

Work: Social Status and the Role of Work along History – Since Ancient Times to Modern Times

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Abstract. *Work has always had the fundamental role in the human existence and the social communities. The Statute of work has evolved over time, this being determined and influenced by the socio-economic level and social and creative maturity of those who performed work. Reality has shown that work remains the fundamental value which through scientific creativity, efficiency and morality characterizes life and human evolution in various stages of development. This paper presents the significant contributions concerning work's role in the history since the ancient times until the modern era.*

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Work has always had the fundamental role in the human existence and the social communities and has seen a continuous diversification. The Statute of work has evolved over time, this being determined and influenced by the socio-economic level and social and creative maturity of those who performed work.

In the contemporary world work is conducted in thousands of ways in some socio-economic structures becoming more complex. The general universe of work and its forms have done and are still doing the subject to various reflections and appreciations. It is about both the extensive theoretical and scientific confrontations in connection with one aspect or another of the content and the role of work, as well as doctrinal and ideological confrontations about what this process is and what this process should be in our current and future society.

In the specialized literature there are numerous definitions for work, which vary depending on the particular approach: economic, philosophical, social.

Work is the man specific conscious activity, directed towards a purpose, in which man performs, regulates and controls through his action the exchange of materials between him and nature to meet his needs (DEX).

According to the dictionary of economics, labour is defined as the primary factor of production consisting of the human subject who performs a transformative action on the material factors of production, in order to obtain useful economic effects.

The economists P. Liedtke and O. Giarini define work as "an understanding between human beings and their environment primarily aimed at self-preservation" (Giarini, Liedtke, 2001, p. 31).

Work - the French economists J. Bremond and A. Geledan state - "is a creative activity of goods and service, an activity sustained by all workers who have technical knowledge and are in a certain relation with the instruments of labour" (Bremond, Geledan, 1995, p. 264).

Geroges Friedman defines work as "all actions that man with his brain, hands, tools or machinery performs on the matter, actions that, in turn, react on man, adjusting him" (Friedman, 1962, p. 64).

Philosophically speaking, the academician Mihai Drăgănescu considers "work is way of human action necessary to man to integrate in the social and material existence and to transform them, like the man himself ... work is an essential human and society specific operator, in other words, this is a natural condition of human life" (Drăgănescu, 1987, p. 161).

What is universally accepted as the definition of work is the fact that work is a human activity, mandatory for human and society existence for the general progress.

To analyze the concept of work it is important to know the meaning of work throughout history, from early human evolution, when human effort involved hunting and harvesting, until now, when on the first place is the symbolic work, the scientific work.

At the beginning of human evolution, work was a continuing battle for survival in a hostile environment, on which man had no influence.

Initially, the human activities *could not be classified as employment*. Searching of food by primitive people was made in those places where the natural environment was favourable. In those circumstances man was collector, hunter, and fisherman. The particular activities and the results obtained were dependent on the nature generosity or poverty. Consuming and obtaining consumer goods were made simultaneously in time and space, the demarcation between work and non-work, between employment and non-employment having no effect (Braudel, 1985, p. 64).

The growing needs for food and continuous threats from wild animals forced people to move to farming and livestock. The volume and intensity of work varied according to the seasons and weather, people worked harder in the summer when the weather was good for crops and the day was longer.

By farming humans became producers, they started to create tools to cultivate plants and raise animals to tame. Thus, production is separated from consumption. Man acquires for the first time the means to change his environment and to ensure greater chances of survival. Each active unit (family, tribe) the goods produced by people - specialized on natural criteria and who used primitive tools - were consumed in particular by its members. The economy was called by Karl Bucher "closed domestic economy" and by Fernand Braudel as "non-economy". Employment by adults was defined and dimensioned in relation to the other community members (Frois, 1994, p. 28) .

As creating certain specialized tools and a wider professional and social division of labour, and work experience transmitted from one generation to another, people were able to produce more goods than there were necessary for everyday consumption of producers, to those who worked, of people employed.

There was thus a temporary surplus of goods – the plus-product. Moreover, they started to save a part of the surplus product. Saving is gradually becoming a feature of human activity, giving his rational character.

The physical more gifted producers and more economists started to save, imposing their particular-private ownership of the goods produced. On the foundation of these longstanding processes appears the direct exchange of products, the first form of existence of the exchange economy. To facilitate exchanges, increasingly numerous and increasingly bulky, necessary tools were created – the money.

From the absolute freedom of the first people, dependent only on the natural environment in which they lived, it ended up to multiple forms of social dependency. First, there was the absolute dependence on slaves of the slave owners. It is mainly about the physical work providers. This form of dependence was followed by the feudal one, whereby those living in fiefs were dependent on its master.

The division of the society into social classes followed the same pattern: the low stratum of society was made up of workers filing the hardest work and the high stratum was reserved for noble professions that of making decisions, orders or were involved in recreational activities.

Many hundreds of years ago a great wise Greek Euripides postulated: "Nobody is able to gather the necessary things for living by doing nothing, without fatigue, just mentioning the gods and always begging" (Simenscy, 1978, p. 582). Without work no thing is easy for people, claimed Phocylides. He continued, this is possible even to the gods. It seems that this finding of the Greek philosopher is still current and useful to delineate work from non work, as well as to shape the work content in all its actions (Dobrotă, Șerban, 2008, p. 54).

The same idea is supported by the Roman philosopher – Seneca – as follows: "There is nothing that can not be won by hard work and a tense and attentive care".

The Greek philosopher Xenophon is the first author who identified in work the source of all wealth, "what adorns the temples, statues, gods and men, only field work produces" (Xenofon, 1987, p. 147). Xenofon, Platon and Aristotel considered agricultural work as the most important: "Agriculture is the mother and teacher of all arts. When agriculture prospers also do the other arts, and when field work is neglected also the other professions, in one way or another linger everywhere" (Xenofon, 1987, p. 149).

In general, the Greek philosophers considered the agricultural work the most important, but make a difference between workers, which they exclude them from any intellectual, political activity, and the intellectual ones who had to hate the physical work, which they considered inferior in terms of the moral (Platon, 1986, p. 371).

In Aristotle's conception, work was incompatible with the real purpose of human life. This contradiction is resolved by the laws of nature themselves. In fact, people are different among themselves from nature. Those with lower intellectual qualities are doomed to become slaves. So, the nature of society dictates the rule of assigning work only to slave to produce goods through crop and the livestock, fishing and the hunting, and various craft activities subordinated to them. The volume of work performed by each slave in part and

by all slaves in a community, their occupation, in different time horizons (daily, year, and lifetime) are directly related to the city population size, the consumption of its each member. The intellectually gifted were intended, according to the same natural law, to lead the less gifted ones (Aristotel, 2000, pp. 8-12).

The Greek philosophers believed that the division of labour had no professional basis, but a sociological one. In general, the manual workers were turned into slaves, being intended for the lower work, which degraded the body and the spirit. Plato emphasized the benefits resulting from the division of labour specialization, considering that "the work products are more numerous, better and faster made when each makes one thing, according to his nature, in his own time and without being concerned with the other activities" (Platon, 1986, p. 136). The superior tasks, management and protection of the fortress were in the hands of the freemen – thinkers, military – who had no other concern.

Unlike the ancients, who considered manual work degrading, the medieval theories support the double ennoblement through labour: firstly, work ennobles because it is required by God, and secondly work has a noble goal because by work, man develops his physical and moral life. Moreover, scholars define work as any occupation which allowed the man to earn an honest existence, unlike the ancients, which reduced it to manual work (Rogojanu, 2009, p. 134). The scholarly theories identify two types of occupations: possessive – which included farm work, considered the leading ones, the industrial and administrative jobs and pecuniary occupations which included trade activities, exchange, and credit.

The possessive activities were intended to produce wealth directly usable by people under the form of consumer goods designed to meet the needs of life. Pecuniary occupations were designed to purchase artificial wealth – pecuniary, being considered speculative.

During the medieval centuries there was an increase in the dignity of labor. The guilds of craftsmen and traders provided the same respect as master builders.

In the Middle Ages utopians notes and ideas appear, through the contribution of Thomas More, who in his book *Utopia* or *Thomas More's Golden Book* presents the economic situation of England in his time, preoccupied with poverty faced by the lower classes. Morus's utopia of The legendary Communism resulted from the influence of Plato's philosophy and the events of his time, which were characterized through the profound social transformation. Thomas Morus addressed the most pressing economic problems of his time generating poverty whose solutions he identified in Communism.

Utopia was dominated by statist – production was shared equally and so was work. Farm work was mandatory, beginning in childhood, working time being limited to six hours per day. Work was considered the source of all welfare, among those who could work, those who were dedicated to the study of arts and sciences were exempted from work, but if they did not justify the usefulness of the study, they were sent to work again. Speculating the attitude of his time hostile to trade, Thomas More projects a production, distribution and consumption on a communist basis that cancels out any possibility for trade and currency use.

New aspects in the relationship between employment and non-employment also in terms of work appeared in the feudal economy. It prevailed in the Western Europe and developed over 13 centuries around the rural areas, laic or church-owned. Agricultural was the base of production in feudalism and was achieved by the peasants' work, the main producers of goods. The vast feudal property was predominant, the feudal area being a closed economic unit. Gradually, the development of production and exchange encouraged the city – commercial and craft centres, marking the beginning of the developed feudalism.

Such an economy was administratively directed and organized to produce only to meet the needs of those who inhabited the area. This was a subsistence economy, that was aimed only at meeting the needs of present and ignored the interests of the owner's profit, the latter claiming from his subjects (serfs or thrall) only benefits in nature (as working days). Employment of the labour resources was determined by the natural conditions, the form of land ownership.

In the late fifteenth century, due to the development technology and inventions, in feudal society there were great economic and social transformations. The feudal ordering began to unravel, to decompose. Simple tools were replaced by machines instead of workshops, there were built factories, which produced much more varied goods, trade developed and a new class appeared – the bourgeoisie. Thus, the bourgeois revolution in England in 1642 is considered to be the development of capitalism, being also the beginning of the modern history.

One important school of thought for the development of economics is the mercantilism, which occurred during the decay of feudalism. Many mercantilists in their works revealed the importance of labour. Thus, A. De Montchrestien wrote: „Man is born to live in a permanent employment and exercise.... human welfare is mainly in wealth, and wealth in employment” (De Montchrestien, 1889, p. 21). The mercantilists believed that a large population that works makes abundant the supply of labour and reduces wages,

and therefore the costs. The obligation to work is reasonable because in the mercantilist conception unemployment is both a potential loss of production, and a source of decadence.

Another mercantilist, W. Petty supports the low pay idea as a condition of some competitive costs and believes that maintaining the high grain prices, even in the years with good harvests, requires additional work. W. Petty is considered the father of the demographic statistics and is concerned about the distinction between the total population, the active and unemployed population. He also examines the quality of work, based on a statistic of the employed population by industry, and shows that labour productivity varies depending on the branch.

In their vast majority, the mercantilists were populists in the sense that they were on the side of the increase of population of a State. Thus, for the mercantilist the relationship between population and development is based on reciprocity the population growth easily allows obtaining of labour force and there are possibilities for the development of industry and trade, as economic development allows the employment of a growing number of people, which encourages population growth.

Physiocracy was a turning point in the evolution of the economic thought; the physiocrats were the first authors who developed a clear concept about the social sciences and the economic principles.

The physiocrats' sources of inspiration are in the intellectual traditions, in the common cultural heritage and economic and political realities of the eighteenth-century France.

In the concept of the physiocrats, the work in agriculture and in the annex sectors is the only productive one, the other activities, industrial, commercial ones, being useful, but not productive.

An important contribution of the physiocrats is Fr. Quesnay's economic picture, which presents the economic cycle as a means of allocating the net product in the economy. The basic idea of the operation of this mechanism is the division of society in the three classes, namely: *the productive class* – which included farmers, people from the agricultural field, fishermen and sailors, *the sterile class* – included traders, industrialists and practitioners of liberal professions and housing and *the proprietary class* – included all those landowners who had independence taken from property (Pohoată, 1993, pp. 56-73).

Employment of human resources acquires new features when moving from dark feudal economy, of subsistence to the capitalist one, to the industrial age.

The Industrial Revolution marked the shift from production based on manual technique to the one sitting solidly on the systematic use of the machinery, therefore, to machinist large-scale production.

The impact of the Industrial Revolution on society was enormous, fundamentally changing the way we live and the perception on work. There is a decoupling of work from nature, following the introduction of independent production processes of natural conditions (e.g. artificial lighting), and an increase in work intensity, following the development of the industrial machinery. The purpose in the industrial age was the production of more goods, the production efficiency being measured by the quantity of units produced per unit time.

The capitalist system is characterized, as it is known, by the unity between the two legal institutions (the individual property rights and the freedom of contract) and three economic institutions (the private enterprise as the basic cell of economic activities, the market as a meeting place between demand and supply, the state, as an indirect participant in the economic activity).

In this institutional framework, the individual ownership right is the fundamental support of the free enterprise under all forms of freedom: freedom to work, to consume, to change, to contract, to serve society by the grouping a larger or lower number of capital gains.

In the basis of institution of individual property, contractual freedom was imposed and operates, which states the equality between the economic agents, legal equality governed by the Civil Code.

It is recognized that the private ownership of material factors generates a sharing of the social body in owner-entrepreneurs of capital, and employees, who "rent" their services for remuneration rates, without participating in decision-making and profit sharing.

By changing to the capitalist system, the status of those who work as employees changed in their meaning of legal freedom, combined with the economic dependence to the owners of capital. Under the influence of the general economic progress provided by the capitalist market economy, the working conditions and the social status of employees has improved continuously.

Socially, the capitalist system is defined by: the free market of employment (of labor) contractual relationship employment user – employee, groups (of unions), as professional defender of employees, discussed and negotiated salaries and bonuses, the possibility of strike.

Until the appearance of macroeconomics as a science, *employment was only addressed with microeconomic sense* and solved by the legislating the

legal age for employment, by regulating the duration of the working week and working hours, possibly by negotiating and establishment of paid leave from work.

The principle of free labour is considered as the first of the new principles for capitalism. Freedom of labour manifests itself with the following principles: freedom for travel, freedom for circulation of goods. But the individual freedom should not prevent the manifestation of other people's freedoms (Frois, 1994, pp. 30-34). In this spirit, the French economist Bastiat F. appreciated that the economy, including the capitalist one, is a natural order which involves a spontaneous harmony between the interests of individuals regardless of their social position. As a response to Bastiat's remarks, the sociologist Lacordaire postulated: "Between the poor and the rich the freedom is that which oppresses and the law is the one issuing".

The glorification of work in capitalism is made by comparison with the slave labour (torture-tripalium) and with work as a punishment for the original sin atonement. In the Middle Ages, in the spirit of Christian dogma, it was convicted the accumulation of money and the banker's work and it was admired the ascetic monk's life.

The successive revolutions which changed the social condition and structure of work were triggered by technical factors (energy, mechanization, automation), by scientific factors (knowledge), as well as the social factors. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the monasteries were turned into agricultural production centres. The emergence of the reformed religion, especially the Calvinist doctrine, changed the medieval view on work. During the Reform, Jean Calvin emphasized the major role that work plays in achieving a state of spiritual salvation, which had significant economic effects. This relationship prompted Max Weber to discover the origins of capitalism in the ascetic ethic work proclaimed by Calvinism (Giarini, Malița, 2005, p. 79). Thus, Max Weber explained the relationship between faith, spiritual life and work sacralization.

Work and accumulation were treated as non values of the modern era. But profit was regarded as a source of accumulation, and not as means for satisfying pleasures.

The model worker is the entrepreneur, who is at the antipodes of the renter, but at the antipodes of the speculator merchant and banker (usurer).

Obviously, all these elements of the employment of people of working age were applied and had economic, social and even political consistency under the circumstances in the capitalist system, of the values of wage labour civilization, modernity specific.

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