

# Introduction

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The purpose of this book is to describe, from an anthropological standpoint, how work has evolved in contemporary European society. Particular stress will be placed on the trend to greater precariousness, which has emerged in “affluent” Europe (i.e., the north and center of the community) against a backdrop of radical changes involving the world of work and employment: the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s; the technological revolution involving manufacturing activities, which is driving millions of jobs to redundancy; globalization, at an ever-increasing pace of financial services, production, markets, strategies, and firms; changes have occurred in the pattern of society (decline of the working class, weakening of the middle class, a higher proportion of older people). The crisis in the welfare state (the United Kingdom was the first country to experience it) has brought about a radical change in the social landscape of western Europe. Full employment polices have been dropped; unemployment benefits have been reduced. As employment becomes more precarious and as layoffs are on the rise, newfangled forms of work appear (part-time, limited intime, interim, subcontracting on a large scale, and so forth) so that firms can meet the demands of free trade and the logic of competitiveness, cutting down on production and manpower costs (Gruppo di Lisbona 1995).

As work undergoes such changes and becomes a “rarer commodity,” the following issue emerges in the debate among intellectuals: Is work, up to now a core value in Western society, about to fade from the scene? As in any time of crisis, a feeling that the future is uncertain fosters the emergence of utopias. Thus, in the mid-1990s the eschatological concept of the “end of work” finds its way to a number of media-friendly philosophical and sociological essays. This blooming utopian literature forecasts a society in which man would be freed from the slavery of work, as Karl Marx imagined (Rifkin 1995). It mirrors the so-called global economic model

that, breaking with the past, would lead to a destruction of the local modes of organizing work. An attempt is made to show that the building up of work as an institution occupying a focal position is a slow historical process, set on its course by the industrial revolution and coming to an end along with industrial societies (Gorz 1989; Média 1995, 1996). The possibility is also evoked for any individual to choose an activity he finds congenial and for which, whatever his choice may be, he is allocated such a sum of money as will allow him to survive on acceptable terms (a kind of lifeline allowance, a negative tax) (Gorz 1999).

The whole issue, thought-provoking as it appeared to us, justified our organizing in 1998 (in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany) and in 2000 (in Krakow, Poland) two international workshops in connection with the biennial of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). Researchers were scrutinizing work problems in Europe, focusing on the symbolic imaginary of workers in their field, in an attempt to weigh the relevance of the very notion of the end of work. In these two EASA workshops, ethnographic surveys, carried out over a long period of time in different European societies, were presented. The surveys analyzed affluent societies, areas of the community where unemployment is endemic (the Italian Mezzogiorno), groups in society torn apart by the repatterning of industry (Welsh miners), and eastern European societies brutally dragged into a market economy with all of its well-known consequences on employment and the status of workers.

Research has shed light on the ambiguous nature of the expression of the end of work. The "end of salaried work" would be a more adequate formulation. It is understandable that the expression the end of work is widely used in a society where officialdom and the media see nothing more in work than its economic function and profitability. The end of work image appeared unjustified for a number of reasons. First, wherever a utopian ideology prevails, those who advocate a freely chosen activity financed by a "negative tax" are prone to describe it as "work." Second, it overlooks the fact that the attrition of employment in our world has brought about the growth of employment "elsewhere." As June Nash (1995, 188–211) has made clear, a working class is emerging in the Third World, while Alain Touraine doomed it to disappearance in the wake of technological progress (cited in *ibid.*, 1995). Last but not least, as they focus on the developed and affluent West, they overlook those areas in the European Union (EU) where for some time, and well before the so-called economic crisis, a structural form of chronic unemployment was officially recognized and involved 30 percent or thereabouts of the active population, as opposed to the 10 percent EU average. If utopian theories were to be believed, work would have already vanished

from those areas. The example of Naples, Italy, to be developed further, goes to show that this is not at all the case. To understand how people have managed to survive, one must look beyond statistical data and explore the underground of unregulated work and trafficking in one form or another. Hence, the relevance of qualitative investigation.

These remarks shed light on the complex nature of the very notion of work. As it referred to the end of work, in fact the end of salaried work, the most usual form in western Europe until then, utopian thinking has had the great advantage of reminding us that work is not limited to the economic sphere in which it has been enclosed by traditional Western philosophy since the eighteenth century (work to produce usefulness, and carried out by the individual worker as an obligation). Anthropological surveys, on the other hand, have for some time insisted on the necessary inclusion of work in a semantic field covering more than its economic aspect. As Frederick Gamst (1995, 1–45) stressed a few years ago, work connotes far more than the mere production of goods and services. A survey of remote societies has shown that work is indiscernible from other human activities. Production cannot be considered an economic process isolated from its background in society; nor can a producer be insulated against forces at work encompassing his area of activity (Sahlins 1972).

Work as a value has to be reconsidered so that work can be reassessed in all of its semantic complexity (Wallman 1979). Work as a reality is a complex notion since it can fit into areas in apparent opposition in the economic, social, and political fields. As will be shown further, work fits into the “formal and the informal,” the “lawful,” “semilawful,” or “illegal.” But is there really cause for surprise? Anthropologically wise, identity is built up, it is assumed by interacting material and nonmaterial factors, as Sandra Wallman and Italo Pardo will elaborate on in this book; consequently, work is to be taken in a broader sense encompassing the various compartments into which, in conventional terms, social reality is divided. These conventional terms are challenged, however, as research gives pride of place to qualitative investigation, whose objects are followed over a long span of time in various areas of the social field where they develop their activities (work, family, neighborhood).

The “moral community” of workers looms much larger than the sociological community of workers with a salaried job. A fresh assessment should be made of work carried out in areas unexplored so far. Thus, an ethnographic survey I carried out in France (Procoli 2000) among humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, where salaried workers work side by side with volunteers, shows that work does not boil down to “paid employment” and “obligation.” The sociological barriers

between workers and volunteers or, indeed, between workers and the unemployed (since associations tend more and more to provide opportunities for reconversion to the unemployed or workers on the brink of retirement) break down as all concerned work out a collective notion of what real work is, unsullied by economic profit (Procoli 2000). Reasoning in anthropological terms, and taking into account the symbolic imaginary of those concerned, it is important to look beyond hallowed sociological categories (work/unemployment, formal/informal, lawful/illegal). Thus, the loss of a job is not enough to exclude a worker from the community of workers. When Cato Wadel (1973) analyzed the figure of George, an unemployed worker of a small rural community of Canada, he showed that his identification as a worker, in the eyes of other people who had known him for a long time, as well as in his own eyes, persisted because of his long past as a logger. More recently, Leo Howe (1990) also demonstrated this, showing that in a community in Ulster, Ireland, where employment is precarious, the "deserving" unemployed still rank with other workers, sharing their ideology of individual endeavor, in opposition to the "undeserving" unemployed, frowned upon as shirkers and parasites. This goes to show that beyond the sociological divide a moral community of workers is shaping up. Such communities develop survival strategies and produce a narrative about survival by which events become meaningful for human groups and enable them to cope with the violence of extreme situations.

This book deals with work and the complex task of attempting a definition. It shows the degree to which identity (intimacy, the family) meshes with work (part I). Further contributions analyze the discourses and survival strategies developed to confront precarious employment. The situation, as employment goes, in the European Union (part II) is put in parallel with the one prevailing in post-communist societies. In the latter case, the role of memory, in a situation where a clean break has occurred in a historical process, is studied with particular care.

## **Part I: Identity and the Experience of Work**

In part I, the authors show that when the issue of the precariousness of work is examined, full account must be taken of the complex nature of identity where the professional and the personal, material and nonmaterial inputs are closely intertwined. Sandra Wallman also shows that the negative impact of precariousness is all the stronger where identity has been most heavily invested in the area of work. While prevailing ideology tends to consider social and family considerations as subservient to eco-

nomic factors, Sophie Day and Susana Narotzky lay stress on the tensions that arise as the former are made the instruments of the latter; the areas observed are as wide apart as prostitution in London and small-scale firms in Spain.

In chapter 1, Wallman points out how work is an activity made meaningful by combinations of time and identity invested in it by the worker. The disruption caused by job loss can be as much—even more—about loss of the structure of time and/or of the sense of self as it is about the crude realities of money. She demonstrates that systems (i.e., communities and individuals) characterized by diffusion and diversity are inherently less precarious than any more homogeneous, more tightly closed ones. Communities built on flexible local labor markets are better placed to adjust to the shutdown of formal employment; similarly, individual well-being will be best assured when time and identity are spread across the whole of life than when narrowly invested in a single domain.

In chapter 2, Day analyzes precarious work in an “unregulated” sector, the object of her ethnographic study: prostitution in London. As work goes, it defies description, as prostitutes cannot give an account of their activities. The lack of a social status and occupational hazards might well doom them to unmitigated precariousness. Two main strategies are deployed by sex workers, one in which work is definitely separated from all other aspects of life, the other in which both are intermingled—the relation with Wallman’s contribution on time, identity, and work is worth noting. The author shows that “career” sex workers seek a more secure and stable living as they associate with regular clients who eventually become friends or business partners, so that sex work can provide a springboard for other enterprises. In such cases prostitutes give up any notion of separating professional considerations from personal ones. Day shows that such an option is to be taken as arising in the context of a political situation in which the welfare state has been dismantled and the ideology of the “self-made” man or woman has become prevalent, that is, he or she will be able to rise to success on his or her own and will be ready to give up his or her personal life to conform to the dictates of the market.

In chapter 3, Narotzky also deals with the personal and the professional as intertwined—so they appear in her survey of the Vega Baja, near Valencia (in southeast Spain) an area of small factories and unregulated workshops. People there rely heavily on family labor, kin, and neighborhood networks to access work and labor. Following recent sociological and economic models, the area has been described as an “industrial district” where social considerations are no longer excluded from, but put to use by, the world of economy. This model is increas-

ingly acquiring a hegemonic role in the agendas of institutional policy-makers including Eurocrats or World Bank advisers. The crucial component of the new industrial district model is the concept of “social capital,” highlighted as the main asset to be developed in order for development policies to succeed. Social capital refers to the idea of the embeddedness of economic rationality within the fabric of a wider social experience. Noneconomic social relations are deemed increasingly necessary for the local establishment of dynamic entrepreneurial practices and flexible relations of production. However, the hegemonic discourse of an organic and culturally defined economic region misrepresents the harsh realities of Vega Baja. What ethnography reveals is a complex and conflict-ladden space where deep tensions are generated by the embeddedness of production relations in the social fabric of the community, the family, and the self.

## Part II: Liminality and the Narrative of Survival

Part II develops the topic of a “moral community” shaping up and producing a survival narrative encompassing values with a clear cultural profile: self-sacrifice for the sake of others, honesty, to work with a will, competitiveness, “entrepreneurialism.” The thorny problem arises from the complex relationship of such a narrative with the all “dominant ideology” (i.e., ideology of wide acceptance, as obvious and morally unimpeachable, and, to a large extent, conveyed by the mass media); it may well embrace some of its concepts; it can also twist them around or subvert them.

In chapter 4, I present an ethnographic survey I carried out in an upper-crust French institute for professional training, where middle- and high-level managers seek to retain their employability. Training courses in the management of human resources, fraught with the ideology of “happy flexibility,” provide an exceptionally good vantage point from which to observe the imaginary of a destabilized middle class. The training method giving pride of place as it does to change fosters strong group dynamics, the impact of which goes well beyond the professional goals as initially planned. Deep-set alterations in identity are thus brought about, along with the emergence of symbolic narratives and spontaneous rituals. Former equilibria may well have disappeared, professional and social life been repatterned; it does not follow that the notion of permanent adaptability has triumphed—much to the contrary. If Change (motto of the training institution) is to be accepted, it must move in the direction of higher stability and deeper entrenchment. It

may seem paradoxical that in the very place where the ideology of permanent adaptability is taught, a counternarrative of resistance should emerge. In fact, participants define of their own accord what good management should be, based on altruistic values. Within the group, they define what is evil (bad management based on individualism) and drive it away in a ritual scene evocative of the scapegoat.

In chapter 5, Richard-Michael Diedrich proceeds to a survey of mining communities in South Wales where the radical economic restructuring of the 1980s has driven them to severe unemployment, weakened as they already were by the decline of the industry over the years. In such a group, to belong to the community of “real men” a *sine qua non* condition is to have a job in the mine. The loss of such a job involves the loss of membership. Indeed, the workplace was an extremely important space for the construction of gendered difference and men who no longer worked were excluded from a prominent arena for the negotiation of male identities. The scope of this identity crisis is expressed in terms of unemployment seen as a case of liminality, or withdrawal from public life, to last forever, or the entrance into a “no-man’s-land.” Diedrich shows that the community survives thanks to a narrative in which male hegemony and work remain core values. This narrative, however, has not arisen *ex novo* since it has matured through trade union struggles against overbearing bosses in the mining industry; paradoxically enough, it borrows the values of respectability and deservingness embedded in the individualistic ideology of capitalism. Mining-community culture was constituted by a political discourse of the working class that linked lines of distinctions, expressed as class differences, with concepts of work, community, and gendered difference. So even at a time when the mining industry declines and is finally wiped out, male hegemony is safeguarded in a narrative when the community of real men—miners still in jobs or the “deserving unemployed”—have some experience, past or present, of work in the mine as opposed to “scroungers” excluded from the community, and whose inferior position is similar to that of women. It is worth noting that the re-creation of identity—eventually by borrowing elements of the dominant ideology—brings to mind some aspects of the retraining/reidentifying program that is the issue of chapter 4. The concept of work, which enabled working class men to construct positive male identities in a situation characterized by exploitation, ultimately involves negative identities when work “disappears.”

In chapter 6, Italo Pardo studies the case of Naples, Italy, a town in the Mezzogiorno, where industrial development has been low throughout its history, where organized crime is present in various sectors of the market, and the official unemployment rate is high. In such a situation,

fraught with so many difficulties, where the local powers that be are quite unable to face up to the south's crucial social problems, the object of the survey display their resilience to a surprising degree as they manage the precariousness of their lives. Contrary to derogatory stereotypes concerning southerners and despite official statistics, genuine unemployment affects only a minority—numerically slight. The present ethnographic work, grounded in episodes of these peoples' lives and narratives, goes to show that survival is built on a system of values where entrepreneurialism and mutual assistance—in a network of family, neighbors, and friends—play a key role. Given these moral tenets, work means more than a form of activity geared to material needs; it is also to be considered in a symbolic field where individuals can defy the powers that have relegated them to an inferior position. Thus, the dichotomy formal/informal, legal/illegal is denied by those concerned, even though it is used by local officialdom when describing social reality as it sees it. As they see it, "legitimate work" is to be found in a "gray area." It may be "outside" the law, but it is never seen as unlawful, since according to their moral code, organized crime alone is responsible for social evils such as drugs and prostitution.

### **Part III: Continuity or Discontinuity with the Past?**

Examining the case of workers from former communist countries (East Germany, the Czech Republic, the USSR, Poland) or migrants from those countries who have settled in the West (German Russian returnees), part III of this book shows how the very concept of work has been drastically modified as the changeover from planned to market economy was taking place. The authors lay particular stress on the feeling of insecurity brought about by the new work ideology. A repatterning of memory, as they show, helps to survive. The contrast between "before" (socialism) and "after" (market economy, a move to the West) may well be dramatic, but the way the survival narrative shapes up shows that the relationship to the past does not amount to a clean break—far from it. Thus, categories from the socialist past may be called upon to reinterpret the capitalist present and resist the new managerial policy when a firm has been bought out by a Western multinational. The ability (or lack of it) to become part of the new economy may well be attributable to varying conceptions of work already in force in a number of social groups under socialism (chapter 8). Finally, history's tragic turns and twists and the decision to emigrate are fully accounted for in a mythical narrative linking the opposite poles of East and West.

In chapter 7, Birgit Müller examines the concept of productivity in central and eastern European countries. Increasing the productivity of labor has been the prime concern in both the planned and the market economies. The aim to produce more in a shorter time was therefore familiar to the workers of the south Moravian factory who needed to adapt to the enterprise politics of their new employer, a multinational combine producing elevators. Fieldwork data from this Czech enterprise, compared to material collected in its Russian and East German subsidiaries, shows how the arguments and strategies with which the combine attempted to extract a maximum productivity from its workers at a minimum cost, contradicted the workers' socialist idea of productivity—defined as a political act of the workforce on behalf of the whole socialist society. Indeed, the combine promoted in the factory a capitalist concept of “productivity” as a category of identity and personal worth. Observing interactions on the shop floor and interviewing managers and workers, Müller finds out how workers and employees respond to the attempt of redefining their identity through the criteria of productivity and how they react to the restructuring of their enterprise as a low-cost factory, where salaries are pushed down to the absolute minimum and where a decent income can only be assured through overtime and a second job. She analyzes the active and passive mechanisms of resistance of the members of the enterprises against this policy and how the workers make use of categories of their socialist past to give sense to the capitalist present.

In chapter 8, Michał Buchowski presents the anthropological field-work he has conducted in the village of Dziekanowice in the Wielkopolska region of western Poland. It shows how different social groups within the community of four hundred people adapt to a changing economic and political situation in the 1990s. Four such social classes can be distinguished: white-collar workers, agricultural workers, nonagricultural workers, and farmers. For all of them, pragmatism is the most striking feature. However, economic, social, and symbolic assets that various groups possess shape the way people deal with a new structural context. In the process of domesticating capitalism, people develop their own strategies for survival and reshape social relations within the community. Culture and class are intertwined in a dynamic relationship and their characteristic features can be observed in various domains, such as ways of facing everyday difficulties, dependence/independence with regard to the state welfare system, the ways in which different groups perceive each other, and, last but not least, the way work-related issues are conceptualized and performed. The new economic model has

brought into life phenomena that were unknown in the socialist past, such as unemployment, migrant labor, private entrepreneurship, and hired work in private enterprises and farms, which are often expanding, deeply involved in market production, some of them in trans-national cooperation. All these factors redefine social structure, village solidarity, and the meaning and value of work itself.

In chapter 9, Regina Römhild looks into the case of Russian German immigrants who represent a specific segment in German “multiculture.” Officially, they are perceived as late returning ethnic Germans from the former Eastern bloc. Entering the German labor market, however, this privileged immigrant status enters into conflict with experiences of ethnicization, social devaluation, and unemployment. As far as men are concerned, what they chiefly experience is a drop in their professional status since their erstwhile training and qualifications are not recognized; women, on the other hand, are excluded all together from the labor market, since the new situation does not play in their favor, particularly when they have children. In everyday social practice, the Russian Germans come to represent just another clientele of post-socialist easterners, namely “Russians,” who seek jobs in the “Golden West.” The chapter explores the ways Russian German immigrants react to this precarious situation and how they themselves try to make sense of Eastern histories in relation to their presence in Germany. The author sheds particular light on their careful seclusion from other east European migrant communities. In this segregated area, leaving Russia is woven into a mythical narrative as a “transnational” move linking rather than dividing East and West.

The different ethnographic studies collected in this book may well show that the issue of work precariousness must be seen against the backdrop of societies where it appeared (its import is not the same everywhere). However, the development of survival strategies takes the necessary course of a symbolic narrative embodying the key concepts that define a group’s identity. This symbolic narrative may be developed in contrast to the discourse of the powers-that-be as they define work and divide up society, and it may challenge dichotomies such as work/unemployment, formal/informal, legal/unlawful. In post-socialist societies, threatened as they are by precariousness, survival takes the course of a repatterning of memory, where elements from the past provide explanatory clues to the present. When all is said and done, it is in all cases around a survival narrative that individuals congregate. Such a community, in contrast with the “world outside,” split up as it is, provides the tools to face up to the crisis.

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