

# Work as Key to the Social Question

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



## The Social Division of Labor and Personal Realization

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**Abstract:** This brief essay discusses the close link between the objective and subjective aspects of work. The objective aspect shows the importance of the modern division of labor as a social mechanism of providing for needs. The second, subjective aspect involves personal realization in work, the development of individual creativity. So there is a tension in work: in its first aspect, as a social institution, society takes precedence over the individual; there is tendency to depersonalization. But in the second, subjective aspect, personal development comes before society, diversity before homogeneity.

### 1. Objective and subjective aspects of work

We hear more and more about personal development at work, about the importance of individuals in organizations and how to integrate them in a profitable business enterprise. This involves two aspects of a single reality: first, each individual realizes himself at work. Man's transformation of his environment transforms himself as an individual and social being. Personal satisfaction is sought in the sphere of personal aspirations. Meanwhile, work has to be profitable, i.e. it has to generate a social return. It is carried out within a social organization. Thus unproductive work does not increase the possibilities of the instrumental plexus constituted by economics. So we have two elements: the subjective aspect involving individuals exercising their occupation and the objective aspect involving the sphere of means or instruments of labor.[\[1\]](#)

These two dimensions that can be distinguished in work have a problematic relationship. There is a tension between personal creativity and the homogenization entailed by

competition and the division of labor. This was recognized by Aristotle. In *Politics* he distinguishes two activities: household management and wealth-getting.<sup>1[2]</sup> The former is carried out within the family and serves to provide for needs. In this activity the value of use predominates and it is defined by its end – the satisfaction of needs. This corresponds to the subjective dimension of work. Wealth-getting, on the other hand, is the art of acquiring goods by exchange. The value of exchange predominates, and its relationship with household management is conflictive. In his example of the use of a shoe Aristotle distinguishes two possibilities. The primary purpose of a shoe is its use. But it can also be exchanged for other goods. Thus a shoe has utility value as footwear and exchange value in barter. Aristotle says that if an individual who exchanges it seeks to meet his needs, this is household management and is good and proper. But if, on the other hand, it is sold for profit, the end is money and the exchange is unrelated to household management. Wealth-getting – the objective aspect of work where maximum profit is sought through trade – comes into play. Aristotle's approach shows the tension at issue: while the division of labor serves man's development it is driven by the satisfaction of needs. But if the maximization of profit predominates, the social organization of work is dislocated from its human framework and becomes a pointless activity. Making money becomes an end in itself. But, as Aristotle points out with the example of the shoe, exchange increases the possibilities of satisfaction. So wherever there is a growing population, the division of labor is established. That is, the objective aspect of work per se – the social division of labor – enables and promotes human development; but, secondly, this social organization runs the risk of becoming detached from its human framework: the individual. Keeping this situation in mind we will consider two points: 1) the social importance of markets. We will show in the next section how the division of labor normalizes individual behavior and acquires an institutional role; 2) the current tension between the subjective development of the individual and the homogenizing tendency of the market.

## **2. The division of labor as an institution**

The study of the social system and its organization in institutions sets out from individual action in its primary aspect: coexistence. An analysis of the interaction of individuals as a basis for institutions has two constituent moments: the first aspect is the satisfaction of needs; the second, the stabilization of behavior.

- First constituent: the satisfaction of needs

The study of institutions starts out from the first work of B. Malinowski.<sup>2[3]</sup> He looks at institutions by tracing their diversity to the satisfying of man's fundamental needs – requirements such as food, reproduction, safety, health and growth. These are all basic needs by virtue of the individual's membership of the human race. An individual cannot fail to provide for his basic needs if he wishes to stay alive. The success of institutions may be

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measured by the degree to which they satisfy these needs. This will give rise to the development and emergence of new needs which will in turn give rise to auxiliary institutions. Thus institutions are coordinated for the satisfaction of more than one need at a time. Malinowski says that “the establishment and maintenance of auxiliary institutions that coordinate others is the best way simultaneously to satisfy a whole range of needs.” 3[4]

Malinowski’s assertion may be countered with the following problem: the needs for food, shelter and sexual intercourse are met with no need for institutions. A society may be built on the systematic robbery, piracy or pillage of its neighbors. So an explanation of social institutions cannot be reduced to the satisfying of needs. What do institutions really contribute to the satisfaction of man’s needs? “What do they yield *per se*?” Answering these questions leads us on to the second constituent of institutions.

- Second constituent: the stabilization of behavior

Setting out from the work of Parsons<sup>4</sup>[5] and P. Berger & T. Luckmann,<sup>5</sup>[6] W.

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Pannenberg considers the importance of institutional stability to the social system. He traces the stability of institutions to the rule-obeying behavior of individuals. Parsons locates the cohesion of the social system in roles. The role, or rather roles, that an individual may play are defined as “the organized system of interaction between the ego and the alter.”<sup>6</sup>[7] Along with roles, *role expectations* arise: “these are reciprocal expectations with respect to mutual actions.”<sup>7</sup>[8] The characteristic feature of institutions is “the integration of actors’ expectations in a suitable system of interactive roles which have a normative and shared pattern of values.”<sup>8</sup>[9]

In this model, institutions constitute an integrated system where role expectations are normalized. These norms should be interpreted as a reciprocal stabilization of conduct, which becomes habitualized. P. Berger & T. Luckmann point out in this regard that “from this perspective, institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by a multiplicity of individuals.”<sup>9</sup>[10] Pannenberg uses the following example taken from Berger & Luckmann to explain this process: “Let there be two individuals, A and B. A observes B’s conduct. He attributes motivations to B’s actions, and in view of the repetition of these actions, he typifies the motives as habitualized. The same happens with A with respect to B. This means that A and B are starting to interpret roles vis-à-vis the other.”<sup>10</sup>[11] With this conception of expectation we can explain the origin of the division of labor, the basis of economic progress. The division of labor is a *role expectation*. It is a particular, highly important case of the process of institutionalization. The division of labor is a role system in so far as it enables one to specialize in a particular task with the expectation of exchanging goods for those produced by others. That is, *the objective dimension of work is the social means for the subjective dimension*. This possibility of exchange on which the market economy is based, this typification of the expectation of exchange, rests on the fact that the division of labor has become normalized, institutionalized. The division of labor’s importance in the general interaction process is stressed by Pannenberg. In his analysis of the various theories of institutions he highlights the importance that Gehlen, mainly in *Urmensch und Spätkultur*, <sup>11</sup>[12] attaches to the division of labor as what determines institutions’ endurance over time. What is the basis for this assertion? The satisfying of the basic needs that are at the root of the formation of institutions. He says: “these needs mean that the habitualization of actions immediately gives place to cooperation in the division of labor, in order to satisfy them.”<sup>12</sup>[13] This is a vital point: *individuals perceive that if they cooperate with each other they can obtain mutual benefits*.

In other words, man interposes the social organization of work between his needs and their satisfaction. This locates the exchange value of work (objective aspect) in its relationship between an external thing and its suitability as a human end (subjective aspect). That is, the labor market is a relationship between man and the world in which he acts. But this man-world relationship for the satisfaction of needs cannot be reduced to one of stimulus-response. A hungry animal looks for food and, if food is available, wolfs it down. It lives in an environment of stimuli that trigger its responses. It is odd that we say of animals that they have an “environment” and keep the word “world” for man. Thus a sharp distinction appears between humans and animals in their form of satisfying needs. Animals are bound to their needs. Their lives are determined by stimuli. But, as A. Millán-Puelles points out in

his book *Economía y Libertad*,<sup>13</sup>[14] man is *obligado* ((objectively) obliged/bound) to satisfy his needs. Economics is an artifice created by man to meet his needs. Instead of relating with them directly as animals do, i.e. instead of binding himself, he interposes the objective world of work. Man is *obligado* to satisfy his needs; he introduces the worldly means of work between his needs and their satisfaction. In this relationship the *ob* implies the ability to transcend needs – while still having them – since it implies the ability to create new forms of satisfying them; it involves the higher dimensions of human life: on one hand, the logic of reason and projection, and on the other, the possibility and risks of choice.

### 3. The subjective aspect of work

Work reaches its full social development when it acquires an objective meaning. The term “institution” means, after E. Durkheim, the modes of conduct established by society and introduced into social life that are previously given to the life of each individual as structures. As José Antonio Marina says in *Ética para Náufragos*,<sup>14</sup>[15] each culture transmits duties through socializing institutions. The structure of these duties is not a mental model to be used *but a model to be realized*. This gives the impression that many norms are definitive summaries of solutions to problems. This is why the market is perceived as an imposition. But this doesn't happen only with the market. Any institution can be perceived as the burden of the past; as solutions to past problems that have lost their solving power. So the following problem arises: on one hand, institutions and culture are seen to show the preeminence of society over the individual; on the other hand, it is seen to be difficult for the individual to create and transform institutions. There are two schools in the study of institutions. The first regards society as superior to the individual. Society is seen to show the superiority of *human nature* over the individual. Society gains substance at the cost of eclipsing particular individuals. Individuals are fully interchangeable. All that is personal disappears under the superiority of *human nature*. The second school seeks to reduce institutions to the particular activity of individuals. Institutions are regarded as a product of human action. Both views contain some truth. The first school highlights the transcendent nature of institutions. No institution is created by a single individual and institutions outlive individuals. But this approach has a high price indeed: the individual disappears. Without individuals, how can the origin, continuance and transformation of institutions be explained? The second approach is needed if we are to explain institutions as key pieces of human action.

We need both approaches in order to understand the dynamism of human work. The first approach expresses the importance of the objective aspect of work based on consolidated market structures – structures that tend to perpetuate themselves. These are companies that have a market share and wish to keep it by offering a competitive product. Within the market process this first approach represents the tendency toward the homogenization of goods; toward competition through the cutting of costs. The second approach shows the difficulty of innovation in work; of launching and developing a new product, service, business organization, etc. The second approach represents the tendency toward innovation and the subjective aspect of work. The two tendencies cover various phenomena that we

may represent as follows:

HOMOGENIZATION	VARIATION
Satisfaction of needs	Need for realization
Society	The individual
Tendency toward mass production	Tendency toward innovation
Social division of labor	Personal realization in work
Security	Risk
Objective aspect of work	Subjective aspect of work

Let us introduce the concept of “market tolerance” in order to analyze the tension between homogeneity and variation as they converge in market forces. To understand these two tendencies we will again consider the field of human action – the field where they manifest themselves. All individuals come up against given economic relationships within which they have to exercise their activity. Here we see the market as an institution in its various facets: first, the market appears as something given, as a tradition in the negative sense. It is, whether we like it or not, the way past generations have normalized their behavior in order to satisfy their needs. It is plain to see that these are social relationships, i.e. that there is no need, no determinism compelling production to follow these criteria. What we have to overcome is the inertia of the system. New forms of organization occur to us that seem more rational and efficient. But, secondly, institutions and traditions are forms of access to reality handed down by past generations. Tradition is a handing down of ways of being in the world. The word *tradition* comes from *paradosis, traditio*, meaning “handing down”. Just as physical characteristics are handed down genetically, the essence of humanity, our ways of being in the world, is handed down in tradition. The living world is built of bricks handed down by past generations. New buildings may be built but the materials are all passed on to us by social means.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus the two tendencies of the market manifest themselves. In the objective aspect we see the social preeminence of the market over the individual. But *the market as an institution, as a tradition handed down, should be subordinated to personal development (the subjective aspect)*. These two aspects put labor relations under strain and determine the “market tolerance” of work. *If the human basis of work is lost, the market depersonalizes man and becomes an end in itself. And at the other extreme, if the social dimension of work is lost, its possibility of service will be lost.* Neither tendency guarantees which one will predominate. They simply mark out the field of action where all individuals must assume their responsibility.

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## 15Notes

16[1] See *Laborem Exercens* for the difference between objective and subjective aspects of work.

17[2] See Aristotle, *Politics*, I 1256 a-1258a

18[3] See B Malinowski *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*, ( 1.944).

19[4] See B Malinowski, op.cit.

20[5] See T. Parsons, *Towards a General Theory of Action*. 3 printing, Harper & Row, New York, 1965.

[6] See P. Berger-T. H. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 1966.

21[7] See T. Parsons, *Towards a general Theory of Action*, op. cit., p. 19.

22[8] Ibid., p. 19.

23[9] Ibid., note 26, p. 20.

24[10] P.Berger-Th. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 51.

25[11] “ A beobachtet das Verhalten von B. Er schreibt B´s Handlungen Motivationen zu und *typisiert*, angesichts der Wiederholungen dieser Handlungen. Die Motive als wiederkehrend... Dasselbe geschieht mit A in Beziehung auf B... Das heisst, A und B beginnen, Rollen zu spielen mit Verhältnis zueinander”. W. Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer perspektive*, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1983, p. 392.

26[12] See A. Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur: Philosophische Ergebnisse und Aussagen*. Athenaion Verlag. Frankfurt, 1977.

27[13] “Diese Grundbedürfnisse veranlassen, dass die Habitualisierung von Handlungen sofort in arbeitsteilige Kooperation zum Ziel der Befriedigung solcher Bedürfnisse übergeht”. W. Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer perspektive*, op.cit., p.391.

28[14] See A. Millán-Puelles, *Economía y Libertad*. CECA, 1974, p. 37.

29[15] See J.A. Marina *Ética para Náufragos*, Editorial Anagrama, Barcelona