



## Modern Times

1. *“By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread”*. Modernity firmly established this Christian principle. Even today, it seems that no way of life, other than the one stemming from this Biblical phrase, is accepted. The person who doesn't work doesn't have the right to make any demands. Dignity only comes with the backing of work.

Work has been a determining factor in man's “being” in the world, particularly over the last two centuries. Social activity (production and leisure, the ways of interpreting the world—ideologies—and basic social conflict) has been structured on the basis of work. The distribution of wealth has been organised through work. The system of meaning and significations necessary to get through life has been built on work. The Industrial Revolution laid the foundations of modernity and raised work to an ethical category. Working was good, not working was bad. Thus the citizenry was expected to reject systems of work characteristic of artisanal culture in order to join—of their own volition or by force—the process of industrial production. The reformists of the early nineteenth century established the norms and criteria—even architectural models (Bentham's Panopticon)—which, by controlling time and focusing on a place, guaranteed that man was used to the full as part of the workforce, his incorporation into the wheel of production. When faced with the logic of exploitation and submission imposed by the work ethic, a culture offering a response grew up: working culture.

The break which gave rise to industrial society was extremely costly, but, as time went by, this new form of work, once it had become established, became an engine of meaning and presence in the world. Now this paradigm, softened by the force of social conflicts, is beginning to mutate. We are entering a new era which points to fundamental changes. Work continues to be the benchmark, but as Bauman has said, the citizen's charter is no longer awarded by work but by consumption. New technology optimises the capacity for production. In advanced societies labour is more dispensable. The person who cannot keep up is condemned to be marginalised. Society is dualised under the pressure of the globalisation process. Once again, a number of voices are lamenting the world of work which is being lost and they ring the death knell of the crisis of meaning which goes with the change of era. But the transformation doesn't stop. Without the radicality of those who express the ideology of the “end of work”, but at a constant rhythm. Until they find stability in a new phase, with another meaning of work, perhaps less centred on social life. If this is the case, the third wave would really mean one of the biggest breaks in humanity.

By presenting an exhibition about work from the viewpoint of the cultures which have been built around it, we seek to: a) highlight the social centrality of work during its long and intense adventure, and b) to reflect on the prospects for transformation which a change in the work paradigm points to.

2. *We can speak of a culture of work in three senses: organisational, symbolic and socialising.*

a) *The culture of the organisation of work.* All social realities generate their own organisational mechanisms. To make work efficient, a series of techniques designed to optimise performance, categorise the workers and structure production processes, have been developed. This is the most immediate level of the culture of work. Of course, all these techniques involving the use of tools for



production and for optimising the output of the workforce have triggered discourses in support of them and as a reaction to them. The culture of the organisation of work concerns its development techniques but also the systems (and the discourses) around which businessmen and workers have been organised. The culture of work is, in this regard, also the culture of social conflict. If, as Jacques Lessourne wrote, “with the Industrial Revolution, man equipped himself with artificial arms, with information and communication technologies he has equipped himself with an artificial brain,” these changes will result in—and are already resulting in—changes not only in the techniques of work, but also in forms of social conflict.

*b) Work and the symbolic.* The decisive role of work in society has led its capacity to generate culture to enter the sphere of the symbolic. From the architecture of work—in which the efficient mixes with power and form—to the plastic arts or film, work is a recurring theme in culture. From the extolment of work, the fascination with technology or the figure of the worker, to the criticism of conditions of exploitation, the artistic avant-gardes have often addressed an issue which has played a decisive role in determining what industrial society might think. After all, work operates in all ideologies as a redemption factor: for moral redemption, economic redemption and social redemption.

*c) Work and mentalities.* One of the characteristics of industrial society is that work operates as the main factor for socialisation. Apart from work there is only marginalisation, a threat which acts psychologically on the worker and economically in order to keep salaries low. Work has permeated mentalities and, for a long time, has been the main factor behind the citizen's identity. When we ask somebody: “And, what do you do?”, we expect—and nearly always receive—a reply about his or her job. Nevertheless, the restrictions of the labour market and the prospects for future work based on greater mobility and versatility (labour flexibility is the buzzword) herald changes which will also concern the sphere of mentalities. Will work cease to have the anthropological basis it has had, to a certain extent, since the expulsion from paradise but especially since the Industrial Revolution? Will man be able to achieve true emancipation: triumph over divine punishment?

*3. Every great mutation brings its own ideological baggage.* Technology is the determining factor of change, making it possible to do much more work with far fewer people. Telematic technology—with the Internet as its symbol—also affects the organisation and possibilities of autonomy of work. The new capitalist utopia tells us of a new style of work based on labour flexibility, permanent training, the constant change of jobs, fragmentation into smaller, more autonomous teams, fostering co-responsibility and high levels of creativity. This is what is happening at the present time, when it seems that wealth and happiness are to be found on the computer screen.

It is said that the consumer (the new social star) calls the shots. The pyramid is turned on its head: it is the buyer who decides. The quintessence of this ideological fantasy is expressed in a poetic outburst by the Spanish liberal economist Pedro Schwartz who says that capitalism rewards “the wise decision to satisfy those who resemble us, to create value by discovering what they are willing to buy”. It is not as if capitalism were the Order of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Every era has its utopia, now is the time of neocapitalist utopias. Work changes, of course, but experience shows that there are still more promises than realities. Teleworking continues to coexist with old business structures. And the globalisation process is still a narrow fringe, placed like a strip on the map of the world. This means that, at the



present time, we find the most primitive and most advanced forms of work on the planet. It remains to be seen which dynamic will be imposed by globalisation: the widespread modernisation of the planet or the deepening division into two societies, the emerging society and the definitively hidden society.

The future of work is a labyrinth and we still don't know the way out. And this is the way it is expressed in this exhibition. The messages are often contradictory. There are great contrasts between experiences. This exhibition seeks to explain the recent adventure of work, to be attentive to the changes which are taking place and expresses its confidence that humanity will indeed find the necessary technological devices to free itself from the punishment of work and turn it into another creative and liberating activity. But it is an illusion not a promise.

4. *The worker is the protagonist of the exhibition.* It may well be that, one day, machines will replace the worker in many of his jobs, particularly the most tedious ones. However, he still remains the protagonist of labour, although as a class the worker has become more diluted as social reality has become more complex, far from the strict division between businesspeople and workers or, to phrase it in the manner of the Marxist canon, between the owners of the means of manufacture and the workforce. For nearly two centuries, the worker represented the promise for radical change in society through his organisations. The failure of the proposal for maxims—communism—which drifted towards the totalitarianism characteristic of any project based on the principle that everything is possible, shouldn't make us forget the extraordinary social victories achieved by pressure from the working classes. However, this stage of the adventure is over. There is no longer a dominant image of the worker. There is enormous social diversity among workers, and their interests don't always coincide. And there is always the shadow cast by those without work who, as a result, often find themselves without a voice. In advanced societies—where the network society is being shaped—everything is very different to the time when industrial modernity was at its peak. This doesn't prevent situations characteristic of the worst moments of the accumulation of capital, and of pre-modern times, from occurring in other parts of the planet—or in pockets within industrial societies themselves.

It will fall to the worker to put the jobs of the so-called "new economy" to the test. We will have moved forward if the new technological prostheses truly enable him to gain autonomy and freedom. However, nothing has been decided in advance. The society of indifference and submission is a threat not to be scorned, if the fight for competitiveness and productivity is maintained as a national—or supranational—crusade in order to keep the ego and ourselves confused. As the poet Raymond Queneau said: the end of society is the welfare of man and not the inexorable fulfilment of the laws of economics. This should be the path along which the adventure of work will be able to find a happy ending.