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„I do my job”

Contemporary society is facing the ever increasingly phenomenon of the conflict between ethical imperatives and professional commandments. Often, this incompatibility is perceived only when it manifests as a conflict between human justice and the professional “*I do my job.*” The process of rationalizing work has had unexpected consequences. Money talks and work provides sense in our lives. The old values of Good, Truth and Beauty were replaced by those of Rights, Legality and Propriety. These new values are relevant only as ways to legitimate this incessant expansion of the market and the needs of administrative control; the Ethic is good only if it encourages people to work harder and justifies the economic or administrative rationale; the only apparent aim of the New Art of advertising is to encourage consumers to buy more and the corporate sub-cultures ply employees with the best reasons ever to put the company first. The market flourishes by following its own logic doubled by the bureaucratic rationality designed for optimum functional performance at every level of social life. Both contribute to the full unity of production and control. This makes all human relations dominated by the quantity-quantity relation. The dominant specialized scientific discourse makes its contribution in shaping the modern man’s vision: although in the daily intercourse such a vision gives the appearance of purely human relations, the “illuminated disillusioned” gaze of the present man meets only things and their prices all-around; he only sees relations among objects of communication, objects useful for his goals or economic exchange, subjects for political manipulation but nowhere does he see *human persons*.

We are witnessing the Reign of quantitative. If it is true that human relations had been globally socialized exclusively in terms of these new values and based on the prejudice of some natural ways of interaction any change in the reigning values alter the human soul profoundly. Considering the traditional communities (*Gemeinschaft*) at the very beginning of organized social life one can argue that *work was a way of living in general*. Work in this context had meaning and significance. Work had a major role in the *Weltanschauung* of each individual. Through his work the individual became integrated into his/her

community and it was work which gave him/her meaning because its usefulness was easily noticeable. An individual's work was significant for the others: they would make good use of it, would be influenced by it, and in this way the individual would fully participate in the life of his/her community. In the Ancient Greece the model of the man was an integral one, men and gods were total and only those with some handicap could be specialized (Orpheus was blind, Hephaestus was a gimp). Even later on, in the organization and functioning of the "labor societies" – *the guilds* –, there can be observed that their members had a clear representation, albeit sometimes idyllic, of the meaning and importance of their work for the whole society.

Gradually, after the emergence of manufactories (factories generally), there can be noticed a change in the meaning of work. It becomes impersonal as it turns into an *exchange token* and thus into a way of earning one's living. Ever since, there were already signals of the subsequent work narrowed down into specialization through which the meaning and importance of one's work is lost for the other as well as for the system to which the individual belongs. For the individual, his work becomes *a means of survival*: "When I am at work, I do my job without personal feelings/biases entering into it!" From the perspective of the social system's way of organization according to economic principles, specialization is the key to success. It also implies the autonomization of the various components of the system, which is necessary for an efficient completion of tasks. The entire system turns from a whole functioning – in K. Mannheim's terms: on the basis of organic rationality – into a structure of well-organized, closed subsystems with a goal-oriented functional rationality. This autonomization of the different areas of professional activity is translated in the societal structure by the emergence of professional classes: "guilds of production" and "guilds of services" within the mentioned divisions that grow further apart, forcing the individuals to develop, live and adjust their lifestyles accordingly. This is how, from the point of view of the individual, *work* becomes a *job*. It becomes *a special way of living* structured by the laws of these monads of the clustered social system. Each of these professional micro-universes develops its own values, protocols and expectations regarding their members. The Ethics of one's life within the social system begins to oppose the Deontology: the particular kind of morality existent within each subsystem of the society (*Gesellschaft*). The universal ethics of the modern rational system is global and has little or no real place for

alternatives. The imperial system of values (*based on those of propriety and justice*) left no place *outside* for values or ways of being different than the apparent identities and differences produced in it. The job-mentality is intimately related with the rise of the modern bureaucratic administration system. For the modern rational man the administrative organization is seen as the technically useful model of the most logical and efficient possible structure. Only in a bureaucratic administration do precision and speed, strict subordination, clarity, continuity and unity, reduction of material and personal costs as well as reduction of friction reach their best. Bureaucratic culture rewards only safe and conformist attitudes. Its model also embodies, by definition, depersonalization. Bureaucrats are engaged in maintaining the official form (the means) than they are to be real persons (the end). They lose sight of what they are supposed to achieve. This is a strong, clear example of how a means can transform in an end in itself. The often blessed “invisible hand” is seen as the panacea for the all humanity’s problems. The market replaced the gods; providing for and fulfilling the needs of all. Also, the juridical-administrative system is thought to be the peacemaker for the entire world. This viewpoint is based on the childish belief that if the system was designed to benefit all humans then it is sufficient but with a certain grade of complexity the system becomes relatively autonomous, self justifying and self-constructive – and therefore more and more unresponsive to peoples' needs.

Within such a system the moral duties of one individual towards his kin, family, and neighbors often comes into opposition with the duty designated by his job. When this job-mentality is transferred to the military (i.e. the job of soldier or officer) the consequences are tragic. It is enough to look at the modern age starting from the “civilizing” slaughter of colonial ages on through the “patriotic” massacres of the two World Wars all the way to the present so-called “peacekeeping forces” to realize how dramatically the values in the name of which the proud soldiers do their jobs changed. Definitively, “there is no Job who can sustain such suffering.” [1]

The result of all this is an ambivalent relation to one’s work. On the one hand, there is *my work*: I possess it just like my other belongings (it is said I do *my* job and not I do a/the job). The individual identifies with it precisely because the deontology of his activity tends to permanently replace his general Ethics. On the other hand, the rationality involved in a particular profession doesn’t go well with the

rest of the individual's world and it can't possibly fit since the functional rationality which structures the specific domain refers exclusively to the relation between means and ends, between quantities or objects of exchange, and sets the efficacy of that particular activity as its sole goal. Even when, within the respective domain, this rationality sets means to improve the inter-personal relations and to increase morality it does so, out of rationales(!) that have to do more with *efficiency* than with humanitarian goals *per se*. Therefore, the result is the impossibility for the individual to feel at home in the environment of his job and his own rejection by it. My job is not what I am, but what I am doing.

The much praised difference between the old, outdated and enslaved "shame culture" and the new "guilt culture" (one of autonomous, rational free agents) ignores one small aspect: the price paid for this transition. The modern responsible man has no shame, the law and job-regulations inserted a kind of accountability and canceled the shame. The guilt is intrinsically related with laws; making truth and justice no longer synonymous. Doing one's job is a relief of moral responsibility, of taking decision (all) by yourself in the larger frame of humanity. You just follow the job description, the pre-formulated instructions for your role (it doesn't matter if the role is one of teacher, priest, politician, manager or one of father, daughter or fellow). The modern man lost the view of the world as a totality and himself as part of it; his guiding line of sight is short and blurred. In the relinquishment of, so unduly reproved by postmodernists, "big narratives" man, now in "total control" over his own history, is about to lose his capacity to create it appropriately and even his ability to understand it. "The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing. We would be faced then with the greatest paradox imaginable, namely, that man, who has achieved the highest degree of rational mastery of existence, left without any ideals, becomes a mere creature of impulses" [2] with powerful means, an Schopenhauer's dissociated monster.

What the adulators of the benefits of specialization forget is its perverse effect. It is no doubt that it increases the efficiency and quality; it definitely is a decisive factor for excellence in any domain but, in modern society, its final aim is perverted by the necessity to put one's skills and ability in the service of surviving, nowadays earning money (i.e. to sell these skills). The specialization sells out its own purpose, or better,

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makes it impossible because its ultimate end is put in the service of something different. (i. e. economic bet of human genome project, military application of nuclear physics, and so on)

The implication of the bureaucratic administration (by overgrowing) under the labor division entails not merely a decrease of the efficiency but also it threatens to become antisocial. The social segregation imposed by the division of labor (specialization) breaks up the social bond and split the individuals sense of unity in life. This closure of man's life in the actual and conceptual framework of one's job looks like a *process of idiotisation*. The psychiatric "idiot savant" syndrome – the juxtaposition of prodigious mental ability and severe mental handicap – appears as the juxtaposition between excellence in mastering a narrow domain and totally helpless and not understanding of other domains or of his own life. The modern *homo* (squared) *sapiens* is able to do miracles in programming computers but is incapable to control the course of or to have a meaningful sense of its own life. Caught in the matrix of impersonal relations modern man has lost the meaning of living among people. He doesn't know how to behave because he lives in a world of appearances and not in one of essences, in one of behaviors and not in one of persons and his unique solution is to do his job and follow the prescription of its role instead of acting after his own integral view over life. The regular procedures of his job are the guiding bible for the modern man.

This is also true for creative people. They tend to retreat into their own world of make-believes. For the fifth century Greece ἰδιώτης were those superior personalities which commit the crime of living only *for themselves* instead of putting their gifts, knowledge and skills in the service of common good. [3] The modern idiots are the specialized *homo sapiens economicus*, Gradgrind and Bounderby of Dickens' *Hard Times* or, on the opposite cultural pole, those intellectual and aesthetic-minded snobs like Bunthorne from Gilbert's *Patience*. The "I-do-my-job mentality", grounded in the economic soil of labor division, is the most illustrative aspect of how a specialization structured, bureaucratic-administrative social system produces alienation among and in individuals. [4] If "I do my job" I live in a "matter-of-factness" world with no transcendent meaning of life, already alienated and my work has no significance for my empty "real" life. It is a means for *earning my existence*; a means among others but one that today became a sort of peculiar means that acts and structures my life like its ultimate end. I am wondering whether

writing this article and attending this conference I am doing more than merely my job?

References:

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- [2] Mannheim, Karl, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Harcourt, Brace, London: Routlage & Kegan Paul, 1954, p. 236
- [3] v. Toynbee, Arnold J., *A study of history*, Abridgement of volumes I-VI, by D. C. Somerwell, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1946, pp. 408-409
- [4] Popoveniuc, Bogdan, "The Faces of Alienation" in *Millennium III. Dialogues of the Humanisms?* (Mileniul III. Dialogul Umanismelor?) Ștefan cel Mare" University Press, 2006, pp. 368-384