

Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



The Changing Meaning of Work:

Implications for the New Society

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Summary

At the end of the twentieth century, not only the problem of unemployment persists and is worsening from a quantitative viewpoint, but the very meaning of work is changing. The problem appears in terms of rendering the concept of work itself empty and useless to the point that the foundations of that specific “civilization of work” which have characterized modernity must be abandoned.

In this contribution, the author discusses these results as problems inherent in the socio-cultural conception of work inherited from the historical-social formations of the past. The current changes in the meanings of work are analyzed as well as the impact of these changes on the re-organization of the whole society.

The underlying thesis is that work continues to be conceived in a mechanical and abstract way and its nature is never analyzed as such. Therefore, a great part of the remedies proposed to combat unemployment are sterile or have perverse effects.

The author attributes this situation to the lack of recognition of the fact that work is, before all else, a social relation. The secularization of work has accentuated the lack of a relational vision of work, with the consequence of generating contradictions, perverse effects, and related new social wants. On the other hand, however, precisely the crisis of the secularized cultures of work is leading to a re-definition of the humanistic approach to work.

The contribution proposes a new conceptual framework which will let us understand the meaning and functions of work in society today and in the near future. Understanding work as a social relation opens up new horizons for the twenty-first century.

1. Work/unemployment as a socio-cultural problem

1.1. At the end of the twentieth century, the problem of unemployment appears in entirely new terms. The foundations of that specific “civilization of work” which have characterized modernity must be abandoned and, with them, the conceptualization that has been made until now of unemployment.

The unemployment issue is not only imperative because of the fact that international statistics show that the phenomenon persists and indeed is worsening on a worldwide scale in all its forms (ILO 1997). Nor does the new feature come from a renewed awareness that unemployment is the product of profound social injustices and that it leads to socially disastrous effects inasmuch as it includes social exclusion, breaks down the fabric of human relations, and erodes the bases of social solidarity. We already knew all this, although recent research has provided new evidence and shed light on new manifestations of these general processes.

What makes the problem of unemployment radically new is the fact that, in it and through it, an epochal historic change is revealed that is upsetting the entire working world and with it the whole of society. The quantitative-qualitative characteristics which unemployment is taking on reveal: i) that a process is underway of *making work precarious on a universal scale*; ii) that the traditional boundaries between work and non-work are falling or shifting and, more generally, that *radical changes in the connections between work and social action* are emerging.

If we continue to be prisoners of the old work/unemployment dichotomy, meaning “real work” as a stable, regular, long-term occupation, and unemployment as a lack of “real work”, we will find ourselves in a situation filled with unsolvable paradoxes.

These paradoxes cannot be taken care of with *lib-lab* solutions (a mix between liberalism and socialism), i.e. through remedies based on balancing de-regulation (freedom, flexibility) and re-regulation (security, control) of work among the state and market actors.

In this framework (*lib-lab*), despite all the efforts made, unemployment continues to increase. We have to ask ourselves then if the conceptual framework in which the problem of work is understood and tackled is not intrinsically distorted or at least insufficient. In my opinion, the answer must be affirmative. In order to understand the new terms of the unemployment issue, it is necessary to redefine work, but in order to do this, it is necessary to get out of the cultural framework in which modernity has conceptualized work.

In this contribution, I do not intend to make an inventory, not even in a synthetic way, of the literature on this subject. The task I have set for myself is to redefine the object field in a dual sense: (i) on the one hand, from a negative viewpoint, I would like to put the framework up for discussion which currently dominates the subject of work/unemployment; (ii) on the other, from a positive viewpoint, I would like to support the thesis that the search

for remedies to the problem of unemployment ought to be entrusted to approaches and instruments that consider work as a fully and properly social activity. [1]

In other words, I intend to tackle the theme of unemployment starting from the problem of the meaning of work. The theme has been somewhat neglected in the past two decades (Castillo 1997). Only recently has this theme recaptured some vigor (Casey 1995; Gamst 1995; Simpson and Harper Simpson 1995; Morandé Court 1998). I would like to show how and why the struggle against unemployment will depend primarily on the way in which a culture understands the *meaning of work*, and the implications that are drawn from this for the organization of society.

1.2. The problem of a lack of work is defined today essentially in terms of economic scarcity. Everyone holds that certain and satisfying work is becoming an increasingly scarce resource and chance in life. With regard to this observation, two theses are competing in this area.

i) On the one hand, there are those who hold that precisely because “real” work is becoming increasingly scarce it is becoming ever more important and discriminating in forging the destinies and life processes of human peoples. Unemployment is seen above all as a problem of social justice in the distribution and redistribution of resources and thus as a problem of social struggle, especially on the part of the disadvantaged (youth, women, professionally unqualified social groups) (Pahl ed. 1988; Kieselback ed. 1997).

ii) On the other hand, there are those who hold to the contrary that we are approaching “the end of the society of work” (*Arbeitsgesellschaft*), [2] or the “end of work” (Rifkin 1995) in the sense that the plan of a society “centered on work” would be worn out. Those who support this thesis – which is presented with many, different formulations – hold that it will be necessary to abandon the concept of work and they propose to go on to the concept of “activities” or similar (Dahrendorf 1988). The unemployed (those who are dismissed from the system of “real” work) could be eliminated by giving value to the activities of all kinds of a non-competitive character, with a different production logic from those proper to the “central” occupational sectors of the past (well remunerated and guaranteed in terms of their security), and by giving more importance to what is called “active *otium*”, to free time, and to the quality of life outside of work (not oriented toward work).

Who is right? Obviously the confrontation between these two theses must be set up correctly. In order to do this, the meaning of work to which we are referring must be clarified. The authors are not always explicit in this regard. The debate is often set up badly because cultural conceptions of work are used which cannot be compared. And then, what sense is there in defining work as a scarce commodity that should leave room for “free activities”?

If the traditional meaning of work is kept as defined in the Taylor-Fordist industrial society, it is obvious that a problem of scarcity exists. But we must ask ourselves if only that

type of work is “real work”. The first thesis (which is widely supported by the labor unions) keeps the modern conception of work: this can be necessary for societies in the process of modernization and still in the stage of industrialization, but it is no longer suitable for societies that are already modernized. The second thesis proposes to abandon the concept of work as a required activity and exalts flexibility and creativity, but it often seems to speak the language of a culture that has nothing to do with work because it refers to expressive activities or to economically marginal occupations which do not seem capable of supporting an economy of real development. Those who support this second thesis look toward a society that is hardly decipherable in terms of human characteristics.

In this contribution, I would like to support a *third* thesis different from the two that have just been mentioned. Against the first thesis, I observe that the transformations of work in the advanced economies are radical today to the point that it is becoming unavoidable to abandon the modern definition of work. Against the second thesis, I observe that the concept of “activity” amplifies and differentiates the concept and reality of work in a morphogenetic way but it cannot substitute it. The society of the future will be one which will stress even more than in the past the importance of work, but for this reason the meaning and form of the work will have to be radically changed. This will have enormous consequences on the system of social rights connected with work and on the whole configuration of the society. The area of choices and tensions is marked by the alternative between mass unemployment and the liberation *of* work (and not the liberation *from* work).

1.3. The red thread running through the arguments presented here is the following. First, it is a question of understanding unemployment as a specific product of modern culture (which has “invented” work and unemployment as mechanical and abstract categories), in order to see if the categories of work/unemployment can be redefined in a context of post-modernity (Part 2).

Second, I will analyze the cultural and structural changes of work which are underway today in the more advanced societies and their possible impact on the reorganization of society. I hold that the differentiation of the cultures of work and in particular the division between secularized and humanistic cultures will become a central feature in the arrangement of society (Part 3).

Third, I will develop the basic argument of my contribution. My thesis is that whereas *in the pre-modern eras* work was principally a servile activity of organic interchange with nature, *and in the modern, industrial era* above all a marketable performance for the production of goods and services in the sense of “objects” (manufactured goods, artificial constructions), *in the post-modern era* work is taking on primarily a value of social relation in that it is given value because of the relational qualities it offers and implies, and, as such, is differentiated into different activities. This is true both for those who work and for those who enjoy the fruits of work, and also for the forms of interaction-intertwining between producer and consumer. Of course, the preceding cultures are not absent and they continue to characterize the more traditional segments of the advanced societies and broad strata of

peoples in the societies in the process of modernization. But work is differentiated in various cultures that are asymmetric to one another, derived from a process of social morphogenesis of work that is both cultural and structural beyond the industrial organization of society. In order to compare and evaluate the new cultures of work, it is necessary to grasp the basic criteria with which each of them evaluates work in relation to the broader array of spiritual and material criteria that characterize each culture (Part 4).

The conclusion of the present contribution leads to holding that if the prevailing conception of work continues to be that of the industrial era, as is still the case in a great part of the world, the problem of unemployment is being tackled with old instruments that are characterized by the search for new forms of regulation of the interests and transactions between economic and political actors, moving in the intertwining relations between state and market, which are intrinsically inadequate to face the problem of unemployment (since they deal with unemployment as a mechanical issue disembodied of social contents). In order to face the structural and cultural changes underway adequately, a new framework is needed which will consider work as a reciprocal activity between subjects interacting as producers-distributors-consumers in a “civil” economy (civil here means generally capable of civilization, and not equal or synonymous with the so-called third sector).

Substantially, my thesis is that with the decline of the industrial (Fordist) order regulated by the post-war welfare state, the progressive reduction of Fordist work will not mean the “end” of work nor the exaltation of free time and volunteer activity, but the redefinition of work as a significant, communicative activity in highly differentiated production-distribution-consumption networks whose dynamics we must understand.

2. The modern culture of work and the phenomenon of unemployment

2.1. We must start from the fact that unemployment is not a “natural fact” but a social construction. How and why is unemployment socially constructed?

In his/her natural condition, a human being is *naturaliter* led to carry out activities from which he/she derives the support necessary for his/her existence. When human beings do not find the resources in nature, they create the instruments themselves for facing their needs. If they cannot do this it is because other human beings impede them from doing so by appropriating resources or creating social bonds and barriers.

We can also say that whereas work is a natural activity for a human being, and as such a need and a resource that is not scarce, it is the society that gives shape to the conditions under which work can become a need and a scarce resource. This was both the “discovery” and the construction of modernity (Rousseau, Marx, etc.) which should not be forgotten. In fact, the concept of unemployment was unknown in pre-modern societies and was born with the modern era. Also in modernity unemployment has been continuously redefined in its symbolic and technical references (in that it must always have the character of a non-voluntary condition).

2.2. Through very complex historical processes, which I do not have time to mention here, [3] the conception of work comes down to us with characteristics which we can summarize as follows.

- a. *The modern culture of work exasperates its own contradictions and loses its assumptions.*

Modernity has introduced profound tensions into the meaning of work in that it has detached it from community activity and made it a commodity. Taking away from work a great part of the social mediations which it brings along with it has created the figure of the abstract worker ready for any use whatsoever. This conception, which has developed gradually, has exasperated conflicts, ambivalences and contradictions inherent in work. Concretely, it has accentuated the ambivalence between the instrumental and expressive components of work, between the abstract search of evaluation and the practical devaluation of its human aspects; it has made the contradictions grow between work as a functional service and work as self-realization of the subject, creating an antithesis between the abstract work which produces values to be exchanged and concrete work which produces values to be used.

The debate over working time (number of working hours) has always been emblematic in this regard. The requests to reduce working hours on the one hand and for greater flexibility in working time on the other reveal all these conflicts.

In any case, today we are witnessing the rejection of these conflicts. Behind this rejection can be seen the *end of the assumptions that have supported the specifically modern culture of work*. We can mention three fundamental presuppositions.

First: Whereas the pre-modern societies treated work as a social relation in which the private and public spheres met and overlapped (community activity), modernity has invented work in its purest form, cleansed from the elements of other areas of social action and functions. It concentrates and polarizes work in the public sphere as opposed to private life. Enormous tensions are then generated between public and private life. One sign of the crisis in the modern order lies precisely in that fact that today society is asking for work to be reconnected to private life in a significant way. New relations are originating between the working sphere and the sphere of private life. New tensions are growing up between the working sphere and the sphere of private life which manifest needs for connections and interactions which modernity has denied or simply forgotten. We can no longer return to the *Gemeinschaft*. However, it is obvious that present-day work rejects the “public” characterization of abstract merchandise which it took on in the classical capitalist era. Work is becoming once again an area of encounter and overlapping between needs of private and public life.

Second: The hierarchy between “humble” and “noble” work proper to the ancient cultures which was reflected in the majority of European languages (*ponos/ergon*,

labor/opus, travail/oeuvre, labor/work, Mühe/Werk, lavoro/opera), was leveled and even upturned subsequent to the affirmation of the Protestant Reformation, the theoretical elaboration of the political economy, and the bourgeois revolution. As Saint-Simon said, the imperative is to struggle against the parasites, against those who do not work, against the dominion of the unproductive classes. As Durkheim would say at the end of the nineteenth century, it is the division of work (“organic”) that becomes the principal source of social solidarity. In the place of the seigniorial ethic the universal work ethic takes over which requires specialization. However, over the course of the past three decades, this culture of work has also begun to decline. Both the Socialist and Marxist labor ideology, which personifies work in the social type of the “worker” and the functional vision of “organic” work have entered into an ever deeper crisis (the “de-motivation”, “allergy”, “refusal” to work have been spoken about). The modern ideology which saw the primary and almost absolute reference point for personal and social identity in work and the only claim to legitimate belonging in society (Accornero 1980) is undergoing a radical breakdown and is no longer at the center of the cultural system. From being a duty, work is becoming a right. However, the point is that the worker is becoming problematic as a measure of the human person’s value and as a title for his/her recognition as a member of society. The modern anthropology of work is no longer sustainable and must be substituted in line with the idea that work is not man’s essence but one of man’s essential dimensions as a relational being.

Third: Modernity has given shape to work following a type of rationality aimed at the goal composed of the *technical* component (pursuit of the goal in the play between man and nature), and the *strategic-economic* component (pursuit of the goal in the play between economic actors). Marx made a distinction between these two processes by calling them respectively “*work process*” and “*evaluation process*”. He shows how modernity makes them interdependent and concomitant. Today, however, they tend to be more and more differentiated, and this puts the modern conception (going back to Marx and the socialists) in crisis which makes salaried work (in the opposition of salaried workers vs owners) the paradigm of the micro and macro sociological arrangement of society. The economic rationality of the firm and the market no longer represents the paradigm on which the whole society can be shaped. In other words, work and the position of workers in the production process are no longer considered the fundamental organizational principles of the social structures. The dynamics of societal development are no longer conceptualized in terms of consequences of the intra-entrepreneurial power conflicts extended to the entire economic system. Social rationality can no longer be defined on the basis of the “labour” model which conceives of it as the optimization of the relationship between technical-organizational means and economic ends.

- b. *Unemployment appears less and less as a “functional” phenomenon and more and more as a paradoxical phenomenon.*

If it is true that unemployment is only one chapter in the more general history of labor, then it can be instructive to see how the meaning of unemployment changes gradually as the culture of work changes.

Modern economic theory conceives of unemployment predominantly in a “functional”

way in that it refers to those workers who must be dismissed for reasons beyond their will and which are technically related to economic progress (such as the adoption of new technologies, the restructuring of firms, etc.). However, since their number and the problems which they raise are becoming a “social problem”, the “functional” considerations of the economic theory no longer hold and must be put up for discussion.

In a technical sense, the term ‘unemployment’ – as defined by the international organizations (cfr. EU Report 1998) – appears at the end of the nineteenth century. [4] It refers to a condition of having lost one’s job in a particular social structure and culture. The social structure consists of a real and proper labor market that is formally free and with a high social mobility in which work can be obtained and lost. The bargaining is rather relational (Williamson 1985) but this relational quality is reduced to utility. The culture requires work to be conceived as a buyable and sellable thing, negotiable, like a transformable activity in an acquisitive sense (so as not to be bound to ascribed, affective, particular, local and community oriented characters). If there were a social regulation capable of impeding these structural and cultural characteristics, unemployment would become a different thing.

We know that in certain societies, unemployment has been reduced or even formally annulled through the use of totalitarian political power (such as in the former USSR). But this way of proceeding has led to catastrophic economic results (low salaries, low productivity, low consumption, etc.) and, above all, it has devalued the meaning and ethic of work. In the market economies, unemployment has been kept under control for decades through systems of social security which have tempered its negative effects, both through income compensations (checks or other benefits) and through incentives for re-employment (professional retraining and up-dating, fiscal breaks for firms, etc.). The fact is that today these welfare state regulations are becoming more and more costly and problematic. Their marginal utility is decreasing. The experience of the states with a neo-corporate welfare regime shows that despite all the efforts of public support for employment, the hopes of entering or re-entering the “central” labor market are diminishing day by day. By becoming a structural phenomenon, unemployment reveals social paradoxes (Accornero and Carmignani 1986) which can be synthesized as follows:

- There can be economic development even without greater employment; on the contrary, in the advanced economies, the fact is becoming normal that economic growth is accompanied by an increase in unemployment;
- To the extent that work becomes less central in the system of social compensations, there is the paradox of the growing feminization of work. Obviously, women’s entrance into the working world has been a largely positive fact and useful for their emancipation, but one must ask oneself why (and with what consequences) women are massively taking on jobs that have been abandoned by men (often those which are less remunerated and less protected);
- The equation “unemployed=poor” is no longer true; to be unemployed no longer necessarily implies a state of material poverty; on the contrary, the category of poor employed persons is growing; this highlights, contrary to the prevailing cultural

representations, that work does not have primarily an instrumental valence;

- The interaction between the supply and demand for work shows traps and contradictions often due to the rigidity with which it is pursued within the industrial model. A new *job competition* opens up then which requires greater degrees of freedom and a much more elastic contractual set-up than in the past in which the working condition is no longer marked by having/not having a job but by the need for diversified, alternating phases in life, made up of numerous transitions between formation-work-other activities; this only increases the sense of uneasiness, anxiety, uncertainty and fear of unemployment.

It is clear that it is the concept of unemployment itself that needs to be redefined and re-regulated. We can only get out of these paradoxes by changing the concepts of social development, of relations between the labor market and other spheres of life, and of social rationality; in brief, the systems of exchange on which work in a broad sense is organized. The need is manifested above all to build production-distribution-consumption networks in which each one can be more of a subject, both as producer and consumer, or as both together (*pro-sumer*).

c. *The cleavage is surfacing between secularized and humanistic cultures of work.*

Modernity leaves us heirs to a fundamental conflict in the meaning and the experience of work: the conflict between secularization processes and humanization processes. Let us clarify the terms of this discussion and the meaning of this confrontation.

Along general lines, a culture is secularized if, and to the extent that it is opposed to a religiously inspired culture. 'Secularized' means that which is not concerned with spiritual or religious affairs (i.e., purely earthly, worldly) and which therefore sees work as an activity that has no religious valences or foundations. A secularized culture is led to subject work to the market or the state as opposed to the orientations of religion. There is no doubt that the modern culture of work has basically followed this direction. However, it does not seem, despite the many positive fruits there may have been in the past, that the final outcome is satisfying. If work is deprived of transcendental (religious) meanings, it loses something which is essential to it in order to produce meaning and, in turn, to make one act with meaning, and to regenerate one's motivations and ability to project.

Undoubtedly, the secularized conceptions of work have won out over the other cultures of work. Today, however, the process of the secularization of work shows profound signs of crisis, especially because the motivational and symbolic bases which favored it are falling short.

The secularized cultures are finding themselves before a crossroad: they can take the road of a further secularization or become de-secularized. Both of these ways are in action. The first follows the direction of a "secularization of secularization" which leads work to be depreciated as a place of humanization. The second way is a re-enchantment of the world, and with it of work, which leads to a new concern for the "other" cultures of work which understand it as a naturaliter human activity, which attribute intrinsically positive, and not

primarily instrumental meanings to it, but which express primary needs of the human being and of society. These are the humanistic conceptions of work which consider it as a non “surmountable” condition for the human being, albeit historically modifiable, and as such essential – in every place and era – for the development of the person and as a title for belonging to a society (in the concrete social formations in which this work is done). The guiding distinction of the humanistic conceptions lies in the vision of work as a social relation in a full sense, and not only in its economic valence (as in the secularized conception). A culture is humanistic if, and to the extent that it values the properly human elements (subjective and intentional) as opposed to those characteristics which are not distinctive of the human species but can also pertain to other living beings or machines (such as physical strength or mechanical skills).

The West has interpreted and constructed the *humanistic/non-humanistic* distinction with a specific interpretative key: namely, the distinction between a value orientation and an instrumental orientation. So, we say that a culture of work is instrumental (oriented to instrumental rationality) when it essentially sees work as goal-oriented to instrumental and consumer purposes, such as income (economic power) and social prestige (status symbol), with connected fringe benefits, consumption and free time. On the other hand, we say that a culture is value oriented (to substantive rationality) when it sees values in work itself which express and realize the humanity of the person and the common good. Work is a good end in itself (creative activity), for the subject who does it and for others (it is an end that serves other persons and other ultimate ends – not mere situational purposes –, not purely abstract and instrumental but goods of substantive rationality).

The modern era has only theoretically given value to the humanization of work while in practice it has denied it. The conflict between humanized and non-humanized work is surfacing today precisely in the form of the death of a dream (especially Marxist), that of a synthesis between nature and humanity mediated by technology (the so-called “technological humanism”).

2.3. For the purposes of the arguments presented here, it can be useful to try and make a conceptual classification. A secularized culture can be oriented both in an instrumental and a substantive sense, and the same is true for a religious culture. If we intersect these two distinctions (secularized/religious, instrumental/humanistic), we have a space of attributes with four cells: secularized-instrumental, secularized-humanistic, religious-instrumental, religious-humanistic.

The historical examples of the cultures of work can be placed in this space of attributes. In particular we can say that:

1. in the *secularized-instrumental* box we can place those cultures which see a pure material fact in work of a “biological” exchange with nature, both with regard to the society as a whole and to the individual worker (a great part of positivist and Marxist thinking) [5];

2. in the *religious-instrumental* box we can place those cultures of work which consider it as a religious duty and, in any case, not expressive of a process of humanization (see the Protestant ethic according to the Weberian interpretation);
3. in the *secularized-humanistic* box we can place those cultures that see essential and positive values for humanity in work, without any transcendence (here many interpretations of nineteenth century liberal and socialist thinking and certain Marxist versions are placed, not least of which are those which combine Marxism with humanistic currents, such as Catholic-Marxists);
4. in the *religious-humanistic* box we can place those cultures which consider work as a *link* between the human and the divine, as a place and means of humanization which is not opposed but rather leads – through works – to God; here the post-Vatican II Catholic ethic is placed.

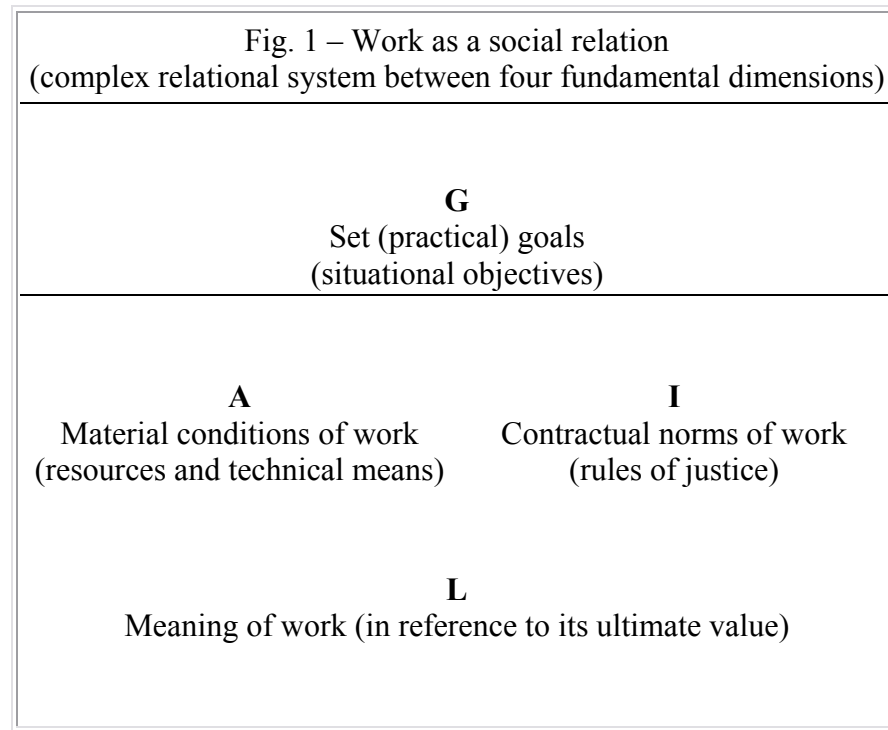
From the empirical viewpoint, we observe that cultures 2 and 3 show a high instability; they tend to be polarized toward cultures 1 and 4. The religious-instrumental cultures (such as the Protestant ethic described by Weber) tend toward the secularized-instrumental type or, albeit to a lesser extent, toward the religious-humanistic type. The secularized-humanistic cultures tend to accentuate their secularization or, although to a lesser extent, move toward a new religiosity.

This indicates that the more important distinctions pass through culture 1 (which I will simply call *secularized*) and culture 4 (which I will call simply *humanistic*). This is the distinction that guides the modern evolution of the culture of work and comes down to us in the distinction between:

- a. *a secularized culture* which understands work as a merely instrumental activity aimed at deriving resources from it for a decent or more decent life; according to this point of view, work shall be done unless these resources can be obtained in another way (such as the enjoyment of a revenue or the availability of welfare benefits);
- b. *a humanistic culture* that understands work as a finalized, subjective activity, with a human meaning rooted in the spirit and which a person cannot do without, not only and not so much because of an abstract social obligation, but rather because the lack of work decreases or leads to the loss of one's own humanity; this kind of orientation, although it can abstractly be aimed at immanent values, implies a vision of the human person as a subject capable of transcendence.

The mixtures between these cultures are always possible, but the distinction is essential in order to understand the phenomenology and the different outcomes of two paradigmatic ways of seeing work which are embodied in complex, empirical systems (organizations of work) that are entirely different. We can analyze them by means of an outline (Fig. 1) which interprets work as a social relation with four dimensions: the material conditions (resources and technical means), the practical goals (situational objectives), the contractual norms (rules of justice), the meaning of the activity in reference to its “ultimate”

value.



The secularized and the humanistic cultures do not differ from one another so much because they propose different material conditions and different set goals. In fact, both aim at improving the material as well as physical conditions (see the ergonomic studies and the concern for a healthy working environment, etc.), and the technical means. The set goals of the practical activity (the objectives, the work plans, etc.) are also shared to a great extent between secularized and humanistic cultures.

What clearly distinguishes the secularized culture from the humanistic culture has to do instead with: (i) the subject of work, (ii) the characteristics of the work relations (in reference to the conception of commutative, distributive and redistributive justice and thus to the contracts), and (iii) the meaning of work (in that it is linked to the ultimate values of the human person).

In fact, *the secularized conception* sees the subject of work in the individual as such and/or in the collective organizations; it has a utilitarian conception of the work relation (and thus of justice and contracts), and it values work in relation to the self-realization of the individual as such. *The humanistic conception*, on the other hand, sees the subject of work in the person as an individual-in-relation to “significant others”; it has a conception of the work relation as a “total social fact” (which implies a substantive conception of justice and of contracts aimed at fulfilling basic human rights-duties), and it values work as a common good, indeed as a relational good. Therefore, it maintains the importance of the primary and secondary social bonds, and of the intermediate social – also labor – formations because it holds that if the person is not integrated socially, starting from the enterprise as a social

organization, the person's problems of humanization are not solved and thus the first end of work is annulled or distorted.

2.4. The different visions of unemployment can be understood in the light of this framework. In the case of secularized visions, unemployment is the result of a play of utility. In the case of a humanistic vision, unemployment is the symptom of a moral distortion in society.

To use the words of A. Margalit (1996), a society is decent if it does not humiliate the man who – in his work – depends on another man. In a decent society there can also be exploitation of the worker (limited to the material conditions, set goals and contractual conditions), but not his humiliation. To not humiliate him, the worker must be recognized in his dignity as a person.

In my relational approach, this requires work to refer to the human person and thus to be understood as a non-instrumental fact but one with a properly human ultimate value. A society becomes ethically *civil* not only to the extent that there is no humiliation but when, between those who give and receive work, there is *reciprocal promotion*. This means that the contractual conditions of work and its compensations must be set up in a fair way.

In the area of the cultural and structural contradictions proper to modernity, unemployment is both a manifestation and a need to overcome the conflict between secularized and humanistic visions of work.

Is it necessary to work? Only for income or for individual self-realization? But if the instrumental goal of income can be obtained in another way, why is it necessary to work? And if one can realize oneself in other ways, why is it necessary to work? It is on this frontier that the present-day debate is being waged.

2.5. It is worthwhile mentioning the fact that these dilemma are running through the Christian world itself, since its beginning.

To make a long story short, let me recall that, between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, we see a deep gap.

On the one hand, the Protestant ethic considers work as a task (*Beruf, calling*) imposed upon man as a servant of God. In the Calvinist version, it evaluates man and work on the basis of the results interpreted as an external sign of salvation or condemnation; it considers unemployment (like poverty) as a sign of personal inability (*blaming the victim*), and in this way gives a strong and concrete impulse to the so-called secular activities.

On the other hand, the Catholic ethic considers work as a task required from man as a

child of God; here *the human vocation encompasses the professional vocation*; this view evaluates work for its subjective moral aspects (intentionality apart from the results); it gives an ethical evaluation of work which subordinates market criteria to non-market criteria; it considers unemployment (like poverty) as an ethical failure of those who have a responsibility to create and/or give work, and thus it requires the social subjects to make efforts to give work, although not forced and unproductive work, to those who have none. Nonetheless, it has the limitation of proclaiming an a-historical notion of work and of considering it again – in an Aristotelian way – as “inferior” to the activity which is carried out by those who have made the choice of the religious life.

The subsequent developments, which have been delineated since the 1960s until today, lead to differences and some convergences.

The differences between Protestant and Catholic ethics are found in the fact that whereas in the Protestant world the theology and ethic of work have been increasingly secularized (Seligman 1992), in the Catholic world a new social doctrine has grown which recognizes an essentially positive character of work to the point of describing it as a divine *co-creation* and a specific way of sanctification. This way is distinct because of its charisma from the strictly religious way (conceived as detachment from the world, *contemptus mundi*), but it is no longer connoted as lacking in religious commitment since work itself – as a laic activity - is a divine vocation. [6]

The convergences are found in the common evaluation of work as an instrument of social progress and peace (US Catholic Bishops 1986; Schasching 1998; Carlotti 1998). However, in these convergences, it is not always clarified that the secularization/humanization division is not external to the Christian world as a whole but runs through each of the Christian Churches to the extent that they accept the compromise between liberalism and socialism (*lib/lab*) or, on the contrary, tend towards humanistic alternatives.

On the practical level of economic activity, it is noted that the different religious denominations continue in any case to support different business ethics (Kennedy and Lawton 1998).

Perhaps, new solutions to the contradictions within the Christian culture are beginning to be seen only today when it is necessary to overcome the dilemmas that arise when one is confronted with the choice between the traditional religious asceticism that seeks salvation “outside of the world” (mystical practice proper to monastic Christianity), and the intra-worldly asceticism that seeks salvation in the transformation of the world (proper to some secularized or utopian currents). Differently from the past, in recent times *a new way has been opened*: the salvation sought in the sanctification of work as a place and occasion for encounter with God, but as children and no more as servants. This way does not coincide with a kind of Christian blessing of capitalism. It cannot be limited to showing the reconcilability between the Catholic ethic and the spirit of capitalism (Novak 1996), but rather it should propose a vision of work that is profoundly different from the capitalistic vision. It is a question of creating a culture which is both religiously inspired and has a

secular, but not a secularized vision of work.

The English language is not very sensitive to the distinction between 'secularized' and 'secular' which has been developed in the Latin world. Whereas in the Anglo-Saxon language 'secular' is opposed to religious (the layman is made similar to the non-believer), in the Latin culture the concept of 'secular' is not opposed to the religious but indicates a Christian lay person who sanctifies him/herself in the world through work by means of an *ultra*-worldly ascetical theology (Del Portillo 1969). This is an enormously important point because it indicates the guiding distinction of a new way of living work that goes beyond the dilemmas of modernity.

3. Current changes in the meanings of work and their impact on the reorganization of society

3.1. Modernity has created unemployment through a specific secularized-instrumental culture of work and a related social structure. There is a rather close correspondence between conceiving of work as a service by an abstract individual (which can be bought and sold on a formally free market) and considering unemployment as a functional need inherent in the division of labor (social stratification). Today we are witnessing the crisis of this order, although it is very far from being surpassed. We ask ourselves whether the problems historically generated in this way can still be tackled with the cultural and structural instruments of modernity or not.

The response can only be complex but, in a rather substantial way, I hold that it tends to be a negative one. We are in the presence of new interactions between cultural models and organizational structures, mediated by the interactions between social agents-actors, which are completely changing the scenario of the meaning and functions of work and thus of unemployment. [7]

Social studies show that three major processes are underway: the end of the Taylor-Fordist division of social work, the end of the cultural metaphors that sustained industrial work, *the emergence of a new subjectivity of work*. Let us take a look at them in a very synthetic way.

- i. The process of morphogenesis of the work structures in the industrial organization (social division of labor, according to Marxist terminology) and in society (division of social labor, according to Durkheim's terminology) occurs roughly in this way:

(T1) given a structure of the micro (enterprise) and macro (societal) economic system, modeled on the Taylorist and Fordist organization,

(T2) through structural interactions between roles and organizational systems,

(T3) there is a passage to new work roles and organizational schemes and thus to new

professions which become less and less hierarchical, dependent, specialized, and rigid, and more and more circular, autonomous, adaptive and flexible.

The social division of labor that results from this is no longer polarized between capitalist and proletariat (as in the time of the first industrial revolution), or stratified between white and blue collared workers (as in the time of the great organization), but rather takes on a reticulated character made up of interactions and interdependencies between work roles which are both relatively more autonomous and yet more inter-related than in the past, within a vast network constituted by highly “de-centered” communications and transactions.

- ii. The cultural modifications follow a considerably analogous morphogenetic process in the sense that:

(T1) starting from a general cultural system inspired by the metaphor of the machine (Rabinbach 1998),

(T2) through interactions with new cultural models which are inspired by values, representations and non-machine-like metaphors that use a symbolic language which is less instrumental and more expressive,

(T3) there is a passage to new ways of understanding both the meaning of work (as bearer and solver of subjective needs) and professional identities (more fragmented but also more autonomous).

Modern culture loses its “center” and becomes highly “dis-located” (Featherstone 1995) and this is reflected on the working world. If the private spheres (such as those of the family and of living worlds) are de-institutionalized and fragmented, this also has enormous repercussions on work institutions. Work becomes generalized and differentiated: now the generic term for work includes both employment and occupation, in the sense of a professional activity (EU Report 1998, p. 45).

- iii. How do the agents-actors change in these processes of structural and cultural morphogenesis?

The surveys on personal satisfaction and the subjective meaning of work reveal how the agents-actors modify the structures and cultural *patterns* through their free, conditioned acting. In general it can be said that:

(T1) in the starting situation, the agents-actors are inserted into an industrialized system which strongly conditions their values, desires and expectations in a “mechanical” sense,

(T2) through their interactions, the agents-actors create new more competitive, free and participative relations,

(T3) and then there is a passage to a situation in which the agents-actors are decidedly more demanding and re-oriented with respect to the former order; the agent-actor is less tied down

than in the past, more mobile and at the same time more insecure, more inter-active, more oriented to the quality of life and the quality of work, the product and consumption.

Objective and subjective transformations of work, on the micro (enterprise) level as well as on the macro (economic system) level, change the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of work (Perret 1995). The orientations, attitudes and expectations are transformed in at least three fundamental directions:

- a. the preferences grow for autonomous and atypical work, or, where work is dependent, the needs increase for a broader autonomy, even if this includes in fact a greater inter-dependence and often has the danger (or hides the existence of) new dependencies;
- b. the expectations grow for more creative work;
- c. the preferences grow for a more balanced relation between life-work in terms of time and transactions (with less asymmetries) and with more reversible and less traumatic passages between the two. Work, from a specialized service functional to mere production, draws much closer to a paradigm of subjectively intentioned action with a social valence.

In brief, the morphogenesis of work expresses tendencies which lead work in the following directions: from salaried to autonomous; from abstract to concrete; from rigid to flexible; from instrumental to expressive; from individually useful to socially useful; from being measured in terms of quantitative time to terms of qualitative time.

Work no longer takes its value from the amount of hours it incorporates (as in the manufacturing-industrial era of Marx), but from the incorporated human quality (quality of the worker and the product, including technical perfection) and thus from qualitative time in the sense of attention, creativity, development of human skills and sensitivities. Quantitative time is certainly reduced both because of the processes of automation and for the purpose of distributing it among more subjects. But the quantitative time is reduced above all because the value of work depends more and more on the way of living time on the part of the subject who carries it out with respect to the conditions of the working process and the use of the final product.

In the economy of information and services, a new “subjectivity of work” is emerging in the sense that work is becoming a protagonist no longer of a salaried, proletarian, passive, aided society but a society of producers—and—consumers with higher subjective needs for self-realization and influence on the economic processes. The guiding criterion for these changes lies in shaping work in such a way as to obtain qualitatively better products from many important viewpoints, both on the side of those who work and those who use the product of the work.

From many viewpoints, a new anthropology of work is making strides which places in synergy the immaterial (intellectual) dimensions and the practical (manual labor) dimensions, the managerial and executive dimensions, among which a circular interaction is

set up which was unknown in previous eras. Work can be oriented more toward the wholeness of the human person in a way that was not possible (nor was it socially requested) previously.

3.2. The current processes of morphogenesis of work have enormous repercussions on the more general social organization and in particular they bring about (Fig. 2):

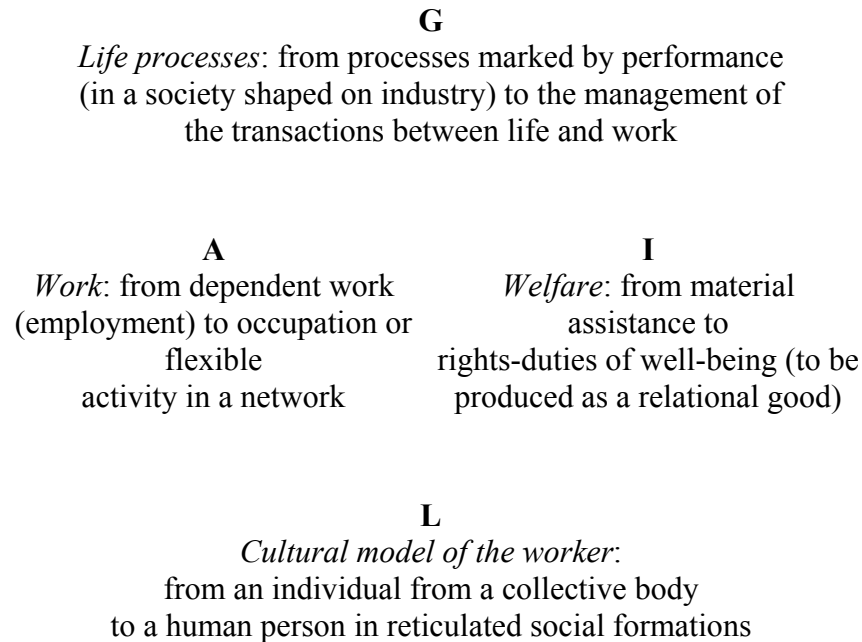
- The de-institutionalization of life processes (professional and non-professional) which formerly conformed to the sequence: formation→work→retirement; alternate periods become possible, new interactions and reversibility between formation, occupation and non-working time; the phenomenon exalts the diversity of occupations, makes the processes more uncertain and the stages of transition more critical, but it also constitutes a *pool* of new meanings and opportunities for work; work now requires more personal, entrepreneurial spirit and a greater capacity to handle risk;
- The end of the “labour welfare state”, i.e., the model of a social state which had its reference-basis in work for access to the institutions of social well-being; it becomes necessary to think of a progressive detachment between work and guarantees related to human and social rights (Martini 1999);
- The end of the vision of the worker as an individual from a collective body and the emergence of a new vision of the worker as a personal subject with reticulated social formations; from the language of needs there is a passage to a language of the worker’s human rights-duties.

The triangle formed between occupation, life processes (professional and non-professional) and welfare rights typical of the industrial order is being radically changed. In the new order these three poles must no longer correspond to the functional primacy of work, but to the rights-duties of the human person. The fundamental need becomes that of “personalizing the person” of the worker (and thus the personal freedoms and responsibilities with the connected risks).

If there is an authentically human meaning in the growing need to personalize work, this meaning is to be seen in the new relations (input-output and trade-offs) between these four polarities: work, life processes, welfare, human person (Fig. 2). The instrumental dimension (A) is no longer the guiding criterion that gives meaning and norms to the other relations; it must put itself in relation to the cultural model of the worker subject (L) who takes on a guiding role in the post-Fordist order of society.

More generally, every term in the discussion takes on a relational character. The *work-welfare link*, for example, changes because the relations change between the other terms of the discussion such as between the definition of a worker and of life processes.

Fig. 2– The old and new shape of relations between work and societal organization



3.3. How then is the current day meaning of unemployment changing and the ways in which the social and cultural systems try to tackle it?

Unemployment is taking on many faces and many meanings. [8]

First of all, it is necessary to make a distinction between unemployment as a lack of work due to entirely involuntary external constraints (e.g., being fired), or due to subjective needs of the worker in one of the life transitions or transactions between work and other activities (but always of an involuntary nature). The collections of official statistical data are still not adequate in order to grasp these distinctions. There are different forms of unemployment which require differentiated evaluations and interventions.

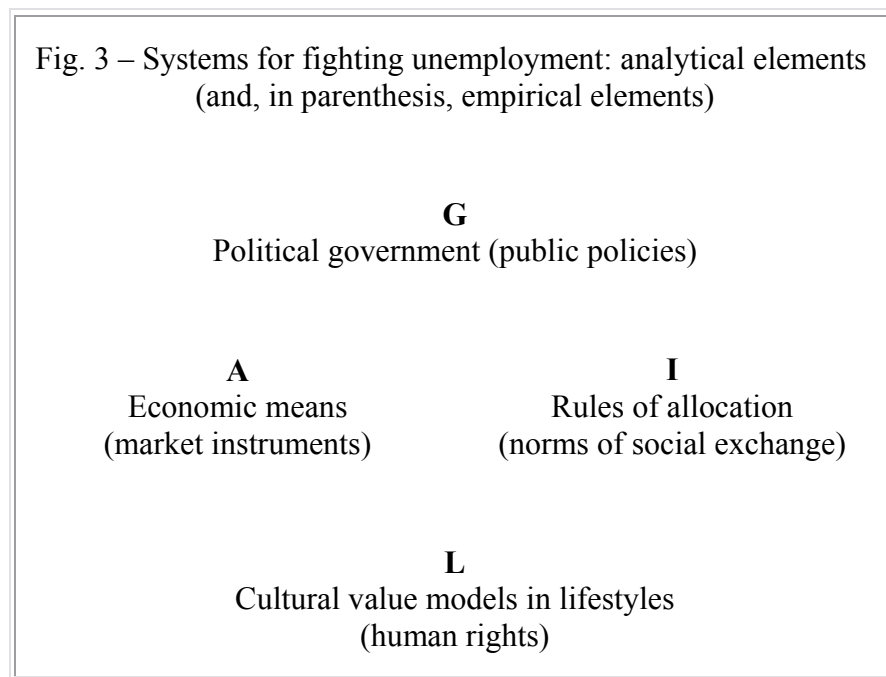
Next, it is necessary to make a distinction between the subjective experience of unemployment (feeling excluded from work and the social consequences of this), and the collective experience (or the collective representation) of unemployment: How are the unemployed culturally defined? Once they were seen as “lazy” and “undeserving poor” (this characteristic is still strong in countries with a Protestant culture). Today we are more inclined not to look down on the victims but rather to have pity on them or draw up new rights related to the different situations of unemployment (courses for professional re-

qualification, professional counseling services, allotments to temporary support their income, etc.). With regard to the meaning of work, it is decisive whether these rights are recognized as a gracious concession from the social state or, in following the principle of subsidiarity, represent the fruit of a mature civil society which draws them up and manages them on its own. In any case, we must make a distinction between the unemployed in a strict sense (involuntary) and those who have no work because they refuse it (those who exclude themselves from the working world such as vagrants or the voluntarily homeless, etc.), thus removing themselves from the rights-duties of social solidarity. We still know very little about the so-called “cultures of non-work”.

Since in a considerable part of the industrially advanced countries unemployment is no longer synonymous with poverty, a distinction must be made between the poor unemployed and the unemployed who are not poor because poverty and unemployment are the result of different living conditions and processes.

In what way and to what extent does the configuration of systems aimed at fighting unemployment (Fig. 3) take these distinctions into account?

It could be said rather little, although research is under way which is attempting to select the figure of the “(true) unemployed at risk”, i.e., at risk of social exclusion. [9] We are interested in particular in understanding the role of culture (meanings of work and unemployment) in the ways of combating unemployment.



The remedies for unemployment:

- a. can all be internal to each sub-system (A,G,I,L); for example, everything can be entrusted to the public policies (G) or to the market (A), or wage on norms of social

exchange (I), or on the enforcement of certain lifestyles (L); this way is the least valid because it is entrusted to only one dimension;

- b. two or more of these sub-systems can be combined; in fact, the predominant solutions today foresee political regulations of the market in the search for a balance between social guarantees and freedom of initiative; these solutions have a limited validity because they do not change the normative and cultural assumptions at the origin of unemployment;
- c. all of these dimensions and their relations can be taken into consideration; in the most complete case, the political regulations of the market refer to norms of exchange between the subjects of work and to cultural models in work and life styles; these are the most valid solutions.

In principle, seeing unemployment as a cultural fact derived from the adoption of certain lifestyles and evaluating it as a product of particular rules of allocation in the social exchanges can be just as, if not more instructive than considering it simply as a functional need of the market or a failure of the system of political government.

3.4. There is much discussion about whether there is a universal “right to work” or not (Archer and Malinvaud eds. 1998). This is mentioned in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948 (“Everyone has the right to work, to freely choose his/her profession, to fair and advantageous working conditions and to protection from unemployment”), and in a similar way in many national Constitutions and international treaties. But the question, “Is there a right to work?” still raises more doubts and perplexities.

Jon Elster (1988) voiced the thesis according to which there is not and cannot be a “right to work” as a positive right. His argument is that in order to show that a value ought to be given as a right, it would be necessary to show that it is individually possible to do so and that this value is so important as to have priority over other rights that are opposed to it which could be created. The reasoning he uses in order to verify this possibility is based on some restrictive premises. First, real rights are only those produced legally by democratic decision-making processes (Elster excludes the natural human rights) and concretely the right to work is a problem of an intersection between democratic theory and the theory of the welfare state. Second, the right to work can only be justified on the basis of the demonstration that it has a priority value different from that of the right to have an income because of the fact that it provides advantages and responds to needs that come before a simple income, such as esteem for self and others, social contacts needed for social integration, a non-alienating structure of daily life, and the self-realization that is required by human nature.

On the basis of these assumptions, Elster argues that: first, the right to work cannot be a legal right (imposed by law) because this is not compatible with the market based on contracts between individuals; in brief, the argument is that democracy cannot be reduced to

a welfare state; second, in his opinion the empirical surveys say human nature adapts both to work and to non-work and so the primary advantages invoked to justify the right (self-esteem, social integration, etc.) are not necessarily ensured by work.

His conclusion is that “the right to work that could be created is not a right that may be worthwhile having”. I personally feel that this position is very debatable. One could agree with Elster about the fact, conceptually and practically, that the right to work is not of the same kind as the rights to welfare. [10] This certainly has to do first of all with a moral right. However, the fact that it is primarily moral does not mean that it is abstract nor that it cannot be expressed in economic and political measures and hence in juridical norms too. The fact that it is primarily a moral right does not mean that there are no concrete subjects who ought to observe it and make it observed. It means instead, and properly speaking, that it has to do with a human right in the sociological meaning of the term.

In the light of my outline (Fig. 3), the limit of Elster’s argumentation lies in the fact that he seeks the remedy for unemployment only through economic (A) and political-juridical (G) instruments, completely apart from the social problems of justice (I) and the cultural models, the life styles and, in the final analysis, the human rights (L) which are made residual and purely derived from the economic and political-juridical needs.

It is obvious, however, that human rights do not work alone. They are references for the other components of the systems for fighting unemployment and thus constitute only one element which must be combined with the solutions in the other sub-systems. In this light, then it also becomes clearer that it would be better to speak about a “duty of all the social subjects” (firms, state, etc.) to ensure the conditions that give value to work instead of speaking about a “(subjective) right to work” as an abstract right which has no concrete empirical reference responsible for guaranteeing it. In the same way a “subjective right to health” cannot be spoken about, but rather a duty on the part of society to ensure the environmental conditions and the health services necessary for combating the absence of health. To speak about a right to work implies recognizing a right of the social subjects to give value to all the relations that create work and not only to regulating their effects (we have yet to understand how a *promotional regulation* of all forms of work can be made).

It is here that the *cleavage* between secularized and humanistic conceptions of work comes back into play.

One must ask oneself whether the market system of work can be “goal-oriented” to human values and rights, or whether it ought to be left to the evolutionary logic inherent in the economic system.

The answers which scholars and governments give to this question are still very ambiguous. To a great extent they mix a purely adaptive (functional) vision and a finalistic (humanistic) vision which cannot be really reconciled. It often has to do with rhetoric which, behind a veil of humanistic appearances, hides a substantial functionalism.

a) The adaptive (secularized) vision sees work as in instrument for objectives which,

although they may include meta-economic ends (such as social cohesion) are nonetheless evaluated in an economic way. Even when cultural models referring to the person and to human rights are spoken about, they are interpreted economically. Along these lines, work is only an expression of human energy which can and must be made more efficient through more suitable instruments, and this can also be avoided if an individual possesses a patrimony or sufficient benefits to live without working.

A great part of the logic regulating work and the struggle against unemployment follow a *lib/lab* mode (Donati 1998) of compromise between freedom and social justice (or security) which has as its objective-guide a further modernization of work (including the forms of so-called black, underground, gray, informal and often illegal work). This is the apotheosis of neo-functionalism: “A l’avenir, une capacité d’adaption accrue sera la clé du succès” [In the future, an increased ability to adapt will be the key to success.] (European Commission 1998, p. 7). But what does the “ability to adapt” mean?

When the *lib/lab* model tries to take the meaning of work into consideration, what is looked at is still and always the economic (rules of the market) and political (interventions by the welfare state) mechanisms; therefore, the discussion about the meanings of work disappears in the solutions proposed as remedies for unemployment. New slogans are coined which have, not by chance, the character of oxymorons, such as “flexible rigidity” (coined by Ronald Dore in reference to Japan), or counterpoints to the right to work such as the “right to leisure” (Lafargue and Russel), or the “right to active leisure” (Domenico De masi).

The fact is that the secularized approach does not know well what *human* meaning to give to work. This vision thus ends up giving work the character of a mere social obligation (the English case and the Dutch model are two current examples), or it virtualizes work in that it refers to the worker as an impersonal subject who must be available and adaptable in everything.

b) The finalist (humanistic) vision sees work as a social activity among subjects who are in relations of exchange. Work is considered rather as a means but with particular qualities and a dignity of its own within a more complex relational system of action. Work is first of all a moral right-duty of the person, and society ought to give it value as such, and not subject it to adaptive processes which are extraneous to it. The meaning of work is not to represent man’s end but, on the contrary, to manifest his being (work is for the expansion of the human person and not vice versa). The relations with the life processes and with the welfare measures should not introduce new forms of alienation but, at most, tend toward the liberation of work in the form and content of a promotion of the auto-teleological subjectivity of the human person (Wojtyla 1995). Work is thus configured as a “system of meaning” and as a crucial relation for the fabric of the community (Zampetti 1997). In the end, this perspective says that there is an urgency to the task of analyzing and understanding the interdependence and interplay between market and society and to regulating markets *so that they can do what they are intended to do* and can be prevented from unintentionally – and unnecessarily – generating tragedies

Today the discussion about work and unemployment is becoming more and more a question of a confrontation between the secularized interpretation (*lib/lab* order based on social guarantees for a freedom seen as “freedom from”), and the humanistic interpretation (which claims an order of substantial justice in which freedom will be configured in a positive sense, as “freedom to”, according to the well known distinction made by Amartya Sen). The “third way”, theorized by Anthony Giddens and Tony Blair, is an example of a *lib/lab* conception, whereas the social doctrine of the Church is part of the humanistic alternatives. The difference lies in the fact that whereas the “third way” is a mix of capitalism (*lib*) and of socialism (*lab*), the Catholic social doctrine proposes an order that transcends both liberalism and socialism.

4. Work as a social relation: new horizons for the twenty-first century

4.1. In a broad sociological perspective, work (as an occupation) can be defined as: (i) *a personal activity aimed at a socially useful purpose, (ii) on whose realization depends the obtaining of resources for living for those who do it and/or for those to whom this subject may wish to distribute them.* The definition seems obvious but it is not by any means. It places the emphasis on two characteristics, one general and one specific, which are put up for discussion.

i) There are some who deny, in theory or in practice, the goal-oriented character of work by saying that it is only a functional service (performance), a kind of vital extrinsic expression (this is the nucleus of the secularized approach). There are those who recognize the finalist character but see the purpose only in terms of instrumental compensations (money, prestige, etc.), i.e., they adopt a utilitarian ethic. On the other hand, there are those who recognize that work is a human action and thus have recourse to a non-utilitarian ethic (this is the nucleus of the humanistic approach). The latter holds that, properly speaking, the ethic begins where and at the moment when the human being conceives of his/her life – and thus of work – as a task (Utz 1998).

The merely empirical observation that many persons – the majority according to opinion polls (see the reports of the *International Social Survey Programme: ISSP 1997*) – are not aware of the ethical character of work but only consider it for its usefulness, does not belie the sociological definition of work that I have given it. For this it would be sufficient to analyze people’s lives a little more in depth from a sociological viewpoint. This can be seen, for example, in the research on the effects of unemployment which shed light on the drama of unemployed persons precisely as a burning out of their moral life (see the investigations by Kelvin and Jarrett 1985, Kieselbach 1997). In a complex society, it is the lack of work which shows the ethical contents of work *a posteriori*.

ii) The characteristic that distinguishes work, among all the goal-oriented relations, or the specific characteristic that guides its meaning (guiding distinction) is the fact that obtaining the resources necessary for living depends on this activity. If this were not the case, the activity would not be work but another type of relation.

Up until now there has been a direct connection between work and resources obtained directly in the market relations, although they are regulated by the political system and channeled by collective organizations, such as labor unions. The new fact is that the connection is becoming less and less direct (on the market) and increasingly indirect, i.e., mediated by a third party. A third party assures the obtainment of the resources for living at certain conditions. In the past decades, the role of this third party has been taken on by the welfare state but it has absorbed too many functions of guarantee and mediation, generated perverse effects, and has problems of management today. Could there be other agencies, mechanisms or relations that would take on this role? I think that precisely on this point we are witnessing the birth of a new societal configuration. Work cannot be detached from its goal-oriented character in order to obtain what is necessary for living, but the connection can be mediated by new systems of social relations which will reshape the freedom of work on the one hand, and security in life on the other through new associative subjects which are different from the state.

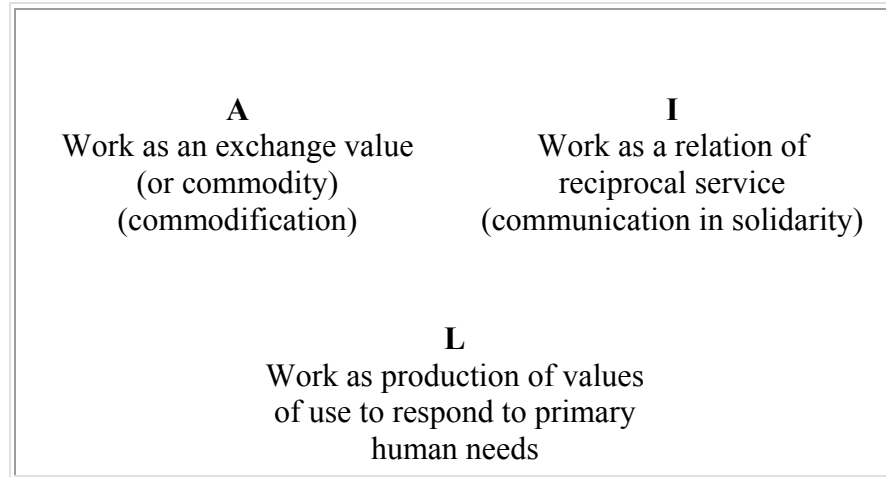
My thesis is that the post-modern era will tend to put more and more emphasis on the relational aspects of work both — so to speak — the “*external*” aspects (visible in the relations of exchange), and — so to speak — “*internal*” aspects that have to do with the fact that the goal of activity and the way of doing it are socially mediated through the subjectivity of individual persons (and are thus much more difficult to see).

In order to present this vision, I will use two arguments. The first concerns the empirical transformations of work as a social relation; the second has to do with the current morphogenesis of the professions.

4.2. In a general way, work is being transformed because its boundaries are shifted and intertwined with activities that do not fall within the modern definition of work. We are going toward a kind of society in which a plurality will co-exist of theoretical conceptions and practical cultures of work competing with one another. They can be distinguished and classified on the basis of the meanings that stress: work as a value of exchange (commodity), as an activity that is legitimized for political purposes of de-commodification (goals non-conditioned by the market), as a communicative relation of reciprocal service, as a virtuous action that responds to primary human needs (Fig. 4). In this last meaning a certain process of cultural and perhaps also religious re-enchantment is revealed.

Fig. 4 - Differentiation in the meanings of work

G
Work as an activity that gets value
from extra-economic ends
(political de-commodification)



Interpreted in an analytical sense, these meanings correspond to four fundamental dimensions of work as a social relation. Everywhere and in any case work implies – even only in a latent way – a value of exchange (A), a situational end of an extra-economic type (G), a form of communication for reciprocal social integration (I), a response to primary human needs according to values of use (L).

Interpreted in an empirical sense, these meanings can lead to identifying material areas in which each of the four symbolic codes prevails. For example, one possible translation of fig. 4 into empirical terms is the following: A corresponds to market work, G to civic work (civic obligations), I to work in networks of an associative kind (third sector, social private, *economie solidaire*, etc.), L to work of a domestic kind and in informal networks.

How are these different meanings of work differentiated and how are they integrated? To respond to this question, it is necessary to have a *generalized theory* of work as a social relation. From this profile (as a relation), work can be interpreted through three major semantic codes: i.e., a symbolic reference, a structural bond, and an emerging phenomenon.

- a. As a symbolic reference (*refero*), work is a search for meaning. This can be seen very well in young people for whom work has principally the value of being involved in the search for existential meanings: the search for one's first job means making the choice of a symbolic commitment which can – first of all – offer a human meaning. The empirical investigations reveal, for instance, how the new generations in Europe put emphasis on detachment from the instrumental value of mere profit and stress the values of an intense human relation with work companions and/or with a client.
- b. As a social bond (*religo*), work is the bind and the structural resource that makes up the fabric connecting the subject agents in a system of expectations, rules and common interactive patterns. It is thus an essential basis of social cohesion.
- c. As an effect of exchange (*Wechselwirkung*), work is what emerges from the reciprocal interaction between the workers and between those who work and those

who make use of the products. As an emerging effect of these systems of exchange, work shows its sovra-functional character (and not mere functional service) in that it regenerates the social bonds among the members of the production-consumption network.

Looking at the *gendered* character of work is also part of this theory. In fact, everything that we have said about the new cultures of work and, in particular, about the importance of not using strictly economic and political criteria for giving value to work, can also be seen as a manifestation and effect of the crisis in male work (or, of male models of industrial work) with respect to the emergence of women's work. The male ethic emphasizes the capacity for individual performance, the instrumental value of the task, the hierarchical structure of command, power, the value of the service, in brief, instrumental achievement. The female ethic accentuates the expressive value of the task, the process, the relationality, the care, the quality both of the product and of the service, in brief, work as a coordinated, less segmented accomplishment, that is attentive to the fact that autonomy is expressed in responsibility. In a greater and better way than men, women connect the quality of the work with its results and grasp the social usefulness of work.

This is not a matter of affirming the supremacy of one cultural mode of living work over another, or of blocking the *sex typing* of work or inverting it. It is rather an observation that the mass entrance of women into the labor market, which has taken place in the past decades, has contributed to great shifts in the meanings of work and also in the end to the "destiny of gender" in assigning one type of work to one gender or another. The attempts to institutionalize this new situation through work "quotas" reserved to one of the two genders, or the adoption of an "an-affective paradigm" (affective neutrality) of work have proven to be a disappointment and a failure.

The value and symbolic patterns of work lived according to gender let interesting developments be expected in the emergence of new cultures of work.

To hold that the transformations of work are shaping it more and more as a social relation means to assert that:

- a. work is being socially mediated more and more, even in relation to the nature and to the material things produced in that: it assumes relations; it takes place within social relations; it leads to social relations. Therefore, the society is intervening more and more in the work activity and giving it value (compensations and sanctions) according to new rules.
- b. Present-day society emphasizes the importance which work has in the relations between the subject who acts and the one to whom he/she turns (employer, client or user in general) and the type of bond that exists between those who create the goods and those who make use of them. A new civil economy is born; cultures of *fair trade* are affirmed.

These new mediations and the relative changes in the process of devaluating certain forms of work and of giving value to other forms of culture must be taken care of.

4.3. The second argument illustrates these transformations as a morphogenesis of the occupations and professions. A synthetic glance over the changes in occupations, jobs and professions shows that today: (A) in the market, (G) in civic occupations, (I) in the third sector (economy of relations), (L) in the informal networks, there is an explosion of new profiles and working styles which the existing juridical regulations cannot control and which the labor unions themselves and the structures of neo-corporativism cannot manage (Donati ed. 1993; Chiesi 1997).

Few see in these processes the emergence of a new social relationality. The cultures of work are still to a great extent conditioned by an old approach that tends to define work on the basis of the different material and formal contents of the functional performances, whereas there is a substantial lack of relational vision of work. Relationality is seen at most in that part of the so-called social economy which produces caring services.

These processes have given rise to theories about the end of work (as employment) and a passage has been spoken of from the status of “job” to the status of being “active” (Boissonat Report 1995; Priestly 1995; Gaudu 1995). A shift of this kind seems to many to be impracticable. What seems correct and possible is to generalize the concept of work from employment to “work activity” in the sense that *it refers to an action that is binding by contract*, whether this contract is taken on voluntarily or results from a social role that is binding for the person, thereby keeping the concept of work distinct from that of a simple activity which does not imply juridical obligations related to a contract (EU Report 1998, paragraphs 205-209).

The relational approach is in agreement with this viewpoint with one proviso: the work contract must be the regulative expression of a relation which is not merely instrumental but community as well. Work refers more and more to exchange circuits which involve the common good (as a relational good) [11] of a network of producers and consumers who cover increasingly interactive and even reversible roles.

4.4. The insurmountable limit of the modern ethics (bourgeois and Marxist, liberal and socialist) and thus the structural limit of the *lib/lab* solutions which are so much in fashion today, lies in the fact that they seek the meaning of work outside of its relational contents, or at least they do not see the human richness of work as a social relation. They do not see how the category of work is central when work is no longer defined as a relation of exploitation with nature, or in terms of the relationship between servant and owner, worker and capitalist, or worker and employer, but as a complex exchange relationship between human persons and between their communities.

Ever since Aristotle’s time, the West has made one deadly distinction with perverse outcomes: namely, the distinction between man’s activity as a *bios practicos* and human activity as a *bios teoreticos*, the former meaning labor (tiresome and necessary), and the

latter, a free and unconditioned activity (“action”, as Hannah Arendt calls it). Marx draws all the consequences from this separation which had grown over the course of the ages, and delineated his antithesis between alienated work and man’s vital activity (*menschliche Lebenstätigkeit*), conscious (*bewusste Tätigkeit*) or free (*freie Tätigkeit*) activity. On this basis, through mere dialectical antithesis, he develops his theory about the end of work and of the society of work.

Hannah Arendt (1964) gets her idea from this thinking that we are living in a society of work in which work could be absent. However, by thinking in this way, Arendt too remains a prisoner of the categories of Greek thought and gives free rein to the idea that it is possible to live in a society without work. In a sympathetic tone, Dominique Méda (1965) holds that it is necessary to “disenchant” work, in the sense of taking away the symbolic weight which modernity has attached to it (as an instrument of progress and synonymous with human essence), and reduce it to one of the many components of the individual’s and the collective body’s lifetime.

In reality, the Aristotelian distinctions and the Marxist antitheses, in reference to which a great part of liberal thinking has also been defined, are now behind us. These categories of thought lose meaning when we think of work as a social relation that implies simultaneously and interactively an *active life* and a *contemplative life* (*bios practicos* and *bios teoreticos*), as it involves the entirety of the human person more and more. Even Kant’s antithesis between autonomous action and heteronomous acting disappears because in the work relation (we should say: in work as a social relation) both of these are present and cannot be separated theoretically or practically.

To free work means to see it as an “action among” subjects, according to its own directive distinction, which is inter-subjectively qualified. The turning point lies in the fact that this guiding distinction is no longer to obtain a salary for survival or for the production of a good to be given as an exchange commodity; it is rather to produce a good on which both producers and consumers depend for their lives. This does not happen everywhere and in any case, but only where it is possible “to goal-orient” work.

When conceived and lived in this way, work becomes not only a “*merit want*”, but also and above all a “*relational want*” (Donati 1993, chapter 2). And this is so not only because the system of relations for the activity that is defined as work conditions its meaning, but because work comes to consist of (“and is made up of”) social relations on which all those who are involved depend.

4.5. If we start from the idea that work is a social relation, we can get out of the conceptual framework that has imprisoned western culture in which work has been defined as an instrumental service that is the object of appropriation and/or contract in the dialectics between servant/owner, proletariat/bourgeoisie, worker/employer.

We can then see work as an activity in exchange systems which are differentiated

from one another, which have (or could have) different forms of currency, with different rules of equivalency, commutation and redistribution. What we usually call “money” is only *one* of the possible forms of *instruments of credit* for acquiring goods and services. The differentiation of society brings along the rise of differentiated spheres with their own symbolic codes of transaction and thus with their own “currencies” and rules of exchange. These spheres are not necessarily separate but can (or could) in turn also be associated or reach an agreement with one another through further forms of exchange which would make goods and services accessible to all the members through forms of conversion of the individual currencies in force in each relational sphere where work takes on its own way of being carried out, organized and valued.

The idea of the Citizen’s Minimum Wage is not only compatible with this view of things but it favors it. In fact, supposing that individuals can enjoy a minimum income in cash, they could add to this income the whole set of “instruments of credit” (other forms of money) which each one obtains through his/her activity in various spheres of life and work, in the form of access to benefits, goods and services that are not and cannot be given monetary value (in terms of currency).

The transition process to this new economy of work is favored by the fact that in the exchange spheres regulated on the basis of the activities that are different from work in a traditional sense (occupation is the principal source of income), the social relation which work expresses in a broad sense (and which is contained in it) is revalued and enormously strengthened. Here the work-relation becomes a good in itself and a dimension comparable to other dimensions in terms of the usefulness and of the “money” (instruments of credit) it provides.

This perspective can be criticized and opposed by one fundamental objection which still expresses all the abstract and mechanical weight of modernity. The objection states that monetary money (the instrument of credit expressed in currency) is by far more advantageous than all the other forms of “money” because it has the quality of abstraction, i.e., it can be exchanged with any other good without being subordinated to relational conditions; indeed, it works precisely on the condition that it can be transferred only if it maintains or increases the possibilities of being used without any extra-economic bond, i.e., if it increases the conditions of communicative contingency (as expressed by Niklas Luhmann 1984).

However, in my opinion, the objection is not diriment. We can keep the advantages of “money” as a generalized, symbolic means of exchange, produced as an “evolutionary universal” by modernity, while giving life to new systems of exchange different from the typically capitalistic market. This can be done for some good reasons:

- (i) first, because the process of unlimited financing of the economy through currency produces perverse effects (e.g., the phenomena of instability of world financial markets are well known and the ruin of entire areas of the globe through simple monetary decisions taken in places which have no relation to the areas interested in the financial movements); these perverse effects indicate that there are thresholds

beyond which the extension of only one currency on a worldwide scale should not go (limits of utilization of the currency as a virtual currency and cyber money);

(ii) second, because forms of generalized use of non-monetary instruments of credit can also be found (e.g., the time used in “time banks” could be transferred from one bank to another);

(iii) because the balancing between the abstraction and concreteness of instruments of credit can be more appropriate in areas of exchange precisely where we want to limit the commodification of what is exchanged, as in the case of meritorious, positional and relational goods, and in general of non-negotiable human goods (non marketable).

In brief, thinking that systems of exchange can be created with different forms of money does not mean to hold that work can be recognized only if it pertains to a specific social group or to particular, limited and exclusive social circles. Of course, opening up to the relational discussion does not imply going back to an economy of barter or, in any case, to a pre-modern type. On the contrary, it means inventing post-modern forms of complex exchanges in which work itself is seen as a complex activity (management of one’s own time in differentiated spheres). It means holding that work can be valued to the maximum degree as a relation with a *sui generis* meaning in each of the different social circles.

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[1] To say that work is a "social fact" means to observe that it implies relevant economic, political, juridical and cultural dimensions, but that it cannot be reduced to any of these inasmuch as it pertains to a *sui generis* order of reality. In its essence, what is social is a fact of "moral life" (in a sociological sense) that refers both to persons and to society.

[2] The term was coined in the 80s by various authors: cfr. Offe (1983), Dahrendorf (1988), Gorz (1988).

[3] In a longer version of this essay I developed an analysis of the historical cultures of work which I cannot report here because of the space allotted.

[4] Although the term *unemployment* also appears previously (Oxford English Dictionary of 1882), it is defined in a modern sense by John Hobson (1896), followed by W.H. Beveridge (1909). The unemployed no longer refers - as it did previously - to those who are simply «not employed», inactive or idle (as Marx still defines them using the word *Unbeschäftigte*), but those who have unwillingly lost a job (*Arbeitslosigkeit*) and are distinct

from the poor (the unemployed are not necessarily indigent and, if they are, their indigence is not due to laziness).

[5] In this cell, some authors are also placed who are apparently far from it, such as Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas, who understand work only as a relationship with nature. It should be pointed out that Habermas (1990) places a *dualism* between *work* (defined as an instrumental activity, for production and exchanges, which characterize the market) and *interaction* (defined as an activity of dialogue, of an expressive nature and which characterizes politics). This dualism is misleading in that it is derived from a romanticization of the concepts of “action” (praxis) and of a public sphere in Aristotle which Habermas uses to oppose strategic action and communicative action one against the other. Far from contributing to clarifying the nature of work as a social relation, an approach such as this keeps work in the area of alienation (according to the classic Marxist scheme, shared also by Méda 1995).

[6] This occurs starting from the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*) and is made explicit in John Paul II’s Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. Among the precursors of this “turning point”, there is the thinking of Blessed Josémaría Escrivá (cfr. Llanes 1980).

[7] The analytical pattern that I have in mind refers to that of the morphostasis/morphogenesis (Archer 1995) and is based on three major processes: i) the modifications of the social structures of work, ii) the modifications of the cultures of work, iii) the interactions between actors-agents which lead the structures (social and cultural) to new configurations. These changes take place in three, analytically and empirically distinct subsequent time phases (T1), (T2), (T3). Among the processes i), ii), iii) there are not and cannot be determining relations, but there are reciprocal influences.

[8] Fig. 2 can constitute a map for investigating these meanings: unemployment can be defined in relation to each of the four poles (A,G,I,L), i.e., unemployment respectively as a lack of work for reasons inherent in the economic system, as a lack of work because of a life process, as a distorting effect of certain welfare measures, or as related to problems of subjective identity.

[9] Present sociological surveys reveal that unemployment leads to social exclusion if the individuals affected: are very-long-term unemployed with the risk of continuous unemployment, suffer from severe financial hardship, are not able to structure their time in a meaningful way, show a loss of self-esteem due to high employment orientations and the irrelevance of other areas of life from which to derive self-esteem, display feelings of shame as a result of experiencing stigmatization and internal attributions of blame, lack social support (on individual, group, family and institutional levels).

[10] The justification that I hold of such difference is nonetheless different from the one put forth by Elster. Elster holds that the fundamental difference between the rights to welfare and the right to work lies in the fact that whereas the values of welfare (health, insurance, personal services, education, lodging, etc.) can be provided indifferently *in cash and in kind* (since, in any case, money can buy them), the opposite occurs for work which

cannot be bought. In my opinion, the difference lies rather in the fact that the right to work has to do with human rights and not the social rights to welfare (for the distinction, see Donati 1993, conclusions).

[11] On the theory of the “relational good” as a specific way to understand the common good see Donati 1993, chapter 2.