Life-and working-design interventions for constructing a sustainable human(e) world

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Abstract: Since their very beginning, most of the "life design interventions" (which were previously named vocational guidance, career counseling or career education) developed in the 20th century, have focused on the facilitation of access to available occupational functions and, especially, to paid employment. However, the severe crises afflicting the world at present compel us to inquire in how much the current forms of work organization, as well as of the organization of the exchange of work's products, have been accessory to triggering them. These organization forms are very efficient, but have negative consequences both for the planet (pollution, depletion of natural resources, etc.) and for the self-construction and health of a significant number of workers (exhaustion, stress, sense of worthlessness, burnout, occupational diseases, depression, suicide, etc.). But work as such is much more than just paid-work. Many work activities are exchanged in ways other than monetary ones (e.g., domestic work). Work has indeed a psychological function of praxis: people seek to satisfy their need for achievement by engaging in production of goods and services. This desire of achievement and self-fulfillment through working makes it possible to develop life-design interventions that address the issue of constructing a human(e) sustainable world. Such interventions would be designed around the counselees' reflection in which their inclusion in the current world of work would be secondary to the overriding concern of their individual contribution, by their humane and decent work activities, to the development of a good life, with and for others, in just institutions, to ensure the sustainability of a genuine human life on earth.

Key words: construction of the self, decent work, ethical intention, imperative of responsibility, life-design interventions, sustainable development, work organization

Introduction

In wealthy countries, specific interventions for helping people design their occupational lives began to be implemented at the turn of the 19th century by a new body

of professionals that was formed to that purpose. Since that time, the interventions have developed considerably. First called "vocational guidance," they have been restructured and renamed as "career development interventions," "career education," "career counseling," and, at the turn of the 20th century, "life design interventions," as work and societies have been transforming and paradigm shifts have taken place in the study of human subjective identity. During such interventions, as pointed out by Alicja Kargulowa (2016, p. 19), counselors and counselees function as "reflective individuals embedded in the cultural, social, political and economic realities [who] create 'projects of being-in-the-world.'"

Whatever their names, the interventions are informed by the same notion that working is central to most people's lives. Indeed, work plays a core role in transformations of the world, in changes of humankind in general, and in the construction of individual subjectivities. But for some decades now, working (or at least certain kinds of work activities that seem increasingly common) has attracted sustained attention as an object of doubt and concern related to its effects on those who work and on the world it contributes to creating. Moreover, the contemporary world experiences very severe crises, such as staggering population growth, global warming, depletion of natural resources, increasing pollution, extinction of multiple natural species, etc. (For a review, see Guichard, 2016). In this context, an important question arises: What kind of work activities should be at the heart of life-design interventions to help people, first, deal with these crises and, second, construct both themselves and our world in compliance with fundamental principles of universal ethics?

To provide some answers to this fundamental question, this argument develops in three stages. In stage one, two concepts are discussed that offer a critical perspective on work: those of decent work and of humane work. In stage two, the literature on work is surveyed to distinguish relevant dimensions for thinking about the kind of work activity that should be at the heart of life-design interventions. In stage three, drawing on Hans Jonas and Paul Ricoeur, a general ethical principle is proposed to underpin the definition of work activities that meet all the challenges listed above and might help develop, correspondingly, questions and reflection in life-design interventions.

1. Two concepts for a critical scrutiny of work: Decent work and humane work

At the turn of the 20th century, the International Labour Organization (ILO) proposed a concept of decent work. According to the ILO (2001, 2008), decent work refers to opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. For the ILO, the concept of

decent work has a strategic objective, which is to define clear criteria for elimination of the working conditions deleterious to the health and personal development of individuals working in such deplorable settings, of their relatives and neighbors, and, more generally, of the communities in which these people interact.

In today's world, such a political agenda is fundamental. But it may be considered insufficient by those who explore the factors to be pondered by people while designing their working lives. The ILO considerations on decent work indeed seem to be focused primarily on the exchange costs of work's products. On this model, decent work means fundamentally a fair income, security in the workplace, social protection for families, and equal treatment of men and women. One of the correlates of this definition is obvious: production costs in decent work settings are higher than production costs in indecent working conditions, the elimination of which appears a prerequisite to developing a global regulation for the establishment of healthy business competition. Therefore, the ILO concept of decent work can also be understood as resulting from a compromise achieved by the partners in a tripartite international organization (representatives of governments, of employee unions, and of employers' organizations) whose priority is regulation of current international trade.

For decades, a concern similar to "decent work" has informed studies of psychologists and sociologists of work, vocational psychologists, ergonomists, and some psychoanalysts. However, these researchers have considered work from perspectives other than the ILO viewpoint. Their position is encapsulated in the title of a book published in 1950 by the sociologist Georges Friedmann: *Où va le travail humain?*, which roughly translates as "Where is human(e) working heading?" *Le Travail Humain* (Human[e] Work) is also the name of the leading Francophone journal of work psychology founded in 1933.

In this body of research, instead of "decent work," the core concept has been, and still is, that of "humane work": humane work as opposed to working in inhumane conditions. One of the concerns shared by these researchers is, indeed, what effects various kinds of work organization have on workers: Do some of them foster the workers' self-actualization (e.g., in allowing them to use and develop their competencies) while other ones dehumanize them as human beings, reducing them, for example, to a quasi-animal condition? What representations of the world, of other people, and of themselves do workers construct when engaged in a given form of work organization? How do they cope with the demands produced by their work situation? Do they develop defense mechanisms? Etc. Such issues of the organizational conditions for human(e) working open a critical perspective on work that complements the ILO's viewpoint, in which relations between the organizational frameworks of work and the construction of individual subjects are left unexamined.

These two critical views on work usefully highlight certain major characteristics of this human activity. But, in the context of the global crises that afflict humankind

today, it seems important to go beyond these considerations and examine in more detail what it is that basically characterizes work. This is, exactly, the purpose of the following argument as it seeks to identify fundamental characteristics of work on which to ground possible definitions of work contributory to resolving these crises and developing a human(e) world by humane working.

2. Selected major features of working

Building on the impressive scholarly literature on work (produced in history, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, management science, etc.; with the following studies representing the recent French contributions: Clot, 1999; Dejours, 2009; Dubar, 1998; Lallement, 2007; Linhart, 2015; Méda, 2007; Méda, & Vendramin, 2013; Rolo, 2015; etc.), the following synthetic definition can be proposed: Work is an activity that each human being has to perform in order to produce something (goods, services, etc.) that (1) is required to directly, or indirectly, satisfy one or more human needs ("needs" as broadly defined by Abraham Maslow [1954] and inclusive of the desire for personal development and self-actualization); and (2) is exchangeable for other "products" of the same nature, developed in similar conditions. Work activity – to which human beings commit themselves notably in order to fulfill their desire for personal achievement – triggers the development of production techniques, of work organizations, and of exchange systems of work and its products, all of which deeply transform the world and human beings.

In work, production and exchange are intrinsically interconnected. Because the monetary system of exchanging work for money and money for work's products has long been so prevalent, we tend to equate "work" with "paid work." Though explicable, this is an erroneous attitude. The attribute of "affording a monetary income" is, indeed, a major one when we form the category of work in our minds. Therefore "paid work" is, for us, a prototypical example of the "work" category. But this does not mean that all exchange of work happens necessarily on a monetary basis. This exchange can be informal, as is the case with homemakers, who take care of their children's education and of their households without being officially "paid" for doing it. Work can also be exchanged for recognition only, as is the case with creators of artworks that, though perceived as such in their communities, do not find buyers. Work can be part of reciprocal gift-giving exchanges in traditional societies. This is but a handful of examples. Work, thus, refers to jobs, craftsmanship, self-entrepreneurship, local systems of trade, domestic activities, etc.

The exchange of work products is neither extrinsic to production nor posterior to it. On the contrary, the form of exchange plays a decisive role in production. It is part of the goods and services produced. While particular goods and services can be exchanged within a given kind of exchange, the reverse is also true: a specific form of exchange (for example, monetary exchange within globalized financial capitalism) entails producing such and not other goods and services.

As already stated, in today's industrialized societies, the monetary system of exchanging work and its products is dominant. A distinct property of money, which is no more than objectified work, is that it is accumulable. The accumulation of money has led to considerable changes in the organization of work, to the rise of gigantic industries, and – recently, in connection with the development of new communication tools – to globalization of many exchanges. In addition, the same accumulation has engendered profit-seeking and –maximizing financial capitalism, which has powerfully affected (and continues to affect) the organization of work, as well as exchange of work and its products.

To produce goods and services which satisfy various human needs, work activity generates also tools, production techniques, and organizations of work for enhancing the work processes. Production techniques and work organization forms are gradually transformed by technological and organizational discoveries that increase the efficiency of the production process. The technologies and work organization forms are closely related. Generally, technological developments – linked to concern for productivity and return on investment – prompt designing new types of work organization (e.g., the Internet has made teleworking possible).

In contemporary Western societies, various kinds of work organization coexist. For example, there are still trades (e.g., stone-cutting) that correspond to a traditional form of work organization, while using new technologies now. However, in our societies, the most common forms of work activity are production-line jobs (of either the Henry-Ford or the U-line-Toyota type) and professional functions in work networks of various degrees of ephemerality that must collectively achieve a production target, with each networker's function specified relative to those of others.

Work organization forms determine, on the one hand, workers' activities and, on the other hand, specific modes of relationships among them. These relationships encompass, in proportions varying across organizations, cooperation, competition, domination, recognition, etc. Alongside the work activity itself, such relationships have a major impact on workers' self-construction: they can develop new skills, new interests, self-esteem, strong professional identities, solidarity values, etc.

However, the impact that work activities and the relationships they imply exert on self-construction is not always positive. Some modes of work organization seeking predominantly a significant productivity increase have a negative effect on the personal development of those involved in them: they deeply affect their self-construction by decreasing their self-esteem, generating a sense of stagnation, etc. The strikes occasioned by the implementation of the scientific organization of work by Henry Ford are well known. Workers no longer plied their trades; each of them became an operator that endlessly repeated a series of simple gestures corresponding to a workstation. Cooperation among workers and the recognition of the personal value of each, predicated on the quality of his/her work's products, were jeopardized. Today, some forms of work organization appear to have deleterious

psychological effects. They are observable, for example, in certain working teams whose organizational principle is utter flexibility. These teams are formed of interchangeable people and work routines are lacking in them while the cognitive load and the fear of subpar work (and likely the actual risk of errors) are greatly increased. As a result, the workers tend to develop a sense of doing a bad job.

Furthermore, many current forms of work organization are based on the idea that an increase in individual productivity is required to improve the efficiency of the production process: each worker is held responsible for his/her individual contribution to the collective work's outcomes. In such a setting, everyone comes to be viewed by all others – and to regard him/herself – as potentially impeding the achievement of production targets. Consequently, the balance between cooperation and competition, which generally characterizes work activity, gets disrupted as only competition matters. Many workers are beset with fear and anxiety. Afraid to fail to perform at work as expected, they do not dare to divulge their difficulties to their colleagues, who are now, more or less explicitly, their work's judges. As a result, they over-invest in work activity and become physically and/or psychologically exhausted. Thus, the likelihood of burnout and sometimes suicide or other forms of violence at the workplace increases markedly.

Today, a number of work functions are physically and/or psychologically hazardous to those that perform them. Three major types of such functions can be distinguished which could be labeled as, respectively, "nasty jobs," "bullshit jobs," and "detrimental jobs." A fundamental feature of the "nasty jobs" is that, while indeed meeting basic human needs, they place extreme demands on people who perform them, exposing them to physical effort, dirt, accident risks, occupational diseases, etc. The category includes, for example, levelling work, waste collection, slaughterhouse work, mining, seasonal fruit and vegetable harvesting labor, etc. These "nasty jobs" are usually done by people who cannot earn their livelihoods in any other way. Thus, in the past, convicts were forced to build roads or to work in quarries. Since the early 20th century, in wealthy economies, the "nasty jobs" are typically performed by new immigrants. Many of these jobs have been relocated to Third World countries with lower production costs and embryonic labor law.

Although painful, dirty, tiring, or emotionally draining to the workers, the "nasty jobs" afford sometimes a sense of pride to the people who, for the most part, are forced to take them up. They can pride themselves on rendering valuable services to the community in very challenging conditions. The feeling of pride is often manifests in collective risk-taking, as if the workers wanted to show emphatically that only collectives of exceptional people are capable of doing what they do. A famous photo of eleven workers lunching, feet in the air, on a metal beam overlooking the entire Manhattan, is a perfect illustration of such risk-taking: a symbol of the (Irish) migrants' activity during the Great Depression of the 1930s, it was published as a promotional document for the Rockefeller Center.

Another type of jobs jeopardizing those who perform them was named "bullshit jobs" by David Graeber (2013). Their major characteristic is that they consist of a set of tasks that most of those doing them evidently perceive as irrelevant to the common good and the human development. These jobs are tertiary activities, often in the general management of major companies, administrations and organizations. They involve also lobbyists, telemarketers, communications officers, editors of various pieces of texts, advisers of all kinds, and many other work functions that are even difficult to name. These jobs, which have proliferated enormously over the past decades in wealthy economies, gradually make those who perform them feel socially useless, toppling them into a latent depression.

In addition, in the same economies, there is a third type of occupational functions (some of which are outsourced and subcontracted to companies in "emerging" economies) whose detrimental effects are both more serious and more insidious. These are work activities – generally corresponding to paid jobs, or subcontracting – which, far from aiming to meet human needs, are explicitly intended to exploit and/or harm human beings, a characteristic that can hardly be ignored by those who perform them (often because they have not found an alternative for their living). Such jobs are well exemplified in certain positions in credit organizations in which employees were encouraged by their superiors (usually subcontractors of well-known financial organizations) to provide home loans to consumers, although the employees realized, first, that the mortgagers could not possibly repay their loans and, second, that schemes had already been set up to seize the mortgagers' property at cheap prices. Today, a growing number of sales solicitations resemble such dealings: targeting, for example, the elderly or people who cannot well understand the implications of the contract they sign, these solicitations are based, in many cases, on the mendacity of employees (purposefully trained to, for example, introduce themselves as offering voluntary assistance) (Rolo, 2015). Other examples of such work activities could be found in industries that design and manufacture weapons (anti-personnel mines, toxic gases, etc.) prohibited by international treaties as enormously destructive to civilian populations. Individuals who perform such activities are generally aware that they violate certain universal ethical principles, such as the injunction not to steal or not to cause death of innocent people. The well documented medium-term consequences of such work on the health of these workers include various psychosomatic disorders (e.g., severe chronic eczema), dissociative identity disorder, various kinds of addictions, etc.

Work plays thus a major role in the workers' construction of the self and affects their health positively or negatively. Therefore, it might be argued that workers construct themselves "as such," that is to say, as "such specific workers and human beings," mainly due to their work activities. Obviously, work also affects their families and the communities in which they live, notably by its products, by the income it provides, by pollution and other environmental damage it causes, by the collective activities and/or actions it stirs up, etc. In a more general way, we can say that the

world we live in is a product of the work of those who have preceded us, combined with our modest contribution.

These considerations could be succinctly rendered in two words: "Homo faber." By forging this expression, the philosopher Henri Bergson (1907) meant to emphasize that, when human beings manufacture things, they also manufacture their world and themselves. Bergson viewed the technological development as deeply transformative of humanity: there was a stone age followed by an iron age, an age of the wheel, etc. Correlatively, these transformations of the human world have continued to re-make humankind by generating new ways of thinking, being, and acting. But, as we have seen, psychologists of work, for their part, have placed a greater emphasis on work activity as being – by itself – a consequential factor in self-construction. At the same time, work activity can be harmful to the physical or mental health of workers.

3. Ethical principle for a critical perspective on work and life design interventions for sustainable development

As "Homines fabri," we live in a world of objects, goods, services, and the like, that is, in a world produced by our parent's work, plus ours. At the same time, as already mentioned, our world faces serious crises, such as pollution, global warming and the depletion of several natural resources. These crises are equally a product of work and of its prevalent exchange forms. Such crises, therefore, cast doubt on the founding principle of the current dominant exchange system of work and its products, a principle which is generally summarized in Adam Smith's concept of the "invisible hand" (1776). The coinage refers to the idea that individuals' efforts to pursue their own interests may benefit the common good more than if their actions were directly intended to promote the common good. Today, this "invisible hand" is, conversely, perceived as the chief cause of the current major world crises. Namely, in working to advance their own interests only, people tend to destroy the only planet they have.

Given such complex and exigent circumstances, it is crucial that people who design their lives develop a reflection on work and its individual and collective consequences in order to prevent the "invisible hand" from eventually leading humanity where it seems to be leading it today. But on what principle should such reflection be based? Neither of the two critical views presented in the foregoing seems comprehensive enough to cover all the aspects of work outlined above. The concept of "decent work" questions work primarily in terms of fair economic competition. The concept of "humane work" interrogates it in terms of its potential harmful effects on self-construction and health. Certainly, these two aspects are very important. But now work must be examined in relation to far broader issues, such as how it impacts the planet and what kind of human beings and what world it contributes to constructing.

It seems that the principle of such a reflection on work can be articulated in the fundamental proposals put forward by two major 20th-century thinkers on ethics: Hans Jonas and Paul Ricoeur. Hans Jonas (1979) defined an "imperative of responsibility" with a view to constituting an "ethics for the technological age." This imperative is as follows: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of a genuine human life" on earth. For his part, Paul Ricoeur (1990) stated that ethics aims at "a good life, with and for others in just institutions." If we combine these two basic ethical principles, we arrive at a norm for assessing any work activity, its products and the exchanges to which they give rise: Do this work activity, its products, and their exchange promote or hinder the development of a "good life, with and for others, in just institutions, to ensure the sustainability of a genuine human life on earth?"

This norm helps raise a series of more specific questions, such as: What tradable goods or services must be produced as a priority to meet this norm's requirements? What is the value of any particular working and of its product/s as regards, first, the subjectivity construction of the worker who performs it; second, this product's impact on others; and, third, the human (sustainable) development in general? Which kinds of work organization facilitate the production of such goods or services? Do some of these organization forms meet the imperatives of an ethics of human(e) work better than other forms do? In which trade systems can these goods or services be exchanged? Do some of these systems meet the imperatives of an ethics of human(e) work better than other systems do? As regards the monetary remuneration, is it fair or does it deprive the worker (if worker's remuneration is too low) or others (if it is too high), directly or indirectly, of some of the proceeds from his/her work? Many other similar questions could be asked.

Such questioning might form the core and axis of various life design interventions ultimately aimed to help people find their own answers to questions derived from the previous ones. During such interventions, counselors might, for example, ask counselees: "Which exchangeable goods or services that meet human needs, would you like to produce through your working activity? To what work activities (= activities that produce exchangeable goods or services that meet human needs) would you like to commit yourself? Within which kinds of work organization can these goods or services be produced? Are there other, alternate kinds of work organization? What are the known or potential effects of each of these work organization forms on those are involved in them? on their close ones? on the communities in which they are embedded? on the general development of humankind? and on the globe? Within which exchange systems can the produced goods or services fit?" Etc.

Conclusion

Since their onset, most interventions of vocational guidance, career counseling, and/or career education designed in the 20th century focused on access to the available occupational functions and, especially, to paid employment. These interventions were designed to prepare counselees to become ideal candidates for occupational selection that included them in the world of work, a world in which the concerns of decent and humane working activities and of a sustainable human development were by no means a priority.

The severe crises afflicting our world today prompt questions about complicity of work activities in their genesis. As noted, work is an activity that human beings have to perform in order to produce goods, services, etc., that satisfy human needs and are exchangeable for other "products" of the same kind. Production organization forms and work exchange systems are tightly interwoven. The monetary exchange form, which is prevalent in the world today, has stimulated the development of very efficient production organization forms and exchange systems. Yet, though effective in many senses, they bear particularly negative ramifications both for our planet (pollution, depletion of natural resources, etc.) and for the self-construction and health of a multitude of workers (exhaustion, stress, reduced self-worth, burnout, occupational diseases, depression, suicide, etc.).

If such deleterious effects of work activities on the workers' subjectivity and health are observable, it is because many contemporary forms of work organization and exchange have abolished a major psychological function of work which we could call *praxis*. Indeed, if we apply the *praxis-poiesis* distinction made by the ancient Greeks, notably by Aristotle, it becomes evident that working is not simply reducible to *poiesis*. We cannot regard working as an activity aimed solely to produce goods or services. Certainly, working is *poiesis*, but it is also, emphatically, *praxis*: a productive activity known by workers as likely to offer them a unique opportunity to construct and transform themselves; an activity, in other words, to which they may legitimately wish to commit themselves in order to fulfill their potential and obtain recognition (as, for example, someone competent) through their work achievements. But, as vividly illustrated by the Charlie Chaplin movie *Modern Times*, many contemporary forms of work organization just ignore these high expectations of self-realization that are intrinsic to working. Work is considered only in terms of the exchange value of the goods it produces while its essential function in the construction of individual subjectivities and the human(e) world is denied. It is nevertheless by referring to these major features of working that life design intervention (counseling or education) can be crafted, based on the idea that certain types of work activities are productive of goods and services that contribute to the development of a "good life, with and for others, in just institutions, to ensure the sustainability of a genuine human life on earth." This implies that these

interventions aim to promote the development of new forms of organization, distribution, and exchange of work (and of its various products).

Such life design interventions would concentrate on counselees' reflections concerning not their inclusion into the world of work as it is, but rather their contribution to transforming it by their decent human(e) work. In this way, life design interventions would embrace the task of *Transforming our world* expressed in the title of the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, unanimously adopted on 25 September, 2015. In doing so, they would follow the principle which Jacobus G. Maree formulated in conclusion to his 2013 book on counseling: "None of us is defined by our circumstances. Quite the contrary! We should actively strive to overcome barriers, to master what we have suffered or are suffering and eventually turn our condition into victory" (Maree, 2013, p.116).

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