

5 Prosperity in work

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The intention of this chapter is to contribute to a redefinition of prosperity in the realm of work. Identifying with what Jean De Munck has, in this volume, called the “cultural critique of capitalism”, we seek to challenge a system of production that is inherent to capitalism which defines prosperity with no regard for the worker’s “quality of life”. We believe that, as part of a broader conception of prosperity, one must consider the multiple dimensions that constitute quality of life at work (which we also call the experience of living work).

Etymologically, the term prosperity, borrowed from the Latin word *prosperitas*, refers to a “happy situation”. At times, it has the secondary meanings of “well-being” and “physical health”. *Prosperus* signifies “that which lives up to one’s hopes, propitious, favourable”. To be prosperous is “to be fortunate, happy, favoured with success, often with the secondary notion of beautiful appearance, when speaking of a plant, an animal, and, ironically, a human being” (Rey, 2006: 2982).

These indications demonstrate the concept’s semantic complexity, which belongs to a configuration in which it echoes “well-being”, “fortune”, “happiness”, “abundance”, and “success”, without being reducible exclusively to economic wealth. True, the metonymic senses of “fortunate event” and “healthy appearance” have not been preserved in modern usage. The economic sense of “state of abundance, increased wealth (of a community, of a business)” (Rey, 2006: 2982), has, however, become predominant.

Now that it has entered the vocabulary of political economy, the concept of prosperity has at least two characteristics that we believe are worth mentioning in introducing our argument. On the one hand, it refers to a particular social condition, and, as such, must be considered in macroeconomic and macrosociological terms. Yet it must also call our attention to local and singular work experiences. We thus propose to examine how one might “grasp” the work experience in all its complexity, without crushing it under the weight of an overly general and reductive conception of prosperity.

On the other hand, while classical and neoclassical economics have borrowed the term as a criterion for evaluating a “population’s well-being”, it has also been taken up by the critical tradition. It still contains a critical potential, which could challenge the connection between economic wealth, happiness, and human

self-realisation. Thus for the young Marx, “the most prosperous state of society ... means stationary misery for workers” (1972: 12)³; the key problem (and communism’s deep meaning) is that of replacing false opulence with true wealth – humanity’s creative potential, based on the “human manifestation of life” through human needs. Hence the second question that will inform this chapter, to which we will offer a succinct answer in the conclusion: how can we go beyond an approach to prosperity – at work and through work – that has been traditionally formulated in the utilitarian terms of well-being and life satisfaction? How might we rethink the conditions needed for work that is “prosperous” in that it allows its practitioners to experience the vital energies of exploration and creation?

This chapter consists of three parts. First, we discuss the conception of prosperity that prevailed in Europe during the post-Second World War period. Within the framework of a compromise between collective solidarity and productive capacities, collective well-being was assumed to depend on social prosperity, understood as increasing and shared economic wealth. Statistical indicators were created during this time to evaluate economic growth, social justice, and well-being at work. Because they were associated with a particular way of conceiving politics (and, implicitly, the subjective experience of work), these indicators entered into a state of crisis beginning in the mid-70s. We demonstrate that other ways of grasping work in all of its different facets had a difficult time establishing themselves, despite the introduction of the category of “psycho-social factors” into surveys of working conditions.

In part two, we will attempt to describe contemporary malaise in the workplace. This volume’s editors encouraged us to consider the discrepancy between the continuous economic growth in all European countries during the post-war period and the decline in subjective indicators of personal satisfaction. How can this incongruity be explained? Were promises of growth not kept? Individual job-related malaise was obviously not lacking during the Fordist era, but it could be “justified” by a conception of work in which toil was seen as legitimate to the extent that it contributed to improving the lot of future generations and advancing social justice. These connections have become unravelled, even as new manifestations of work-related malaise have begun to appear. Adopting a clinical approach, we will consider social malaise and particularly social pathologies, the origins of which can be traced back to new ways of organising the production of goods and services. We propose to address what we call “pathologies of engagement”, which are characteristic of contemporary capitalism. In this way, our analysis interrogates ways of accounting for the dark side of economic prosperity through the elaboration of statistical indicators and clinical symptoms.

In the final part, we will attempt to define, not prosperity and well-being at work as such, but the ways to account for the experience of work in all its complexity, such that it would renovate our approach to defining living work for a different kind of prosperity. In our view, sustained reflection on the characteristics of the work experience and ways to grasp it collectively should be central to any redefinition of prosperity. These efforts must be the foundation of an

alternative approach to prosperity, one that could undo the bond that is too often preserved between opulence, economic growth, and well-being. The approach we have chosen could lead one to refuse to sacrifice “quality of life” at work to the imperatives of economic growth – unless a new compromise, following the post-war Fordist compromise, proved capable of challenging the most widespread of contemporary assumptions concerning life satisfaction and consumerism.

1 The crisis of Fordist conceptions of prosperity

Statistical indicators in general, and those of prosperity and well-being in particular, are not simply mathematical representations of society, which are limited only by the development of techniques of calculations. They are closely tied to particular ways of representing the social world.⁴ Representation, whether statistical, political, or cognitive, can be thought of as an act of positing equivalencies, making it possible to treat people and things “in general”. In order to treat things in general (or “conventionally”, in the sense of the French “economy of conventions” tradition), a form of equivalence must be established between the entities in question by characterising them in a particular way – in other words, by “investing in form” (Thévenot, 1986). This operation transforms particular entities (such as groups of workers), integrating them into more general wholes (for example, social classes) and situating them along a common horizon (such as the advent of communism).

In this way, the indicators of prosperity and “well-being”, which flourished after the Second World War, drew on a particular way of thinking about politics.⁵ After briefly describing it, we can then consider the way in which these kinds of representation – which are both statistical and political – have been criticised, and in the name of which other forms.

“Prosperity” under the Fordist compromise

From 1945 to the mid-1970s, political and statistical representations of society generally drew on a compromise between two principles of justice: the civic and the industrial (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). The result was to consolidate the compromise between collective solidarity and productive capacities. The first of these two principles valued solidarity, social justice, and seeking the general interest, and drew on a movement to formalise collective rules. The second, industrial principle promoted utility. It was aided by the standardisation of production and long-term investment. The establishment of a compromise between these two principles was stabilised through the introduction of workers’ rights, the social state,⁶ and labour organisations, as well as the development of collective bargaining agreements, demands for security, the negotiation of salary scales, and so on. This “civic-industrial” compromise implied a state that was able to plan and respond to the needs of the productive system.

It is expected that the state acts “on average,” covers risks, and ensures that individuals are equalised for statistical and insurance purposes. It strives to reduce the social inequalities described in statistics generated through poll-based surveys. The Keynesian government minister seeks to adjust aggregate supply to aggregate demand, using macroeconomic models based on national accounting tables.

(Desrosières, 1997: 275)

During the period between roughly 1950 and 1975, an effort existed, at least as a trend, to unite economic and social debates through a common language, that of planning and Keynesian macroeconomics, growth and national accounting, the sociology of social inequalities and statistical indicators, state-sponsored collective negotiations between employers and unions, and a redistributive system of social protection based co-managed by labour and business.

(Desrosières, 1992: 143)

In short, productivity and the general interest were, in this context, linked to the elaboration of a common good that would guide the actions of management and labour. Collective well-being was based on social prosperity, understood as increasing and sharing society’s wealth. At a practical level, industry’s efficiency and performance made solidarity possible through social security. Statistical measures supported the ideal of equalising opportunity (through education) and improving the conditions of the underprivileged. Regulations were based on future projections. Institutional decisions were justified on the basis of expertise and implemented by a centralising state.

This compromise was, moreover, founded on a future-oriented sense of time and “delayed gratification”: one worked without expecting immediate satisfaction, in order to further “social progress” and help society down the right path. At the same time, the strong presence of unions and, in particular, the pillarisation of Belgian society encouraged workers to grasp their professional activities in the categories of the civic-industrial compromise. This can be seen with such concepts as “social class” or “profession”, which generalised the conditions under which people participated in work. Socio-professional categories, once they had left the offices of statisticians and began to influence public debates, also contributed to this generalised representation of the work experience and to the integration of personal experience into collective categories and shared horizons.

The forms of public action that were rooted in the civic-industrial compromise drew on statistical indicators that generalised professional activity, understood as the execution of a plan (Thévenot, 1995) or the realisation of a task. In companies, this meant that the coordination of various individual activities was conceived as the execution of formal rules, based on an intentional conception of action and the objectification of such action in a plan (the classic example being a Taylorist industrial plan). The worker fulfils his role insofar as

he accomplishes what is formally expected of him. In this context, his environment is seen as a series of means that have been made available in order to achieve a goal: the realisation of the task. This form of planning, with its particular conception of the person, the environment, and action, was generalised under the civic-industrial compromise we have just described: the plan's temporality and the construction of efficient action were put to good use in the industrial conception of the common good, as were the definition of tasks and the development of collective bargaining agreements in the civic order.

Within this framework, the worker's well-being was evaluated in terms of standards of hygiene and workplace security, which grasped the physical and physiological constraints that weighed down upon the worker.⁷ The latter was frequently considered from a more collective perspective, one that was attentive to wage conditions, which were themselves integrated into socio-political categories. "Working conditions" were considered from the standpoint of workload, pay, and the relationship between socio-professional categories. At a different level, these elements were incorporated into indicators of growth and productivity (Gadrey, 2001): in short, workers' activity consisted in achieving expected tasks which contributed to the valorisation of production. Statistics, in this way, played a role in distributing the fruits of collective efforts.

The Fordist compromise thus rested on a compromise between the ideals of economic progress and those of social progress. The problem of difficult work, to which we will shortly return, was not lacking, but it tended to be tolerated, as it could be integrated into a more general model of delayed satisfaction: work, experienced as duty or sacrifice, had to contribute to improving the lot of later generations before gratifying the worker himself. Obstacles to well-being were seen as lying almost exclusively within the realm of workplace security and hygiene and were checked against wages. In this way, work had powerful political effects. Indeed, wage conditions and participation in institutions of social dialogue (such as unions), when tied to such representations, became spaces in which the contradictions of social life could be experienced from the standpoint of the worker's sense of what was just and unjust (Ferreras, 2007). But these ways of grasping work, which are characteristic of the Fordist compromise, entered a state of crisis at the same time as the civic and industrial justifications.

The crisis of the Fordist compromise

The conception of work as the execution of plan, as well as the entire Taylorist model of work to which it belongs, have been widely criticised (among others, by sociologists of labour) as unrealistic and far removed from work's reality and for being in any case practically undermined by workers' self-regulation. Moreover, others have denounced the dwindling regularity of professional tests under the Fordist compromise, which depended on a relatively stable and closed statutory system (witness the rigidity of professional careers). The Taylorist model was accused of leaving no room for innovation and individual competence, which were crushed by its authoritarianism. A flexible approach to organising

work, one that was supposedly more open to communication and initiative, came to be valued. These changes were rooted in principles of representation that differed from those of the Fordist compromise.

Much criticism was also rooted in commercial criteria. Competition came to be integrated into every organisational stage, burdening all employees with its constraints (of which the presence of clients at production sites was a powerful illustration). The timeframe required for judgement was tightened in the short term and accompanied by demands for diversification and production renewal. According to Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), capitalism rebuilt itself around the idea of the network. In this context, it was deemed important to engage in projects and extend one's networks. This demands a great capacity of adaptation and flexibility of the individual. Mobility was valued to the extent that it allows for mediation between several networks.

With each of these critiques, work seen through the categories of the civic-industrial compromise came to be seen as oppressive and even alienating. Rooted in a long-term outlook, these categories were viewed as excessively rigid and as threatening individual interests, mobility, and freedom. Bureaucracy and technocracy allegedly impaired the speed of commercial exchange and reticular dynamics. The Fordist model, it was argued, disdained the most personal ways of engaging in work, as well as each individual's unique traits.

A new vocabulary emerged for understanding the social world and justifying new organisational structures, granting greater importance to individual action and personal responsibility. In a way, this was a response to the critiques of May 1968 (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). The greater consideration now given to the personal aspirations of workers was supposedly a response to the need for creativity and autonomy. Flexible production appeared as a solution to the unresponsiveness of ponderous hierarchical structures. This new organisation of labour sought to be open to creativity and to allow self-development. At the same time, thanks to theories of human capital, management began to understand the work experience in terms of competencies that had to be made to bear fruit in order to increase individual employability. But this required significant self-mobilisation, which "intensifies subjective engagement and puts to work the employee's affects, values, and relational dispositions", which previously had been firmly confined to the private sphere (Périlleux, 2003: 243). Engagement in a company depends on appeals to personal experience, initiative, individual responsibility, and openness to opportunities and challenges. The competencies expected are no longer those associated with Fordist discipline, but rather those of the "performing subject", who is pulled between self-mobilisation and the imperatives of generalised competition. This subject must be active and competitive, calculating and prudent, and nomadic and buoyant (Sennett, 1998; Périlleux, 2004, 2009).

In keeping with this perspective, new characteristics, requiring the elaboration of new indicators, began to appear in surveys of working conditions: the use of new technology, cognitive development at work, access to training, and so on. The will to take into account and evaluate these new traits necessitated

the development of innovative measurement tools that could recognise how individual performances contributed to completing a project. This led in particular to the elaboration of indicators and rankings that incentivised collective and individual actors, while also forcing them to compete.

While these new indicators imply a new conception of work, it seems to us that the older criteria of judgement have not yet been “replaced” by equivalent forms of judgement. Rather, they have been supplanted by evaluations that are no longer directed at justice in a general sense, but limit themselves, in keeping with the principles of liberalism (i.e. the political philosophy), to focusing on divergent “private” interests, which can, at best, be aggregated. Indeed, the experience of work is no longer grasped in the generalised forms of the Fordist compromise. The private is integrated into the public realm on a contractual basis, which is particularly suited to the market. The collective is constituted through the aggregation of individual entities and the good pursued is thus limited to the realisation of a project constructed on the basis on contractual relations (Thévenot, 1995). The lack of any reference to a principle of justice has given way to a conception of what is shared that no longer concerns itself with such generalities, but that focuses on situation-specific arrangements achieved through bargaining.

We should acknowledge that the positive effect of these developments is that they allow us to better grasp the individual at work, occupied with his daily tasks. The worker becomes a little less interchangeable and is recognised as having a kind of specificity, without being immediately absorbed into the public categories of the Fordist compromise. Yet that which is most personal in his professional engagement is grasped in terms of interests and efficiency, at the expense of such familiar forms as “tricks of the trade” and other local habits. At the same time, though the Fordist perspective has been criticised from the standpoint of commercial and “connectionist” justifications, the horizon of a common good in work has gradually dwindled. The “common” in work no longer means anything more than the sum of interests, leading to a rejection of questions of social justice as they relate to work.

2 The search for new representations of work

It is important to note the profound ambivalence of the way in which working conditions have developed. A number of (technological, organisational, and cultural) advances have freed some workers from thankless, stigmatising tasks, offering them new opportunities for choice in their “varied” and “flexible” lives. But at the same time, there are numerous symptoms of a decline in working conditions that has reintroduced, though in new forms, the oppression, alienation, and exploitation that the capitalist system of production has never ceased to generate.

In this way, we see a deepening chasm between managerial promises focused on the self-realisation of the autonomous and responsible individual (freedom from servitude, self-entrepreneurship, living intensely at the crossroads of

opportunities, satisfaction and motivation at work, and so on) and the silent malaise that often expresses itself indirectly, through symptoms that are reinterpreted as “problems that must be managed” – when they are not quite simply exploited for productive ends.

In this way, the crisis of the Fordist compromise raises two questions: how can we, at present, grasp the dark side of prosperity in the working world? Is it possible to rebuild a conception of the common good, to define prosperity differently, without neglecting the distinct malaise that many feel in their professional experiences?

This twofold challenge enjoins us to return to the problem of indicators of well-being at work and to consider their limitations. To advance further in our diagnosis of current problems, we will examine the contributions of work clinics. The latter allows two displacements to occur: from the question of indicators of well-being to that of symptoms of workplace *malaise*; and from overall life satisfaction to the distinctive experiences of *living work*. These displacements will allow us to reconstruct a broad political perspective on the conditions required for “prosperous” work, to which we shall return in the Conclusion.

Work indicators: two challenges

We have seen how the indicators constituted around the Fordist compromise participated in a social compromise of which they were the conventional markers. Yet because they lacked a sensitive grasp of “lived” work (Breviglieri, 2004), they were also powerful tools for crushing the personal experience of work.

In the contemporary period, the extension of indicators of well-being to “psycho-social factors” represents an attempt to further integrate the subjective appreciation of working conditions.⁸ Though exposure to “health and security risks” and the physical burdens of work are still significant indicators, current surveys, particularly at the European level, now attach considerable importance to issues relating to the organisation of work and the way in which workers experience it.⁹ This represents a significant advance in redefining the conditions for prosperous work. Yet even so, we wonder if, in its very construction, this way of grasping “well-being” makes it possible to articulate all the levels of the work experience, from the most personal of ordeals to work’s political and moral implications, by way of its technical and instrumental characteristics. In this way, indicators of “quality of life” at work pose two challenges:

- 1 “Upward”, in their relationship to the common good, they risk becoming detached from any reference to justice, thus obstructing or short-circuiting political deliberation. This is true of rankings relating to the “social performance” of corporations, which are used only to make comparisons and which refuse to reconsider the underlying productive models and the principles of justice upon which they could be based. This is usually known as the technocratic use of indicators.

2 “Downward”, in their relationship to the situations they grasp, they risk
 tearing experiences away from the life context to which they owe their own
 singular truth. This is what we see in the example of surveys that ask
 respondents to state their “life satisfaction” in absolute terms, independently
 of any referential context (the same is very often true for indices of work
 satisfaction¹⁰). Entire swathes of experience are generalised and rendered
 equivalent through statistical charts. But while it may be possible to measure
 rates of absenteeism (for example), or even rates of depression, can one
 quantify the experience of suffering in order to generalise it without doing
 violence to its individual character?

Liberal critiques of the Fordist model showed us that conceptions of work that
 are exclusively focused on justice transform the worker into a disembodied
 being, a single component of a larger entity. But the liberal anthropology that
 promotes the idea of a performing and responsible individual scorns, in turn,
 certain aspects of our daily engagement in work, by reducing the personal to the
 private (Foessel, 2008) and disdaining the (potential) relationship between work
 and the common good. Such characterisations and judgements *distort* certain
 forms of activity, other ways of engaging in work that depend on different ways
 of treating people. It is in this context that the lessons of the work clinic prove
 illuminating.

From indicators to symptoms: clinical displacements

The work clinic concerns the way that individuals engage in their tasks by con-
 fronting the organisation’s failures and the obstacles that rein in their creative
 powers. The activity of working engages the worker’s subjectivity; it affects him
 “for better and for worse”. In this sense, work, as a source of pleasure and of
 suffering or malaise, is always experienced in an individual way and this is what
 must be explained clinically.¹¹

But the work clinic also has political significance: it makes silent, work-
 related suffering apparent, using it as a standpoint from which social critique can
 re-emerge (Renault, 2008; Périlleux and Cultiaux, 2009). One of its contribu-
 tions is to identify what it calls the “new pathologies of work”, thus displacing
 the question of indicators towards in favour of that of symptoms and their exist-
 ential and political meaning.

Two traits distinguish a clinical symptom from a statistical indicator. First,
 unlike indicators, which immediately place all information on the same level of
 impersonal equivalence, the existence of symptoms and their meaning is formu-
 lated by individuals through a process whereby they are listened to and “risk”
 speaking. In other words, a symptom is always addressed to someone who is
 capable of hearing and, in this way, some of the individual’s distinctive truth is
 made apparent (Dejours, 1993). To speak of symptoms is to grasp in a particular
 way the individual’s troubles in relation to his milieu. Decoding them requires a
 theory of the subject and a theory of activity, which are often lacking in

contemporary indicators of well-being at work.¹² This means, however, that the shift from the particularity of the symptom to the generality of the analysis will be a difficult one.

Second, unlike indicators, which tend to freeze particular conditions (satisfaction, well-being, stress, burn-out, depression, absenteeism, and so on) in time, symptoms imply an ambivalent dynamic. They consist of the individual's most personal contradictions, in addition to those of his milieu. They create stability in the way one lives and acts, but at the same time result in crisis. They can, paradoxically, be regarded as original – albeit thwarted – expressions of an individual's creative forces, even if they can simultaneously diminish it.

For the social sciences in general and discussions about prosperity in particular, these developments pose the question of the legitimacy of an approach based on symptoms and pathologies: do they medicalise social problems? Do collective pathologies exist? Can one speak of social pathologies?

Let us dismiss any concepts that are simple analogies and excessively functionalistic, which see society as an organism that could be considered sick or healthy.¹³ We can then see social pathology as a concept of considerable critical scope, to the extent that it refers to processes that threaten or destroy the practical conditions for human fulfilment – or, more precisely, in relation to the question that concerns us, the conditions for the development of living work, which would allow human beings to experience, in their practical lives, their own vital forces.

Social pathologies undermine “the relationships to oneself and to the world without which life loses its value and quality”, writes Emmanuel Renault (2008).

They are above all a critique of a social condition that is felt to be alienating, lacking meaning, reified, and even sick.... This negativity must be evaluated not narrowly, as a failure in relation to principles of social justice, but much more broadly as a violation of the conditions of a good or successful life.

(Renault, 2008: 86, 105)

In particular, social pathologies make it difficult to practice living work, understood as real work, the subjective praxis of the individual, his activity as dictated by the prescriptions of the life inside of him – the realisation, in other words, of his vital forces, of his capacities for being and acting.¹⁴

As we understand it, the idea of social pathology is far from medicalising social problems and the way in which they are expressed or treated. To the contrary, it opens up an original path, leading to the search for the origins of clinical symptoms in the social conditions of life and work. Furthermore, the concept of social pathology cannot be separated from the (historically relative) norms that define the negative processes of “perverse” social development, “normal” situations, and the horizons of emancipation; it thus requires that critique make explicit its own criteria for political and moral evaluation. It is in this sense that the clinic seems justified in renewing our representations of work and prosperity.

3 Elements of a clinical approach to prosperity in work

Let us turn to the symptoms that the clinic encourages us to consider as manifestations of “new pathologies of work”, which traditional indicators of prosperity are incapable of grasping due to the concept of work upon which they are based. We will then present our own contribution, relating to the idea of “pathologies of engagement”.

The “new pathologies of work”

According to Christophe Dejours’ description (2006), there are, in the first place, *pathologies of overwork*, to which we often refer using such poorly defined terms as “stress” or “burnout”, to which we must add the musculoskeletal disorders that are typical of Taylorised production. The clinic puts these problems in perspective by identifying any number of trends in the organisation of production: work intensification (i.e. doing more in less time), combined with distressing interruptions in the completion of tasks; the accumulation of industrial and commercial constraints at every hierarchical level and increased time pressures resulting from direct contact with clients (Gollac and Volkoff, 2000; Askenazy *et al.*, 2006); burdens of responsibility without the necessary resources (Clot, 1998); and the feeling of having to choose, in isolation, between the contradictory demands of production quality and quantity (Dejours, 2006).

Next are the *pathologies of harassment*, which testify to a dramatic degradation of the conditions of collective living. In this case, the symptoms assume several forms: on the one hand, a sense of solitude and the experience of being isolated in confronting the actual difficulties of a work-related task; on the other, different forms of direct or indirect violence, aimed at others or oneself. This description, which cannot be discussed at length in this chapter, raises several questions that are essential to our way of thinking. First, it illustrates increased sensitivity to the most subjective aspects of the work experience. In this way, it parallels trends that exist in the organisation of production individual. In the representations of capitalism’s spokespersons, work, which is no longer reducible to the realisation of a plan, now appeals to each worker’s most personal qualities – his initiative, his psychological availability, his relational abilities, and so on. The trend is towards what might call the “subjectification of work” (Périlleux, 2003). It is not surprising that it is accompanied by the forceful emergence of subjective problems at the workplace.

Second, there is clearly a need to revamp our understanding workplace malaise, in ways that go beyond the indicators inherited from the Fordist era. The ravages of Taylorism and Fordist production have not gone away; in some sectors, they have multiplied and worsened. But they can no longer be detached from the way in which work is experienced through new “troubles”. Work experience must now be elaborated by exploring with the subjects themselves the inner dynamic of their relationship with work.

Third, there is the question of the pervasiveness of these pathologies per sector, hierarchical level, or category of workers.

For the work clinic, the source of these work pathologies lies in the applications of new management methods to the organisation of production – most important of which consist of individualised performance evaluation and “total quality” procedures – which are themselves tied to the transformation of capitalism after it found itself economically exhausted and culturally contested after 1968.¹⁵ It is worth noting that we are indeed talking about sources rather than causes: what is being sought is the symptom’s origins, their active core in the mutually shaping relationship between individuals and their work environments.

These “pathogenic” management methods, however, transcend the boundaries separating different kinds of work and different categories of personnel. According to surveys on working conditions, some symptoms affect specific personnel categories preferentially – in other words, unequally. For example, assembly-line workers are more likely to suffer from musculoskeletal disorders, and women are more exposed than men; symptoms of professional exhaustion first hit those in healthcare professions; and so on.

For its part, the work clinic maintains that most pathologies transcend the boundaries of the newly segmented labour force, while accentuating the inequalities arising from wage labour’s increasing precariousness. Thus while new pathologies have everything to do with hierarchical relationships at work and what Isabelle Ferreras (2007) calls the “domestic regime” that prevails in companies, the clinicians believe that they affect professionals in positions of power in hyper-flexible companies more than precarious employees, as for the former are themselves enmeshed in the mechanisms of “domination” they wield over the latter (Dejours, 2006).

But this question revives the delicate methodological and epistemological issue of grasping work experience in all its richness. The elaboration of clinical symptoms makes it possible to hew as close as possible to experience, but their integration into pathology charts, the question of their social pervasiveness, and the denunciation of their social origins makes it necessary to rise to a higher level of generality through other information formats (epidemiological surveys, statistical charts, large scale chronological perspectives, and broad references to justice). We thus need a new way of articulating these plans for elaborating experience to identify malaise at work and redefine a new path to prosperity. Before returning to this problem, we will conclude this section by proposing a transversal interpretation of what the clinic encouraged us to regard as pathologies of work.

Pathologies of engagement

The work experience consists of engaging oneself in various regimes of activity in which one experiences reality’s resistance to the one’s task.¹⁶ If one accepts this proposition, it is possible to understand the symptoms described by the work clinic as social pathologies of engagement. We do not intend, with this term, to propose a single way of reading social pathologies. Rather, we seek to redeploy clinical analysis through a transversal framework that can account for lived experience in all its richness.

The term “engagement” calls attention to the “mutual fashioning” of the individual and his environment (Thévenot, 2006: 14). It emphasises the engagements that give the individual a certain existential consistency through his various multiple relationships with himself, others, and the world. Indeed, engagements respond to highly variable demands, ranging from familiar situations, in which engagement flows through routine forms, to spaces of political deliberation, where there is a heavy demand for political justification. Finally, the term engagement emphasises the idea of a *guarantee* that is implicit in the word “*gage*” – in French, a promise as well as proof – and which supports the power to speak and to act.

In work, guarantees are at once conventional (contracts, statutes, protections guaranteed by law), functional (assurance of the effectiveness of certain gestures), and routine and familiar, ensuring basic confidence in the way an activity transpires, making it possible to inhabit the workplace (Breviglieri, 2004). In this way, the worker accesses a number of goods, including common goods, the realisation of the project, and a sense of ease (Thévenot, 2006).

In our view, it is on the basis of these goods and their articulation that an alternative vision of prosperity must be reconstructed. It strikes us as particularly important not to limit ourselves to a conception that would be disconnected from these goods. We favour an approach that is also interested in articulating engagement’s problems and successes, thus rendering meaningful the sense of “subjective consistency” experienced in tests that are not simply moments in an evaluative process, but which can also be demanding on the individual (Périlleux, 2001; Stavo-Debaugé, 2009).

But successful engagement can be hard to find. This leads to a different set of problems. From an existential standpoint, guarantees are always precarious and engagement always risky. To engage in a work-related activity is to risk encountering the unexpected¹⁷: disturbed routines, failures of planned coordination with colleagues, and often brutal clashes between different sets of values over what is considered just. The work experience is a confrontation with reality, and to engage with it is to wager [*gager*] one’s competencies, sensibility, moral principles, imaginative powers, and even one’s health, without knowing what will come of it.

Many of the symptoms mentioned by the work clinic can be reconsidered from this standpoint. Numerous observers have called attention to the problem of *excessive engagement*: as if the identification with the ideal of performance (Aubert and de Gaulejac, 1991; Aubert, 2004; Dujarier, 2006) and the imaginary passion of risk (Ewald and Kessler, 2000; Hamraoui, 2007), in the form of a *subject of performance*, led one to devote one’s body and soul to it, without restraint and to the point of exhaustion. Other analyses now highlight a *lack of engagement* in work relations: as if the desire to withdraw from the pathological effects of “overwork” and “abuses of power” led to the avoidance of encounters with other people, with all the encroachments they necessarily entail on one’s private life (Lebrun, 2007).

It is possible, however, that the distance between excessive and insufficient engagement is not quite as great as it seems, since both participate in the *logic of avoiding* the existential risk implicit in engaging oneself in work.

In this sense, one might speak of a social pathology of engagement in the sense that new methods for organising production, associated with capitalism's redeployment over the past forty years, threaten the practical conditions that make possible the challenge of living work. Justifying the implementation of these management methods, which value the autonomous and performing individual, managerial ideology has dangled the promise of exciting work – at least for qualified professionals – to be found in the wide variety of projects and intensity of tasks. In reality, there is reason to fear that it has presented work as intense living, the obligation to enjoy as the freedom to choose, “the burden of production as the buoyancy of work, sickness as health, the individual pushing forward as physical extravagance”; in short, it has presented “death as the face of life” (Barkat, 2008: 18).

4 Towards a redefined prosperity?

On this basis, how should we reconsider prosperity in work? In the first section, we reflected on the nature of the statistical indicators that purported to grasp and guide prosperity during the Fordist period and the crisis they went through beginning in the mid-70s. In the second part, our attention turned to the different ways in which work is represented at present. The final stage addressed ways of explaining the pain experienced by living work through the clinical elaboration of work-related malaise. If the guiding thread of our argument has been the experience of work in all its complexity, it is because we believe the latter must be the foundation of an alternative approach to prosperity, one that is capable can unfasten the bond that is too often maintained between opulence, economic growth, and well-being (which surveys call “life satisfaction”).

We can now affirm that contemporary “measure” of work should satisfy the demands for justice contained in the engagement in work and in its subjective basis, as both are inherent to the work experience. The question is thus whether it is possible to grasp work's pluralistic nature, which is rarely grasped as such. As a result, work is often problematised in what Isabelle Ferreras calls a “dis-membered” way (2007). The challenge of redefining prosperity is thus twofold: on the one hand, it seeks to address the epistemological critiques regarding the indicators' limits; on the other hand, it seeks to go beyond the approach based on “well-being” and “life satisfaction”, which is steeped in contestable utilitarian assumptions.¹⁸

The Fordist compromise was rooted in the goal of connecting economic and social progress. This model has undergone a profound crisis, which has had an impact on the indicators that can gauge the quality of life at work. The statistical apparatus created at the end of the Second World War understood the activity of the work as the realisation of a plan, while integrating it into the realisation of a much broader common good, formulated in terms of social justice, so that engagement in work contributed to social progress. Obstacles to “well-being” were seen as lying almost exclusively in such realms as workplace security and hygiene and were often checked against wages.

While these aspects are included in “measures” of the work experience, they have ceased to be dominant. The perspective to which they belong has been widely challenged since the second half of the 1970s, from a perspective privileging commercial and connectionist justifications. The quest for the common good that is unique to these two approaches has been stretched increasingly thin, thanks to a liberal perspective in which the common consists only of the diversity of interests, thus dismissing the question of justice. At the same time, management put forth the notion of a “performing subject” that is expected to be autonomous and responsible.

We presented two of the challenges with which this development saddles work indicators: “upwards”, in their relation to the common good, and “downward”, in their relationship to the situations they grasp.

One possible answer to this twofold challenge could be gleaned from an approach in terms of symptoms and pathologies, which highlighted the pathologies of engagement resulting from new methods of organising production. In considering the description of these symptoms, there is a powerful temptation to see work as the locus *par excellence* of oppression, and even alienation, and thus to advocate an alternative form of prosperity based on abandoning the “work society”.

It seems to us that a redefinition of prosperity cannot avoid the task of reflecting deeply on the experience and organisation of work, lest it reimpose a burdensome denial onto the vital experience of work, its pathologies, and its accomplishments. Our proposal is rather to consider that prosperity at a societal level necessarily requires a less pathogenic way of organising work, in that it would respect the practical conditions for deploying the multiplicity of work experiences. This requires us to consider that prosperity cannot be reduced to increasing economic wealth, and that it can even be opposed to the latter: what does prosperity mean in a society where “one wastes living by earning one’s living”? Where work does not challenge the worker’s vital forces, but crushes them? Where the quality of life is sacrificed to the imperatives of economic growth, understood in its most restricted sense?

Some might consider that the indicators of “decent work” meet the criteria that we have proposed in this chapter, in that it cares about the “quality of employment” (see Méda, 2009). True – and this is not negligible – they are concerned with what we called the “upward” challenge, by placing their work clearly within the horizon of quest for justice in and through work. Yet it seems to us that too little attention has been given to the “downward” challenges, which are less preoccupied with the quality of employment than with subjective engagement in work. It is true that indicators of decent work do not confine themselves to unemployment rates and are also interested in evaluating other dimensions of work, such as “quality of life” and “possibilities for individual achievement” (Anker *et al.*, 2003); but the aspects of work that they consider in practice, and the parameters according to which they propose to measure them, do not manage to grasp subjective engagement in professional activity in its own terms, nor do they connect it to the other goods that we have identified as consti-

tutive of genuine prosperity in work: common goods relating to workplace justice and functional goods relating to work efficiency.¹⁹

What we would like to encourage is not only an improvement of statistical indicators, so that they can better account for a fuller reality, but also and especially new connections between personal experiences arising from work's familiar terrain, functional decisions at the level of the organisation, and socio-economic system's overall regulations. As we see it, an alternative conception of prosperity must take the need to articulate very different kinds of goods head on. It must promote social justice and the functional realisation of sustainable productive projects, as well as the subjective experience of living work; it must also take into account the articulations of these goods and of their potential tensions.

It is thus appropriate to situate the place of these indicators of prosperity and well-being (whether they be alternative or not). This should not be done from a systemic perspective, which would amount to defining the indicators' sphere of relevance and rendering them impermeable to other accounts of work experience, but rather through an approach emphasising procedure and the evaluation of quality of life at work, based on indicators of well-being and prosperity that are attentive to the intrinsic plurality of the experience of engagement at work. Promoting a process that is exclusively focused on work's political and general aspects is not, in this way, sufficient. The point is rather to conceptualise forms of evaluation that rest on political constructions of the "common" and recognise subjectivity.

These paths make it possible to go back and forth between local experiences and broader deliberations, thus allowing work to be grasped politically in a pluralistic and composite way. The goal is to conceptualise a way of connecting the identification of symptoms to the public's qualification, without ignoring the need for these measure to be efficient. More than anything, redefining prosperity thus requires that we attentively consider the spaces where these new indicators – which must be receptive to the plurality of work experiences – can be formed.

Notes

- 1 *Université catholique de Louvain*
- 2 Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research. For further information see authors' biographies at the front of this volume.
- 3 Translator's note: this is a translation of the French translation of Marx's remark, as in available English translations, Marx does not use the word "prosperous".
- 4 On this topic, see the work of Desrosières and Thévenot listed in the bibliography.
- 5 This perspective is particularly adapted to the French situation, where statistical tools are more developed than in Belgium, thanks to the INSEE and the INED, two institutions which are also research centres.
- 6 We include the social state as a component of this compromise. Indeed, it must be grasped as the consequence of a particular form of representation, given that various forms of generality can be folded into a compromise. Because it is of the same nature as statistical indicators, it cannot explain them.

- 7 This is obviously not unconnected to the fact that the heavy manufacturing and, to a
 2 lesser extent, agriculture comprised a significant majority of all workers, who were
 3 thus more exposed to dangers than those in the tertiary sector, which employs most of
 4 the workers at present. Even if these questions have not been erased from con-
 5 temporary surveys of working conditions, they are now integrated into a range of dif-
 6 ferent cognitive and normative factors, which emphasise, for example, the quality of
 7 information about work-related risks. We will return to this point at the end of the
 8 section.
- 8 In France, it was in 1987 that a first national study of the “psychological conditions”
 9 of work was conducted. At the European level, it is noteworthy that “moral harass-
 10 ment” is the number one reason for health-related absenteeism. “Work intensity” is
 11 also the object of statistical analysis, which indicates that it has accentuated in recent
 12 years, even as the exposure to “physical” risks (vibrations, noise, temperatures, repeti-
 13 tive movements, painful positions, and so on) is very stable over time. In light of these
 14 results, it is surprising to note that general satisfaction regarding working conditions
 15 also remains very stable over time.
- 9 For example, through reflections on the possibility of choosing or modifying work
 16 rhythms and methods, the feeling of being competent in executing one’s work, per-
 17 ceptions of health threats, and so on. We should recall that the introduction of these
 18 indicators did mean that more traditional ones were abandoned. For example, eval-
 19 uations of “work’s impact on health” can exist alongside evaluations of “perceptions of
 20 work’s impact on health”. Similarly, indicators of “satisfaction with working condi-
 21 tions” can be found side-by-side with charts of “income and remuneration systems”
 22 (fourth European survey working conditions survey, 2007).
- 10 In surveys on satisfaction, the question often takes this form: “Generally speaking, are
 21 you satisfied with your working conditions?” Researchers at the European Foundation
 22 for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Dublin) make the point
 23 themselves: their survey presents a “complex and multifaceted portrait” of European
 24 working conditions, but it also calls for “new research in order to better understand,
 25 interpret and contextualise the data”. It remains to be seen how to make this inter-
 26 pretation operational, while avoiding a simple juxtaposition of statistical surveys and
 27 qualitative data out of respect for different facets of the work experience, including its
 28 most unusual aspects.
- 11 Christophe Dejours has based his analysis on the concept of *suffering* at work. We
 29 will continue to use the term *malaise*, as it refers to the ambivalence of the work
 30 experience. In contrast to utilitarian assumptions, it makes manifest the fact that the
 31 human capacity for freedom is limited (Freud, 1995). According to Freudian anthro-
 32 pology, malaise is unavoidable. This does not, however, rule out struggles against the
 33 sources of unjust suffering, nor a reconsideration of prosperity on this basis.
- 12 One could plausibly think that things have not always been this way. As we demon-
 34 strated in part one, it is indeed possible to see statistical indicators as *conventional*
 35 and to integrate them into a general theory of action and personhood.
- 13 For an overview of models of social pathologies in the social sciences, see Renault
 36 (2008).
- 14 See, on this point, Michel Henry’s reading of Marx. In the capitalist system of pro-
 38 duction, living work is placed under the domination of an external and coercive
 39 reality: exchange value and its equivalent, money. Living work and its production
 40 value are *incommensurable*. To grasp the reality of work, one must come back to its
 41 “*subjective determinations*” (Henry, 1976, 2004; Dufour-Kowalska, 1980).
- 15 Without going into the details relating to the new forms of production organisation,
 42 the following traits can nonetheless be mentioned: the shift from work productivity to
 43 systemic efficiency; production flexibility and the individualisation of wage relations;
 44 the shift to “stockholder governance” concurrently with the financialisation of the
 45 economy.

- 16 In this instance, the term “real” has a precise definition. It refers to that which escapes the worker’s mastery through knowledge and know-how (cf. Dejours, 1993, 1998).
- 17 We find here one of the possible meanings of the concept of “test” (*épreuve*), which is widely used in the field of sociology.
- 18 Without presenting the critique of these assumptions in detail, let us say that if one questions the concept of growth, one must be prepared to abandon that of well-being, which rests on anthropological bases that are in our view untenable. Well-being is a word with multiple meanings, with roots in utilitarianism that are so deep that utility, satisfaction of desires, and well-being are often considered synonyms (Kymlicka, 1999). Yet it is important to distinguish desires from needs. Unlike needs, which can be counted, desire is characterised by a lack. Recognising this means embracing a more tragic view of the human condition – and more critical of capitalism and its exacerbation of artificial needs (Arnsperger, 2005).
- 19 Thus the proposals devoted to “decent work” (Anker *et al.*, 2003) consist of six constitutive elements: the possibility of working, the conditions of freedom, productive work, work equity, security at work, and dignity of work. Eleven parameters are considered: the possibilities of working, the acceptability of work, remuneration and productivity, length of work, stability and work security, work/family life balance, fair treatment at work, work-related security and health, social protection, social dialogue and relations of production, and socio-economic contexts. This ultimately results in a list of thirty indicators from which what we called subjective engagement in work, brought down to the principles of social justice, finally disappears from the study.

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