

Generations at Work and Social Cohesion

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The Sense of Work

- Long term changes in the meaning of work (Méda, 1995)
 - Work > **a production factor** that provides an income (the definition of economists in the 18th).
 - Work > **the essence of man** (19th), a human activity that enables man to express himself and transform the world (Hegel and Marx).
 - Work > **a system for distributing income, rights and protection** (wage-earning society, work as employment, 20th).

- Changes in the relationship to work over the last forty years (Maslow and Inglehart)
 - In post-industrial societies, concern for individual expression and quality of life are becoming more important than concern for survival.
 - **Work** > an **ethic of duty** (an obligation vis-à-vis society) > then an **instrumental value** (work provides security and income) > today, an **expressive value**.
 - In developed countries characterised by “post-materialistic” values, work should enable individuals to fulfil themselves.

- The contemporary perspective: double or triple dimension of work
 - Extrinsic / Intrinsic
 - Materialist / post-materialist (Inglehart & Baker)
 - Instrumental / expressive (Habermas, Zoll)
- **Instrumental / social / symbolic**
 - The instrumental dimension has to do with material expectations (salary, security), the social dimension concerns the importance of human relations at work and the symbolic dimension relates to opportunities for self-development, to the content of work, the feeling of success, autonomy, social usefulness, etc.

- Work has always been and remains a **powerful integrator** in society. It gives place, duties and rights, and distributes individuals on a scale of social prestige. Work is still a key element in the inclusion/exclusion process within societies. **However**, over a long period **the sense** of work **has changed** for individuals. It has become more diversified and is now **a matter for high expectations, at different levels** (instrumental / social / expressive).

Work and Identities in Post-Industrial Societies

- Post-industrial societies
 - Relative increase of economic security, even if inequalities and exclusion are still part of the system.
 - Democratisation of education >> an increased number of qualified people, particularly among young people who hold higher degrees of education, especially young women
 - High participation of women in the labour market

- A certain distance to work
 - Work is no longer a value in itself \neq denying the importance of work
 - Work is an area where important values can be realised: self-development, autonomy, personal achievement, creativity.
 - The distance to work (particularly among young graduates) cannot be understood without highlighting the disenchantment caused by the decline of status that goes with the entry into the labour market and more generally, the frustration and dissatisfaction regarding a social model that no longer links higher degrees, work and social mobility.

- From an hegemonic value of work to a polycentric conception of existence.
 - If work remains important, it is no longer the sole most important dimension of identity-building and existential equilibrium. Family, friends, hobbies, social life, social involvement and civic life are also significant parts of identity- building.

- A gender perspective
 - Historically
 - Men identity was built especially as breadwinner of the family
 - Thanks to their participation in the labour market, women started an emancipation process from the role of wife and mother under the patriarchal control
 - Today
 - Reduction in the dichotomy between the male and female patterns of relations to work
 - Contamination of gender models in the young generation
 - "Feminisation" of the male orientation to work. Increased importance of other aspects of life, more expressive expectations.
 - "Masculinisation" of the female orientation to work. Work is not anymore an instrument of emancipation of traditional roles, which is given for granted although the gender discrimination and segregation persist. Work is important in social identity and for obtaining self-realisation.

Social Cohesion at Work

- Historical and cultural differences among *age groups* do exist. They result from:
 - Wealth development / ↑ post-materialistic orientation
 - ↑ tertiary education / ↑ expressive orientation
 - Information Society / digital divide between last generation and the others
 - ↑ individualisation / more search of autonomy, self-development, self-fulfilment
 - Deregulation of labour markets / ↑ job precariousness
 - Women's employment revolution / problem of work-life balance, gendered working models questioned

- A generational standpoint
 - Youth is increasingly more educated compared to previous generations. Women have an advantage as regard levels of education.
 - Generations are unfairly used to adjust to economic fluctuations
 - A differentiated access to social protection benefits (labour market models and welfare state models shape individual trajectories)

- The change of relationship to work: how generation matters?
 - Which relevance of the “generation” variable?
 - Other variables may overwhelm the effect of the “generation” variable: gender, education, socio-professional grouping, economical development, institutional contexts.
 - Research results are convergent with major surveys: EVS, ESS, ISSP.
 - However, substantial differences between the generations in terms of their “subjective” attitudes (the value of work and their conception of existence) and expectations and their “objective” working conditions.

- With few differences among countries, generations are diversely positioned on the labour market:
 - **Young people (< 30)**
 - more exposed to precariousness and unemployment
 - but benefit of positive educational and digital differentials
 - **The adult generation (30 to 50)**
 - usually enjoys a stable position in the labour market
 - but more exposed to the difficulties related to work life balance - critical position of adult women
 - **The elder generation (> 50) – when they are still at work –**
 - enjoy the best wages and security and the highest representation by trade unions
 - but the most exposed in case of company restructuring because of deskilling

- Moreover, different generations also show different cultures and expectations towards work.
 - **Young people (< 30)**
 - ask for more social protection and higher income
 - but also for more freedom and opportunity of self-development
 - **The adult generation (30 to 50)**
 - asks for social and company support to better reconcile work and family
 - but also for life-long learning measures in ageing-worker's perspective
 - **The elder generation (> 50)**
 - asks for recognition of experience
 - but also for the removal of constraints in working conditions

- However
 - No awareness of conflicting interests
 - Denial of the importance of age + no awareness of belonging to a generation >> status quo.
- A conflict between the generations should assume that a cohort would be aware of a common social situation, and that the cleavage between the generations would be perceived as structuring inequities.
 - A social movement can be initiated by the awareness of differentiated characteristics linked to structural conditions and affecting a particular group.
- But recent youth rebellions in Europe suggest that such an awareness is emerging.

- Tensions between generations
 - About employment (security), not work (sense)
- Paradoxical complicity between the generations
 - Competition at work / Solidarity outside work
 - Young people do not protest against the parents' generation (regarding secure jobs and retirement benefits) since they are conscious that those privileges guarantee them a safety net

- Perspectives on solidarity and social ties at work
 - Communitarian enterprise > older generation
 - Solidarity as a mechanism of social regulation
 - Large unions. Traditional activist bodies
 - Given belonging
 - Open enterprise > young generation
 - Solidarity limited to small, manageable social groups
 - New forms of activism
 - Chosen belonging
 - Solidarity is not linked to predetermined belonging > Solidarity is a built value.

- Work is a concrete and symbolic place where different conceptions of work, existence and social ties meet but do not collide. However, in the future, we can suspect that a continuing discrepancy between work and life expectations and the nature of places available in society could become more threatening for social cohesion.

References

- **SPReW** research (Social Patterns of Relation to Work)
 - 6 Framework research programme of the European Commission, 2006-2008. Countries involved: BE, DE, FR, HU, IT, PT.
 - Key questions of the research:
 - Are generations different regarding work?
 - Are there trends that can affect the quality of relationships between generations at work?
 - What are the challenges for social cohesion?
 - All reports are available on <http://www.ftu-namur.org/sprew>
- Vendramin P. (ed), *Generations at Work and Social Cohesion in Europe*, Peter Lang, 2010.