

WHY IS WORK IMPORTANT?

The status of work in contemporary societies is the result of a long historical process. Work has become a central organising feature of both the rationality and the ethics of our societies. Relations of production and consumption are now at the centre of economic organisation and social life. In addition to its obvious economical relevance, work is also central in several other dimensions, namely in its role as a socialising mechanism, as a source of social exchanges, and as a feature of individual identity. Work, then, can be seen as the pillar of social organisation, but also, to a large extent, as an important pillar of the existential organisation of individuals. It is precisely because of this that work has become a fundamental feature in many dimensions of social inclusion, such as health, housing, and interpersonal networks.

Let's summarise the importance of work both at the individual and the societal level:

- For individuals, work is an important feature in structuring: personal and social identity; family and social bonds; ways of making money, and thereby accessing a number of essential and non-essential goods, services and activities; daily routines; level of activity; physical and mental well-being; self-confidence and self-esteem; a sense of self-worth provided by the feeling of contributing to society or the common good
- For societies, work is an important feature in: promoting community cohesion and safety; increasing civic participation; reducing public spending in a range of welfare benefits (provided, of course, that work is performed in a decently paid job); promoting social and economic development; organising social life at a macro level

It is widely acknowledged, then, that work plays a positive role as a source of well-being and social integration. The relevance of Work Integration Programmes is made even more acute when both macro and microstructural conditions create obstacles to the positive role of work. These must be carefully considered:

- Macrostructural conditions: integration through work is a greater challenge given the structural crisis that the labour market is currently facing. This structural crisis is clearly visible in the rise of unemployment - particularly youth unemployment - and job precariousness. To be sure, while these are general trends, they are not impacting all European countries in the same way. It is important to realise that these trends are, nonetheless, signs of a deep transformation not only of the labour markets, but also of work itself. Richard Sennett, in a book called *The Corrosion of Character*, analyses the ways in which the work ethics itself has been undergoing important changes in the past few decades. These changes are deeply intertwined with the move towards an increasingly flexible capitalism, in which competitiveness and adaptability play a major role both at the collective and the individual levels. His main argument, then, is that the progressive loss of the notion of long-term in the labour market (as jobs become increasingly precarious, subject to sudden change or elimination) is reflected in the individuals' weakening sense of security, commitment and loyalty (not only to their jobs, but also to each other). Work Integration Programmes should take these transformations seriously. To be sure, because these are macrostructural conditions, their solution is beyond the scope and reach of any

single intervention programme (see: [Public Policy](#)). That does not mean they can be simply brushed aside: on the contrary, it is crucial to understand to what extent the target groups are affected by such transformations, as this may help explaining their levels of motivation to join a given work integration programme. In other words, we need not only ask 'Why is work important?' To begin with, we actually need to ask our target-groups: 'Is work important for you?' Only afterwards should we ask why (or why not).

- Microstructural conditions: in articulation with what was said above, it shouldn't sound too awkward now to argue that working is not, by itself, synonym with integration. Indeed, precarious, unappealing, dangerous, low-paid and low-status jobs relegate individuals to the margins of society. A clear indication of this is that in the USA, [the working poor currently amount to 32% of all working families](#); in the European Union, in 2009, [the working poor amounted to 18% of all workers](#). It is also important to take into account the fact that, as precariousness rises and expands, the middle classes are increasingly affected by it. That is, the middle classes are increasingly affected by downward social mobility.

Macro and microstructural conditions should not be regarded as separate entities. While the current crisis of work is the consequence of macrostructural mechanisms, they impact concrete individuals. The current reconfiguration on work in contemporary societies is one of the major sources of psychological suffering in the so-called developed countries. Schnapper (1998) sums up this situation: "Deprived from his/her space and time references, the unemployed person feels like he/she has lost his/her dignity. He/she lives through a personal identity crisis that jeopardises both family roles and relationships in general. Isolation and de-socialisation are integral to what we may call 'the unemployment test'."

That is, work still has a fundamental role in the individual's psychological well-being and in structuring his/her biography, and thus in structuring the meaning he/she ascribes to his/her personal life. As an activity, work organises and provides meaning to the use of time in a society that has programmed its rhythms as a function of work. Work, then, is important in structuring daily life and in enabling a sense of continuity; what's more, it is an antidote against boredom and emptiness. However, the illegal nature of some work (for example, work in the illegal drugs market) may eventually prove to be one more push towards marginalisation, and so informal work seldom serves as a truly integrative device for individuals who are already involved in disqualification processes. Given the above, informal, sometimes even illegal work, is sought not only because it provides financial gains to satisfy at least basic needs, but also because it organises daily life and provides a sense of usefulness and occupation. Inversely, the loss of work is an important destabilising factor, as revealed by the biographies of marginalised individuals. Indeed, both ethnographic and biographic research show that unemployment, intermittent work, and poorly qualified jobs play an important role in the social disqualification of street drug-users and homeless people. In a society that educates for work and keeps equating personal success not only with financial success but also with professional status, loss of work and the erosion of its quality have a strong negative impact on the ways individuals perceive themselves.

To sum up, work is a pillar in the building of societies. Indeed, the distinction between working and dangerous classes, between working individuals and lazy persons lies at the moral heart of our

societies. Work has long become a frontier: it enables the distinction between normality and deviance. It has also become a disciplinary instrument, one that should enable conducting individuals back to respect for norms and a sense of social usefulness. As such, it has also become a tool for regeneration (see, for example, the re-education of young offenders and the reintegration of former inmates).

While some theorists of post-industrial societies argued that work would gradually lose importance, namely through the transformations brought about by technological progress and the growing importance of leisure time, the truth is that the social and economic impact of the current surge of unemployment shows that work is still a central piece in our societies. Therefore, it is not only an indispensable means of enhancing individual senses of usefulness and belonging, but also of providing financial means. No doubt, it is still a crucial factor in the social integration of vulnerable groups.

To sum up, some questions need to be answered:

- Is work important for the target group?
- If so, in what ways is it important?
- If not, why does that happen and how can that situation be overcome?

References

- Sennett, Richard (2001). *A Corrosão do Carácter*. Lisboa: Terramar.
- Schnapper, Dominique (1998). *Contra o Fim do Trabalho*. Lisboa: Terramar.