New perspectives on work as value

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Developing “perspectives on work” calls for an understanding of how work came to play the all-important role it has in society today: what was the underlying historical process? what forces brought this situation about? In other words, what needs to be done is to lay bare the rationale whereby work – a historically determined construct if ever there was one – has come to be regarded as an inherent feature of the human condition, as the only means of fulfilling all individual and social aspirations.

It is high time to put an end to the fruitless debates about whether work is or is not at the centre of modern life and to reveal the historical process whereby work has come to dominate the entirety of individual and social time and space. This is an urgent task – for unless it is undertaken there can be no understanding both why work is today the main vehicle for the formation of social relationships and for self-fulfilment, and that this has not always been the case or will be in the future. The place taken by work in contemporary social organization is an outcome, a fact, not a structural feature of all human societies.

In other words, it is by accident and not on account of the immutable nature of things that work has become the essential mechanism for the achievement of social integration and self-fulfilment, and the origins of this fact lie not buried in the mists of time but in the response to a certain historically situated state of affairs from which the world may now be emerging, and from which it is certainly desirable to emerge. It is necessary to distinguish the question of the amount of work which will be available in the future from the question of the place that work rightfully occupies in personal and societal life.

The interesting question – and which should be of major concern to every politician and citizen – is this: what are the necessary conditions for the construction and preservation of the good society, that is, a society forming a well-integrated whole, providing a mooring and a source of identity for its citizens, able to deal with all manner of strains, both internal (xenophobia,
violence, inequality ...) and external, a society unlikely to dissolve into atoms, i.e. into individuals, at the first threat? It is the question of the good constitution, of good government, which all previous societies have had to ask themselves, which has for centuries lain at the heart of political philosophy and practice, and which, alone, our own civilization has neglected to ask.

Work alone – in the sense of paid participation by individuals in the productive process – cannot weave together and sustain the system of social relationships which is central to a society’s cohesion and its insertion in a particular historical period. This is especially evident when one sees how the notion of work prevailing today is a misshapen creature resulting from the numerous meanings conferred on the word over the past two hundred years.

The invention of work

“Work” as a category passed through three broad stages before acquiring the meaning it has today. In the eighteenth century it appears both as a means of increasing wealth and as a mechanism for the emancipation of the individual – another category then emerging. That these two dimensions coincided was significant: if work is an individual service which can be the subject of exchange and of contractual arrangements, it is also the sum of all individual effort – of the efforts and industry of an entire nation – whereby the individual is integrated into society as a whole and social relationships are organized. But at the time work was neither positively valued nor glorified. In the nineteenth century a further crucial dimension was added. The nineteenth century’s distinctive contribution was to transform, civilize and humanize the world, whilst also enabling individuals to develop their potential; this process was termed Bildung by contemporary German culture and eventually came to be known simply as work. Whether termed a movement of the Spirit, of God or of humanity, it was the leading factor in the humanization of the world.

A true ideology of work emerges during this period, contemporaneously with the proliferation of inhuman working conditions and with the debate on pauperism. Work is presented on the one hand as a truly creative freedom, a symbol of human endeavour whose full realization is fettered by the way in which production is organized and which will provide the basis for the eventual creation of a more just social order based on capacities, on the individual’s contribution to production; and, on the other hand, as the facilitating factor of common endeavour.

Work thus becomes a synonym for creation (in the sense that something of the producer’s self goes into the object produced, it is a means of self-expression) and at the same time a collective creation (in the sense that by expressing self an image of self is produced for others). As Marx says, once work is no longer alienated and people can produce freely there will be no more need for money since the goods and services produced will reveal people to each other as they are revealed to themselves.
Suppose we had produced things as human beings... Our productions would be so many mirrors reflecting our nature.1

This illustrates very well the type of future society imagined by the nineteenth century in general and by Marx in particular: in this vision, production and therefore work are the site of the alchemy of social relationships in a philosophy of mutual expressiveness and recognition. Marx succeeds in synthesizing English political economy and the German philosophy of expressiveness, placing himself in the tradition of a philosophy of humanization: humanity is seen as pursuing not only material affluence, but also the humanization and civilization of the world. From that moment on all utopian hopes and efforts concentrated on the productive sphere: production would not only improve material living conditions but would also create the conditions for the full realization of potential at both personal and social levels. In the same period, in Marx, Proudhon, Louis Blanc and in socialist (and also liberal) philosophy as a whole, work became synonymous with fully human endeavour: the activity proper to humankind is work, and the most fundamentally human activity is work itself.

However, Marx remains consistent, he is aware that work has yet to become a liberating creative activity – or at least that it is still only potentially so, not yet a reality. That basic need will be satisfied only when humanity comes to produce in conditions of absolute freedom, when wage labour is abolished and a world of abundance created. Then work will no longer be equated with drudgery, suffering or sacrifice, it will be pure self-fulfilment, pure expressive power; then and only then will the difference between work and leisure disappear.

Also relevant to our subject, the third stage (which was theorized in German social democracy) consists of a recovery of the socialist heritage – the belief in the inherently fulfilling nature of work and in the necessity of the pursuit of abundance – combined with a fundamental change in its doctrinal content. Instead of abolishing wage labour, in both its discourse and practice German social democracy made wages into the vehicle whereby wealth was to be distributed and a new social order – more just because based on labour and on capacities, and truly collective through the organization of the producers – gradually came into being. From then on the State was entrusted with the related tasks of guaranteeing continued economic growth and full employment, in other words of offering to all access to the riches which were pouring forth. But this stands in total contradiction with the thought of Marx, because in the original discourse of social democracy fulfilment was to come from work itself, whereas in this new version it is only thanks to increasing wages and consumption that this can be achieved. In the words of Habermas:

For the burdens that continue to be connected with the cushioned status of dependent wage labour, the citizen is compensated in his role as client of the welfare state bureaucracies with legal claims, and in his role as consumer of

mass-produced goods with buying power. The lever for the pacification of class antagonisms thus continues to be the neutralization of the conflict potential inherent in the status of the wage labourer.\(^2\)

In other words social democracy, which in this sense remains the dominant view today, is based on a profound contradiction (from which contemporary left-wing parties have been unable to extricate themselves) in that it approaches work as the principal path to human fulfilment, both personal and collective, but without providing the means of producing a work of creation (since work is undertaken for a purpose extraneous to itself) let alone a collective work of creation achieved through authentic cooperation. Thus social democracy has confused two conceptions of work which socialist thought had traditionally taken care to distinguish: actually existing, alienated work which is the object of political action aimed at reducing the time it takes up, and freed work, which one day should become life’s most basic need albeit fundamentally changing its meaning.

What do we learn from this historical summary? That work is a construct, that it has definitely not always been associated with the creation of value, with the transformation of the natural world, or with self-fulfilment; that it is multi-faceted because of its multiple meanings (as a factor of production, as creative freedom, as a mechanism for the distribution of income, status and security), but also because it is a mixture of elements, some objective and some made up largely of utopia, fantasy and dream. From this two consequences follow: on the one hand we are the victims of a retrospective illusion, believing as we do that work has always existed – are we not told that it is already there in the Bible, that men have worked since time immemorial, even though it is centuries of reinterpretation which forced into one category activities which in their time were experienced in highly diverse ways?\(^3\) On the other hand, contemporary discourse on work does not distinguish between its different dimensions. Does it mean work as a factor of production whose efficiency must constantly increase thus creating ever more wealth, whatever the consequences for the way in which work is undertaken? Does it mean work as the vision of an activity inherent to the human condition, enabling humanity to express itself, for humans to gain mutual recognition and to engage together in creative effort? Or does it simply refer, more prosaically, to employment and the system whereby income, status and security are distributed?

**Work and the social bond**

This backward glance shows how for the last two centuries work has been the central social bond, the basis for the construction of the “social

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2 For further details on the way in which history is retrospectively represented, and on societies without work, see Dominique Méda, op. cit., Ch. II, “Des sociétés sans travail?”.

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contract”, the foundation of the hierarchy of positions and pay. It then follows – indeed to say so becomes a tautology – that to have work is today the primary condition for belonging to society, the central factor in the construction of a person’s identity; that people who are without work lack everything; and that work is the only available collective endeavour, since the rest belongs to the private sphere. This must be the case, since work has become the central axis around which social relations as a whole have come to be organized, in societies which for the last two centuries have made the pursuit of affluence their sole concern. So we simply cannot imagine any other collective endeavour, any way of expressing ourselves or any basis for relating socially to one another save through work. Are we forever condemned to reinvent work, forever driven to place everything under man’s yoke, in accordance with the theories of Bacon, Saint-Simon and Marx, and to do so exclusively in the form of work? As advanced societies succeed in satisfying their needs with an ever-decreasing expenditure of time, will they still feel impelled to seek out ever more opportunities for the creation of value, ever newer horizons to strive towards? When will we finally decide that we have attained this famous state of abundance, the dream after which we have longed for so long? The answer, of course, is never. Abundance is a limitless concept, the path to it an asymptotic curve leading nowhere.

But perhaps today a point in history has been reached when this line of reasoning ceases to be tenable, when it can finally be realized, on the one hand, that work cannot fulfill all the functions heaped upon it over such a short period, and on the other, that it is precisely on account of our inability to extricate ourselves from traditional modes of thought that we cannot solve our problems. If work is not the only means whereby an individual can achieve self-fulfilment, if it is not necessarily the main vehicle for the tying of social bonds, if the use made of the world can be measured in non-monetary terms, maybe then the attempt to save the social bond by making all activities into work will be seen for the absurdity which it surely is. For, once again, the central problem in contemporary societies is not the growing scarcity of production but rather, first, the criteria of distribution of what is produced, and therefore the question of universal access to what remains the main vector of income distribution and of status allocation; and, second, the extreme fragility of the social bond. Has the time not come to employ some mechanism other than work as the basis for distributing the wealth of a nation and for cementing the social bond?

Returning to the utopian and contradictory expectations which humanity has of work, two points should be emphasized.

First, the idea that work, in the sense of paid participation in the production of goods and services, would be the most appropriate vehicle for personal fulfilment – as some would have it, a “positive passion”. 4 This idea should be approached with extreme caution, because it contradicts the fact that work is primarily the means to an end, production, and is therefore

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subordinate to a force external to itself, namely the logic of ever-increasing efficiency. Also because access to fulfilling types of work is nowadays a realistic prospect for only a small part of the economically active population. And finally, because the small number of surveys of people’s perceptions and aspirations show that once the issue of income is removed from the picture, individual aspirations shift to other, freely chosen activities, undertaken under different conditions, at different levels of intensity, and fulfilment ceases to depend exclusively on work. This idea needs developing: work is not the only way for individuals to find fulfilment, and if one could but recall that the reduction operated by Marx in relation to Hegel’s thought consisted precisely in combining the many means of civilizing the world into the single category of work, it would become clear that what in German is called “culture” cannot and should not be reduced to work.

The time has come to restore to words their proper meaning and to stop confusing culture – the development of human capacities with all the suffering, creation, and joy that entails – with work alone, as if reading, learning, education, art, friendship, cuisine, and no doubt much else besides should all be subsumed under the heading of work. To believe that these are all merely work, to confound these highly varied activities and ways of living out one’s humanity with a paid activity whose sole recompense is as a contribution to national product, is to confound action with production – yet, as Aristotle already explained, life is action not production. Stated in even clearer terms, the last two centuries have seen not the reduction of a timeless pseudo-concept of work to paid work, but rather the reduction of the entire range and variety of activities to work alone – and thus the invention of the concept of work itself.

And second, it is also time to undertake a thorough reappraisal of the idea that work is the only way to create and maintain the social bond – indeed, to question the very nature of a social bond which is shaped by work. To be sure, there will be some who say that over time work has been intimately related to economics and that economics itself creates a particular social bond in which all are needed for each individual’s subsistence and in which participation in the functioning of society is linked to each person’s ability to contribute to production and therefore to exchange. But is this type of social bond an adequate basis for society? As Louis Dumont and, more recently, Alain Supiot and Robert Castel have said, it is on account of the institution of contract and of the labour market that it became possible for a more “egalitarian” social order to emerge, for the dominance of ties of personal dependence to be overcome, and for individuals to be emancipated from traditional forms of authority. At the same time the chance to transform part of one’s abilities into money, into unconstrained purchasing

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5 Alain Supiot: “Le travail, liberté partagée”, in Droit social (Paris), No. 9/10 (Sep.), 1993, p. 715.

power, has contributed greatly to strengthening the basis of individual independence. This no one could deny, least of all women for whom this emancipation has recently progressed at an accelerated pace. But the problem is whether this is history's last word or whether, after the successive stages of communities founded on personal dependence (Gemeinschaft) and later on contract and personal autonomy, it is now possible, indeed indispensable, to move on to a third stage in which the advantages of the first two would be preserved and, above all, the disadvantages of contract-based societies overcome.

In other words, does the economic bond alone suffice to create a true sense of belonging, of belonging together, a true solidarity among the members of society? For that is the central issue in the debate on the social “fracture” and on social “cohesion” (two concepts which should also one day be subjected to a more critical gaze). That is undeniably the issue at stake, when the question is asked whether society can achieve a measure of cohesion and whether we have the means to implement policies to reduce the social polarization currently attracting so much attention. But before such policies can be evolved, society needs first to be represented as having a reality, a good of its own, its existence and cohesion must themselves be regarded as a good. And in that case, is there any use for the model of society and its underlying philosophy offered by the discipline of economics?

Critique of economics

It is reasonable to hold that contemporary economics, whose theoretical foundations are those developed by eighteenth-century economists despite the vast changes in the subject since then, continues to be based on a profoundly dated conception of humanity and society, in which society only ever appears as the external framework for autonomous individuals who conduct exchanges according to rules which, though social in nature, are still, like society, ultimately the creation of those individuals alone. Economics has kept to the individualist and contractualist assumptions of a period which never succeeded in imagining society as something more than the result of a contract between individuals who perform lost something of themselves on their entry into that society. For the same reason, the eighteenth century was never able to imagine social riches as something more than the sum of individuals’ enrichment through exchange, and had no concept of wealth as a heritage held in trust. In other words, economics sees no value in an individual’s development towards a goal other than exchange, or in any form of “enrichment” of society which has a truly collective (as opposed to an aggregative) dimension or is measurable in terms other than those of “production”.

For economics, then, no value can be placed either on the existence of healthy, peace-loving, happy, civically aware, tolerant, non-violent individuals, or on the establishment of a “good society”, that is a just,
peace-seeking, closely knit and cultivated society. Economics conceives of social wealth only in the form of increasing GNP because it continues to hold to a representation of society as a mere "collection of individuals". And it cannot develop a broader conception thereof because it continues to believe in the eighteenth-century assumptions that the expansion of wealth will suffice for individuals to become sufficiently employed and civilized so as to live together. Economists also continue to believe that increasing production is good in itself, since in that way all those vast unsatisfied needs can be met, even though for the most part this expansion does not meet the needs of the most deprived, because such issues are regarded as falling outside the subject's competence – as belonging rather to ethics. I would only recall the following from the critique of economics which I have developed at greater length elsewhere: just as the invention of the contract signified an enormous step forward in the formalization of human relations in the eighteenth century and provided the basis for individual autonomy, so economics provided the extremely valuable tools which opened the way to the formalization and conceptualization of the increase in production which our countries needed, and thus underpinned a particular way of developing the world. In the process, however, economics concentrated all attention on one particular means of creating value, and concealed from view other dimensions, other means of translating human capabilities into value and developing them, in short, other ways of living in society.

Even if economists respond to this criticism by maintaining that they do not confuse growth indicators with welfare indicators, that confusion does exist, and all the more so because of the absence of the time, the space and the structures necessary to translate the world into value by means other than those measured in monetary terms. When Hegel said that civil society – the locus of political economy, needs and individual interest – should be circumscribed and integrated in a political community, he meant precisely that there are several ways of approaching the civilization of the world and of participating in the life of society: to be sure, contribution to the production of goods and services has its place, but so do political activities, religion, art, philosophy, science, and the elaboration of ever more sophisticated ways of living and cooperating, whether in the form of political institutions, rules of justice or whatever.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century a particular current of thought drew attention to the dangers arising from a purely economic approach to the development of the world, and also to the dual character of the economic bond: its emancipatory potential, but also its potential for bringing about the dissolution of established societies. Hegel and Tocqueville developed their theories at the same time and on the same theme: civil (or bourgeois) society represented the destruction of the old

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1 Dominique Méda, op. cit., Ch. VIII, "Critique de l'économie"; and Ch. IX, "Réinventer la politique".
feudal order and the rise of a new one based on individual freedom and equality, but also contained the seeds of a new danger: the "atomization" of society, on account of its inability to preserve a minimum of solidarity and effective bonds. Hence these writers' obsessive concern to confine purely economic logic within certain limits and their desire to integrate it into a political community of rights and duties based on institutions and giving substance to the social bond. Thus it can be seen – as an entire German tradition from Hegel to Habermas, passing through Hannah Arendt, has insisted – that to make a society, and especially a good society, production alone is not enough, political institutions must also be built, loci where social bonds are forged in some other way than by mere juxtaposition in mechanical productive cooperation. It is also necessary to talk, discuss, debate, and participate, to provide not only for the sphere devoted to production, but also for the continuous existence of a public sphere set aside for debate, for specifically political activity.

Smith and Marx both believed that the social order could be founded on production, and also that these conflicts, agreements and disagreements, taken together, could be solved in the sphere of production alone. They denied the need for a specifically political sphere which could impose rules and limits on the productive sphere but also counterbalance it, raise issues and develop types of relationship having nothing to do with production of any kind. This belief seems to be shared by those who, today, disagree with the need to reduce the space occupied by work, production and economics so as to create a truly public, and therefore political, space. Such is the place taken by production that this is now thought to be virtually impossible: very little room is left between those who believe that individuals would use time freed up in this way not to take part in politics but rather to extend their leisure activities, and those who think that politics is far too serious a business to be left to the ignorant masses.

And yet, with a populist note entering the highly justified criticism of élites which has been going on, though barely audibly and quite ineffectively, perhaps the time has come to reflect on the relationship between economic and productive development on the one hand, and the "depoliticization of the masses", as Habermas calls it, on the other. The issue is not one of repoliticizing the masses, but rather of developing public spaces where choice and democracy can be effectively exercised, which means at the most local level, and in this way to redistribute not only work (and its fruits) but also political activity in the simplest, noblest and most straightforward sense of the word – namely the discussion of ends to pursue, of the means to be marshalled to attain them, and of the sharing-out of wealth and functions. In other words, the task ahead is to reduce the space occupied by work so as to make way for the activity which is essential to the long-term cohesion of societies and which has the best prospect of cementing the social bond, namely the activity of politics.
The ambiguous notion of a fully active society

This idea presupposes two simultaneous shifts: a reduction of the place taken by work in individual and social life (with the work to be done spread across the whole working population), and the development, in the time and space thus vacated by work, of new private and public activities – related on the one hand to friendship, family and emotional and cultural life, on the other to the public sphere and politics in particular – which are at least as essential to individual fulfilment and to democracy. This idea deserves the status of a normative ideal to guide action, and thus to ward off the worst of the fates now haunting society, namely polarization, fragmentation and atomization.

Other “solutions” have recently been proposed to these problems. The ideas of a universal social benefit (in recognition of the weakening link between work and income) or of the emergence of a third sector (of voluntary, “convivial” or solidarity-based activities to provide for those excluded from the formal productive sector) both seem to contain the seeds of a process of polarization. Both are founded on the incapacity of an ever-increasing number of individuals to remain within the traditional productive system for whom a “softer” alternative is arranged, leading in all likelihood in the medium-to-long term to a second-rate existence compared with that led by the managers of the established productive system. A life with less security, fewer rights and lower status.

Other possible solutions remain stuck in the narrow and misguided framework of traditional indicators of wealth and continue to focus exclusively on the growth of commercial exchanges of goods and services, without any concern for the content of this growth or for its redistribution. These solutions do nothing to help solve the central issue of the quality of the individual elements constituting the social bond and offer no response to the “democratic deficit” which is as much a problem for society today as the employment deficit and the uneven distribution of work.

The normative ideal proposed here points towards what might well be called a fully active society, but only on condition that such full activity characterizes not only society as a whole but also each individual. A society in which it is acceptable that some can have good, secure and well-paid jobs, while others undertake socially useful jobs with less security and less pay, cannot avoid the risk of division.

A fully active society is one which ensures each individual access to the entire range of human activities or, more precisely, to the whole range of activities which the individual is capable of undertaking alone or as part of a group. This means that everyone should simultaneously have access to political, productive and cultural activities, as well as to the private activities involving friendship, family and emotional ties. Thus the idea of full activity goes far beyond the merely productive to encompass the entirety of human activities necessary for personal and social fulfilment in all its diversity and richness.

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This does not mean replacing work with political or private activity. It means preventing productive activity from invading all the available individual and social time and space, thus permitting a new organization of the various uses individuals make of their time, and their coordination with the allocation of time by society as a whole.

With this ideal of multi-activity it will be possible to intervene legitimately in the time-space left to work: only once the value of speech, debate, education, and leisure time to our immediate surroundings and to the functioning of society itself has been demonstrated, will the formulation of consistent work and employment policies be possible.

For the time being, if these ideas appear utopian, that is because there is no scale by which to measure the benefits for society of healthy individuals, inclined to peaceful coexistence and mature discussion, untainted by racism and living in a less polluted atmosphere. And this is because of the limitations of eighteenth-century conceptions of wealth – which would be called medieval did they not date back merely two hundred years – and of the contractualist vision of society which was the cornerstone of the “science”, especially the economics, of that time.

So long as the “wealth” of a society continues to be defined exclusively as the result of the commercial exchange of material goods and services – a definition roughly embodied in national accounts – one remains caught in this vicious circle. For this reason, if society aspires to the possibility one day of a careful redistribution of work among individuals, to a genuine practice of political activity in an appropriate public sphere (above all, the city) and to the articulation of different social time frames, then one must reconsider what is meant by the wealth of a society (in terms of flows but especially stock, comprising human as well as material qualities) and by the vision which underlies it.

It is possible to describe this solution as “full employment” (avoiding misleading debates on the disappearance or replacement of work, or the alarmist talk about people renouncing the goal of full employment). In this perspective, full employment would simply mean that everyone has access to employment on a fair and equitable basis, but that this employment occupies fewer hours, leaving everyone the space and time to devote to other private and collective activities.

If this is the desired form of full employment and if the real question is the best way to base the political community on solidarity and to breathe life into the social bond, then it must also be the case that the solution to the employment problem necessitates a vast public debate on the purpose of life in society, on the nature of society’s riches, and on the distribution of basic goods (including work itself) which will do most to promote social cohesion. With this approach as given, one can but agree with the provocative view recently expressed by Renaud Camus that there is no employment problem.9

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