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Catalin Ghita¹

Labour as Fear of Gratuity: A Cultural Reading of the Hidden Side of Employment Security

Premise

Throughout recent history, the concept of „labour” (or, simply put, „work”) has been presented as a defining trait of human behaviour, and therefore perceived as mandatory (space constraints prevent me from delving into additional details, alluring though these may be: suffice it to say that this concept is among the most challenging and powerful in the history of ideas). Its contemporary definition, that of a lucrative activity, meant to sustain an individual’s life in society, was fixed as early as the dawn of modernity, when protestant ethics came to challenge traditional Christian poverty (eagerly defended by Franciscan friars, for example) and decreed that happiness on earth was at hand, provided that the individual actively worked to attain it through material prosperity. However, one had to wait for the actual dawn of socialist philosophy in the mid-19th century in order to encounter a philosophical discourse able to execute an engaging deconstruction of labour. Thus, in his unfinished *Outlines of the Critique of the Political Economy* (*Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, a manuscript abandoned in 1858 and published as late as 1939), the German Socialist thinker Karl Marx joined the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith in saying that, ‘in its historical forms as slave-labour, serf-labour and wage-labour, labour always appears as repulsive, always as *external, forced labour* (emphasis in the text); and non-labour by contrast as „freedom and happiness”². A similar critique of labour, though from a different perspective and to a different end, was executed by the *fin-de-siècle aesthetes* in France and England (Charles Baudelaire, J.-K. Huysmans, Oscar Wilde etc.), who eagerly sought to replace the idea of bourgeois responsibility towards work with a concept which must have then sounded utterly blasphemous: *flânerie* (vagabondage), implying aesthetic contemplation or simply social laziness. My purpose in this paper is, firstly, to examine briefly the concept of labour in relation to a thinly disguised fear of gratuity and then to read it through the lens afforded by two literary patterns.

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² K. Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, in: *A Dictionary of Philosophical Quotations*, A.J. Ayer, J. O’Grady (ed.), Oxford and Carlton 1994, s. 290.

Fear of Gratuity

It is my assertion that people usually fear to downplay labour as a gratuitous act because they are afraid of what this might eventually entail: a lack of personal existential purpose. A life based on contemplation (or, as feverish economists would have it, on doing nothing in the lucrative sense) pulverizes the work ethic of recent times, whose main tenet is that any human being should be an active, not a passive, agent in society. Otherwise, the same economists would say, society would crumble through sheer inactivity of its members. However, reality proves that the purely sanguine character of most human agents turns them into involved actors on the economic scene. In all circumstances, they would continue to be engaged in some kind of work, simply because they lack a contemplative nature. Concurrently, people endowed with a passive attitude will continue to fritter their time away over a cup of tea or coffee. Subsequently, both groups would try to develop defence mechanisms, both in theory and in practice, that would justify their social behaviour.

This argument brings me first to the value ascribed to work in general. Thus, the crux of any argument concerning labour is the eternal and insoluble question as to how exactly can one determine its just value: how much is a person's work worth? As shown by Bertrand Russell in his monumental *History of Western Philosophy* (first published just after the Second World War, in 1946), most people think that the original formulator of the so-called „labour theory of value” (which establishes a mathematical direct proportion between the value of a product and the amount of work it required) was either Karl Marx or David Ricardo. In reality, it was John Locke who was the author of the formula. Russell focused on two capital features of this engaging theory, i.e. its ethical and economic dimensions. More specifically, he agreed that „the value of a product ought to be proportional to the labour expended on it”³ and, concurrently, that „in fact the labour regulates the price”⁴. Therein something more intricate looms large: the disconcerting problem of labour efficiency, which is the main reason for work exploitation throughout human history. This baffling formula is based on what I consider to be the incorrect assumption that there is a significant difference in value (promptly translated into wages) between the labour exerted by a manual labourer and that exerted by an intellectual.

At this delicate point, a useful quote from Nietzsche's *Human, All too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches: Ein Buch für freie Geister*, published in 1878) will enable us all to understand the fetish of

³ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London and New York 2004.

⁴ Ibid.

effectiveness which has dominated labour exploitation throughout older and more recent history:

If we try to determine the value of labour by the amount of time, industry, good or bad will, constraint, inventiveness or laziness, honesty or make-believe bestowed upon it, the valuation can never be a just one. For the whole personality would have to be thrown into the scale, and this is impossible⁵.

The whole issue is, therefore, complicated by the concept of usefulness, which has been thrown into the equation by the people who controlled labour in order to make sure that labourers are content that they have been offered jobs and not question their wages. Nietzsche continued:

If we reflect further we find every person nonresponsible for his product, the labour; hence merit can never be derived therefrom, and every labour is as good or as bad as it must be through this or that necessary concatenation of forces and weaknesses, abilities and desires. The worker is not at liberty to say whether he shall work or not, or to decide how he shall work. Only the standpoints of usefulness, wider and narrower, have created the valuation of labour⁶.

The complex relationship between work and property and the human tendency towards reification of labour was best expressed by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), his response to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Nozick insisted that mixing an individual's work with something else makes the individual feel that he owns that something. This perception is wrong, opined Nozick, who offered the following parable: „If I own a can of tomato juice and spill it in the sea so that its molecules (...) mingle evenly throughout the sea, do I thereby come to own the sea, or have I foolishly dissipated my tomato juice?“⁷. Thus it becomes clear how difficult it is to separate the notions of work and property.

In his anarchic and rather uneven *Counter History of Philosophy (Le Contre histoire de la philosophie*, in 13 volumes so far, presented and/or published between 2006 and 2015), the highly original, if equally tendentious, French philosopher Michel Onfray deftly pointed out that, as early as the fifth century BC, Europe was the arena of a metaphysical conflict between idealists and he-

⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Excerpts from Human, All too Human*, in: *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, G. Clive (ed.), translated by Oscar Levy, New York, London, Ringwood, Toronto and Auckland 1996, s. 637.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, in: *A Dictionary of Philosophical Quotations*, A.J. Ayer, J. O'Grady (ed.), Oxford and Carlton 1994, s. 328.

donists and/or materialists (atomists). The outcome of that powerful clash is visible to us all: it was Plato and Aristotle's ideas that triumphed, rather than Epicurus's or Democritus's. I do not think that I am at all exaggerating when I decipher within the intellectual code of this dialectic the subsequent clash between asceticism and *joie de vivre*, the final literary expression of which is detectable in Hermann Hesse's antinomic, if rather formulaic, narrative fable, *Narcissus and Goldmund* (*Narzif und Goldmund*, published in 1930). It follows that contrasting human attitudes towards work are simply the inevitable consequences of the aforementioned ideological war.

To synthesize what I have been commenting on so far and to state the problem in my own terms, I interpret people's recent obsession with labour as a means of amassing wealth (a reification of power) and their irrational fetish with the concrete existence of a workplace as an ever-elusive fear of gratuity. Thus, human beings now find it hard to accept that their existence should not be predicated on labour, be it physical or intellectual, but, rather, on self-development and self-fulfilment (at various levels of interpretation). Correlatively, these goals could be achieved through active or passive seeking of pleasure and would involve no cost and no mercantile reward at all. Instead, most people still prefer to cling to a steady job and to the material benefits this brings about as a way of justifying their life *hic et nunc*. This ontological fear of gratuity is the reason why people nowadays have come to place employment security above all else, except physical health. The pressure of society, nurtured by centuries of rigid work ethic meant to fuel individuals into submission and therefore into fixed work patterns has brought about an omnipresent, if fluid, identity crisis.

I am also of the opinion that people find it hard to accept the optional and totally arbitrary value of any exerted work based on a respected and socially-recognized profession and, therefore, equate labour gratuity with a lack of ontological sense. So deeply ingrained is the principle of reward in the human psyche, that it seems that no mention of gratuity in the context of one's profession or work undertaken in a specific field can go unpunished. The present forms of work ethic, based on fierce competition and painstaking accumulation, have managed to push things farther than one could have ever imagined by simply equating labour with the meaning of life, when, of course, labour is just a means of striving towards obtaining an existential meaning, if there be any.

Paradigms of Attitude towards Labour in Culture

Cultural history has provided us with a welter of examples summing up the various attitudes towards labour. Due to obvious space constraints, I have elected to reduce my argument to a polar binominal, epitomized by two central

characters in 18th and 19th century novels respectively. These will enable us to understand more keenly why any abandonment of social involvement and any refusal to act, in general, and to work, in particular, have instilled so many fears in the psyche of modern man. The former example embodies sanguinity and resourcefulness, the latter – the very opposite traits. Both are relevant in the cultural context discussed in these lines, but, whereas the former is widely used in practice to emphasize the virtues of industriousness and resilience, being therefore forged as a positive example, the latter is, on the contrary, deployed to evince the ills of fatigue and sluggishness, and therefore construed in negative terms.

Robinson Crusoe

Robinson Crusoe has constantly been hailed as the first modern economic man, the capitalist *in statu nascendi*, obsessed with amassing goods and painstakingly inventorying his properties.

As a literary character, Crusoe was invented, as we all know, by the early English novelist, Daniel Defoe, in 1719, and his exciting experiences were based on the actual adventures of one Alexander Selkirk, who was marooned for about four years on an uninhabited island off the coast of present-day Chile. These experiences are then viewed by the author through an economic lens, (However, literary history has suggested, at times, different other hypotexts for Defoe's novel.) In contrast to Selkirk, Crusoe spent no less than 28 years on a desert island near today's Trinidad, during which time he had to fight his way through famine, tempest, attacks by wild beasts and even cannibalistic assaults. Not even these rocambolesque feats can account for the complexity of this single character, who manages to embody the hailed virtues of a then just-emerging social class, brought about by the nascent Industrial Revolution: the capitalist. If one adds the feature of piety to this critical equation, one cannot possibly overlook the insight offered by a controversial study, published in 1905, by an equally controversial, if undoubtedly brilliant, German sociologist and economist, Max Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (*Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist der Kapitalismus*).

Weber defined a capitalistic economic action as „one which rests on the expectation of profit by the utilization of the opportunities for exchange, that is on (formally) peaceful chances of profit”⁸. To various degrees and in various forms, capitalism has existed virtually everywhere in the world, but, as Weber pointed out, only in Europe has a specific, even unique, form of capitalism

⁸ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, with an introduction by Anthony Giddens, translated by Talcott Parsons, London and New York 2005, s. 32.

emerged: „the rational capitalistic organization of (formally) free labour”⁹. This does not imply Eurocentrism, for Weber was rather careful, at least according to the scientific standards of more than a century ago, not to offend or misconstrue other cultures and civilizations, but it does imply specificity: the advent of Protestant cults have irrevocably reshaped older Catholicism into something palpable and more down-to-earth. Where Franciscan friars, for instance, wrote lengthy and, at times, poetic apologies for poverty, the more modern Protestants (be they Calvinists, Pietists, Methodists or Baptists) were not ashamed to display their newly-acquired wealth as a sign of respect for God’s creation. Christianity finally broke with that long, ascetic tradition extolling only the virtues of the transcendent and, instead, embraced the immanent: life was worth living not in careful preparation for a desired heaven through repeated acts of penance, but *in se* and *per se*. Through hard labour and a strict code of work ethic, men could establish the city of God *hic et nunc*.

Weber’s theory can be readily applied to Crusoe’s work ethic. As soon as he became aware that he had become stranded on a desert island, the main character of the novel could not conceive of his own existence in the absence of a strict code of labour, which demanded planning of a strategy, rationalization of execution and careful calculation of resources. Crusoe is not just a colonist, he is the principal economic actor on the scene of his remote island, i.e. a capitalist. And it is this constant balance of expenditure and production that enables him to feel safe within the boundaries of his small, but challenging empire. That is precisely why he makes a careful inventory of his goods, why he decides to build himself a fortress on a remote and deserted island where chances of facing hostile forces are remote, and why, in due course, he even invents his own proletariat: his man Friday, whom he liberates from his fellow oppressors (who, predictably enough, are ruthless cannibals), thereby anticipating Rousseau’s vision of the noble, if docile and hard-working, savage.

Oblomov

To individuals who are placed in social positions of languor without the financial means of Goncharov’s hero, one may safely attribute Nietzsche’s pun found in *The Case of Wagner* (*Der Fall Wagner*, published in 1888): „When one is not rich, one should at least have enough pride to be poor”¹⁰. Yet the rich landowner Oblomov, the central character in Ivan Goncharov’s second novel, published in 1859, is far from poor: his malaise is not poverty, but boredom equally

⁹ *Ibid.*, s. 34.

¹⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Excerpts from The Case of Wagner*, in: *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, G. Clive (ed.), translated by Oscar Levy, New York, London, Ringwood, Toronto and Auckland 1996, s. 284.

triggered by isolation and affluence. (Naturalism may also point to a number of genetic traits.) The young Russian aristocrat is neither evil nor hateful: in fact, he is a warm-hearted character, incapable of galvanizing himself into any significant social act. Even his generosity is indiscriminate, a palpable proof to the integrity of his character. Nothing and no one can embolden him to act in either the concrete or the abstract sense.

Seduced by a romantic tendency to express ideas in polar forms, as anti-nomic realities, Goncharov throws an additional character into his novel: Oblomov's friend and confidant, Andrey Stoltz. Stoltz's mixed ascendancy (his father is German, whereas his mother is Russian) is a narratively biographic proof of his strict upbringing and his economic efficiency as a hard-working professional. Stoltz embodies the virtues of European intrepid capitalism, as opposed to the puny features of Russian apathy.

Concretely, in the first part of the novel, when he receives a piece of disquieting news, that his country estate is in a precarious financial condition, which must be addressed without delay, all he can do is remain lying on the sofa, totally benumbed. Even the prospect of marriage to the beautiful Olga fails to excite the hero, who keeps prevaricating, until it becomes clear that his lack of will can do nothing more than dissolve a promising engagement. The outcome is that, freed from the never-consummated manacles of Oblomovian love, Olga flees to Paris, where, in a dramatic, but predictable course of events, she meets Stoltz, falls in love with him and eventually accepts his marriage proposal. *Et labor, non amor, vincit.*

Although Marquis de Custine's poignant 1839 Russian travelogue may seem a cruel story of backwardness and deceit, perhaps Goncharov's treatment (and literary indictment) of the realities of his own country are more credible in the highly circumspect eyes of the Westerner. But I choose not to read the novel through the satirical lens generously afforded by Goncharov himself, but in my own terms.

Oblomov constitutes Goncharov's and, through him, 'civilized' Europe's indictment of good-for-nothing bonhomie. His being part of the gentry is, of course, the narrator's artistic licence: in 19th century Russia (as was the case throughout most of Europe, no doubt), hardly anybody, except an aristocrat, could afford to do nothing. Oblomov's attitude, insofar as work is concerned, is even more radical than that of Western European aesthetes: whereas they are consciously lazy in defiance of the Protestant ethic which informs the bourgeois society amidst which they live, Oblomov is organically lazy, as a result of all his tendencies and inclinations. He is not a poseur, as J.K. Huysmans's inconceivably snobbish Des Esseintes, who stages his own life with careful debauch-

ery, but a real fugitive from labour reality. I consider him an archetypal figure of labour evasionists.

Conclusion

In his succinct conclusion to his bulky doctoral dissertation, *The Division of Labour in Society* (*De la division du travail social*), first published in 1893, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim defended a point of view according to which the division of labour creates solidarity „because it creates among men a whole system of rights and duties joining them in a lasting way to one another”¹¹. This may well be the case, but Durkheim, taking his cue from the very first theorist of the division of labour in society, Adam Smith, failed to account for the various ills this same division of labour brings about within the fine fabric of society: rifts between professions, professional envy and disgrace and, most importantly, the defence of the obligatory, rather than optional or at least advisable, character of work in general. My lines should not be seen as coalescing an apology of idleness, but merely as a theoretical account of an alternative course of action, which is even simpler to defend now that machines of various kinds and functions can and will replace human labour, thereby freeing the human being and enabling the same to pursue more enlightening and enriching activities. Individuals are finally free to pursue their innermost goals, their most refined dreams: how sad it would be for them to discover that their obsession with labour and work security hides, in fact, very little, if anything at all...

Praca jako strach przed nagrodą: kulturowe spojrzenie na zakrytą stronę bezpieczeństwa zatrudnienia

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy delikatnego i złożonego problemu pracy, który podejmę w nawiązaniu do ontologicznego strachu przed nagrodą. W obszerniejszym kontekście kulturowym zinterpretuję stosunkowo współczesną obsesję na punkcie pracy będącej sposobem gromadzenia dóbr (reifikacja władzy) oraz irracjonalne fetyszowanie konkretnego miejsca pracy, jako przejawy wiecznie nieuchwytnego strachu przed nagrodą. Współcześni ludzie z trud-

Abstract

My paper addresses the intricate problem of labour, which I construe in terms of an ontological fear of gratuity. Within a broader cultural context, I interpret people's relatively recent obsession with work as a means of amassing wealth (a reification of power) and their irrational fetish with the concrete existence of a workplace as an ever-elusive fear of gratuity. Thus, contemporary human beings find it hard to accept that their exis-

¹¹ É. Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, in: Lewis A. Coser translated by W.D. Halls, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Singapore 1997, s. 337-338.

nością akceptują fakt, iż ich własna egzystencja nie powinna opierać się na wysiłku, fizycznym lub intelektualnym, ale raczej na samorozwoju lub samospelnieniu (zakładając różne poziomy interpretacji).

Uznając ich wzajemny wpływ na siebie, cele te mogą być osiągnięte poprzez aktywne lub pasywne szukanie przyjemności, które w żadnym stopniu nie wymagałyby nakładów finansowych, ani wymiernych nagród. Tymczasem jednak, większość ludzi kurczowo trzyma się zatrudnienia i korzyści materialnych, uzasadniając w ten sposób swoje istnienie *hic et nunc*. Tak rozumiany ontologiczny strach przed nagrodą jest więc przyczyną, dla której dzisiejsi ludzie stawiają bezpieczeństwo zatrudnienia ponad inne dobra, za wyjątkiem zdrowia. Na przestrzeni wieków, presja społeczna wraz z rygorystyczną etyką pracy miały skłonić jednostki do uległości, także wobec sztywnych reguł pracy, wywołując w ten sposób wszechobecny, choć nieuchwytny, kryzys tożsamości.

Moją teorię zademonstruję poprzez analizę wzorców kulturowych obecnych w dwóch powieściach: za pierwszy przykład posłuży osoba nieustraszonego podróżnika Robinsona Crusoe (tytułowego bohatera powieści Daniela Defoe), drugi natomiast jest uosobiony w postaci leniwego ziemianina Ilii Iljicza Oblomowa (tytułowego bohatera powieści Iwana Gonczarowa).

tence should not be predicated on labour, be it physical or intellectual, but, rather, on self-development and self-fulfilment (at various levels of interpretation). Correlatively, these goals could be achieved through active or passive seeking of pleasure, and would involve no cost and no mercantile reward at all. Instead, most people still prefer to cling to a steady job and to the material benefits this brings about as a way of justifying their life *hic et nunc*. This ontological fear of gratuity is the reason why people nowadays have come to place employment security above all else, except physical health. The pressure of society, nurtured by centuries of rigid work ethic meant to fuel individuals into submission and therefore into fixed work patterns has brought about an omnipresent, if elusive, identity crisis. I shall demonstrate my theory by examining a couple of cultural patterns found in two novels: one being epitomized by the intrepid adventurer Robinson Crusoe (Daniel Defoe's eponymous hero), the other, by the prostrate country gentleman Ilya Ilych Oblomov (Ivan Goncharov's eponymous hero).

Słowa kluczowe

Praca, strach, nagroda, ontologia etyka, bezpieczeństwo zatrudnienia, kultura, teoria

Key words

Work, fear, gratuity, ontology, ethic, employment security, culture, theory

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