

# Work, social structure and leadership

## Spirituality and the problem of employment

Rafael Alvira  
[ralvira@unav.es](mailto:ralvira@unav.es)  
Navarra, Spain

### Contents

1. Work
2. Social structure
3. Leadership
4. Spirituality
5. Employment

### 1. Work

In general, we can say that all work is an activity, although not all activities are work. The activities we carry out consciously fall into two categories which the ancients would have called *otium* and *negotium*, leisure and business. These terms, refined where necessary, can be said to denote activities which transform our inner lives (those which fall under the heading of leisure), and activities which transform the outside world which we use for our own benefit (those which are productive or which are to do with business).

Work, understood as activity and effort, is required in both cases, but in the strict sense only activities which transform the outside world have normally been taken to be work. For centuries this was also the reason why leisure was held to be completely superior to work. Leisure, the activity which *transforms me* was *educational*, it enriched me as a human being, it was *humanist*, whereas production and trade changed the outside world in order to make it more useful for me, but did not enrich me internally as a human being.

People who had spare time because the basic necessities of their life had already been provided and they hardly had to work could belong in principle to the upper class consisting of educated people. These included landowners whose servants worked the land, soldiers in times of peace (which were long), clerics and celibate religious.

Traditionally these people, the leisured classes, were those who made up the ruling social group. Not even artists were to be found among them, as their activity was a form of productive work: their products were objects of decoration or things which made life more agreeable.

## 2. Social structure

It is not strange that the leaders of society should have emerged from these classes, since on the one hand they were educated, that is, they possessed the *universal vision* which education provides, and on the other, they had spare time to dedicate to managerial activity.

They were in possession of both material and spiritual property (education), and together with this they had the ability to govern, to take on managerial functions, and power, that is, they had sufficient means. Power, government and property form the basic triad of social dominance.

Workers, however, had none of this, or only a very little. Thus a heavily hierarchical social structure was established in which the merely utilitarian nature of work meant that service was seen as mainly instrumental, and so were the servants or slaves, the people who carried out the work.

As one might expect, the form of social dialogue reflected this structure: one does not speak to an "equal" in the same way as one speaks to someone who is not one's "equal". And so ways of speaking were established that contributed to reinforcing this structure.

It is often true now, and was much more so then, that the person who owns property also has power and governs, even though these three realities are not always embodied in the same person. That is why we can say that in general the shape of society is determined by the *system of ownership* and the *system of dialogue* which are current within it. Since to dialogue it is necessary to have a certain amount of education (the spiritual property of the person who has it), and since really to own property it is necessary to love and know how to use it (to understand what one has) the point lies in the fact that the shape of society is determined by the way in which *property is distributed*, taking this in its broadest sense. This is the key to social structure.

\*\*\*

One of the characteristic features of "modernity" lies in its bid to change the structure of society thoroughly, not just superficially. Its strategy for carrying this out was to claim the primacy and central importance of work, an idea which rested on a levelling philosophy and world view. This was carried through in different areas of life. From the religious point of view, it was emphasized that God created man to transform the world: "be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it" as Genesis tells us and Francis Bacon reminds us. Moreover, according to Luther, there is no *hierarchy* in the people of God, and revelation comes to every person in an individual manner. The Bible

has to be translated for everyone to read and understand, and the work of the layman has a fundamental importance.

This new vision of the world also dismantled all hierarchies; the sun, the earth, the moon and the other stars were no longer superior or inferior to each other. The same pattern is found in metaphysics, which renounced *substantial forms* (all forms are *distinctive*) and the ontological scale. In addition to this, the universe came to be understood as *material*.

In economics, commerce, which is free of hierarchies, became increasingly important, gaining ascendancy over the hierarchical fixity of land ownership. In the end, in the revolution, both law and politics sought a levelling equality.

Are we equal because we all know and have leisure, because we all work in a levelled-out society in which there are no more servants, because the difference between leisure and business has been erased, because business is superior to leisure, or because we believe that leisure ought to disappear? The answer is that in modern society we are equal for all these reasons, and this entails the formation of a new social structure, what we might call the *society of work*.

In this society, we are all essentially equal because we are all *workers*, or at least we suppose so, and this is what characterizes us. If one person knows and the other does not, then knowing, being educated, is what is fundamental and a hierarchy exists. But if the difference is that one person works more and the other less, the difference is the quantitative yield, but there is no difference in quality.

We are equal for the following reasons. 1) Universal education is the aim, and everyone is supposed to have access to knowledge without gradations. 2) Because all wealth is moveable, and it is necessary to learn to do business and work in business if one wants to survive. 3) It is felt that the most important aspect of the human being is the freedom in which we are all equal, and to enjoy this freedom we need both external and internal goods. 4) Moreover, it is thought that *contemplation* is either pure entertainment - psychological or physical relaxation - or completely worthless, because there is a refusal to accept that it is possible to contemplate God. This is why the knowledge of production and business is superior to that of leisure. 5) Finally, the ultimate conclusions are drawn that leisure in the classical sense is useless, as if there is no God, or we are unable to know him, our inner, spiritual enrichment can be nothing more than aestheticism.

This last conclusion is that reached in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche, who maintained that "work makes us atheists" and that there is nothing left to do but "write philosophy with a hammer".

Thus the primacy of work belongs within a levelled-out social structure, in which the only differences can be quantitative, even though the difference is the "energy boost" of Nietzsche's power of the individual will.

\*\*\*

None the less, this levelling, which would seem to be the quintessence of present-day democratic society, is not present in a form which is as clear and easy as one might expect. The explanation for this is to be found, at least partly, in the liberal interpretation of democracy.

Liberalism accepts the revolutionary currency but places the stress on freedom over and above equality, and does not insist on fraternity. We are all equal, there are no *qualitative* differences, but what we are equal in is the very substance of our being, that is, *freedom*. Freedom cannot be forced, and so it is impossible to *demand* fraternity. In this, classic liberalism differs from its closest relative, anarchism, which takes the radically logical view that without fraternity, freedom violates equality *de facto*.

Qualitative freedom is maintained, and we are all workers, but the *division of labour* and the *unequal distribution of capital*, both consequences of freedom, mean that the man who qualitatively and officially is no longer a servant is nevertheless one in fact. This is the structure of bourgeois society, the society of work, which is therefore not egalitarian.

A society whose principles are individual freedom and work cannot allow itself this luxury. It is possible to allow particular circumstantial inequalities, however many there may be, but not an "unequalitarian" structure, because if the division of labour and the unequal distribution of capital are perpetuated, then it does not matter that individual subjects have the ever-open possibility of changing rung on the social ladder: the problem remains that some are up and others are down. And the person who is at the bottom is the "servant", with the result that there are formally recognised freedoms, but there is no genuine freedom.

This problem was what led Karl Marx to propose his thesis that it is necessary to put an end to the division of labour and the unequal distribution of capital. Given the presuppositions of modern thinking, this was the logical conclusion: it was the way of rescuing democracy.

The historical collapse of Marxism is a failure of both social structure and method. Regarding the former, what has happened is so universal and spectacular that nothing more need be said. There is no lasting economic development without private property, nor is there any motivation to work. Thus an economy based on labour, which is what the Marxist one was, resulted in economic stagnation and a minimum of work.

As far as method is concerned, it is obvious that the problem of democracy is to harmonize freedom and equality. The liberal method - and at the same time, the liberal myth - is that liberty brings equality. The socialist-Marxist myth goes the other way round: equality brings freedom. But it did not.

\*\*\*

### **3. Leadership**

There is, however, a problem which is common to both methods: *who is to lead society?* This question is more complex than it might seem. If there are no differences, if individual freedom is a basic principle, there is no *authority*. A society of human beings who are free and equal ought not to require the mediation of any authority. But this is a utopian view. From the first, the desire of democracy has always been to find governors who are not hierarchs, who are no different from the other members of society.

Marxist socialism attempts to solve the problem by recourse to civil servants who ought, in Marx's opinion, to administer things, rather than govern people.

Liberalism leaves matters in the hands of *entrepreneurs* and *organizers*, and a small group of representatives of the "minimum State".

The solution put forward by socialist radicalism has proved completely inadequate, but the scheme set forth by pure liberalism has not turned out as expected either. Suffice it to mention the harsh opposition which US liberals encounter in the form of "communitarians". It is not clear whether some communitarian principles are fully democratic, but whatever the truth of this, it is always true that society has need of people with the ability to communicate with others, to integrate and to convey enthusiasm. It is not enough to have a businessman who signs contracts with his employees - to structure itself properly, society needs more.

Hence the emphasis today on the importance of *leadership*, a term and concept whose success, particularly in America, is still surprising. In fact, it was fascism which launched the idea, in response to the problem of democratic integration.

Above and beyond the historical vagaries of the term and its present-day use in the language of the *business culture*, it is indubitable that every society needs people who are capable of giving it structure. Pure individual *freedom* does not articulate anything, nor does *equality*. This is why the first democrats added the word *fraternity*. But this was never taken seriously in Europe, except by anarchists, who were in any case not capable of genuinely creating it. In our own time, fraternity has stepped to the forefront again, expressed by the word "solidarity", which is used first by the social teachings of the Church, and then by charitable institutions, etc. But the individualism in our surroundings is so strong that solidarity comes as an additional extra, important to correct the defects of the system, but not essential to it.

In the USA, the idea of a form of freedom which entails care for society has always been more highly developed. There is an awareness that everyone should contribute to the institutions of education, culture and social welfare which are so necessary for the well-being of society, and that this is the responsibility of the citizen, not the State. But it is one thing to contribute - by giving money, and sometimes effort - to the common good, and another thing to unite and motivate society. That is, there must be a mediator, a person who joins others together, a leader.

To be a leader, one must possess various qualities. On the one hand, one must be well acquainted with the principles, history, structure and character of the institution or group of people one is going to lead. On the other, it is necessary to have a sufficiently clear idea of the direction one wishes to take, the aims one wants to achieve, and how. Finally, it is necessary to display a moral capacity which places one beyond suspicion. That is, the people who are to be led will only accept this situation if they can see that the leader is working for the common good and not for his or her own.

In other words, the leader has to be someone who embodies the *universal*, both on the level of *knowledge* and on that of the *will*. If it is beyond many people's reach to possess intelligence and a broad overview of complex situations, it is still more difficult to find someone with a will that is tuned in to the universal good.

This particular question was never resolved by the classical thinkers of democracy. While Hobbes's anthropological pessimism would seem unacceptable, Rousseau's optimism appears even more unreal. And the halfway solutions like that of Locke display nothing more than a moderate understanding of human nature, but never come up with reasons why anyone should take the initiative to make him or herself responsible for society. To do this, one needs a *universal will*, or if we prefer, a will trained to do the *common good*.

If we look at the basic theses of the modern political economy, we see that Adam Smith similarly sketched out an image of the human being as a worker, who wants to exercise good social conduct and respect for others, but that he sees no reason why someone should feel obliged to take on the responsibility for uniting and improving society.

However, the figure of the leader, as it is understood in business today, reflects a social philosophy close to that of Christian social teachings. In the latter, we insist on the need to work for the good of our neighbours, and on the importance of respecting every individual; stress is also placed on the need to avoid 'economicism', and the social supremacy of the market is rejected.

As far as our present subject is concerned, this means that a genuine leader cannot be someone who simply gets the employees in a company to be more enthusiastic about it, work better and produce more. Rather, it is someone who takes responsibility for the human development of all the others, the betterment of every person and of society as a whole.

A leader whose philosophy is merely of the economicist variety is simply an expert in getting more out of people, but this is not what they really want. There is a sensation of frustrated hopes, which may be explicit or implicit, in many employees in the western world. This constitutes a human problem which is much deeper and more severe than it might seem.

This frustrated hope springs from the fact that a strong bond exists between the leader and the people who are led, a kind of life-giving stream, but the people's insight that the

leader's interests are chiefly economic and "external" destroys the magic of this relationship.

The classic liberal notion that emancipated people do not need "directors" to run their lives is, in my view, not adequately grounded in anthropology. Human beings need mirrors, examples, in which they can regard themselves, and people who can help them to progress in different aspects of their life. Living, for human beings, is essentially living with others, which means that all of us need other people's help to develop all the dimensions of our lives.

But *giving help* in aspects other than superficial, external ones means assuming one's own responsibility towards other people. And this presupposes *intellectual vision, strength and generosity of will*, and having *something inside to give*. It is not possible to help if we do not possess anything to give to others.

#### **4. Spirituality**

*Inner strength, generosity of will, and vision* make up what we call *spirituality*. So an important point for our society is that leaders ought to have spirituality. Without it, it is impossible really to work for the good of others. Mere generalized sympathy enables people to do a lot of good things, but in the medium and long term it does not make better people.

This is perhaps the key factor that has been lacking in liberal society. It has brought many benefits: respect for individual freedoms is an undisputed advance; the active, lively concept of an economy in a state of perpetual growth, hand in hand with technological progress, is a magnificent contribution, and so on. Moreover, it cannot be said that, above all in its origins, the liberal economy has been unconcerned with ethics. The liberal-capitalist economy is a formidable instrument, whereas the socialist one no longer exists.

The problem is that if anthropology does not take account of the fact that, beyond correct, interested individual actions, everyone has to take responsibility for society as far as is possible, then that anthropology does not fully reflect the truth of what the human being is. This goes first and foremost, in a special way, for those who have qualities of leadership.

The west today is not a society that is structured, held together, governed, by people seeking the *common good*, the overall human good, which includes a just economic profit. Instead, it is a society lacking in cohesion, in which some people are pursuing financial profits while others are earning money by defending the weak, under the auspices of the State and analogous entities. All leadership is fictitious: some lay claims to leadership for the sake of business gains, although this also affects the profits of others, while others seek it for political ends, even though they may be working in the interests of the people.

But the crucial point lies in the fact that "correct individualism", in which everyone defends his or her own interests and perhaps also happens to do some good to others, is not the same as the anthropological thesis that it is everyone's moral obligation to take responsibility for others, which is particularly true for leaders because great ability brings great obligation.

The failure to realise this has emptied the west of humanity. But as I have said, there is no humanity because there is no *spirituality*. Just as nature only attains perfection through supernatural power, so that without this, nature is not sufficiently natural, it is also true to say that *what is human in the human being* can only be reached through spirituality. So when this is lacking, the individual's actions become, to a greater or lesser extent, inhuman.

Spirituality includes the unfolding of an *inner* world within the person, and of a sense of responsibility to others, all of which merges together in a profoundly ethical attitude to life. The spiritual man knows that reality is worth more than the material profit which can be obtained from it. When he is generous, he knows that he is not losing but gaining. Just as the person who is generous enough to invest financially earns more than the miser, whose only interest is to amass treasure for himself, the spiritual man knows that when he abandons the avarice of only looking after himself, in order to assume responsibility for others, he is gaining greatly in humanity. As the Greeks would have said, he goes from being an *idiot*, concerned only with himself, to being a *noble* man. As we read in the gospel, only he who loses his life (his purely private life) will gain it (that is, he will gain the noble life).

Thus all spirituality means something more than the mere development of an "inner life". There is no inner life without outer life, and so a human inner life which does not take seriously the fact that other people are there, outside, facing us, is an inner life which is abstract, existing only in the imagination or the intellect. But if I want them to accept me, to respect me absolutely, as Kant asked, if I want not to be treated as only a means or a tool, then I have to accept other people absolutely too. In reality, I cannot do so unless I am convinced that a personal absolute is possible, that is, that God exists.

If there is a God, I can be a person, and if the human being truly exists, then God does too. This is a philosophical form - a form that is intended to be philosophical - of expressing the Christian commandment to see God in every human being.

Spirituality can therefore not be detached from work. Historically, the commonest image of the spiritual man was that of the ascete who fled the world, to a greater or lesser extent, in order to immerse his soul in the divine. Catholic tradition, however, felt a growing need to direct spirituality towards helping others, through health care, education and charity.

\*\*\*

But the leader today needs something else, as it is not just a case of bearing what is good, of helping, of bringing God to others and to one's work, all of which is of utmost importance, but also of discovering what is divine and what is spiritual in work itself.

Living is being active, and we are all active in one way or another. But, as I said at the beginning, in the strict sense activity is one thing and work is another. Work is *business*, the *production of external things*, things which stay outside and do not enrich us *internally*. But if work does not enter our inner lives, then Nietzsche may have been right when he said that "work makes us atheists".

For work to enrich us internally, it has to meet certain conditions:

- a) We have to enrich ourselves educationally through work; we have to cultivate our minds. To this end, it is necessary to consider that both *physical nature* and *practical action* are books in which we can read the deepest aspects of our being.
- b) We have to see work as a place where we can learn and exercise the moral virtues.
- c) Particularly, we have to consider that all work is a gift for others, or rather, in every kind of work we can transform our lives in the service of others. When we work in this way, we fulfil the spiritual commandment to give our lives for others.
- d) The material world is in our hands for us to take care of it and make it perfect. The Creator gave us the task of caring for and perfecting His creation.
- e) All this implies that we must see God in all our work, and see this at once from a spiritual and a worldly point of view.

## **5. Employment**

The last point concerns the problem of work. In ancient society - some of the forms of which survived in the west until quite recently, particularly in some European and Latin American countries - the most desirable thing was to live comfortably without having to work. In present-day society, however, even those who could live comfortably without working become depressed if they have no job or employment. Work is now not only a means to ensure subsistence, or even the modern means of achieving integration into society, but has turned into a major psychological need. This is a result of environmental pressure which is a product of our modern social philosophy and anthropology.

Without employment, many people today do not know what to do, since they do not know how to live leisure in the classical sense, nor do they have any form of spirituality. In addition to this, they feel humiliated and excluded from society.

It is certainly necessary to make every effort to bring unemployment down as low as possible. Such efforts are already being made, and every effective measure is important. But what I want to emphasize here is the following:

a) The problem of unemployment is complex, and its severity depends on the social philosophy which surrounds it. We can say, I think, that this is an issue which cannot be resolved through economic measures alone, or rather, by economicist measures, as is the case today.

b) Leaders with a spiritual training must play a decisive role in solving this problem.

\*\*\*

Regarding the former, a start can be made by looking at a question which is very directly related to this issue, and which is of topical interest today. I refer to the presence of women in the workplace.

Women are calling for full entry into the labour market, and ask that they should not be the object of any kind of discrimination in this respect. They have long been asking for their employers to make it easier for them to be employed and be mothers at the same time, but this campaign seems to have lost momentum in the last few years. On the one hand, this may be because they have realised that, despite favourable legislation, the time they have to devote to their children and their family reduces their ability to compete; and on the other, the consumerism and hedonism which are in the air cause them to lose interest in what was classically considered to be the family with children.

Establishing quotas to impose a certain proportion of women is, from another point of view, extremely dubious from the economic angle, and pure political rhetoric. But above all, it is humiliating for women. The only solution which is worthy and dignified is the principle of "equal education for all, and the free labour market".

In short, the underlying problem with female unemployment has the same origin as the general problem of unemployment, and it does not consist only of factors to do with more or less investment, higher or lower taxes, or higher or lower interest rates - all of which are very important, both in general and in the context of the present situation - but also of the simple fact that the economy does not look at the human being, but is only concerned with wealth. Or, to use the terms of classical logic, it concerns itself with wealth *in recto*, but with the human being *in obliquo*, when it really ought to do the opposite, even from the point of view of profitability. In fact, if all the workers are happy in their work, and enjoy respect and esteem, overall productivity increases. It is true that this is more difficult to bring about, though, and that it may turn out to be comparatively less profitable for some.

Few people take into account the point that if not many children are born, if the population is small, or if some children are born but their parents do not have time to educate them properly, then the economic consequences will be very grave. It will be necessary to accept immigrants with different customs and ways of life, who have to learn how to adapt. A balance of the losses and gains in such a case would surely be negative for the economy.

But the personal and social loss is much greater. We are left with a society that is sad and selfish, in which the joys of life are never explored. People no longer go to work singing, as Charles Péguy reminds us was once the case.

So the essential question concerning women's work is not whether they should occupy more or fewer jobs. On this point there should be complete freedom and respect in the labour market. The point is that society should understand that the presence of what is *feminine* and *maternal*, which is not exactly the same as the presence of women at work, is necessary even for the economic system to function properly.

Something similar holds for retired people. They are said to be useful for the economy because they contribute to it as consumers, but this contains a certain sarcasm. It would seem that there are now human beings who, rather than being people or citizens, are in fact *consumers*. There is no need here to go into detail about the loss of working capacity, the destabilizing psychological effects, and the economic costs of such a process.

\*\*\*

To sum up, what I want to say here is that the radical problem of employment is primarily social and anthropological in nature. It is not necessary for everyone to have jobs, and the idea of *full employment* may even be a *structural error*. Society cannot function with full employment, because it requires many forms of work to be done which are not strictly speaking types of employment.

We have to change the social philosophy and philosophical anthropology current today. In the last few hundred years we have taken on the idea that work is not something secondary, and not purely a kind of entertainment to avoid idleness. Just as people who entered the religious life used to take their new life quite seriously, saying that they made their *profession* in an order or congregation, we now see that work is fully professional, and it is carried out with inner dedication. And this, as I have said, is a gain.

So when we say here that we have to imagine a society in which not everyone is employed, we are not maintaining that these non-employed people have to work less, or with less "professional" seriousness. This is what tends to be the case today with people who live on pensions. It seems that the professional spirit is only available for the employed. But we ought to bear in mind that *professionalism is a spirit, while employment is only an administrative situation*. There are employees who are unprofessional, or unwillingly professional, and there are non-employed people who work with a professional spirit, even though there are fewer of these.

In treatises on economics, it has been repeated time and time again that this discipline is concerned with the distribution and apportioning of scarce goods. In the "metaphysical" sense, goods are always scarce for us, because the human being is insatiable. But in the economic sense, goods are now in plentiful supply, or at least, they could be. The production capacity is potentially immense. The economy should rather be dealing with the subject of creating employment and ensuring professional work for everyone.

\*\*\*

The present situation in the west, as far as these last aspects are concerned, is shown quite clearly in the phenomenon of non-profit-making organizations. The first point which emerges from this is the statism which peacefully invades the ambience of all the so-called free countries. These organizations, which contain large numbers of people who want to work despite the fact that many of them have no job, even though they do have an income, are often, in many countries, described as "non-governmental" or "non-state". It would seem that in the free society something is either state-run, or it can only be described negatively. We have lost the awareness that the State (the Government) is just one of the institutions in society, though it is, of course, a very important one.

Today, it is the State which embodies the rule of the people; and the people want what is good for themselves, so the State is paying increasing attention to social welfare and forms of aid. If people want to work in this field, they are entering the sphere of the State, coming into competition with it, and so the State graciously permits them to do so, labelling them "non-governmental". For centuries, the Church has been the institution with the greatest responsibility for social welfare and beneficence - and now, in some countries it has *de facto* the status of a charity. None the less, a mother who stays at home works more, and with greater "professionalism" (in the sense of the word I have been using here), and is more useful to society, than many employees. But she may not have a "job", and the same holds for many other people within the sphere of the Church, and so on.

It is very possible that capitalism will once again be capable of creating large numbers of jobs. This has been the case before, and may well be again. But this will not solve the underlying problem. This problem should be tackled with the idea that society must be organized in such a way that the distribution of resources is good and everyone can work, where possible with a spirit of professionalism; however, not everyone needs a job, in the sense in which we understand this word in an industrial society. What is necessary is that everyone should have an income, and that the dignity of everyone's work should be respected. Work has to be accepted as being necessary for the proper functioning of the economy, because it is.

Bringing civil society to life means encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit, making sure that there are more people around with the mentality that it is important to "provide work", and not to wait for someone else to give them a job. In the USA this is an integral part of the system, but in Europe such an attitude is often lacking. But it is becoming increasingly necessary, and this brings us back to our previous point.

We need a leader with the right spirit, some of whose distinctive features might be as follows:

- a) taking the *common good* as a priority;
- b) taking steps to create employment;

- c) seeking a *proper place* for every person;
- d) encouraging the entrepreneurial spirit;
- e) understanding the need to reform social structure and introduce a new mentality in which a love of work entails a profound respect for each person's role;
- f) the ability to strike a balance between equality - without egalitarianism - on the one hand, and freedom and authority on the other.

In today's society we are all *free* and *equal* before *authority*, since we scarcely recognise that there is any, and we are all *unequal* in our social and psychosocial integration, which is determined by the *economic structure*.

It would be useful to go in the opposite direction: to achieve greater equality in the economic structure, without egalitarianism, and at the same time find a way of enjoying a freedom that is compatible with genuine authority.