experience:

[9] **Lifelong learning** is considered to be a very broad and comprehensive idea. It **includes all formal, nonformal and information learning** - whether intentional or unanticipated - **which occurs at any time across the lifespan**. [au\_15 4,733]

In [9], the **^solution** to (un)employment is translated into an exhortation for all of human experience (everything people do until they die) to be brought into a formally codified system of lifelong learning so that the labour force can be rendered more flexible and "mobile". This is both a **^solution** and an intertextually derived **^outcome**.

We can see the **objective^outcome** RF deployed more overtly in an extract from the International Monetary Fund (IMF):

[10] This study also analyzes how **workers with different skill levels respond to local labor demand shocks**. That question is addressed using a unique data set on working-age population, labor force, and employment for five educational groups (ranging from the illiterate to the college-educated) over 1964-92 for the 50 Spanish provinces. The **high-skilled** are found to **migrate very promptly** in response to a decline in local labor demand, whereas the **low-skilled drop out** of the labor force **or stay unemployed for a long time**. In other words, the results suggest that labor market adjustment is particularly sluggish among the low-skilled. **Therefore, labor market and other structural policies should devote**

particular attention to promoting the mobility of the low-skilled. [imf\_2: 784]

**Problem**<sup>^</sup>**solution** and **objective**<sup>^</sup>**outcome** are very closely linked semantically within the contemporary policy genre because of its managerialist Orientation (Graham forthcoming).

Proposed **^solutions** become policy **objectives** with specified **^outcomes**. In [10], the definition of "skilled" is presupposed as being related directly to formal education levels. High-skilled, well-educated persons are not a **problem**. But the sluggish, low-skilled, illiterate, and therefore socially immobile need to be legislated for—"they" are the natural objects of employment policy **objectives**, all of which are naturally formulated around "skills" re-education for whole classes, communities, regions, States, and Nations. Being high-skilled is an **^outcome** of lifelong learning, or life-experience in general.

#### Colonising and codifying human experience

The **problem**<sup>^</sup>**solution** links between depleted communities, "low skills", education, and the "third sector" are made explicit in the following passage from the leader of the aptly named Australian Labor Party:

[11] Today about 2.6 million people - one in every five adults - **works** for more than four hours a week in some form of voluntary activity. The range of services they provide is absolutely huge. They help and counsel people suffering from the whole gamut of physical and intellectual handicap [sic]. They help rescue ships at sea, and swimmers on our beaches. They protect kids from injury and advise nursing mothers. They help in preserving the environment, mentoring the young, providing food and shelter for the homeless, visiting the old and disabled, and seeing kids across the road. ... Volunteers form what has been called the third sector of our economy, alongside private enterprise and the public sector. Often voluntary organisations are able to do their work more cheaply than either the public or private sectors - they use volunteers, and often have the expertise the other sectors don't have. In addition, they can often be more effective - being closer to the ground, they understand community needs better. In an age

where all the discussion has been about the loss of a sense of community, these are the people who **have simply and quietly, gone about establishing their own meaning**, and **their own connection**, with **their own community**. [au\_2: 1,441]

This is a massive **general<sup>^</sup>particular—generalisation<sup>^</sup>attribution** chain. The third sector (**general**) comprises // a huge number of people across a range of specific activity areas (**particular**). The third sector (**generalisation**) has // unique experience and skill sets, and runs more cheaply and thus “effectively” than the other sectors could (**attribution**). Clearly, the third sector is “the social safety net”. It is community based and locally oriented. It services disadvantaged, disenfranchised, endangered, and helpless people. Best of all, because it uses volunteers, it services them cheaply.

The paradox of such a sector becomes crystalline, as do legislative imperatives for formalising what appears to be an already-existing and informal set of relationships: by defining the “third sector” as distinct from government (the public sector), government distances itself from a whole raft of responsibilities for the mentally and physically handicapped, public safety, medical care, environmental protection, homelessness, aged care, and so on—practically everything that has no immediate, obvious, or direct “economic” benefit; practically every area of human frailty for which the widely-disparaged “welfare state” once provided support. At the same time, legislatures clearly feel the need to regulate the third sector, perhaps because the authors of policy realise that when particular areas of responsibility that correspond to this “sector” go into an “outcomes deficit”, public and media backlashes are invariably savage.

Third sector discourses empower legislatures to formalise very intimate areas of human association. As the following shows, the basic social unit of human society falls squarely into the

focus of policy and programs when family members are classified as mentally ill, or unemployed, or both:

[12] At present **families are** virtually ‘**the third sector**’ in the **mental health** system. As such they **are unpaid, unfunded and often unrecognised** but an **incredibly significant** and instrumental ‘force’ in the **achievement of policies. Research can bring families more centrally into the focus of policy and programs.** [au\_4: 8,815]

While [12] may appear to metaphorically index the family as an unfunded “third sector” institution (a **generalisation^attribution** RF), the following passage [13], some preamble to the proposition that research can bring families ... into the focus of policy and programs, shows that the usage is quite literal:

[13] In **70% of** the cases where a **severe psychiatric disorder** was diagnosed, the onset of the disorder **followed unemployment. But** as the severe mental disorders commonly disable because of the long prodrome, **it is not certain** whether the **unemployment is the result of** the early and **undiagnosed** phase of the **illness**. Significantly, **in more than half of those cases there was no evidence of any stress apart from that directly associated with unemployment.** Thus **the need is** less to demonstrate the connections between mental disorder, psychiatric disability and unemployment than it is **to construct interventions based on action research to test the connection between education, training, rehabilitation and employment as techniques whereby** the onset of **mental disorder might be delayed or averted.** [au\_4: 7,247]

The complex RF chain in [13] is organised around a series of “problematic” **cause^consequence** RFs which link to the Organising **problem^solution** of the corpus. The RF chain includes an **evidence^hypothesis—cause^consequence—further evidence^conclusion** formation, beginning with a similarly chained construction as that in [7] which problematises the causal relationship between the presence of technology within firms and the number of its high-skilled workers. The implied **^hypothesis** derived from the problematic (causally indistinct)

**^consequence** is that unemployment may cause a severe psychiatric disorder. However, the reverse may also be the case. In any case, the two closely correlate. The **further evidence** [that no evidence of any stress apart from that directly associated with unemployment is involved] suggests, though, that most likely direction of **cause^consequence** is **unemployment^severe psychiatric disorder**. The RF chain’s **^conclusion** is that further action research is needed to test the connection between education, training, rehabilitation and employment, thus including a further hypothesis [that education, training, rehabilitation and employment can delay or stop the onset of mental disorder]. In the third sector, (un)employment is just a state of mind.

### Conclusion

Under scrutiny, the “skilled” discourses of third sector policy reveal that its object is to divest public and private institutions of particular “burdens”: namely, those specific to ‘the elderly, the handicapped, the mentally ill, disadvantaged youth, the homeless and indigent’ (Rifkin 1996: 240). The underpinning assumptions of third sector employment policy are similar to the ‘paradoxical attitudes ... that classify a golf ball as an asset, while education and health are categorised as liabilities’ (Saul 1997: 157). “Third sector” and “skilled” discourses are about redefining social welfare programs; relationships between individuals, families, businesses, communities, and the State; the meaning of work; and, most of all, towards redefining the meaning of unemployment so that it would ideally no longer exist as a concept. If this last is achieved, the problem of unemployment is ideally cured, thus realising the technocratic function expected of policy makers—to solve extensive social “problems”, in this case by defining them out of existence.

Our analysis demonstrates clear linkages in contemporary policy between third sector

discourses and more or less overt elaborations of pre-capitalist Organisational and Orientational meanings of work. We also see an explicit tendency for policy authors to define the meaning of skill, employability, and moral and social worth in terms of their own social situatedness. Moreover, we show an overt tendency for contemporary policy to subsume disparate social domains under its managerialist auspices by linking the shibboleths of (un)employment, volunteerism, and “skills” attainment. The deployment of RFs in these discourses warp and hybridise sometimes quite distant social realms. The effect is to infuse societies with economic political interventions to the point of saturation.

The Organising assumption of third sector (un)employment policy is that, because of increasing technological advances, increased levels of unemployment are an inevitable outcome (Rifkin 1996: 236-48). The ‘employed’ will have ‘free time at their disposal’, while, ‘the unemployed’ will have ‘idle time on their hands’ (Rifkin 1996: 239, emphasis added). The intertextual links between idle hands needs no further elaboration. But according to Rifkin, the opportunity now exists

to harness the unused labor of millions of people toward constructive tasks outside the private and public sectors. The talents and energy of both the employed and unemployed – those with leisure hours and those with idle time – could be effectively directed toward rebuilding thousands of local communities and creating a third force that flourishes independent of the marketplace and the public sector. (Rifkin 1996: 239, emphasis added)

What is elided from discussions of the “idle sector”, and from its apparently degenerate and deteriorated social contexts, is the generative source of that very destruction. There is no mention of why there are the problems of “excess labour” and “shortages of skills”. There is no mention of why communities might have been destroyed in the first place. Employment, education, and welfare

policies increasingly presuppose social degeneration as a starting point, and appear resigned to the technocratic “facts” of the globalising discourses in which they are embedded. It is as if the authors of third sector “employment” policy have fallen victim to their own technocratic presuppositions, thus rendering their discourse ineffectual and obsolete, if not utterly disingenuous.

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Appendix 1: Corpus texts cited

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> We encourage interested readers to refer to Bewes (1997), Eatwell, (1995), and Fairclough (2000) for thoroughgoing critical reviews of various Third Way movements.

<sup>2</sup> Corpus documents are cited by their file names and marked with concordance word numbers. A full list of documents cited is in Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> Blakey quotes a document laid before a 17C jurist, Sargeant Snigge, later a judge under James 1.