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*EVOLUTION AND QUESTION OF THE CENTRALITY OF THE VALUE: "WORK" IN OUR  
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY*

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**Résumé** : Dans cet article, nous allons questionner le travail et sur son évolution dans notre société post-industrielle. Tout d'abord, on se demandera si nous sommes bien engagés dans la voie de son dépassement, ou pas. En d'autres termes, nous nous poserons la question suivante : Le travail est-il un valeur en voie de disparition<sup>1</sup> ? Dans un deuxième temps, nous reviendrons sur le passage de la société industrielle à la société post-industrielle, pour y analyser l'évolution de la valeur « travail », avec l'hypothèse que cette transformation sociétale majeure n'a pas amélioré notre relation au travail.

**Summary** : In this article we will question work and its evolution in our post-industrial society. First of all, we will wonder if we really are in the right track to go beyond it, or not. In other terms, the question is: Is work an endangered value<sup>2</sup>? Then, we will go back over the transition from industrial society to post-industrial one, in order to analyse the evolution of the value : "work", considering the hypothesis that this major societal transformation did not improve our tie to work.

**Mots clés** : travail, activité, société post-industrielle, revenu minimum

**Keywords** : work, activity, post-industrial society, minimum welfare

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<sup>1</sup> Nous empruntons ce titre à Dominique Méda qui en a fait le titre de l'un de ses ouvrages.

<sup>2</sup> Borrowed term from Dominique Méda's works.

# Evolution and question of the centrality of the value: "work" in our contemporary society

## 1. WORK, BETWEEN SUFFERING AND EMANCIPATION...

Since its origin, work has always appeared as an ambivalent term in the sense that it is considered as an inextricable blend of pain and creation. Firstly, it includes a feeling of trouble and burden. This meaning comes from its Latin etymology<sup>3</sup> (*tripalium*) which is connoted with the ideas of suffering and coercion. Secondly, it is related to the active, voluntary and intentional effort, and, thanks to a perfect knowledge of his or her job, its purpose can become a work, envisaged in its artistic meaning. If we immediately link such a work to those of painters and artists, it is essential to consider it in a broader dimension: an intellectual but also manual work, following the example of the "Compagnons" (a French organization which aims to train people to do traditional works and to experience life in community) and their famous "tour de France" (each member regularly changes of school, everywhere in France), which, *in fine*, leads them to realise an original work of restoration of the cultural heritage. Sometimes, work is considered as tough and even alienating and sometimes, as potentially liberating and totally fulfilling. It is this original ambiguity which makes of it a difficult concept to handle and which is problematical for sociologists, as we will note. First of all, we will introduce a few definitions of work, in order to seize the issue and to define more precisely this so peculiar value: work.

Everyone knows the concept of work... but it is far from being useless to remind its definition. The French dictionary, "Le Petit Robert" (published in 1985), makes a distinction between two meanings of the word. The first meaning is described as "ancient": "state of someone suffering, and being tortured; tough task". This edition also evokes "birth delivery during which woman has contractions and works to expel the foetus". It is only the second meaning of this dictionary which is related to "the whole human activities, coordinated in order to produce or to contribute to the production of what is useful; state or situation of someone acting to achieve such a result". This second meaning is interesting since it refers to the idea of a certain cooperation between men and women when we evoke work, and therefore to a collective vision of

the concept. Finally, dictionary refers to the definition of "labour" in which we find the image of hardness: labour, to plough. These terms evoke the traditional agricultural sector, often considered as hard.

The term "job" may be simpler to apprehend: it would be the form of work in wage societies. Thus, having a job would be equivalent to working, understood as a remunerated work. The main disadvantage of this term is that it does not include craft-workers, shopkeepers, members of liberal professions. And yet, even if they have no "manager", and if we take into consideration the fact they often spend more time working than workers, they feel as concerned as anyone else by the debate on work.

And what about "activity"? It would be a broader notion which encompasses more elements than work but which, at the same time, includes this precise notion of work. Following this pattern, job is an activity among others. In a chapter of his book, Michel Autès (1999) questions the notion of insertion<sup>4</sup>. To do it, he takes up back what Guy Roustang wrote in the French review *Esprit* (1995): "dealing with multi-activity is considering job as an activity among others. We use the notion of activity to underline the fact that individual finds fulfilment by constantly comparing itself with others, by overcoming difficulties, by improving his or her knowledge of a specific skill -manual or artistic-, by achieving a project likely to influence his or her social or natural environment, and by devoting himself or herself to intellectual activities" (p.209).

This term refers to a collective activity and this is precisely what is essential. Sociologists are interested in activity because it could be the possible answer to envisage an alternative to work, promoting activity. So, when we evoke someone who has an activity, it may refer to someone who is paid for this precise activity, but not only, we can think of someone who practises sport or who is involved in an association; another example should be unpaid activities which are essential to explain the richness of French associations.

Another important term is "occupation". It refers to the idea of "occupational" therefore to something

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<sup>3</sup>According to Alain Rey, in his *historical dictionary of French language*, Paris, Le Robert, 2006.

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<sup>4</sup>Chapter 3, "L'insertion au carrefour du social", pp. 153-218.

much more derogatory and demeaning. Once again, in "Le Petit Robert", occupation is defined as following: "work likely to occupy". With this definition, the relation to beneficial work for collectivity is far from being obvious and there is the rub. To people who were youth workers, this notion must ring a bell. It may remind them the too numerous useless work experiences offered to teenagers a few years ago with only one aim: to "occupy" them.

### 1.1 Work in question?

The initial state we can draw is that even if -current or future- debates on the place of work in our post-industrial society are central, we do not deal with them very often, excepted maybe when there are direct links to conjectural issues of the political calendar and which need a solution in short or long term (the issue of pensions in France, for instance). And yet, it seems that for all the political parties (excepted the timid example of the green political party) the only utopian aim of this wage society is full-employment. The questioning of work, considered in this case as a remunerated activity, seems very complicated to achieve. And yet, it would be a theoretical possibility, in view of the huge progress in term of productivity during the last fifty years.

What is striking is that even the alternative ways of criticising are still mobilized to fulfil this well-known aim of full-employment. In the same time, these criticisms cast doubt over the importance given in our society to work as a salaried activity and suggest another distribution of social time. Guy Roustang who promoted multi-activity, remains very cautious in an other part of his article<sup>5</sup>: "with all the difficulties that it implies, we can not abandon the aim of full-employment. If we take such a risk, the probable consequence would be to divide society in two categories of citizens: people who subsist thanks to remunerated activities and people who subsist thanks to health and social security services".

Michel Autès<sup>6</sup> gives a second example of the ambiguity that researchers have to call and describe this precise object which may replace work. There is no doubt that this ambiguity comes from the fact that even them doubt of the existence of such an object. In a collective work (Guy Roustang collaborated with other sociologists such as Jean-Louis Laville, and Bernard Eme<sup>7</sup>), Michel Autès

points out that the first thing that researchers admit is that remunerated work will be sooner or later a null and void notion: "the current success of the notion of activity means that more and more people admit that salaried activity will not play the same hegemonic role as it played since the Industrial Revolution" (1996). But in another extract analysed by Michel Autès, they change their mind: "job has a significant role in our society and we can not imagine any alternative. At the same time, it is the means of enjoying a salary, of having social guarantees and of being able of assuming his or her individual autonomy. It the base of the agreement which defines the mutual obligations between the individual and his or her society" (p.209).

These two examples perfectly illustrate the ambiguity these researchers feel. They all deliver two contradictory speeches: firstly, there is no possible dignity without work (remunerated work); secondly, they express the idea that this specific way of considering work, that is to say job, is more and more challenged today. Finally these examples prove that this question of work remains a sensitive issue for sociologists. Even if the majority of these researchers agree to challenge this notion, they do not manage to find another concept, which sooner or later, would take its place. This difficulty comes from the fact that work (once again remunerated) is still central for integration and formation of identities on our society.

The only clear-cut opinion we can find is in Robert Castel's work. The author of *Metamorphosis of the social issue* does not try to idealise past (retrospectively considered by others as the golden age of Ford). He also takes a stand against people who think we must be ready to abandon the ideally and usually defined "wage society", and so, either to promote a society of the "tout marché" which would be individualist and flexible in its liberal version, or to encourage a post-labour society, which in its utopian vision, would accept to revise the tie between salary and work. To Robert Castel, today it does not exist a credible alternative to wage society.

Finally, we can also find this ambiguity -which is an integral part of the work we already dealt with- in sociologists' speeches and more precisely, in a still active debate on the value we should allocate to work and what would be its content. This is a difficult debate to settle and all this ambivalence about work or activity is essential in sociologists' approach. How can we clear this obstacle and how can we progress?

The solution may come from Dominique Méda's works on the issue. She suggests to organize the debate around these two paradoxical concepts of works. On the one hand, you must envisage work as

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<sup>5</sup>La pleine activité ne remplacera pas l'emploi, In "Esprit", December 1995 (op. cit.), p. 61.

<sup>6</sup>Les paradoxes du travail social (op.cit.).

<sup>7</sup>These researchers became the specialists of this "third sector" constituted of the nébuleuse of companies experiencing "the economical insertion".

a necessary activity for Man to produce the conditions -if only material ones- of his life. In this part, what is stressed here is the hard, difficult and morally or physically alienating side of work envisaged in the generic form of job which would correspond to its social form. Viewed from this angle, it is essential to considerably reduce the weekly or monthly working time in order to devote oneself to more fulfilling activities. On the other hand, we analyse the term "work" in its fullest meaning, that is to say with the idea of participating to work, envisaged in this case in a sense of value, self and social recognition that such an activity can procure. It is essential to strike a balance between these two notions and that work in its idealistic definition should be in-between.

### ***1.2 Work as a social construction***

There is something beyond this consubstantial ambiguity. It is very interesting to point out that work was a notion invented by "modern" societies, indeed, primitive societies did not make of labour one of their central activity. Once again, Dominique Méda, who paid a special attention to these contemporary mutations of our tie to work, invites us to step back on this term which according to her is far from being a natural fact: "we are victim of a retrospective illusion. We believe in the fact that work has always existed since it is written in Bible and that men have always worked, but centuries of reinterpretation have led us to gather activities which, at that time of primitive societies were diversified in a unique notion" (1998).

We see it, work has not always been at the heart of the social link, far from it. It is a modern concept designed during the eighteenth century in order to come up to the dual issue that was the foundation and the control of a new and secularized society. It is not a fundamental anthropological category and does not constitute human essence. If in our days, work enables us to benefit from a certain kind of sociability, it is because it became the major pattern of social time organization and because it is the dominating social link on which exchanges and social hierarchies are based on. In any case it is because it has been designed as a means of establishing a social link.

Today, people associate the notion of work to productivity, hierarchy and a way of getting rich; in the same time, the notion of personal fulfilment through work remains important. We can wonder if we still have this feeling of physical suffering and hardness which is so characteristic of industrial society. Or do we really begin a new period with another and much more insidious form of suffering? Finally did we manage to free ourselves from the darkest side of work, associated to a burden?

## **2. FROM INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY TO POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY...**

Now, let's try to understand why the transition from industrial society to post-industrial society did not permit us to considerably reduce this difficult portion of work and consequently to share it.

George Friedman was a precursor, in the 50s he had already foreseen the debates that were to begin on working time which would have been liberated thanks to a more and more important automation. In the conclusion of his book entitled " Shredding work" (1956) he imagines the best aspect (advent of society of leisure) but also the worst one (a still existing subservience to inevitable new tasks).

During the 80s, in France but also in the United States, this reflexivity continued and there were debates and conferences on the idea of "working in a different way". Through these conferences, it seemed that another kind of work was possible in post-industrial nations. In other terms, it was a dream based on the end of industrial society, this model being replaced by a new and fulfilling society. Decline in employment in western countries became a good news and working time sharing would become a concrete reality, accompanied by constant productivity improvements and numerous relocations to southern/"emerging"<sup>8</sup> countries. This dream of a less mind-numbing work (a dream started during the post-war economic boom) could include an increase of buying power which rhymed with a view of companies in which it was still possible, if not to make a career, at least to reach a kind of fulfilment. Besides, the elderly did not have the same way of considering working place. They felt at ease there, they spoke of "a home away from home", today, no one really thinks that...

In this utopian painting, it seems that leisure, self-fulfilment, family life and unpaid activities prevail over long day's work. And all that thanks to more and more free time since it seems that working time decreases day after day. This is what thought André Gorz (in "*Metamorphosis of work, critical study on economic rationale*"), Dominique Méda (in her first works) or even in a more provocative way, Jérémy Rifkin (1996) who foresaw the "end of work" in his eponymous book.

Unfortunately, the script that is played for now ten years it not exactly the same. In other terms, just like the end of nuclear activities (at least in France), it seems that the "end of work" is not going to happen in a hurry. To express it in a more provocative style, whose fault is it?

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<sup>8</sup>Thanks to relocation, and it would be a mistake to think that industrial sector is absent from our societies, it has just moved. Relocation had generated other problems as it is mentioned in Bernard Stiegler's works.

This beautiful dream did not last a long time because of the inexorable action of capitalism, capable of inventing every day new -and always harder- management methods, of creating more and more stressful jobs, no longer physically but morally. It seems that this "heavy" tendency more generally affects the countries of northern Europe as it is demonstrated in a study led on quality of employment in Europe<sup>9</sup> (we will see it later). Finally, hardness due to industrial society (hard and difficult tasks for human body, noise pollution, harsh working environment (mines, steel industry, textile industry...), various pollution having repercussions on human body like asbestos, lead...) have been replaced by other kind of hardness, this time more insidious and caused by post-industrial society which is entirely devoted to services; these forms of suffering are more difficult to describe but are as destructive if not more: stress, deskilling of tasks, humiliation, lack of self-esteem because of lack of recognition of our work from hierarchy, psychological abuses, being in competition instead of working in collaboration... the advent of this "society of services" has also increased individual work to the detriment of collective effort.

All these new constraints lead at least to severe nervous breakdown, and in the worst case to commit suicide at work. These consequences are new spheres of research for sociologists. Is our society a really developed society since it manages to realise new and unprecedented methods of management which lead the people considered as "normal" to commit suicide because of work? We will suggest the possibility that it is mostly because of "biographical methods of management"<sup>10</sup> ("Toyotism" having replaced "Fordism") which main goal is to adopt new forms of rationalisation and which have led to a totally unknown situation. Toyota model was initially designed to be applied to industrial sector but has progressively and insidiously entered the whole society of services.

What are the new characteristic jobs in this society of services which generate a new kind of hardness we had never met before. Fast food employees, cleaning operatives with staggered hours and longer day's work and now called maintenance persons to be more politically correct, store-men, delivery boys working under hidden subcontracting arrangements for giant and well-established haulage companies, security guards, (most of the time foreigners), who have to wait for hours in the entrance of stores to arrest shoplifters if there are shoplifters, clerks ("check-out operators"), of superstores who have flexible timetables and have

to accept long and unpaid breaks with an imposed rather than chosen part-time work, people working for call centres and for more and more services providers (EDF/GDF, "Pôle Emploi", online sales brands, France Telecom, and other Internet providers, but also humanitarian organizations, which is recent and problematical). This list is always more important and does not stop getting longer.

We can add to this dark picture the growing sector of support services and more precisely of support services to the elderly. In 1995, Robert Castel forecast that these aids were to become a new form of exploitation and of precarious work. Foreign women work in this sector since they have no other alternative. Because of the boom of this society of "services" (characteristic of our post-industrial society) more and more people work for sectors with no protection and in which trade unions are absent. Process of "emancipation" remains to be built. Moreover, people working in these sectors are subject to new constraints that did not exist before. They are linked to flexibility and unpredictability of schedules (timetables given at the last minute), to imposed availability (breaks during day's work, working on Sunday and on evening), to divided work and to employees' versatility. Technical improvement did not lead to a decrease of work hardness. It has shifted the emphasis of the issue. Before these changes, ill-being was characteristic of specific jobs such as workers, builders, bus drivers, clerks, nurses; now, from employees to executives, no one is spared.

To conclude, this broad study on the definitions of the value: "work" in our post-industrial society is a way of soon envisaging a new alternative to it. And yet, reliable theories are to be built and so by "deconstructing our imagination" in which, work remains an utopian reality and the only means of reaching a social identity. Can we think that this change has already started thanks to the institution of a conditionally minimum welfare in different western nations? Even if this minimum welfare has compensations, it may pave the way to the creation of an income which would permit to subsist and which would be paid to everyone without any compensation.

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<sup>9</sup>In *Économie et statistiques*, n° 410, 2007.

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