WHY WORK? A CULTURALLY INFORMED CRITIQUE OF PAST AND PRESENT SHOP FLOOR INTERPRETATIONS OF WORK

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ABSTRACT: This paper provides a cultural critique of the meanings of work as they transcend different modes of production. Twenty years on from the collapse of state socialism, Western experts are still called upon to prescribe 'the best way' for how productive work should be conducted/managed across the non-Western world (Jankowicz, 1993; 1994; Kostera, 1995, Kelemen, 1999). This 'one best way' usually assumes that the basic unit of analysis is the rational, utility-maximising individual; a species, bred inside Westernized secondary and tertiary educational institutions, business schools, or (vocational) training courses, all of these producing their special form of 'learning to labour' (Willis, 1977). Thus equipped, this species – what we might call, for the time being, the 'model-worker' - is bound to inhabit a rather inhabitable place, an arena of in increasingly global capitalism: the market.

KEY WORDS: work; cultural critique; workplace cultures; working cultures; neo-liberal context of work; socialist context of work

1. INTRODUCTION

Significantly, the contemporary model-worker is often portrayed as void of any extra-economic sentiments, social bondages, or emotional affections. Bound to survive on the market, s/he pursues individualized life-styles, identifies with an entrepreneurial self, aspires to lateral or portfolio careers, or is driven by a passion for excellence (e.g. du Gay, 1996).

Some might herald this development as apt response to the ‘end of work’ (Rifkin, 1995); others may lament a ‘corrosion of character’ on that account (Sennett, 1998). At any rate, we shall argue that - regardless of one’s denomination - the contemporary model-worker cannot dispense of language, meaning, and, more

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generally, a symbolic universe in order to work. In other words, without embedding both production and consumption within a corresponding (working) culture, neither socio-economic systems nor workers – be they model exemplars or not - can endure. We compare contemporary forms of work with previous - most notably, state-socialist - working cultures. As we shall demonstrate the emerging differences and correspondences might not be coincidental.

2. LEARNING (HOW) TO LABOUR – OR WHY CULTURE MATTERS

Marx’s seminal arguments on labour power and the generational reproduction of labour power are seminal. But there is a sleight of hand in Marx’s argument and in many others which follow him. A whole series of cultural and social assumptions are smuggled into the apparently economic argument concerning generational reproduction. To the one side are the well aired issues concerning the gendered relations and material productions of the domestic sphere which biologically ‘reproduce’ labour power.

Equally important, though, is the cultural reproduction and formation of labour power which takes in a wide field of spiritual, symbolic and aesthetic resources and practices of understanding, specific educational forms and, not least, the actions and creativities of the self-formation of individual identity and the willingness to work in specific historical contexts. These processes require their own kinds of sui generis understandings. To understand economic development, one must be cognisant of the cultural factors that are contributing to it.

A cursory look at the history of the meanings of work suggests that the drive to work is culturally and ideologically conditioned, being central to the inception and development of both capitalist and socialist forms of production (Grint, 2005). Investments in work surpass economic reasoning and calculation and involve a cultural element. We conceive of work as deeply intertwined with other cultural discourses and cultural forms in society rather than as pure economic necessity or anthropological datum.

So we are arguing that working cultures develop through human creativities. Echoing the famous quotation from Marx, we argue that human beings are not like bees, automatic in their work, but utilise planning and imagination in what they produce. These faculties are also exercised in general processes of meaning-making and identity formation, so work routines and objectives are themselves enacted in ways that reflect values, norms, and sentiments developed and sustained through lived experience in and outside the workplace. While there are obvious economic motives both in managing and undertaking labour in productive activities, equally important are the meanings with which work is imbued, the struggles over the definitions of what it is to be human, what kinds of values and aspirations are in play and which kinds of human future are implicated in productive working relations and human relations more generally.

Contemporary forms of capitalism, be they neo-liberal, corporatist or post-socialist have seen traditional meanings of work thrown into confusion. The demise of manual labour in Western countries has led to the decline of working class culture
while autonomous forms of masculinity and craft pride are under threat (Savage, 2001). Coupled with the well documented tendency for wages to decline or stagnate for semi and unskilled workers and competition from (and often racist responses towards) migrant workers (see the ‘Polish plumber’ and the ‘Asian nurse’), the kudos of the working class hero has eroded markedly. Moreover, the rise of individualism and the risk society (Beck, 2004) in both Western and Eastern Europe has eroded collectivist forms of social engagement, with top down control seeking to replace established regimes of collective representation and bargaining, thus putting into jeopardy (male) working class culture and corresponding form of organising.

At the corporate level, struggles over the legitimacy of capitalist production take place with multinationals leading the way in arguing that specific late capitalist methods of meeting and creating human wants and needs are for the social benefit of all. To communicate outside, with its important stakeholders, and inside with the workers and managers, the corporation relies on the ever more bizarre inventions of management theory and motivational concoctions and nostrums to establish what counts as valid and legitimate with respect to work. Indeed, the rise of ‘management’ as a credible academic discipline has armed corporate players with the cultural resources to affect the ways in which work conceived of, performed, and at times resisted. From its beginnings, the corporation is deeply implicated in economic, political and cultural transformations which affect European societies in broadest sense, as well as expectations and aspirations about work, and forms of self-knowledge and self-governance.

Against the mantra of ‘Work is Good’ and its intrinsic answer to the ‘Why work?’ question, the issue of ‘Good Work’ is gaining new significance. For once, business has embarked on reformulating - albeit in predominantly productivist terms that stress parameters such efficiency, innovation, and marketability - the work agenda, as an increasing number of employees have become disenfranchised from the ‘corporate dream’ or, more seriously, have suffer from burnout.

Thus, there is another image of ‘Good Work’ that is negatively defined at the background of the pervasive evidence for stress and burnout in the workplace, reports about ‘mobbing’ and ‘harassment’, and common fears about unemployment and social degradation that, occasionally at least, translate into anxiety, disorientation and/or xenophobia. Significantly, such sentiments also transcend organizational and social hierarchies, as does the ideal of ‘Good Work’ that they invoke. ‘Good Work’, in this version, implies security, self-actualization, and cooperation, echoing concerns of the Human Relations Movement. Consequently, the benevolence ascribed to work is highly ambivalent, stemming from its status as being both a social obligation and an individual aspiration.

Of particular interest then is the way in which justifications and legitimations may be changing in ‘real politick’ light of global change and the unprecedented public commentary on potentially negative aspects of current change for wage labourers in the west.

Top down views on the ‘why work’ question are meeting new challenges. At the middle management and operational level, managers adapt corporate and general managerial strategies to the practical business of directing labour, developing their own
common sense and often cynical assumptions about ‘good work’ or its impossibility and inappropriateness. At the bottom strata of the corporate space, varieties of traditional and emergent shop floor cultures have been revived in an attempt to cope with the materiality and sensuous wearings down of labour. Some of these seem to echo past strategies of ‘distancing’ or ‘making out’ reminiscence of ‘Banana time’ or ‘normal clay’ where workers subvert the organizationally warranted meaning of work through a mixture of creativity, humour, and cynicism (Roy, 1959; Clegg 1975). Today’s call centres, for example, have become notorious for their rigid taylorized working conditions and for that matter have been dubbed ‘electronic sweatshops’. Here, both managers and workers resort to ‘fun days’ or ‘themed entertainment’ to balance monotony and work intensification, with humour becoming, once again, a form of subversion of the (electronic) factory regime (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 2003).

It is our core belief that these levels of emergent work adaptations are not inevitable, natural or programmed in some external and ungovernable fashion to unfold in similar ways across the capitalist world. We believe that there are different forms and relationships of the elements and layers within different economic/political types. Loosely drawing on Esping-Anderson (1990) we contrast two economic/political types. First, the neo-liberal model. Here, the principles of market efficiency and commodification are elevated to a supreme status, governing the role of the corporation in the society. The individual is a sovereign consumer whose best strategy at work is to align his needs to the needs of the corporation on a short term basis in order to acquire ‘skills’ in demand. Rather than developing long-term relationships with the corporation, one’s aim is to become a more marketable individual: a so-called entrepreneurial self (du Gay, 1996) who will use corporate culture to advance his own interests.

At least theoretically, managers and workers may assume equal status/power in this model. The other pole of this politic-economic spectrum constitutes the state-socialist mode of organizing production. In this model, economic activity in corporations is subordinated to political imperatives rather than to market efficiency and commodification. With the collapse of communism in Europe, this model is rather historical but absolutely crucial because it gives real dimensionality to our scale: here the individual (be him/her manager or worker) is obliged to work by law in exchange for all his/her needs being met by the State. This is a highly illuminating pole in the continuum of possible answers to the question, ‘Why work?’.

Albeit the collapse of state-socialism in Eastern Europe seems to fuel the neo-liberal fantasy of an ‘end of history’, some critics, however, warn that:

“As socialism retreats into the past, the danger is that we will become even more enthralled with a single model, a typification of liberal capitalism against which to compare reality…we will lose sight of alternatives, whether alternative capitalisms, alternative socialisms or other utopias that offer novel lenses through which to interpret the present and the past as well as the future” (Burawoy, 1999: 309).

Therefore, it is important to let history teach us lessons that don’t need repeating as well as those lessons that one should repeat.
3. THE NEO-LIBERAL CONTEXT OF WORK

In neo-liberal economies, the global restructuring of the labour and product markets brings new threats to the security of all who depend on selling their labour but particularly to the un- and semi skilled. The increased uncertainty and fragility of employment within a Western neo-liberal society affects the individual’s sense of the self in and outside localities of work. The enticements of leisure and consumption supposedly offer new kinds of identities and non-work affiliations apparently untramelled by restraints of income, education and class background even as workers continue to toil for most of their lives in the realms of necessity strictly determined precisely by these latter things. Against the mantra of high work place expectations and what is actually verbalised to the workers, their motivation is often assumed to have eroded with ever more bizarre management regimes, ideologies and nostrums vying with each other in attempts to remedy the situation.

The features of neo-liberalism have been endlessly debated in the literature. Some commentators have taken an optimistic view arguing that globalisation, time-space compression, consumerism, and the marketization of private life in the West are positive and inevitable developments which demonstrate the superiority of capitalism over any other form of production/social organisation for productive purposes. The result of such advances is a flexible, multi-skilled, empowered, albeit highly fragmented, workforce which is the driving engine for further economic and technological developments (Ohmae, 1990). A permanent quest for improvement of personal human capital and polishing the skills required to sell one’s capacities to the highest bidder seem to stand in the place of internal, spiritual and cultural motivations to work.

Other commentators suggest that while being accorded the primordial status of consumer, the individual faces an identity crisis which cannot be managed successfully within the sphere of production for he/she no longer derives his/her identity and sense of achievement by engaging in productive work (Bauman, 1991). With the end of ‘the internal contract’ (Capelli et al, 1997), trajectoral career paths have given way to discontinuous and precarious employment biographies, and the mantra of modernity and industrialism – ‘working for a living’ – has lost much of its charm and rendered an implausible promise (Grey, 1994). Thus, the individual seems in fact disenchanted with work and disempowered at work, and any attempt to reconnect the individual to the society via productive activities is at best spurious (Knights and Willmott, 1989).

While thirty years ago, during the era of mass production and mass consumption, the corporate system/culture still depended on the existence of a genuine working class system/culture, the 21st century corporation rarely knows who its workers are (for example, the call centers in India operating on behalf of British Corporation/ manufacturing operations relocated in China or Eastern Europe) and spends large amounts of time on communicating with its external audiences rather than attending to its employees (Taylor and Bain, 2005).

On other occasions, the organizationally proclaimed ‘passion for excellence’, which has got hold of Western factory regimes via disciplinary discourses such as Total Quality Management or Business Process Reengineering that serve, at once, as
vessel for management prerogatives and corresponding workplace resistance. Often, such discourses seek to establish a model identity, one that is designed to constitute a benchmark for those aiming to comply with the demands of the disciplinary regime (Jackson and Carter, 1998). As Doray (1988) has shown, attributes and behaviour of such a model worker can acquire the status of an internal law. In fact, managing identities has been an important aspect of disciplinary factory regimes for some time. Yet, with the retreat of direct forms of supervision (be it front-line managers or assembly lines), attempts to create with the help of a role model a form of self-policing identity have become more pronounced (Hopper and Macintosh, 1998).

Significantly, such disciplinary regimes show considerable strengths but also limitations. The implicit dictum of the discourse of excellence – i.e.: It’s never enough! - drives aspirations of both managers and workers to live up to the model identity provided ad absurdum (Bunzel et al., 2002). Whatever their attempts to please the customer, there will be new wants and needs to be met in an escalating spiral of self-subordination the market ideology (Bunzel, 2001). Commonly, the result is a workplace culture that constitutes an “amalgam of fear, commitment, and self-subordination” (Deetz, 1998). Resistance, here, often amounts to ‘inner immigration’ on behalf of those governed by the disciplinary discourse.

In an unexplored territory between neoliberal and socialist, we are intrigued as to why people continue to invest in work at a time when the physiological, intellectual, and emotional stakes are rising yet the return on such investment is evermore insecure. As the traditional forms of mechanical solidity associated with hundreds of years of industrialisation and urbanisation decline, there may be new meanings of work taking their place, some being orchestrated from the top, others arising sporadically from below. Such meanings are by no means controllable and manageable in a traditional way: they are rather fragmented, slippery, on their way to be constituted but not quite there yet.

4. THE STATE SOCIALIST CONTEXT OF WORK

Whereas capitalist firms operate under stringent profit constraints, the limits imposed upon monetary mechanisms and politically motivated price regulation allowed state-socialist organizations to operate under soft budget constraints (Kornai, 1990). Instead of private appropriation of surplus and price setting through markets, the state-socialist enterprise faced central appropriation and allocation of goods and services (Burawoy, 1985). This and the doctrine of central planning made it impossible for enterprises to accumulate profits. Instead, they were nodes in a microcosm in which all economic activities were subordinated to the general interests of the state-socialist society - or what the Communist party defined as such (Constantinescu et al., 1983).

Arguably, most significant for understanding the socio-economic context of state-socialist enterprises is the paradigmatic shift from an “extension of the product base” to “intensively extended reproduction” conducted within most East-European countries within the 1970s (Deppe and Hoß, 1988). This trend, which temporally corresponded to the crisis of Fordism in the most advanced capitalist economies, meant that the mode of extensive economic growth that was characteristic for the years
following World War II and during which the “infrastructural base” of the economy (mainly heavy industries and the production of mass consumption articles) was developed, had met its limits. Shortages in both financial and qualified human resources - caused by inefficient allocation in conjunction with low rates of productivity and innovation - led political and economic leaders to demand a more effective and efficient use of resources and to focus on substantial gains in productivity (Spalatelu, 1981).

Translated into the context of state-socialist workplaces, this meant that managers and workers were asked to work harder and to intensify their efforts. This way, official Party directive declared, more wealth would be generated that could be used to improve working and living conditions for all the people.

Contrary to the severe restrictions that prevailed within the state-socialist political sphere (no democratically legitimised Parliament based on free elections was existent; the supreme role of the Communist Party was constitutionally stipulated; no general freedom of speech and publication was guaranteed; and restrictions on travel to countries that were not part of the Eastern Block were imposed, to name only the most notorious restrictions), people enjoyed a considerable amount of discretion in the context of work organizations. Not least the vibrant state-socialist ‘shadow economy’, where manual labour and (handi) craftmanship found ready markets outside of the formal work context, and where a developed barter trade partially replaced the sheer economic necessity to work hard and diligently, provided plenty of opportunity for both workplace resistance and ‘free-riding’. Put it in rather negative terms, one could talk of a lack of sanction power on the part of state authorities and business leaders (Vosskamp and Wittke, 1990).

While it was possible to bring people into line when it came to silencing political dissent by threatening with oppressive measures, it was not that easy to raise production by fear; let alone to hope that that fear might stimulate individuals’ commitment to the state-socialist cause. For once, there was no real ‘threat’ imposed by the external labour market, as workers in state-socialist societies had the constitutional right – and the duty – to work. In addition, the chronic shortage of labour within the state-socialist economy led organizations to ‘stockpile’ workers – even those known to be less than efficient and/or unreliable – to uphold their numerical flexibility. Practically, this meant that each individual had a secure job and that even in cases of severe misbehaviour (habitual absenteeism, drunkenness at work, etc.) factory leaders or supervisors had neither the means nor the motivation to ‘sack’ unreliable workers. As long as the latter did not express any political dissent, they were safe from reprisals (Kelemen and Bunzel, 2005).

Under these conditions, workers’ rationale to work for and cooperate within the state-socialist production process were anything but evident. Smith and Thompson (1992) point towards an informal contract with the workforce whereby employment security and other rewards such as subsidised goods and housing were provided in exchange for cooperation in the workplace. On other occasions, first-line managers conspired with their subordinated workers to ‘fake’ the meeting of planning figures in the face of sheer irresolvable shortages of resources within the centrally planned economic machinery (Vosskamp and Wittke, 1990). Haraszi (1978) illustrates the
mechanisms by which piece rate workers in a Hungarian factory were drawn into their own subjugation: once workers were convinced that the plan was achievable and therefore legitimate, they worked hard to achieve the targets and were prepared to endure sacrifices to get their wages at the end of the month. However, as soon as targets had proven attainable, they were usually increased. Thus, striving to meet targets proved a self-defeating strategy and – over time – frustration and cynicism prevailed among workers.

While during the early stages of state-socialist rule, extrinsic motivation worked to some degree, during the 1980s, most workers lost interest in the economic success of the organization. With economic planning becoming increasingly fictitious, targets became unrealistic and faking economic reports became institutionalised (Bunzel and Kelemen, 2008). In an economy marked by scarcity of consumption goods and services and, thus, by a developed barter trade, monetary incentives (or penalties) did not carry very far. Moreover, various attempts to create a “socialist competition” - a form of competition that showed striking similarities to contemporary Western management strategies – did not produce the desired results either. When they were asked to compete for the best or highest work performances to be granted awards such as ‘Employee of the Months’ or ‘Activist of socialist work’, most workers soon figured out that any such record performance would inevitably bring about a rise of the general working targets. Not surprisingly, those striving to become ‘model workers’ were stigmatized as ‘believers’ in the state-socialist ideology and were usually quickly brought into line by peer pressure (Kelemen and Bunzel, 2008). Consequently, submission to the state-socialist work ethos – or striving for excellence, as contemporary corporate Newspeak would call it – carried little prestige; and, instead of earning admiration from peers, it commonly provoked isolation.

What prevailed in Eastern European enterprises then, was a culture of cynicism towards Party rhetoric, fictitious economic targets, and the officially proclaimed work ethos. While most manual workers engaged in some sort of ‘surface acting’ (Hochschild, 1983), the professional class, the so-called intellectual elite, which was highly educated and motivated by a vocational ethos, appeared to find more meaning in work.

5. AN ATTEMPT TO CONCLUDE: PROVOKING NEW FORMS OF RESISTANCE?

Workplace cultures across different societal systems show surprising similarities. While the organizationally chanted meanings of work receive partial avowal, shopfloor subcultures emerge that subvert the official dictums. In the context of pressure from the external labour market, as in market economies, the economically established rationale for working – earning a living – provides both limitations to and discretions for workplace forms of resistance. Whilst disciplinary factory regimes in neo-liberal economies seek, to some extent successfully, to conquer employees’ hearts and souls (Knights and Willmott, 1989), subtle forms of resistance emerge. In the hegemonic battle for the meaning of work, it is the very indexicality of any sense-making process that allows workers to undermine the organizational agenda. Surface
acting here renders an apt response to the totalitarian claims of a corporately avowed identity. As in the totalitarian context of former state-socialist countries, the model worker is at once both an image that provides a reference for workers’ search for meaning and a meaningless Phantom to eschew the disciplinary factory regime. Thus in an ironic twist to the lads that once ‘learned to labour’, here it is the organization that provokes new forms of resistance in its attempt to bypass it. The question, ‘Why Work’ is anything but trivial in this respect. Cultural framings of work force their way onto the economic agenda.

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