

CHAPTER SIX. TRANSFORMATIONS OF LABOR

What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them.

HANNAH ARENDT, *The Human Condition*

Every concept of order divides and establishes the boundaries of what is acceptable; every concept of order leaves a part of society on the other side of the border – and openly voices the dilemma of its assimilation or parting ways with it for ever.

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Unnecessary and Rejected, or the Poor in a Rich World*

The category of labor belongs to sociology's classic problems, occupying also a prominent place in theoretical systems developed within this discipline. It appears in the title of Durkheim's first book (2013), which attempts to derive the transformations of social solidarity from changes in the division of labor. In Weber's view (2005), shifts in attitudes towards labor are one of the main reasons behind the rise of capitalism – a socio-economic formation that is completely different from traditional society. In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel (2005) continues to return to labor as a factor whose fluctuations have affected the value of objects, people, and actions. All these thinkers convincingly demonstrate that the concept of labor involves a series of problems that are central to sociology (cf. Poleszczuk 1991), primarily because it combines the levels of individual actions and systemic properties, or – as in Simmel's theory – the domain of individual experiences (subjective, personal value) and their social standardization or objectification (value expressed in money).

A keen interest in the question of labor has been also taken by contemporary sociology, although it made the issue acquire a different character. Labor has become a self-contained object of study, treated as a separate area of human activity carried out in specific social organizations. The social dimension of labor is now analyzed primarily by studying relations among people employed in a single workplace, and their attitude to labor as such. Sociologists of labor focus

on its forms, ways of organization, workers' relations, values connected to labor, as well as unemployment considered – almost by definition – as complementing the discussed concept.

Despite the significance attributed to labor, both as a theoretical category and as a distinguished area of activity, analyzed empirically, it remains difficult to define what it is. Is gathering of roots labor? Is hunting for buffalo labor? Can we say that labor is more like chipping stone pieces to give them the kind of shape that would make it easier to scrape meat from animal skins? Most people would find it more natural to provide a positive answer to the last question rather than the first two. In a popular view, labor is associated with creating tools and transforming the natural environment, while hunting, and especially gathering, seem to lack the above features²⁵⁷ – not to mention that also animals perform them.²⁵⁸

Still, attempts to approach the definition of labor in a more disciplined, scientific manner have brought more questions than answers. It is assumed today that “the essential feature of human labor is that its direct or indirect goal is to acquire means necessary to sustain the existence of both humanity as well as the world it has created and adopted, increasing chances for survival in a specific environment by controlling and transforming it” (Kozek 2002, 174). Clearly, such a broad definition of labor basically covers all forms of human activity that are not related to rest. This corresponds to the division into labor and leisure as two basic areas of human activity in contemporary societies. Yet, this dualism also accentuates the presentist character of such understanding of labor in sociological analyzes, i.e. one limited to a specific form of social order. Meanwhile, all data available to both scientists and amateurs unequivocally indicates that decisions about what is and what is not labor are strongly determined by historical and cultural factors.

It is precisely this aspect of human activity that Hannah Arendt emphasizes. “The world in which the *vita activa* spends itself,” she writes, “consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively

257 However, it ought to be said that both activities, even in their simplest form, necessitate the use of proto-tools (stones or sticks to kill animals; vessels for storing gathered fruit, seeds and roots). Moreover, both can greatly affect the natural environment, which is indicated by hypotheses formulated by researchers studying human prehistory.

258 It is the connection between labor and creation of tools that lay at the foundation of the well-known Marxist thesis that labor has created man. As Hannah Arendt notes, it was “one of the most persistent ideas of Marx since his youth”; however, as she points out, “Hume, and not Marx, was the first to insist that labor distinguishes man from animal” (1998, 86).

to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things” (1998, 9). The list of those “things” – “works and deeds and words” (19) – ought to include the socially created concept of labor as a factor that in turn conditions not only human actions but also forms of sociality.

Arendt uses the term *vita activa* to define three fundamental kinds of human activity: labor, work, and action. She considers them as basic since each corresponds to one of the three fundamental conditions of human life. Labor is an activity conditioned by the necessity to sustain the biological existence of human organism. Work refers to the world of culture, which is treated – as we do throughout this study – as an extension of, and simultaneously condition for the emergence and sustenance of a human-specific kind of mentality.²⁵⁹ Finally, action, according to Arendt’s argument, is related to broadly understood politics. It would be conditioned by the fact that “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (xii); thus, decisions taken by individuals have consequences not only for them but also for other members of the collective.

From our perspective, what seems most interesting about Arendt’s views is the analytical distinction between labor and work. Even if we treat all three kinds of the above activities as fundamental conditions of human existence, one could immediately assume that labor is in fact “more fundamental” than others for at least two reasons. First, biological sustenance of human organisms constitutes the necessary condition for becoming engaged in other forms of activity. Second, in the way that Arendt understands it, labor combines in itself the pre-social phase of humanity’s history and the socialized “human condition.”

For both reasons, such a narrowed concept of labor²⁶⁰ seems to be particularly suitable for analyzing the transformations of forms of sociality. Although labor

259 Arendt remarks that “[w]ork is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings” (7). Both this explicitly articulated understanding and her later analysis of work as a specific form of activity allow to treat the term proposed by Arendt as one referring to actions connected with the sphere of culture (in the sense assumed in this study), which is related in this particular case primarily to the production of tools and knowledge.

260 It is important to emphasize again that we do not take this narrowed understanding as the definition of labor, especially one under the conditions of modern society, but

has accompanied people since always (just like family, analyzed in the previous chapter), it can be variously understood and organized, which entails that it can in turn variously condition the form of social bonds and the specifics of accompanying obligations.

Therefore, let us examine the transformations of human labor understood in this way.

6.1 Labor as an element of being in the world – hunter-gatherer societies

In a provocatively titled essay “The Original Affluent Society,” Marshall D. Sahlins argues that hunter-gatherer societies serve a double role in social sciences. First, they constitute a negative example of so-called survival economy. Second, they offer the key argument in treating the history of human societies as one constantly progressing in terms of development, not only economic but also civilizational. He biting remarks: “Almost universally committed to the proposition that life was hard in the Palaeolithic, our textbooks compete to convey a sense of impending doom, leaving one to wonder not only how hunters managed to live but whether, after all, this was living?” (1972, 1). Therefore, for both these reasons, it seems that the main function of these societies is to make contemporary researchers feel better (and their potential readers too), allowing them to look around and say (some actually do so): “Well, look where we are now thanks to human ingenuity!”

This specific variant of “negative PR” against primal societies studied by Western European travelers and scientists had its roots in the use of European criteria to describe other cultures, which hardly happens these days. However, improved methodological standards fail to protect scholars from another pitfall – one related to the fact that contemporary tribal communities studied by contemporary scientists substantially differ from their Palaeolithic prototypes. Sahlins points out this difference clearly when he writes that “the anthropology of hunters is largely an anachronistic study of *ex-savages*, an inquest into the corpse of one society, Grey once said, presided over by members of another” (1972, 8; emphasis added).

rather as a tool that makes it possible to achieve greater precision in demarcating this area or aspect of human activity, which is the subject of analyzes in this chapter. It seems obvious to us – just like it seems to have been to Arendt – that labor understood in this way cannot be in fact separated from either “work” or “action” in the sense she gave to these terms.

Notwithstanding the above, let us attempt to say something about the place occupied by labor in the earliest form of human communities by referring to anthropological studies. It is universally assumed – hence the name of this kind of social organization – that these communities relied on two kinds of activities: gathering, done mainly by women, and hunting, which was the domain of men. However, as Jared Diamond points out, the share of hunting in the provision of food is overestimated with regard to these communities (especially in relation to proto-human collectivities from before the Great Leap Forward), at least because hunters would usually catch smaller animals – ones that would only round out a diet whose main component were plants (1991, 33–35). Analyzes presented by Sahlins lead to similar conclusions. Based on data acquired in the middle of the twentieth century, his research shows that in longer stretches of time it was the gathering done by women that provided the whole community with the major portion of food.

As Sahlins demonstrates, finding and preparing food would take members of these societies ca 4–5 hours a day; thus, “they do not work continuously. The subsistence quest was highly intermittent. It would stop for the time being when the people had procured enough for the time being, which left them plenty of time to spare” (17). It is worth emphasizing here that this type of labor was not limited to securing simple survival because a portion of time allocated to it would be taken by searching not just for any food but for its particular types. The rest of time would be devoted to sleep, rest and “social” activities.²⁶¹ And even though finding food was the basic occupation in hunter-gatherer societies, in overall balance it took relatively little time and had a discontinuous character in the sense that it was intermingled with frequent periods of sleep and rest.

From the perspective of the role played by this mode of sustaining biological existence in creating a specific form of sociality, which is found – regardless of later modifications – in contemporary tribal communities, it seems to be of greatest importance that labor does not create in them a separate subsystem, one that would be disconnected from other forms of activity. Despite the existence of a sex-based division of tasks, there is no specialization in hunter-gatherer communities, and no division between labor and work. Necessary tools are produced by everyone who needs them at a given moment. Even if there do emerge individuals distinguished by their agility or some specific skill (sculpting, making nets or arrowheads), their talents do not relieve them from participating

261 In languages used by certain Australian tribes, “work” and “play” are designated with the same word.

in actions that form the basis of labor in the entire community. The same is true for the tribe's chieftain, who is appointed due to individual characteristics but participates in communal life on the same terms as everyone else.

Furthermore, despite the fact that hunting and gathering – part of common knowledge transmitted from one generation to another – are obviously socialized, they are also subordinated to physiological rhythms rather than economic ones. Phases of labor are interwoven with phases of rest in accordance with the daily rhythms of hunger and satiation, without even considering the future, i.e. without gathering surplus food for future needs in case of a shortage. In other words, labor does not create separate forms of sociality, ones that would belong only to this form of activity. It does not create social divisions or social regulations proper only to it. In that sense, labor is woven into the everyday rhythm of being in the world on the same terms as it occurs among other species.

It is possible to put it in even stronger terms: if the search is after the factor responsible for the “creation of humanity” during the Neolithic Revolution, then contrary to the belief held by Marx, it would not be labor – hunter-gatherer communities that survived until today are by all means “human” or, to use our preferred terminology, “socialized” in all aspects of their existence, despite the fact that labor is organized in them in a way conditioned by features of the habitat, and subordinated to regulation of biological needs. Demands of labor do not possess their own driving force in these collectivities – one that would be capable of modifying other aspects of communal life in a way that would distort the socially generated state of balance. They are woven into the order of nature rather than into the economic one.

This state of balance – in which a handful of hunter-gatherer tribes still last, living in relative separation from outside influences – was shaken only by the transition to agriculture and the adoption of a settled lifestyle. Certainly, this was not a one-time event, but a process initiated independently in several places on earth. It unfolded slowly: since the emergence of agriculture in the Middle East ca 8,500 BC, two thousand years had to pass until it reached Greece, and further two and a half before it found imitators in Britain and Scandinavia. Moreover, contrary to the popular view linking this process with “progress” induced by the development of human mind, data available today show that the shift actually worsened the “quality of life” among food producers rather than improved it in comparison to hunter-gatherers.

Both Sahlins and Diamond underline that even if we take into account contemporary standards related to the sustenance of biological existence, the hunter-gatherer form of labor had many advantages over any later ones. Sahlins quotes estimates of energy balance calculated on the basis of daily food rations,

which show that these amounts more than meet today's criteria, also with regard to specific nutrients. Further, he draws attention to the incomparably greater amount of free time enjoyed by individuals. Diamond, in turn, referring to the results of research conducted by paleopathologists, indicates that the shift from the hunter-gatherer to the agricultural mode of obtaining food had several negative consequences: decrease in the average height among the population;²⁶² increase of the number of cavities and teeth diseases; increase in contagious and bone structure diseases; and finally, rise in mortality rates.²⁶³ Furthermore, the risk of hunger went up as well due to the dependence on one or several kinds of crops (1991, 170–172).²⁶⁴

In light of the above data, the true mystery is not how certain forms of hunter-gatherer societies managed to survive until this day, but rather how it even happened that a fundamental change in the mode of obtaining food was made along with the popularization of agriculture. Hypotheses attempting to explain this process point to the coincidence of factors that are primarily related to transformations of habitat. These included, on the one hand, decrease in the amount of food obtained directly from the natural environment, which was caused by climate change and the extinction of certain species of animals, as well as the perfection of hunting skills among the primitive tribes and the increase of their size, which caused the habitat's resources to be exploited more intensively, in turn decimating animals and ultimately necessitating animal husbandry. On the other hand, the aforementioned climate changes led, towards the end of the Pleistocene, to the increase in the range of wild species of cereal crops in the Middle East, which, in turn, favored adopting these crops more frequently as a dietary basis (Diamond 1999, 114–119; cf. also Saggs 1962, 3–10). Thus, it was

262 The average height of hunter-gatherers in the area of today's Greece and Turkey was, towards the end of the Ice Age, 180 cm for men and 168 cm for women, whereas ca 4,000 BC, when agriculture already dominated in those regions, these numbers amounted to 160 cm and 155 cm, respectively.

263 Introduction of intensive maize crops ca 1,000 CE in America caused the per cent of people aged 50 or more to drop to 1 per cent in comparison to 5 per cent before the popularization of these crops.

264 In hunter-gatherer societies (naturally, those that live in a relatively natural habitat) there are better or worse periods in terms of food amounts, but there are no instances of devastating hunger since a varied diet allows to replace some forms of food with others. The best-known example of tragic consequences of dependence on a monoculture of crops is the Great Famine in Ireland (1845–1847), during which potato blight caused around a million people to die and forced a half of the remaining population (ca 1.5 million) to emigrate. Cf. more on this subject in Hobhouse 2005.

necessity, on the one hand, and opportunity, on the other, that helped set in motion the process that came to be called the Neolithic Revolution. It initiated a long chain of events transforming labor into one of the crucial factors determining the form and content of socializing processes.

6.2 Labor as a task – traditional societies

In sociology, the term “traditional societies” is used in reference to all those forms of social organization that existed before the emergence of modern society. This is justified both by the discipline’s tradition²⁶⁵ and by certain features shared by actions and institutions encountered in premodern societies. They include the dominant role of religion in determining collective representations, the centrality of agriculture to economy, the rule of a king or a chieftain in the political sphere, a low pace of changes and the subordination of individual actions to the patterns of behavior passed from one generation to another. Without negating the existence of certain similarities, it is worth to remark here that using a single semantic category to refer to societies as different as primitive hunter-gatherers (who did not know agriculture), ancient empires, Greece and the Roman Empire, and, finally, feudal Europe, makes it more difficult to discern the complexity of processes hiding behind the transformations of dominant forms of sociality.²⁶⁶ This becomes particularly inconvenient when considering processes linked to transformations of the economic order and the resulting changes to both social structure and attitudes toward labor as such.

In the first period of the transition to agriculture and settled life, nothing really heralded the immense scale of transformations induced by the change in the mode of obtaining food. As we have stated above, it was forced, unfolded slowly and entailed a clear decrease in quality of life since the profits gained from producing food were quickly equalized or literally consumed by the rapidly growing population. The settled lifestyle enabled to shorten the period between subsequent births, which led to a growth of population that would often exceed the rise in food production. Nevertheless, it was exactly the relationship between food production and population growth in a given society that turned out to be the decisive factor in the acceleration of changes. After all, “higher

265 We mean here primarily works by Durkheim, Tönnies, and partially Weber; they all focus on the moment of the transition to modernity, which favors assuming a bipolar division.

266 However, it makes it easier to treat human history as a steady line of progress leading from primitive communities to Greeks, Romans, and the contemporary world.

birthrate of food producers, together with their ability to feed more people per acre, lets them achieve much higher population densities than hunter-gatherers” (Diamond 1999, 89). Thus, the latter began to be driven out from their territories or were forced to give up their nomadic lifestyle.²⁶⁷

As discussed in Chapter Four, one direct outcome of population growth was the change in the organization of social life, which involved replacing tribal systems with chiefdoms. In the Middle East, the latter emerged already ca 5,500 BC, giving rise to a division that still accompanies humanity: the division into those who work and those who do not, the latter obtaining means for the sustenance of their biological existence from other sources or forms of activity. At many stages of human history, this division structured societies in a variety of ways, but has invariably constituted an important factor in shaping social bonds, and consequently – the forms of socializing human actions. For this reason alone, one ought to consider separately the cases of ancient empires, Greece, and European feudalism. After all, they represent diverse ways of solving problems related to the transition from chiefdoms, based largely on tribal communities, to more complex systems of social organization. Such a distinction will help identify the influence that transformations of labor had on the development of this general form of sociality we have come to call the traditional society.

Historically speaking, the earliest ancient empires rose in Mesopotamia, which is understandable given the fact that the region between Euphrates and Tigris was one of the first where the Neolithic Revolution started.²⁶⁸ The oldest remains of settlements found in this area date back to ca 5,000 BC. From the perspective of labor, it is interesting that they differed from hunter-gatherer communities primarily in having developed early forms of specialization in everyday activities of their inhabitants. However, these settlements were relatively small, comprising just several larger families. Isolated and economically self-sufficient, they would be led by an elected chieftain. They established contacts with others only gradually, by initiating trade. A truly revolutionary change was started only by the rise of city-states.

267 “Those few peoples who remained hunter-gatherers into the twentieth century escaped replacement by food producers because they were confined to areas not fit for food production, especially deserts and Arctic regions” (Diamond 1999, 113).

268 The area is called the Fertile Crescent. Diamond (1999) lists four additional regions: China (Yellow and Yangtze Valleys of China), Mesoamerica (today’s central and southern Mexico, and adjacent parts of Central America), the Andes, and the eastern part of today’s USA. In each of them, the transition began later than in Mesopotamia.

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In his discussion of the earliest period in the history of Mesopotamia, Henry W. F. Saggs argues that “[t]he aggregation of communities in the south into cities was almost certainly dictated by the rivers: to control and utilize them effectively needed cooperation on a larger scale than small isolated primitive villages could provide” (1962, 19).²⁶⁹ Credit for the organization of the first city-state in this region is given to the Sumerians. It was in their cities that – at the threshold of the third millennium BC – there developed an economy based on full-blown specialization. As Saggs points out, “[t]wo aspects of this specialization with almost immeasurable consequences for the subsequent activities of Man were the development on the one hand of the arts and on the other of a social group professionally concerned with the religious response of Man to the pattern imposed on his life by the agricultural cycle” (7).

Sumerian city-states initially had a theocratic character, with land belonging to the temple, and the lay chieftain of the city being a representative of the local deity, managing the temple’s property with the help of an army of subordinate officials.²⁷⁰ This property would include not only land but also tools and animals necessary to cultivate it, as well as craftsmen’s workshops, mills and breweries. Land was partially leased, but large portions of it were worked by hired people, paid either in precious metals or food products. The entire economic activity would be centralized, with management based on a bureaucratic system: specialized teams did the work directed by appropriate offices, while strict bookkeeping stimulated the development of writing.

With the passage of time, secular authorities would gain greater autonomy. Along with the consolidation of power by rulers of city-states, most agricultural areas would become property of the king or – strictly speaking – of the state.²⁷¹ However, this did not change much in the division of labor, except for the rise of an elaborate state administration. Basically, everyone would work, even the

269 Anyway, all “agrarian bureaucracies” were dependent on rivers carrying fertile silt (Egypt), on canals irrigating desert-like areas (Mesopotamia and Persia), and on maintaining elaborate irrigation systems (China).

270 This office was initially filled in the course of an election from among the city’s free citizens, and became hereditary only since the middle of the third millennium BC.

271 This process was related to a very complex, three-thousand-year-long history of the region, during which centers of power moved from the cradle of the Sumerian state – the city of Uruk – to Ur, and were subdued at the turn of the second millennium by Babylon. In turn, since the eighth century BC Babylon was conquered by the Assyrians, but after the latter’s fall in the seventh century BC it regained its former position for a brief period before surrendering to the invasion of Persians led by Cyrus.

ruler's party would have its own duties between military campaigns, engaging in works related to maintenance of canals and construction. Craftsmen were "temple's men" or "king's men," which meant permanent employment in one of the big workshops run by the two main centers of economic life (Bielicki 1966). They would be organized into guilds, in which "the elderly ensured a just distribution of commissions, controlled the quality of products, and were held responsible by the temple or the ruler for the raw materials received from magazines as well as for prompt supply of appropriate quantities of ready products" (289). Their position depended on qualifications and skills. In this strongly structured society, anyone who could not cope with assigned tasks would fall to the lower rungs of the social ladder.

The account of the functioning of the entire system, which emerges from hundreds of clay tablets containing receipts, lists and directives, resembles a description of a well-managed company whose profits are of course unevenly divided but whose large portion would be allocated to serve the public good, i.e. to construct a network of canals, roads, and further temples. Naturally, one could infer that – just like it happens in today's organizations of this type – the closer one gets to the top of the social ladder, the smaller role is played by the principle of meritocracy in favor of descent as well as informal relations and connections. This can be easily discerned at least from the fact that some rulers introduced rotation with regard to certain high posts (an equivalent to province governor would be periodically transferred from one region to another), thereby attempting to counteract the creation and congealing of local systems of connections. It should also be expected that the functioning of the entire bureaucracy would be strongly limited during frequent periods of invasions and struggles for power. Historians agree that along with subsequent waves of invaders, "the old Sumerian system of state-socialism had begun to break down" (Saggs 1962, 198).

In economic terms, this breakdown manifested mainly in the increasing diversification of wealth. Whereas in earlier periods temples were not only companies employing ranks of people but also supported citizens afflicted by hunger, natural disasters and disease by distributing food, with the course of time independent farmers, traders or craftsmen could only take out a loan at a high interest. "Over the years this would result in the greater part of the peasantry becoming the victims to a crippling load of debt, and the situation could only be cleared by drastic measures, namely by a general remission and a fresh start"²⁷² (198). This

272 Descriptions of similar situations can be found in the Old Testament. Cf. Chouraqui 1971.

would be done by the ruler enacting laws that would specify, among other things, prices of foodstuffs, farm laborers' wages, and charges for hiring carts or boats. As Saggs emphasizes, the basic goal of ancient legal systems was "to set forth justice in the land" (198), mainly in the economic sense.

If the social structure of Mesopotamia's ancient empires sometimes resembles elaborate classifications of professions used by contemporary sociology, while the various laws included in diverse "codices" bound men and women in equal²⁷³ measure, then "the Greek city in its classical form was marked by a double exclusion: the exclusion of women, which made it a 'men's club'; and the exclusion of slaves, which made it a 'citizens' club'" (Vidal-Naquet 1986, 206). Slaves were also found in the social structure of Mesopotamia, but they played a chiefly economic role, i.e. as a source of cheap workforce; moreover, a free citizen could become a slave as well after becoming an insolvent debtor (Bielicki 1966). It was different in Greece. As Arendt shows, keeping slaves was not related to economic factors but to the desire to set oneself free from "the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life. [...] To labor meant to be enslaved by necessity, and this enslavement was inherent in the conditions of human life" (1998, 83–84).

Thus, the status of slaves was primarily a derivative of the Greeks' attitude to labor, which they saw as a condition that humans share with animals. After all, the latter also need to struggle to obtain means for sustaining biological life, which makes it inhuman, i.e. not specific to the human condition. "The 'good life,' as Aristotle called the life of the citizen [...] was 'good' to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process" (Arendt 1998, 36–37). As Pierre Vidal-Naquet aptly notes, "[t]he slave made the [Greek] social game feasible, not because he performed all the manual labor (that was never true) but because his condition as the anti-citizen, the utter foreigner, allowed citizen status to define itself" (1986, 164).

The attitude towards labor developed by Greeks certainly evolved. Homer's heroes perform various tasks that could be evidently called labor: Paris and Odysseus help with building their houses, while Nausicaa herself washes the underwear of her brothers, which does not require any further explanation.²⁷⁴

273 Still, the latter would suffer worse consequences than men in the usual punishment for the same misdeeds.

274 Arendt explains this by referring to "the self-sufficiency of the Homeric hero, to his independence and the autonomic supremacy of his person." "No work," she concludes,

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During the archaic period – the setting of Homer’s epic poems – there naturally were slaves in the Greek society. However, they did not occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder – this place was reserved for farm laborers, who had only a pair of hands at their disposal, and had no permanent ties to the farm (Vidal-Naquet 1986, 160). “It is only from the late fifth century onward that the *polls* began to classify occupations according to the amount of effort required, so that Aristotle called those occupations the meanest ‘in which the body is most deteriorated.’ Although he refused to admit *banausoi* [craftsmen] to citizenship, he would have accepted shepherds and painters (but neither peasants nor sculptors)” (Arendt 1998, 8–182). However, it was already Hesiod (active at the turn of the eighth and the seventh centuries BC) who wrote that labor, just like any other evil, was released from Pandora’s box as a punishment inflicted by Zeus on Prometheus for the fraud the latter committed against gods. Hesiod also found it natural and unworthy of justification that farm labor constitutes a preoccupation strictly for slaves and farm animals. The contempt for labor displayed by the Greeks, which emerged from the desire to liberate oneself from life’s necessities, was only reinforced as a result of increasing duties related to participation in the life of the *polis*, and the pressure to abstain from any activities beyond those of public character.

At first glance, Romans seem to have partaken in the Greeks’ attitude towards labor. The claim made by Cicero – “wage labor is sordid and unworthy of a free man, for wages are the price of labor and not of some art; craft labor is sordid, as is the business of retailing” (after Veyne 1992, 121) – does not differ at all from Aristotle’s quoted above. However, Cicero also adds the following caveat to the last item: “as opposed to large-scale wholesale trade” (121). For Romans, being free from labor was not the equivalent of freedom, or at least not the only one; it was first of all an indicator of high social status. Wealth and descent counted most. That is why wholesale trade was not as “ignoble” as running a small shop, while a landowner who took up trade would not be treated like a merchant, although a tradesman who bought land would be long considered a parvenu.

This difference was reflected in dominant social divisions. In Greece, the basic structure involved division into citizens, metics (foreigners earning their living

“is sordid if it means greater independence; the selfsame activity might well be a sign of slavishness if not personal independence but sheer survival is at stake” (1998, 83; note 7). However, this interpretation seems anachronistic since it does not take into account differences in ways of thinking, which distinguish the archaic and classical periods of Greek culture.

as craftsmen or tradesmen) and slaves. In Rome, free citizens would be divided into “estates” – ordinary citizens, decurions, equites and senators. This division was based on wealth, whose main component was land. However, it was not material wealth in itself that decided about affluence, but rather descent. Slaves could hold high offices and make fortunes, becoming trusted confidants of their masters, managers of their estates, and teachers of their children, but were nevertheless prohibited from participating in public life. An impoverished descendant of a noble family could give lessons at the house of a notable and be treated as a friend of the house despite being paid for his services. As Veyne writes, “[i]n this society no one was a worker; all social relations were conceived in terms of friendship or authority” (1992, 125).

Nonetheless, the primacy of birth in the determination of social position does not mean that the Roman upper class was a “leisure” one. It is even possible to say that the lives of these people were filled with business, speculation, management of workshops or companies, lending money at usurious rates etc. In the writings of Roman thinkers, we also find much praise for labor and entrepreneurship. However, as Veyne underlines, Romans considered diligence to be a moral virtue, not really a factor lying at the root of social divisions. The differentiation between those who work and those who do not appeared primarily at the level of collective representations, not at the level of real differences between kinds of activities. “Only common folk worked for a living. People of quality managed, that is, they engaged in the activity referred to as *cura* or *epimeleia*, which one might translate as ‘government’ [...]. This was the only activity worth of a free man, for it involved the exercise of authority” (141). Even if such “government” took up all time available to a given person, and even if it entailed receiving remuneration or involved activities demanding physical effort, it was not labor as long as that person was of noble descent.

One could therefore say that, by virtue of this semantic trick, the Romans succeeded in combining in their attitude to labor two features that would seem entirely contradictory: the kind of deprecation typical of the Greeks, and the belief that “no labor is disgraceful as long as it brings large profits,” an idea typical of contemporary capitalist society. According to Veyne, Romans went even further in their approval of labor than it happens today, in line with the principle “Any toil, no matter how pleasurable, merited payment” (147).²⁷⁵ Engaging

275 “One picturesque aspect of amorous customs among the Romans was that the female partner in a high-society affair was paid for her trouble. A matron who deceived her husband received a large sum or, in some cases, an annual income from her lover. [...] The practice of accepting gifts from lovers was considered not prostitution but

one's own and other people's resourcefulness, pursuing profits, seeking favors of the high and mighty, and taking any opportunity that presents itself to multiply wealth – these tendencies blurred any differences between estates, uniting all in the effort to amass riches. If the group that had the best opportunities to achieve this goal was the nobility, it was because they had easier access to information as well as because the entire economic system was based on agricultural production, making land ownership the best and most reliable capital resource.

All of this changed radically when the Roman Empire fell and the Middle Ages began. Despite being based on an agrarian economy, the Roman world was essentially urban, while the mediaeval one was first and foremost that of the countryside (Le Goff 1970, 13). It was also dominated by a vision of reality forged under the pervasive influence of Christianity, which is based on entirely different principles than those informing Greek and Roman views.²⁷⁶ Finally, it was a world deeply marked by its tribal, “barbarian” heritage, which only to a certain extent yielded to the influence of “the mission to civilize” taken on by the Christian clergy, which considered itself the heir to Roman culture (Le Goff 1992; Modzelewski 2004).

At the same time, the very concept of the Middle Ages is internally “broken,” both in its spatial and temporal dimensions. Different factors shaped forms of life on territories that had been part of the Roman Empire, and those extending east of the Rhine and north of the Alps and the Danube. Moreover, different factors played the leading role in the period up to the tenth century, on the one hand, and the period up to the fifteenth, on the other, which saw the budding of processes that transformed mediaeval feudalism into germinating capitalism. Keeping this in mind, let us nevertheless identify the most characteristic features that determined the place of labor in the feudal society.

The face of the medieval society was shaped not only by the dominance of agrarian economy – in fact, cultivation of land serves as the basis of economy in all kinds of traditional societies discussed here – but also by the ruralization of the population (Le Goff 1992). The destruction of cities during subsequent waves of “barbarian” invasions certainly contributed to this, but – as Le Goff emphasizes – this was just the final note in a long process that began during the final stages of

work for hire. The woman did not give herself because she was paid, the jurists held; she was rewarded for giving herself of her own free will. She who loved best was most handsomely paid” (Veyne 1992, 147).

276 Of course, Christianity drew many themes from Greek thought, but gave them a different meaning.

the Roman Empire. It led to the gradual limitation and finally disappearance of those forms of economic activity that keep cities alive: craftsmanship, trade, as well as material, intellectual and cultural consumption. This process had at its roots a complex weave of factors which conditioned the functioning of Roman economy. Among them an important role was played by the growing fiscalization of the state. Importantly, it led to the disorganization of exchange. “The disorganization of the exchanges increased hunger and the hunger pushed the masses into the countryside and subjected them to the servitude of the ‘breadgivers,’ the great lords” (Le Goff 1992, 24–25).

Invaders became part of this economic structure effortlessly. First, they were no longer nomads, but “fugitive sedentaries” (27).²⁷⁷ Second, barbarian tribes had long abandoned the egalitarianism of their original communities. Despite its members still retaining the status of free men, barbarian communities were deeply differentiated in social terms, including “powerful and weak, rich and poor who easily transformed themselves into great and small proprietors or occupants on the conquered land” (28). And finally, third, the desire to retain their difference, together with the fear of melting into local population due to small size,²⁷⁸ inclined barbarians – at least initially – to avoid cities and to settle in villages, where it was easier to follow the old traditions, whose nature is best reflected by the so-called Salic Law.²⁷⁹

However, becoming part of the economic structure of the late Roman Empire did not mean that the state’s ideas about the world, or its models of behavior were to be continued. As Le Goff notes, barbarians “turned a decline into a regression. They combined a threefold barbarism, their own, that of the decrepit Roman world and that of the old primitive forces which lay below the Roman varnish and had been freed by the dissolving of the varnish under the impact of the invasions. The regression was chiefly a quantitative one. The barbarians destroyed human lives, great buildings, and equipment necessary for the economy. The population fell sharply; art treasures were lost; the roads, workshops, warehouses, irrigation systems, and cultivated areas fell into decay. [...] In this impoverished, underfed,

277 Le Goff writes that “the medieval society was half-nomadic. Hunger for land, changing fates of conflicts, religious unrest – all inclined these people to mobility” (1970, 15). It was, therefore, a mobility enforced by specific circumstances of individual existence, not a lifestyle component.

278 According to estimates made by historians, the population of all barbarian tribes after settling on the territories of the former Roman Empire amounted to only 5 per cent of the total population (Le Goff 1992, 29).

279 Cf. more on this subject in Modzelewski 2004.

weakened world a natural calamity succeeded in completing what the barbarians had begun” (31–32). It was the bubonic plague that – since 543 CE – devastated for half a century Italy, Spain and large parts of the Gaul.

The bubonic plague – or, strictly speaking, its consequences – interfered for a long time with the weak process of acculturation, which began with the settlement of barbarian tribes on the territories of the former Empire. One could even say that these circumstances halted all forms of socializing processes. Thus, it was not only a period of return to paganism but primarily to sophisticated torture, excess and exceptional “despotism curbed by murder,” a period when “direct regulation” would become dominant (Elias 2000), i.e. one based mainly on physical force or the law of the stronger.²⁸⁰

This period concluded in the eighth century when political power was consolidated, thereby allowing for the formation of a properly feudal society (cf. Le Goff 1992; Elias 2000). The process was extended in time: its economic and social effects began to be felt only at the beginning of the eleventh century. These effects included the crystallization of social divisions. During the early Middle Ages, the categories used to describe the society had a bipolar character. Depending on the context, they involved the following oppositions: clergy and laity, mighty and weak, free and slaves. In the eleventh century, there emerges another classification, “which was to become classic: those who pray, those who fight, those who labor: *oratores, bellatores, laboratores*” (Le Goff 1992, 256). Nevertheless, the concept of *laboratores* – as Le Goff shows – had a very specific sense: it “designated the upper level of the peasantry, the ones who owned at least a yoke of oxen and their work-implements” (259). Thus, it would not cover the masses of poorest physical workers, whose only tools were their own hands. A later reflection of this division is the one into the clergy, nobility and third estate, i.e. the bourgeoisie. This system also leaves no place for simple folk, who exist, as it were, outside society.

The emergence of the bourgeoisie within this tripartite schema is related to the transformations that occurred between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries with the development of cities. During the early Middle Ages, there were basically few cities in today’s sense of the word. Most of them, as we have already mentioned, were razed, ruined or deserted. The few that survived from

280 Le Goff provides a summary of this period: “people of the Middle Ages – here one can risk saying: all of them – desired one thing only: to escape from their epoch into the spirit world, to Heaven. Among all the different things that made them tremble, the fear of death was the weakest” (1970, 16).

the Roman times lost their political and economic functions, owing their existence and relative prominence chiefly to having become the bishop's seat. New burghs were simply extended seats of notables, surrounded with walls that also protected people living in settlements outside them, which later grew, forming cities. The economy had a largely natural character, with the exchange of goods and products occurring mainly within local communities.

In this world of farmers and warriors, with clergy reminding the faithful about the futility of all earthly things, labor was considered as an activity of an unambiguously low status. It was despised both by knights and clergy, although the latter usually expressed this in a more veiled manner. "[I]n man's obligation to labor the church saw [...] the result of his imperfection [...]. The Fall entailed divine retribution" (Gurevich 1985, 259–260).²⁸¹ According to Christian theologians, people ought to care more for the salvation of their souls than for survival and material prosperity. Thus, a contemplative life that brings man closer to God would be the most appreciated of all forms of activity. As Max Weber observed, it was already Thomas Aquinas who argued, while interpreting the claim made by St. Paul ("He who does not work, neither shall he eat"), that labor is necessary only due to the need to keep oneself alive. "Where this end is achieved, the precept ceases to have any meaning. Moreover, it holds only for the race, not for every individual" (Weber 2005, 105).

However, even in the early Middle Ages, the attitude towards labor was not as clear-cut as it might seem at first glance. As is often emphasized, labor plays a significant role because of its disciplinary character as well as the interest of the whole. *Laboratores* are an inseparable part of an organic vision of society, which could not exist without them. As Le Goff points out, "in medieval iconography clergy and aristocracy allowed peasants their own place not because of the size of that social group but because the reigning ideology desired to portray in art an image of society that would be not only hierarchical but also coherent and harmonious – such an image would naturally counteract any claims or revolts" (1970, 15). At the same time, emphasizing the significance of labor also had an educational aspect. "Idleness – the 'enemy of the soul' – breeds vice and threatens

281 As Hannah Arendt remarks, "[a]ll the European words for 'labor,' the Latin and English *labor*, the Greek *ponos*, the French *travail*, the German *Arbeit*, signify pain and effort and are also used for the pangs of birth. *Labor* has the same etymological root as *labare* ('to stumble under a burden'); *ponos* and *Arbeit* have the same etymological roots as 'poverty' (*penia* in Greek and *Armut* in German)" (1998, 48; note 39).

the immortal soul, while work subdues the flesh and makes for self-discipline and application” (Gurevich 1985, 161).

This was especially true for farm labor because other forms of activity did not enjoy such approval. For example, synodal statutes forbade monks to take up such professions as weaving, cloth-making, shoe-making, dyeing, milling, smithery, and brewing, i.e. typically craftsmanship-like forms of activity. At the same time, it was assumed that intellectual work – to which the clergy was chiefly devoted – does not demand material remuneration: “in particular, teachers did not receive salaries, for wisdom was accounted as a gift of God which therefore could not be the object of mercenary trading. At best, a teacher could be offered gifts in gratitude for his dispensation of knowledge” (266).

The rapid growth of cities at the beginning of the eleventh century – simultaneously the effect and one of the main reasons of economic growth – evidently disrupted the above coherent image of reality. Little wonder then that it initially met with strong opposition. “According to the Bible, Cain was the builder of the first city. An English sermon of the fourteenth century contrasts priests, the knights and the workers, created by God, with the townspeople and the money-lenders, the spawn of the devil” (272). With the course of time, however, the Church adapted, albeit reluctantly, to the changing reality, both in practical terms and in the preached vision of reality. The same Bible from which the inferiority of labor was derived became the source of the theological idea “that Adam *tilled* the Garden of Eden, and hence, before becoming a form of penitence, labor had been an activity enjoying God’s blessing” (265). Figures of craftsmen began to appear in church iconography, along with the spreading belief that all professions are worthy of a Christian, while all people have their vocations, the finding of which shall save them.

Well, perhaps not *all* professions, particularly not that of a usurer. “With virtually no excuses available, the usurer remained, during the thirteenth century, one of the few men whose trade was condemned *secundum se*, ‘in itself,’ *de natura*, ‘by its very nature.’ He shared this unhappy fate with prostitutes and acrobats” (Le Goff 1990, 50). Condemnation of usurers is related to the danger posed to old Christian values by the spreading money economy. Since its very beginnings, Christianity has propagated a cult of poverty and opposed the cult of Mammon, i.e. growing wealthy just for the sake of doing so. Already in middle of the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas stated emphatically: “Work has four aims. First and foremost, it must provide necessities of life, secondly it must chase away idleness which is the source of many evils, thirdly it must restrain concupiscence by mortifying the body, fourthly it allows one to give alms” (after Le Goff 1992, 222).

The aim of the medieval economy was to secure survival, not to facilitate becoming wealthier – satisfying *nessitas*, not stimulating development. “Necessity legitimized work and even brought with it exemptions from certain religious rules”; however, “[a]ll economic calculation which went beyond providing necessities was severely condemned” (Le Goff 1992, 222–223). As Le Goff convincingly argues, economic growth, which was observed in medieval Europe in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, did not stem by any means from the activation of certain developmental factors, but was primarily related to demographic growth, which entailed the necessity to feed, clothe, and shelter a growing number of people. The improvement of tools and modes of production was only an indirect consequence of that necessity. Surpluses were either hoarded or used to stimulate consumption, which – contrary to the “ideology of poverty” preached by the Church – was related not only to the nobility and the bourgeoisie, but also to the clergy. “It was normal that this indifference and even this hostility to economic growth should be reflected in the monetary economy sector and should put up strong resistance to the development within this sector of a spirit of profit of precapitalist type” (224).

The medieval substitute for the above “spirit of profit” was cupidity. “In the later Middle Ages,” writes Johan Huizinga, “[...] cupidity becomes the predominant sin” (1987, 26). It was an epoch of poverty, which made people even greedier, and led to stronger condemnation of cupidity among those who fell victim to those possessed by this vice. “A furious chorus of invectives against cupidity and avarice rises up everywhere from the literature of that period. Preachers, moralists, satirical writers, chroniclers, and poets speak with one voice” (27). It is precisely excessive avarice that lays at the foundation of condemnation of usurers. However, even official texts would not refer to all involved with such business, but only to those “carrying on *excessive usury*” (Le Goff 1990, 72; emphasis preserved). It was also the combination of avarice, primitive pride and ostentatious boasting of one’s riches that provoked greatest outrage. “Riches have not acquired the spectral impalpability which capitalism, founded on credit, will give them later” (Huizinga 1987, 26).

Before that could happen, however, until the end of the Middle Ages land and spoils of war remained the main source of wealth. Even the prosperity of medieval cities – despite their economy being based on trade and craftsmanship²⁸² – was

282 Still in the early years of the fourteenth century trade involved mainly rare goods – exotic and luxurious ones – making the group of their recipients limited to the upper classes, which were not really sizeable and whose wealth was additionally conditioned

primarily rooted in land. “Even the towns which had most enriched themselves by trade [...] had to base their activity and power on their rural hinterland” (Le Goff 1992, 296). “The Autumn of the Middle Ages” in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries differed in many respects from the epoch’s early years, but these differences are – at least in the social sphere – often a mere intensification of features typical for earlier periods, which later became more prominent. “The image of society would remain the same, or even revisit older concepts: in a society of three orders or estates nobility and clergy would still rule, despite the bourgeoisie becoming bigger, richer and more confident. It would be satisfied either by penetrating into the upper classes through ennoblement or by representing the entirety of the third estate. [...] In fact, these were times of ‘feudal reaction’: ‘secondary serfdom’ would emerge in the east and peasants would be even more tyrannized in the west” (Le Goff 1970, 360).

This necessarily telegraphic survey of transformations of labor across the period of around 7,000 years – i.e. from the rise of first city-states in ancient Sumer to what we assume was the beginning of the “capitalist era” – allows nevertheless to formulate several more general conclusions related directly to labor’s role in shaping that form of sociality which we call traditional society.

First, it needs to be emphasized that, in this type of society, the division into those who work and those who do not is based on *the division of tasks*: those who did not work were distinguished not only (and not even primarily) by the fact that they did not have to work (i.e. did not have to personally undertake any activities to obtain food) but also because they performed a different role in the organization of tasks in the entire society. This is best visible in the case of feudal society, which explicitly stressed that all estates are complementary and form an organic whole. However, the division of tasks also functioned in Greek society – if we do not wish to follow Greek intellectuals in their attempts to exclude slaves and women from it, its differentiation would have to be described precisely in terms of the division of tasks. The specific character of that differentiation (which also appears in ancient empires and in the Roman Empire) lies in the fact that one social group – peasants or slaves, or anyone in between – would

by fluctuating income from agriculture that depended on atmospheric conditions. The same was true for craftsmanship, which also catered for the needs of the upper classes.

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be obliged, as it were, to keep others “alive” so that the latter can effectively perform their tasks.

Second, the particular content of these tasks was obviously defined by cultural parameters, but in all traditional societies the division of tasks among specific social groups was justified not by economic matters but by referring to the religious “order of the world” (or a political one, though rooted in religion). In this configuration, labor would appear as part of a divine plan, a kind of – one might say – “calling” of a particular social group, which the individual inherits through the sole fact of being born in it, the same as others inherit other tasks by being born in other groups.²⁸³

Third, labor is related mainly to the production of food. The organization of this “production process” differs among various kinds of traditional societies; however, since the fundamental “workplace” was land, it would invariably lead to the segmentation of society into relatively independent *territorial* units, and not functional ones.²⁸⁴ Each of those units constitutes a miniature of the entire society, embracing the typical triad of “lord, peasant, and parson,” or counterparts to these categories found in other traditional societies. It is also within those territorial units that there emerge social bonds characteristic for a “traditional” type of sociality, and that labor is potentially divided into more specialized activities, including the production of goods other than food.

Fourth, territorially distinct societies are basically self-sufficient²⁸⁵ in terms of their functioning. By the same token, they are the ones creating a variant of *base communities* for traditional societies. Social integration occurs in them on the politico-religious level. We deal with the issue in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Let us only recall here that in the case of the feudal society the goal of

283 The calling to become part of a specific group can also occur through co-optation. Let us note that the concept of “the calling” has survived to this day among priests or politicians.

284 The term “segmentation” was coined by Durkheim (2013), who identified this kind of society primarily with clan-like organization of communities, although he also demonstrates that it survived until feudalism.

285 This also relates to medieval cities which – as we have already mentioned – had their own hinterland. At the same time, however, one needs to remember that their self-sufficiency depended to a large extent on natural disasters, foreign invasions, and epidemics – factors that would deplete the resources of the basic “means of production” in traditional societies, namely peasants.

that level was to break those base communities and subordinate their population to another kind of “communality” rather than integrate them into a higher kind of social organism.

Fifth, a specific form of such territorial units are cities, which developed in the feudal society since the eleventh century. What differs them from the cities that existed in earlier forms of traditional society is primarily the fact that whereas the latter were, for the most part, centers of political life and large-scale trading, controlled by the group of the highest status, which made extra profit there (and sometimes the bulk of it), the former, i.e. mediaeval cities, brought to life a separate “task team” focused on *exchange*, which, in turn, would become the aforementioned “third estate” representing – as Le Goff indicates (1992, 260) – not the entirety of the bourgeoisie but only its wealthiest or best-educated part.²⁸⁶

The Protestant ethos that emerged towards the end of the fifteenth century is basically an expression of the period’s twilight – a time when religion played the role of the fundamental factor integrating the fragmented image of reality, although (as Weber rightly observes) its emphasis on individual responsibility also heralds the later period when the character of social *praxis*, by foregrounding individual interest, seems to leave no room for the emergence of a collective “We.”²⁸⁷ Weber’s “disenchantment of the world” is, after all, nothing else than historical mothballing of such traditionalistic sentiments as faithfulness or gratitude, which lie at the foundation of a sense of community. It was no longer the community that was to assign tasks to individuals and social groups, but rather the rationally planned tasks began to determine the “community” of the company, bureaucratic organization or army. The shift from “calling” to “profession” was a move from norms determined by a moral universe to norms determined by the logic of utility.

6.3 Denaturalization of labor – modern society

In terms of all its features related to labor, the modern society that emerged in the nineteenth century stands in stark contrast to the traditional one. First, the

286 It was the revolt of the “third estate” many centuries later that put a symbolic end to traditional society, establishing the modern one.

287 Let us draw attention here to the fact that it was the persecution during Counter-Reformation that gave the Protestant bourgeoisie the character of a community not only in religious but also in secular terms, just like in the case of early Christian communes. The ethos itself does not seem to feature any elements establishing the necessity for individuals to cooperate in the realm of *praxis*.

division into those who work and those who do not would be no longer based on tasks but on the criterion of employment. In this system, those who do not work include, on the one hand, the rentier class and owners of companies, while on the other: women performing household tasks, who are commonly regarded as “unemployed,” and the new category of those who are capable of, and wish to, work but have no available jobs to take up.²⁸⁸ Second, the period saw the rise of real division of labor. All the activities related to the sustenance of human existence underwent far-reaching specialization subordinated to economic considerations; thus, labor became *employment*. Third, among those activities the production of food was moved into the background, while industrial production took the lead, with the administrative sector and services developing as well. Fourth, city became the crucial spatial form of population concentration²⁸⁹ yet simultaneously ceased to serve the function of a base community. Fifth, neither urban nor countryside areas (nor any other somehow distinguished social group) would be self-sufficient any more. A complex web of dependencies began to link all forms of spatial and social aggregations of population.

Naturally, none of these changes occurred on a one-off basis – the transition from the traditional society to the modern one took as many as four centuries, even in countries where the above transformations concluded first. The question about what started this process is one that has kept recurring in social sciences since the nineteenth century, when the magnitude of these changes was first acknowledged. Most theorists have focused on one, singled-out fundamental factor explaining the entire metamorphosis. For Marx, it was the development of production means; for Durkheim – the increasing division of labor; for Weber – the Protestant ethos; for Sombart – the rationalization of economic activities, leading to the development of bookkeeping, calculation and modern enterprise in Italian cities. Certainly, each of those factors played a prominent role in the changes that occurred between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. However, one could also indicate that each of them did appear before without triggering such a thoroughgoing transformation. The development of production means, just like the increasing division of labor, has accompanied humanity since the very beginning. Asceticism through labor constituted one of the fundamental

288 Of course, during the Middle Ages there were also poor people who did not work, but in most cases they were incapacitated by age or disability. In modern society, the unemployed have an entirely different status, which is best expressed in the concept of a “reserve army of labor” introduced by Karl Marx. Cf. also Bauman 1998a.

289 Alongside processes of industrialization, processes of urbanization are considered to be crucial in the emergence of modern society.

components shaping the Christian culture of monastic orders during the Middle Ages (Le Goff 1992). Bookkeeping and banking, which go hand in hand with economic activities, were already developed in the city-states of Mesopotamia.²⁹⁰ Finally, the period of greatest intensification of urbanization processes in Europe occurred between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries when a record number of cities were founded (Braudel 1992). All of this, however, did not erode the traditional form of sociality, which determined, for seven thousand years, the basic modes of institutionalizing labor and the dominant forms of social bonds emerging from them (in some parts of the world, the traditional form survives to this day). One could ask, on a similar basis, why it was England that became the hotbed of the new kind of rationality²⁹¹ that lay at the foundation of the new, modern form of sociality – not Italy, which led the way as far as development of banking is concerned; not Germany, where Protestantism was born; and finally, not France or Switzerland, where inventiveness blossomed, leading to the construction of elaborate, automatic toys (Bronowski 1979).

Therefore, we return to the question posed in Chapter Three where we draw attention to the fact that the mode in which the human mind – and consequently, human behavior – functions is conditioned, among other things, by the dominant form of sociality, which selects the contents created and processed by the mind, not only ideas but also new technical solutions or behavioral strategies, as well as actions undertaken by individuals. In relation to the problems considered here, it follows that any specific effects of the above factors, which are ascribed a special role in the rise of capitalism, could only transpire *after* abandoning the form of sociality proper for traditional societies. This means, in turn, that the emergence of capitalism cannot be regarded – as would be suggested by theories discussed before – as an evolutionary process of economic development, within which people, while perfecting their tools, adapt to new means of production in a learning process, while new institutions are born out of the old ones. The rise

290 The term “Babylonian capitalism” does in fact appear in the history of economy. Cf. Wojnarski 2004.

291 Ferdinand Braudel’s analyzes of the period before the fifteenth century demonstrate how much the modern rationality, which makes labor the basis of individual success, differs from the rationality of traditional society: “Potentially a pauper was the man who barely scraped a living from his work. If he lost his physical strength, if a marriage partner died, if there were too many children, if the price of bread was too high or the winter harsher than usual; if employers refused work, or wages fell – the victim would have to appeal for help to survive until better days. If urban charity provided for him, he was as good as saved. Pauperdom was still a condition in society” (1983, 506).

of capitalism had to be preceded by a radical break away from earlier dominant forms of socializing human actions, and by the emergence of such factors that would entail a profound restructuring of the psychic apparatus of individuals as well as the social bonds which link them with others.

Robert Brenner (1989) reaches a similar conclusion, when he analyzes the premises of the belief that economic growth is a “natural” effect of human orientation towards the increase of profit. He draws attention to the fact that assuming the idea of the “invisible hand of the market,” which exploits this motive of human action, entails making a series of unarticulated assumptions that have no justification in historical knowledge – assumptions about what is rational and what is possible from the perspective of social actors. As he demonstrates, until feudal peasants possessed land they could inherit from generation to generation, the crops providing at least a minimum on which to survive, and until lords had at their disposal all means of coercion, which allowed them to make a living from rents paid in one form or another by the peasants, the lords’ rationality would rather incline them to invest in the arming of troops which allowed them to both keep peasants in line and wage wars in order to extend their territories, whereas the peasants’ rationality inclined them, at best, to rebel or flee when rents soared high enough to endanger their and their families’ survival. In other words, the rationality of individual behavior was a derivative of the internal logic of the dominant form of socializing the modes of producing means necessary to reproduce the feudal society in its biological dimension.

Thus, in Brenner’s view, the basic factor enforcing changes to the rationality of survival and expansion was the emergence of a large segment of the feudal society which did not have any guaranteed access to land and was therefore deprived of certainty about sustaining its biological reproduction.²⁹² As he shows, this occurred earliest in England, where enclosures and the process of shifting to land lease began already in the thirteenth century, which led to the situation in which individual tenants were forced to compete with each other for access to land. Naturally, it was not the direct aim of English lords to introduce new ownership relations – they only wanted to multiply their profits by taking advantage of the demand for wool. Thus, they adopted means proper for the rationality of the period, i.e. began violently grabbing commons and the land that belonged

292 Before Brenner, a similar thesis was formulated by Karl Polanyi (2001), who indicates that the basic factor that initiated the “great transformation” of an agrarian economy into an industrial one was the separation of laborers from means necessary to sustain life.

to peasants. Similarly, the peasants-turned-tenants did not immediately subordinate their actions to maximization of profits. In the fifteenth century, tenancy rates were still relatively low and did not necessitate abandoning the rationality of survival. However, “as the demand for land, for food, and for raw materials thus began to grow in consequence of the expansion of population, commerce, and industrial production in the course of the sixteenth century, tenants found themselves under pressure to maintain their holdings”; they had no other choice but to adapt their production to the rationality of profit-making, “for unless they specialized, accumulated, and improved, they would fail to compete successfully on the market for leases and lose their plots” (1989, 49).

According to Brenner, it was the specificity of solutions adopted by English feudal lords to multiply profits from land that explains both why capitalism developed earliest in England, and why Central European countries would gradually fall behind economically – countries where the same goal was realized through a re-introduction of serfdom, thereby postponing for a long time any transformations of rationality lying at the foundation of economic activity. At the same time, it is crucial that the shift away from the rationality of survival to one of profit-making did not entail any fundamental change in the basic motives driving people’s behavior. Adam Smith’s claim that it is self-interest that acts as this basis could be probably true for any form of sociality. The issue is rather that this self-interest was put in the service of innovativeness and calculated striving for profit, no longer helping with survival wedded to unreflective greed (as Huizinga bluntly puts it) or the will to amass riches.

While accepting Brenner’s thesis,²⁹³ we need to remember about two important factors accompanying the discussed transformations of rationality, especially in the early stages of this process. First, the elevation of self-interest to the rank of a chief principle in individual actions – an interest subordinated to the rationality of profit-making – did not create any new forms of sociality despite necessitating the destruction of those that dominated in the past. As we have indicated before, the form of sociality is established on the basis of emotional ties, which entail obligations to a larger community, whereas being driven by profit-making demands rational calculation, which does not allow considering

293 Let us draw attention to the fact that this thesis perfectly fits all theories which claim that capitalism began with the development of cities. After all, from their beginnings, cities have concentrated people whose majority would have neither direct access to land, nor would be able to forcefully appropriate crops. At the same time, the discussed thesis offers an explanation of processes in which “urban mentality” could become widespread and permeate into other segments of society.

any other motives than economic ones. Second, calculation is an option available to those who have some, even slightest means, and believe that these means could be multiplied through hard labor and “a worldly asceticism.” It would be difficult to convince poor people who live on parish support, alms or casual labor to adopt rational calculation or begin thinking in terms of profit.²⁹⁴ As Zygmunt Bauman writes, “the premodern poor – docile, reconciled with their fate, and not believing in the possibility of changing it – remained oblivious to the promise of regular pay in exchange for submitting to factory discipline. They lived like before, as far as anyone can remember: from day to day, and in submission to acquired habits. As long as they were able to eat as much as they did the day before, which is what they have grown used to, they would see no reason to make any effort to shake off poverty once and for all” (1998b, 5).

When combined, both these factors led to a truly inconceivable exploitation of workforce, which, at the first stages, comprised mainly of poor people fleeing to cities from rural poverty. In a traditional society, “the presence of people demanding consolation and support was both a challenge and a divine gift for all others. It was the necessary component in a society where earthly life derived its meaning from the eternal one, and where mortal existence was merely a preparation for the Last Judgement” (4). In the modern society that was budding in England, withdrawing from traditional forms of helping the poor was facilitated not only by the adoption of Protestant work ethics among the middle classes, which left little room for practicing the traditional Christian virtue of charity, but also by entirely practical reasons. The rapidly developing workshops, and later on factories, demanded more and more hands to work, which could be obtained – easily and cheaply – by gathering paupers inside them.²⁹⁵

Shortage of workforce was one of the main maladies of the growing capitalism. One of its nineteenth-century ideologues, Andrew Ure, argued that the

294 According to estimates quoted by Braudel (1983, 469), in Stuart England one fourth or even a half of the population lived below or near the threshold of poverty defined by the sum equal to half of income spent on bread in a family.

295 Workshops would be often set up in shelters, barracks, and prisons, which became centers of forced labor. For example, a spinning mill was founded in a prison combined with mental institution and orphanage in Pforzheim in the seventeenth century. Its workers would also include vagrants and beggars detained in the city. Similar workshops were organized in places such as Nuremberg and Basle. One well-known poorhouse in Paris (founded in 1656) housed 560 girls forced to labor, who were spinning, weaving, sewing and embroidering under the supervision of qualified craftsmen (Maciejewski 2001, 56).

goal should be “to supersede human labor altogether, or to diminish its cost by substituting the industry of women and children for that of men; or that of ordinary laborers for trained artisans” (after Anthony 1977, 58). It was not only the cost that played the key role, but also the ease of training young people and those without habits formed by earlier labor experience, so as to adapt them to the requirements enforced by labor in the rapidly developing industry.²⁹⁶

These requirements were completely different from those that accompanied labor in traditional societies. The kind of labor that lies at the foundation of modern society was entirely denaturalized. This stems mainly from the fact that it ceased to be directly related to activities aiming at the sustenance of human existence. By referring to the terms proposed by Hannah Arendt, one could say more generally that labor was simultaneously clearly separated from work and subordinated to it. The former process finds expression primarily in the increased significance of the division between the countryside and the city, each focusing on different tasks. The latter process, in turn, is visible in the division into household and professional work. The importance of the last distinction is emphasized by Ulrich Beck, who writes that “[t]he ascription of the gender characters is the *basis* of the industrial society, and not some traditional relic that could be easily dispensed with. Without the separation of male and female roles [...] there would be no bourgeois society with its typical pattern of work and life” (1992, 104; emphasis preserved).²⁹⁷ Sustenance of “life” within a household ceased to be related to labor, as everyday activities of women were considered something obvious and unprofitable. It is the man who became the family’s only “breadwinner” – and it is his activity, related to participation in production processes, that began to be called labor. As Toffler underlines (1989), for the first time in human history production and consumption became separated.

Denaturalization of labor also stems from the fact that it ceased to be tied to the natural cycle of life, in which periods of activity are interwoven – both in daily and yearly rhythms – with periods of rest. It would be no longer a task whose goals are obvious as such because they are derived from the human condition (one needs to eat, defend oneself, as well as earn the favor of God or gods), but a dismembered set of activities whose ultimate outcome or goal cannot be figured out at all. Labor ceased to mean using tools, which constitute a natural

296 In the 1830s, the number of adults employed in the cotton industry would still amount to only 25–28 per cent of all employed (Maciejewski 2001, 109).

297 In the terminology we have adopted from Arendt this distinction is one between labor and work.

extension of the hand; instead, it started to involve the operation of ever more complex machines and equipment, in which one careless move might carry huge consequences (e.g. breaking of the machine, disability or even death). This is related not only to physical labor but also to the so-called intellectual work in bureaucratic institutions that developed parallel to industry.

One consequence of the denaturalization of labor was the rising significance of disciplining human body in modern society, along with surveillance of its functions. As Michel Foucault writes, “[m]any disciplinary methods had long been in existence – in monasteries, armies, workshops. But in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the disciplines became general formulas of domination. [...] Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). [...] If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labor, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination” (1979, 137–138). Disciplining occurs by way of disassembling the collective into individuals, whole activities into isolated gestures, and products into their constituent parts – in order to reassemble them in a new, scientifically grounded way that guarantees better organization of a given activity and increased efficiency.

Adaptation to the mode of labor characteristic of industrial society occurred primarily in schools. Alvin Toffler draws attention to the fact that the overt program of mass education was only camouflaging the hidden one, which had a far greater significance for the organization of modern society than learning to read and write, or acquiring basics of history. “It consisted – and still does in most industrial nations – of three courses: one in punctuality, one in obedience, and in rote, repetitive work” (1989, 29). Learning follows the rhythm of the bell, and its scope is determined only by the teacher, who orders children to do oft-repeated exercises meant to develop skillful hands (writing) and linguistic proficiency (reading).²⁹⁸ Any deviations from norms imposed by the school would be

298 Foucault draws attention to the transformations of the organization of classes during the transition from Jesuit colleges to public schools in France during the Empire. In the former, classes could have even a couple hundred pupils, and would be divided into ten-pupil groups, ascribed to either the “Roman” or the “Carthaginian” camp. “The general form was that of war and rivalry; work, apprenticeship and classification were carried out in the form of the joust, through the confrontation of two armies; the contribution of each pupil was inscribed in this general duel; it contributed to the victory or the defeat of a whole camp” (1979, 146). Since the second half of the eighteenth century, classes in schools were already organized in accordance with today’s

punished (physically, by sitting at a separate table, or through grades and entries in record books).

While analyzing the sense of punishment in various nineteenth-century contexts, Foucault is right to stress that “the art of punishing, in the regime of disciplinary power, is aimed neither at expiation, nor even precisely at repression. [...] The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (1979, 182–183; emphasis preserved). This norm has a specific genesis since it does not arise from a total image of the world, in which a specific place would be ascribed to particular individuals or groups, but is a derivative of utility considered from the perspective of efficiency and effectiveness. “The order that the disciplinary punishments must enforce is of a mixed nature: it is an ‘artificial’ order, explicitly laid down by a law, a program, a set of regulations” (179). Thus, the social order arising from it has to be again “normalized” or, more precisely, “naturalized.”

As we have already mentioned, the rise of capitalism was preceded by the destruction of the traditional form of socializing labor. This meant, among other things, the shattering of local communities as base communities, i.e. ones in which dominant social groups could meet and forge social bonds characteristic for the traditional society. In the slowly developing modern society it was the family that has initially taken their place. In the countryside, the family was (basically, since always) the basic unit of production. As Michelle Perrot and Anne Martin-Fugier point out, “[p]rotoindustrial development relied heavily on the family cell, on the coincidence of workplace and residence. [...] The small family business – store or workshop – is another French dream that has persisted stubbornly despite the vulnerability of small business to bankruptcy and the attendant risk of family dishonor” (1990, 116–17). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, most products in Europe would still come from workshops located in houses, where craftsmen and their families would rely on their own skills in processing of materials provided by tradesmen (Rosenberg 1986, 148).²⁹⁹

individualistic principle: every pupil would be responsible for him- or herself, and everyone would individually compete with others.

299 In order to protect their entitlements, weaving guilds forced the British Parliament to pass a special law in 1555, which allowed setting up workshops outside cities as long as they were equipped with no more than two looms and employed no more than two journeymen. In the eighteenth century, in some villages in Picardy and Artois in France, for every 100 households 90 would be entirely devoted to outwork.

With the passage of time, and along with the increase in economy's complexity, which was accompanied by the introduction of greater mechanization of labor, workshops began to be replaced by factories. In France, they would be first located close to the countryside so as to allow employing all members of the family. The "family team," directed by the father and including mother and children, provided the solution to the problem of supervision. "The mill owner himself set the example. He lived near the plant, sometimes on the factory grounds. His wife kept the books, and he invited employees to share in family occasions. Paternalism was the first system of industrial relations. Its benefits flowed to a core group of key workers whose reliability was essential. The system was feasible only where willing workers resided near the workplace. Paternalistic industrialism spoke the language of the family [...]" (Perrot & Martin-Fugier 1990, 118). One could say that whereas in the outwork system family was an enterprise, later on enterprises would become an "extended family."

Relations within those "families" were never idyllic. Especially in England, company owners would act as "punishing" rather than "loving" fathers. Naturally, it was the pay that was the basic source of conflicts. In the first half of the nineteenth century, in their attempts to increase profits, employers would not pay their workers in cash but in products. Throughout the nineteenth century, the so-called iron law of pay remained in force, along with the belief in the existence of the so-called natural cost of labor, which was supposed to be equivalent to the goods and services necessary to regenerate the employees' capacity to labor (Daszkowski 2002, 17). In practice, this meant starvation-level rates. The awareness that wages exceeding the natural cost of labor could be an incentive to increase productivity among workers, and consequently increase the profits of company owners, developed among the latter very slowly. One true "revolutionary" in this respect turned out to be Henry Ford.

As Zygmunt Bauman rightly observed, by doubling one day his workers' wages, Ford "wanted to tie his employees to Ford enterprises once and for all, to make the money invested in their training and drill pay, and pay again, for the duration of the working lives of his workers. And to achieve such effect, he had to immobilize his staff [...]. He had to make them as dependent on employment in *his* factory [...] as he himself depended for his wealth and power on employing them" (2001a, 21). Tying employees to the company was not limited to increases in pay. In the course of time, entrepreneurs would start building entire housing estates for them, opening special shops, establishing mutual assistance funds, and developing programs meant to foster healthcare and provide pensions.

This modern variant of paternalism caused the company to become the basic living environment, not only for regular workers but to all the employed,

including the owners. The certainty that employment at a particular company makes one tied to it for the rest of his or her professional life contributed to the development of what Bauman has called “long term mentality,” which boils down “to an expectation born of experience, and by that experience convincingly and ever anew corroborated, that the respective fates of people who buy labor and people who sell it are closely and inseparably intertwined for a long time to come – in practical terms for ever – and that therefore working out a bearable mode of cohabitation is just as much ‘in everybody’s interest’ as is the negotiation of the rules of neighborly fair play among the house-owners settled in the same estate” (2001a, 23). This bred loyalty, responsibility and even the readiness to make sacrifices.

This is precisely what “naturalizes” the company, turning it – or, to speak more broadly, any workplace since this mode of employment included also institutions based on hired labor other than the industrial ones – into a base community of the modern society. Labor in such places would be still organized artificially, i.e. differently than activities undertaken in private life, but thanks to school training, which would begin early and spare none, it became something obvious. Anyway, as Richard Sennett aptly remarks, “routine can demean, but it can also protect; routine can decompose labor, but it can also compose a life” (1998, 43). Thanks to the routine of social life, people can plan their individual biographies – it is more or less predictable, first, what course a particular life may take because – despite the prevalence of meritocratic rules – inheriting social status would be still strong; and second, what pace shall mark one’s career progress, due to the principle of seniority; and finally, what one might be doing after retiring because one’s retirement pension became calculable in advance.

Of course, modern society is largely structured, but in the middle of the twentieth century the place of strongly hierarchized and thus conflictual class divisions from the first stages of capitalism came to be replaced by a more balanced social system based on a social contract between capital (employers), work (employees) and the state (government). The state began to be engaged in public investments (e.g. construction of motorways, or urbanization) in order to support mass production and consumption, which, in turn, was supposed to guarantee almost permanent employment. The state would also oversee public spending (better education, healthcare and pensions), providing citizens with a relatively fair living standard, thus encouraging consumption. The legal framework regulating those relations, as well as strong institutions, facilitated stable economic and social growth. Trade unions would become stronger. With better organization, they could often wield considerable political power. Their preferences were reflected not only in labor law but also in social policy, making

them the architect and main proponent of the post-war welfare state, which strove for full employment, social security and decent pay.

However, as Zygmunt Bauman aptly points out, the concept of welfare state originated not with the desire to grant everyone fair living conditions, but with the necessity to support the unemployed, who would form a reserve army of labor “on standby.” Welfare state “was a contraption meant to tackle the anomalies, prevent departures from the norm and defuse the consequences of norm-breaking were it to happen, nevertheless. The norm itself, hardly put in question, was the direct, face-to-face, mutual engagement of capital and labor, and the solving of all the important and vexing social issues within the frame of such engagement” (2001a, 22). In other words, it was a more or less peaceful coexistence that served as the norm, arising from the awareness of interdependency. The basic indicator of the effectiveness of this form of sociality was the numerical growth of the so-called middle class.

6.4 Dematerialization of labor in contemporary society

Routine, which constitutes the basis of labor in modern society, reduced the division of labor to the categorization of actions, and in the case of unskilled labor – even to isolated gestures. The assembly line became the symbol of modern society. However, it is important to remember that routine also characterized the work of state or municipal officials and other white-collar workers. Weber’s bureaucratic organization that lay at the foundation of modern management of institutions was supposed to rationalize the use of time, which demanded the use of routinized procedures. Changes that occurred over time were either integrated into existing procedures or sparked the development of new ones.

The stabilized world of day-to-day routines began to crumble in the 1980s when certain changes in labor began to be acutely felt, although their origins went back to much earlier periods. Labor ceased to be a well-marked career path, which gave meaning to individual biographies, and began to resemble a rollercoaster ride full of ups and downs, sudden turns, unexpected events, and entailing many risks. Companies began to dismiss employees, move them to new posts, or suddenly demand travelling to the other side of the world. Large industry began to relocate factories to third-world countries, where workforce is much cheaper, while companies of long-standing tradition would bankrupt overnight. Unemployment rose, while benefits dwindled. Toffler’s “third wave” of civilization-scale changes burst into people’s lives with a dizzying force.

When considering the basis of currently experienced changes, it is usually assumed that they have been caused by the transformation of those

production processes that are related to the introduction of new technologies and methods of management, necessitated after the Second World War both by the incessant contest between communist East and capitalist West, and the recession of the early 1970s, which brought the growth of the Western economy to a temporary halt. Certainly, these factors played a significant role, but one also needs to remember that the development of production depends primarily on a sales market, which is correlated with demand. Henry Ford understood this well when he decided on the mass production of his cars, expecting that the relatively high wages he paid to his workers would come back to him as soon as those workers begin to buy the cars. “The Fordist economy,” Steven Miles observes, “was dependent upon the fact that workers had a surplus of disposable income which they could invest in the increasing diversity of goods that were being made available to them. This was a crucial development” (2006, 7). This, however, required time. As Miles makes it clear, “it was not until the 1950s that the accessibility of consumer goods began to transcend social classes and that the status-conferring qualities discussed decades earlier by Thorstein Veblen [...] came to have a more general social relevance” (8). From this perspective, the introduction of the credit card in 1950 was as momentous as the earlier invention of the steam engine. The industrial revolution gave way to the consumerist revolution, while the ethos of work was replaced by the ethos of consumerism, especially in its function of shaping lifestyles.

One could say that whereas in modernity people worked in order to earn means for satisfying their needs, the arrival of the consumerist era has made people work in order to satisfy their desires, which are “fueled” by the elaborate advertising “industry.” As Claus Offe rightly observed already in 1985, labor has been ousted from the center to the margins of individual life.³⁰⁰ Thus, it has become a subordinate element of individual biographies. Lunt and Livingstone phrase this even more forcefully when they argue that “involvement with material culture is such that mass consumption infiltrates everyday life not only at the levels of economic processes, social activities and household structures, but also at the level of meaningful psychological experience – affecting the construction of identities, the formation of relationships, the framing of events” (after Miles 2006, 9). Consumerism – or, to be more precise, its rejection – has also become

300 This is perfectly illustrated by a snippet of a telephone conversation the authors recently had during working hours. “What are you doing?” one of us asked and the other replied: “Nothing. I’m working.”

the main point of reference for mass social movements and therefore the fundamental field of contemporary political conflicts.

The subordination of the economy to consumerism was possible thanks to the aforementioned technological development, which allowed for a more flexible use of machines, swift and cheap production of short series of high-quality products, and quick reaction to market trends. This fostered a move from mass production to a model characterized by “diversified quality” (Lash & Urry 1994, 72–73), i.e. oriented towards the creation of individualized products adapted to suit the needs of various client groups and different micro markets. At the most general level of analyzes, the entirety of the processes transforming contemporary economy is often called with the overall term of a transition from organized to disorganized capitalism (Lash & Urry 1993). Whereas “organized capitalism” was distinguished by concentration and centralization of capital on regulated national markets, “disorganized capitalism” is characterized by spatial dispersion and decentralization of economic relations, freeing them from the supervision of the national state. This transition was accompanied by qualitative changes of the very nature of labor and its organizational structure.

The essence of these changes is probably best captured by the concept of “the dematerialization of labor,” which is a derivative of “the dematerialization of economy” (Goldfinger 1998, 109). The term underscores the fact that in contemporary economies labor is increasingly less often organized around the production of objects (although they still constitute a significant portion of final products), and more and more often deals with ideas and abstract things. “A dematerialized economy transforms the nature of labor and its place in space and time. Labor is becoming dematerialized, both in terms of the objects produced, and the relations between employees and their environment (including interactions among people). What is more, the change of the nature of labor and its modes is accompanied by a deep transformation of the relation between labor and non-labor activities. Traditional boundaries between the two are becoming blurred, obscuring the division between the time and space devoted to labor and those related to what people do beyond it. Labor leaves factories and offices, appropriating private space and public spaces. Once so clear, the distinction between workplace and other spheres of life, and between time of labor and that of non-labor, is becoming increasingly fluid” (Chojnowska 2002, 2).

The phenomenon of the dematerialization of labor is usually associated with the shift towards the “knowledge-based economy,” which would suggest the presence of a large intellectual load in processes of production. Certainly, adopting scientific achievements is a crucial feature of contemporary economy, but the above “dealing with ideas and abstract things” is definitely not related to

scientific ideas. Rather, it is connected with the emergence of hosts of specialists whose basic task is, on the one hand, to improve labor's efficiency by adopting the best possible uses, not of physical power, but that of minds concentrated in an organization or working for it; and on the other hand, to improve the "efficiency of consumption," which primarily means, under conditions of intense competition, finding ever more complex ways of tying potential consumers with the products of given company. That is why the basic areas of the dematerialization of labor include the activities related, on the one hand, to the management of "human resources," and on the other – to marketing.

Management naturally encompasses various indirect goals such as increase of efficiency and flexibility, decrease of costs, etc. All of them, however, are related to an assumption which forms – as Richard Sennet claims – "the cornerstone of modern management practice," namely that "loose networks are more open to decisive reinvention than are pyramidal hierarchies such as ruled the Fordist era" (1998, 48). The network structure is supposed to be more flexible, better suited to the changeable nature of tasks faced by organizations in the era of disorganized capitalism, while teamwork is supposed to match "human nature," to which the routine of monotonously repeated activities is not only degrading but also wearisome.

In consequence, the two major fields of activity in management (of course, beyond running the company and making strategic decisions) include ceaseless re-engineering of organization, focusing on developing more effective ways of building networks of connections to decrease employment³⁰¹ on the one hand, and on the other – organizing various workplace reunions and special trainings³⁰² that are not meant to develop strictly professional skills but rather foster better teamwork.³⁰³ After all, the last element demands sensitivity to

301 As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, today's large corporations list workforce among liabilities rather than assets: "today's slimmed-down, streamlined and flexible industrial plants – hungry for capital and knowledge – do their bookkeeping in such a way that employees are classified as liabilities, as a negative factor in calculations of productivity" (1998b, 5).

302 Naturally, each of those fields of activity has its own specialists; whereas direct running of the company is the responsibility of the management, all kinds of actions supposed to increase its efficiency are typically the domain of professionals employed by specialized companies.

303 As Sennett observed, there is basically no evidence that re-engineering increases the effectiveness of companies. Some even claim that it has the opposite effect, although the very fact of implementing it might increase the company's value as it testifies to changes that are valued in themselves. One could add here that trainings could

others, the ability to listen, willingness to cooperate, orienting oneself quickly in new circumstances, and the aptitude to disregard any problems that could interfere with the joint accomplishment of specific tasks.

The second important area in which the dematerialization of labor has occurred is the rapidly developing marketing. Advertising as such constitutes only a small component of it, while direct appeals to potential customers to buy specific products are merely a distant echo of the strategies that currently assume much more complex and sophisticated forms. Contemporary marketing has come a long way from creating particular needs, through developing complete lifestyles, to the crafting of “life worlds,” in which specific experiences or sensations are being sold as part of so-called experiential marketing.³⁰⁴ Today’s marketing is an area of activities based on specialized knowledge not only about human actions but also about all those elements of mutual relations between humans and culture that facilitate the modelling of these actions in various ways. Nevertheless, they are always supposed to lead clients to the shelf that contains products of a specific brand.

Both management and marketing constitute an indispensable functional component of contemporary industrial organizations, which may still be oriented towards maximization of profits, but try to achieve that goal not through production but rather employment and sales. In this they are primarily aided by the “dematerialization of labor.” Thus, one might say, with only slight exaggeration, that dematerialized labor is neither an activity aiming at the sustenance of human existence, nor one focused on production. Instead, it becomes “action” in Hannah Arendt’s sense: a unique mode of engineering “souls” and interpersonal relations.

It is worth mentioning here that processes of the dematerialization of labor understood in this way are primarily related only to certain groups of people employed in contemporary economy, mainly to the “symbolic analysts” as Robert Reich calls them (1992). It would be difficult to speak of the actual dematerialization in the case of people whose job is to enter data into computers, or deal with clients in places where products or services are sold. After all, their activity

constitute an attempt at developing communal characteristics inside a formal organization, e.g. engagement, loyalty and mutual trust, which do not arise from real cooperation but are taught through exercises done in task teams, aiming to increase the effectiveness of teamwork.

304 Along the same lines, one may argue that “Nike towns” are a reworked version of Disneyland, which would also confirm the claim made by many that today’s mass culture is covertly infantilized.

has a more concrete and less abstract character, even though it does not lead to the creation of material objects. It is in the case of such individuals as well as other categories of people entering the job market that a particular significance is acquired by the transformations of the very structure of labor organization, which departs from the traditional division of workforce into the employed and the unemployed, the latter forming a reserve army of labor.

In contrast to the economy from the period of modern society, i.e. one based on long-term, often life-long and inherited relation with the company, today's economy is based on a flexible regime of employment, involving a gradable certainty of keeping jobs, which has led to the emergence of two, fundamentally different segments of the job market: the core and the periphery (Harvey 1995, 150–152). The core is a constantly dwindling group comprised of highly qualified employees who are essential from the perspective of long-term functioning of a given organization. Potential costs related to dismissing employees from the core favor the practice of subcontracting even at the highest level, which makes the core group relatively small. Its members are full-time employees, enjoying secure status and having opportunities to participate in trainings and become promoted. Moreover, they receive high salaries, social benefits, and other kinds of bonuses. In return, full availability is expected from them.

The periphery, on the other hand, includes two different subgroups. The first is comprised by full-time employees whose skills are easily obtainable on the market, e.g. salesmen, personal assistants or workers performing routine manual tasks – chiefly the so-called pink-collar sector. Members of this subgroup have little opportunity to pursue any career, and have smaller certainty of keeping their post since a large supply of such skills makes lay-offs among them relatively easy and natural. The second peripheral subgroup includes part-time employees, temporary workers hired on subcontracts, the self-employed, and those working in several places. They are so-called buffer workers whose employment security is even smaller than that of the representatives of the other group. They merely provide workforce depending on particular demand on the part of companies, often taking the so-called McJobs: unqualified, badly paid, insecure posts without any perspective of development, although this group also includes highly-qualified specialists hired to perform specific tasks. In both cases, this category of workers is not offered any trainings or promotion opportunities, and is not given any promises regarding continuation of work (cf. also Hartley et al 1991, 5).

The flexible system of employment thus assumes two kinds of flexibility. The core employees are supposed to be “functionally flexible:” in exchange for high salaries, security and good working conditions, they are demanded to do whatever the company currently needs them to do. At the same time, however,

employees from the periphery of the job market are hired to perform specific tasks and are dismissed as soon as they are no longer necessary – in this case, we deal with “numerical flexibility.” It is crucial that changes observed in the structure of the job market are parallel to those transformations that occur in contemporary economy’s organizational structure. The economy itself is becoming increasingly polarized, with relatively few large, international corporations, on the one hand, and the other – countless small, often family-run companies, easy to found yet easily vanishing, which try to flexibly adapt to the conditions of ever-changing demand.³⁰⁵ Middle-size national companies have more and more problems with staying afloat, although they constituted the bulk of nineteenth- and twentieth-century “mature capitalism” and simultaneously the social base of socio-political relations formed within that regime.

The above transformations of the nature of labor and its structural organization have two important consequences. The first one affects mainly independent experts as well as employees of those large corporations and state institutions that are being ceaselessly restructured. Endlessly moving from one project to another, their attitudes and work habits change in a direction that Richard Sennett (1998) sees as destructive, both from the individual perspective and from the perspective of the company’s long-term interest. “The corrosion of character” involves individuals dropping such attitudes as loyalty, engagement, firmness, and being goal-oriented. They are hallmarks of long-term relations for which there is no place in the constantly changing workplace. For an average employee, working in such an environment entails being torn away from the past, lacking foothold or attachment to one’s work, and most importantly – needing to accept its chaos and fragmentation, which prevents individuals from planning their lives. Their actions cease to be tied to the company’s interest or good name, but begin to be oriented towards performing the role of an enthusiastic employee ready to accept any new challenge.

The second consequence produced by the shift to “disorganized” capitalism was the complete downfall of politics and institutions appealing to class interest. This is largely due to the disappearance of conditions favoring the development of trade unions as the main representative of working-class interests. Regardless of the reduction of that class’s size, as Harvey notes, “struggling against capitalist exploitation in the factory is very different from struggling against a father

305 According to data quoted by Kazimierz Frieske, in 1999 the job market’s portion belonging to small businesses amounted in the EU to 66 per cent, while in the candidate countries – to 72 per cent of all employed (2004, 365).

or uncle who organizes family labor into a highly disciplined and competitive sweatshop that works to order for multinational capital” (1995, 153). However, the dwindling significance of the idea, according to which representing class interests ought to be the basis of actions taken in the public sphere, was also affected both by processes of globalized change in the role played by the national state in supervising economic activity, and – or perhaps even primarily – by the structural transformations of labor itself, which, in turn, led to such changes in social relations that have made it more difficult to define individual aspirations in terms of relatively stable interests.

The consequence was that – as Ulrich Beck put it – “the people have been removed from class commitments” (1992, 87). This leads to progressing individualization, which has been enforced by the structural properties of postmodern society. Although the process of individuals being “*set free* from the social forms of industrial society – class, stratification, family, gender status of men and women” (87; emphasis preserved) was in its initial stages largely alleviated thanks to the development of the capitalist welfare state, it currently also involves (perhaps crucially) the equaling of everyone’s chance of becoming unemployed, with increasingly limited assistance provided by the state. “No qualification or membership in any professional group *can protect one from unemployment*,” Beck strongly emphasizes. “What formerly used to be a fate shared by the entire group,” he concludes, “is now [...] *distributed crosswise among biographies* [...] while a large portion of the population is at least ‘temporarily’ confronted with unemployment (and poverty)” (2002, 138 & 141; emphasis preserved).

Labor has become a rare good. As Jeremy Rifkin writes in the symptomatically titled book *The End of Work*: “We are entering a new phase in world history – one in which fewer and fewer workers will be needed to produce the goods and services for the global population” (1995, xvi). Therefore, one might say that labor is being “dematerialized” also in the sense that, along with technological progress, the scope of actions for which humans are necessary becomes narrower.³⁰⁶ More and more people are sentenced to remain outside the world of labor.³⁰⁷ They no

306 As Ulrich Beck points out (1992), housework is basically the only area in which, until recently, there was a “technological gap” which necessitated human work. However, this area has been recently invaded by “processes of technical automation,” which leads – according to Claus Offe (quoted by Beck) – to the “*deskilling of housework*” (110; emphasis preserved).

307 According to estimates of the International Labor Organization, almost a billion people worldwide are deprived of work or are forced to accept part-time employment. Taking into account that the number of people capable of working is estimated

longer constitute a reserve army of labor, but are quickly becoming a dispensable part of a society (Bauman 1998a) in which the place of the individual is determined not by labor but by consumption.

“Glorification of hired labor as humanity’s greatest calling, the condition of moral decency, a guarantee of law and order, and simultaneously a patented solution to poverty,” Bauman writes, “harmonized with the once labor-hungry industry, in which the production output would grow along with the number of staff” (1998b). This sounds anachronistic today, not only because large corporations have adopted new major sources of profit, namely downsizing (reduction of employment by utilizing new technologies) and re-engineering of organizational structure, but also because it is consumption, and not labor, that has begun to provide meaning to human activities, and to act as the driving force behind market economy. However, the juxtaposition of these two reasons demonstrates unequivocally that although labor ceases to be one of the fundamental areas of socializing human actions – since it no longer produces any bonds, creating adaptations at best – it might soon become one of the most explosive areas of human activity. After all, it is difficult nowadays to be a consumer if one does not have a job.

to amount to ca 3 billion, this would mean that one in three people around the world are either unemployed or do not enjoy full-time employment (Budnikowski 2002, 7).

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