Work or consumption – indicators of one’s place in the society

Urszula Swadźba

Silesian University
Poland

Abstract

This paper initially introduces different theories of work. First, it discusses the traditional Protestant work ethic shaped in the period of industrialism. M. Weber indicated that certain movements within Protestantism promoted the rational maximalization of profit. Second, the evolution of the aforementioned ethics in the post-industrial society is depicted. The communicative ethos of work which occurs within the current society of Western Europe is presented. The next problem discussed in this paper is the theory of “the end of the work era” and the satisfaction of the society related to this. Ethics of work will be forced out of the lives of societies as well as individuals. After all is considered, the author would like to evaluate whether work is currently the only indicator of one’s place in the society or if consumption also plays a role, and if so, to what degree.

Key words: work theory, ethics of work, industrialization

Introduction

For many years numerous authors have argued that work will no longer be an indicator of one’s place in the society. These conceptions indicate that given the current level of economic growth of the Western World only around 20% of the available labour force is sufficient enough to produce the goods and services that humanity needs (Rifkin 2001, Martin and Schumann 2000). What then would happen with the rest of the people capable of working? Would they be sentenced to a lifetime of unemployment, since until now work, in our minds, has indicated one’s place in the society? Would consumption replace work as some people would wish? (Bauman 2006)

In this paper the author will first discuss the sources of the work ethic in the capitalist society, then indicate changes of this ethic which take place in the Western European society, and finally express her own opinion regarding the role of consumption in the contemporary world.

1. The traditional work ethic

In the history of mankind, work has not always been positively perceived. In classical antiquity, work was the obligation of slaves and metics while any free citizen could perform communal services and practice philosophy (Platon 1958, Arystoteles 1960, Pszczolowski 1966).

The traditional ethic of work is closely associated with the Industrial Age. The Industrial Age was characterized by rational activity. It shaped entrepreneurs who were fulfilling their obligations by scrupulous work in their profession. M. Weber, who studied influence of Protestantism on the work ethos, indicated that some movements within Protestantism provided stimulations convenient for the rational maximalization of profit. In particular it referred to Calvinism (Weber 1994). Every man strives to prove his value through work. Workers were encouraged to accept life in which work was not only their existential but also their moral obligation. Any form of living based on the valuation of work was seen as...
higher than not working. The desired ethic of work was characterized by the following attributes: reliability, punctuality, discipline, frugality, sobriety, obedience and devotion to work.

The period of The Great Depression in the 1930’s, when work was a very rare commodity, went a long way in further defining the ethic of work. A high ethic of work ruled until the late 1960’s due to several reasons. After the Second World War the world economy, especially the European economy, transformed and significantly influenced the ethic of work. Europe, after the period of rebuilding, went into a stage of unprecedented development which lasted for a quarter of a century. Help provided by the Marshall Plan made the rebuilding of Western Europe’s (especially Germany’s) economic potential faster and went a long way towards the economic growth of the 1950’s (Ciamaga 1990, 117-120). Investments in the entire Western Europe reached a high level, new technologies were implemented in production quickly, and work efficiency increased significantly.

The next reason for the continuing high ethic of work was the fact that labourers working in the 1950’s and 60’s felt their material status improving. They could afford goods formerly reserved for the rich. A democratization of goods with a symbolic meaning (radio, television, refrigerator, car) occurred (Beck 2002, 117-120). The certainty of employment as well as many social benefits led many to characterize the first post-war generation as having a high ethic of work.

The possibility of acquiring goods through work for the generation that went through a difficult period of war and the Interwar Period of unemployment resulted in work being of high value. Several factors, listed below, influenced the reinforcement of the traditional ethic of work which was the ethic of workers.

- Most of all, the fast economic growth which was related to the high demand for labour.
- Secondly, work satisfaction and material gratification provided by work.
- Thirdly, the memory of the period of poverty, unemployment and famine.

2. Transformations of the ethic of work

The aforementioned ethic of work was useful in the society of The Industrial Age. Gradually, in the 1960’s and early 70’s, structural transformations in the European economy occurred. Employment in the service sector grew, the percentage of industrial workers decreased and the percentage of white collar workers increased. Innovations created a post-Industrial society.

Simultaneously, with old industries (heavy industry and machine industry) dying off, the professional structure transformed. German sociologists described transformations in the mining communities of Ruhr (Tillman 1996, 253-254). Those communities differed professionally. There was no more need for the profession of miner to be passed down from a generation to a generation. The youth were not very keen on choosing such professions, as more attractive possibilities were available. The majority of the society converted from a professionally homogeneous to a heterogeneous society. Economic growth as well as the demand for different types of work forced the transformation of the ethic of work.

One more factor that added to the transformation was a generational change and connected with it changes in the system of values. The meaning of free time changed (Inglehart 1977, Kmiecik 1976). This process started in the 1970’s, when the generation brought up in wealthy countries, without experiencing the period of unemployment and war, entered the labor market.

German sociologists studying attitudes towards work in the 1970’s and 1980’s could clearly notice that among the young generation, the percentage of people who feel that their favourite part of the day falls in the time when they are at work decreased and also that the
percentage of people who feel that their favourite time of day is when they do not work increased (Kmieciak 1976, 71). That was a confirmation of the thesis that the young generation, having a different system of values, is entering the labour market. Such a thesis on “The Silent Revolution” was stated by R. Inglehart (Inglehart 1977). Based on A. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, R. Inglehart stated that people tend to satisfy their basis needs first and only then their higher needs. Both environmental circumstances and experiences of the past influence people (socialization thesis) (Inglehart 1977, Inglehart and Basanez and Moreno 1998, 1-23). From these conceptions R. Inglehart concludes that the younger generation will tend to choose immaterial values due to the fact that they were brought up in a society of wealth and therefore take material values for granted. The older generation which during the period socialization experienced poverty and different shortcomings will put material values before immaterial ones. How would these conceptions influence the ethic of work?

Some authors indicate the fact that a weakening of the bourgeois system of values occurs. Symptoms of this process are:

a) Decreased orientation towards professional achievements;
b) The collapse of the ethic of work;
c) Orientation rather towards the quality of life than towards high income (ambivalent attitude towards material gains);
d) Increased meaning of free time in comparison with work;
e) The limiting of traditional standards and tutorial practice for the benefit of the democratic egalitarian orientations (Noelle-Neumann and Strumpel 1984, Ray 1997).

According to sociologists, this process of transformation means abandoning the traditional ethic of work which was characterized by vocation, obligation, discipline, punctuality, order and obedience. These values give way to hedonistic consumption as well as individual values. The young generation, in the opinion of sociologists, do not think as much about personal fulfillment through work as they do about free time. In their free time they socialize and spend time practicing their hobbies. Work is a necessity, as there is a need for obtaining the resources required for living, work, however, is not the most important value in life (Inglehart and Basanez and Moreno 1998, Mariański 1994, 75-76).

Other sociologists also indicate that we really are witnessing a transformation of the attitude towards work (Schmidtchen 1996, Riffault 1998). On the one hand the abandonment of the traditional ethic of work is occurring and puritan values connected with personal development through work are losing their meaning. Work has not lost its meaning, however it is no longer treated as the most important value of life. It is as important as other values e.g. free time and high consumption (Inglehart and Basanez and Moreno 1998, Mariański 1994). The same conclusions were reached by Polish and foreign researchers studying systems of values of European societies within the framework of EVS (European Value Studies). According to Inglehart’s theory, in post-materialistic societies e.g. Holland, work is becoming a more and more important element in the life of citizens (Jasińska-Kania and Marody 2002). People start searching for possibilities in order to fulfil their personalities outside of work. A more important role in life is played by the development of one’s interests, while at work, attributes different than its certainty take priority. Sociologists call such an ethic of work “communicative”, characterized by the preference of team work, information feedback, openness and empathy. Work would have been a value, but the employee wants to realize his passions and interests through work. This new ethic can be found especially among better educated people and in professions with a higher prestige (Schmidtchen 1996, Riffault 1998, Mariański 1994).

Along with the transformation of work values and its place in the system of values among the young generation, activities in free time are becoming more important. Work is
starting to have only an instrumental character for those people who do not have the possibilities of finding the meaning of life in it.

3. The end of the world of work

Since the mid 1980’s, visions and predictions of the “end of work” era and “society of risk” have appeared. This risk means that there will no longer be a certainty of employment. The authors of the aforementioned theories who are observing the economic and social transformations are western sociologists and political scientists such as U. Beck, E. Luttwak, H.P. Martin, H. Schumann, and J. Rifkin (Martin and Schumann 2000, Rifkin 2001, Beck 2002, Rifkin 2003). These theories indicate that certain processes occurring in the world’s economy are permanent and one of them is a systematic decrease of the significance of the workplace.

This decrease concerned traditional entrepreneurs since the mid 1950’s. At the same time, the service sector was developing. However it appears that workplaces were only created up to a certain point in time. In the mid 1970’s, transformations in the influence of the Scientific Revolution on the shaping of the world’s economic structure appeared. They can easily be connected with the appearance of microprocessor technology. First, they strongly influenced the manufacturing industry and also services. Companies wanting to adjust to the demands of the market and keep up with competitors had to make use of newer technologies. According to J. Rifkin, companies all over the world are discovering innumerable ways of re-engineering in order to cut down on production time and reduce labor cost (Martin and Schumann 2000, Luttwak 2000, Rifkin 2001, Beck 2002, Rifkin 2003, Bauman 2006).

The greatest invention in this cost reduction chain was the computer. Computers increasingly deliver all the necessary information and help coordinate the running of activities in the economic process, eliminating retailers, clerks, lorry drivers, warehouse workers and office workers. New information and telecommunication technologies eliminate workplace on each level of the hierarchy. Not only lower level workers are losing their employment, as the reduction of workplace also concerns middle- and high level employees. This causes the flattening of the management tier and saves time and money (Rifkin 2001). Educated and well qualified employees can make decisions quicker than their managers, who are a distance off. Automotive plants count on tripling their profits by cutting labour cost in half. It is estimated that one robot can replace four people and could also, by working 24 hours a day, pay itself off after one year (Rifkin 2001). Would these people find work in the service sector? It is not that easy, as permanent workplaces in the services are also being reduced. The implementation of cash machines, non-cash transactions caused a lower demand for work in the services. New information and telecommunication technologies also eliminate permanent office work. Wire-less faxes, modems and laptops allow for working in any place, also at home. It is estimated that the number of such mobile employees increased by 20%. However the majority is being dismissed (Rifkin 2001).

Considering the above, some scientists started speculating on which direction the labour marked was heading. Would there not be a need for workers anymore? Would a large amount of people be left without resources for living and would work along with its ethic no longer be needed?

The answer was given by U. Beck, among others, who states that in the current society there are many “zombie” institutions (relicts) that are in fact dead but are still functioning. The “zombie” institutions are family, household or social class (Martin and Schumann 2000). The most burdensome institution is the institution of full employment. One should comprehend that a reversed modernization of the work society is taking place. There exists a permanent exchange between technological innovation, based on knowledge, and its products which winds the spiral of development in the society of knowledge. The author expects that
people will be capable of adapting their personal life plans such as mobility, self-reliance and saving up for their old-age (Beck 2000, Beck 2002). The system of risk is characteristic and determines economic behavior under the circumstances of the free market and open competition world-wide. Attributes of this work according to U. Beck are:
- The employer should have an easier access to the dismissal of employees.
- Redistribution of risk which is being transferred from the government to the individual (health insurance and retirement fund).
- Risk that education and knowledge, gathered in the early years, would not be sufficient at an older age (Beck 2002).

More and more work relations will be deregulated and contracted for a short period of time. Z. Bauman, who defines the transformations of the ethic of work arrived at the same conclusion (Bauman 2006). The ethic of work, according to Z. Bauman, will only concern those who are employed under a contract for an undefined period of time while the rest of the employees will only be a reserve workforce (“routine employees”) that will change employers depending on the needs of both sides. There will be a gradual process of work losing its central position. The ethic of work will be discarded from both the social and individual space. According to the author, the future of the society, in which there will be too little work for everyone and for those who would be employed, work will be related to self-development and pleasure (Bauman 2006).

4. Does consumption indicate one's place in the society?

What would then define one’s position in the society? Work would be the source of satisfaction and a symbol of prestige for only some members of the society. Would consumption then replace the role of work for the rest of employees as some authors suggest? (Bell 1998, Rifkin 2003, Bauman 2006)

Z. Bauman sets forth that consumption will replace work as an indicator of one’s position is the society. All things are changeable and unstable within a consumption society. The most important is a prospering business as well as the ability to consume. The role that work used to have, combined with personal motives, social integration and systemic reproduction, is currently played by consumption (Bauman 2006, 59). Consumption indicates one's social position. In the consumption society, “normal life” is a life of consumers, absorbed by making choices among a variety of different goods and services. That gives the opportunity to experience an array of different sensations and to take part in a vanity fair (Bauman 2006, 77). Consumption takes place individually in order to show off goods and services which give a sense of fulfilment and prestige. Since the society of consumption provides a possibility of choices, their members fall within the frames of choices. Money and wealth are important; however, their importance declines when they no longer provide consumers with a choice.

The ethic of work, according to Z. Bauman, is being replaced by the aesthetics of consumption (Bauman 2006, 65). The ethic of work considers a well fulfilled duty as the most important while the aesthetics of consumption does so with sophisticated experience. This experience should not be postponed, but realized immediately as any delay would result in a wasted opportunity.

For the rest of the employees, working in a flexible market, there are no such possibilities. A devotion to one’s profession or to the workplace is seen in a negative light. As Z. Bauman states, it can lead to an emotional catastrophe. It also concerns people, who thus far have not been in danger, as the threat of unemployment now also reaches the middle class (Martin and Schumann 2000, 197-220).

Could one agree with the aforementioned thesis? Does consumption indicate one’s place in the society? It appears that even though the processes are heading in that direction in
the labour market, the replacement of work, as a factor indicating one's place in the society, cannot be certain. It results from several factors:

First, work will be an indicator of one's place in the society for the first group of employees. In this regard one could agree with Bauman that for those people, work is a meaning of their lives, source of success and they fulfil their personalities through work. They have money for consumption but very often not enough time to do so. Consumption also indicates their place in the society through their access to luxury goods and services which they can afford.

Second, work for the “reserved army of employees” can also be a subject of pride and will indicate their place in society. In order to perform this type of work, one should also gain the appropriate education in order to identify in the future with one’s profession. There are professions that require years of specialist studies (e.g. Doctor, Engineer) and these people are also difficult to replace by those who have different qualifications. Work connected with those qualifications will therefore indicate their place in society.

Third, in highly developed countries with a high living standard, consumption plays a more and more important role due to high incomes. As Bauman states consumption requires time, therefore those employees who make enough money are not keen on performing more than the required minimum. They choose to spend their free time on consumption where they can realize their passions. Consumption indicates one’s place in the society, as it is directly linked to the amount one spends on goods. But to be able to consume, one must first gain money for consumption. Therefore both work and consumption play important roles in highly developed societies.

References


