

Changing work values in a liquid world

Livia Pogan^{*a}

^a*“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Sibiu, Romania*

Abstract

Work, values and change are among most analyzed social issues, starting from ancient philosophers, to Middle Ages thinkers and nowadays sociologists, human resources researchers or business specialists. We have chosen to discuss in this article how social change reflects on values attached to work, as the public discourse often draws attention on specific features of the young generations or millennials. The often-mentioned idea is that young adults are disengaged, not interested, superficial, frequently unstable and unreliable when analyzing their work behavior. For them, classical motivation theories and consecrated job satisfaction models seems like are not working. Starting from the assumption that values are the ones that orientate individuals` behavior, the purpose of this paper is to emphasize the connections that emerge between social changes, values transformation and working behavior, through the key of modernism-postmodernism shift.

Keywords: *work values; work ethics; modernism; postmodernism; values change.*

1. Introducing the context

Several aspects must be mentioned when addressing work theme. One of them certainly is globalization, as this phenomenon, with wide coverage, has a great influence on work domain. Defined by Giddens (1990: p. 64) as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away”, globalization has several facets and different effects. Through it, national boundaries tend to diminish, cultural differences are confronted, traditional views, perceptions and attitudes are reshaping, and central models are rapidly spread towards semi-periphery and periphery, as Immanuel Wallerstein shows in his theory regarding world systems.

Another effect of globalization targets the techno-space, as Appadurai explains (Appadurai 1990), with direct effects on changing job types (or even disappearance of some of them), because the routine, standardized or dulling ones are steadily executed by various machines and new technologies replace human work in an increasing number of domains, even in those where human connection was considered a must, as customer care or medicine¹. We will see further how such technological jumps

^{*}Livia Pogan. *E-mail address: livia.pogan@ulbsibiu.ro.*

¹ For more details about the five dimensions of globalization, that form the “global cultural economy” and interact, influencing one another, named by Appadurai “global cultural flows”,

influence both work content and the way work itself is done. Thus, beside the fact that some jobs disappear because they are no longer needed or they are no more executed by human beings, the way people work also changes. Remote working possibilities are various nowadays, as many companies agree working from home, open subsidiaries in other countries, so their employees speak different languages and embrace various cultures, collaborate with freelancers, externalize the work of their departments and so on.

Nevertheless, especially western countries, but not only them, benefit from the so called “welfare state”, which provides the basic means for survival. This, as we will think out in an upcoming section, may strongly affect the way people relate to work, because it is no longer considered the sole alternative for living. Secularization contributes to a different interpretation of work, if we compare it to the one that elder generations embraced, considering work a necessary evil (Christianism) or the only way to approach God`s will (Protestantism).

Another aspect that deserves our attention regards the intense people movement all across the Globe, reaching an amplitude never met before. “Although migratory movements have been occurring in different zones of the planet since ancient times, a significant amount of theoretic attention was driven towards them starting in the XIXth century” (Porumbescu 2018: p. 8). When referring to work, migration`s effects are numerous, from cultural clash to payment issues or know-how and the list can go on, as we have previously shown: “International human migration represents, by itself, a form of change in the society: when individuals migrate, they change not only their residence and work place, but also their behavior, the rules they obey, the institutions they refer to, and, most important, the type of relationships they engage into” (Porumbescu and Pogan 2018: p. 17).

Perhaps one of the most metaphoric and also eloquent descriptions of modern world is that of Zygmunt Bauman, who speaks about “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000). His standing point is that society is passing through a late stage of modernity, a stage which is rather characterized by chaos because individuals are seen as tourists in their own lives, so everything is fluid and changeable. What Bauman`s model stresses and may be at interest for the present analysis, is that people cut connection with their traditional support networks, which can contribute to a greater feeling of freedom, but can also frustrate individuals, as benchmarks are less stable, ever-changing and thus people are always searching for something that they may never find. We will see further how can work environment and the relations created here can come and help those with a greater request for certitude.

2. Theoretical framing and historical background

We cannot analyze present without speaking about the past, so this section will highlight some key elements concerning work signification, different valences that remarkable thinkers identified and addressed through their research. When speaking about work, philosophers have a meaningful word to say, starting from ancient thinkers, Plato and Aristotle, mentioning afterwards John Locke and Adam Smith, referring to Max Weber with his fundamental “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” and analyzing the eloquent distinction between work and labor, proposed

see his theory of disjuncture. He identifies ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, financescapas and ideoscapas (Appadurai 1990).

by Hannah Arendt. Concentrating our attention to the latter mentioned author, a worth discussing distinction is the one between “work” and “labor”. While the first term refers to that challenging, meaningful activity, that not only has financial purposes, but, more than that, brings satisfaction, self-actualization and is usually connected to performance, Arendt sees in “labor” those routine jobs, sometimes even dangerous that are in no way associated with pleasure or satisfaction. For many people the jobs performed contain elements from both sides, the positive and the negative one, while we can also find work positions that are rather closer to the negative pole of the above discussed categories.

Beside this distinction, work was also considered a necessary evil or a way to get closer to what God appreciates and thus a way to ensure one`s salvation. More than that, the differences between Christianity and the Protestant position regarding work were seen as causes or explanations of differences in economic development of European countries (Webber 1993). The modern age brings work`s ascension, from the previous accusations and perceptions of it as a dulling activity or punishment. If we remember for instance how Marx stated that work can be considered the expression of humanity itself, one must acknowledge his merits. Before Karl Marx, who devoted a lot of his work to work, there are authors who consider that John Locke was the first to reestablish the slandered position of work, when he “discovered that labor is the source of all property” (Arendt 2007: p. 131).

3. Changing work values

What guides us through this analysis is the aim to understand how people relate to work nowadays and why they embrace such an approach, why is it differently seen today, compared to other past times. It is obvious that technological revolution changed work content, work rhythm, some jobs disappeared, others are new and still insufficient regulated, and, beyond the labor sector, individuals also changed. If in the first years of industrial revolution men, women and even children worked as much as they could, during weekends, legal holidays, without days off or insurances, until exhaustion, next years brought many changes, through legal regulations and other soft steps that contributed to the labor market as we see it today, if we speak about Western World.

If we want to understand such processes, taking a look to Maslow`s pyramid of needs may seem a good starting point, because one premises, largely circulated, is that people work because they have needs, that are gratified working. The subtle discussion here goes beyond this rough causality, by distinguishing between the different steps of the hierarchy. Thus, the first ones, corresponding to basic needs, such as physiological and security ones, are closer to what “labor” defines, while upper levels, referring to love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization, are closer to what we previously described as “work”, according to Arendt`s view point. Maslow`s idea is that as needs are accomplished, people climb the steps of his conceptualized pyramid, starting from the basic ones, that include the need for water, food or shelter, to personal security, health, resources and employment, at the beginning. For people that don`t have problems in satisfying these basic needs, the next, upper floors of the hierarchy become tempting. Transposed to the present analysis of work, for those persons, according to this model, a well-paid job is not enough. Together with the salary, that contributes to fulfilling the basic needs, other job characteristics are sought, features that can contribute to status, recognition, the sense of freedom, or even self-actualization.

The concern for developing theoretical models that can provide plausible strategies for human resources specialists, strategies that can boost engagement, satisfaction and performance, brought to light the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic work orientation. The two types of work orientations can be again associated to different connotations given to “work” or “labor”. The intrinsic work orientations define the people who find in what they do a scope in itself, pleasure, feeling that they can achieve something, because their activity allows them to unfold and maximizes their potential. On the other hand, an extrinsic positioning finds labor as a way of satisfying goals that are outside that job and the recurrent activity is not a source of pleasure in itself, but a vehicle to other aspects that are seen as valuable. For the employers that fit to this second category, the motivation sprinkles not from the work they accomplish, but from other external factors, such as good pay, generous holidays, enjoyable physical environment. These aspects may contribute to reducing the unpleasant characteristics of a job, the ones conceptualized as defining “labor”, or represent the means of achieving other goals.

Another idea that emerges when consulting literature is that these changes regarding work orientations can be the result of the broader concept “modernization” (de Witte, Halman and Gelissen 2004: p. 257), seen as a passing from rather traditional values to modern, individualistic ones, if we analyze this domain. Modernization does not refer only to work, but to many other aspects that influence each other and work also. The changes that modernization involves affect economy, technologization, cultural and political life and of course labor market. Nevertheless, economic growth contributes to a higher professionalization of working people, to their higher levels of specialization, a more educated working force bringing a valuable input for the economy, through innovation. Beside this back effect on economy, highly educated professionals benefit from a broader range of opportunities, they have many choices and step by step, they are no longer dependent on traditional institutions or to conservationist ways of thinking. When analyzing work values, we can associate an extrinsic orientation to traditionalist, materialist values, while modern, post - materialist perspectives are rather defined by intrinsic job orientations.

When trying to better understand such social phenomenon, Maslow`s perspective seems useful, especially if we notice that Inglehart also mentioned it and built his explanation about values change through scarcity hypothesis and socialization theory, starting from the above - mentioned hierarchy of needs (Inglehart 2008). According to Inglehart, the modern welfare states, with their security systems, are a very important cause of the individualistic orientation and influence value positioning. Referring to Maslow`s explanatory model, Inglehart considers that people tend to appreciate what is scarce, so if unemployment rates are low, job conditions satisfying and the payment also, it is expected that little importance will be given to such extrinsic factors. In this well – developed economies, most people will focus on intrinsic values and motivations, as the satisfaction of their basic needs is guaranteed. Moving deeper, his socialization theory states that the childhood context has a great impact, considering that values significance is somehow passed down through socialization. More precisely, Inglehart considers that the socio-economic context from one`s childhood years will influence his/her values orientation (towards intrinsic or extrinsic values) as an adult (Inglehart 2008).

Inglehart`s scarcity hypothesis leaves space for the reverse movement, the return to materialist values, after getting to post-materialist views in recession conditions, or

other economic issues, such as a financial crisis (Inglehart 2008). Military confrontations are also a possible cause of increasing levels of insecurity, what again can determine a shift to extrinsic orientations.

In such a reflexive world, corporations try to find the answers to many unsaid questions, providing for their employees the needed benchmarks, able to replace the classical social support networks. In this manner, work may act as a socializing agent, especially for those without deep-rooted previous models or in the case of the persons who are not appreciating in a positive light their background. When taking into consideration migrant populations, even if we address movements from rural to urban areas, or from one country to another, the working environment has a great socializing impact. Employees take over principles, attitudes or behavioral models and value systems are shaping or rather re-shaping. Employers are aware of their educating function and focus on spreading the desirable contents for the aim of their companies. Trainings, together with personal and professional development programs contribute to the spread of desired patterns, promoting models, values, principles and attitudes that best match their purposes.

Taking into account the shift from traditional views to modern, individualist ones, companies consider also classical motivation models, as the one described in a previous section, the hierarchy of needs. This is way, one of corporations` purpose is to act as a “big family”, as a response to our born need of belonging, so social capital reshapes it`s contents and actors. Human beings are naturally defined by the need to interact, communicate, the need to belong to reference groups and to relate to them. The argument we try to emphasize here is that human needs are the same, but the possible providers for such needs change, as, for example, the small rural community has been replaced by the team from work.

In Romania, and not only, transnational corporations are a most desired employer for young people and a model of success for the economy. The way this companies socialize their employees influences their education, specialization, professionalization and may contribute to a rather individualist and post- materialist orientation, in areas where choices are numerous. For instance, a region with plenty of jobs, a secure welfare regime, is expected to be characterized by post-materialistic values, if we use the above explained models, the theory of scarcity, proposed by Inglehart, for example.

4. Discussions

A worthily asked question regards the nature of work itself – is work a mean or a scope of our world? People work because of the work outcomes themselves, or because of what can be achieved through those results? The answer to this question may be rather challenging, as one can refer to this activity considering the positive or the negative connotation, as Arendt showed. On one hand, we must say that especially routine activities, dangerous, that some jobs involve, entitle those employers to consider that what they perform is a necessity, as no pleasure can be associated with the activity itself. On the other hand, this “laboring” connotation and utilitarian view does not apply for the lucky category of those who consider that they have found their vocation and fulfilment is what defines their work.

Many researchers argue that the modern consumption society only sees work as a vehicle to produce goods and earnings that are consumed, and the process is seen as a repeating one (Arendt, 2007). Karl Marx has an interesting standing point that can be mentioned regarding this debate though, considering that work and consumption are

nothing but the two phases of the biological life cycle, like the two faces of the same coin (Marx 2009: p. 201).

Furthermore, beside those natural stages, of production and consumption, work can have several and very different connotations and one issue that should certainly reinforce its position, is that this activity is definingly specific to human beings, because we are the ones to change the environment in order to accomplish our needs and desires, through labor. Remembering that work was described as “the supreme world-building capacity of man” (Arendt 2007: p. 132), starting from Locke’s visions, according to whom labor is the source of property, together with Smith’s standpoint, who saw it as the spring of wealth and without forgetting Marx’s contribution, we must admit that Modern Ages thinkers had a great contribution in restoring work’s image. Their contributions can also be reiterated in contemporary context.

In the end, one opinion that worth mentioning, refers to Hofstede’s views on differences regarding countries. For the present analysis we consider useful the distinction between individualism and collectivism (Hofstede 1996: pp. 82-98). According to his model, in developing countries, work is considered a way of contributing to economic well-being of the family, while for inhabitants of financially strong – consolidated countries, the same activity may be seen as an expression of individualism. For the second category, overwork may be interpreted as an exacerbated desired for goods and resources accumulation.

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