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The Emergence, Centrality and End of Work

For some time in the social sciences one has turned readily to the phrase ‘invention of . . .’ to mean the historical and localized character of the notion which is being discussed, as for example the market or unemployment. It may seem riskier to use the term for work, inasmuch as work appears an obvious necessity of the human condition.

Work could be defined and demarcated, after eliminating the particularities that it presents in all known societies, through activities contributing to the necessities of human and social life. It can somehow exist independently of any social relationship to organize it. Necessities are perceived – through our common sense and by economic thought – as the necessary minimum for human existence. Because of that, one attributes to work a pre-eminence over all other activities.

This representation of labour, as a universal activity, poses a problem, for several reasons.¹

Work Has Not Always Existed. It Was Invented

Two arguments provoke reflection: the absence of the term or notion of work in numerous societies, and the obligation to admit the hypothesis of *homo faber* founding the universality of labour in nature.

Only Our Societies Distinguish Work from Other Activities

The study carried out by Marie-Noëlle Chamoux (1994) on the terms used to refer to ‘work’ in many societies is quite bothersome for the universalist vision of labour. Either the term and the notion are absent; or they are split into several words and realities; or their antonyms are neither ‘rest’ nor ‘leisure’; or they are invariably and explicitly linked to magic or religious acts;

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or yet again, they do not include activities which are necessary to material life, such as hunting, etc. Neither does the notion of effort that is found in many societies present any homogeneity in the definition or in the activities thus mentioned. The category of work has revealed itself therefore to be difficult to comprehend empirically. Chamoux then asks the question: can it be said that labour exists when it is neither thought of nor lived as such?

Historians and anthropologists nearly all seem to agree that today, economics, production, labour and so on as they are meant in western society are notions and areas which clearly came into being in the 18th century in Europe, with the differentiation of a capitalist market within the market that predated it. Before, economics, production and labour were, so to speak, embedded – mixed in with politics and religion or merged with them. One may attempt to represent this embedding of economics and work by considering, for example, the family sphere as it is thought of today. Many activities still come indissolubly from education, affection, necessities, submission, recognition and so on. From this common constant, research orientations diverge.

Karl Polanyi (1983), citing and developing observations made beforehand by Karl Marx and Max Weber, notably on the ‘non-segregated’ character of economic aspects in relation to other aspects of life in all societies besides the West, concludes that there is no universal ‘conceptual’ definition possible of economics. Each era experiences distinct economic forms. Conversely, he believes that it is possible to give ‘substantive’ definitions of economics, production and work that are valid for all known societies: that is, the activity necessary to material life of the people and the society. But this activity, distinguished from some or firmly embedded in others, is not necessarily determinant through its nature on the other activities. Depending on the era it can be of variable importance in social life in general. Karl Polanyi uses this occasion to denounce the economism that was, in his opinion, invading the historical and social sciences.

Maurice Godelier, in his work *The Mental and the Material* (Godelier, 1984), cites the Polanyian thesis, but without sharing the conclusions. He writes that, on the contrary, this allows for the re-examination of the Marxist notion of the social relationship of production and to separate from it any reference to a particular society, notably western society, which has autonomized economics. Above all it allows for understanding – in opposition to what Polanyi himself states – why social relationships called ‘superstructural’ (such as parenting or political relationships) can found and organize together a whole society. Production is inserted in these relationships and consequently they function as production relationships. It is even thanks to the exception that western capitalist society has been since the end of the 18th century that has revealed and designated economics as such, that it has become possible ‘to comprehend the importance of material activities and economic relationships in the movement of production and reproduction of

societies' (Godelier, 1984: 32). The fact that economic relationships once autonomized appear determinant in social life would be proof that the political and symbolic relationships which have reigned over certain societies have only been able to because they integrate the social relationships of production. This reasoning, then led by Godelier,² therefore re-established the latter to the foundation of all societies, different from that stated by Polanyi.

Louis Dumont proposes developing the Polanyian thesis up to what seemed to him to be its logical conclusion: that is to renounce definitively any economism, including, in capitalist societies, to

... refuse the compartmentalism that our society alone offers steadfastly, and instead of searching for the meaning of social totality in the economy – which Polanyi is most certainly opposed to – looking rather in social totality for the meaning of what economy is within our society and for us.³

In actual fact, many anthropologists consider that culture is already present at the point where history begins. Production is symbolic right through. Bourgeois society first of all is a culture before being an economy: 'Considering trade as advantageous to both parties represented a fundamental change and signalled the accession to the economic category' (Dumont, 1985: 45).

Two major orientations can therefore be distinguished. For the first, the capital-labour relationship autonomized activities making use of material reproduction and thus allowed for the definition of economics in general, beyond its capitalist form. So work would always have been this activity which consisted of using, mastering and dominating nature to produce from it the utilities necessary for humankind. Consequently, there would have been a substantive definition possible for work, permitting analysis of this form of activity in every society with common criteria and determination of which place it was able to take up in the structuring of social relationships. Whereas for Polanyi economics and labour would only be structuring in capitalist societies, for Marx and Godelier (1984) the capital-labour relationships would also have revealed that they are structuring in all societies.

According to the second orientation, a culture – and up to now a sole culture, the Burgess – has invented an area called the economic. A universal definition of the economic is therefore impossible both conceptually and substantively. Work, as it is understood today, corresponds in this perspective to the emergence of the labour relationship and 'free worker' selling her or his work capability. The progressive spread and hegemony of this social relationship have become the reference to perceive, think and organize a number of activities. The consequence would have had an extension of the term work to activities which were not designated as such and which do not stem from the labour relationship, such as 'domestic work' and 'independent work'. A naturalization of work would thus have resulted. From this point work is perceived as a universal reality and as having always existed. It would have been

projected on the past and on other societies, instead of realizing it through the historical conditions that made it emerge three centuries ago.

A good way of going forward in such a debate is to search for both positions' presuppositions.

The Hypothesis of the Unveiling of Work and Economics Through the Capital-Labour Relationship and Therefore of its Universality Supposes Agreement with a Naturalist Materialism Unacceptable Today

An American journalist had already objected to Karl Marx, after having read the preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in which Marx exposed his distinction between relationships founding a society (infrastructures) and those which govern it (superstructures), that the determination of social life through social relationships of production cannot be considered as universal. Ancient and feudal societies, he remembered, were founded on essentially political relationships. Marx responds, in a note in *Das Kapital*, that, during the breakdown of feudal relationships, Don Quixote still had to find by himself something to eat and drink. In other words, deprived of the relationships which in some societies both encompass and mask the relationships by which a society's material reproduction is guaranteed, people find themselves confronted with their primary physical obligation: nourishment. The determination through the economic would therefore clearly have originated in unavoidable vital necessities.

It would be useful to remember where this natural-materialist position comes from. It took root in the first philosophical works of Karl Marx. Reacting against the idealism and Hegelian universalism, Marx and Engels wrote in *L'Idéologie allemande* that the human in general does not exist and that humans only exist as actual historical individuals.

It is men who produce their representations, their ideas, etc., but [they are] real, active men, such as are conditioned by a determined development of their productive forces and of the mode of relationships which correspond to them, including the widest forms that these can assume. The conscience can never be other than the conscious Being, and men's Being is their process of real life. (Engels and Marx, 1968: 50)

Thus to 'dissipate the universalist phantasmagorias of thought and break free of them', they propose a work programme aiming at studying concrete historical human beings, the relationships they maintained among them, their living conditions and the process of real life. To justify this programme, they put forward three arguments. First a methodological argument: the material life of real human beings can be verified by purely empirical means. It is an important argument if it tries to denounce the omission of real living conditions and their relationships with the common differences and forms of reflection through universalist thought. It is also an argument, however

insufficient, to justify the primacy accorded to material life in order to understand other human manifestations. At this point a second argument comes into play: it can be proved that there is a link in human history between the different stages of development in the division of labour and forms of properties, namely the relationships of individuals among themselves. But this noticeable correlation, not logically, implies that material production is thereby more determinant. Finally, there intervenes a third, clearly naturalist, argument:

... we are led to begin by the first observation of any human existence, in any history; that is, that men must live to be able to 'make history'. But in order to live, man must first and foremost drink, eat, house and clothe himself, among other things. The first historical fact is thus the production of the means allowing him to meet these needs, the production of material life itself, and even there is a historical fact, a fundamental precondition of any history that today must be filled day after day, hour after hour just like thousands of years ago, simply to keep man alive.

... One can distinguish men from animals through conscience, religion, or anything that one wishes. They themselves begin distinguishing themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of existence, a step forward that is the very consequence of their bodily organization. (Engels and Marx, 1968: 57, 45)

Engels and Marx add that very quickly other needs and indeed a whole lifestyle develop. Nonetheless, they found the pre-eminence of the productive activity on vital needs, evidence which is not really proof, and through a discourse on the origins of humankind, which actually is a discourse on what humans were at their origin.

The thesis's presuppositions of 'first historical fact', in other words the production of the means allowing the satisfaction of needs for food, are too numerous and uncertain to be retained today. It would be necessary that, in the animal species, proto-human did not find anything to eat or drink in its ecosystem. This would have had to be this vital need – being an absolute constraint – and not any other that set off invention and human reflection, as well as the first social intercourse. It would be necessary to seek recourse in an 'artificial' means for the acquisition of food, being the peculiarity for humans, which is well known not to be the case.

In other words, it no longer seems possible to establish a thesis as pregnant as this with theoretical consequences and practices as that of the social relationships of production at the basis of any society on the fragile hypothesis of *homo faber*. We can reasonably postulate that there was a 'complete' social being, freed from any primitivism. The conditions of existence are a society, a language, the transmission of knowledge, reasons for life and death, etc., as well as eating and drinking, without going into other natural or cultural conditions, just as essential, but that are simply ignored because they are given.

Is this a throwback to Dumont's position? Is one obliged to seek the

reasons for the division and the designation of activities in each society? It would be necessary to represent society as an organism, endowed with a unique principle of existence, order and regulation, which would give meaning to each of its parts; instead of attempting to build such 'totality', it would seem more prudent and heuristically more fruitful to start from the primary acknowledgement of the existence of social relationships, having their own logic – acted upon, updated and changeable by the social players that each of these relationships institute, coexisting or articulating between them, creating social fields, whose designation and borders shift in relation to the place and size that these social relationships acquire, each in relation to another.

Curiously, Marx gives the opportunity and possibility of committing himself to this path and thinking that the concept of the social relationship is disengaged from any 'substantive' determination.

The Capital–Labour Relationships and the Work That This Relationship Has Historically Engendered Are Not Linked Conceptually to Material Production

In his research on productive and unproductive labour, Marx showed that this distinction only has meaning in relation to a form of social accumulation. Taking up Adam Smith's thesis and defending it against J. B. Say and the post-classicists, he shows that the definition of the productive worker as producer of use values has no scientific interest, any person being this from the moment when the material or immaterial product of her or his activity finds some use, even if it is fantasy. The goal of capitalist production not being the production of use values or goods for themselves, but the reproduction of ancient worth and the creation of added value, productive labour is thus that which is exchanged against capital, whereas unproductive labour is that which is exchanged for income, whatever their form (salary, profit, annuity, tax and so on).

Marx differentiates himself from Smith on an important point. For Smith, productive capital labour corresponds to the production of material goods in the form of merchandise, and unproductive work in the form of 'services', defined as person-to-person exchanges. He therefore establishes the productive–unproductive distinction not only on the relationship of labour to capital, but also on a difference in the nature of the activity. He introduces a second determination: that of the product's materiality. On the contrary, Marx shows that, if it is true that productive capital labour produces material goods most often, its definition has nothing to do with its concrete contents, but designates a social relationship exclusively. A person exercising the same activity – cooking for example – will be productive or unproductive from the capital point of view, depending on whether she or he sells their work

capability to a restaurant owner or to an individual: that is, depending on whether his or her work capability is exchanged for capital to enhance him or her or for income to meet the holder of this income's needs. A teacher will be productive (from a capital point of view) if she or he is employed by a for-profit scholastic institution, but unproductive of capital if she or he gives private lessons in a family or in the national education system. When Marx says, the characteristic of 'productive workers, which means workers producing capital, is that their work manifests itself in goods or material wealth', he speaks of goods in the sense of value for exchange, he designates 'a fictive, purely social existence of goods, absolutely distinct from its physical reality; . . . the illusion stems here from how a social relationship manifests itself in the form of an object' (Marx, 1932: 33–4).

By considering the concept of the capital–labour relationship as a purely social relationship, by showing that it is not linked to material production, Marx thus turns this 'social relationship of production', historically dated, into a relationship whose pre-eminence over other relationships can no longer come out of activities serving a society's material reproduction. He never seems to have drawn such a conclusion. Still, it stems logically from his analysis of the productive work of capital. It is, as has been seen, in contradiction with the materialistic naturalism of *L'Idéologie allemande*.⁴

So, today, as in the past, it is impossible to give a substantive definition to work, namely to define it by the nature of the activities it is supposed to regroup or by their use.

In capitalist societies, the same activity can be work or non-work. Its nature makes no difference. It depends if the activity is carried out or not in one of the three social relationships: the employee relationship, the merchant relationship (not in every case) and the domestic relationship (which is beginning to be, but not admitted by everyone). It must finally be noted that an increasing number of activities, held as not being part of economics and not being labour, become work with the spread of the employee relationship and particularly that of capital–labour.

A given activity can be work or non-work according to the moment or the person who carries it out: gardening, driving, cooking, building, singing, etc. The same activity can be work and non-work at the same moment. Thus a person with their own children simultaneously looks after others' children in exchange for remuneration. It therefore can only be said that an activity is work if the social relationship in which it is carried out is specified. And today, there are barely only three social relationships that stimulate thought about work: employee, merchant and domestic relationships.

The social relationships that transform activities into work are no longer linked to a particular social area either. They are susceptible of organizing very diverse activities of which many are not part of what is commonly agreed upon as production, or the economic field.

The capital–labour relationship, for example, has expanded and continues to expand more and more beyond activities considered in the past as outside the economic sphere: leisure, sports, politics, religion, symbols, science, art, philosophy, the police, etc. It did not concern the origin of the essential activities of material life. It was late in including agricultural activities in some countries. Its variable limits in time and space, the often vain attempts to contain expansionism, show that it is a relationship indifferent to the nature of the activities that it organizes. For example, today, discussions are beginning to find out under which social relationship (donation, compensation, purchase or salary) all or part of human reproduction is going to be carried out in the future, or even the act of ‘accompanying’ the dying. The capital–labour relationship is therefore a social relationship capable of spreading to all sorts of activities. None of them a priori can escape from this relationship through its nature. Even this expansion, going beyond all the frontiers set today in western societies between the types of human activities, confirms the purely social and historical characteristic of economics and labour.

From this point of view, it can be said that work always becomes central: both because it is, for the largest number, the indispensable form of activity to accede to the material and immaterial resources necessary to live in our societies, and because it is becoming the manifestation of human activities more and more. Today, it is a question of society to find out if limits should not be set to the mercantilization of human relationships.

As soon as one of the known social relationships called production – in this case the capital–labour relationship – is not linked conceptually to material reproduction of life in society, it becomes impossible to make the latter the criterion of definition and to insist on pre-eminence of social relationships of production in general on other social relationships. This fact invalidates the possibility of building a universal concept of social relationships of production and brings one to consider the capital–labour relationship as a ‘totally social’ relationship – namely, as a relationship which does not belong to a particular area of activity which would exist outside itself; which does not belong to a particular category of social relationships; which is unique as all social relationships are; which is able to organize the near-totality of social life, as other social relationships in history seem to have been able to do; and finally which does not present a dimension which prevails over others, as the analysis of the capital–labour relationship itself shows, this relationship being just as political and symbolic as economic.

Would work then be a pure social construction without any link with natural demands? How is it possible to understand that a social relationship can historically prevail over others, and sometimes hegemonize and homogenize anything social, if it does not gain control from the considered societies’ ‘vital’ activities? It is difficult to believe that there are no necessary conditions

for the reproduction of any society in the human race, and that the conditions specific to each society are the only ones that count.

But these general conditions are multiple: eating and drinking of course, possibly clothing and housing oneself, but also procreating, breathing, communicating, being recognized, moving, not being killed and many other known or unknown conditions. These 'vital' conditions only become vital and are perceived as such from the moment that they are no longer given naturally or socially to everyone or to the greatest number. This is why some (such as breathing) are laughable because up to now air, even though of variable quality, remains directly accessible to all. This example, however, has the merit of recalling the social and historic characteristic of reproductive conditions of life in society. They only acquire the status of conditions if they are the objects of natural rarefaction, of social appropriation, or of a collective restriction. At that point, it can be thought that material reproduction and work as an activity which would be devoted to the latter, have not been able to be socially important or founding, if other conditions just as essential to life in society or to such or such a society were the preferential object of private appropriation or political minority control.

From this perspective, each social relationship would have its worth, its economics, its rationality, its form of sharing out and division of the activities that it governs, its technical principles, and so on, being able to become those of a society, if this social relationship eventually prevails over the others historically.

Thus one can hypothesize that a social relationship becomes important when it transforms some natural or cultural data into social stakes, in non-guaranteed conditions of life in society and in the means of differentiation and control, and that it is fundamental when it is able to be the indispensable path to accede to what the material and immaterial resources (of any kind) necessary to life in the considered society have become.

What is meant by economics and by work would not exist and would therefore only be important in capitalist societies. They would inherit their central characteristics from what are the naturalized manifestation and designation of a social relationship which has become a hegemony by governing certain general conditions necessary to life in society, and the particular conditions belonging to our own societies.

The Spread of the Capital–Labour Relationship and the Naturalist Universalization of Work

If it were thus, how could this term have spread to designate activities that are not carried out under any social aspect? Two generalizations are to be understood: that of salaried labour and employees, and, more largely, that of work.

The terms salary, employees and wage-earning class seem to have expanded subsequently to situations from whence they did not come: for instance, the household or community employee who sells her or his services for income and not capital and who is paid in wages; government employees – ‘civil servants’ – whose remunerations are the recompense for the social function that they fill on behalf of the community. Actually, despite the legal homogenization of working conditions, the type of relationship is not the same. Subordination is not of the same type and the uncertainty of the social relationship does not have the same form according to the employee relationship being considered. The employer’s goal is neither personal enrichment nor capital buildup. The employer spends her or his income obtaining the services that she or he expects, without intention, hope or duty to recover her or his capital. The goal is satisfaction with the service rendered.

If there can be, and if there really is, at more or less regular intervals, notably on the part of communities (state, local authorities, associations, institutions, etc.), the search for better efficiency at a lower cost through ‘reforms’ or ‘contracts’, it is from political pressure from all or some of those paying taxes or contributions and who desire to see them stop progressing or see them diminish for whatever reason, and not from the necessity of reproducing capital to avoid it disappearing.

Work Today Has Become Central, Because the Social Relationship That Created It Is Spreading to All Activities and Because This Relationship Is Totally Social

The capital–labour relationship was perceived and considered for a long time as a simple merchant relationship: entrepreneurs and workers bought and sold work at market prices. It was necessary for many debates and conflicts throughout the 19th century so that employees could recognize and make it recognized around them that it was about a specific relationship, the subject of special legislation distinct from other laws, notably business laws. It is not then about a simple misunderstanding or a means for employers to free themselves of all liability, notably in the case of an accident. There would in reality exist very widely ambiguous forms: subcontracting in the home and mobile work teams led by a supervisory worker. Since then, it has been acknowledged that the labour contract is not an exchange between equals.

It seals the subordination of the worker to the authority of the employer, but, at the same time, it harbours an insurmountable uncertainty, the second essential characteristic of this relationship – that which every person considers as sold or bought in the act of hiring is questioned daily in work relationships. What exactly does a sale of labour capability cover?

Is it a worker putting her or his energy, experience, intelligence, motivation, devotion and imagination at someone else's disposal all at the same time? Or, as history attests, is it a constant conflict about what each person can demand one from another, in other words about the nature of a worker's or employer's respective freedom? The scope of what one deems to have sold and what another esteems to have bought does not differ only because of divergent interests between the former and the latter, but because of a different appreciation about that which is judged able to be bought and sold: are devotion and fidelity a part of this? Are motivation, imagination and intelligence also a part, and if so, to what extent? The precise definition of labour is not only an employer's tendency in the form of prescription, it is also the employee's request that limits be set on what can be demanded of her or him.

The capital-labour relationship demands workers' 'freedom' to sell their work abilities and the right of capital holders to purchase them. These two freedoms are neither natural nor permanent, with neither limits nor alterations. Nor does everyone enjoy these freedoms. Children up to their majority, and wives up to recently, and still today in many countries, must have their parent's or husband's authorization to be employed, and do not always dispose of – through fact or law – the money coming from the sale of their abilities. These 'liberties' are in constant redefinition and limitation, both legally and pragmatically. The debates and conflicts about working hours cannot be reduced to divergences on the quality and rhythm of life necessary or acceptable in deference to the 'economic' imperatives and demands of reproduction of work capabilities, but throw the 'free' worker back to the 'political'.

The capital-labour relationship also implied, be it considered as morally acceptable, that the sum of egocentric interests can overwhelm or compete with the interest, and in the interest of, general well-being. Truthfully, capitalism's moral trial still remains open. The renewal of economic liberalism has been accompanied by a discourse, not only on its efficiency but also on the fact that it would be fairer.

Finally, through the act of selling her or his work capability, the employee acknowledges the buyer's legitimacy, be it conceded temporarily or partially, and in the ambiguity of the authority that will be exerted on the worker. This recognition must be reconfirmed daily in the act of labour so that the capital-labour relationship can reproduce. The 'free' worker accepts the alienation of her or his 'freedom' to work during working hours and to limit her or his citizen's rights which are her or his outside the time and space of the company where she or he is employed.

The employee relationship, and notably the capital-labour relationship, does not lend itself easily to analysis in terms of the economic, or, conversely, of the political or symbolic. It contains all the dimensions of the social. It does not seem simply to be a social relationship in the economic order, or an

economic relationship embedded in the social, but a totally social relationship able to order and structure all or a large part of the social, as other social relationships are able to do in other societies.

Uncertainty, inherent to the worker's contract, does not limit itself to the unpredictable conditions of realization that can occur, but to the very nature of work capabilities that one would like to buy as goods, whereas that cannot be. This explains the necessity for material, legal, relational and social explicit or implicit rules, sanctioned or not by public power, so that the capital holder has more assurance of getting the products she or he expects from the employees whose work capabilities she or he has bought.

The first route consists of establishing factually, or even legally, a relationship of confidence, through which, in exchange for her or his workers' guarantee not only for expected volume of production but also for growth of productivity, quality of participation and invention of new processes thanks to voluntary professional specialization and mobility, the employer in turn gives her or his employees the guarantee of increasing the number of employees and their salaries, as well as the ability to find out and check the pertinence of strategic choices upon which the obtained guarantees depend. Along this route, the divisions of work take place between specialists in different areas of knowledge and know-how, each of the specialists being not only useful but more importantly indispensable to design, organize and arrive at the expected result. The design/execution division contradicts in this regard the initial trust pact, and it is counterproductive. Is this the route taken in the past? Is it experiencing a certain revival today? Leaving aside renewed analysis of industrial history, it appears that there are few examples of the type of employee relationship that it presupposes, and that the sharing out of work between specialists of similar levels of ability is a form of dividing up work which never took root, even if, occasionally, some examples of it can be seen.

The second route consists in intervening in the design of the production process, of tools and machines, of work organization and of forms of cooperation between employees so that these mechanisms limit the activity or impose themselves, as much as possible, on those who will have to implement the tasks, an absolute framework and prescription being impossible. An essential part of the intelligence of work then passes to the authority of the employer, and because of this, changes content and form. The division of work intelligence then replaces the sharing out of work between specialists. It limits the variety of production techniques and the forms of work organization, rules, structuring, classification and training. The employer's intervention in the design of the production process is already observable in the origins of the capital-labour relationship, as well as in the construction of a group or several groups of employees aimed at helping him or her in this task.

Is Work Losing the Centrality that it Acquired? Is it no Longer at the Establishment of the Social Link?

In the current debate on the loss of work centrality, at least three positions can be distinguished, leading to very different practical conclusions. For some, work has changed its nature and must be perceived from now on as an activity enabling each person to give proof of her or his capabilities. For others, work is no longer – if it ever was – the only source of wealth and is no longer economically central. Finally, for others still, possible productivity gains are such today with new technology that it will no longer be possible in the future to give work to everyone. It is an opportunity to practise a wide division of work and allow the greatest number of people access to activities of their own choosing.

For the first group, work represents a constraining, prescriptive and imposed activity, with no autonomy, in other words Taylorist work, as it was abusively described and generalized. Noticing that this type of work is being replaced by an activity involving surveillance, intervention and communication, able to give way to initiative and invention (which stems more from affirmation or wish than from observation and analysis [Freyssenet, 1992]), they conclude that a new reality is emerging which no longer deserves the name ‘work’, to the extent that it allows for personal fulfilment.

For the second group, the theory of value founded on work is theoretically and pragmatically invalidated. Work is no longer – if it ever was – the fundamental or exclusive element of production of value. Economic performance can not be or is no longer linked directly to work, in terms of its volume, quality, organization on the shop floor, production management, design organization, relationships with customers and so on. But, in any case, work was never conceptually limited to that of the shop floor.

For the third group, work is fundamentally and definitively constrained. It is useless to hope to transform it into a means of fulfilment. However, it is proper to use it to the maximum of its potential for time reduction and consecrate it there so that each person may concentrate on the social and cultural activities of his or her choice and thus allow other social relationships to emerge. This presupposes first of all growth in productivity gains, which must always be more important than those of potential competitors in order not to have to call into question the continued reduction of working time; next, a ban on investment capital in new social activities which will have revealed a potential market *de facto*; finally, a strong political authority disposing of enough means to guarantee a share of work remaining socially necessary or a minimum existence income for all, and the time to take care of the periodic conversions inherent in production, technical and organizational changes. But in this case work would remain the condition for existence and supremacy: that is, it would in fact remain central, the object of all attention.

If work is analysed as a historical invention, as has been attempted here, then one is led to think that the end of its centrality will not be seen soon. In order for work not to be central any more, it will be necessary to sell each person's work capabilities or the product of her or his labours – if only partially – not to be the condition to accede to what has historically become a living condition, even in our society. It would also be necessary to no longer invest capital in all former or new areas of social life, as is done irresistibly, despite the temporary stoppages which may be from time to time imposed on it, as this expansion to new fields is a condition for capital's reproduction.

Even though the exercise appears somewhat pathetic, some reasoning can be risked. In order for work to be no longer central, what is needed is a backward surge of the capital–labour relationship under the dynamism of another social relationship, which would finally replace it by being more outstanding than the other relationships in the field from which it takes its power for expansion. It is no understatement to say that many have difficulty imagining the process.

Notes

- 1 This article cites and expands on a number of texts published since 1987: 'Le concept de rapport social peut-il fonder une autre conception de l'objectivité et une autre conception du social?' (Can the Concept of Social Relationships Found Another Conception of Objectivity and Another Social Conception?) (Freyssenet and Magri, 1989: 9–23) and 'Le rapport capital–travail et l'économique' (The Capital–Labour Relationship and the Economy) (Freyssenet and Magri, 1990: 5–16); 'L'invention du travail' (The Invention of Work), (*Futur Antérieur*, 1993–2: 17–26); 'Historicité et centralité du travail' (Work Historicity and Centrality) (Bidet and Texier, 1995: 227–44).
- 2 The position of Godelier has since changed, as he explained in his forward to 'La Transformation dans la nature et rapports sociaux' (Transformation in Nature and Social Relationships) (Freyssenet and Magri, 1990: 19–20). Citing a text entitled 'L'Oeuvre de Marx' (Marx's Works) published in 'Le Marxisme analytique anglo-saxon' (Anglo-Saxon Analytic Marxism), he writes

When, for example, parenting relationships in a tribal society also function from the inside as production relationships – therefore both as infrastructure and superstructure – it must be explained why. . . . [Now], social anthropology has never discovered to this day the direct causal relationship between a mode of production and a mode of filiation and alliance. Actually, if parenting relationships do not depend directly, for their other appearances, on a mode of production, it is because they have their own distinct functions and possess – the only paradox here is in appearance – an independent material basis: biological relationships between sexes and generations, material conditions of production of new individuals to which the rules of filiation and alliance of the diverse systems of parenthood give a sense and social uses, etc. Thus Marx's central hypothesis,

making material and social means of production the general basis of social life, has not been confirmed. It keeps a more restrained, though still impressive, capability of the explanation of societies' functioning and evolution. (Godelier, 1990: ???)

- 3 Preface by Louis Dumont to Karl Polanyi's work *La Grande Transformation* (Polanyi, 1983: xxvi).
- 4 It might be necessary today to retain this effort from Marx's scientific works – which can be seen in his writing and even more so as he puts his own analyses back into question, particularly those of the denaturalization and historicization of common notions and realities – an effort that is far from having been pursued, including by those who denounced Marx's materialism, as seen in the widely held conviction in all sorts of philosophical and political currents that labour is inherent to the human condition.

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