

Culture as a source of new working practices: new perspectives and types of employment ¹

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GREETINGS

Esteemed colleagues and professors: good morning. I would like to offer my most sincere thanks for my invitation from the Autonomous University of Lisbon to take part in this International Conference for Experts about “Emerging Patterns of Work”.

I would particularly like to thank Prof. Eduardo de Sousa Ferreira who, despite my absence from university life for several years, considered it useful to have me here with you. I have, therefore, had to recover my English, nearly forgotten, and trust it will serve to exchange some ideas with you.

1. THE CONTEXT OF MY OBSERVATIONS

The context of my observations is quite singular. Because I live in Spain which, while undergoing a long period of economic growth and productive modernisation, has the lowest levels of employment in the European Union.

Although, it is true that unemployment rates have constantly decreased since 1996 to a present level of 9.5% of the active population, the indications are that this is not enough to change the employment situation in the short term.

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Seeking a diagnosis, nearly all national and international experts, individuals and institutions, coincide in the fact that the reason for this situation is the incredible inflexibility of the Spanish employment market.

As a solution, the result has been an intense policy of privatisation of companies and public services, competition and the remoulding of frameworks for employment.

These measures, combined with expensive industrial and agricultural reconversions in the 1980's have, undoubtedly, led to an improvement in the employment market. However, their effects appear to have been diluted by structural problems before reaching their objectives, and before reaching a level of unemployment of 5%, considered as ideal.

We, therefore, believe that it is necessary to seek other causes, and make other diagnoses which may help us to understand what for many is a negative and paradoxical display of the steady growth of the Spanish economy in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Without doubt, one of these causes is the strong inertia which affects the jobs catalogues. Beyond the flexibility of the relationships of work and the increase in competition between businesses, the Spanish market appears to be clinging to a concept of employment which belongs to an industrial economy. This acts as an obstacle to the appearance of new types of work and the exploration of the rich seams where this work is to be found.

Considering things from the particular point of view of an unemployed worker, the feeling is that Spaniards looking for work believe that a job will be created for them, instead of them adapting to the opportunity of applying for jobs which already exist in the marketplace³. It is as if the Spanish only considered work to be what

³ 87,95% of unemployed Spaniards are not prepared to move house in order to find work, and 31,12% reject any job which involves a change in occupation. For 51,99% it would be unacceptable to take work which meant a reduction in their income according to their professional category, and only 53,75% of the unemployed would accept work in a category below their own. Source: INE (Spanish national Statistics Institute), May 2001.

it was in the previous productive model, whereas they depreciate the importance of other economies which are breaking new ground with the social stigma of undesirable jobs ⁴.

In my opinion, this is the main obstacle with the policies of employment must overcome. We cannot continue considering something which is only a profound change in productive structures as a crisis. And the old idea of “full employment” cannot continue monopolising efforts which should instead be aimed at the new economy and the idea of “full activity”.

2. THE GENERAL FOCUS OF THE PROBLEM

It is possible to see that new technologies are affecting the structure of the productive process, something which is perhaps the only evidence we have in this field.

The work factor changes its qualifications, and reduces its quantitative importance (DELGADO and BARRIOS, 2000: 70-79). Capital evolves, from the problems of technification and financing, towards the field of knowledge (HOWARD, 1995). Factories, as a localised unit of production, evolve towards the so-called “network business”, with an ever-increasing delocalisation and organisational flexibility (CASTELLS, 1998).

However, this is not proof that the appearance of new technologies means the appearance of inevitable structural unemployment, nor that there has been a change in the mentality with which politicians, workers and employers deal with new employment challenges.

⁴ Whereas information technology produces 3,02% of Europe's GNP, the same sector in Spain only produces 2,02%. This explains why the foreseeable development of this sector, which is now growing in Spain faster than the European average, may create a demand for 250.000 specialised workers between 2001-2005.

Whereas the old debate about the relationships between machinism and employment has once again appeared in the light of this new economy, I would place my bets on the theory of compensation, and take it as real that the new technologies have a surprising ability to compensate for jobs which are eliminated through increased productivity, or simply by workers being replaced by machines.

Of course, the compensating effects are neither immediate nor automatic, nor do they appear in the same sectors, nor are they suitable for the same workers who have gone from being employed to unemployed. Even though we may be sure that the medium term will be better than now, we are

obliged to carry out active policies aimed at softening the effects which modern productive systems have on employment ⁵.

If we do not do so, or if we turn down the principle of compensation of employment, then the new technologies will appear to us as being the anti-thesis of full employment, and each of the characteristics of the actual model of employment – flexibility, the renewal of directives, bonuses, variable salaries, the decentralisation of work, the availability of the worker, teamwork and the three-pronged business organisation ⁶ – will be seen as proof of an employment crisis which questions the traditional values of stability, personal satisfaction and adequate wages.

⁵ The European Union with structural unemployment estimated at between 18 and 20 million people (11% of the active population) has, in the words of Romano Prodi, a “dramatic” need for specialists in new technologies, calculated by the European Commission at around 1.6. million workers. There is also a vast structural inequality to this employment with regard to sex, age groups, productive sectors and levels of specialisation. It may, therefore, be said that in some way the creation of complementary work boosted by the new technology takes the shape of a profound restructuring of the productive apparatus. Cfr.: *Presentation of the objectives of the Stockholm Summit* (Brussels, 7th february 2001).

⁶ The division of businesses into three organisational strata: a) professionals and upper management, b) specialised workers flexibility integrated into the company, c) non-specialised and external workers, employed for services, subcontracts for projects, or with part-time contracts.

Put another way, the technological revolution forces us to recover the distinction between 'activity' and 'employment' which the industrial era had eliminated⁷, in order to break away from the rigid working structure which is slowing down the development of the new economy. In turn, this implies the need to design public policies which, overcoming the old idea of 'full work', are instead aimed at 'full activity'.

The formulation of the new ideal means that all citizens are active, are useful to society, and have resources necessary to carry out a dignified and independent personal and social activity. The practical expression of this new mentality is the belief that full employment – "*one salary for every person*" – is not the only possible way of achieving the ideal of full activity.

We should not forget that the main virtue of the economy of knowledge is not in its application to old deposits of work, but instead in its ability to make unexploited possibilities flourish (LIKKANEN, 2001: 29). Neither should we forget that the political impetus of European authorities will increasingly head in this

⁷ The concept of work has undergone an intense evolution throughout history, which has not always been linear. It may now be said that, like art, war or love, it is a way of looking into the social and political structures created by the process of civilisation. This means that the ways of dealing with the study of work are countless, and that the reductionism and partiality of the different points of view is, more than a risk, an inexorable horizon. Being conscious of this fact, and without any intention of solving this difficult question, I would like to draw attention to two aspects which I consider particularly useful for understanding my proposal:

- That, placed in the disjunction of conceiving work as an 'anthropological category' or 'essentially economic category', and following the analysis of Hannah Arendt, I would opt for the first (ARENDT: 1958). And that far from joining in with those who predict the end of work...as a human value (MEDA: 1998), I would dare to place the social objectives of work before its productive objectives (PERRET:1993).
- That if we analyse the conceptual evolution of work, the so-called Industrial Revolution, and its evolution throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we see this is the time when the disjunction between the economic and anthropological aspects of work became much more pronounced, until becoming, with the help of Marxist analysis, a mere factor of production.

Nobody doubts today that the model of organising work which went hand-in-hand with industrialisation is causing a crisis in the post-modern period (RIFKIN: 1996). But going beyond this evidence, which recovers the axiological pluralism of work, the definition of the model of industrial work which is now causing a crisis, implies the conscious affirmation that things were not always so, and that it is possible to find some historical moments in which the anthropological concept of work was much more important than its inseparable condition of economic category.

direction, convinced that it is the only guarantee to be able to grow and compete in the mid-term ⁸.

The concept of full activity has, in our opinion, some noteworthy advantages:

- a) It is not essentially linked to the production of goods, and opens itself to other aspects – such as the realisation of social and personal values – which do not, strictly speaking, have a market.
- b) It creates structures of activity which are small and flexible, and perfectly suited to technological optimisation.
- c) It is perfectly compatible with the characteristics of the worker demanded by the new economy.
- d) It uncovers previously unexplored sources of employment, and accelerates the process of working compensation in the new economy.
- e) It renews the perspective of change, and avoids the critical vision of structural unemployment leading to highly costly and inefficient public policies.

This is where the great importance of culture appears as the foundations for the expansion of employment, and as a stimulus to the change of mentality which should support the introduction of new technologies.

⁸ Cfr.: Agreements of the Lisbon Summit (March 2000) and Stockholm Summit (March 2000), and their subsequent decalogue of objectives: 1) **employment**: quality jobs, jobs for women and the elderly; 2) **Mobility**: the creation of a genuinely European market, and the equalising of social security benefit and pensions; 3) **Internal market**: open to the exchange of services and competition in the energy and transport sectors; 4) **Financial market**: with businesses having access to projects and third-party investments; 5) **Joint legal system**: legal equality and simplicity; 6) **e-Europe**: modernisation of the communication system; 7) **Work qualification**: create quality jobs and a high degree of technological qualification, and encourage the immigration of specialised workers; 8) **Investigation**: create an European investigation area; 9) **New technology**: creation of high-tech companies which create employment and guarantee growth; 10) **Prevision of the effects of aging in the population**: changes in the pension system, improved health care and complementary social policies.

3. CULTURE AS A SOURCE OF ACTIVITY

If there exists a field of action in which activity is more important than employment, this must surely be in the world of culture.

Obviously, culture goes far beyond the intellectual or artistic activity which, always involved certain minorities as actors or spectators. As we explore the modern concept of 'political culture', we should include here all the activities which support the habits and values of a society, until we are able to determine its social and political behaviour, and its institutional and participative models.

Thus, for example, beyond the classic concept of cultural activity – music, cinema, literature, cultural tourism, to name but a few – we should consider as modern cultural elements other aspects such as solidarity, pacifism, ecology, leisure, multiculturalism, communication, and all the elements which determine the existence of a free and participatory society.

Here it should be said that this is a culture which is blossoming, the defence and undertaking of many of these elements is not implicit in the normal development of the productive activities and public policies which uphold our model of society. It is even possible that on more than one occasion they may be seen as elements which go against economic development.

Yet the society of the future will not arrive, in my opinion, until instead of linking public policies with the exclusive objective of employment and a salary, we make a proposal which is aimed at encouraging values which, without being strictly connected to the market of goods and services, may be considered as beneficial to modern society, and be duly compensated, in the widest and most flexible sense of the term.

Beyond the foreseeable geometric increase in cultural elements and services which may be channelled through the market place – tourism, literature, art, events – there now appears the possibility and need to direct efforts, resources and knowledge towards the management of the values which define and structure the new concept of democracy.

How may we do this? By bringing together civil society, organising solidarity movements, promoting social service based on volunteer work, directing pacifist movements, activating the types of social action which contribute to the definition of the agenda of the government and public policies, providing the elements which make possible open political debate, and activating all of the socialising instruments which bring efficacy to the educational system and integration policies.

Although it is obvious that this kind of activity is not the philosopher's stone necessary to fight against unemployment and encourage complementary work created by the introduction of new technologies, it is also true that it is an enormous reserve of work which is susceptible to being particularly distributed among collectives – women, young people looking for their first job, workers close to retirement age, disabled people – who are the main features of the unemployment lists of the European Union.

In a complex society such as Europe, it would not be wise to leave all the objectives to scattered individual initiatives, developed as complementary activities. It is important to consider the incipient movements of professionalisation which are developing as an opportunity for efficiency, and as a source of activity which, as well as being considered abundant, is directly connected to the characteristics of a post-industrial society.

Neither should we lose the perspective that an economy of understanding contributes to the rapid and profound change of a man into a social actor. Something which leads, sooner rather than later, to an economy of human relationships, and the appearance of a new work ethic which will decisively influence the social organisation and definition of public policies (KLECK, 1997).

At the European Council meeting in Lisbon in March 2000, a general objective for the European Union was defined of "becoming the most dynamic and competitive economy based on knowledge in the world". To do so, it was recognised that there is an urgent need for the acceptance of the culture of risk-taking in business, of the innovative dynamics of companies, and of the opening of new markets.

But none of these policies will be fruitful if we forget that the new economy is only possible with a new mentality, which has to take shape in a new concept of work and the values which it serves.

I believe this is, in the widest sense, the idea of culture as a source of work.

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