

Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



The Great Transformations: Pressing Issues and Problems of Work in Light of its Subjective Dimension

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Almost twenty years ago—ninety years after *Rerum novarum*—His Holiness John Paul II issued the Encyclical *Laborem exercens*, updating the social teaching of the Church on the organization of economic life. For the first time, work was the chief focus of papal teaching, being described as the keystone of the whole social question. An essential analytical and theological distinction was made between the objective dimension of work and its subjective end or purpose. This distinction highlighted the fruitfulness of gospel inspiration, which upholds the absolute primacy of the subjective dimension (the one basing the meaning and value of work on human dignity and on the creative vocation of the person, who was created in the image of God and is the subject of work).

I should like to consider some of the great modern-day changes in human work in the light of this subjective dimension. There are so many major trends that a selection is vital. Here I was helped by a session organized by the French Social Weeks in November 1999 devoted to the issue of work, and particularly by the paper given by Claude Thelot on that occasion. However, the provisional nature of such a selection means that we should not make too many claims here. I shall bear in mind the very sobering warning given to us this morning by Cardinal Nguyễn Văn Thuận in the prayer, “If you are a speaker, may your words seem to come from the very mouth of God”. In making my selection, I shall also bear in mind the call to creative intelligence contained in *Laborem exercens*: “The general situation of man in the modern world, studied and analyzed in its various aspects of geography, culture and civilization, calls for the discovery of the *new meanings of human work*.” I shall seek to examine these prospects in the conclusion to the present study.

Which of the major trends and events involved in the changes in work today should be stressed?

One preliminary observation is that the analytical framework used by the Encyclical twenty years ago is still valid. The distinction between the objective and subjective

dimensions of work is confirmed in two ways. On the one hand, all the trends noted by the Encyclical twenty years ago as objective factors—the rapid spread of technological innovations, the globalization of trade, etc.—are still as relevant today, or even more so. On the other hand, the view that the quality of work must be measured against criteria of human dignity, rather than on the basis of quantitative data, is now shared by a wide range of schools of thought, further confirming the importance of the subjective dimension, quite apart from Christian thought. In the course of our in-depth reflection, we shall, however, show the limitations of this distinction. Nevertheless, it does help us—like many of our contemporaries, whether leaders, researchers or simple citizens—to judge the problems raised by recent developments in the work sphere.

A first far-reaching trend—and one that will certainly become a generalized phenomenon throughout the world—confirms the central place of work in terms of the whole social question. An ever-growing number of our contemporaries perform, have performed or will perform paid work. This can be seen in the increase in every country of the “activity rates”, which indicate the proportion of the population performing an independent or paid profession or aspiring to do so. The growing tendency of women to work outside their own homes is the main factor here, but not the only one. It would thus appear that the contractualization of work is a necessary step on the road to socialization.

However, this observation must at once be put into perspective or further explained by another: while “contractual” work is becoming the general rule, the amount of time that each person devotes to paid work in the course of his or her life is falling. The time the individual dedicates to work, whether in annual terms or in the number of active years in the course of his or her life, has been falling steadily for the past hundred years, particularly the past thirty or forty.

Statistics show that our contemporaries value the financial independence and social recognition resulting from contractual work, but also indicate that they are keen to open themselves to other dimensions of their existence. However indispensable work may be, it must not exhaust the person, but should allow him or her to profit from time that has been “earned” or “chosen”, whether in the form of more years of retirement, leisure, or time devoted to personal improvement, the education of children or voluntary activities—for the time gradually gained through a reduction in the part of our lives spent working is not necessarily spent in idleness. It also leads to the development of other forms of activity, a phenomenon so marked that the very notion of activity has recently become a practical concept in social and economic analysis.

At first sight, these two trends would appear to be positive aspects of the change in modern societies. While the value placed on contractual work reflects the possibility of fulfilling a subjective aspiration within it, the rise of this aspiration is also seen in the possibility of expressing a personal capacity outside the workplace. However, this globally optimistic conclusion must be tempered by many practical tensions. Despite the reduction in time spent working, it is still hard to coordinate or combine the various forms of activity, as is seen in the “double working days” of mothers and in the absence of family life, which many men so regret at certain key stages in their lives. The “indirect employer” to use a

term from the Encyclical *Laborem exercens*, i.e. the social legislator, has a considerable task to ensure that working individuals have the opportunity to choose a better harmony between the various times of life. However, we should not imagine that this indirect employer has sole responsibility here. The individual conscience also often lacks the capacity to assess the complementary nature and individual value of various forms of activity—educational, cultural, community and professional—in order to make a proper choice.

A second far-reaching trend in the changes in the work sphere—and one typically objective in the sense intended in the social teaching of the Church—concerns the steady growth in productivity. Measured against the quantity and quality of goods and services produced, the efficiency of human labour is constantly growing, at an annual rate of between 1 and 2%. And the cumulative amount of this growth has allowed part of the income from production to be distributed in the form of a reduction in working hours, rather than an increase in purchasing power, a tendency seen particularly in the past twenty years. The over-all amount of this growth also leads to a relative increase in the “indirect income” redistributed in the form of social services to those with social security. The proportion of these indirect resources has been growing all over the world, particularly in newly developed countries that used to depend exclusively on family solidarity. In this context, we can say that the centrality of work in social terms has been increasingly growing in the past twenty years.

So it is as if the inability to act directly on the quality of individual work led the “indirect employer” of the Encyclicals, i.e. the legislator, to work out a way of creating general conditions for a recognition of its subjective dimension. Work must be a source of liberation for human potential, and cannot therefore be an exclusive occupation; it is also the means of an extended solidarity between all the members of the social body.

Nor is this all. The stage now reached in certain activities and certain countries by the level of productivity from work, in other words the fact that thanks to the various forms of automation so few people are capable of producing so many goods, leads our contemporaries to raise completely new questions concerning the very significance of work, in line with the creative intuition of the encyclical mentioned at the outset. I shall highlight two of these in particular, for in their very contradiction, they indicate the possibility of a debate open to the contribution of ethical reflection, in other words inspired by a subjective view of human destiny.

The first is that of the universal allowance (sometimes referred to as the base income), a “utopian” idea that has developed particularly in Europe since the early 1990s in view of the persistence of a widescale structural unemployment that affects unskilled people with no apparent possibility of gaining further skills. Why should we make such efforts to reintegrate these people, particularly at the cost of maintaining very low pay levels or of denying the right to refuse an offer of work (i.e. the right not to work)? Should we not at this point separate work and the right to a decent life by taking advantage of increased productivity to raise the level of an allowance referred to as “universal” inasmuch as it is owed to any citizen of an age to raise a family?

The second idea, on the other hand, follows classical thought regarding the importance of work as a place and means of socialization. It is based on an observed development in the organization of work that is favourable to the human factor, inasmuch as the pursuit of increased productivity seems to be based more than previously on the intelligence and capacity for initiative of the workers themselves. This fosters a far-reaching revision in mind-sets concerning the organization of life in the workplace and team work. In this perspective, the generalized spread of instruments linked to or centred on interpersonal communication and the development of individual capacities and knowledge—in other words, the new information technologies—confirms the views of those supporting an “ergonomic” revolution based on the greater appreciation and development of knowledge. Thus, far from leading to a further banalization of tasks, the new technological advances call for interaction and judgment. In this optimistic perspective, work would be less than ever a rare good, but an indefinite source of a multiplication of services and goods, linked to the personalization of functions and tasks. Instead of an irreversible exclusion from work, there would thus be new forms of access to employment, supported on the one hand by a generalized effort at ongoing training throughout the person’s lifetime, and on the other by the elimination of obstacles to the creation of new activities.

The subjective inspiration of the social teaching of the Church can throw light on the debate between the upholders of these two viewpoints, as well as a dilemma concerning the conditions for the humanization of globalization. Let us take a closer look. In the light of the teaching, we cannot accept a social polarization between those who have “chosen work” and those who have made the opposite choice. Total social security, stripped of any creative or service counterpart, can only be a last resort in the face of successive failures. This can be seen in the new demands being made by associations of the long-term unemployed, who call not only for decent allowances, but equally for the right to a recognition of their social usefulness, and first and foremost the right to a decent job.

On the other hand, however, we must not harbour the illusion that the huge numbers of unemployed can be reabsorbed simply through ongoing training together with a complete market liberalization. To do so would mean ignoring the actual time needed to acquire new skills, as well as the handicaps accumulated in certain sectors and certain regions. It would also mean providing systematic encouragement to an unacceptable international mobility that would lead to direct competition between young people from developing countries and the least skilled workers from developed countries. The “subjective” inspiration recommends action on all fronts here: in favour of active employment policies in developed countries, but also in favour of adequate professional training in developing countries, which presupposes general recognition of a minimum of social standards and new priorities in development policies. Michel Hansenne has given us some first-hand information on possible advances here. The subjective inspiration also invites us to continue the movement towards market liberalization, combining it with the guarantee of certain social conditions by companies that benefit from such liberalization. In particular, the policies based on competition that regulate company take-overs and mergers should take account of other criteria as well as financial and market considerations.

At this point, it might seem that we have given a good overview of the question, inasmuch as national and international problems are fairly similar. However, reference to the growing place of new types of information technology in productivity gains may not be sufficient to account for another change that appeared before the development of this technology. We must therefore also note another long-term trend: that of dematerialization of the production process. In other words, not only do service activities represent an ever-growing proportion of total jobs (in developed countries this proportion is now over two-thirds), but within the traditional agricultural or industrial sectors, manual activities in direct contact with physical materials are on the decrease, while the numbers of white-collar workers are rising and those of blue-collar workers falling. This has a number of specific consequences for the subjective quality of human labour.

Dematerialization also weakens the social structure of labour. Unions and workers' and employers' organizations do not match the new forms of employment, business and skill. Even so, they still bear the primary responsibility for modernizing the collective acceptance and application of labour laws. Although they have been weakened by the sometimes spectacular fall in their membership, they are also responsible for influencing and sometimes for establishing the new trans-national rules controlling work contracts. Despite the fall in their membership, they have to fight together against a strong current of simple liberalization, which reduces national legislation to the lowest common denominator. They also have to take new needs for security and solidarity into account, in a context where career profiles are being "personalized", and this calls for a break with the exclusive protection of employment that is full-time, male and industrial. This situation requires special attention from the government to the promotion of organized forms of social representation and to support for their participation in international negotiations.

Dematerialization also entails a more direct subordination of workers to consumers and users. This is seen, for example, in the spheres of tourism, health and even education, which are undergoing major development. In terms of the subjectivity of work, the consequences are ambiguous. These sectors still suffer from a major lack of collective indicators, evaluation and arbitration structures, and tools for approving and promoting professional skills and capacities. This constitutes a real obstacle in the way of an increase in jobs, although these sectors could go a long way to relieving unemployment.

If I had to summarize the lessons of this overview of the major trends and issues concerned in developments in the work sector over recent years, I would pick out a central disquiet, a lively hope and a possible fresh pointer for the social teaching itself.

The disquiet is concerned with the preponderant place of strictly financial criteria in the regulation of labour markets in international terms. This major position is a result of the present conditions of globalization: decisions on the location of activities and the life cycles of these activities seem increasingly to be based on laws of financial survival, which often run counter to the conditions for "good social management" recommended by modern manuals on human resource management. Just when a sincere recognition of the "human factor" seems to have become a reality, this recognition is contradicted by the chaotic pace—chaotic *and* incomprehensible to most common mortals—of restructuring, mergers

and concentrations that take place according to the over-simple criteria of financial markets. Such restructuring is in itself inherent to the very movement of economic creation and really does have an “objective” function. It is here that its pace and methods become unacceptable, in particular because they block the only possibilities of guiding the adaptation of work through the negotiation of reconversion plans and programmes between the parties concerned, with the support of the government. Another cause for disquiet is the impotence expressed by the very people whose position at the head of large businesses or governments means that people tend to see them as spearheading such movements. They all say that the process is absolutely beyond their control, which encourages an irrational temptation to revolt.

This inevitably throws fresh doubt on the desirability of financial unilateralism. In my view, the central issue of a real globalization of the rules of competition, often raised by the European Commissioner Mario Monti, should therefore be one of the main priorities on the agenda of “multilateral” international negotiations. However, there is no guarantee that it would be enough simply to modernize the rules, allowing their criteria to be broadened, without fear of unequal competition between the different regions of the world. Should we not also, as Father Calvez suggests in his recent work on modern capitalism, examine the exercise of the right to ownership? This calls for clear thinking on the part of the collectivity, if we want to avoid the pitfall of a statism that also ignores the subjectivity of work—and the Encyclical *Laborem exercens* did in fact invite us to meet this challenge when it said: “Recognition of the proper position of labour and the worker in the production process demands various adaptations in the sphere of the right to ownership of the means of production.”

On the other hand, this sincere recognition of the human factor as the keystone of productive effectiveness gives rise to hope. Why is the adjective “sincere” used here? For a long time, management manuals have been saying that human beings represent the whole wealth. In practice, we have often seen many public and private leaders allowing an authoritarian or paternalistic attitude to take the upper hand in the performance of their duties. Today there is reason to believe that when training and selecting managers, proper attention will also be paid to qualities that will enable them to fulfill this new responsibility. This balance between delegation and responsibility lies at the heart of the lessons of “good governance”, which is being discussed in both companies and government offices today.

In my view, this change in attitudes is neither temporary nor superficial. The steady rise in the general level of education and training over the past fifty years has changed the whole work sector, just as it has changed the expectations of voters with regard to political leaders. It is now in the interest of employers to encourage an organization of work that takes account of each employee’s individual capacities, encouraging and taking advantage of the exchange of experiences—a whole approach powerfully assisted by technological developments in the information sphere. Without being overly optimistic, it seems clear that such perspectives are in harmony with a reduction in the proportion of life spent at work and an increase in the time spent on training and personal evaluation with a view to working more effectively and creatively. Since this harmony can be brought about only in the long run and in an unaccustomed framework of collective negotiation, it is hard for the classic

democratic system, with its regular elections, to promote it. The support of a social conscience is needed.

This again shows the fruitfulness of the inspiration of a line of social teaching that started almost a hundred years ago when the lack of dignity in the conditions of many manual and other workers was observed, and that then, twenty years ago, in the light of developments in the meantime, was led to focus on human dignity at work as the pivotal point of the whole social question. Today, we could add, the social question has become globalized, and work has lost none of its centrality—except that considering work in the subjective sense now clearly entails a need for international coordination. In this perspective, legislation directly regarding work and workers no longer seems to be the only—or most important—element. The field of what allows us to give meaning to work has to be broadened. And this is perhaps where the distinction between objective factors, which are in a sense natural features of human work, and the subjective dimension of its purpose or end threatens to restrict our view, hampering the search for new paths. This distinction confines us too closely to the environment of the person in his or her work, whereas the subjective dimension is already seen in the wider conditions under which gains in productivity are achieved. And it is this same subjective dimension that underlies the society of knowledge and the greater or lesser freedom that economic and political leaders will have to promote it.