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# Discourses of global competition

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## Obscuring the changing labour processes of managerial work

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How the world of the corporate manager has changed in the last decade! The era of the organization man, with his secure employment and ever-increasing standard of living, has given way to what *Fortune* has called the “new Darwinian workplace” (Sherman, 1993). It was not so very long ago that management gurus were extolling the benefits of Japanese-style lifetime employment. Now we hear about the benefits of “just-in-time workers” and virtual organizations.

This article will explore the changes which have taken place in the labour process of white-collar work. It will argue that, while big business leaders, government officials and the business press attribute these changes to the globalization of the economy and increased “global competition”, these changes are better understood as the consequence of intentional strategies tied to the implementation of particular forms of information technology (IT) which has allowed capital to improve its control over the white-collar labour process, to make white-collar and managerial labour more disposable, and to reduce its price in the marketplace. It concludes that discourses of global competition can be seen as smoke-screens behind which the actual actions and intent of capital can be obscured.

### **The restructuring of managerial work**

In his seminal work, Edwards (1979) suggests that capital's[1] control over the labour process in the American economy was accomplished, in part, by the creation of a segmented labour market. Managers and other (traditionally white male) professionals found themselves in the ranks of a segment of the labour market which was characterized by stable employment with considerable job security, established career progression, and relatively high pay. By the early 1980s, however, this view of the “organization man” (Whyte, 1956) had disappeared in waves of white-collar layoffs, first from the frenzy of corporate restructuring resulting from the merger and acquisition craze, and then as a response to “global competition” (Nussbaum, 1986). The statistics are staggering. A 1991 poll conducted by *Fortune* of 1,005 firms indicated that 86 per cent had reduced their managerial ranks in the past five years; further,

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among the firms with 5,000 employees or more, the percentage rose to over 90 per cent (Kirkpatrick, 1991). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, while managers and professionals represented between 14 and 18 per cent of the United States workforce, estimates indicate that they represented 25 to 40 per cent of all workers laid off. Few, if any, expect to be recalled when the economy turns around:

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Victims of corporate failures and “downsizing”, they find themselves, usually for the first time, stranded on still, suburban streets where adult males other than mailmen were once a rare sight on weekdays. Generally middle-aged, they convert bedrooms into makeshift offices and search for jobs, or find part-time work and call themselves “consultants”. A few volunteer at schools, churches and sports teams. But most remain hidden and quietly desperate, burdensome to their families and ashamed of their plight (Horowitz, 1993, p. A1).

For many, the economic reality of unemployment leads them from yearly earnings which place them securely in upper income brackets (the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that, in 1991, the median salary for a white male college graduate, 25 years or older, was about \$55,000), to the need to take \$5.00 per hour part-time jobs. The psychological consequences can be devastating. According to the Rev. George Hollingshead, a Presbyterian minister in an exclusive Philadelphia suburb:

A lot of men here are going through a sort of death. They thought they were guaranteed success because they went to the right schools, married the right women, joined the right companies and clubs. When it all goes wrong, they can't cope (quoted in Horowitz, 1993, p. A3).

While some of the unemployed find that there are opportunities available outside the world of large corporations (Nussbaum, 1993), most find that, *if* they land a new job, neither the salary nor the benefits package will match what they previously had (Labich, 1993).

And what of the corporate survivors? In the classic *The Organization Man*, Whyte reports that the “average” executive was working nine-and-a-half-hour days, five days a week (Whyte, 1956, p. 7). Similarly, Margolis reports in 1979 that the managers she studied put in about 48 hours per week in the office (Margolis, 1979, p. 59). More recently, survivors in large companies report that it is not uncommon to work a 70-hour work week; and some report working 14-hour days, six days a week (Fisher, 1992). While the number of workers in many firms have been reduced substantially, there is no decline in the amount of work that has to be done. What does this mean to these individuals? Not only does it mean less leisure and time with the family. It also represents a substantial reduction in their hourly wages. Let us take for our example a white-collar worker with that median wage of \$55,000. That wage leaves the worker with a gross take-home pay of \$1,058 per week. If that individual puts in 48 hours in the office, they are being paid \$20.34 per hour (this assumes, following US labour law, 40 hours at straight time and eight hours at time-and-a-half overtime). Increase the time commitment to 70 hours, and the hourly wage drops to \$12.45 per hour. For those poor souls putting in 14-hour six-day weeks (84 hours), the hourly rate drops to \$9.98.

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The implications of this analysis show clearly in the American economy. For the last two years (1993 and 1994) productivity growth is at a ten-year high, real wages are stagnant, downsizing continues unabated, and there has been no real change in the unemployment situation of white-collar and managerial workers. What we must deal with is not “what” is happening, but rather, “why” it is happening. The privileged and secure positions once held by managers and other white-collar workers is quickly eroding. The question is whether this is due to some fundamental shift in the rules of the global economy, or whether it is the result of the culmination of a capitalist strategy that has slowly impacted on one type of work after another? In the remainder of this article, I will examine competing explanations for what is happening.

### **Global competition – what capital wants us to believe**

As Chomsky (Chomsky, 1989; Herman and Chomsky, 1988) has so often pointed out, in societies where overt coercion is not utilized as a means of social control, propaganda, distributed through media channels under the control of the power élite, functions “to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 1). As I have shown in the previous section, the structure of the employment relation between white-collar workers and their employers has undergone a radical transformation. Explanations of this change have been offered by the business press (*Fortune*, *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, etc.) and other agents of the corporate power élite such as The Conference Board and The Business Round Table. In the early 1980s, during what was called the “merger and acquisition craze”, discourses emanating from these sources centred on the economic rationality of efficiency. Thus restructured and reorganized firms were to be economically more efficient and therefore have their competitive abilities greatly enhanced. This discourse ignored the huge amounts of wealth that it created for financial speculators and Wall Street operatives; and ignored the subsequent financial difficulties faced by restructured firms because of the volumes of debt with which they were saddled (Barlett and Steele, 1992).

By the middle of the 1980s, discourses found in the business press changed their focus from efficiency to “global competition” (Barlett and Steele, 1992, pp. 89-104; Bernstein, 1992). Now, restructuring was necessary to fend off the assault of more competitive foreign rivals. This discourse masked a number of important points. It ignored the fact that during the late 1970s and early 1980s American companies suffered from a lack of investment in research and development, as well as in new plant and equipment. Further, it ignored the fact that the firms who used global competition as an excuse for restructuring were themselves large multinational global competitors, who, at least in non-US markets, were quite competitive. In a similar vein, it is these large multinational firms which champion calls for free trade and open market, and which spent millions on lobbying for the NAFTA treaty.

But why is this important? As the economist Robert M. Solow points out, labour markets do not exist as pure systems of exchange based on supply and demand. They exist as a social institution. He notes:

...that the labour market really is different. In particular, I claim that it cannot be understood without taking into account the fact that participants, on both sides, have well-developed notions of what is fair and what is not (Solow, 1990, p. 3).

As evidence, he notes that, traditionally, economists have not observed a substantial reduction in wage rates at periods of high unemployment, as general equilibrium theory would predict.

I will broadly assert now that global competition is *not* the reason that white-collar employment relations are changing, but rather that *discourses* of global competition are being utilized to mask a deliberate strategy to change the nature of white-collar work. As Mumby (1988) says about discursive practices in and around organizations:

meaning does not arise spontaneously and consensually, but is rather the product of the vested interests of particular organizational groups. Power is exercised by such groups not only in the control of organizational resources..., but also to the degree that they are able to frame organizational reality discursively in a way that serves their own interests. Ideology serves in this capacity by producing and reproducing the subjectivity of organization members through the process of interpellation. As such, the dominant interests are taken uncritically as the interests of all organizational groups (p. 157).

The indeterminacy of the employment contract under “employment at will” requires the establishment of discourse to make it governable (Townley, 1993). Thus, a change in the definition of “fairness” requires a change in the discourse surrounding the employment relationship. Reference to economic and strategic imperatives constitutes a form of managerial discourse which acts to legitimize capitalist praxis (Knights and Morgan, 1991). Thus, although the conditions of the employment relations of white-collar workers are changing rapidly, their consent (Buroway, 1979; Sturdy *et al.*, 1992) to the terms of employment must still be obtained. Therefore, it is through the propagation of discourses of global competition, that the subjective understandings of organization members of the conditions of their organizations can be altered by strategic distortion (Habermas, 1984). Thus, for the organizational member, it is the inevitability of economic forces or the actions of distant competitors that has led to the individual’s unemployment, insecurity or long working hours, not the deliberate action of the boss.

*How capital thinks: underlying strategies and the change in the white-collar employment relationship*

While the discursive practices of capital in the popular press are important in understanding the social reinforcement of the labour market as a social institution, it is also important to understand liberal economics as an instrument of knowledge/power (Foucault, 1980) and how it influences capitalist praxis. As Townley states:

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Knowledge is not detached and independent; as a source of illumination, it is integral to the operation of power. From this perspective, procedures for the formation and accumulation of knowledge, including scientific method, are not, therefore, neutral instruments for the presentation of the real. Indeed, scientific discourse and the institutions that produce it are part of the taken-for-granted assumptions of knowledge that should be questioned. Procedures for investigation and research (e.g. the use of a classificatory table), although operating as a procedure of knowledge, can operate equally as a technique of power. Knowledge is the operation of discipline. It delineates an analytical space and in constituting an arena of knowledge, provides the basis for action and intervention – the operation of power (1993, p. 521).

From this perspective, *transaction cost* economics (Williamson, 1975) can be seen to sit at the heart of the scholarly discourse explaining the behaviour of organizations and in particular explaining the current behaviour of employers. Central to this perspective is the axiom that organizations develop structures (including methods for acquiring labour) which minimize the costs of transactions across the organizational system. Based in the liberal economic belief that, in the purest forms, market exchanges maximize economic efficiency, the *markets and hierarchy* approach (alternatively called the market failure framework) attempts to explain the breakdown of market mechanisms in acquisition of labour in advanced economies:

The markets and hierarchies approach attempts to identify a set of *environmental factors* which together with a related set of *human factors* explain the circumstances under which complex contingent claims contracts will be costly to write, execute, and enforce. Faced with such difficulties, and considering the risks that simple (or incomplete) contingent claims contracts pose, the firm may decide to bypass the market and resort to hierarchical modes of organization. Transactions that might otherwise be handled in the market are thus performed internally, governed by administrative processes, instead (Williamson, 1975, p. 9).

The markets and hierarchies approach identifies four problems that lead to internal labour markets: bounded rationality, uncertainty, opportunism (on the part of the labour suppliers) and small numbers exchange (driven by task idiosyncrasy). Essentially, this approach argues that firms develop hierarchical structures and internal labour markets when the long-term task performance cannot be specified, and when the sellers of labour (employees) have advantage in their negotiating position because of the asymmetry of information resources to mis-state the value of their contribution. The key, from a transaction cost approach, to understanding the changes in the labour market conditions for managers and white-collar workers follows from Williamson's assertion that:

...whichever way the assignment of transactions to firm or market is made initially, the choice ought not be regarded as fixed. Both firms and markets change over time in ways that may render inappropriate an initial assignment of transactions to firms or market. The degree of uncertainty associated with transactions in question may diminish; market growth may support large-number supplier relations; and information processing technology may occur which alter the degree to which bounded rationality limits apply ... *Thus, we ought periodically to reassess the efficacy of completing transactions by one mode rather than another* (Williamson, 1975, p. 10, emphasis added).

Thus, we must recognize that new technologies, in particular computers and other information technologies (such as facsimile transmissions), have caused

employers, utilizing transaction cost economics as their mental framework, to rethink the advantages of hierarchical arrangements in favour of market relationships. But further, these new technologies have allowed the firm to renegotiate its relationship with managerial workers:

[N]ew information technologies, whether for transmission of data, facsimile documents or audio-visual exchange, is beginning to facilitate communication over distances and the precise logging (i.e. measurement) of the transmission. Long-range communication can take place with increasing ease and reducing real cost, and less reliance has therefore to be placed on the close proximity of working that justifies the "office". Taking into account as well the burden of wage and salary costs, *the balance of transaction cost advantage is thus moving back towards the market relationship* in which smaller units and even people working at home are linked electronically and *through market contract* to form a whole system of work (Child, 1987, p. 85, emphasis added).

Further, the implementation of new information technology has allowed the "downsizing" of organizations. The subsequent high levels of unemployment among former managers and white-collar employees has also restructured supplier relations (of labour). Internal labour markets traditionally relied on organization-specific skills derived from long periods of on-the-job-training. With the new need for smaller staffs, former employees, who have already acquired the required skills, end up competing in the open market for available contract work. This change in the supply structure places the firm in a position to take advantage of the large-number supply relations, where individual suppliers cannot price their services opportunistically.

Armed with the belief of the inevitability of economic rationality and the deterministic leverage of market forces, capital then sees itself as acting in the only "rational" way possible. Further, seeing the implementation of new technologies as both inevitable and unproblematic, transaction cost economics serves as both an explanation and a justification in the internal discourses of capitalism in its ever-increasing search for profit. Thus, current capitalist praxis can be explained, without reference to "global competition", by one of the premier power/knowledge discourses of liberal economics.

*Welcome to the project Mr Organization Man – the transformation of the white-collar workplace*

While transaction cost economics explains/justifies the current actions taken by capital in the rearrangement of employment relations of white-collar workers, this discourse and praxis must be seen in its broader historical context. A significant aspect of the capitalist project has been the transformation of labour processes in such a way that they (capital) have increasing control over the nature of production (Braverman, 1974).

Labour process theory, with its roots in Marxist economics, focuses on the capitalist division of labour. Of particular interest is the means by which labour is simplified and the substitution of machinery for human labour becomes possible. From the labour process perspective:

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...in carrying out such substitutions, management is at least as interested in the capacity of certain types of machinery to centralize their control over the labor process as it is in its effect on the productivity of labor. The particular production technology introduced into the work process under capitalism is therefore designed to maximize managerial control. Capitalism is characterized by "the incessant drive to enlarge and perfect machinery on the one hand, and to diminish the worker on the other" (Foster, 1994, p. 8).

While the bulk of work in labour process theory has focused on blue-collar work and the changes which have occurred in that arena, I argue that the current transformation of white-collar employment relations is nothing more than the extension of work design strategies once used on blue-collar workers to the white-collar realm, aided by new computer technologies.

In *Contested Terrain*, Edwards (1979) argues that the essential problem for capital is to extract the greatest amount of labour from the labour power that they have purchased:

Once the wages-for-time exchange has been made, the capitalist cannot rest content. He has purchased a given quantity of labor power, but he must now "stride ahead" and strive to extract actual labor from the labor power he now legally owns.

Workers must provide labor power in order to receive their wages, that is, they must show up for work; but they need not necessarily provide *labor*, much less the amount of labor that the capitalist desires to extract from the labor power they have sold. In a situation where workers do not control their own labor process and cannot make their work a creative experience, any exertion beyond the minimum needed to avert boredom will not be in the workers' interest. On the other side, for the capitalist it is true *without limit* that the more work he can wring out of the labor power that he has purchased, the more goods will be produced; and they will be produced without any increased wage costs (Edwards, 1979, p. 12).

The control of the labour process, and therefore the optimization of the extraction of labour from labour power, in production and clerical operations is accomplished through the use of simple, technical and bureaucratic controls. However, taking control of the labour process of managers and professionals has been substantially more difficult. While Edwards argues that capital has attempted to do this through the segmentation of the workforce, as well as through the imposition of some bureaucratic controls, the ambiguous nature of managerial work leaves the white-collar labourer with substantial discretion in the effort he or she puts forth. This dilemma leaves capital with the need to find other means to manifest their control over the labour process. One method, described by Edwards as segmenting the labour market, placed managers and professionals in privileged positions within the market. Finding themselves in relatively well-paid, stable positions, with perquisites and career ladders, managers and professionals are seduced into co-operating with the capitalist project. This is in fact not a very different position from that which is suggested by Cyert and March (1963) in the managerialist literature when they suggest that managers are co-opted through the use of side-payments (salaries, prerequisites and privileges) derived from "slack" resources within the organization.

Further, being unable to control the work itself, capital responded with the utilization of "post-bureaucratic" control systems (Rosen and Baroudi, 1992)

including *motivation control* and *ideational control*, such as organizational culture (Johnson and Gill, 1993; Liston, 1988; Rosen and Baroudi, 1992), supported by the power/knowledge of industrial-organizational psychology (Shorris, 1981; Steffy and Grimes, 1992).

The revolution that has taken place in the last decade in computers and information technology, particularly the decentralization of the input/output functions of computing, allows capital to overcome the previously experienced problems of controlling white-collar work and has led to the new work environment for managerial and professional workers. The implementation of these technologies has not been unintentional. As Rosen and Baroudi (1992) suggest:

...information technology cannot be a neutral tool, for such a technology is an objectification of the intentions and expectations of its creators and managerial sponsors (p. 221).

They further note:

information systems increase rationalization and control through the limiting of available choices and the reduction of discretion, while at the same time increasing the perception of discretion through the utilization of self-selection facilities and preplanned menus. Similar to earlier technologies, information technology requires the use of predefined and standardized responses, where much of the variance in possible outcomes will already have been eliminated (p. 221).

The implementation of new information technologies has two effects on the white-collar labour process. First, for managers and professionals, control over information was a particularly effective basis for intra-organizational power (Hickson *et al.*, 1971; Hinings *et al.*, 1974). The movement of organizational information from the proprietary files of the individual managers to generally accessible organizational databases serves to limit any particular manager's power. In addition, the creation of centralized databases removes the need for some of the traditional labour in the information-processing function of the organization; thus potentially allowing for the reduction of managerial staffing.

The second effect of the implementation of information technology as an adjunct to managerial and professional work is the deskilling of the white-collar labour process (Garson, 1988). By embedding all salient organizational learning and knowledge into the information technology, the increasing value of human capital which came with organizationally specific experience, training and development no longer accrues. The long-tenure employee is no longer the most valued human asset. Rather, value accrues to those who have the necessary (and non-organizationally specific) technological skills to interact with the information technology. By defining managerial and professional work processes in terms of non-organizationally specific skills or knowledge, capital commodifies white-collar labour in the same way that it has blue- and pink-collar skills. For example, Rosenbrock discusses the implications of deskilling in the use of computer-aided design (CAD) systems which is used to:

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...subdivide and codify the design process, incorporating the knowledge of designers, so that it is reduced to a sequence of simple choices. Thus “deskilled,” the job can be done by men with much less training and much less experience (quoted in Shaiken, 1984, p. 225).

Similar trends can be seen with the advent of computer-based spreadsheets, computer-based accounting systems, and desk-top publishing software for the production of marketing materials.

The implementation of computer-based technologies into the labour process of white-collar workers is supported by ideational systems (Rosen and Baroudi, 1992) and cultural assumptions about the inevitability of technological necessity of information systems, based on arguments of efficiency (Howard, 1985; Rosen and Baroudi, 1992; Zuboff, 1988):

Computers have become such an accepted part of our culture that to oppose their use is “irrational”. While resistance to the introduction of automation is still experienced in many companies, we believe that this will lessen greatly as more and more of the work force grows up with the computer, accepting it as easily as our parents accepted the telephone as a natural part of the work setting. Consequently, we believe the ability of workers to recognize and resist the control facilitated by computerization is greatly reduced as the technology is accepted as a not only natural, but also necessary part of the workplace. The implicit and explicit cultural assumptions holding the computer as an efficient and effective tool, whose deployment in many cases can be seen as necessary to the very survival of the organization, facilitate this control (Rosen and Baroudi, 1992, p. 222).

Thus, when we look at the history of work under the capitalist project, we can see that the current trends in white-collar work – deskilling, contracting and “automation” – have their historical correlates in the development of blue-collar labour processes in the earlier part of this century. For those who were once agents of the capitalist project, technological development has now brought them within the project.

### **The future of managerial work?**

In this article I have made two important arguments about the current state of managerial work. First, the labour process of managerial work has been altered drastically by the introduction of computer-based information technology. This technology both diminishes the power of managerial workers and deskills their work in such a way that their labour becomes a commodity, which finds that its value as human capital no longer increases with organizational tenure. I have also argued that the commodification of managerial work brings about drastic changes in the managerial and professional labour market. Given the social nature of this market, with its beliefs concerning “fairness”, I have argued that it is necessary for capital to invoke discourses of efficiency and “global competition” to mask their actual intent.

What then lies in the future for managers, professionals and other white-collar workers? If current trends go unabated I would suggest that the world of managers and professionals will change in a number of significant ways. The first will be a new role for the “middle manager”. These individuals will find that their primary responsibility will be the contracting, scheduling and

supervision of freelance technicians who will interact with the organization's information technology to carry out tasks formerly assigned to full-time white-collar workers and managers.

Because of the commodification of white-collar labour, I would suggest that the second significant change will be in the compensation and earnings of white-collar workers. In the USA, average real wages of non-managerial workers declined from \$198.35 per week in 1972 to \$167.81 (1972 dollars) per week in 1988. If white-collar wages were to mimic this, and there is no reason to think that they should not, the average 1990 wage for a college graduate of approximately \$39,500 will decline to a constant dollar value of \$33,575 by the year 2005. In addition, benefits costs of 25 per cent of salary are currently not uncommon. This cost, now a tax-free addition to the wage, will need to be borne by the individual if they find themselves as a contract employee. Those who remain as permanent employees of the organization, if we extrapolate current trends, will also be asked to contribute greater and greater portions of their earnings to cover some of their benefits costs.

The third change will be that the managerial and professional labour market will be subject to "global competition". Because the required skills and knowledge will be commodified, and because actual work will require interaction with information technology, the location of the worker will become irrelevant. Access to "information super-highways" will allow capital to seek sources of white-collar labour on a global basis, driven by differential wage costs. Domestically, US firms have already been seen to be moving "back office" operations to low-cost locations. And there are already reports that some companies are considering the relocation of research and development and design functions to countries like India. Such a move allows a firm to take advantage of a labour market which has a large cadre of well-trained and competent engineers, whose costs are approximately one-third of that of an engineer in the United States on a yearly basis.

Clearly, like their blue-collar counterparts, white-collar and managerial workers are going to find that both their jobs and the terms of their employment will become subject to "global competition". Lower pay, longer hours and no security are already becoming a part of the once privileged world of the manager. But what will be the long-term consequences for the firm? As *The Economist* notes so aptly:

firms will find that retaining good employees and motivating mediocre ones is far more difficult. Worried about their next job or career-switch, workers will not care much about any firm's long-term fortunes unless given a good reason to do so ... Turning the clock back and offering the prospect of a 40-year climb up the career ladder will be impossible. With the message of constant change drummed into them, no one will believe such a promise.

In the workplace of the future, the fiercest competition between firms may not be for customers, but for the hearts and minds of employees (1993, pp. 13-14).

Without the ability to invoke outmoded concepts such as commitment, loyalty and the mutual benefits of striving to achieve organizational goals, capital is likely to find that the greater control afforded to them through the use of

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information technology will require greater and greater measures of control to ensure the work gets done. Further, as alienation spreads among white-collar workers, their use as agents of control over the “labouring masses” (the other 60 to 70 per cent of the workforce) may be lost. The question is whether this crisis, an outcome of the inherent contradictions of control, can be survived by its architects?

**Note**

1. Under the American system of speculative capitalism, the traditional formulation of “capital” or “capitalist class” leads, at best, to confusion. Throughout this article, I am using “capital” as a shorthand term to mean a class of individuals within the society, consisting of the remnants of the old industrial capitalist class (old money such as the Astors, Rockefellers, and so forth) as well as individuals drawn from the managerial ranks who have taken positions at the pinnacles of large corporations. When taken in combination, this group both accounts for a substantial ownership of privately held assets and, potentially more importantly, effects control of a majority of the business assets within the United States economy (see also, Schwartz, 1987).

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