



Impact of globalization on human work

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ABSTRACT

This contribution addresses the phenomenon of globalization in its impact on the nature of work. Starting from an analysis and characterization of the general understanding of globalization, the contribution will attempt to identify those factors of globalization processes which appear to affect most strongly the work of different employment categories (e.g. management, production workers, intellectual workers). In a next step, the work and organizational psychological consequences of globalization in a two-pronged perspective will be analyzed: (1) The significant changes on work places (e.g. growth of mental work, expansion of service sector employment and corresponding shrinking of production work, work hour changes, unemployment, industrial relations). (2) The changing psychological demands on individuals in the work force (e.g. flexibility, coping with diversity, changing competence demands, changing the meaning of working). The concluding section considers the requisite political reorientation towards work in a globalizing world.

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1. Introduction

Two dates can be identified that give the term “globalization” a generally accepted currency: 9/11/01 and 12/26/04. These dates especially have gained an evident world-wide significance. The first evokes the horror and inhumanity of the terrorist attack on New York’s World Trade Towers in 2001. The second vividly incites scenes of hundreds of thousands of persons perishing within seconds in the deadly Tsunami in South-East Asia. The reason why these events awaken within us the feeling of a truly global phenomenon is probably the fact that people throughout the world can perceive the possibility of becoming a victim of such catastrophes.

The term “Globalization” entered public use only during the early 1990s. Meanwhile it has become yet another “catch-all” term – everyone uses it, everyone associates something with it, everyone probably something different. The attempt to define the term is as futile as nailing a pudding to the wall (Beck, 2002). And yet, there cannot be any doubt that the ubiquitous use of the term hides various most intriguing problems. Their precise nature co-varies with the particular notion various authors and disciplines denote with the term and phenomenon which is considered a crucial and extremely influential characteristic of our time. Notwithstanding this consensus, psychology has hardly given it any attention. An exception is Arnett (2002) who focuses globalization’s effects on adolescence and assumes that “globalization is likely to be one of the dominant forces in the psychological development

of the people of the 21st century” (781). This paper addresses the effects of globalization on work and workers.

First, a short review of some major disciplinary treatments of globalization in the relevant literature of various social science disciplines (Section 2) is presented. While each of these topics warrant separate treatments in volumes of books, this contribution confines itself to a sketch of two more specific and yet very broad issues: The significant changing demands in work places (Section 3) and the psychological and behavioral response adjusting/mal-adjusting to the changes by employees/workers (Section 4).

2. Differential aspects of globalization

2.1. Economy

For Altvater and Mahnkopf (1996) globalization means the disappearance of economic and financial borders. The “process of globalization (in the perspective of the world system) appears as increasing integration of regions and Nations into the world market” (21). Its actors are mainly three kinds of enterprises: global players (internationally active companies and banks) which can withdraw themselves from competition, enterprises which cannot withdraw themselves but still are internationally active, and companies of only national or regional importance. Similarly, Stiglitz (2002:9) who defines globalization as “... closer integration of countries and people of the world” points at the emergence of new institutions and the growing importance of internationally active corporations moving capital, goods, and technology across borders. For him globalization is governed by economic and financial world institutions such as IMF, World Bank and WTO. At the same time the question seems justified whether globalization is a

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truly novel phenomenon or rather the continuation of a long standing trend of border transcending commerce of utilities and services (Lichtblau, 1997).

2.2. Sociology

A more psychological understanding is approached by the sociologist Robertson (1992), who describes globalization as a concept “which refers both to a compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (8) resulting in a “single global arena” (61). However, as Lechner and Boli (2000:320) point out: “At the same time, globalization accentuates differences: each group must define its particular place, fashion its particular interpretation of universal precepts. Globalization, in short, unifies and separates, creates similarities and differences”. Similarly Appadurai (2000:324) points out: “The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization”.

2.3. Information and communication

World-wide general access to information through new information and communication technologies (ICT) are yet another aspect of globalization. Its ultimate symbol, instrument and for the time being its spearhead is certainly the World-Wide-Web. Together with mobile phones ICT offer new opportunities for individualization and self-determination on the one hand and the global emergence of virtual nets of interest groups in close interaction. However, ICT also facilitate the transfer of production sites from one country to others as long as requisite qualification is available, because work increasingly becomes independent from a fixed locale. A consequence may be the upgrading of incomes in low income countries and growing unemployment in others (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994).

2.4. Mobility (tourism and migration)

In no time in history has the democratization of world-wide traveling found such a general acceptance as nowadays. International tourism has become one of the largest and fastest growing business sectors in many countries. Cheap air travel and enticing tourist infrastructures have made it possible and interesting also for middle and low income populations to take vacations in far away places making these activities yet another facet of globalization.

“In both export agriculture and export manufacturing, the disruption of traditional work structures as a result of the introduction of modern modes of production has played a key role in transforming people into migrant workers and, potentially, into emigrants” (Sassen, 1998:41). Labor migration across national borders is a dominant characteristic of many countries today, certainly in North-America and Europe. The ensuing diversity of cultural backgrounds, mental sets and corresponding behavior patterns in communities and of the work force at large (Triandis et al., 1994) is of ever growing importance.

2.5. Social theory

For Hengsbach (1997), globalization may connote three dimensions: (1) the global dimension of environmental destruction, (2) the expansive conquest of less developed nations by Western socio-cultural models, (3) the increasing socio-economic pressures to adjust to world-wide competition.

In short: globalization is a multifaceted term; it means many things to many. The common connotational basis of its different meanings seems to be the growth of border transcending flows

of people, ideas, information, finances, technology, and goods with sometimes frightening concomitant socio-economic changes.

What then are the objectively changing work place demands as a consequence of such globalizing tendencies?

3. Consequences for workers and work places

3.1. The impact of new information technologies

Technological innovation has always been an important factor of change in work. But changes due to the world-wide and wholesale introduction of new information technologies (NIT) in work have particularly important impacts, in part in promoting and speeding up globalization, in part of recurrently influencing work settings.

One consequence of NIT has often been noted: the switch from physical work demands to mental, information handling, “intellective” operations with their concomitant stressors like undue increase of mental workload. This virtualization of work and the switch from physical to mental activities has been labeled by Zuboff (1984) as desensualization of work. New technologies in work settings imply changed competence demands, a new division of local labor, and organizational change. “The history of work in the twentieth century is a history in which machines have increasingly replaced the skills of workers of all collars. In a production process in which science and technology are central, knowledge and not skill defines the process” (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994:92). In order to realize how fast and dramatic these technical changes occur it is sufficient to remind ourselves that it is only since the 1980s that the computer began to enter our work and private life to any noticeable extent. Today, practically every second work place in many parts of the world is affected by the “smart machine”. New information technologies have also transformed the work life for staff in universities. Most university employees spend many hours daily in front of the computer screens. Daily they are linked to their colleagues through often real-time e-mail and internet contacts. Literature search is conducted by scientists themselves through search machines in the www. The division of labor in university departments changes. Secretaries no longer need to type because scientists usually write their papers and letters themselves. Secretaries become office assistants and office managers.

Thus, the World-Wide-Web and the introduction of new and capital intensive NIT in work settings may be considered as a central precondition for globalized information access and communication. It implies the possibility of breaking down the traditional unity of time and place in work. Flexibilization of working time and the increased possibility to achieve one’s work by telematics (Andriessen and Roe, 1994) and independently of a specific physically determined workplace offer the work force opportunities of self-determined planning and self-determined learning. This increase in autonomy is bound to have repercussions for the distribution of power in work settings as well as in families. The whole fabric of society is affected by this new flexibility.

We are confronted here with a curious irony of history. After all, the introduction of new technologies and the concomitant increase of automation in work followed the rationale of making the production process more controllable and more independent of human action. But due to the drastic increase of capital intensity of high-tech workplaces, workplaces also become more vulnerable due to the possibility of human error or sabotage. Hence, ironically, the opposite of original expectations takes place: work becomes ever more dependent on responsible, competent, and committed human work activity. Add the world-wide increase of competition and the experience of workers to be dependent on the success of their company in order to remain employed, and then we understand why those still employed are characterized by high motiva-

tion to work diligently. Threatened by unemployment people work harder. The protection and intermediate brokerage of unions becomes more and more obsolete (Streeck, 1996).

3.2. Changing work structures in industrialized countries

However, world-wide changes in technology not only induce changes in work places, but they also engender dramatic changes in the occupational structure and the professions. We observe world-wide the emergence of new professions which is accompanied by the growing obsolescence and sometimes wholesale disappearance of traditional professions. In consequence, career patterns must change; inter-professional mobility and frequent professional changes in one's life time are required. More importantly, these new professional categories do not follow the received professional classifications and they do not correspond any more to traditional vocational and professional educational or training programs. We note here a remarkable uncoupling of work and professional demands in the economy from the existing educational system.

Unemployment, as a characteristic of labor market structure, is one of the most prominent crisis symptoms of many Western industrialized societies. Although still claimed by many economists or politicians, this is not a consequence of economic cycles but a structural phenomenon resulting from technical progress and ensuing productivity increases which sometimes reach 200–300%. “There is no question that labor productivity, if it is measured as a ratio of a unit of output to the time required for its production, has increased dramatically” (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994:299). We observe a growth in productive capacities which makes “living work” (Marx), the demand for work of real people, redundant. Both, global competition and outgrown productive capacities appear to be the main drivers of unemployment.

At least in Germany the daily news about the growth of unemployment figures and the imminent wiping out of jobs is staggering. “Cybernetics is the most widely applied current means by which labor is being progressively freed (without pay) from the industrial, commercial, and professional workplace” (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994:82). Sometime ago, it was possible to read, within a time span of a couple of days, the following alarming news in German papers:

- Deutsche Bank reduces workforce by 6400.
- Association of German Banks announces to lay-off more than 5000.
- More than 5–7 million unemployed persons in Germany.
- Some regional unemployment rates reach more than 20%.
- Opel intends to reduce staff by 6000.

A split goes through most European societies. A split between those who still own a workplace and those who do not. This is true for many of the so-called developing countries as well. The ratio of those deprived of a job is increasing. Some people speak of a two-thirds society; two-thirds living on the sunny, one third living on the shady side. Our societies are marked by a gap of social justice when we consider the distribution of work. Given the continued productivity growth in our economies, this trend is likely to continue even if it is periodically interrupted and temporarily even reversed. One important index of this development is also the steady erosion of traditional fixed work contracts in favor of more flexible work arrangements and self-employment. This growing casualization of work contracts (i.e. the reduction of safeguards against firing, the growth of part-time employment and temporary work agencies and the demise of life-long employment policies) is indeed a reflection of the predicament of work in our societies.

And yet, our societies define themselves as work societies. Almost half a century ago, Hannah Arendt (1958), one of the most important German philosopher of the 20th century, has heralded the troublesome problem of a society without work:

“The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole society into a laboring society. The fulfillment of the wish (not needing to work), therefore ... comes at a moment when it can only be self-defeating... What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse” (4–5).

However, since the 1930s we know from the work of psychologists that the unemployment experience creates conditions for health hazards and deteriorating physical and mental health (Jahoda et al., 1960; Warr, 1984).

When discussing work in society we can distinguish at least four perspectives (MOW, 1987):

- The philosophic-anthropological meaning of work as a fundamental human condition in the sense of Hannah Arendt;
- the objective societal significance of work as the central societal means to create and maintain culture;
- the economic role of work as the central mechanism for the distribution of goods and social opportunities; and, finally,
- the subjective, psychological meaning of work in the context of other life roles.

Already Durkheim (1960) (1893/1960) considered work and the social division of labor as the fundamental connection among humans creating the basis for social integration. In line with Arendt, also similarly Anthony (1980:424): “But what is to the course and the foundation of moral order when work ceases for many or diminishes for most? If men enter society through work what will be left of society if work ends?...Is it possible that man will become truly alienated from other men only when he is released from work which was said to have alienated him?”

Thus, we may conclude that beyond the mere provision of income to cover basic needs, it is through the social bonding of work which links individuals to society, gives them social standing and status, serves as a basis for the construction of their personal identity. Given our cultural heritage, work is for most an existential necessity, providing livelihood and meaning in life.

As to migration: The issues that need to be addressed in connection with international migration range from basic human rights and political problems of citizenship over health issues, social rootlessness and dual ethnic loyalty of migrants and their offspring to ethnic revival and politicization of minorities in response to xenophobic radicalization of the work force (Wilpert, 1989). The entry of foreign workers also raises issues such as how European or US managers and regulators deal with the proliferation of immigrant workshops and sweatshops, which threaten to reintroduce the poor labor conditions of 19th Century Europe and 20th Century Asia into the back streets of Europe and the US. We deal here with workers who have come into our own countries (legally and illegally) from poorer countries and take the dirty jobs in our companies at low pay and often without health and retirement benefits and face many stresses and acculturation problems for themselves and their families (Oppen, 1988; Collatz, 1992; Wilpert, 1998). Do they have the same rights as our citizens to workplace health and safety, and if they do not, what is being done or should be done? And if they have the same protections and rights but don't know how to use them, how should we adapt our regulations and policies to help them?

Women face particular problems in the migratory process. Half of the estimated 120 million migrants world-wide are women. Women generally add to the predicament of male unemployment:

“One of the most serious – and ironic – consequence of the feminization of the new proletariat has been to increase the pool of wage laborers and thus contribute to male unemployment” (Sassen, 1998:42). And it is an epochal trend towards increasing female labor market participation. But it is mainly migrant women who fill poorly paid jobs in receiving countries as domestic workers, as nannies and housekeepers, as sex workers while often being separated for years from their own families and children in their countries of origin (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003).

3.3. Change of work in many developing countries

While unemployment in industrialized countries is one of their major labor market characteristics, other problems are posed in the mean and long-term perspective for countries in the so-called Third World regions. Import of highly developed production technologies and rapid industrialization processes meet country contexts which may be far from offering appropriate receptive conditions for a balanced and sustained development (see the series of annual reports on human development by the United Nations Development Program – UNDP). Further, an unabated influx of migrants from rural areas to metropolitan centers in Third World countries creates a growing urban under-educated and under-employed proletariat on the one hand and the emergence of new elites who have mastered the new work performance demands and requisite new technologies which make their integration in the globalized economy possible, while, at the same time, contributes to growing rifts and disparities in the social fabric of the population in the developing countries.

3.4. Changing industrial relations systems

There can be no doubt that also the industrial relations system is drastically affected by competition in all world markets. Particularly, institutionally and statutorily regulated systems of industrial relations are threatened, because under prevailing conditions companies find it easier than before to escape from demanding regulatory frameworks such as the traditional German system of codetermination. As a consequence, more voluntaristic rather than obligatory systems emerge and social partners (unions and employers organizations) are predicated in their activities less institutionally than by market forces. Employment conditions are more and more determined by company policies rather than general statutory rule systems (Streeck, 1996). The general decline of union membership appears in this context as a reflex of the work force which perceives little protective potential in unions. In short: industrial relations systems, too, undergo critical changes.

By way of an interim summary: Change, the disruption of continuity, the tearing of social fabric, uncertainty and an upheaval in all life spheres seems to be the endemic effect of globalization. “What’s peculiar about uncertainty today is that it exists without any looming historical disaster; instead it is woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism. Instability is meant to be normal” (Sennett, 1998:31). What then are the consequences of these drastically changing conditions for the adjustments or maladjustments of working people?

4. The psychological and behavioral response of employees/workers: adjusting/mal-adjusting to the changes

4.1. Groping for identity

For Arnett (2002:777) globalization influences fundamental psychological functioning: “The central psychological consequence of globalization is that it results in transformations in identity”.

This, he assumes, is due to “the degree and intensity of the connections among different cultures and different world regions have accelerated dramatically because of the advances in telecommunication and a rapid increase in economic and financial interdependence world-wide.” (774). This new interconnectedness, which Robertson (1992:132) claims somewhat sweepingly, results in ‘globality’ as a “consciousness of the world as a single place”, is differentiated by Arnett into four identity aspects: bicultural identity, identity confusions, self-selected cultures, and emerging adulthood. *Bicultural identity* is meant to be an amalgam of local and global identity, possibly leading to a “multicultural identity or a complex hybrid identity” (Arnett, 2002:778) as forms of psychological adjustment. *Identity confusion* implies the feeling of not belonging to any cultural place, of being alienated and marginalized. The notion of *self-selected cultures* refers to trends of individual and social differentiation (“joining a self-selected culture of fellow dissenters” (Arnett, 2002:779) in a context of global homogenization. *Emerging adulthood* means the world-wide postponement of transitions from adolescence into adulthood that are due to the instability triggered by globalization.

Arnett’s stimulating article in the *American Psychologist*, as one of the first attempts by a psychologist to address globalization, might be considered as a collection of interesting hypotheses. Too little empirical evidence is provided to interpret his tenets as a statement of verified knowledge of psychological consequences of globalization. However, Sennett (1998:31) goes even further. Since instability is considered as normal, he postulates: “perhaps the corroding of character is an inevitable consequence”. By that he means: to have “no long-term...is a principle which corrodes trust, loyalty and commitment” (24). And: “Time’s arrow is broken; it has no trajectory in a continually reengineered, routine-hating, short-term political economy. People feel the lack of sustained human relations and durable purposes ...The work ethic is the arena in which the depth of experience is most challenged today” (98).

Thus, a frightening scenario is drawn: The scenario of uncertainty and change affects all the people who are exposed to globalization, i.e., everybody. How much more would it affect those truly marginalized persons of the work force: people threatened by insecure jobs and people already without jobs, the underpaid, and the unemployed. Indeed, one is inclined to submerge in depression.

In the face of this it is refreshing to find a positive outlook. In an important analysis of what is necessary in order to face the challenges of the 21st century, Frese (1996), while more or less referring to the same or similar changes in work life as mentioned above, comes to the conclusion: All of the above mentioned trends increase the importance of self-reliance. To deal with global competition, employees have to be able to keep up with new knowledge and with new ideas. Moreover, new ideas have to be advanced. Self-reliance, that is being able to rely on one’s knowledge, skills and motivation, enables one to stay in this race. It facilitates survival under conditions of change and uncertainty. Thus, all of the above changes of the workplace that can be projected into the future are related to self-reliance (Frese, 1996). Even farther reaching but similarly Arnett (2002:779) “The values of the global culture are based on individualism, free market economics, and democracy and include freedom of choice, individual rights, openness to change, and tolerance of differences”.

Two important consequences seem to follow from these conjectures: self-reliance requires a continuous openness of individuals towards new learning and self-adaptation (life-long learning) on the one hand, and on the other hand, an increasing relevance of more general personal qualifications such as social competencies, and the ability to learn how to learn during the whole life span. However, here is the crucial question: Who prepares for such qualities?

4.2. Adjusting quality of life

Here a thesis may be formulated:

The growing contradiction between the objective reduction in the demand for living, human work and the continued high subjective and social importance of working increases the need for adjustment processes at the societal level.

This thesis draws the conclusion from the foregoing observations. It leads directly to the heart of our topic: the future of life and of work in society.

It is clearly true that certain changes in numerous dimensions of work-related values are taking place in Western industrialized countries, particularly in work motives and social norms: apart from the continued function of work to generate income, the interest in meaningful and fulfilling work continues to be strong. But change is reflected also in the increase of importance of the time outside of paid work: leisure and unpaid free time.

The reassuring attempts of economists claiming that unemployment will vanish with increased productivity, with longer work hours and with economic growth should be met with skepticism. The alarming increase in unemployment cannot any more be abated by economic growth. Rather the epochal and spectacular increase of productivity, particularly of production industries in industrialized economies, has led to a drastic reduction in the need for human work. To some degree the trend in production industries may be counteracted by the general trend of considerable parts of the work force flowing into the service sector which is probably fostered by globalization and the spread of information and communication technologies. Given that rationalizing effects in the service sector are only in the beginning, it can be assumed that in the long run human work saving effects will soon also be noticed. This leads to the heinous and disgraceful scandal of unemployment and societal polarization. Tomorrow we will in all likelihood have even more people out of paid work, because all arguments in favor to invest more in new technologies with the hope to fight unemployment will increase the dilemma. After all, where will investors invest? They will invest in productivity enhancing, labor saving technologies in order to become more competitive in the new global economy. The consequence: less need for human work. The deprivation of large parts of our population with a concomitant decrease of well-being and the increase of health risks are written on the walls.

Of course, the consequences of globalization may affect everyday and work life differently in less developed than in Western industrialized countries. However, the challenges of growing under- and unemployment as well as the need to adjust to new work demands, particularly due to the unrelenting world-wide spread of new information and communication technologies, present material context conditions which necessarily will affect the social fabric in Third World regions as well. New inter-organizational relations are emerging and with them the need and opportunity for new industrial relations. The growing virtualization and individualization of job demands are likely to impact on social work relations. Such dynamics, in spite of their regional differentiations, are genuinely global.

5. Outlook

As has been shown, globalization dramatically upsets traditional and received structures and order on all societal levels: the individual, the family, the social community, the institutional and inter-institutional level. Formerly functional recipes and responses are increasingly becoming obsolete. Therefore, revolutionary rethinking is needed. It is unlikely that central political planning

and action will achieve drastic changes in these complex and sensitive societal fabrics, because they would ultimately require a world-wide accepted governance structure. The appeal for revolutionary rethinking is, therefore, addressed to the minds of people concerned in the hope that eventually changing awareness will impact political strategies. The requisite rethinking seems necessary in at least three domains:

- (1) Revolutionary rethinking is needed with regard to *a more sensible, more just distribution of work nationally and internationally*. Things being as they are, this can be done only via further per capita reductions in work time and consequent creation, or rather maintaining, of workplaces. Work time reduction across the board alone will not do the trick, because we must take into consideration that there are regions and industrial sectors where we have a lack of qualified workers, in others we have an overabundance. Hence, such work time reductions must be accompanied by respective educational and (re)training programs. Such new distributions of work ought to be complemented by extending the notion of work to other domains of society where work has to be done, but so far has not found the dignity of being paid (environmental protection, care for the old and sick, antiracist activities etc.). This also demands the development and implementation of legal initiatives to guarantee acceptable levels of health and safety within and across countries.
- (2) Revolutionary rethinking is needed with regard to *the redistribution of surplus value created by work*, i.e. we have to develop new concepts for the redistribution of the fruits of working, because it is an unbearable prospect to see that the fruits of work benefit only those who happen to own a workplace and to leave out those who suffer from not finding work. Unless we find solutions here we will undoubtedly have large scale social unrest and explosive developments. One solution might be guaranteed minimum income.
- (3) Revolutionary rethinking is needed with regard to the “construction of a civilization of liberated time” (Gorz, 1993). The hopeless and desperate search for full employment under given criteria for the distribution of work and its fruits impedes the search for new models for the use of free time. What is required is to jump on the opportunity to develop concepts for a better and self-reliant use of auto-determined time in the face of hetero-determined time in traditional workplaces which are anyway increasingly reduced.

The conclusion of a new social contract may be indeed a way of bundling these three strands of revolutionary thinking. Hengsbach (1997) has already sketched out the elements of such a proposal. It would have to integrate new forms of relating to our exploitation threatened natural environment, new gender relations which cover the political and personal aspects of economic and social equality and autonomy between women and men, and the inclusion of new criteria for the distribution of income and wealth in society. It looks like these demands go far beyond economic quick fixes and require the involvement of many disciplines, psychology being not the least one.

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