

# On the Cultural Meaning of Work in Postindustrial Societies

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The paper discusses the question of the cultural meaning of work in postindustrial societies and pleads for a wider anthropological perspective on this topic. Based on a critique of postmodern discourses of our society it will be showed that work in our individualistic society still has a central and positive meaning although it underlies the typical ambivalence of modernity between liberty and discipline. Prejudices against the unemployed, just as the memories and experiences of workers in a mining community, show a positive attitude towards work. Even under unfavourable conditions people develop specific and creative ways to organize work what refers to more than just the necessity of subsistence.

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“Perhaps to an even more dramatic extent than was thought possible a decade ago, the subjective importance of work as the pre-eminent and natural site of self-realisation, as the sphere, which establishes identity and promises happiness or at least satisfaction, has dwindled” (Marstedt 1994: 10).<sup>1</sup>

This report, summarising a study commissioned by the Angestelltenkammer Bremen [Bremen Chamber of Clerical Workers], also notes that, in response to a question on the subjective ranking of life goals and aspects of life, “family and partnership” and/or “love” or a “happy family life” take precedence over “a satisfying job”. This is merely an arbitrary example of the thesis that the significance of work has been eroded in our postindustrial world. There are countless such findings and there seems to be agreement in large parts of the scientific community, that in the course of a general change in values, work no longer occupies the central position it once did.

In what follows I would like to investigate these assertions, by showing first of all the role the imagery of the debate about postmodernity plays in this context and how that influences discussion of the importance of work. I will

compare that with results drawn from my own field research and demonstrate, that to talk about an erosion of the significance of work for people in our society is something of an oversimplification.

Admittedly it's perhaps an accident, that the debate about postmodernity is reaching its climax at the end of our century, but the end of the millennium may encourage some thinkers to indulge in speculation. At any rate, the fact is, that in postmodernity all the supposed certainties of the previous period are being put in question. In particular, new technologies in the area of transport and communications give rise to the outlining of scenarios, for which there is often no evidence as yet, but which are described with an imagery which is all the more extravagant. Anthony Giddens has, not without reason, noted critically, that the concept of postmodernity refers, among other things, to “living through a period of marked disparity from the past” (Giddens 1990: 46). David Harvey, for example, sees changed economic conditions – the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation – as resulting in an increased volatility and transience of fashions, products, production techniques, labour processes, ideas,

ideologies, values and established practices (Harvey 1994: 50). He agrees with Paul Virilio, that time and space have disappeared as meaningful dimensions of human thought and behaviour (ibid.: 67). Accordingly, in a period in which everything is fluid and in motion, identities become ever more fragile and unstable.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has described the consequences of postmodernity in a number of writings. In a lecture at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Vienna he presented the social characters of the tourist and the vagabond – in an earlier version for the journal *Das Argument* there had still been the flaneur, the vagabond, the tourist and the gambler (Bauman 1994) – as constituting the two poles between which the inhabitants of postmodern society moved (Bauman 1996). The name of the game is mobility, because it is the absolute condition for everything which postmodern man desires (ibid.: 6). The degree of freedom of choice in this respect corresponds to status in the social hierarchy; the tourist moves of his own free will and on his initiative [or what he believes to be so – J.M.], the vagabond, because constraints force him to do so. The central issue for a postmodern strategy of living is no longer the achievement of a stable identity, but an avoidance of being defined: Postmodernity “means the exhilarating freedom to pursue anything and the mind-boggling uncertainty as to what is worth pursuing and in the name of what one should pursue it” (Bauman 1992: VII). In a world of such uncertainty attitudes to work and profession also inevitably change. On the one hand, “In this world, not only jobs-for-life have disappeared, but trades and professions which have acquired the confusing habit of appearing from nowhere and vanishing without notice can hardly be lived as Weberian ‘vocations’ – and to rub salt into the wound, the demand for the skills needed to practise such professions seldom lasts as long as the time needed to acquire them” (Bauman 1996: 3). On the other, Bauman formulated – carefully perhaps, as he thought, but nevertheless – the thesis, that in contemporary society, the consumer’s freedom of choice has the same decisive role which the concept of work (job, occupation, profession) had in modern society (Bauman 1992: 223). Basically, many

different ideas flow into the prognosis of a disintegration of postmodern society, which finds expression in a far-reaching transformation of our system of values and norms.

As a cultural anthropologist, one will be on one’s guard against predictions of this kind, since there are several aspects which give cause for wariness. First of all, we should ask ourselves the simple question, what actually still holds our society together, in view of the processes of dissolution which are supposedly taking place in it. The postmodern debate is particularly marked by a lack of empirical evidence which could support the arguments being put forward. Isolated observations become generalisations and interpretation begins – in complete contrast to Clifford Geertz’s requirement of the anthropologist – long before any attempt whatsoever is made to grasp the complexity of human thought and behaviour with its “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another” (Geertz 1975: 10). It is precisely in this context, that the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren has recently demanded more thick descriptions of “how people in different temporal and social milieus link identities and territories”, and demanded a historical perspective “in order to sharpen analytical precision and to fit contemporary developments into a framework of longer term historical processes” (Löfgren 1995: 363).

I would like to demonstrate this lack of empirical depth of field with reference to two small examples in Harvey and Bauman. David Harvey thinks that volatility and transience contribute to making a secure sense of continuity more difficult (Harvey 1994: 57). Then, however, he cites research by Rochberg-Halton, according to which the inhabitants of North Chicago don’t attach the greatest importance to the “costly trophies of a materialist culture”, but to objects, which express the relationship to loved ones and relatives; for him this is a reaction to the overstimulation of a consumption oriented culture (ibid.: 58f). It does not occur to him, that this might be a matter of the persistence of existing attitudes and value systems – at any rate it’s not a new phenomenon.

Similarly paradigmatic for so many misun-

derstandings between possibility and reality seems to me to be Bauman's example of the photographic paper (and the resulting family albums) of modernity and the video tape (the definitive medium) of postmodernity. While the former captures irreversible and identity-forming events, the latter can be wiped and re-used, is intended to capture nothing forever, to make space for the events of today only at the expense of yesterday's, impregnating everything that is considered worth recording with the universal 'for the time being' (Bauman 1994: 389). Bauman, however, doesn't enquire as to actual use. The fact that things can be erased, does not automatically mean that they are erased. In my experience, the identity-forming events recorded on video tape are not wiped, except unintentionally, which can turn into a drama – just as when the equivalent photos are torn.

Such lines of argument have for some time been evident with reference to work, though not all of them should be seen in the context of the postmodern debate. Although the concept of work has a long semantic history (cf., i.a., Moser 1993: 15ff), work and/or gainful employment only became the constitutive principle of modern societies with industrialisation and the related recurring upheavals. This is primarily because, among other things, only through the Industrial Revolution was a distinction made between work and leisure (Turner 1982: 32). This distinction is of the greatest significance, since it characterises the area of tension within which the concept of work has since found itself – pulled between work as a central category for the understanding of society and human existence altogether, and the attempt to relativise the importance of work.

In order to work out the position of work in a postindustrial society – given all the possible regional and national differences – what is needed is a careful ethnographic approach in Geertz's sense: "Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalised graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour" (Geertz 1975: 10).

I shall show below, what a wealth of seeming contradictions have grown up around the complex of work, all of which, however, have something to do with its significance in our cultural system. My own research on this subject was carried out in Austria – in Styria and Vienna – and is based on observation and a large number of qualitative interviews. On the one hand, I was concerned with the subject of work and unemployment (Moser 1993), and on the other I am at present working on a project on socio-cultural change in a declining mining region (Moser & Graf 1997; Moser 1997). In all these investigations, it turned out that work continues to have a central significance for people. However, it is necessary, "in short, [to] descend into detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various sorts of individuals within each culture, if we wish to encounter humanity face to face" (Geertz 1975: 53). Transferred to research in an industrial society, that means, that it is not enough to glance at the material from outside – it would be more accurate to say 'from above.' Only the whole context of life world and lived circumstances affords the necessary insight. Clifford Geertz quotes Wittgenstein, who thought, we often do not understand the people of another country, even when we speak their language: "We cannot find our feet with them" (ibid.: 13). This is perhaps the harshest criticism that has to be made of many superficial assessments of the importance of work. 'Armchair anthropologists' was the name given to those researchers, who only dealt with other cultures from the perspective of their desk – by way of the descriptions of third parties. Many investigations of a change in values resemble precisely this perspective. Their hypotheses – if they are tested empirically at all – are sketched out in accordance with the ideas of the desk-bound researcher and are based on prejudice. The world looks different, consequently we must pursue the laborious path into the field, "to understand our own Others as well as the other Others in the context of the culturally constructed worlds they live in" (Greverus 1996: 156) and – to go beyond Geertz – we must not only develop one

reading of a manuscript of 'culture', but several, in order to find the most plausible. I furthermore agree with the criticisms made from many sides of those anthropologists, who refer to a crisis of ethnographic representation and "who have evidently had enough of the charm of work in the 'field' and now talk more about themselves than about their research object" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996: 103). Here the discourses of the postmodernists, value change theorists and critics of ethnographic writing resemble one another both in the lack of empirical material as well as in a narrowed view of things, which often takes the writer's own experience of life to be the whole of it. Very frequently, the image of a man of the comfortable middle class shows through in the descriptions of the ideal characters of postmodern society.

A major problem in understanding work, is first of all due to the concept itself, because there is no adequate definition and the definitions suggested by academics have – apart from other weaknesses – nothing to do with people's lifeworlds. The economic aspect is frequently the centre of attention in discussions of work (cf. Moser 1993: 43ff), which in the most extreme formulation understands work – or labour power, which, however is not, and can hardly be analytically separated – as a commodity. As long ago as 1944, Karl Polanyi presented a critique of this approach, referring to work as a fictitious commodity. To include work and land in the market mechanism, means "to subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market" (Polanyi 1944: 71). "Labor is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized" (ibid.: 72). With that he points to the impossibility of the attempts of many economists to remove economic interests from the larger context of cultural and social relationships.

Bronislaw Malinowski pointed to the broader context of work, embedded within a more extensive system of meaning, which presupposes both a general state of knowledge about the moral intellectual and economic frame of reference and the necessity of communication (Ma-

linowski 1954: 621f). Above all, the collection edited by Sandra Wallmann, "The Social Anthropology of Work", demonstrates the complexity of the subject from the anthropological perspective, Wallmann herself dealing with, among other things, the significance of the valuation of work (Wallmann 1979). These valuations also guide our perceptions, as I would like to demonstrate with an example from my own research. In the course of surveys conducted on two housing estates in Graz, a woman describes, in an interview, a family whose members fulfil for her all the criteria of an unwillingness to work. She pays particular attention to the head of the family. "When I come home at lunchtime", she says, "he's sitting out there in the back, sunning himself". In conversation with this gentleman, who was interviewed on this very same bench, it then turned out that he, after 44 years of hard work, is unable properly to enjoy his retirement. Since, in his job, he constantly had to handle oils and gases, he developed an illness, which today forces him to spend as much time as possible in the open air. This spectacular misjudgement demonstrates a phenomenon, to which Pierre Bourdieu has also referred. "...the social neighbourhood as place of least difference can also simultaneously easily be the point of greatest tensions. The objectively smallest distance in the social sphere can coincide with the subjectively greatest distance" (Bourdieu 1987: 251).

I don't, however, want to deal with the problems of neighbourly misjudgement, but rather with the pictures in our heads, which make such misperceptions possible. The example mentioned here demonstrates the importance of work in the woman's system of meaning and yet also makes clear that it contains an element of ambivalence. On the one hand, she cannot understand at all, how someone, whom she imagines to be of working age, can just sit around like that, and turns to the most obvious (to her) explanation of an unwillingness to work. On the other hand, however, it could also be a projection, because, to her, the pleasure of sitting in the sun may seem, at first sight, more desirable than her employment. In relation to work, this apparent contradiction often encourages mistaken assessments.

The tension between work as burden and evil on the one hand, but on the other as fulfilment and calling is already established in the semantic history of the word. In modernity – the age of ambivalence – this culminates in the conflict between the promises of the Enlightenment and the specific demands of industrialisation. Peter Wagner recently emphasised this in his *A Sociology of Modernity*, when he argued that the whole history of modernity was characterized by the coexistence of discourses of freedom and discipline. “It makes certain types of self-realization much easier to achieve, but tends to prevent others” (Wagner 1994: XIV). As Michel Foucault had already said, “the ‘Enlightenment’ which discovered freedom, also invented discipline” (Foucault 1977: 285). Admittedly power was now bound to rules and the individual was recognized as a legal subject, but due to the various practices of control, a ‘disciplinary individual’ has developed, who is a product of these new technologies of power (Breuer 1995: 50). This standardisation, however, also gives rise to resistance – according to Foucault – because where there is power, there is also resistance (cf. *ibid.*: 52). This resistance was observed again and again, precisely in the factories, those showpieces of disciplining and of the indoctrination of a new idea of work (cf. i.a., Lüdtkke 1993: 112ff).

The complexity of the problem is not, however, demonstrated only in the synchronicity of freedom and discipline; what is understood as work can vary from one episode to the next, as a nice literary example, which I have borrowed from Hans Georg Zilian tells us.

“That well known survival artist Tom Sawyer has been forced, by his aunt, to paint the fence around her house – and that on a Saturday when there was no school. His first, conventional plan is to hire other boys to carry out the work. After examining his ‘worldly wealth’ – ‘bits of toys, marbles, and trash’ – he rejects this idea, since the purchasing power of these objects seems too little. When the first boy-observer turns up, the following, among other things, occurs:

‘...Tom surveyed his last touch with the eye of an artist; then he gave his brush another gentle

sweep, and surveyed the result as before.

Ben Rogers began to see the thing in a new light... Watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said: Say, Tom, let me whitewash a little.’

“Tom first of all rejects this suggestion. His aunt wouldn’t allow it, since she’s ‘awful particular about this fence’ (I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done.)’. The outcome of the story is well known: ‘...the fence had three coats of whitewash!’ The boys of the village had sacrificed all their objects in their suddenly discovered passion for painting fences. ‘If he hadn’t run out of whitewash he would have bankrupted every boy in the village. At the end of the chapter, Mark Twain himself takes stock of the episode: Tom Sawyer had discovered ‘that work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do’” (Zilian 1985: 7f).

The example is instructive, although Twain’s analysis does not go far enough. It is related to that economic way of looking at things, according to which work is conceived as an ‘evil’, which it is sensible to unload onto someone else, if one can afford to do so or can find someone who will do it for other reasons. Many economists, especially neoliberal ones, agree with this literary example and assume an “income-leisure preference model”, according to which human beings always prefer leisure to work, above all, if no or only limited losses of income are involved. Yet leisure, which is always contrasted with the evil of work, only gains its value in relation to work. How else can this free-time be defined? From what would one otherwise be free? Leisure is a “non-work, even an anti-work phase in the life of a person who also works” (Turner 1982: 36). Unlimited leisure without work is one of the most terrible burdens which can be imposed on a human being. Günther Anders criticises the equation of leisure and freedom with reference to unemployment. “The other way round, leisure, that is, non-work, is experienced as a curse. And instead of the famous Old Testament one – (Genesis 3, verse 14) – the new one will go as follows: ‘Thou shalt sit on thine

backside and gawk at tv all thy life long!" (Anders 1980: 28). Hence, the importance of leisure in our society can increase, without that necessarily changing the importance of work for human beings.

The extra-economic aspects are always ignored in this debate; these include, among others, the structure imposed by time, not least by the standardization of the life cycle, the acquisition of status and prestige, the mediation of social contacts and the formation of social identity. Sometimes we only need to observe everyday life, in order to get an insight into normality. If, for example, we were to ask someone, "What do you do?" and he replied, "I travel," we would assume he was a travelling salesman, a steward or perhaps a tourist courier. No one would conclude, in the light of Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern characters, "Oh, you're a tourist!" On the contrary, the questioner would be somewhat surprised at the response, "I travel", since a profession or something equivalent – e.g. university, apprenticeship, school – is expected as answer to this particular question.

The importance of work becomes especially clear from the attitudes to unemployment and the unemployed, which I researched in Styria a few years ago. At the time unemployment was already a permanent phenomenon, and full employment was no longer a prospect. According to the assessments of a number of theorists of society and of a shift in values this should not be a problem, since work has lost its central position for people and for society (cf. Offe 1983; Marstedt 1994) or a large proportion of the unemployed did not want to work anyway (Noelle-Neumann & Gillies 1987). In the perceptions of members of our society, however, unemployment represents an extraordinary problem, although both those affected by unemployment and those not affected nevertheless respond to it with a surprising degree of emotion. What is surprising about those not affected is the aggression which they display – at least verbally – towards the unemployed. I shall demonstrate this by way of two stereotypical response models, which turned up again and again in conversations with me.

The first stereotype disapproves of the laziness of many of the unemployed, who sit around

at home and do nothing. On the one hand, reference is made to personal experiences with the unemployed: "He's been signing on for five whole years, he just lies at home all day." Or: "And not a stroke of work, they just stay at home all day; three or four years at home."

Above all, the payment of unemployment benefit is, in general, not regarded as an insurance payout, but perceived as a cash transfer for which there is no return. An example is a hypothetical digression by Mr Kurz, a businessman:

"But if someone signs on for six months, then he doesn't want to work any more. Because – no one tells him when he has to get up, no one tells him what he's got to do, he gets the money paid into his account. He only needs to be lucky enough, if you can put it that way, for his wife to be signing on too, and then fine, the two of them lie at home in bed and pocket two lots of dole. Well, why should they bother working?"

This statement succinctly expresses the fears which exist in relation to the pleasures of unemployment. The real background is of no importance any more. Mr Kurz evidently doesn't give a moment's thought as to what effect the "idleness" or the "dullness" of the never-changing daily routine described by him might have on the libido. In his story, which I don't want to give in detail here, he paints a picture of a dissolute, extravagant unemployed couple, leading a life of pleasure at the expense of the community as a whole. In view of the multitude of accounts, which describe how depressing or at least how dissatisfying unemployment is experienced as being, such notions can safely be consigned to the realms of fantasy.

On the other hand, remarks by the unemployed are very often quoted, for example, "I'm not going to be as daft as to go and work, if I've got enough money to have fun at home." This remark, if indeed it was really ever made, can probably best be explained by reference to Howard S. Becker. In his theory of deviance, he showed that many deviant groups develop rationalizations, which are intended to represent their deviant behaviour as advantageous or as better than that of the majority (Becker 1963:

38f), so that their members can preserve their sense of self-worth as rationally acting subjects. In our case, someone making the remark quoted above could be demonstrating himself to be a *homo oeconomicus*, even if at every other level he is stigmatised by being unemployed. His motto is then simply: You've got to work, while I pocket the money and don't have to do anything. Aside from the fact, that it's hardly possible to talk about a good life, in financial terms, during unemployment, as the relevant statistics prove, this approach "can be used as a communicative strategy in certain situations, in order to cover up an actual shame at an inferior status" (Neckel 1991: 161).

The second stereotype deals with the possibility of finding work. Very many of those questioned thought that anyone could find work, if he really wanted to. The actual statements then go as follows: "People who want to work, will always find work." Or: "There's always something, if you really want to work." Or: "But only, I think, if someone wants to work, it doesn't matter what job or what line, then he'll always get something. If he wants to work." What probably plays a part here, is, above all, the not very surprising fact that even at times of high unemployment there are still situations vacant. Many of those questioned are surprised at the number of jobs advertised in the paper. A 54-year old civil servant said, "I don't understand it anyway, there are so many people unemployed, and on the other hand they say they don't have any workers. What are the unemployed doing? Why do they get benefit, if there are so many jobs, or you only need to look in the paper at the weekend, to see how many jobs are available.

A 71-year old pensioner, who likewise gives expression to his surprise at the number of unfilled vacancies, argues in similar vein: We really needn't have so many unemployed. Some of them don't want to work. Just take a look, there are so many jobs, I'm always reading the paper. So many jobs, but if you ask a company, why? – these people don't want to. Now, it can hardly be expected that everyone will be familiar with the details of the labour market – some aspects are even beyond the experts. And, of course, the fact of unfilled posts when there is

unemployment – even high unemployment – is not so surprising. This must be the case, otherwise no company could expand, no one retire, no employee die nor could anyone be fired. What is surprising in the statements quoted above, however, is the certainty with which mistaken information is passed around. The civil servant would have to have spent her free time reading empirical studies of the labour market – in which case, she would, however, have something different to say – and whether the 71-year old former engineering worker can really boast of intensive contacts with a number of companies may equally be doubted. At any rate the stories are presented in a form which is supposed to lend them authenticity, thereby confirming what Clifford Geertz said in relation to common sense. "Religion rests its case on revelation, science on method, ideology on moral passion; but common sense rests its on the assertion that it is not a case at all, just life in a nutshell. The world is its authority" (Geertz 1983: 75).

These images of the unemployed have something to do with the significance of work for human beings. Transmitted during the various phases of socialization it represents a culture pattern in Geertz's sense – he refers to organized systems of significant symbols – which provide the orientation, without which "man's behaviour would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions" (Geertz 1975: 46). These cultural patterns are part of our collective memory, which preserves the store of knowledge of a group and through its reconstruction, always refers to contemporary situations (cf. Assmann 1988: 13). The world is complex, which is why human beings, with a restricted information capacity, are forced to simplify and categorize. Consequently, observations which fit into an already existing picture, are more easily remembered or interpreted than those which deviate from it. This serves to order experience and to reduce complexity. That academics are not invulnerable to such mechanisms, has been demonstrated elsewhere in relation to the pre-suppositions to be found in the models of economists (Zilian & Moser 1989).

This becomes especially clear from the situ-

ation of the unemployed themselves. They are victims of lack – of jobs – but are declared to be its cause. Discrimination and stigmatization results (cf. Moser 1993: 81ff), because those affected are seen as unemployed idlers. This problem also has an interactive aspect, however, as Erving Goffmann has demonstrated. “Of course, the individual constructs his image of himself out of the same materials, from which others first construct a social and personal identification of him...” (Goffman 1963: 133). The unemployed, therefore, have the same ideas about work as other people; they have the same prejudices about others who are unemployed, they only see their own problems with a greater degree of differentiation. They suffer from the loss of work and frequently a personal feeling of shame develops, whose consequences have been succinctly assessed by Sighard Neckel. “Shame is a strain on the individual and creates a feeling of insecurity, shame isolates. To be ashamed causes loneliness. Shame ruins self-confidence and other people notice that” (Neckel 1991: 17).

The result is that many unemployed don’t acknowledge that they are unemployed, but try to re-interpret their situation. So a young unemployed woman with a small child, living with her parents, says, “I’m not unemployed at all – I’m doing something.” Another interviewee provided an extremely interesting interpretation of his situation. He doesn’t feel that he’s one of the unemployed, this is only his situation at the moment: “Because a student, who gets a job in the summer, doesn’t say all of a sudden that he’s one of the workers, he remains a student.” These unemployed seem to know about what Bourdieu has called the symbolic dimension of the social sciences, “because individuals and groups are not only objectively defined by their being, but also by what they apparently are, that is by a perceived being” (Bourdieu 1987: 246). Mr Gangl seems to take this equally to heart, when he responds to the question, whether he feels he is one of the unemployed, “Yes, I could almost say, that, I wouldn’t put it like that any more, I would say, that I’m a house husband.” Although Mr Gangl is far from satisfied with his role as house husband, as he let me know in the interview, he preferred to identify

with it, rather than with the unemployed. The role of house husband can still perhaps be understood and perceived as a freely chosen alternative, in the case of unemployment, choice would be an unmistakable sign of an unwillingness to work. The unemployed see themselves in a state of transition, such as has been described by Victor Turner with his concept of liminality. Admittedly Turner applies his concept primarily to initiation rites, but he emphasizes “a certain homology between the ‘weakness’ and ‘passivity’ of liminality in diachronic transitions between states and statuses, and the ‘structural’ or synchronic inferiority of certain personae, groups, and social categories in political, legal, and economic systems” (Turner 1969: 99f). A state of transition – as in the case of unemployment – can be accompanied by low social status, so that only after leaving this state can there be a change in status again. From that it can be deduced, that for the unemployed it may also be appropriate for them to more or less see through their state, in order afterwards to be properly integrated into the social system again.

Researches in a declining mining region in Austria also emphasized the massive importance of work. In Eisenerz (literally Iron Ore) iron has been extracted from the Erzberg (literally Ore Mountain) for hundreds of years; now, however, the mine will soon be shut down. Since the 1960s, the number of employed has declined from 4,000 to 340, who themselves no longer work exclusively in the mine. The normal biography of a man in Eisenerz, was that he was born into a mining family, and it was taken for granted that he too would be apprenticed as a miner. As in the Ruhr, as described by Rolf Lindner, a relatively homogeneous social landscape came into being, which was dominated by a working class milieu, and which had little internal stratification (cf. Lindner 1994: 216). Work always played a central role in this milieu, everything revolved around work: once there was the work in the mine, which dominated everything, today there is the lack of jobs, which everyone in Eisenerz declares to be the central problem.

Precisely the hard work in the mine demonstrates what work still is, beyond the mainte-



nance of subsistence. Work for the miners down the pit, means, among other things, the overcoming of fear, the necessary skill to wrest the ore from the mountain, but above all the legendary "comradeship", which was always being talked about. The miners characterized the pit as a place, which, in Marc Augé's sense, is marked by identity, relationship and history (Augé 1994: 92f): What counted in the pit was the collective; there's the history of the accidents, which are very precisely remembered and the miner sometimes even has an emotional bond with the place, which finds expression in descriptions of the atmosphere. "So when you were down there and it began to creak, and a little bit of something fell down, then that was tension enough, that was, that was great", a miner told us enthusiastically. In general, much more attention should be paid to these symbolic dimensions when considering work.

In the last ten years the miners had to leave the pit when they're only 50 or 51, and via the status of long term unemployment with special rights (by virtue of a so-called Special Support Law), are granted early retirement. This doesn't happen without problems, however, because the former employees still imagine themselves to be in the prime of their working life – which makes the situation much worse than in the case of the familiar phenomenon of pension shock. Very suddenly their labour power and their experience are no longer needed; instead they are a cost factor, which must be removed by dismissal – cushioned by a social plan. All the interviewees described the great problems which they had during this phase, until they had eventually found a substitute employment.

The symbolic relationships can be demonstrated, for example, by the fate of the celebrations on St Barbara's Day – St Barbara being the patron saint of miners. The festivity had for a long time been an important tradition in Eisenerz, though one always subject to certain cycles. Gerd Baumann has drawn attention to the significance attached to the Others, other groups or the public at large, in rituals within plural societies. Thus the explicit or implicit ritual reference to Others can be a means by which a group obtains recognition and influence and to differentiate or integrate itself

(quoted from Wolbert 1995: 24).

St Barbara's Day served not only for the purpose of internal endorsement, but also as a demonstration to the outside world. By the beginning of this century interest in St Barbara's Day had already declined to such an extent, that the festivity had to be discontinued. Karl Stocker suspects that the reason was the waning of a corporate consciousness, which as a result of the proletarianization of the miners had been replaced by a class consciousness. In 1926, the custom was revived by the management of the mine, a move intended to raise the miners' sense of status, and to strengthen the attachment of the miners to the company. From 1928 the Knappschaftsverein des steirischen Erzberges (Miners' Association of the Styrian Ore Mountain), which had also been set up by the company, played a central role in organising the celebration. The miners, as the real target group, didn't want to know about it, under the given conditions (cf. Stocker 1984: 46ff).

Only after the Second World War did the picture change again; on the one hand because the co-operation of the two sides of industry (social partnership) had resulted in a much improved social situation for the workers, on the other, because the influence of the Socialist Party had increased considerably in Eisenerz. Now on St Barbara's Day, there was once more a demonstration of where the economic prosperity of the town came from; at the same time it was also a demonstration of the trade union's power and because of the media character of the event, also of the Socialist Party – the senior Austrian politicians turned up in Eisenerz for the occasion. On the 4th of December, the whole of Eisenerz was in the streets and after the official ceremonies – which always included a commemoration for those killed in accidents, at which the whole of the local cemetery was turned into a sea of blazing torches – festivities continued for a long time in the public houses.

Today, as a result of the crisis, the elites have once more regained that power of definition which they did not possess in the heyday of the mining milieu. They are now in demand as experts – or make themselves in demand – and construct the valid pictures. As a consequence, on the one hand the miner's work is elevated in

museums, in the show mine and in the maintenance of traditions, while on the other, the mentality of those employed in the mine is blamed for the fact that the economic transformation, the shift to other branches of economic activity and the anxiously awaited recovery are not taking place at the desired speed. Hence participation in the St Barbara's Day celebrations is extremely small, people no longer feel attached to the symbolic orders on which the celebration is based (cf. Douglas 1982: 2). It has become a kind of duty for those still working in the mine and for a few retired miners who are attached to the tradition. They are joined by a few local dignitaries and some second and third rank politicians. Whereas once the streets were filled with crowds from the town itself, today only a few of the curious watch the procession. The commemoration ceremony at the cemetery is the only event still attended by many people, who have not taken part in the rest of the ceremonies, in order to honour their dead.

Today, as Becker et al., write, the "previous unproblematic functioning of socially distinct forms of knowledge and patterns of interpretation..." has come "under pressure to become consistent" (Becker et al. 1987: 3). The retired miners experience it most sharply, given to understand that their labour is obsolete and their values an obstacle to modern development. The ideas in their head and social practice – Edmund Leach would say the relationship of meaning between the "concept in the mind" and the "external world" (Leach 1976: 38) no longer correspond. Against this background, it becomes comprehensible, that both the miners and large sections of the rest of the population have ceased to support traditions, which without the identity factors which were related to work, have lost their meaning.

The empirical examples, substantiating the importance of work, could be extended indefinitely – and not only with reference to employment in the manufacturing and service sectors as my findings suggest. In her study of health and sickness in peasant community, the ethnologist Walburga Haas has shown that the awareness of the body among the group studied is very strongly related to work and the work ethos. "Human beings are here to work, after

all", says an old peasant woman (Haas 1996: 70).

Now this should not be taken to mean, that people are not conscious of the effort involved in work. In my opinion it is precisely the features of burdensomeness and effort inherent in work which constitute its value or significance. Human beings as creators of culture, constantly appropriating their environment in a creative process, are fully aware of the related costs. If we could manage everything so easily – the writing of an academic paper or working on a building site in scorching heat – then we would also lack the degree of satisfaction, which we draw from these activities. At first sight it may look as if people's moans and groans about their work means that it has lost its significance. But Clifford Geertz reminds us to substitute complex pictures for simple ones (Geertz 1975: 33).

It is in this sense that I also have tried to interpret my empirical material. If we investigate the significance of work in our society, then we obtain a multitude of data, which may seem contradictory to us. Looked at more closely, however, we recognize the central importance of work in our system of common sense, which "is a cultural system" that can be "empirically uncovered and conceptually formulated". But we must not "do so by cataloguing its content, which is wildly heterogeneous, not only across societies but within them – ant-heap wisdom" (Geertz 1983: 92). The system changes, just as the given facts of our world change; but it changes with reference to what is already present in our system of meaning, it builds on a foundation of collectively shared stocks of knowledge. Hence leisure can gain in importance, without work losing its significance. Why should the unemployed suffer from their unemployment, if work is not important to them? Why in Germany does one talk about an "Alliance for Work" (i.e. of government, employers and trade unions), if work has lost its central importance? This doesn't happen because a political and business elite believes that the loss of significance of work must be checked, but because work in these webs of significance man himself has spun – called culture (Geertz 1975: 9) is so important, that justice is thereby done to expectations of our society.

## Note

1. All quotations which are not cited from English books or journals have been translated by the author.

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