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Work – Transformation of Objects or Interaction Between Subjects?*¹

One of the essential features of every definition of work is utility, the purpose external to the work (Spittler 2001). But how is this purpose achieved? Work can be basically conceived of in two different ways:

- as transformation of an object
- as interaction with a subject.

The first paradigm – I call it the technical paradigm – implies the transformation of a passive object. The process is controllable and can be planned. When one has the appropriate knowledge, skill, and power, one can form an object according to one's ideas. The means for this are tools or machines. The second paradigm, which I call the interactive paradigm, assumes an object that is not fully controllable. An element of unpredictability is involved. One devotes great attention to the object. One interprets the messages that this object emits and reacts to them. The object possesses a subject character.

The first paradigm is constitutive of the modern position. We “work over” a piece of wood in order to make a spoon. We work on a piece of raw stone and produce a club or a blade. We transform the soil in order to make it agriculturally useful. Production means for us making a product through the transformation of material, of things. This is most obvious in our ideas on transforming dead materials. But we produce not only clubs, spoons and cars, but also wheat, grapes, milk, and pork by “working on” plants and animals. Treating animals as things is not without controversy, but it has been accepted within the technical paradigm at least ever since Descartes.

Habermas assumes the existence of this technical paradigm. In both of his essays “Arbeit und Interaktion” (Work and Interaction) (1968) and “Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie” (Technique and Knowledge as Ideology) (1968) he makes a distinction – based on an Interpretation of Hegel and Marx – between two types of action, “work” and “interaction”. Work is “instrumental action” and follows technical rules. Interaction is “communicative” action and follows its own norms. Both types of action have to be kept strictly separated. Work is absolutely essential, but as Habermas observes – critically of Marx – interaction

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cannot derive from work. Conversely, and here Habermas directs himself against Herbert Marcuse, work cannot be organized as an interaction. If we want to be technically successful, we cannot communicate with nature; we have to work on it. Work belongs to the area of technique and economy. The task of the cultural sciences is to examine interaction. Habermas consistently held this approach and worked it out in his “*Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*” (Theory of Communicative Action) (1981).

Can work and interaction really be so clearly divided? Is interaction free of instrumentality? The foremost question in my discussion is: Is work indeed purely instrumental? Is it only a matter of working on objects or is it not also a matter of interaction between subjects? The idea that not only humans possess their own sense of self-will / selfdetermination (Eigensinn, Eigenwillen), but also animals, plants, and even things, which we regard as dead material, is widespread in non-industrial, non-capitalist societies. The objects, or rather subjects, not only have their own peculiar characteristics (Eigenarten), which one must know and take into account, but have also a self-will, which is not fully controllable. This self-will can be so strong that these subjects are as powerful as humans or even may dominate them. Work becomes a game, a fight, a service, a care, an exchange.

I shall treat these questions first in relation to hunters and gatherers (I), then herders (II) and peasants (III), and finally in relation to capitalist industrial work (IV).

Work among hunters and gatherers

I am not starting with ethnographic examples, but rather with Ortega y Gasset’s “*Prólogo a un Tratado de Montería*” (1944; english “About the Hunt”) because the specific nature of hunting is better analyzed here than in most anthropological studies. Regardless of whether hunting is for subsistence as in the case with the Paleolithic hunters or for purposes of sport as among the aristocracy, wild game has a chance to escape. The hunted animal is an autonomous actor, a subject. Its behavior is not exactly calculated. In hunting there is no guarantee of success. That might be a cause of frustration. But, this is precisely what makes it attractive. Thus, hunting is a happy experience and so differs from arduous work. Happiness does not mean simply pleasure, for the effort involved in hunting is the same whether for sport or for work. But one freely undertakes this effort and with full freedom and for the sake of joy, “while work is an effort which one undertakes with a view to its result”. Here Ortega y Gasset contradicts his comments about

the Paleolithic hunters, who did not hunt for purposes of sport but to secure their subsistence. Thus, hunting can be just as much work, but it is a work of a specific sort, which cannot be interpreted as domination of an object, but rather as an interaction between subjects.

Ortega analyzed this better than social anthropologists taking the approach of “Cultural Materialism” and “Ecological Anthropology” where the idea of instrumental work dominates. What is hunted and gathered is explained by the “theory of optimal search for food” (Harris 1987). Hunters and gatherers optimize their returns in that they optimize the relation between work effort and return on calories obtained from different animals and plants. This theory has its merits but it can offer only a limited explanation. Hunting is a notoriously insecure activity. Hunters differ greatly in their knowledge, skill, and luck. Among the !Kung San studied by Lee (1979) the men spend more time hunting than the women gathering, but the returns are less. More than half of the food (when calculated in calories) comes from the women. However, meat is valued over plant food. While gathering has a constant return, the individual differences in hunting are enormous. That begins with the fact that not all men go hunting. During a study of a period of one month, 7 out of 11 men from one camp went hunting. Only every fourth day was successful and the individual differences again were great. The good hunters went hunting every second day and were disproportionately successful. One hunter, who went hunting only for four days, did not bag one wild animal.

Descola (1986) in a study on the Achuar in Ecuador found that the hunting returns are small because the hunters often return home without success. While 80 minutes of planting a garden can attain 2500 calories, the same amount of time in hunting brings only 600 calories. In respect to protein supply, fishing is the most productive. From a purely utilitarian point of view one could do completely without hunting; the protein requirements can be met with less work effort by planting gardens and catching fish. But here one sees the limitation of input-output calculations and the principle of minimal expenditure of effort. Hunting is fun. The men are out 8 to 10 hours hunting. This activity is not, however, seen as work. When one goes hunting, one speaks of “going to the forest” or “going for a walk”.

The interactive character of hunting is evidenced not only in the hunter’s behavior. The hunters are conscious of the interaction (Ingold 1994). While we tend to exclude technical aspects as instrumental from social relations, Ingold thinks that this is an unjustified imposition of our culture on the culture of hunters. For them tools are not instruments for ruling nature, but rather are mediums for creating a social relationship. Arrows serve the interaction between humans and animals. When it does not reach its goal, then it is because the animal is not ready

to enter into a relation. Ingold asserts a contrast between hunting and herding cultures. In contrast to herders, who dominate their animals and will break their self-will, hunters leave the animals to their own will.

Even when we do not accept the interpretation of the hunters for ourselves, everyone can understand that hunting is more like an uncertain interaction than a successful instrumental activity. For that reason it is argued not only by Ortega y Gasset that hunting is not to be designated as work. Eduard Hahn equates the “Origin of Economic Work” (“Entstehung der wirtschaftlichen Arbeit”, 1908) with the steady activities of the gatherers and the preparation of food by women. Men have fun with insecure hunting, but it is not work. This definitional typecasting of work associates it above all with toil, a position which often corresponds to emic ideas. But if we want to do comparative research, and if we stick to the analytical definition formulated at the start of this paper, then hunting within a subsistence economy is a matter of work.

Not only hunters, but also gatherers (men and women) interact with nature. The interaction is often seen as a gift or exchange relationship. Australian hunters and gatherers speak with the land on which they hunt and gather. Through their sweat and their talk they put the land in a favorable mood. The land is then ready to put at their disposal wild game and fruits (Povinelli 1993). It is reported that the Mbuti, African hunters and gatherers, see themselves as children of the forest. They like to go to the forest in order to be together with their counterparts and nature and to gather at this time the fruits. They sing together with the spirits of the forest and the latter give them their food (Bird-David 1992).

The work of herders

That animals not only have their own distinctiveness (Eigenarten), but also their own self-will (Eigenwillen, Eigensinn) would be conceded by most of us. The question is whether this self-will is respected. Ingold disputed this in regard to herders (in contrast to hunters). My own studies on herders’ work among the Tuareg (Spittler 1998) show other results. According to the Kel Ewey Tuareg, humans and animals, even things, have a well developed self-will. This self-will may turn into resistance as soon as others try to influence it. Consequently there are limits to feasibility and upbringing.

Not only humans have their own sense of self and self-will, animals do too. One tries partly to overcome this opposition, but one also respects it to a certain degree. Animals are no machines that can be ruled by the proper technique. They are rather living beings with their own will. According to one idea that was for-

merly widespread, but today is in retreat, the goats give, for example, less milk when the cheese produced from the milk is sold instead of being consumed in the household. Tugey, to refuse, is a word frequently used which emphasizes the sense of self and self-will of humans, animals, and things. Tugey puts a limit on the upbringing of humans and the domination of animals and things. The daughter who refuses to go to the goat sheds in the grazing area, the son, who refuses to work in the garden, the goats which refuse to come at the call of their women herders – these all encompass types of refusal that are familiar to us. It becomes more difficult when we hear that the goats refuse to give milk or indeed that the dates refuse to be sold, or a language refuses to cooperate. When my progress in learning the Tuareg language lagged behind my hopes, then I was often comforted by the Tuareg with the words: “The Tuareg language refuses”, i.e. the reason was seen to be less my incapacity than the will of the language.

The idea of tugey limits the work principle in several aspects. The limits of what is feasible and what can be educated are narrowly drawn. This is not only because one sees opposition at work; that could be overcome in many cases. Important is that the refusal is often respected, even when it could be technically overcome. The woman herder could force the dog to go to the pastures with her, but she respects its refusal, without asking whether the dog is “justified” in refusing.

This respect is often shown in the handling of camels or goats. Goats are especially self-willed. Even we have, or have had, this view, for the Word “capricious” comes from *capra*, goat. Goats have different characters, which are evidenced in the names which the Tuareg give them. There is *inter alia* the gazelle, which is shy towards the herder and behaves like a gazelle; the quarrelsome, which is always fighting with the other goats; the strayer, who distances itself from the herd; the indifferent, which does not hear the calls of the goat herder; the coy, which has to be tempted with nice words to come to the water trough. These goats make the work of the herdswomen difficult. For example, the goats designated as gazelles do not allow themselves to be milked at all or several women herders have first to capture them. The milking, which normally can be done in a few minutes, lasts half an hour and requires the cooperation of several women.

Capricious goats exist everywhere. But we would sort them out by selling or slaughtering them so that the work becomes easier and these characteristics are not further reproduced in successive generations. Such considerations are not foreign to the herdswomen. But as a rule they dismiss these thoughts and say that one has to respect the goats’ self-will just as of humans. They accept the extra work. But one can also imagine that this makes the work more fun. If the women were to see the goats as pure instruments for achieving their aims, then the lonely

work in the wilderness would be intolerable. To watch a quarrelsome goat is fun. To capture a shy goat is a game that relieves the monotonous milking work.

Respect for the distinctive personality and self-will of animals can be developed into a specific service ethic. A conception of work as a service is common among nomads. Much more so than farmers or stationary cattle holders, nomads adapt their entire way of living to the needs of the animals in that they are as mobile as the animals. Kurt Beck has described this in detail in relation to the nomads in Kordofan (Beck 1994, 1996). The herders are to put their life at the service of the herd. That does not mean that they must always work, but they must always be ready for the herd.

Work among peasants

It is a widespread conception among peasants that work is care. Work alone cannot create a vegetable product but can only help in its growth. In the final analysis, the affluence of nature must be traced back to the will of God.

Anthropologists, like other people, often romanticize the work of peasants in pointing out its harmony with nature or its peaceful interaction with nature. But we should not forget that agricultural work always starts with the destruction of nature. Before sowing and planting can be done, the existing vegetation has to be destroyed. Clearing the field consists of cutting and burning down trees. To prepare fallow land for sowing means uprooting shrubs and grass. The destruction continues even after the sowing. Hoeing to make space for useful plants destroys the weeds. The soil is torn up with the hoe. Interaction with nature does not imply only peaceful exchange or care, but very often a battle. This fight may be dangerous. Tools like axes and hoes resemble weapons, with which the peasant can injure not only other people but himself as well.

In the following, I shall describe an extreme case of fighting found among the Bemba in Zambia. The basis of my description is Audrey Richards well known book "Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia" (1939). Richards describes in great detail the agricultural work process, which is organized in a different way than in neighbouring societies. The martial tradition of the Bemba accounts for the difference. Whereas in many societies peaceful agriculture constitutes the opposite of war, the Bemba organize their most important agricultural work like war. This system has become known under its indigenous name *citemene*.

Clearing among the Bemba does not consist in destroying the trees completely, but in cutting the branches. To this end, the young men have to climb to the top of the trees. This work is seen as play, as pleasurable and exciting. But it

is also very dangerous. Every year several young men fall to their death in this way. Richards gives a vivid description of the climbing: “At the top of the tree the work becomes more and more dangerous. A man may be left standing on a fork at the summit with one of the vertical stems as yet uncut. He has to clasp it with one hand to steady himself, while with the other he slashes at the trunk he is clinging to. He swings his axe till he hears the warning crack and feels the branch sway. Then he slides his body quick as a flash down the mutilated stump of the tree, yelling in triumph as he hears the bough fall”. The Bemba particularly pride themselves on this *citemene* System. “Look at that man! He is an absolute monkey” is a high compliment to pay to a cultivator.

Audrey Richards was once asked whether Englishmen practised the *citemene* system in their own country. She gave a long and detailed description of the merits of English agriculture, but as she spoke she heard one of the young men behind her observe to his friend with a sort of derision: “Hm! Afraid to climb, I suppose.”

Capitalist industrial work

Up to this point I have spoken about hunters and gatherers, peasants, and herders. They all have something to do with “nature”, with plants and animals. At least when it comes to animals, most of us I suspect would be ready to accept their subject character. In regard to plants it is more difficult. But what about the craftsman who works with “raw materials”, with dead wood, with stone and metals? Is there here an interaction between subjects or is there only a working of objects? Social anthropology has long realized that things are not just dead objects for their owners. The argument in Marcel Mauss’ famous “*Essai sur le don*” (Mauss 1925) rests on the premise that “archaic societies” conceive of things having souls. Mauss studied what consequences this has for the gift, but he did not deal with the consequences for work.

The most important test for the question of interaction is not the handling of tools by a craftsman, but rather capitalist industrial work. This is the prototype of instrumental activity; it is the model for Marx’s, Weber’s, and Habermas’ conceptions of work. As the technical or economic paradigms are dominating in research nearly all studies assume this framework. There are, however, some noteworthy exceptions: sociologists and social anthropologists, using the method of participant observation, arrived at other views and were at least on the track of an interactive work.

“Manufacturing Consent. Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism” is the title of a book by Michael Burawoy (1979). The subject of the book is

an old topic: How can it be explained that humans are ready to perform incessant and strenuous work? Burawoy's study is based on his own experiences. For a year he was a worker in a machine manufacturing factory. Burawoy found that supervision, salary attractions, and punishments could not sufficiently explain the achievements of the workers. It was not force or salary attractions which guaranteed a successful production, but rather the game. "Game" has nothing to do with "playing" in contrast to work. Rather it is an essential part of the work process. The playful-antagonistic character with which this work is done and conflicts settled with management and other workers gives a meaning to the work which would otherwise be absent under Tayloristic conditions. It simply drives away boredom. Time passes more quickly when "making out". One becomes less tired. The game makes the basic deprivations that work brings with it tolerable or renders it satisfactory.

Burawoy studied especially the game of "making out". In piecework one can either earn the basic salary without any further efforts, or one can play the game of salary raises by increasing output (making out). In the latter variation all turns on this game: one's own actions, contacts and talks with work colleagues, and supervisors. It is a game insofar as it promises a profit, has elements of insecurity, which arouses ambition, and stimulates competition and cooperation with other workers. It is less the higher salary as such than the forces aroused through the game which results in higher performance. Contrary to the assumption made by Marx and others that under capitalistic conditions the game or playful character of work is lost, and equally contrary to the assumption made by Ortega y Gasset, which postulates an absolute contrariness between hunting and work, play is an element of work even under the extreme conditions of capitalist factory work.

Nearly all of the studies on this, however, focus on the interaction between humans. Humans' self-determination ("Eigensinn") and games between them are examined. Working with objects is less discussed. Burawoy mentions playing with machines, but they are more an instrument in the game between coworkers than a partner or opponent. As a rule it is supposed that objects are worked on and transformed and that through work they are completely controlled. In reality this is not the case. Dealing with things is not the equivalent of dominating things. One of the few studies focusing on the interaction with machines is Julian E. Orr's "Talking about Machines. An Ethnography of a Modern Job" (1996). It examines the triangular relation between service technicians, customers, and copy machines. Orr worked many years as a service technician before he undertook his anthropological research.

Part of the technical service and repair work corresponds to the technical paradigm: "Technical service work is commonly perceived to be the fixing by rote procedure of uniform machines, and routine repair is indeed common." This

applies, however, only to a part of the work. Orr continues after the above sentence: “However, individual machines are quite idiosyncratic, new failure modes appear continuously, and rote procedure cannot address unknown problems... Work in such circumstances is resistant to rationalization, since the expertise vital to such contingent and extemporaneous practice cannot easily be codified.”

Machines are not objects, but rather subjects, in this case partner and opponent. “War Stories” are told about the machines. These deal not only with heroic success, but also often with defeats in handling the machines. Even the heroic stories assume that the machines are difficult and incalculable. “These tales of the heroism required to service early machines seem balanced between celebrations of the perversity of the machines and celebrations of the technicians coping. It is not clear whether the technicians more admire the coping or the perversity.” Each machine is an individual, even when many are of the same type. They are named individually by their users. A technician can differentiate between each machine in his herd. The machines are (like a livestock herd) in principle domesticated, but only in principle. When describing the negative characteristics of machines, one uses moral and value judgments. Machines can be “filthy”, “perverse”, “crotchety”, “odd”. These characteristics are seen not only as negative. “The machines are both perverse and fascinating. Earlier models featured both fires and explosions, and the technicians speak with a fond pride of the labor involved in recovering from such disasters. Catastrophes resulting from oversight are described with the same pride as part of the process of becoming a real technician... Indeed, how could they resent the machines, for such a machine is a worthy opponent, partner, other.”

Orr compares the way technicians deal with the machine with the description by Levi-Strauss (1962) of the bricoleur, who works with what is momentarily available. This corresponds, however, only partially to the self-image of the technician. In practice the technician interacts with the machine as though it is an individual. Their stories are character descriptions and moral value judgments. On the other hand they have a technical world view insofar as they warn to harness the chaos especially with orderly and systematic behavior, based on knowledge and skill.

Conclusion

Empirically we can establish that the interactive conception of work is widespread. This can be most easily seen in respect to hunters and gatherers, peasants and herders, first because of the living nature of the work objects and secondly because of the historical dimension. These forms of work dominate in a pre-mo-

dem world. Clearly, though, even in capitalist industrial work one finds a strong interactive element.

How can one explain, from the point of view of the technical paradigm, the wide extent of work with subjects?

Where interaction is indisputable (for example, in hunting), work proves to be inefficient. The hunters return often to the camp with nothing useful. The effort is high, the failure rate equally high. The average work productivity is thus low. As a consequence, the evolution is towards more efficient economic forms like agriculture and livestock raising.

Where the interaction rests on non-scientific world views, that is, they contradict our ideas, it is a matter of a magical world view and of superstition, which equally leads to inefficiency. This is also supplanted by an evolution in favor of a more efficient economic form. The demystifying of the world (Weber: "Entzauberung der Welt") leads to increasing rationality. Today the remains of such magical views merely show that the Enlightenment has not yet succeeded.

What the social anthropologists describe as an emic world view is often only a metaphor (e.g. wringing with nature), which does not correspond to reality.

There are several objections to these arguments:

Let us start with the latter argument (the interaction metaphor): This argument is indeed to be taken seriously. The protagonists of a culturalistic perspective in social anthropology limit themselves often to a semantic approach in studying work. It is simply supposed this is relevant for action. In my opinion that is anything but obvious. Work goes beyond talking, it has to be done.

To my mind, the neglect of the action level and the limitation to the discourse level miss the object.

The technical paradigm assumes either the universality of its principles or an evolutionary perspective. The first assumption can be easily refuted. Work has never functioned alone according to the model of the technical paradigm. Rather it has always contained interactive elements. This is frequently overlooked, because of the dominance of the technical paradigm in the description and analysis of work. The evolutionary perspective too, which postulates an increasingly technical control of the world, cannot be sustained. Even when one is not a follower of the radical thesis of Latour ("We were never modern," 1995), then it is valid to say of the world of work today that interaction and communication, which evade a simple mechanistic perspective, are increasing, not decreasing. Here the technical paradigm is a poor adviser. This is possibly the case not only for the interaction among humans, but also with machines, e.g. computers.

The technical paradigm overlooks not only the subject in the object, but also in the actor, who works. It assumes a rational actor, in effect a machine (Rabinbach 1990), without thematizing the anthropological or cultural context

of the actor. Work as interaction in any case is more fun than a successful domination of the object which excludes every surprise. Hunting is the best example of this. This is also valid for agricultural work, raising livestock, and industry as I have described above. Having fun at work is a value in itself. It also often increases work productivity as has been known since Fourier. Burawoy (1979) shows this persuasively for capitalist industrial work. Work can be not only a matter of fun, but also a fight. There are victories and defeats in interacting with other subjects. This is so not only for hunters, but also for herders, peasants, and industrial workers.

Persons (actors) and their actions have to be defined substantially in terms of culture. This applies as well to technical and interactive action. Anyone prepared to take risks will conduct work in a risky way (example: the Bemba). Whoever because of religious ideas finds that living in the wilderness is incompatible with human dignity will organize herding work differently from one who feels at home in the wilderness (Beck 1994; 1996; Spittler 1998). When modern persons define themselves as flexible individuals, then they will organize their work in a new way (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). When the actor finds that the aim of work lies not only in practical utility, but also in playfulness and aesthetics, then he will perform the work in another way. The concepts of an actor mentioned here do not necessarily imply an interactive perspective; they do promote it.

(Translation by Chris Jones-Pauly)

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