DECENT EMPLOYMENT AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE: NOTES FOR AN AGENDA OF LABOR POLICIES IN CITIZENSHIP TERMS

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Abstract

Taking back the contemporary problems of work in terms of their actors, the aspects in which labor psychology can produce contributions and reflections are examined. The problem of diagnosis as well as that of understanding and elucidation of the limits and scope that employment policies can contain as proposals of palliative designs for processes not strictly linked to the psycho-social aspects of work, is assessed from the standpoint of decent employment

I analyze the contrast between the importance, in theoretical-research terms, of the employment model and its paradoxical extinction in terms of concrete work, which places unemployment and under-employment as a supplementary function of an absent normality. On the other hand, I present the link between work and citizenship, and the relation between work and subjectivity, retaken to set out the problem of the interdependences that can be considered unidirectionally, and therefore, become sources of impossibility or make vulnerable citizen behaviors and identitarian positioning.

Finally, I expose the results obtained from a qualitative research, analysis by categories remarks the expectations associated to work, based on forms of experience and age groups.

Key words: Decent employment; Labor Subjectivity; Values; Meaning

Introduction

Successive summits of Latin American governments converge in a condition of political agenda, whereby the priority of the region appears under the name of "decent employment". This priority, agreed by the governments, echoes with numerous documents produced in the last decade by the International Labor Convention using the denomination "worthy employment".

This brief writing aims, simultaneously, at indicating and incorporating a series of aspects that Labor Psychology can supply to the national and regional political agenda with regard to employment. As a starting point, it is considered that the construction of an agenda in this matter implies the assumption of the governmental will in connection with a problem that involves us all. Therefore, an agenda around employment and work not only implies terms but it also arbitrates means for the citizenship in this matter. And

if means are usually specified in terms of policies, programs and proposals in the relations of employment offer-demand, a recent element, like the index of labor fragility, seems to incorporate new sensitivities in order to understand the problem. In other ways, the construction of means should not be excluded from the disciplinary experience whose design can be modulated by the labor psychology, and it requires the participation of the recipient social actors, from its formulation to its application and in the permanent evaluation of its impact. The double-problematic defined by the inclusion and the integration, mounts the problem of decent employment to the organizational condition where the work is done with others and objectives are shared in.

Considerations on decent employment

What the term decent employment summons firstly refers to national states' governability itself, together with their capacity of response for two dimensions of equal importance:

1. The right to work and work's rights

Concerning the first one, the main problem is unemployment and the consequences of exclusion and direct inequity that it carries. Whereas the second, work's and workplace's rights, alludes directly to the flexible forms of offer –those that are inclined to produce the experience of labor precariousness – and to the available employment's quality.

2. Worthy work appears like a "tool" against the endemic regional problem: structural poverty and its local forms of reproduction

In this instance, the precarious networks of social inclusion are organized around the working market dynamics under different ways and degrees of intervention of state institutions. This attribution given to the "tool policies" proposes to hit on the most equitable distribution of wealth starting with the occupied population. In parallel, however, it is convenient to indicate three matters at least: certain regions' tendency to "growth without repercussion in employment", the type of social transformations that are explicitly and implicitly promoted around the wage condition in the communities structurally afflicted of "poor condition", and the institutional programs and the professional agents that will carry out a coherent system pursuing the declared objective.

In this sense, the mentioned questions are only some of the problems that decent work contains when it is offered as a solution whose remedial target reaches the most

crucial problems of inequality's effects in Latin America. But in addition to this remedy, worthy work is indeed one of the psycho-sociological components of greater affectation nowadays in the present, starting from what can be called the erosion of the employment-contract-model and the new non-institutionalized working forms.

While the condition of decent employment retakes the political-discourse emphasis on the capacity of inclusion of the labor market, the key question seems to be whether this time it will make it under conditions and criteria of participation and citizen election. Citizen and worker seem to be the two fundamental figures of the contemporary social scenario, two figures that attain –in relation to what Naredo (2001) calls the crisis of the productive working reason – to reemerge in fragmented terms, segmented by consumption and strong social distance, never equivalent in their contribution and that moving away further from the opportunity of stability and social justice.

Centrality of work, values and meanings of work

The fact of taking again the problems of the contemporary societies by the "meaning of work", of its centrality in terms of cohesion and instrumental value, reappears since the Eighties and each time with greater adherence as a formulation that turns into a group of values and a multiplicity of meanings and styles.

This way has encouraged what some authors have denominated the recreation of a third spirit for Capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2002), as well it has reactivate the tradition, non-unique in Latin America, regarding how and how much work integrated – value of socialization by and into work – and how much it has solved in instrumental terms – access to goods and accomplishment of everyday projects.

During last the five years I have tried to investigate and gauge, following the observations of Medá (1998) in France, Naredo (2001) and Blanch Ribas (2003) in Spain, what dose of suspicion we can map in this knotted discourse to an ideological form that we denominate the "work-logic" social model and the contractual format that it takes in "employment".

Work and democratic construction

On one hand, the benefits procured by work have been in the last decade prolonged and perceived in terms of "democratic construction" and "social participation", by numerous European streams and some Latin American circles, under the theoretical equivalence between citizen-worker (De Giorgi, 2002)

In parallel, we have witnessed an extensive de-regulation of work's rights in the same territories, an increase of the atypical modalities that, dividing and devastating the

norms and traditions of life worlds, reached sooner rather than later the labor identity in of each local context (Sennett, 1998).

These parallel constructions above mentioned, frequently take the condition of forgetting the genealogical continuous in which the forms of work have been generated between the '50s and the ´70s, that is to say, between self-accomplishment and oppression in work, either in the same biography or in two extreme ways of inhabiting the working world –that, paraphrasing Bauman (1999), I will denominate tourists or drifters.

Certainly, many of these constructions have not been developed without the collaborationism of specific theoretical-practical positions in Labor Psychology, and at the same time they have not stopped producing practical consequences in terms of organizational utility, social utility and authority utilization.

Consequently, we discursively and politically return to work in remedial terms, forgetting the forms of oppression and the costs of excellence by which a good part of our esteem and accomplishment was captured in the device (Aubert & De Gaulejac, 1993)

Work and labor subjectivity

A second aspect: corresponds to the analysis of the contemporary working condition, regarding the quality of labor life that is promoted or alienated in organizations and companies. A quality whose study in Labor Psycho-sociology began with the analysis of the conditions: structure-ergonomics-atmosphere (Wisner, 1998); to later incorporate those of the socio-professional climate; and afterward, in the Nineties, to visualize the forms of the harassment in the intra-organizational relation processes (Hirigoyen, 2001).

At present, the return of the authority systems in the shape of institutional violence is not the unique condition that threatens labor well-being: impersonal conduction produces in many cases the confused perception of a morally inconvenient autonomy, and other studied effects are added, like those of burning management´s ideals in the organizations (Aubert & De Gaulejac, 1993)

The counterpart is constituted by indexes and particularities of the employability –an always present estimation when developing policies of employment offer – under the traditional criteria of equal meritocratic and *clientelist* opportunity, together with the combination of new dispositions facilitated by the flexibilization, like uprooting, shadow job, dangerous work, unhealthy work (Ferrari et al, 2006).

Work and organizations

The condition of noticeable absence that today possess the structures in which working practices are produced, constitutes a high-priority aspect of the agenda of Labor Psychology. Certainly, the problem of the *organization* in Labor Psychology has drawn at least some of these during the last decade.

a. The model of the organization based on the adjustment of the actors, their relations and meanings to the market, where the organization and its workers are an effect of the integration they achieve.

b. The model of the organization as a domination system that replicates what happens in society in a universal way and without alternative. The organization is here a facsimile of the society without another entity but the reproduction of the oppressive system.

c. The model of the organization as a system of common objectives that requires interdependence, competence and functional legitimacies: an approach by which homogeneity and dysfunctional would act as normative orientation. In the latter, the organization would always be a feasible reality subject to improvement –by a Labor Psychology that pretends to represent a must will – making horizontal and standard via restriction whatever is found divergent or contradictory.

In my opinion, labor psychology has quickly solved what should be seen as a problem, and it problem is that the organization is not a previous data, the adjustment or the submission obtained is confirmed against. In this sense, to analyze the way integration is generated in the four sources of organizational power (Crozier, 1977), are a nodal part of working on the action and restriction margins that will allow us to understand the counter-intuitive effects of collective action. In fact, the problem of cooperation in what is non-common –and even in the divergent and contradictory – guides us back to the options of the integration process and to the range of uncertainty and imbalance that is necessary to tolerate and allow when a margin of freedom is pretended for the actor.

Some references concerning local studies

I propose sharing the analysis of some tendencies from the point of view of the subjects who daily confront different forms of under-employment in urban outskirts and their psycho-social consequences.

A sample of 420 subjects, collected in 2003 and 2005, in the City Buenos Aires interrogated on '*What does 'to work' mean and what do you think of when asked about work as an*'. A polysemic statements field arises, which I have grouped based on the estimations that spontaneously integrate the statements.

Table 1: Categories and values of working activity. Ferrari 2006

Answer categorization	Frequency
Subsistence	71
Accomplishment, personal development	68
To carry out a task in return…	62
To be valued by society	40
To maintain the family	33
Dignity	27
To be or to feel useful	18
Well-being – Consumption	18
Future	13
Freedom	10
Security	10

Two main directions prevail around work's value:

- Subsistence

- Accomplishment

The third form in frequency is an instrumental category:

- To carry out a task in exchange for a remuneration, money, wage, and others.

The values associated to the working activity that spontaneously appear, although low in frequency, are:

- Dignity, to feel useful, well-being – consumption, future, freedom, security.

Based on the subjective perception of standard of living, an examination of the categories allows these reclassifications:

Table 2: Categories and values of working activity and Standard of living. Ferrari 2006

What 'to work' is, according to economic condition				
	Good	Regular	Bad	Total
Subsistence	42	26	3	71
Accomplishment, personal development	40	26	2	68
To carry out a task in return…	27	32	2	61
To be valued by society	19	17	4	40
To maintain the family	21	10	2	33
Dignity	11	15	1	27
To be or to feel useful	12	5	1	18
Well-being – Consumption	11	7		18

Future	5	8		13
Freedom	6	4		10
Security	3	7		10
Frustration, dissatisfaction	15	11	1	27

After according to the self-perceived standard of living, values and their presence–absence are reflected in the three levels:

- The category "To carry out a task in exchange for…" shows the increase of marketing dimension of working.

- Values spontaneously related to the meaning of work appear with lower frequency, mainly linked to the condition perceived as regular and good.

- In parallel, the unworthy aspects of work, like frustration and dissatisfaction associated to the meaning, are those that emerge in the subjective condition; in inverse collating sequence, higher frequency appears chiefly at the good perception of one's own standard of life followed by the self-classified regular condition.

A final review

In summary, the quality, quantity and opportunity of employment can be considered goals of the public policies; but they will always be means for the job-seekers and in this sort they are subject to be evaluated in their daily effectiveness and therefore, needed of transformation and improvement. An intensive qualitative approach to the meanings of work and its incarnated values, allows us a participative condition, different from the registered in the use of those scales that measure values associated to work: an expression of work according to its daily actors.

In my opinion, work does not construct citizenship in a direct form, except when its actors are made to take part. Certainly, from their expressions we have the opportunity to know the difficulties that the dominant under-employment causes today, and how it axes opportunity to organize alternative spaces, challenging Labor Psychology and other involved disciplines also critically and reflexively accompany the conformation of post-fordist subjectivities and the effects of working in the nontraditional biographies that new forms of activity produce (Filippi, 1999).

If working consists in going beyond what is prescribed, as Dejours (1998) defines this praxis that makes subjectivity because we acquire identity in it –an identity that is still recognizable in its dissimilar contemporary forms – We have to strive for that the psycho-social meaning of the content in the definition of decent work procures in all cases a dimension of dignity in what is done, for the subject in their labor context and for the society, to which it contributes. On the contrary, it will take us to a dimension that, reactively, usually appears in numerous researches: "I am not what I do- I do not

do what I am", an inter-subjective space that simultaneously turns insignificant the produced thing as well as the producers.

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