

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF WORK

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I. INTRODUCTION: DEFINITIONS

Work is the first of all human rights, if not for its place in the hierarchy of rights, then for its importance as the means by which other rights are realized. Perturbed by the ideas and practices of trade on a global scale, temporarily threatened by new technologies, work begs priority consideration in the international arena.

Globalization has arrived, bringing with it fundamental changes in the concept and distribution of work, as well as reactions which often take the forms of resistance and protectionism. At the same time, a significant change is affecting workers themselves, and because conditions “internal” and “external” to the worker come together in this change, its character must be taken into account.

This text draws from the author’s experience, first as the Colombian Labor Minister from 1962 to 1963 and subsequently as the Head of State from 1982 to 1986, as well as from time spent as a professor at numerous universities throughout Latin America. Such experiences have taught the author to think that even if globalization and change are inevitable, the term globalization itself has yet to achieve a clear and satisfactory definition. This definitional failure extends to and muddles all discussions about the contemporary status of work.

Another difficulty rests in the temptation of treating the terms *globalization* and *internationalization* as if they were equals. If one falls into this trap, all attempts at analysis become fruitless. Therefore, one must differentiate: “international” simply refers to activities or analyses beyond the national level, while “global” speaks of a strategy that supposes integration.

II. ASYNCHRONOUS DEVELOPMENT

It follows that globalization is a desideratum, one proposed both in the medium and long-term, whose inevitable exigencies must be fulfilled in keeping with the stage in which the process of development finds itself. The asynchronous development of the world's economies poses a stern challenge to the orderly process of globalization. Developed countries began opening their economies during the last phase of economic integration, which is a stage prior to globalization itself. In contrast, both the developing countries and the "poorest of the poor", the nations of the fourth world, presently find themselves only in the initial stages of integration into the world economy. This asynchronous development does not promote a logical perception of universal planning. Similarly, it obscures a clear-sighted view of the international division of labor under a globalization regime. Of course, the problem of uneven development has repeated itself in each phase of history. For our purposes, it is enough to recall the many places in which feudal systems survived, even as capitalism took root and unfolded in others. In short, whether developed countries like it or not, globalization is proceeding unevenly, and its effects are dislocating not only the traditional structures of work and occupation, but traditional social structures as well. The consequences of these dislocations could become serious. Thus, there are those who would rather pay now, and in cash, the cost of the "externalities" that social adjustment to globalization imposes, to avoid the even greater costs of disorder.

The present age has caused these economic and cultural changes to accelerate, and therefore made it important precisely to identify their varied roles and characteristics. In effect, the computer revolution prefers the labor arena; levels of specialization increase without producing hyper-specialization; training remains valid for less and less time, requiring continued professional development; automation has increased in nearly all phases of the productive process; the growing displacement of workers has been observed through the transference of basic operations to those regions where costs are lower, i.e., salaries, bonuses, insurance, social benefits, etc., under the formula of off-shore value added labor.

III. PRIORITIES

These consequences of globalization are wide-reaching and reveal themselves in matters such as governability, social debt, culture, growth, productivity, in the terms of exchange, and in the structure of employment.

The perception and prevention of the problems that flow from globalization pose stern challenges to the quality of the leadership in those who guide the process. Fundamentally, the world of labor is what must be understood. Economic development cannot ignore its cultural impact. Culture fulfills the human who produces it, changes it, suffers from it, and should benefit from transformations in it.

The foregoing allows one to understand how material labor can exist as intellectual work, and serves as a basis for evaluating priorities in different nations. Today's society has substituted the type of energy used to advance production, and in so doing, has introduced changes in the division of labor and in the manner of its participation. These changes of energy have transformed the concept of manual labor from its previous *status* as a *source of energy* to a lesser and replaceable *value added status*. Intellectual work has not escaped unscathed. Its value or appreciation depends on its proximity to the productive process. Production above all other things is what shapes and steers scientific and technological knowledge, the developments in which in turn, have forced a revolution in educational systems.

IV. MANIFEST DESTINY

With societies in this socio-economic framework, the first international division of labor is observable. It separates those in developed countries who through intellectual work create the means of production, from those in developing nations, who deliver consumer or finished products. In the same way, knowledge produces an immense division of labor in the intellectual arena. Leadership in the "production" of knowledge and technology has a dynamism that both classifies and stratifies societies. At the first level are the developed nations, who "produce" scientific and technological innovations. At the second level stand developing nations whose "knowledge workers" can borrow and adaptively employ the intellectual "products" of the developed nations. At the least developed level are those nations whose workers chiefly apply the borrowed knowledge and mechanically produce the goods which embody it. The impact of knowledge has created a challenge in developing countries to generate behaviors, attitudes and abilities to sustain them in their capacity to borrow the incessant innovations of science and technology. The creation and maintenance of these attitudes express the "manifest destiny" of the globalization of work and production.

However, one must consider some gradations (or nuances) in the process of globalization. The special assignment for Third World countries

in this process, given their geographical locations, continues to be the supply of renewable and non-renewable natural resources, as well as the utilization of basic labor. Once again, the influx of knowledge and technology have introduced important social and cultural changes — in this case, through the introduction of intensive agricultural techniques. A well-known pattern repeats itself here: technology breaks the historically established link between extensive agricultural production and the intensive use of local labor. In other words, innovative techniques of agricultural production are associated with the minimal absorption of rural labor. Thus, economic return is guaranteed by the magnitude of the loss — starkly represented in economic and human terms — of the capacity to employ in this sector of production.

V. THE GOLDEN AGE OF SERVICES

Such phenomena, greater production and less labor, bespeak a golden age for services, reflecting negatively on developing countries and positively on developed countries. Services are associated with greater consumption and more leisure time. In developing countries, services reflect the social distance between those who make up the armies in the battle between the rich and the poor, while in developed societies, they express the objective consolidation of the economic and cultural components of the quality of life. Therefore, a peculiar division has arisen between those who some have characterized as the *consumers of the quality of life* and the *consumers of survival*.

Services generate a cultural transformation produced by the substitution of *idleness* for *free or leisure time*, where “idleness” in underdeveloped countries decomposes into having nothing to do. There are those who affirm that at no time are the poor more aware of their poverty than when they are forced to face “leisure time”.

Leisure has become a consumer good, and a considerable part of modern technology is dedicated to satisfying the demand for it — so much so, in fact, that today the instruments which are associated with leisure and the producers of them absorb an appreciable portion of the so-called basic family spending needs. The Italian Swiss businessman, Orio Giarini, made an in-depth analysis of this in his exposé for the UNU-Wider Conference of Helsinki in June of 1994 for the Club of Rome.

It is often asserted that the comparative advantage of developing countries in the supply of raw materials guarantees their place in the globalization process. This affirmation appears questionable. Progressively,

a disassociation between production and the use of raw materials has occurred. In the United States over the past 25 years, a nearly 80% increase in the production of manufactured goods has been paralleled by a significant reduction both in employment and the consumption of raw materials.

VI. HISTORY'S CABOOSE?

It is well known that a considerable amount of raw materials have lost their importance as being necessary for production, removing them from the poorer nations' inventory of goods for sale. This is particularly true in the area of mineral raw materials. They will not disappear from the market place, only from the global orbit of that market place, retaining a lesser value in the developing countries that still can use them.

The situation becomes more complex if, as stated earlier, one considers the growing impact of electronics, computers, miniaturization, and the rapidly growing practice of recycling, which reduces the need for raw materials, thereby affecting not only the flow of resources toward the underdeveloped, but also the effective placement of labor.

VII. INFORMAL ECONOMY

In Latin America, and in developing countries in general, different structures of labor coexist. In a single place, there may be labor models from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries operating alongside one another, without the adjustment that allows for confidence in a rapid homogenization that would facilitate a viable policy.

Real unemployment levels are high. Collection and reporting of the data that accurately expresses its full scope is hampered by an interested cosmetic cover-up. In effect, countries in deep poverty register less unemployment than countries with more advanced development, without considering that in those countries unemployment is accompanied by subsidies.

Unemployment has forced an informal economy to form. Unemployment is also the prime cause of the feeling of transience that ends in appropriating and dissolving both culture and social relationships, which results in the further splitting of the bases of social coexistence.

The grand generator of employment that was the State has seen its responsibility shrivel, a development forced along by the process of modernization. Unemployment has also resulted from the increasing

adoption of new technologies by traditional enterprises. The rhythm of economic opening has brought with it the closing of enterprises — large, medium-sized and small — with the consequent growth of unemployment, while automatization and computerization create new declines in the demand for labor.

VIII. MARGINAL LABOR

Something that cannot be forgotten is the loss of the quality of employment. One speaks of employment growth, which is quantitatively certain, but it responds to the loss of quality employment and the appearance of degrading labor positions.

Marginal labor and informal labor tend to be the “assembly halls” of poor societies. The difference between the two is that while informal labor has been able to establish some actual continuity, marginal labor is defined fundamentally by its lack of continuity.

And if the situation of employment structure is serious in developing nations, it is even more so in those regions of the planet that have come to define the contours of a worrisome fourth world. There the objective conditions of under-development in the third world more than meet their match in the contest of misery.

The seeming unattainability of stable work for people on the fringes of society encourages imaginative solutions. An impressive case is that of the co-operative “Recuperar” in Medellín, Colombia, which arose from a combination of ideas and efforts to solve the problem of waste-management in the city. The people who organized the enterprise were the Mayor, some young professionals, and a group of illiterate rag-pickers who lived in the mountain of trash that had formed over the years. In twelve years, this co-operative has become an institution that has created more than 1,000 jobs in recycling plastic waste, and in cleaning and maintaining parks, subway stations and transportation terminals. Its affiliates now can read and write, and their children now attend secondary schools and universities. Their presence in public places is an example of creativity and of overcoming adversity.

IX. IN SEARCH OF HOPE

The society of the future — in which we already live — warns of a new phenomenon, circumscribed within the classification of the north-south conflict. Every “north”, made up of those who live in wealth or in general

comfort, also has its own "south", peopled by those who suffer without any alternative to poverty or unemployment. The appearance of poverty within wealth is one of the great ironies and challenges of the present and the future, which we have seen worsen because of the migrations of contemporary nomads in search of hope.

Even in this world of injustice, the seriousness of a woman's plight is striking. She is highly discriminated against and unprotected, and she constitutes the larger contingent of the poor. Even should a woman find herself in another environment along the social labor scale, she nevertheless faces notorious margins of disadvantage. These disadvantages are evident despite development in advanced societies. Thus, United Nations figures show that women's income has dropped from 71% of a man's salary to only 66%. And even greater discrimination can be established in the labor market, as the concentration of women in the lowest paid sectors of the economy, particularly in value added production, demonstrates.

In Latin America, labor market discrimination against women is even more evident, especially if one takes into consideration that women make up more than half of the population. Working women comprise no more than 27% of the labor force in jobs characterized by low wages and productivity. That does not mean, however, that women are unoccupied. If one distinguishes between "working and laboring", women of the Third World are linked permanently to non-paid domestic work, where they are an element of family continuity. This phenomenon is not exclusive to urban centres. The double occupation of the woman in rural areas is notable, where she must also cultivate the land due to the massive migrations of the men to the city.

In general, the ruling culture of work continues to consider women as residual components, an attitude that extends to the rural areas as well as the cities. For example, illiteracy is greater among women. Low school performance records, repetition of school years, and school-leaving rates are greater among girls than boys. Under-nourishment indexes are higher for females, and stability at the work place, when women can find employment, is conditional and fragile.

Additionally, we may not overlook working children, who suffer the most shameful degradation in the labor structure. Because of conditions of extreme need, they become the cheapest of labor. Their exploitation in the present not only destroys their childhood, but leaves them without assurance of skills and education that would help to secure their future.

X. GLOBALIZATION BOOSTERS

Globalization, then, as a proposal and as a possible utopia, presents itself as a biased project, not only in the structure of labor and its effects on labor itself, but in all fields of endeavor. The new, innovative realities of economic modernization and the removal of barriers to trade have not varied the developing world's situation substantially from yesterday's condition of dependence that has continued during both the period of modern industrialization and the post-cold war era. Of course, the upper levels of society in developed and developing countries qualitatively have improved their lot, but on comparing them, the qualitative gap between the upper levels of the first and third worlds seems greater than ever. It is also true that work levels and quality in jobs of applied technology have improved, conserving here the same growing distance that appears when one compares the worlds one to another.

The dynamic process of science, technology and production that has already designated the devices designed to promote globalization attracts one's attention. Market boosters, cost, government and competition boosters, financial, labor, communications and computer boosters have been put into place. It is supposed that on applying them we will see each society's labor structure advance, bringing with it a growth in the distance between developed and developing nations.

There is already talk, for example, of *market boosters*, such as making per capita income equal among industrialized nations, thereby providing equal levels of life style and taste which would permit the emergence and growth of global supermarket chains, the identification of global customers, and the development of global advertising; of *cost boosters*, such as accelerated, innovative technology, the generation of scaled, flexible economies and robotics to replace cheap labor; of *government boosters*, such as the insistence of consumer societies' insistence on opening economies, the creation of blocks of trade communities, and reduced tariffs; of *competition boosters*, such as the globalization of companies, market penetration via networks, increased trade, and the acquisition and reengineering of companies; of *labor boosters*, such as accelerated and continued training; of *science boosters*, *computer boosters*, and so on.

XI. THE POSSIBLE UTOPIA

Such steps suggest the development of similar "booster" instruments for the countries and economies of the Third World. But please observe the *vade mecum* of these proposals! They go no further than constituting a

timid maintenance plan of the place that the Third World already occupies in the world organization of labor, and of the economy in general.

The World Bank, for example, maintains its objectives of long-term structural adjustment, based on favoring the free circulation of capital, the reduction of production costs, and incentives for exports. These objectives will augment the disparate interchange within the globalization strategy. To that will be added the massive incorporation of new technologies applied to production, especially in services such as telecommunication, the relative reduction of real salary, the management of unemployment (in part through the magnanimity of non-governmental organizations [NGO's]), labor reorganization, and the privatization of state enterprises. Are these the answers? Or would it be wiser to redistribute existing work by reducing the number of hours in each work day and creating more leisure time?

These measures and objectives lead toward the creation of a modernizing, technocratic elite, who will act as the true proponents of globalization. Globalization eventually will prove attractive, though initially it will be devastating for many human beings, groups, and societies. Moreover, some countries will have to carry the burden of social debt for those groups that are prepared only for some limited entry into the global club.

Globalization as a possible utopia is already an imperative, but the perception exists that for it to be less traumatic, we must first seek the grand objective of humanizing *man and mankind*. Here, humanization serves as a filter, a manner of decanting the other instrumental objectives which are pronounced as valid by a liberal market economy, or as some would call it, the *totalitarianism of market economy*, in order to forge a new world with the least possible social cost.

With the third millennium at the threshold, we must decide whether a few or all of us should arrive at the utopia of globalization promises, even though we may be required to partially reduce the accelerated rhythm that many cannot sustain. Perhaps this reduction of accelerated advancement would be the best contemporary version of the parable of the good Samaritan. There is no reference to abandoning the goal, only of thinking more clearly that economic is also the globalization of all that is human, and of the ethic of the ends corresponding to the ethic of the means.

XII. CONCLUSIONS

1. The design of a strategy of globalization must include the active participation of those who can not only remove the obstacles to, but will promote the full participation of, developing countries in the ongoing processes of globalization.

2. An awareness that no economic globalization can exist without a prior, or at least parallel *globalization of all that is human*, should rule all reflections, plans, actions and evaluations. In pontifical language, it remains true: man is the only way possible.

3. Pre-modern forms of economy must be modernized so as to give coherence to a viable model of transition.

4. No economic concept can abruptly enter the reality of the world. We must discern what the rhythm for its application should be, for example, that of the globalization of the Third World. And once defined, we must apply it constantly so as to reduce the social cost. The jumping about from one model to another only increases these social costs.

5. The only way to generate from work the necessary "value added" is to find an agreement between the value added and knowledge. To act on knowledge is to act on work and therefore on income. Knowledge is the key to international co-operation and consolidated action.

6. Continued education is the only way to guarantee the application of a model, and to make way for augmenting the value added through work.

7. The first phase of globalization is education. Education is the *conditio sine qua non* for creating certain development situations. To become producers of science and technology, to take advantage of what already exists, to operate what has been obtained, comprises the triumvirate of strategies necessary to open the gates of the future.

8. The leadership of developing countries must determine their comparative economic advantages to orient the design of the work of the future, and use these advantages as a factor of co-operation and integration in the global purpose. Just imagine, for example, ecology as one of the ordered elements of economic action, work, and international co-operation.

9. All regions and all countries must accelerate their internal processes of integration. To globalize without integration is to segregate.

10. We must assume the burden of the informal economy, accepting that which is positive, such as the expression of capability and initiative. We must make of the informal economy a starting point for the elaboration of an orderly, functional model of an economy of survival and of solidarity, that reduces the impact of the new tendencies, alleviates the social cost, and contributes to rationalizing the rhythm of advancement towards modernization. Herein lies the key to reducing attendant unemployment.

11. Only constant, orderly, planned investment will be able to put a stop to the wave of migrations into developing countries. It is less costly, and far more just, to invest in prevention than to have to assume the costs that will be generated by unwanted migration.

12. The design for a consolidated economy must be based on preferential

application to the family economy as represented by women, a constant factor in the family, in such a way as to allow her to perform her work without negatively affecting her roles as wife and mother. However, we must insist on the urgency of establishing equal opportunity in the work place for all regardless of gender.

13. Defining the promoters for the developing world, in the market place, government, etc., is a task that must be faced by all who support international agencies.