

# Work as Key to the Social Question

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



## **Crisis at Work:** Conflicting Roles as a Challenge to Ethical Practice

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### **Abstract**

Modern social trends have made it inevitable that whole sections of society will be forever obliged not only to move frequently from job to job, but to have to switch careers several times during their working life. So one might ask how do these changes affect one's personal identity. At one time identity was part and parcel of a person's traditional working role and was reinforced by that role. Today, a person has to carve out an identity for himself and decide for himself what to make of his working role. This cannot be done in isolation and without any feedback. The ego must broaden its perspective by finding out more about those individuals around him and making sense of them. The answer to the question, "Who am I?" is found in answering the other question, "Who are you?"

The interpretative dialogue between "me" and "you" may be nurtured in a community where there is open discussion and evaluation of the day to day working activities of its members. The aims and consequences of such co-operative undertakings need to be weighed up in light of their impact on those affected by them or excluded from them. Then dialogue can go beyond a merely empirical view of the working scenario and pave the way for a more critical and ethically relevant approach.

If an important part of a one's work is about interpersonal dialogues, these will only be successful if the parties concerned have already to demonstrate their capacity for sensitivity, trust, tolerance, good communication skills etc.. These virtues grow and are strengthened in the realm of intimacy by continuous interaction first with parents, later with partners and with friends. Of course, these networks of intimacy, too, have themselves become very fragile and need careful and responsible handling.

Crisis in the home is more often than not the result of economic imperatives which the individual - be it a manager or unskilled worker - is obliged to meet to the detriment of family demands. The resulting stresses and strains may compel him to branch out beyond

his existing identity to become involved in the political arena from whence a new social order better adapted to human needs can be devised.

Within all three areas of life - intimacy, work and politics, conscious ethical practice is always motivated and governed by the idea of the "Good Life". The deeper meaning of this concept is intimately linked with the individual's inheritance. One of the essential roles of the Christian Community is to help people as individuals to come to know the roots of their existence and to release the power that this will give them into the finite realm of ethical demands.

### ***I. Changing Attitudes towards Work***

These days finding a job of any kind is for many people their most urgent problem. It doesn't matter that much whether the job is what they are really looking for or not. If it is right for them at the time and if they like it, all the better. If not, then they will at least have the income. If it is hard going and the work is unpleasant, they may put up with it knowing that it is only short term. So the new 'job' may be quite different to the hitherto high profile of the 'profession' or 'vocation'.

The definition of 'vocation' or 'calling' was established by Martin Luther. What he wants to say is that each human being is an individual personality, created by the will of God and accepted as being unique. It is not important where tradition or social class puts the individual. The individual is free to choose. But the choice is not arbitrary. A person needs to find out what he is capable of doing. He has to find a role to play in society. Playing an active role in society he finds inner fulfilment too. 'Who' a person is, and 'what' he or she is doing, is therefore closely interwoven. The Protestant Work Ethic lays greater stress on one's duty and less upon one's personal preference which would add pleasure to the accomplishment of the task. Every person is considered (by Luther) to be an instrument for God's purpose - individual happiness having been left out of the equation.

Today many skilled and well educated people are finding that society is failing to offer adequate employment to match their education. Doubtless society desperately needs this competent work force. We are in need of more teachers, more doctors, nurses etc. - only we cannot afford to pay them.

In these circumstances, one is obliged to go from one job to another - each one limited by contract. This is why *the link between profession and personality is becoming more tenuous*. At the same time, society doesn't really appreciate the qualities needed for certain types of work. A person's value is only measured in abstract terms of time and cost benefit to the employer.

Each one of us runs the risk of one day becoming excluded in this way. People are finding it harder now to map out their future. There is a sharp contrast to the promises of modern society urging each person to pursue his or her own happiness (See Declaration of

Independence/ French Revolution). You can make your own choice, but you aren't allowed to do much with it.

This is nothing new to system theory. What matters is that the system is working. The system doesn't register that certain people are on the outside. The outside is merely the world around us and it is pretty amorphous anyway. So seen in this way one could ask - "what is the problem?" However this is the way things stand at present and it begs the question - is such indifference not evidence of a decline in the human standards of our society?

## ***II. Reflected Personality***

How do people come to terms with a depressing situation like this? It is depressing because the focus has gone. *Ones sense of ones own identity is weakened* as it is no longer expressed or confirmed in the professional role as before. There is no longer any acknowledgement or respect for the person who had played this role in society. As a result, a person's sense of identity suffers. Society, on the other hand, firmly maintains its standards by regarding only those people in secure positions as its true members.

Under such circumstances a person may easily lose touch and feel alienated. A well educated person may well find it easier to cope in such a predicament. It makes it easier to imagine what the different outcomes may be. Yet this won't stop them from feeling somehow guilty and from blaming themselves for being losers. The more deeply seated our cultural values of career and success, the more difficult it is to maintain our self respect when plans go wrong. The highly tuned 'individualism' of modern society self-help ethic then rears its ugly head and isolation and loneliness soon follow. Highly educated people will be particularly affected. It may be much easier for people with a traditional background - where family solidarity is still valued - to cope with a crisis like this and many an unskilled worker will make up for the 'public' job he has lost by working on the Black Market.

What avenues are open to help a person find a new identity? I think we have to distinguish between being on the one hand true to ourselves and the working role we are expected to play on the other hand on the wider social stage . The bourgeois view that these two are more or less identical is clearly flawed.

By discovering the difference between the essential 'me' and the professional 'me' it becomes clear that the latter is not the only way of expressing the former. The sum of my personality is not concentrated on this or that task which I'm doing: I am not by nature a teacher or a doctor and may find fulfilment in number of different pursuits . Even an assortment of different jobs may meet the needs of my self esteem. What is important is that whatever job I am doing, it is compatible with my understanding of who I am. This insight does not however lessen the sense of loss when my career is suddenly interrupted.

### *III. Workaholics and Consumers*

The time has come for us to take another look at our roles in society as we now have a better understanding both of the world itself and of our own capabilities.

There was a time when external factors determined a person's identity. Custom and religion meant this changed very little if at all. For the individual concerned it was simply a question of take it or leave it. Nowadays this is no longer the case and people have to carve out their own identity and find other ways of expressing their individuality, their working role being only one of these.

Clearly we need to ask ourselves whether it is always possible for people know how to integrate in this way and whether real social needs are being met. Is such independence nothing more than a dangerous dream? Is it not a way of cutting oneself off from the real world around us? There is a serious risk of this happening.

The individual often has a two-fold identity. The first being the one he adopts for work. This involves total compliance. For him the relentless demands made by work become inextricably linked with conscience. In being so compliant, he is creating stress for himself without realising that the two are intimately linked. The workaholic does not ask whether there is any sense for him in playing this role. He loses a sense of perspective in terms of his life in general. He is oblivious to the ultimate aims of his area of work whether in production or administration. He has let himself become a cog in a wheel, intent solely on increasing his output and efficiency.

Is such a way of living a sign of weakness - the expression of existential angst? Is it not a denial of life's finitude, its fragility and uncertainty? This person's individual identity has got seriously lost in the workings of society's new treadmills. From neglecting himself he goes on to neglect others around him, seeing them too purely in terms of what he can get out of them and denying them the respect they deserve as colleagues. He fails to acknowledge that they are different people - individuals in their own right, instead he perceives them as a threat.

Undermining colleagues in this way and rejecting sensible dialogue about the work to be done will inevitably result in conflict. Attitudes will become entrenched and there will be no room left for amicable exchange. Such people often find it hard to express their own thoughts and feelings and are reduced to unrestrained emotional outbursts. At the other end of the spectrum is the type of person who is completely indifferent to work. For many people work is meaningless and has no intrinsic value and only the money they earn matters to them. It is an abstract means to exchange and enjoyment of a variety of consumer goods. Their interpretation of work is more complex than that of the workaholic, since for them work is seen as only one part of their life and not as the whole. They are able to enjoy much more than the basic necessities of life and work is significant as being the key to greater

worldly pleasures.

What matters here is that there is no link between the job a person does and who that person is. Work is no longer seen as meaningful in itself. In line with this lack of self-awareness about their working role, there is a corresponding lack of thought about the pros and cons of being a consumer. They have no way of finding out for themselves which goods are crucial for personal development and which are not. People are becoming dependent and alienated all over again in their role as consumers. They are themselves becoming consumed by the all-abundant warehouse of superfluous goods. They are all 'hooked' on the promises of material happiness.

It is a vicious circle. The more there is on offer, the more a person has to work. There is not enough time left to derive real benefit from the things we buy which could otherwise enrich our inner lives. The consumer is a superficial creature - just like the endless stream of goods on offer to him. The pleasure it affords him is merely that each purchase is different to the one that went before. Nowadays people have to make a choice at every turn from among the many conflicting options. They have to ask themselves very carefully which of these things is taking them in the direction they want to go in their lives and which is not. Not all the options which would suit a person's character and personality can be taken up, as our short lifespan prevents us from realising all of them. As Paul Tillich once said life only comes from self determination and from sacrificing a considerable part of what could be in store for us.

Apparently consumerism has simply to be accepted without question. It is be on the proach. It offers a high standard of living for almost everybody. The enduring task of social politics will be to give the those who are less well off equal access to what is on offer and to satisfy their cultural needs at the same time. But social welfare alone does not amount to happiness. From a human point of view it is not enough just keeping people busy in a perpetual round of entertainment.

#### ***IV. Shared Spirit of Solidarity***

Those who value their personal identity must take a good look and try to fathom the aims and interrelationships of the employment process in its entirety of which they are a part . In this way people at work broaden their understanding of their social environment, of the values adherent in the body or structure which employs them and of its shortcomings in living up to them.

*Building up ones personal identity by cultivating social understanding* is not about accumulating more and more factual information. What it does mean is becoming open towards other people in society and having an insight into the way the individual's destiny is interwoven with the identities and processes of society as a whole. It means coming to grips with the things in life that really matter. Such existential, interpretative processes are the basis for my identity, my sense of being me. It won't serve as a guideline which will apply to

our day to day business. But it is one on which will pave the way for such guidelines.

Awareness of our relationship as individuals within society is not only linked to our thought processes, but is part of our human make up. As a person develops, his inner experience is communicated to other people. It will be met by criticism from others. If we don't want to upset one other we will have to learn to listen attentively and take care what we say in reply. With time we will learn to deal appropriately with conflicting views by learning to respect each other even if we disagree.

Despite their differences people will learn from this kind of communication that work is about co-operation and teamwork. Even ones earnings represent more than mere money, but a sign of recognition both of the work done and a person's contribution to it. This challenging notion where mutual respect is woven invisibly into daily working practice allows for critical comment when things go wrong and a person is denied both a job and his role in society. At the same time an employee is expected to make a deliberate and responsible contribution to the working process Co-responsibility comes from understanding ones rights and obligations. So people will grow to learn their role in society when they go beyond co-operation at a merely technical level and become involved through active participation in ethical issues as well.

If people have only technical concepts to go on and nothing else, they will sheepishly do what they are told. So that even when people are part of a modern day team where roles are equally distributed, they will be answerable to external dictates. Such a structure is completely top heavy and there is no room for serious criticism. At the other end of the spectrum, ethical debate prefers to look at the aims and structure of industrial logic. A popular question is about the aims of technical enterprise. The underlying argument rests on the concept of the 'Good Life'.

Those, however, who have given this question (of social co-operation) serious thought as representing the core structure of human life, will think and act favourably towards other people in a spirit of self determination rather than a sense of submission to an external authority. For those people co-operative action involves more than just keeping the cogs turning. It is about people and in particular about the dignity and happiness of each individual in society.

Bearing in mind modern working conditions I think it is appropriate to reassert the need for solidarity. The notion of solidarity is often used to describe a vague sense of generalised unity between individuals in a group. I would like to look at it from a different point of view and see it in terms of unity stemming from deliberate choices people have made. I believe that only careful working partnership can redress the mindless power of social mechanisms and the dehumanising effect of automation which makes people redundant in modern society.

Reflective solidarity is at once both limited and yet universal. It is limited in the way it is expressed by the special circumstances of any given situation and involves only the few people who are immediately concerned. It is at the same time universal, because everybody

is invited to become part of this network of solidarity. The concreteness is open, the openness always concrete. So, a real show of solidarity may be possible even though many participants won't be able to share the experience from start to finish. In addition the structure may itself grow and become part of other similar structures and projects.

The identity as 'we' which makes for solidarity may first be arrived at when a few individuals talk about the work they do in common and problems which arise in the process. Later, this tenuous shared identity may be strengthened and take the more lasting form of a council, association etc. But it is always important that these associations develop at a conceptual level and don't end up dealing with only one aspect of the issue such as earning-related campaigning and nothing else.

### ***V. The Sources: Intimacy, Religion***

Solidarity, if it is to be effective, requires the driving force of individual people behind it. Education is not the only key to a position of responsibility, but it is very important. It is in the home, in particular, that values are learned. But as we know we can no longer pretend to rely on strong and unchallenged family traditions. Nowadays (in the west) individuals choose for themselves to stay together and marriage and family life reflect this change. Partnership is based upon personal freedom. As an evolving structure it needs to experience processes of conflict and reconciliation. Neither partner should forego his or her personal freedom within the family structure which they have formed together. Instead, one partner should help the other to express his or her own freedom in all its potential and actively respect and be 'wedded' to the otherness of that person.

Modern marriage, as a joint undertaking of partners which prizes each one's individuality, is *a fundamental example of a deliberately chosen 'we' identity* to be carefully nurtured, in many ways recreated and reinvented during its life.

Within the social arena the wider economic demands upon a partner often prevail at great cost over a family's life of intimacy. How do people come to terms with these ongoing constraints? How can they assert their right to a happy private life? Here as before, it is important to have an objective understanding of wider social implications of any real or threatened estrangement and unhappiness. Clearly a deeper understanding of the incongruities of social substructures will hardly resolve the problems of intimacy and family life, but it is a crucial step towards clarifying the picture.

Awareness of these external constraints may motivate people to go beyond purely family ethics and become politically involved. The gap between wider economic constraints and the demands of family life may have become so irreconcilable that they feel compelled to give the matter of the 'Good Life' a public airing.

Frank discussion of real human needs may take them into local grass roots politics - whether it be meetings in the local community or in local government, or on a wider scale. Such

activities will bring together isolated voices and their protests will gain ground. The topics discussed will become more generalised and will ultimately come onto the political agenda.

It is true that once it is on the political agenda one can argue that the issue becomes less real. It is no longer 'my' case or 'your' case at issue. It has become just another social concern and it has been allocated to someone else. Lets assume that the bureaucrats concerned take a philosophical view and don't measure human reality strictly by the book - there may even be a culture of common sense and liberality at a political level. By the same token economic and political institutions have to gear themselves towards the humanisation of society and its members. Political thought which embraces ethical concerns will always be ready to accept sound criticism from groups at the grass roots and be ready to work together with them. And vice versa.

One idea inspires those on the political stage, single people, groups and administrators - the idea of the 'Good Life'. *The connotations of the 'Good Life' are rooted in religious experience.* The sense of values which shapes our behaviour at work, in the home and in the world of politics is none other than a transformation of our religious heritage. Obviously, religion itself is only valid as long as it is a lived experience and one which is nurtured. For this reason people have to be continuously confronted with their (spiritual) heritage. This demands much more than formal religious instruction. We often feel put off by abstract teachings and religious rites having become unfamiliar or just seem irrelevant in light of our personal experience. It is very difficult for us in this modern age to articulate those very questions which move our hearts and unsettle us at the very core of our being.

Religions are renowned for withholding their truths from worldly affairs and its ethical challenges. Therefore, it will always remain the task of the Christian community to provide a clear correlation between the finite and the infinite. The Christian community is there to assist everybody who wants to, to grow as a person and to discover the essence of his or her life. The Christian community invites them to nurture their freedom of religious self-expression and take up their responsibilities in the world. By discovering the ultimate sense in what they are doing here and now they will find the energy to follow their conscience and will pursue their moral principles with even greater determination when they meet with failure.

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