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Health crisis. Work crisis. An opportunity amidst the chaos?

The present context of health crisis and unprecedented lockdown is an opportunity for thinking, position-taking, indignation and controversy. As a social activity, work redefines itself every day, according to circumstances. Work specialists, ergonomists included, observe and reflect.

Contrary to certain preconceived ideas, Ergonomics is not primarily about so-called “ergonomic” chairs, desks or toothbrushes. Work is a central object of ergonomics, and the technical resources associated with it cover only some of the questions it raises. The ergonomic project consists of perceiving this Work; and above and beyond the technical resources, it is the values, skills, relationships, organizations, etc. that are its pivotal components, as is its inclusion in society, and therefore in the lives of each and every one of us.

Ergonomics and human work: creating a society

Ergonomists are part of a humanist tradition that initially aimed to adapt work to men and women in all their diversity¹, and to do so over time, so that they do not lose or wear out their lives by earning a living, but instead develop and build their health in and through this Work. The main idea behind this tradition is to ensure that Work is human, i.e. that it guarantees and nourishes our vital needs. And while the level and constancy of our remuneration allow us to ensure our basic needs, our vital needs as human beings also include:

- the creation of a social and cultural bond, which lets us make, weave, mesh, learn, share, create and innovate, with and for others;
- being part of a community and a place that recognizes, accepts, protects and needs us;
- a sense of being useful: producing goods and services that have meaning, that are worthwhile in the eyes of those who matter.

Some of these performance levers are undoubtedly under-invested in many organizations. To put it another way: we are talking about work that gives everyone the opportunity to live as genuine protagonists of society and as actors in a performance that makes sense. It is therefore vital to look after this work, and sometimes to care for it; think about it and even make it well again. Alongside other disciplines, Ergonomics thus helps to draw, at different scales, the outlines of what a society would look like if it really achieved this: to make society in the workplace is to make society in the surrounding area and beyond. The relationship

¹ C. Teiger, L'approche ergonomique : du travail humain à l'activité des hommes et des femmes au travail, *Éducation Permanente*, 1993, 116, 71-96.

between ergonomics and society, through work, is an original issue² that this health crisis is reviving.

The health crisis is revealing to us all the dead ends and blind spots of pre-crisis work

The historical moment we are currently experiencing is an extremely powerful indicator: this pandemic is what anthropologist Mauss calls a "total social fact", a phenomenon which "*sets in motion the whole of society and its institutions*"³, which involves society in its entirety, with all its members. His understanding supposes that the phenomenon is not broken down or dissected according to its various dimensions (biological, historical, political, legal, geographical, demographic, psychological, economic, etc.), because "*it is by considering the everything as a whole that we [can] perceive the essential*". The pandemic imposes on us all the global and systemic vision claimed by ergonomics as we understand it.

It is thanks to the work of people in the health, social, hygiene, education, agriculture, food, energy, transport and information sectors, and of many others who are locked down and working from home, that our "standby" society is coping with the pandemic. Many of the jobs that are now supporting our livelihoods were previously undervalued⁴. Many of those who are taking risks to ensure our food needs while we are in lockdown, are to a large extent those whose work society has gradually been emptied of the vital requirements of human work, in the sense developed above.

What a paradox! But what a source of hope this lockdown is also proving to be! Faced with such chaos, dustmen, cleaners and checkout assistants are today applauded and recognized as elements of social cohesion; in the face of viral devastation in hospitals, healthcare workers are seeing their longstanding and unheard warnings become socially acceptable once again; in the face of the mortality among the elderly, care workers embody humanity's only refuge for accompanying people at the end of their lives.

For the duration of the health crisis, these professions have regained control of their Work. But is the cost a reasonable one? Under what conditions, at what risk and with how much freedom of choice? Do we even give them a choice? Can we accept that this recovery will only last the time of the health crisis, however long that may be?

The economic options that have overdetermined evolutions in work and society in recent years are not unrelated to the effects we are seeing today. Here we have in mind globalisation, with its share of low-cost subcontracting, relocation of production and services or the virtual monopoly of multinationals; but let us also consider the globalisation of value chains and the hyper-specialisation of each of the actors in the chain. The preferred choice has been the lowest short-term cost for the customer, to the detriment of the quality of the Work: hyper-

² F. Daniellou, « Je me demanderais ce que la société attend de nous... » A propos des positions épistémologiques d'Alain Wisner, *Travailler*, 15, 2006, 23-38.

³ M. Mauss, *Essai sur le don : Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, PUF, Collection Sociologie d'aujourd'hui, 1973, 143-279, p. 274-275.

⁴ K. Messing, C. Haentjens et G. Doniol-Shaw, L'invisible nécessaire : L'activité de nettoyage des toilettes sur les trains de voyageurs en gare, *Le Travail Humain*, 55, 4, 1992, 353-370.

specialization leads to the devaluation of know-how, the individualisation of tasks, fragmentation of the activity⁵, loss of meaning, and impeded quality⁶. It is also to the detriment of what is in the interest of Societies themselves, i.e. in the interest of the greatest number: more consumption, more transport and pollution; very high dependency on global contexts that are very remote and very difficult to influence. When it is a question of masks and respirators during the period of COVID-19, the Work crisis becomes a problem of subsistence. The costs of recovery and the debts incurred in the process will be immense. The choice of the lowest cost in the short term becomes questionable when facing the consequences of the pandemic - including economically for the customer himself/herself.

Intensification of work is the ever-increasing, combining for example tighter deadlines with a standardisation of operating methods and increased control of the operations performed: depriving work of its human dimensions to such an extent that the term "workforce" now means no more than a cost to be reduced.

Management imperatives are omnipresent. In particular, they advocate very precise personnel planning and a reduction in stocks, most often associated with the illusion of nominal and controllable work. Such imperatives cause workers to operate in ever deteriorating conditions, due to the inherent variabilities of human work; and because these conditions are denied they are not taken seriously. The absence of stocks upstream of, during and downstream of means of production, reduces the risks of unsold products. But this also makes human work dependent on the market, a dependency that can be integrated through the increasing flexibility of work contracts and working hours: staggered hours, part-time work, short-term contracts, etc.

To a large extent the digital revolution in our society reinforces the growing trivialisation of atypical working hours and social or even family precariousness, as the balance between family life and professional life is sometimes upset. From this standpoint, compulsory remote working, combined with childcare (these same parents having to ensure educational continuity for their children) offers a vast shared experience of the difficulties associated with the deregulation of the system of activities⁷.

All of these options dehumanise Work, which is then considered to be a cost and not a challenge for individual, collective, local and environmental development. At best, the "human factor" is an adjustment variable; at worst it is a factor of savings to be made, justified in part by the forms of disengagement that the contemporary condition of this work engenders. The harmful effects of these working conditions on individuals are very well documented in the scientific literature, some of them since long ago. They are also widely trivialized by the redress mechanisms that compensate for proven and sometimes long-lasting health issues, or even reduced life expectancy.

⁵ G. Friedmann, *Le Travail en miettes*, Gallimard, 1956 (rééd. 1964).

⁶ Y. Clot, *Le travail à cœur*, Paris : La Découverte, 2010.

⁷ J. Curie, V. Hajjar, A. Baubion-Broye, *Psychopathologie du travail ou dérégulation du système des activités*, 1990, *Perspectives psychiatriques*, 22, 85-91.

Of course, not everyone is affected by all this. But the trends remain significant and largely dominant. Explanation, intervention and theorization, particularly in the field of ergonomics, have made it possible to shed light on the dynamics underlying these conceptions of economic performance, with a view to overcoming and surpassing them, and not confining oneself to alarmist observations, however relevant they may be. However, local successes have probably been too discrete on the societal scale to contribute towards any upheaval in the state of affairs.

Regaining control of Work: a possibility

All is not so bleak however, because in experiencing the crisis, many workers also experience new work situations, alone or in existing or (re)composed groups, often revealing other ways of doing things and of thinking about Work and Society: united, proud to be useful, authentic, inspired by moral values and alternative conceptions of "living together". Very small companies in the textile field are modifying their production methods in order to make masks; one of a multinational cosmetics company's sites has begun to manufacture hydroalcoholic gel; nurses are transforming painter's suits into smocks; car manufacturers are making respirators; bakeries are recruiting personnel to deliver to people isolated in their homes, and so on. This reconfiguration of ways of doing things is changing the daily life of hospitals, nursing homes, the market gardening sector, the building and public works sector and many others. What is needed is authentic work that is useful to others, to drive a project for individual and collective well-being and which, through activity and in the face of the pandemic, recomposes the links between actors and spontaneously reassesses the value of things and of jobs. Of course, there is no explicit prioritized societal project in all of this; simply an irresistible reality-based injunction to work together. But when we look at what these "intelligences at work" achieve, how can we fail to see the keys to new systems for the production of goods or services? In the health crisis and its urgency, the standard rules and norms of everyday life no longer apply, allowing each individual to reinvent in situations where they were previously shut away. *"The broadening of the scope of action is a typical and fundamental feature of human development. [...] The competency of workers is very much linked to their ability to change register according to circumstance,"* said Wisner⁸, an ergonomist. The *"cumbersome subjectivities"*⁹ of the past become the salutary subjectivities of today, to the extent that the usefulness of local and solidarity-based economies embedded in their regions and living environments reveals the true conditions of subsistence for each individual and his/her loved ones.

During a crisis, life is re-invented and health is built with, and in the face of, risks. This is how Canguilhem, a doctor and philosopher, defined his health while coping with a different world crisis between 1939 and 1945: *"I am well to the extent that I feel able to take responsibility for*

⁸ A. Wisner, Aspects psychologiques de l'anthropotechnologie, *Le Travail Humain*, 1997, 60, 3, 229-254, p250-51.

⁹ G. Le Blanc, *Les maladies de l'homme normal*, Paris : Vrin, 2004.

my actions, to bring things into existence and to create between them relations that would not come without me and that would not be what they are without them".¹⁰

These experiences of work in fact call upon what ergonomics and other disciplines concerned with work have been saying for some considerable time:

- the importance of considering the activity of those who perform it, in their inseparably singular, collective and societal dimensions. Nowadays, very few carers exercise their right to withdraw when faced with a shortage of beds, staff, masks, gowns, gels, etc. What greater risk than contracting Covid19 might they run? They probably feel that the risk of losing the meaning of their professional commitment would be even more unbearable. In this consent to accept exposure, in a context where, despite everything, obligations in terms of worker safety and protection remain, we once again find the debate on and the complementarity of hygiene-based and constructive approaches to health;
- the importance of comparing points of view, of bringing together the persons concerned to construct the problem in all its complexity and as the pivot of any approach to finding answers that will be adapted and therefore pertinent;
- the importance for workers to feel relevant to the use that the work makes of them: to regain control.

Every citizen is responsible for perceiving this pandemic as a breakdown or as a crisis, for and beyond Work

We can consider the current situation to be a breakdown, or a crisis. A breakdown is an unexpected accident. After diagnosis, it leads to the repair or replacement of the defective parts, or even to improved preventive maintenance, to ensure the system's continuity in the future and guarantee its resilience. That which organized the most recent history of our society will therefore last until the next breakdown, perhaps even more serious, which we will once again have to perceive as either a breakdown or a crisis. If we consider this pandemic to be a crisis, it then becomes an opportunity to rebuild, to redefine what is important to us; the same applies to conceiving what will prevail when making decisions thereafter. What will be the performances in the light of which those responsible for the work will be judged? This is undoubtedly an opportunity to expand the criteria used to assess the performance of organizations, to move towards welcome attention being paid to the complexity of the human work issues at work, and to the status of the human being in the production of this performance.

Whether breakdown or crisis, there will always be efforts and difficulties that will affect one or the other in unequal measure. But since a rare opportunity may arise from this chaos, what shall we hope for? What Work and what Society are we going to endeavour to achieve, i.e. make work during the phase of coming out of lockdown? Will we therefore be able to make the most of the hope that has resulted from this dramatic current event, and work towards a

¹⁰ G. Canguilhem, *Ecrits sur la médecine*, Paris : Seuil, 2002, p68.

major renormalization of our work and living spaces, these areas at the crossroads of food, care, housing, energy, environment, education, science and culture issues? Ergonomists, who specialize in Work, have taken part, and must continue to do so, in the analyses and experiments of the future, beyond the surges of solidarity to which they currently contribute at the heart of this period where time seems to be suspended. Modestly and in keeping with their deontological charter, they have the capacity to be precious actors of the changes to come.

If this pandemic is a total social fact, the various societal subjects of the moment must be considered together. And no subject really escapes either Work or Region: equal access to public services, difficult working conditions and the age of retirement, employment insecurity instead of jobs, representation and social dialogue, risk prevention, etc. With no satisfactory response as far as healthcare workers are concerned, the public hospital crisis has on its own crystallized many of these issues. Stifled by the health emergency, these issues will return, perhaps more violently, in particular because this health crisis will become an economic crisis and therefore an employment crisis.

The question is not just one of our future, as today's adults, but one of the future of subsequent generations. So, what work for what society? On one side of the pandemic tightrope we have the breakdown. On the other side the crisis. And we have to choose.

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