

Granted autonomy and appropriation of labor

Cinara L. Rosenfield¹

Introduction

A context of precarization and flexibilization of employment associated to changes in the organization of labor in capitalist societies imposes a new pattern of involvement in labor to industrial workers. Productive labor – as a pattern, which does not mean the inexistence of precarious and strenuous or brutalizing Taylorist labor – has become more varied and more complex; the content and nature of labor have become richer, given a higher demand for subjective investment and mobilization of intelligence. Instead of repetitive and monotonous tasks, industrial labor has become more stimulating, within a context of liberalizing the labor situation by granting autonomy. Such model has replaced the old and stiffer, formally authoritarian organizations. Therefore, it is possible that such situation represents gains for workers, since working has become more interesting and labor relations have become more democratic.

This article is aimed at debating the meaning of that *granted autonomy*, which is the organizational corollary of a subjective mobilization demand. These reflections are associated to an empirical research study carried out with workers in the processing industry in two situations: the first one is related to a study on the chemical industry in France (Péage de Roussillon) and Brazil (Paulínia and São José dos Campos), in the first half of the 1990s, and resulted in a proposed typology on relationship with labor, based on 200 interviews made in the two countries (ROSENFELD, 2003a); the second one refers to an investigation in the petrochemical industry at the Triunfo Petrochemical Complex (in the state of Rio Grande do Sul), in 2000-2001, with 40 workers. It followed the same methodology in order to update the aforementioned typology (ROSENFELD, 2003b). The present article discusses the concept and implications of the oft-mentioned labor autonomy – productive industrial and waged² labor –, based on – mostly French – literature and on our empirical observation. However, empirical data will not be explicitly mobilized since the idea is to develop a conceptual discussion as a result of constant empirical analysis shown on the aforementioned articles.

1. Granted Autonomy and normalization of labor

In recent decades, the organization of the labor process has changed towards a higher demand for qualification and autonomy. In a context of strong international competitiveness, businesses face increasing productivity and quality imperatives. People's relationship with and adhesion to labor become factors for their success, in order to face a twofold challenge:

¹ Professor of the Department of Sociology and the Program of Graduate Studies in Sociology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

² Even when speaking of labor in general, reflections here refer to waged, industrial productive labor.

increasing the productivity and quality of its products and responding to the demands for flexibility and variability of the products. Making production more adaptable and more responsive to market demands are the aims of that integrated and flexible “new production model”, whose emergence seeks to respond to the new imperatives for “de-specialization” of workers and machines, for multifunctional teamwork, for systemic approach to relations between the distinct positions within the company in order to control the whole production cycle. The new organization of labor must therefore face the dynamic of a series of events, granting operators a certain necessary autonomy and developing the symbolic universe related to their place within the company in order to create and develop common cognitive and ethical references as well as zones for questioning and for making objectives explicit.

Such change reflects the review of the organizational and technological model of the Taylorist production process, which is characterized by: 1) stiffness in the production apparatus; 2) logic of specialization and fragmentation of tasks, which makes production time longer; 3) increase in the marginal cost of production; 4) dissociation between direct and indirect labor, thus halting the innovative potential of the systemic approach to production; 5) limitedly skilled labor force, created by the technical and organization system itself; 6) slow reaction to quality problems and disturbances in increasingly heterogeneous and unstable demand (ZARIFIAN, 1990).

Therefore, companies seek to increase their ability to react to several problems, to improve the quality of products, to have more reliable means, to favor flexibility of production, and to exert tight control on production costs. In order to reach such aims, it is necessary to have an organizational and people management system that allows workers more autonomy and responsibility, improves working and safety conditions, makes working interesting, and fosters the development of competencies.

The new demands for production translate as an increase in autonomy, initiative, accountability, motivation, reached by methods based on multifunctionality, teamwork, on the integration of intelligences and knowledges, on the right to expression, on decentralized controls. Workers are encouraged to express themselves and judge the organization of labor in order to individually offer their specific knowledge and therefore contribute to decisions. Such proposition, according to D. Martin (1994), aims at satisfying workers in terms of: 1) higher interest on the tasks; 2) more consideration, which workers will believe to be enjoying; 3) development of their ingenuity; 4) increase in their competencies; 5) possibility of functional advancement; 6) perspective for “self-actualization”.

Promoting participation of workers in the production process aims at implicating them in the process and transparently integrating their personal contribution into prescribed tasks. Participating means contributing in an open and explicit way, integrating the informal into the rule, as long as it improves that rule. Now, granted autonomy of workers aims at reducing the margin for creation and improvisation, thus making way for a normative management system where real autonomy should be integrated into institutionalization of autonomy. Real autonomy means initiatives, creation and decision power in an unpredicted situation. And it always exists, in spite of current efforts towards maximum prevision and prescription. In case an unpredicted and extraordinary fact takes place within the production process, the worker takes an initiative to solve the problem and guarantee production flow and quality. If the initiative is successful, the hierarchy immediately integrates it into the rule, in order to spread that intervention and indicate to all workers how to react before that unexpected event. What is extraordinary should become predictable – in order to always guarantee the best reaction before the unexpected event in the production process – and creation becomes part of the rule. Real autonomy turns into a heteronym since it becomes a rule to be followed. ISO 9000 certification processes include precisely the maximum normalization of production process (“writing all that is done, doing all that is written”), in order to control the unpredicted and to

cancel the possibility to compromise quality and speed. Quality assurance demands normalization of labor, where everyone should do it in the same way – the best way – and therefore it is necessary to integrate workers' know-how. Those workers – by creating a solution for the unpredicted, contribute to normalization of initiatives to be taken in recurrent cases. Instead of real autonomy, what emerges is granted autonomy. Real autonomy is related to creation and improvisation while granted autonomy is related to the prescription that “workers must be autonomous” in order to incorporate the unpredictable into the rule. That rule should contain as many foresights and prescriptions as possible in order for actions to be uniformed and to assure that everyone's labor has high quality, that is, the less inventive operator must integrate the initiative taken by the more creative one to his or her work. Therefore, granted autonomy is paradoxical regarding real autonomy, since autonomy can be seen in two senses: firstly, in its positive sense: real autonomy at work – the autonomy of “doing it well” – which is recognized by its peers. Such autonomy allows people to protect themselves, since it preserves the group as identitarian bases and allows a return on oneself that is able to confer meaning to labor. Secondly, in its instrumental sense, autonomy is granted as an instrument of coordination of labor relations and aims at reaching an economic objective for business management (ROSENFELD, 2003a).

Autonomy, whether real or granted, is that margin for independence regarding what has been prescribed; it is the initiative to decide and chose, or at least to influence or intervene on the course of production. While a trend is seen towards normalization of the productive act, it is necessary to point out that there is always a certain zone for autonomy. According to J. D. Reynaud (1993: 1) there is no automated facility that does not need to be piloted. There is always a margin for unpredicted events, uncertainties, that is, for the unexpected; 2) strict instructions always leave room for imprecision that is covered by the executor's decision and initiative; 3) there is a permanent process of improvement of an equipment because of the movements within the gap between conception and execution; 4) there are official written rules and unwritten ones that emerge from practice itself. As long as the latter become collective, they allow the group to be constituted as such. Effective rules include both informal and formal rules; 5) if the effective rule presupposes the informal one, workers are confronted by a contradiction between strictly following orders – what makes the informal rule into a violation, – and making decisions out of their own experience and their own knowledge, thus opposing an insufficient or incomplete rule. Then they will have to dissimulate their act of freedom or accept to be disappropriated from it at the moment when it will be integrated to the rule by the higher hierarchy. Such movement suggests a successful initiative. But if it fails, such initiative returns to what it has always been: a violation, and therefore subject to sanction.

From the issue of the development of labor division, G. de Terssac (1992) develops his argument about the notion of labor autonomy. Division of labor is seen as specialization that introduces separation between those who decide and those who execute. The author identifies two approaches to the analysis of the social function of division of labor: 1) the one developed by G. Friedmann (1972), which considers that the system of operational and behavioral norms and rules strongly reduces the degree of freedom that individuals have in their actions, that is, they are effectively influenced by the restraints imposed; 2) that advocated by J.-D. Reynaud (1993), based on the existence of informal groups that are not predicted by the official organization and escape the dominant and official rationalization. Terssac agrees with this second theoretical approach, according to which “the individual is not entirely subjected to the system of *constraints*” (TERSSAC, 1992, p. 32)³. The latter perspective allows approaching the issue from the existence of written or formal rules and of unwritten or

³ All quotes in this article have been translated into English from Portuguese translations provided by the author.

informal ones. Written rules include the set of prescriptions that establish the norms and limits of the work and that: a) must be respected; b) are defined by a group in order to influence the behavior of another group; c) are made outside the group to which they apply. Unwritten rules include all organizational solutions that have already been implemented and established by executors to carry out the task that has been commanded; and a) those are decisions that are common to the whole group of execution and are tacitly accepted by its members; b) they constitute something “irregular” by the standards of written rules. Even though we agree with the author’s theoretical outlook, it seems important to stress two points where our analyses disagree. Firstly, written rules – the author argues – are made outside the group of execution. That applies to an initial moment: they are made by the group that “possesses that knowledge”. Their global and technical knowledge gives them power of decision and choice, which precedes the productive act itself. However, at a reflexive level, other choices are always made since it is impossible to exhaust the list of possible situations. Operators end up contributing to the rule when they take an action that is not included or in clear opposition to it. Put differently, the rule is made outside the execution group, but also inside it. The issue here is disappropriation of an act that was the result of a margin for freedom and/or audacity. No system to recognize the originality turned into rule is seen. The rule is impersonal and autonomous.

In behalf of more autonomous labor organization, the hierarchy has withdrawn, and its previous role of agent for the recognition of each worker’s individual effort and competence has disappeared. No recognition system replaced the one that used to be exercised by the boss. The withdrawal of the hierarchy was felt by many as some sort of abandonment, which is demonstrated by the fact that many workers experience nostalgia of a strong boss who is more present and direct. It used to be more authoritarian but, on the other hand, it was franker and abler to give support to workers when they needed it. The boss as a support disappears – it takes on the role of facilitating group dynamics – and workers often regret the loss of the tough but coherent and available boss. Recognition, as Dejours (1995) puts it, is: 1) realizing the insufficiencies of the prescribed labor organization and the contributions made by workers, individually and collectively, to its development and effectiveness; 2) gratitude for contributions without which the labor process would stop. Now, when practical intelligence is constantly absorbed by the anonymous rule and direct hierarchy withdraws and weakens its judgment power, the identitarian validity of autonomy is challenged⁴. Our argument is that autonomy encourages creation and freedom just to integrate them into the norm, the author disappears and creation becomes the rule for well-done work – and that work is judged by the product of collective labor. No recognition system interfaces freedom and norm.

Moreover, Terssac (1992) characterizes the unwritten rule as a common decision of the execution group that is tacitly accepted by its members. We entirely agree with such assertion. In our empirical studies we verified the existence of agreements about “violations”, supported by the group as a whole. Those agreements are the expression of resistance to the norm, to obedience, and to disappropriation of all margin of freedom. But there is also the individual, astute, ingenious act that is the expression of personal and individual freedom and creation. It is a call to the presence of the worker’s person amongst rules that normalize labor – which becomes increasingly anonymous since it is governed by rules and norms to be followed.

The author clearly identifies the movement towards informal actions, since it is impossible to predict everything. Autonomy becomes a technical element for success and its

⁴ “It is essential to underline here that recognition does not go directly to the person; it is indirect, it is mediated by labor. The object of judgment is the result of labor and it is only after a return on oneself that the subject re-appropriates that judgment to articulate it to the problems of his or her identity” (DEJOURS, 1993, p. 50).

transgression character tends to be erased, for it opposes the rules. From then on, autonomy must be part of the rule.

It seems that legalizing violations takes on a very particular sense for those who carry them out. While the violation is an act of transgression, of rupture, its legalization might mean loss of meaning since, when it is integrated to the rule, what used to be violation becomes order to be respected. For the worker, it is the move from an objective rationality characterized by the search for autonomy to an instrumental logic characterized by the logic of maximum economic efficiency. Dispossessed of a margin of freedom, workers lose real autonomy. Autonomy encouraged by bosses is equally rejected since, as soon as it results in something positive, it is destroyed as a margin for creation and innovation just to become an impersonal rule that is common to all. The search for autonomy as an institutional demand institutionalizes creation and spontaneity so as to increase the forms of control over workers' initiatives. The margins of maneuver denote the flexibility needed to execution schemes in order to find original and increasingly effective solutions. However, it must be stressed that such necessary autonomy does not entail simultaneously to more real freedom. There is a permanent process of search for autonomy and loss of that same autonomy.

G. Terzacc sustains that the passage from a universe of clandestine rules to one of formal explicit rules ultimately means a loss of autonomy. It is clear that the search for real autonomy is not necessarily located within the logic of immediate efficiency; it rather serves to reach the recognition of an identity and a contribution, and for self-realization. Autonomy is opposed to heteronomy and necessity, since the autonomy of an activity marked by necessity is doomed to remain formal. A. Gorz (1988) sustains that autonomous activities are the ones that are their own ends. In those, the subject undergoes the experience of his or her sovereignty and realizes him/herself as a person. Granted autonomy imposes a socialization characterized by the non-coincidence between individuals/subjects and their social being; now, such coincidence, from then on impossible, is at the origin of individual autonomy and of all cultural creation. Individuals are condemned to experiencing the duality of being themselves (*l'être-soi*) – because they need to be themselves – and at the same time to respond to social demands from work that demands “a way of being themselves” at work (*le devoir être*). In fact, such duality ends up partly preventing them from being themselves (*l'être-soi*).

According to J. P. Durand (2004), thought should be given to the fact that nowadays, those who have a formal job, even though they work a lot and/or more than in the past – whether because of workload or because of work hours – say they are satisfied with their work. The author coined the concept of “constrained implication” (*implication contrainte*) to account for that paradox: more implication is needed as well as more investment in the work if employees wish to keep it, but at the same time such investment has symbolic rewards as a result of the increase of autonomy at work, creativity, and the margin of initiative that are given to workers. We, in turn, refer to with the concept of granted autonomy to account for that same paradox (engaging with and joining the companies' aims *versus* obligation to engage) even though the author opposes the concept of achieved autonomy to that of granted autonomy. According to him, autonomy is achieved as it is appropriated by workers, thus providing self-organization and becoming necessary to guarantee that established aims are reached. However, we sustain that the achievement of granted autonomy favors adaptation and acceptance by workers of the new production standards, but it does not attenuate its character of imposition. The paradox that results from opposing the imposition of autonomy and its appropriation by some of the workers renews the phenomenon of alienation of waged labor. Together with symbolic rewards, alienation conditions are doubled by the masking of wage relations established by the granting of autonomy, which gathers the conditions of what the author calls a new voluntary servitude.

2. Is granted autonomy is a gain for workers?

If autonomy is a working method conceived for workers – and not by them, which nevertheless demands their subjective mobilization, can it mean gain for industrial workers? The issue is related to the role of labor in capitalist societies and the real possibilities to make labor autonomous, of appropriating and fighting heteronomy and alienation.

Speaking of granted autonomy means presenting autonomy as a gift: workers are once again in a position of objects rather than subjects. The separation between conception and realization – a separation valued by Taylorism – regards language, according to the thesis advocated by Zarifian (1996). In the model of Taylorism, workers are excluded twice: they are excluded from the language **about** the organization, i.e., the language that defines the organization and the methods of work; and from the language **within** the organization, given that workers should have no exchange among themselves or with the hierarchy. It is the organization that speaks of them through its planning and methods department, and even when there is an attempt to speak of them as people – psychology is increasingly introduced into the discourse about workers, in order to better understand them as subjects with their own desires and affections – nothing changes in terms of the fact that those who speak about them are not themselves, and that they remain as objects of discourse and never as subjects of enunciation. Following the author’s reasoning but applying it to our object, it is possible to assert that autonomy granted by the organization is once again a method, a way of working, conceived **by** the agents of the conception **for** workers. Excluded from production of their own autonomy, workers are totally prevented from reaching the status of subjects – subjects of language and subjects of the productive act. Legitimate language is that of the leadership over the working “subject”. Real autonomy, in turn, is that created by the constitution of subjects as subjects of the enunciation, which would mean a real change in their social status. At this point, workers leave the role of passive receptors in order to speak of themselves, their work, and their contribution to the organization. Therefore, granted autonomy does not break away from the model inherited from Taylorism for accessing language; only real autonomy would be able to propose a change in that model.

While a working team can be considered autonomous when they have a certain decision power – at least to decide on the best way to act to reach previously established aims – and institutional logic is characterized by strong reduction in individual autonomy, the practice of institutionalization of autonomy turns out to be paradoxical. Autonomy itself is already an order and integrates a series of norms that establish the best way to work to assure quality, cooperation, ISO 9000 certification rules, participation, teamwork, motivation, engagement, etc. New regulations are not the result of agreements or negotiation: they are granted. Autonomy is part of a new organization of labor that establishes a process of institutionalization where submission to the rule (and it preaches autonomy!) replaces the agreement between individuals involved.

If autonomy is institutional, and based on the hypothesis that pleasure and self-realization at work find themselves within the creative space located between the rule and the action, is it possible to conclude that such organization does not represent a gain for workers? On the one hand, preached autonomy and the enrichment of the context of work make it more pleasant (which would be a gain for workers); on the other hand, which meaning can be conferred to the suppression of that margin of real freedom for self-realization (and gain lacking there)? The transient pleasure of working with more “freedom”, of mastering the work and a higher amount of information is the only possible way to experience the deprivation of a real space for freedom. Hence the following finding: what is usually called “cultural change” within companies is actually liberalization of the labor situation allied to

complexification of tasks, in order to present it as a gain for workers (and perhaps it is), but without it meaning an identitarian gain at the level of self-realization. Cultural change, according to our empirical observations, might translate as the right to listen to radio while working, of saying what one thinks when asked, of being closer to the bosses, of having more information available, more autonomy, of using different and more complex working tools (including management tools) and working increasingly more in order to respond to that new demand.

However, is that space – of real creation and freedom – really canceled? Could we not assume, beyond that situation of granted autonomy and restrictions, the emergence and the creation of new modalities that allow preserving a certain freedom? If it is possible to acknowledge that there will always be actions that cannot be predicted and that different interpretations of those actions are legitimate, could we not assume the existence of a resistance to that organizational trend aimed at suppressing the unfulfilled space between rule and action - resistance able to develop new forms of relation to work, in order to preserve a certain margin of freedom and autonomy? And if that margin is not susceptible to arrive at self-realization, it can at least contribute to keep a status of subject through resistance. Liberalization means a climate of granted freedom and autonomy but it does not mean effectively more freedom. On the contrary, it entails an insecurity event by the loss of a real reference – concrete, non-granted autonomy – regarding which workers build their autonomy. Doing one's work, and doing it correctly, is no longer the result of an autonomous investment on it.

3. Appropriation of labor and social bond

The idea of autonomy at work is related to the notion of working as an expression of man and a site for creation. In societies based on labor, that labor is where individuals recognize themselves in their exteriority and to the eyes of others. Labor would be the means to intervene on nature and to position oneself in relation to the other. It would be able to reveal subjects to themselves and their peers; it would be the activity for development and fulfillment par excellence, of self-realization and social integration.

Labor as a social bond is based on the idea of reciprocity, of social contract, and social usefulness (MEDA, 1995). After an individual contribution, workers give a contribution that develops their sense of belonging as a result of its usefulness. For subjects, labor reveals themselves (what they are) and society, and is also able to change the world. However, as D. Méda sustains, labor is not the bearer of such functions itself – they can be assured by other systems and, besides, the meaning of labor has changed historically. While working is the discovery of oneself, the expression of individuality as belonging to the human gender, in capitalist societies – and that is Marx's argument – the aim of human labor is not the development of man, but rather his wealth. Labor in the capitalist industrial society is always already alienated since it becomes a mere *means* to guarantee existence. "Real labor is an abstraction deprived of content, whose objective is exterior to it." (MEDA, 1995:105).

Instead of *essential* activity, labor as a factor for production and generation of wealth is alienated labor. What makes it alienated is its end of serving accumulation of wealth, regardless of its content. The instrumental rationality that follows capitalism uses labor as a means to reach an end that has already been determined – wealth, and nowadays, competitiveness as well – the latter presenting itself as the exterior and permanent threat that is able to make the organization vanish – so that labor ends up being an end in itself, just as instrumental rationality that has "forgotten" why it has been instrumentalized.

Waged labor, more than any other, has a character of subordination, and labor can only mean fulfillment for those who can organize their own work in a sovereign way.

The core characteristic of waged labor, which radically distinguishes it from independent labor, is the subordination link between waged workers and their employer, which is an almost logical result from the work contract. Put differently, from the moment that human labor can be considered the object of business, such purchase results in the free disposition of what has been purchased, that is, its orientation, in the double sense of 'defining the objectives' and of 'guiding' (MEDA, 1995, p. 145).

The author criticizes the Marxist approach that saw the first reasons for which labor is alienated, namely, capitalist logic and subordination (workers must do what they are told to do, as they are told to do, in a previously determined organization), without realizing that those two reasons are ultimately explained by a third one: the desire for abundance or humanization, the basis of productivism. And that means that today's meaning of labor is always the imperative of efficiency and that any organization of labor will be governed by the sovereign principle of increasing wealth. That is why Marxist theory does not provide the means to think of a real change of meaning for labor: the belief in the development of productive forces prevents the understanding of how to make labor autonomous even with the appropriation of means of production by workers.

The issue to be explored would be, still according to the author, if an activity conceived from the exterior can be an expression of itself and of autonomy. How is it possible to reconcile subordination with autonomy and fulfillment? Is it possible to fight the heteronomy of labor? Is there creative and personalized labor in formal action? Is there any chance for creation and personal contribution in an act marked by exteriority? Does immaterial but complex labor, which demands increasing intellectual competencies, make labor more autonomous?

Méda sustains that it does not: labor becomes less degrading and demands new human abilities, but it would be abusive to say that it allows individual expression and autonomy. The author enunciates three objections to analyses that believe in the increase of autonomy: 1) in order for work to become our "oeuvre" and our "social mediator", it would be necessary to break away from its economic dimension; 2) while it is nearly impossible to work all day without employing something of oneself, the organization leaves little room for self-expression and when it does leave it, it is by accident (or because it is convenient, we would say). Anyway, real autonomy and real self-expression consist of "*giving oneself one's own law, establishing one's own goals and means to reach them*" (MEDA, 1995, p. 165); 3) the exaggeration of theories that think that all work has to be an "oeuvre", as though every act could be self-expression. That is, her criticism aims at the conception of working as an oeuvre (ARENDR, 1991) when in fact it is the highest expression of the logic of effectiveness.

According to our conception, while it is true that waged labor in capitalist organizations is not autonomous and does not allow real self-expression, it is also true that workers can always find some margin for creation and autonomy, if only to survive or subvert. Under such conditions, the work is not an "oeuvre" but we sustain that, in the world of labor, workers face themselves as well as the society they live in and that imposes its rules. Efficiency, which serves the organization more than the workers since it is inherent to productivism, can be a source for some self-realization, as long as it is possible to appropriate the work. Or yet, in criticism or in negativity, and even in conformity, there is the expression of refusal or lassitude. Degrading work can only be experienced under a psychic "void" that

allows one to stand suffering. Individual transgression consists of experiencing work as a space for confronting oneself and the rules that govern society.

At this point working can become a source for de-alienation. Somehow refusing – even though they keep working as though nothing were going on – or experiencing work in a position of withdrawal – even though it is not subjectively comfortable – might mean a contribution to self-realization and a transgression towards a work that can never become an “oeuvre”.

Besides, working contributes essentially to the social bond today, since it is the main form of organization of social time and the dominant social relation, and not because work is at the core of society, since that society has other aims than production and wealth.

Companies are not in charge of creating political communities, “*in order to favor the fulfillment of individuals there and allow them to exert their main abilities demanded by community life*” (MEDA, 1995, p. 187).

Labor, according to A. Gorz (1988), can no longer be at the basis of social integration, since the economy no longer needs everyone. It is no longer about a “society of labor”. Today the ideology of labor means motivating part of the labor force that cannot be easily replaced right now because of their own competencies and in controlling them ideologically when material control is not possible. How? By preserving the ethic of work in the labor force; by destroying the solidarities that could unite the less privileged; by inciting to work as much as possible to serve the interests of the collectivity and their own. Such functional integration to work prevents all cooperation; social integration becomes impossible without building common ends according to common criteria. The stable nucleus amongst workers would be an elite that gains with the re-organization of labor, as opposed to the precariousness of employment, the insecurity of others, unemployment, and lack of skills. According to the author, the success of that organization presupposes relations of trust and cooperation between those workers and the leadership of the company. Such cooperation should be the new source of social integration related only to a few workers. The elite includes workers of a new kind: they are able, within a multifunctional team, to operate an automated facility; they are able to take quick initiatives, to cooperate with their peers; they bear autonomy and sense of responsibility. The organization values those workers psychologically and socially. Our study on the processing industry, in turn, has verified that very small elite: they know they are an elite, but the members of that elite resent the prevailing insecurity, as well as their feeling like “winners” among so many “losers”. They do not feel really valued, but they at least maintain hope for the future. All workers – considering their distinct levels of implication in the work – seek to respond to the new demands without, however, enjoying a real counterpart contribution from the company. The motor of the work is not integration, but rather exclusion or de-affiliation, according to Castel’s concept (1995).

Out of the factory, the world of labor can be even more degrading, since even the most qualified workers with highly valued competencies experience the specter of precariousness of employment. And those workers, who were told they had a promising future, express some skepticism. Working ends up serving as integration and social bond not for what it offers, but rather because of the exclusion represented by not working. Working is the social bond by exclusion.

B. Perret (1988, p. 108) sustains that working confers formal legitimacy to citizens and contributes “to the quality of their effective participation in social life”. Based on Durkheim, the author demonstrates that working is a form of social cohesion if it fulfills two conditions: 1) the conditions of meaning, when working is part of a common oeuvre that goes beyond the worker’s individual horizon and its particular existence; 2) the condition of equity, which means that the place of each worker within the division of labor must be perceived by him or her as corresponding to his or her abilities. Labor plays an irreplaceable role in the process of

building self-image, and the cooperation resulting from integration through work engages the actor in a collective future. Working takes part in the construction of the social bond, since it founds people's social autonomy. For the author, human labor tends to specialize precisely because of its specificity in relation to machines. Put differently, it is its specifically human and therefore nobler character that serves as an irreplaceable competence, namely: 1) *“the ability to interpret information regarding the totality of the elements in the context; 2) “imagination, the ability to invent new worlds of unbelievable complexity”; 3) “the ability to establish communication and sympathy to one's peers, of achieving such rare and fragile resource: the trust of others”* (PERRET, 1988, p. 112). However, the author underscores that human labor will also remain in the “dark” zones of more efficient systems: there will always be “dirty” and manual work to be done, such as cleaning, unclogging, sweeping, getting into pipes, etc. Therefore, intelligent work is followed by uninteresting and sometimes strenuous work.

Nevertheless, such social bond promised by work has a double movement: one of integration – when emphasis falls on mobilization and engagement of workers – and precariousness – when it is about reducing costs and adjusting labor to the new demands of production. While working in companies integrates competent and motivated workers, that same company will reject those who are not productive enough and integrated to their project. Working does integrate; but it also excludes in the same proportion (PERRET, 1997).

According to Perret and Roustang (1993), productive activity for Marx represents transparency in the mediation between individuals and social totality. Industrial labor, while it is strenuous, is also at the origin of a sense of belonging – focused on the workplace and collective or class autonomy – to society. Class struggle would allow the weaker to join a powerful and recognized social group by constituting a professional identity, by cultural integration, and by participation in political life. However, increasing individualization establishes a functional solidarity where joining the company's project overcomes class solidarities.

The company says it increasingly recognizes and values workers' intelligence and qualities, at the expense of an exclusion of a growing number of them from the world of labor. *“Everything happens as though the most intensive exploration of human resources made socialization of the masses through the economic domain more difficult”* (PERRET & ROUSTANG, 1993, p. 77). The social domain also becomes exclusive.

A social context of increasing “abolition” of work-employment plays a crucial role on the progressive individualism seen in the world of labor. As sustained by A. Gorz (1997), the non-working that in post-Fordism could liberate individuals ended up turning against them to dispossess them and subjugate them. How? By abolishing work but keeping it as *“the basis of belonging and social rights, the mandatory way for esteem of oneself and others”* (GORZ, 1997, p. 16). In the post-Fordist company, according to the author, immediate production work is only the result of a material application of immaterial labor that presupposes reflection, the reconciliation of knowledges and observations, the exchange of information. When such process seemed to announce re-appropriation of labor by workers, its transformation into a good whose possession demands sacrifices and the transformation of employment into a privilege have culminated in subjection of the very person of the worker. Moreover, always according to the author, seeing autonomy at work – as prescribed by the post-Fordist company – as an exercise of workers' autonomy is a “theoristic delirium”:

Autonomy at work means little in the absence of cultural, moral and political autonomy that extends it and is not the result of productive cooperation itself, but rather of a militant activity and a culture of submission, rebellion, fraternity, free debate, radical questioning (that

which goes to the roots of things) and the dissidence it produces.
(GORZ, 1997, p. 72).

Within a context of high unemployment and precarization of labor, autonomy at work takes on a particular meaning: having an autonomous work – regardless of the gains it brings – seems to be secondary to simply having a job, what is to say that the demands placed by labor and its transformations impose a nearly unconditional adjustment, without really facing re-appropriation of work, which *a priori* would follow autonomy at work. Autonomy is granted and it necessarily implies neither more real freedom nor personal investment or re-appropriation of work.

Final remarks

Labor undergoes the contradiction between the eulogy of autonomy and an increasingly normalized organization of labor. Preached autonomy means “managing it” on one’s own when the prescribed work is not able to respond to the complexity of real work. But that work is not autonomous, it is rather controlled and it follows very strict rules. The autonomy proposed by the organization encourages creation just to integrate it to the norm. Therefore, there is a depossession of a creative act without a recognition mechanism that mediates creation and rule. Autonomy loses its identitarian power, since there is no return on oneself. It is alienating granted autonomy – a way to solve the contradiction between autonomy and norm. It is alienating autonomy precisely because of its weak identitarian potential given its contradictory. Therefore, for its demand for inclusion into an eminently exclusive universe, it confers workers a state of servitude – a voluntary servitude in the words of J. P. Durand (2004).

The concept of labor autonomy at work resorts to two points: 1) its functional, operational demands, which relate to organization of labor; 2) the search for self-assertion, for freedom, of realization, and which relates to its identitarian dimension. The granting of autonomy at work is a symbolic change in the organization of labor: the decision to grant autonomy is made at the level of men and production management, but its success depends upon workers-executors. The success of the organization of labor depends on the investment on the work of operators and their initiative to decide, chose, and influence the course of production, that is, it depends on immaterial work. The logic of evaluation according to competence, with its behavioral component, is the means to control how the margin granted to workers is used, so as to evaluate their loyalty and reliability to the employer. It means control and a guarantee of attitudes towards work, the organization and/or the employer (DURAND, 2004).

As subjects are mobilized to execute the work, it can be assumed *a priori* that workers “gain” with the enrichment of content and the nature of their work. Such gain can emerge through the liberalization of the work situation that replaces old, stiffer, and more authoritarian organizations. However, those changes are also based on economic rationality, despite the mainstream discourse that evokes social and/or subjective ends.

Granted autonomy evidences the margin of freedom and creation from which workers are deprived. The situation is seen under a paradoxical dimension: a permanent process of search for real autonomy by workers that finally find themselves deprived by the granting of a predefined autonomy. However, its paradoxical dimension goes even farther: while granted autonomy is a sort of pseudo-freedom, it is also symbolic enrichment of work through the increase in real autonomy, creativity, and initiative. The core issue, however, cannot be diluted within that paradox: the search for autonomy is located off the economic logic and

within a logic of values and achievement of meaning, while granted autonomy is based on an instrumental logic.

References

- ARENDT, Hannah. **A condição humana**. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 1991.
- CASTEL, Robert. **Les métamorphoses de la question sociale**. Paris: Fayard, 1995.
- DEJOURS, Christophe. Coopération et construction de l'identité en situation de travail. **Futur antérieur**, n. 16, p. 41-52, 1993.
- DEJOURS, Christophe. Analyse psychodynamique des situations de travail et sociologie du langage. In: BOUTET, Josiane (org.). **Paroles au travail**. Paris: l'Harmattan, 1995.
- DURAND, Jean-Pierre. **La chaîne invisible**. Paris: Seuil, 2004.
- FRIEDMANN, Georges. **O trabalho em migalhas**. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1972.
- GORZ, André. **Métamorphoses du travail et quête de sens**. Paris: Galilée, 1988.
- GORZ, André. **Misères du présent, Richesse du possible**. Paris: Galilée, 1997.
- MARTIN, Dominique. **Démocratie industrielle**. Paris: PUF, 1994.
- MEDA, Dominique. **Le travail, une valeur en voie de disparition**. Paris: Aubier, 1995.
- PERRET, Bernard. Fin de la valeur travail? **Esprit**, n.1, 1988.
- PERRET, Bernard. L'avenir du travail. In: BOISARD, Pierre *et al.* **Le travail, quel avenir?** Paris: Gallimard, 1997.
- PERRET, B. & ROUSTANG, G. **L'économie contre la société**. Paris: Seuil, 1993.
- REYNAUD, J.-D. **Les règles du jeu, l'action collective et la régulation sociale**. Paris: Armand Colin, 1993.
- ROSENFELD, Cinara L. **L'autonomie comme norme et le rapport au travail**; une étude comparative France-Brésil. Lille: ANRT, 2003a.
- ROSENFELD, Cinara L. Autonomia outorgada e relação com o trabalho: liberdade e resistência no trabalho na indústria de processo. **Revista Sociologias**, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Sociologia, IFCH/UFRGS, ano 5, n°10, p. 350-378, jul/dez 2003b.
- TERSSAC, Gilbert de. **Autonomie dans le travail**. Paris: PUF, 1992.
- ZARIFIAN, Philippe. **La nouvelle productivité**. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990.
- ZARIFIAN, Philippe. **Travail et communication**; essai sociologique sur le travail dans la grande entreprise industrielle. Paris: PUF, 1996.

ABSTRACT

This work is aimed at debating the meaning of *granted autonomy* as the organizational corollary of a subjective mobilization demand. Labor is undergoing the contradiction between the eulogy to autonomy and an increasing normalized labor organization, where being autonomous is the rule. The concept of labor autonomy resorts to two issues: the operational dimension and the identity dimension. The transformation of labor into a good whose possession demands sacrifices and the transformation of the job into a privilege culminate at subjection of the worker's very person, without really raising the issue of labor re-appropriation, which *a priori* follows labor autonomy. The core issue, however, cannot be diluted into this paradox between real autonomy and granted autonomy: the search for autonomy is placed out of the economic logic and within a logic of values and achievement of meaning, while granted autonomy is part of an instrumental logic.

Keywords: normalization of labor, granted autonomy, symbolic gains, instrumental logic.

*Translated by Roberto Cataldo Costa
Translation from Sociologias, n.12, Dez. 2004 p.202-227*