

## RECREATING DIGNITY IN LABOUR; THE MARXIST NEXUS

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**Abstract:** Work constitutes the mainstay of human activity. The involvement in labour process upgrades those who participate in labour activities as they derive intrinsic satisfaction in what they carry out. The main concern in this paper is to assess the proper conceptualization of work in the Marxist perspectives. The definition and the various perceptions by different authors is undertaken. The ideological viewpoints from different groups: the Calvinist, the Greeks, the Hebrews, the ancient Christians and Moslems is taken to show how they consider work. The externalization of work has thus created the hatred for work as it is now purely considered for lower class that must eke their living from performing these tasks. Works become too specialized to make meaning to the worker who now see work only with an extrinsic value and thus considered in instrumental value. In Nigeria the economic situation has further pushed the worker to see work only as means to an end. The economy has further compounded the situation of work in Nigeria. The Marxist conception of work has thus been fully observed among the workers in Nigeria. The only solution has largely remained the expansion of the economic space to allow most people to get value for what they produce.

**Key Words:** Intrinsic, Extrinsic, Self-actualization, Expiation

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## INTRODUCTION

Most people spend most of their waking life working. This predominant phenomenon in our lives defines who we are. However, there are contradictory perceptions about work, while some feel that is a salvation, others think it is a curse. Thus work creates wealth and salvation; it also creates poverty and alienation. In many historical epochs, people were engaged in work in order to eke out a living. Labour was performed in order to get intrinsic satisfaction, but in modern capitalist societies, work is performed mostly for extrinsic satisfaction generally geared towards meeting an end. Work therefore; create wealth and salvation, poverty and alienation. In this paper the main concern is to dwell on the conceptualization and purpose of work, review of the ideological views on work, the nature and practice of work, the social and cultural attitudes that have shaped the perception of work. All of these are related to fostering better work ethics and development of Nigeria at period when the country is in deep recession.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION AND PURPOSE OF WORK

There is hardly any adequate conceptual definition of work in the literature. However Fox (1971:1) offered one minimum aspect of work necessary for the production of goods and services. Work is necessary for the production of goods identified with earning a living, it has financial or economic base, and it involves physical and mental effort the production of goods and services for the satisfaction of human wants accounts for the universal interest in work. Work create wealth and satisfaction, it creates poverty and alienation. The general purpose of work is to create material goods and services, which may be consumed by the worker or sold to someone else. Work thus, includes paid labour, self employment and unpaid labour including that of housewives and househusbands. Work provides material and personal benefits, but it can also be a source of frustration and aggravation (Hudson, 1990:3).

According to Fox (1971:1) for most of man's history, the struggle for bare survival has imposed its own inescapable imperatives, leaving few choices. These compulsions have often been reinforced by a social fabric of tradition, upheld by a ruling group which integrated work, status and religious practices which left little scope for independent speculation. Men have no innate genetically given orientation to work; attitudes to work are socially and culturally molded by a variety of socializing agencies. The State itself implicitly and explicitly encourages certain attitudes to work; the industry, business and commerce, religion and educational institutions.

Wright Mills (1956:215) concludes that:

*"Work may be a mere source of livelihood ,or the most significant part of one's inner life; it may be experienced as expiation ,or an exuberant expression of self; as burden duty ,or as the development of man's universal nature . Neither love nor hatred of work is inherent in man, or inherent in any given line of work"*

### **Ideological Viewpoints**

The meaning and motive for work has historically changed over the years reflecting the changes in the social order. To the ancient Greeks, work was simply a curse, deploying mechanical arts as brutalizing the mind in a way that rendered it unfit for contemplation and practice of virtue; the Romans held similar views with the Greeks about the brutalizing nature of work; the Hebrews saw work as painful drudgery, but as a way of expiating sin and recovering from lost spiritual dignity. For the primitive Christians, labour had no intrinsic value or importance, but was instrumental in promoting health of body and soul, making possible the virtue of charity and guarding against evil thoughts and habits. Work is never exalted as having any value in itself, and remains simply an instrument of purification, charity and expiation. In the later stages, work became exalted with the ushering in of Luther and the Medieval Catholics. Their perception sees work as a natural affiliation of *fallen man*, a perpetual punishment suffered by mankind as a result of *original sin*, a *necessary evil*.

Manual and intellectual work was a religious duty. The function of work was self-discipline, but in an enabling rather than degrading sense, a way of serving God. Work is valued as a means towards spiritual salvation. The Calvinist added the virtues of austerity. Men must not lust after the fruits of their labour (wealth, possession soft living). Their sweat and toil have value only as they help to establish the kingdom of God on earth. With the new creed, comes a new man, strong-willed, active, austere, and hard working from the religious conviction. This perception informs the Islamic viewpoint of work as a duty expressing Allah's will as well as complementing prayer (Fox 1971:3).

Apart from the religious perceptions, there were some ideological colourations to work as coinciding with the periods of development. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, work reached its apex height. The leading thinkers exalted work to a position far above any it had hitherto held in religious or ethics, making it the cause of all human progress, material, intellectual and spiritual. Work was no longer the only yardstick for measuring individual advancement, and self improvement, but major criterion by which societies were compared. The Capitalist thinkers looked at work as a productive activity directed at meeting two ends: the self interest of individuals; and for capital accumulation-profit. The Socialists looked at work as a productive and creative activity directed at meeting human needs of individual worker and the collective. From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs (Marx, 1952).

### **Nature and Practice of Work**

As we have earlier stated, the perception and organization of work has undergone a lot of changes over the period. The social organization of work is the set of relations among the people at work. These relations have consequences for life outside the workplace as well. The changing nature of work has also had important implications for workers' satisfaction, for the cohesiveness of society, for relations between men and women, and for ideas about the nature of work

and its place in social life. The most fundamental change in the nature of work over time has been the increasing division of labour (Hudson, 1990:4).

The increasing division of labour has accentuated the ascription of work to an extrinsic meaning. Work yields no value in and through itself, but is seen solely in terms of its instrumentality, as a means to some end. In fact, work is also seen to have some intrinsic meaning. Value is sought in and through the activities of work themselves, with enriching experiences through which men can meet challenges and overcome obstacles, develop their aptitudes and abilities, and enjoy the satisfaction of achievements. In the course of these experiences, men undergo psychological growth, realize themselves and reach due stature as full, mature and autonomous moral agents.

Men make themselves through the process of self-determination and growth. This is exhibited in making a choice by taking decisions and accepting responsibility for what is chosen. A work situation, which is devoid of making choice or providing only the trivial opportunities for choice, decision-making, and acceptance of responsibility, offers no opportunities for growth. Dehumanization of work is derived from the loss of sense of self, is described as alienation. Marx (1959) has captured this situation of alienation in his early philosophical writings:

*First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature, that consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery, not of well being, does not develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker therefore feels at home only during his leisure, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only means for satisfying other needs (Bottomore & Rubel, 1978:75).*

Some other motivational theories see individual with all potentials for meeting challenges, exercising responsibility, developing independence, and freely expressing a range of aptitudes. Through these means he becomes an autonomous moral agent, achieves psychological growth in a process of self actualization. They feel that the modern industry fails to meet these provisions for producing the mature *self-actualizing individual* through the structural conditions. In its fragmentation and dehumanization of work due to bureaucratic, authoritarian forms of organization, stunt and impoverish his development (Agyris, 1957; Herzberg, 1957; McGregor, 1960; Maslow, 1965). Later arguments add more conditions for achievement of self-actualization; nevertheless, much is lost in the structural organization of modern industrial work. Thus, they recommend restructuring of work to meet those requirements like redesigning, re-organizing and restructuring of work (Wright Mills, 1956; Marx, 1959).

Work must therefore have some certain pre-requisites for promoting the workers' instrumentality with the extrinsic rewards. There must be status, security and satisfaction of social needs. These are the primary source of self esteem among co-workers, superiors, subordinates, customers, friends, family and community at large. These, to a large extent, determine the choice of employment. The nature of work that gives individual satisfaction must be the type with intrinsic and extrinsic orientation in nature. Work is centre-life interest as men spend most of their waking time working. The intrinsic nature of work satisfies certain conditions of self-actualization, initiatives, while extrinsic factors tend to provide salary, security, status, allowances and other fringe benefits.

In the process of historical development, there has been a movement from independent commodity production of the handicraft stage, the putting out stage. The major characteristics included the situation where the worker works at home, owns the raw materials, the tools and the final products. The workers could start and close from work

at anytime he felt like, could change and modify his plan in the process of production. In fact, he has total control over the process of production (Marx, 1959). The work situation changed slightly during the Putting-out stage. Most of what obtained in the handicraft stage was obtained in the putting-out stage, except that, the worker do not own the raw materials and the final products. The merchants who put them out own and control the disposal of the final products.

The manufacture stage introduced major changes in the organization of work. Many people assemble together under one roof and one capitalist. The workers belong to different independent production units, but under their cooperation produce a definite article. They could also produce different things and bring them together. The major thing that happened here is the production of the detailed labourer due to specialization. The worker produces one particular aspects of a particular production process. The modern manufacture finally brings to the end of the individual initiatives. Machines replace human strength and the energy is provided by a central power source. A very important and crucial reversal has taken place as under this stage, workers become mere appendages to machines. The worker does not own the means of production, has no control over the space and rhythm of production, and worse still, he has no say in the disposal of the final products which are in fact, alien and opposed to him (Marx, 1982).

Work is still divided into small bits leaving workers very dissatisfied with what they do. Adam Smith (1937) demonstrated the typical industrial worker as he makes a pin, needed 18 distinct operations:

*One man draws out the wire; another straightens it; a third cuts it; a fourth points it; a fifth grinds it; ... Ten persons, therefore could make among them upwards of 48,000 pins a day.*

While the operations created a detailed worker and lowered the price of pin on the one hand, it reduced the skills and lowered the wages of the worker that made the pins on the other hand. The employer of labour determines the wages; the possessor of labour sells it to the capitalist in order to live. Wages are not the workers share in the

commodity produced by him. Wages are not part of already existing commodities with which the capitalist buys for himself a definite amount of productive labour power (Marx, 1985)

Notwithstanding the loss of control by the worker, the work environment is substantially different. The enterprises increase in size with increased centralization. This comes with increased bureaucracy regularizing the use of rules and creation of offices with clearly delineated duties. The centralized personnel office removed the individual from hiring to the centre. The standardized practices were evolved to protect the workers from abuses and favouritism by the foremen. Work environment generally become depersonalized. The introduction of new means of controlling workers meant increasing job specialization to technology used in the given plant. The assembly line set a rapid pace for workers and keeps them at the task much more closely than the harshest foreman. The working day becomes progressively shortened, but the monotony of work increased. It is against the background of this monotony of work and increased dissatisfaction with the organization of work that workers organize into solidarities as they shared grievances among themselves. The trade unions thus, try to counteract the excruciating conditions at the workplaces while the individual workers attempt to contain with deprivations of individuality at work.

In postindustrial societies, the number of highly skilled professional workers has increased. These workers hold privileged positions in the division of labour based on their possession of knowledge and expertise. As a result, they can command relatively high degree of autonomy in decision making. What motivates people to work in the post industrial society is the welfare scheme that provides some material support for the people. The workers are motivated by the high level of rewards they can expect by their advanced training in professional specialty and by the expectations of their profession and their employer that they will be committed to their work. The major



distinction to work in postindustrial society is the idea of commitment.

### **The Nigerian Experience**

Most industrialized Western countries have passed through to the processes outlined above to the post-industrial stage, and are already in the information stage. The United States of America which started industrialization after Britain has taken over and become the model of the world. We have only about 3 percent of the workforce engaged in agriculture, 30 percent in manufacturing, while the rest are engaged in services like insurance, banking, information technology. Most of the companies involved in manufacturing are producing outside the United States of America, using cheap and readily available labour in Asia and other developing countries.

The developing and the less industrialized countries are left below the manufacturing stage on dependent nature. Our labour force is at the rudimentary stage of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, depending on the organization of work around the machineries. The situation of the manufactures applies here. Our workforce is forced to work with instrumental disposition as a means to satisfying other ends. In Nigeria more than 80 percent of the population is engaged in production of agriculture and agricultural processing industries. In order to survive we must go back to the basics of

### **CONCLUSION**

There is nothing better for a man, than that he eats and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour (Ecclesiastes 2:24). That may seem to have summed up the feeling of a satisfied man but the changes to this and the organization around it demands more than that. The two major schools of thought hold that there is intrinsic and extrinsic orientation to work. Intrinsic orientation see the value of work through the activities of work themselves which is not burden to be borne for the sake of their instrumental usefulness, but enriching experience to meet challenges

and overcome obstacles, develop their aptitudes and abilities and enjoy the satisfaction of achievements.

Intrinsic satisfaction is derived from the fact that individuals undergo psychological growth, realize themselves and reach due stature as full mature and autonomous moral agents. If this attitude is developed, men derive a lot of satisfaction in decision making choice and responsibility as a source of self-determination and growth.

However, alienation has crept into people's life because of loss of sense of self which is looted in the dehumanization of work. This makes work to become external to the worker; it is not part of his nature; he does not fulfill himself in his work; his work not voluntary, but imposed. Work is a means to the satisfaction of other needs. This is the extrinsic orientation which work now means to the workers. The economic, political and social infrastructures provide a major yardstick for measuring the dignity of labour.

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