

How work is changing - Notes about an immediate future¹

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Summary

When trying to look beyond the persistently bad unemployment figures in Spain, work appears as a complex and far from homogeneous reality. Intellectual ingenuity is needed to read it. A fact imposes itself immediately: the duality between traditional jobs and precarious or ephemeral jobs; these are part imposed, part freely chosen. Home working has transformed labour relationships, with positive and negative consequences. Psychological ailment is on the increase in companies. Flexible working time makes family conciliation more difficult. The black economy maintains a substantial part of work under unsafe condition. Below these changes, one can perceive the effects of technology, whose impact on the future of work is uncertain. While some pay attention to “transhumanist” utopia and the end of work, the COVID pandemics has brought to light that many first necessity jobs are persistently undervalued. Against this set of unanswered questions, there is an urgent need for a deeply renewed social dialogue, far from polemics, to build a new consensus on the lines of the common good.

Who works and who does’nt

We are accustomed – perhaps anesthetized – to Spanish unemployment figures that remain persistently among the highest in Europe, with more than 35% youth unemployment between 15 and 24 years. At the same time, we know that in several European countries – and even in parts of Spain – with the post-pandemic economic revival, many companies find it difficult to hire the skilled workers they need. It may be useful for a moment to look at things from another point of view: that of labour participation, that is, the percentage of the active population (employed and unemployed) out of the total working-age population (between 15 and 64 years old). According to OECD data², the latest figures for labour participation in Spain are around 57%, compared to, for example, 48% in Italy and 73% in Sweden. The level of female participation in Spain is 52%. When considering only people between 25 and 64 years, the Spanish participation rate is 79% (71% in Italy and 89% in Sweden). There is

¹ Translated from an article published in *Corintios XIII, Revista de teología y pastoral de la caridad*, Cáritas Española Editores, octubre-diciembre 2021

² <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=STLABOUR>

therefore a wide margin of people in our country who are not currently looking for work, but who could do so.

In a recent book³, Italian sociologist Luca Ricolfi proposes the provocative concept of "Mass Stately Society": a country in which only about half of the total population works in paid jobs, in which a good part of the inactive enjoy a comfortable standard of living (largely young people who neither study nor work and live on family resources), whereas the active part includes an exploited minority of low-paid workers who subsist in conditions of quasi-slavery, many of them immigrants. His dystopian description refers to the social characteristics of Italy, perhaps reflecting a little less those of Spain. But it applies here too to some extent: anyone may be struck by the contrast between high levels of inactive or unemployed young people, on the one hand, and the images that are presented to us daily of a youth that loves the party and lives nonchalantly a time apparently devoid of any demands.

This image, maybe excessive and unfair, should at least serve to provoke a critical reflection on the transformation of work now underway. The evolution of work raises many unanswered questions. It is important to approach it with prudence and mental freshness. Work is not a homogeneous reality that can be "distributed". Employment statistics do not fully reflect the complex and diverse reality of work. And the fact of getting to work does not depend only on the creation of jobs by entrepreneurial initiative – although this is the essential engine – or by the public sector. It also depends, and perhaps previously, on the availability, on the level of training and on the expectations of the candidates themselves.

Post-pandemic work: questions

The pandemic has profoundly changed our way of working. In fact it has only accelerated changes that were already taking place as a result of previous evolution and for different reasons.

The first thing that stands out is the duality between traditional employment – stable long-term jobs, with fixed hours and a 38-hour workweek – and the multiple forms of variable, short and often ephemeral jobs of the “gig economy”, a regime of brief and isolated performances. This duality is reflected in the contractual and economic reality of the labour “market” in Spain, a duality often denounced between long-term contracts and “junk” contracts: high levels of protection enjoyed by traditional contracts are an obstacle to the generation of jobs and contribute to maintaining the precariousness of less stable hiring formulas. A very conflictive and (badly) politicized issue.

Trying to go beyond the usual debate that has us so often prisoners of sterile polarization, it is worth analysing the reason for “gig” jobs. There are economic and technological reasons for this, no doubt. But, at least in part, in addition to technical and commercial motivations, these formats also respond to aspirations of young

³ RICOLFI, L. *La società signorile di massa*, 2019

people who approach work without the idea of long-term permanence. For many, paid work is seen as a needed means of achieving autonomy, and not as an arable occupation in itself. The “gig” economy allows freedom and flexibility to both parties, employers and workers. In many cases, it may not be chosen by workers, but a provisional solution in the face of the impossibility of finding a permanent job; in extreme situations, which particularly affect migrants employed in intensive agriculture, precarious conditions are a harsh imposition of the strongest party; but in other cases, flexibility may be a preferred option for preserving individual freedom. In this sense, at least in these latter cases of relatively privileged situations and "covered backs", aspirations for autonomous development can harbour the seeds of a capacity to undertake, and it could be a mistake to put limits on them.

Greater work flexibility is also accompanied by a greater sense of insecurity and an increase in problems of psychological maladjustment and anxiety. Throughout the pandemic, it seems, cases of psychological ailments have intensified even in the most stable companies, creating the need for a care service comparable to that of the occupational medicine service. Human resource management have had to face the question of how far companies should take charge of these interventions, while in the past they were considered strictly personal. In any case, and this is revealing, several start-ups have been developed specialized in the outsourcing of business psychological care.

Home working and continuous working time

Home working has transformed many things in companies. It has forced managers and team leaders to live on a capital of human relations and cooperation accumulated sometimes over the years. Today it is not clear if these good relations can be maintained among those who were already there, and if they can be created among those who enter new. In many companies, teleworking has been experienced as something positive, as an opportunity to strengthen internal ties of cooperation in the company. But it is likely that this is a passing effect. In fact, the problems of organization now arise with hybrid systems, partially presential and optional, such as those that many companies are implementing in the post-pandemic phase: will there be differences in remuneration between those who choose to always work in person, those who opt for a hybrid solution or those working only at home? How far is the company responsible for the cost of materials, equipment and operating expenses involved in teleworking? And how to ensure equal access to positions of responsibility for those who choose to telework?

Flexibilization also affects schedules. With or without teleworking, we are witnessing a generalization of unconventional work schedules to meet the needs of continuous service (in commerce, for example), in globalized businesses with time-zone differences in multinational companies, or to suit machines – robots or computers – which must be attended 24 hours a day every day ... The work of 8am to 3pm typical of routine administrative tasks is ending. With this, new freedoms arise, but also new

problems as the already difficult conditions of work-life balance become more complicated.

Another order of questions – old but recurrent – is that of work in the underground economy, that of the well-known question "do I invoice you with or without VAT?". Some experts estimate that the underground economy in Spain still accounts for more than 17% of GDP. There is a division of opinion on the effects of the pandemic: the generalization of card payments and online commerce may make the underground economy tend rather to retreat. But the problem of insecurity still stands for those who work in these fraudulent and risky conditions, lacking basic social protection.

Technology: the end of human labour?

Underneath these evolutions technological change is exerting its effects. General studies on the consequences of digitalization indicate a tendency to a reduction of routine work, in particular administrative work, in which for reasons of cost and quality (avoidance of errors) functions are being delegated to industrial robots and computing software based on "artificial intelligence" algorithms. However, works which require creativity and, even more, the capacity for empathy and care that are properly human are less exposed to being replaced. This means that the transformation lurks in the layers of average qualified jobs, leaving more "protected", at both ends, those with higher and lower qualifications.

This topic was extensively addressed in the multidisciplinary seminar "Digital footprint: servitude or service?" organized by the *Fundación Pablo VI* between 2019 and 2021⁴. From an economic point of view, it is useful to study the history of technological revolutions of the past – textile industry in the nineteenth century, transportation and electricity in the twentieth century – to visualize the time elapsed between a first scientific discovery, until an invention among a hundred finally comes to solidify into a standardized technology. The effects that this process has on workers in each sector and on the population in general take time, but the increases in productivity and consumption that translate in the medium term into increases in well-being are spectacular.

Then as now, the transition period is difficult, especially when, as is currently the case, technology evolves more rapidly than people's ability to learn. In any case, the debate results in a reinforced conviction: technology is the result of human work, technological change is a social construction, there is nothing in it that is uncontrollable by nature. Moreover, in many cases, technology has served to complement, not replace human labour. Today some jobs disappear, others are being created, and it is difficult to have an overview of the process. But through the demand for products and through policies and incentives, both consumer opinion and public authorities can nudge research and development towards technologies that incorporate and reinforce human labour. The authorities must also ensure that

⁴ <https://www.fpablovi.org/index.php/huella-digital>. See especially the chapter on "The future of work" by Alfredo Pastor. To be published shortly in book form in Spanish.

competition is defended: each stage of technological revolution in history has led to a process of business concentration and oligopoly situations, and it has sometimes been necessary to correct this trend with appropriate reforms and policies, even by breaking up too powerful business groups.

In the ideologized view of some prophets of "transhumanism," technology and the human person will somehow merge and human labour, as we know it, will disappear altogether. We are painted a utopian future in which machines and artificial intelligence will have absorbed all the tasks that require effort, and in which we will all be navigating in endless leisure, paid for by a benevolent State (the basic universal income of which small partial versions are already being tested) and distracted in endless digital game theme parks. These are science fiction perspectives that have glimpses of reality but ignore all the harsh permanence of conflicts and inequalities in today's world. They are dreams that distance us from the real vision, that of a world in which a majority of human beings must fight to survive. For this majority, the ideologues of technology have no scenario in mind, except that of the "discard", the rejection denounced by Pope Francis. Utopias based on the exclusion and separation of a part of humanity, protecting those who identify with technology and leaving the rest to their sad and definitive sunset, are at the opposite pole of what we could call an updated vision of the common good. And given this, it is necessary to develop a different thinking and action program, in which technology approaches the most disadvantaged populations, where they make it their own to develop their own models of digital development from the base.

Low-paid or unpaid jobs

In the "lower" rungs of the social scale there are many jobs that the pandemic has revalued, at least in theory: those of care for the sick and elderly in the first place, but also distribution workers and those of cleaning and maintenance, basic services in the health sector, transport of goods and food, agriculture, infant, primary and secondary education... Before Covid, we were not so clearly aware of their irreplaceable importance and the human quality provided by those who perform these essential proximity services day by day. They are in high demand and yet they are still low-paying, low-wage jobs. The question is whether society has instruments or whether there are forces capable of correcting this situation in a substantial way. Increasing the interprofessional minimum legal wage is the path followed by some rulers, but it is a "coffee for all" measure that ignores regional and sectoral differences and causes difficulties for many small companies without solving the specific issue. Better targeted approaches, true socio-economic "acupuncture", would probably be necessary to reach those services, unanimously recognized as necessary, and improve their conditions. Above all, a permanent change of collective mentality will be needed in their favour. First, the recognition of a fact: people are capable of extraordinary feats of service and care not for reasons of money, but for the intimate satisfaction of a job well done. This is the clearest demonstration that the abstraction of *homo oeconomicus*, with which some pretend to explain all economic behaviour, and which

only moves for money, is incorrect. It just is not true in the simplest jobs, nor is it in jobs of very high specialization and high responsibility. Thus, it is fair to call for a revision of the lowest salaries, clearly undervalued. And also – as a co-responsible and exemplary measure – for a downward moderation of very high remunerations in prominent business positions.

When you talk about work, of course, you're not just talking about paid employment. Families cared for by mothers or fathers – women have of course more experience of the "impossible" conciliation of family and professional work – or the generous dedication of many grandparents in our society: all this has no statistical recognition and, therefore, it is as if it did not exist. It would probably not be possible to pay for work in the household, which would entail immense bureaucratic waste. But somehow, perhaps through social protection measures (pensions, for example) they should be publicly recognized in a balanced society.

And finally, one cannot ignore the unpaid activity of those preparing as students or those who choose as retirees to dedicate free time to study or voluntary work. From a general point of view, as is being suggested here, these activities are as important as paid jobs and should be recognised with coaching and rewards.

Work and the common good: a topic for debate

Facing with so many questions, we need a multidisciplinary dialogue in which experts participate alongside practitioners of labour relations. In the current socio-political context, it is common to observe how the social partners are capable of greater realism and are more pragmatic than political representatives. It is important to preserve this relative autonomy of labour relations and, at the same time, to ensure that new realities and uncertainties penetrate the minds and take their place at the dialogue table, so that attempts can be made to build little by little the elements of a new social, non-ideological and shared contract.

The future of work has more questions than answers. Asking the right questions is the first step. This is what will be tried from the end of 2021 to 2023 in a new seminar promoted by the *Fundación Pablo VI* on "Work is transformed". The differential element of this effort will be, as befits a "think tank" dedicated to deepening the social teaching of the Catholic Church, renewed in a multidisciplinary way with the most current thought and debates. It will start from concrete realities in different sectors, trying in each case to discern how the flexibilization of working conditions has occurred, what consequences it has on different population groups, and how it can evolve. At the end, one hopes to draw conclusions and recommendations that translate an approach to human work inspired in the common good into concrete steps, and which can serve to inspire political, business and educational decisions.

In this perspective, everything that can be done by public authorities, by business, by universities and educational institutions, and throughout society, will be useful to prepare people for a change that is still undetermined. The end of the process is not known, therefore in addition to the necessary applied technical knowledge, humanistic

and ethical training that educates the capacity for discernment and helps to make future decisions is equally indispensable. And perhaps, rather than any kind of universal basic income, we should design systems that truly allow people to learn to work and to achieve in fact the dignity that work confers. Hence the essential importance in our society of a return to the forgotten concept of apprenticeship.