Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica 2019, 20(3): 11–24

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ECOautonomous work for "practicability of life": Experiences of work and production in different economy movements in Italy

I present, here, a study that pertains to the discussion about work and production in "different economies" (Solidarity Economy Networks, Solidarity Purchasing Groups, "Conflictual mutualism", Self-development Experimentation Centres, the Degrowth movement, etc.). These organisations have developed their own practices and values that have given rise to new ways of living, new models of work and a new sense of the "practicability of life" (Bertell 2016).

As workers move to jobs (or start their career in jobs) in these economic contexts, we see the emergence of new social practices, along with forms of critical consumption, and relationships based on principles of mutuality, solidarity, engagement with the land and the local area – all taking place in the context of a rejection of the prevailing neo-liberal model, and the aspiration to be free from the dominant system.

After a short introduction that touches on a number of key concepts relating to the principal values and dynamics that these different economies oppose, I discuss the results of a study conducted using a qualitative methodology based on case studies and Grounded Theory. Supported by the TiLT group,[2] I conducted this study in the Italian regions of Veneto and Sardinia, areas with significantly different histories and economic realities. The results reveal the ways that the experiences of workers in different economies (whom I have named "transition workers") have involved new types of organisation and forms of work that are marked by the pursuit of spaces of autonomy and opportunities for self-determination.

These ECOautonomous workers (another term generated through a Grounded Theory approach) find themselves in transition from a growth-based economic model to an ecological model based on an appreciation of the limited nature of resources. All over the world, we see movements that can be considered "rehearsals for the future". Research

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shows that experiences and communities of this type are becoming more widespread in Italy, but also in Europe and North America (Schor 2008, 2010).

From the study data, a core category has emerged (the "practicability of life") that is concerned with work (and workers) and their connection with *life*, rather than their role in the capitalist economy. These young people and adults – women, men and others – who have chosen to work in different economies talk in terms of life and not of profit. They relate to those they come into contact with as peers, and these relationships in turn generate non-hierarchical, and network-based forms of organisation.

I have described these workers as "ECOautonomous", a term that emerged from my own Grounded-Theory analysis (Bertell 2016). To me, it underlines their desire for freedom and their profound connection with the "zoe-sphere" (Braidotti 2013).

With their choice of life style (decreasing consumption) and ECOautonomous forms of work, they are building communities that have a "new dream" (Schor 2010), with new categories with which to talk about the future and which give new meaning to work, money, consumption, relations of power, and the conflict with modern forms of market and capitalism.

By doing so, they are succeeding in redefining the spaces and rhythms of life.

Key words: work in different and alternative economies, Degrowth, social movements, transition work

Introduction

In the second half of the last century, a number of academics were already concerned with the question of possible economic and ecological crises (Georgescu Roegen 1971, 2003; Illich 2005a, 2005b), highlighting the close relationship between the growth and infinite development that forms the foundation of the capitalist economic system, and the exploitation of nature, a resource they believed had not been taken sufficiently into consideration in traditional economic theory. The thesis forwarded by environmentalists, and others, of the "exhaustion of natural resources" has only been fully incorporated into economic analysis in recent years as the actual scarcity of certain resources (water, oil, farmland and much more besides) has demonstrated the pertinence what, in the twentieth century, was considered a marginal of a line of thinking. All around the world, from Europe to Asia and the Americas, new voices have begun to make themselves heard and new social practices and systems have emerged that aim to resist – and even battle – the capitalist system that sets the law of the market as the guiding principle for life (Hopkins 2005, 2008; Schor 2010; Sage 2012; Shiva 2002; De Vita 2009; Forno 2013). One example, in this regard, is provided by the conflictual practices of groups and movements united by the common principle of critical consumption as political action.

As Karl Polanyi affirmed, "What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man's institutions. To isolate it and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors (…). We might as well imagine [man] being born without hands and feet as carrying on his life without land. And yet to separate land from man and to organize society in such a way as to satisfy the requirements of a real-estate market was a vital part of the utopian concept of a market economy" (2001: 187). Polanyi's condemnation of the utopia of the market economy as an "economistic fallacy" is well known, as is the way that this utopian vision (interesting to think that even capitalism has one) led to a social model based exclusively on economic growth: a system guided, in theory, by the market's own process of self-regulation, and by the primacy of a market whose essential, horizontal relationships with politics and society are defined by their disconnectedness. As utopian visions go, this is a dehumanised example, decoupled from the living world in all its forms. Furthermore, in the last few decades, and with the global crisis, it has revealed its own fallaciousness, leaving us with a "utopia" that is itself in crisis, and has retreated behind the pervasive, violent mechanisms of capitalism.

Faced with this violence and pervasiveness, new forms of resistance have emerged, new ways of doing battle that consist in new kinds of everyday action capable of generating the modes and spaces of what we call, in our research, "different economies"[3]: wide-ranging workshops of social justice practice and – more so – actions (individual actions that become collective) for reclaiming spaces of autonomy and self-determination through alternative lifestyles (simple living) (Alexander, Ussher 2012; De Vita, Bertell 2018), critical consumption (Forno, Graziani 2014, 2016; Schor 2008) and ways of working that are in harmony with the living world (Bertell 2016, 2017; Gosetti 2017; Schor 2010). For the most part, these consist of a broad variety of experiences brought together under the umbrella of global social movements that aspire to effect a "break in the capitalistic pact with consumption" through the choice of alternative lifestyles (voluntary simplicity), consumption (conscientious and reduced purchasing) and working behaviours ("ECOautonomy" and "transition work").[4] Co-housing, eco-villages,

[3] The *Laboratorio TiLT* [*Territori in Libera Transizione* i.e. "Territories in Free Transition"] – an interdisciplinary group set up by the University of Verona to research new forms and practices of citizenship – arrived at the term "different economies" [in Italian: *economie diverse*] following an initial study of alternative economies published in: (Bertell, Deriu, De Vita, Gosetti 2013). The concept is covered in greater detail in the latter section of this paper. The concept of the "different economy" is discussed in similar terms in J.K. Gibson-Graham's 2006 volume, *A Postcapitalist Politics*.

[4] As we shall see below, the concepts of "ECOautonomy" (in Italian: Econoautonomia) and "transition work" emerged from an empirical study conducted in Italy with workers engaged in production within the different-economy sectors of the Veneto region and Sardinia (Bertell 2016), as we shall see below.

transition towns, time banking, show fashion, urban agriculture, small-scale organic producers, self-managed local markets, *gruppi di acquisto solidale* (an Italian form of responsible purchasing group), recycling workshops, bicycle repair cooperatives, craft workshops: all examples of critical forms of consumption and production in which it is not only the price and quality of the product that matter, but also the producer's methods and conduct, and the environmental and social sustainability of the production chain (Forno, Graziano 2016; Deriu, Domenighini 2016; Bertell *et al.* 2017).

There are two issues here that require particular attention: the first is the fundamental question of what I have described as a "break in the capitalistic pact with consumption"; the second concerns the need to understand that "different economies" is not synonymous with "non-profit".

It is in the rupture in the pact with consumption that these new activities break with the movements witnessed in the last century, such as the cooperative movement and mutualism, which also sought to open up spaces of resistance. The "different economy" exhibits different traits from 19th and 20th-century efforts to combat the capitalist model, albeit there is some overlap. Non-profit status (a distinguishing feature of cooperatives and social enterprises) is not enough, in itself, to put a production or work enterprise (social or otherwise) in conflict with the capitalist philosophy of profit. For the most part, today's cooperatives are dependent on the market or the state, winning contracts, whether directly or through tender, by offering the lowest price for the job. Where, at one time, the member of a cooperative would be a conscious participant in a non-hierarchical, democratic form of production ("one man, one vote" they used to say), today the cooperative model means working as part of the vast third-party market that has developed in both the private and public sectors over the last 15–20 years with the practice of outsourcing elements of services and production. This is not to say that there cannot be cooperatives that remain true to the spirit of solidarity and mutualism, or that enterprises in different economies cannot adopt a cooperative or association model. However, it should be clear that when we talk of non-profits/cooperatives, on the one hand, and different economies on the other, we are talking about different things. In a sense, the difference lies in the way the different economy model overcomes the ethic of "work as a means to an end", replacing it with a "convivial" ethic of work, to borrow from Illich (2005; see also Bertell 2016).

What does this mean? In offering an answer, I borrow the four-part typology used by sociologist of work Michele La Rosa (La Rosa 2002) to elucidate the different possible ethics of work:

- the all-encompassing ethic, with working conditions that are largely stable, localised and connected with basic necessities;

- "work as means", typified by a two-way bond between income and consumption;
- an emancipatory ethic, which offers the pursuit of the meaning of work;
- and finally, a contingent ethic of work, which is rooted in the present with no idea of the future.

It seems clear that the advanced capitalist model, in particular, is based on the ethic of work-as-means whereby the cycle of work-pay-consume has shaped the existential and cultural symbolism of recent generations, and guided the shift in our identity from that of "worker" to that of "consumer". As the American sociologist Juliet Schor suggests, "The first [significant development in American consumer society in the last decade] is the 'work and spend' culture. This is the idea that work productivity growth gets channelled not into shorter hours of work, but into incomes; and those incomes then get spent. Now, there has been a significant change in that culture" (Schor 2008: 588). This same creed of work as a means, or instrument, doubly binds the figure of the worker to that of the consumer, with results that are clear for all to see: where once it was social class that divided society, today it is access to consumption (Codeluppi, Paltrinieri 2010). And it is this vicious cycle of work-pay-consume that, heedless to the cost to the planet, fuels economic growth through the symbolic, cultural and material despoilment of humans and the natural world alike.

With the widespread emergence of social forms that challenge the appropriative dynamics of capitalism through new practices of work and production, we can begin to talk in terms of a transition towards a convivial, vernacular ethics of work. Writing in the last century, Illich was one of the most vocal critics of the commoditisation of life. His challenge, which has been taken up – albeit unconsciously in many cases – by the various actors of the different economies, is concerned with the transition from an heteronomous to an autonomous model of life and work. Illich was interested in understanding the limits that needed to be set on both capitalist development and the work-consumption mechanism: "Wherever the shadow of economic growth might fall, if we do not have a job, or if we are not engaged in consuming, we are rendered useless" (Illich 2005b). The ethics of work in different economies is an ethics in transition, from working for the purposes of consumption to working in the interest of a convivial society, "a society in which the modern tool can be used by the person who is integrated with the collective (…)" (Illich 2005a: 15). The workers who seek to set up new enterprises based on these principles are opening a new existential and political front in the war against modern capitalism's capacity for material and symbolic expropriation. The proposed "shift towards a convivial society, is made in the full awareness that it implies removing economics and work from the position of actual and symbolic supremacy, and greatest value, to which the capitalist system has appointed them"

(Bertell 2016: 68) – which is to say, it implies separating them from consumption. As such, a form of work based on an ethics of conviviality makes a natural partner to the choice of a simpler life and a reduction of purchasing (critical consumption). "A convivial society is one that offers men the opportunity to exercise the most autonomous and creative activity, using tools that are as little controlled by others as possible. Productivity is expressed in terms of 'having', conviviality in terms of 'being'" (Illich 2005a: 42).[5]

If the ethics of conviviality is articulated in terms of *being* convivial, the individual's own tempos and relationships, and nature itself, can assume a new and different role in the processes of work and production. The margins between work and life can fall back into harmony with nature (staring with an understanding of seasonal cycles). If the market economy knows no limits, it follows that it knows no borders. It is omnivorous, all-pervasive. Different econmies, meanwhile, tend to set limits, to be localised, to choose specific sources of nourishment. If the former turns our work and lives into commodities, the latter uses work to create use value; it refocuses attention on the utility of a thing. And where the former is compelled to expropriate, to accumulate, the latter is measured and considerate of – if not designed around – the requirements of nature.

At this point, I think it is interesting to consider, in relation to these issues, the concept of "accumulation by dispossession" with which David Harvey[6] builds on the Marxist model of primitive accumulation, or rather the mechanisms by which capital expands its own arena of reproduction.

In a seminar in Italy in 2014,[7] Harvey posited that the practice of accumulation by dispossession was a cornerstone of capitalism, and that its importance had grown over the last 35 years to the point that it had become central to capitalism's development (and to mind, to its very survival). Harvey uses this concept to outline the way the dominant economic system enacts strategies to restart the process of accumulation. In his writing, with *The New Imperialism* (2003) and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) in particular, he focuses on the capitalist practices of accumulation by means of the expropriation and privatisation of common assets, and the impoverishment of universal welfare systems and union rights. "These [practices] include the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations (…); conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights (…); suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption;

[5] My translation.

[6] Harvey's intense dialogue with Marx's texts is fascinating.

[7] David Harvey, speaking at the seminar "A proposito del capitalismo estrattivo" at the *Auditorium Urbani* in Passignano sul Trasimeno (Province of Perugia), 18 September 2014.

colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade (which continues particularly in the sex industry); and usury, the national debt and, most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical means of accumulation by dispossession" (2005: 159). Properly understanding these processes of "accumulation by dispossession" may offer a path to comprehending just how, in this civilised age of hard-won rights, we allow them, day by day, to be expropriated. However, it would be equally invaluable for those who are interested not only in studying this change, but also in promoting the increasingly widespread processes of reharmonisation and the pursuit of beauty. As we shall see, the work practices and production processes introduced in the context of different economies are indicative of a movement that aims to escape the appropriative modalities of the dominant system and, at the same time, to create spaces for a more ecologically-connected autonomy and different ways of using time, space, the soil, relationships (Pasquinelli 2014).

Different and alternative economies: More than critical consumption…

> The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.
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> Italo Calvino, *Invisible cities*

In 2009, the *TiLT*[8] interdisciplinary research group began a series of studies which reported a number of new citizenship practices in urban and rural contexts that were effectively serving as vehicles for innovation and social creation (De Vita 2009). After an initial study designed to distinguish the commonalities and links between the groups and individuals that formed part of networks of critical consumption and production – the results of which were published in the volume *Davide e Golia. La primavera delle economie diverse* (2013) – we decided to concentrate on the various dimensions of work, considering new and emergent work

[8] TiLT/Territori in Libera Transizione ("Territories in free transition") – an inter-university research group based at the Dept. of Human Sciences at the University of Verona that was set up to study new forms of citizenship (Federica de Cordova, Marco Deriu, Antonia De Vita, Francesca Forno, Giorgio Gosetti, Caterina Martinelli and me). Since 2009, it has conducted research with a number of local and national partners (tilt@ateneo.univr.it).

and production practices and organisational forms. This led to two, ultimately interlocking studies.

It was in the volume *Davide e Golia* [i.e. "David and Goliath"] that we arrived at *economie diverse* ["different economies"] as our preferred term for the vast area that, in Italian, tends to be called *l'Altra Economia* [the "Other Economy"]. It was only subsequently that we discovered that, a number of years earlier, the academics Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham had arrived at much the same expression (albeit in the singular) in their attempt to coin a new terminology: "Our intervention is to propose a language of the *diverse economy* as an exploratory thinking practice, a weak theory of economy. This language expands our economic vocabulary, widening the identity of the economy to include all of those practices excluded or marginalized by a strong theory of capitalism" (2006).

What we encountered when we interviewed members of the *Gruppi di acquisto solidale*[9] of Nuoro, Verona, Parma and the *Centro sperimentazione autosviluppo*[10] "Domus Amigas" of the Iglesiente area of Sardinia, as well as small-scale producers from their respective networks, was not so much experiences of an "other" economy – in the sense of a stark, binary alternative – as what came across as workshops for practices in a state of "transition"[11] from a capitalist model to a new, emergent, model founded on a principle of respect for life.

[9] The first of the *Gruppi di acquisto solidale* ["solidarity purchasing groups"] was established in Fidenza, Italy in 1994. Arising spontaneously, groups spread rapidly across the whole of Italy. Following a principle of critical consumption, they seek to apply the values of equity, social justice, solidarity (e.g. with producers) and environmental sustainability to practices of purchasing. The groups typically count a few dozen family units, who organise their purchasing on the basis of prioritising local producers, supporting political causes, and favouring certain methods of production (e.g. organic) and contractual arrangements (Forno, Graziano 2014).

[10] The *Centri di Sperimentazione Autosviluppo* (literally "centres for experimentation in self-development") or CSA, are local workshops established (as the name suggests) to explore practices of self-development. The *Centro* included the study is based in Sardinia, together with Sicily one of Italy's two large, island regions. It was set up in the former province of Carbonia-Iglesias, an area that grew up around a number of key mining centres only to risk drastic depopulation when the mining sector fell into crisis and the mines began to close at the end of the last century. Faced with this prospect, a group of women, who were involved in environmentalist and pacifist movements, began to ask themselves if there was anything they could do by their own efforts. Today, the CSA Domus Amigas is a network community, including women and men, that provides a range of services and products including tourist accommodation, connections with small-scale, local producers, immigrant reception services, sustainable architecture and construction, artisan crafts and products, cultural services and education on alternative lifestyles and new forms of citizenship and economics. The address for their website is given below, although it fails to fully communicate the importance of the work they do. Domus Amigas is currently engaged in fighting the introduction of a weapons factory. Although it is claimed the factory will provide much-needed jobs, the CSA has proposed an alternative model for the area's development (www.domusamigas.it).

[11] "Transition" is a key concept in the TiLT group's work. Indeed, this year TiLT and the Dept. of Human Sciences at the University of Verona are running a Master's degree course titled "Knowledge in Transition. Education for environmental sustainability and active global citizenship".

In Italy, the (initially) grass roots practices and experiences of engaged groups and individuals, who – starting with themselves and their own lives – enact new and different relationships with the world and its systems of governance are given names such as *altra economia* (other economy), or *economia solidale*, *economia di giustizia*, *economia dei beni comuni* (respectively "economies of": "solidarity", "justice", "the commons"). Thus, in the 1990s, Italy saw the birth of the *Bilanci di Giustizia* campaign[12] whose slogan was "if the economy kills then change is needed". The campaign was driven by groups of women and men (often couples and family units) who, in aiming to challenge the globalisation and – as they saw it – injustice of the economy, began to work at a local level and on changing themselves, starting with their own lifestyles and consumer behaviours. The same period also saw the creation of *Gruppi di acquisto solidale*, which established direct relationships with small, local organic producers or production set-ups that offered an alternative to mainstream models. With time, other groups and structures would emerge, from *economia solidale* networks and groups linked to the Degrowth movement, to more recent movements like the *Economia dei beni comuni*, *Fuori mercato* and *Genuino clandestino*, not to mention transition towns and ecovillages, to cite just the Italian manifestations (albeit some of them are part of international networks).

Our choice of the adjective "different" [*diverse* in Italian], rather than "other" [*altre*] to describe these experiences arose from a consideration of how to move beyond a binary conception that would be prey to simplistic labels and ideologies. However, we did not wish to overstate the case for this preference. After all, the sense that one is somehow "other" than the identity attributed by the capitalist system is often an important motivation in the choice to pursue a life in harmony with the natural world or an ECOautonomous approach to work and production. As Federica de Cordova has suggested, we wanted to coin an "umbrella term (…) that would highlight the shift intimated by certain forms of experimentation in relation to the essentially neo-liberal system of production and consumption" (2017: 27).

Inherent to the expression "different economies" is the image of cells activating themselves in ways that are different to the dictates of the surrounding structure, but that are also different from one another, for all that they retain a number of common traits such as the drive to be at one with nature, mutualistic forms of relationship, a sense of participation, the powerful and (as we shall see) existential longing for self-activation, self-determination and self-management. Enacting a self-managed form of production does not, by itself, create a new market. Rather, it gives rise to varied forms – depending on location, local cultures,

[12] A difficult title to translate, but roughly "household budgets for justice".

gender, natural context – of production, exchange, relationships, organisation and/or economy, which still have to interact with the dominant system. We are not talking about a movement of hermits who live on a mountaintop and live off whatever they manage to produce themselves. In his introduction to Andrè Gorz's *Ecologia e libertà* (2015) – the recent Italian edition of Écologie *et liberté* – Emanuele Leonardi highlights Gorz's notion of self-management as the recovery of a creative capacity that had been subsumed by capitalism and atrophied by the state. In Gorz, we do not find a rejection of the historical dynamic so much as a reorientation of it in favour of the convivial society: "In short, self-management presupposes tools capable of being self-managed. The creation of these tools is technically feasible. It is not a question of reverting to cottage industry, to the village economy, or the Middle Ages, but of subordinating industrial technologies to the continuing extension of individual and collective autonomy, instead of subordinating this autonomy to the continuing extension of industrial technologies" (Gorz 2016: 72). As Leonardi correctly suggests, in this affermation there is also a criticism of the European trade union movement, which – even today – is more concerned with the question of wages (i.e. with the distribution of value) than with the contents of production, which is to say the qualitative definition of that which is to be produced and the reasons for its production.

This leads us also to consider the practices of transition put in place by ECO-autonomous workers as they distance themselves from the expropriatory capitalist model, and seek, instead, to set out a convivial system of the future. We have labelled the examples we have encountered in our own research, and in those of many other researchers around the world, "rehearsals for the future". At this point in history, both academic and militant forms of research have a huge responsibility: that of gathering, naming, mapping and critiquing – with due academic rigour – experiences of transition from a paradigm of economic development to new paradigms of ecology and conviviality.

Using grounded theory to study new forms of work and production

Following a joint project by the TiLT group that used a case study methodology, I set up an additional study that – although a qualitative study, like the group project – was based on Grounded Theory (GT) (Charmaz 2006; Glaser, Tarozzi 2007). I adopted this approach with some enthusiasm because, like the choice of research questions and selection of whom to involve, in Grounded Theory the interpretations emerge from the mouths of the participants themselves, and are (indeed) grounded in the observed phenomena. I conducted 25 interviews with

women and men from the Veneto region and Sardinia who had chosen a variety of jobs and professions within the orbit of "different economies": an artisan bicycle maker, an organic or biodynamic farmer, a libertarian educator, a practitioner of "critical" medicine, a vegetarian cook, a producer of plant-based sponges, a saffron producer, a baker, an independent bookshop owner, a member of a social farming cooperative, and so on. These interviews allowed me to home in on the categories that might populate a new theoretical framework (specific to the context studied) and at the same time (as GT allows), to outline the process that these people have initiated with their choice of non-mainstream work/production. Subsequently, I was able to consolidate the analysis of these interviews with a number of other narratives.[13]

"Picture a pyramid whose base is formed from hundreds of words or phrases taken from the interviews. As we climb the steps, these are grouped into homogenous concepts, which in turn are grouped into categories, and so on, until further up we reach the Core Category" (Bertell 2016: 117). What emerges at this point is a sort of essence of what I term "ECOautonomous work", the work of people who – abandoning the dichotomy offered by the system – are experimenting with practices through which they can begin to outline a different model, to which they may choose to cross over. I have labelled the emergent concept the "practicability of life", largely because I found that rather than talk in terms of economics, the protagonists of these stories would speak to me of everyday life practices that were in harmony with nature. The categories of this "practicability of life" correspond to four features or qualities that were particularly prominent in the accounts: 1) a decentralised income (not at the top of the scale of need), typically a modest income and frequently from multiple sources and diverse work activities; 2) remuneration in the form of material exchanges between producers, but also rewards that reflect the consumer's tangible recognition of the value of the product or service; 3) relationships of utility (but not utilitarian), formed from a common vision of the future, from assistance with the work or production process (including help from the consumers themselves, who in these cases are recognised as "co-producers"); relationships that create a local context and community, relationships that form the basis for new forms of organisation, and informal norms and procedures; 4) and last, but certainly not least, the category that makes the others possible and that is inextricably interwoven with them: a life lived simply, and with little, in order that capitalist pact with consumption be broken.

In terms of the processes set in motion by these workers, there is one result that struck me as being particularly significant: what motivates these (often young) people (in large numbers) to change to (or begin their career with) a job in this

[13] For processing and analysing the data, I used NVivo 10, a qualitative analysis programme that is frequently used with the Grounded-Theory methodology.

field is the insatiable, existential pursuit of self-determination. The factors that had emerged in many previous studies included values such as solidarity, justice, equity and concern for the environment; yet throughout the accounts collected, the question of autonomy proved to be the principal driver – the fuel, even – for the creation of new dimensions of life and work that are bound up tightly with a desire to learn. I have called this the "discovery of freedom", and believe it is important that we make this idea heard and continue researching this question of autonomy as self-expression. In the words of Dominique Méda, if we want our jobs to be our life's work, and our work to become the prime media of our society, we have to break with its essential economic dimension. We have to abandon the infinite pursuit of abundance and efficacy, and thus, our subordination (1997).

Transition work: On the trail of a different way to work

The experiences of ECOautonomous workers teach us that what makes these people unique is the way they assign new meaning to work as a basic factor in our lives that is connected with other human lives and universes. These workers have clearly chosen a path that steers away from the idea of work perpetuated in the modern collective consciousness. They have avoided the "work as means" ethic, in which employment serves primarily – and at times almost exclusively – to generate income and consumption. "Instead, work is a personal need (…) and answers, foremost, to the interior need that work activities – along with the rest of life – be in harmony with our choice of a lifestyle that respects animal life and the environment, and is responsive to issues of social justice. Commitment to a new way of living, combined with the distress inherent in the rejection of a world that treats us as vehicles for some other purpose, pushes us to find alternative, tangible paths to well-being that move beyond ideological militancy" (Bertell: 114–115). It is here that we find the actual and symbolic shift from the concept of "the sustainability of work" to the principle of "the practicability of life". ECOautonomous workers are not seeking the sustainability of work and enterprise as it is presented in the dominant capitalist model, where earnings, profit and economic growth remain at the heart of the whole endeavour. Instead, they – and the forms and styles they adopt in their existentially-directed working practices – constitute a tangible example of the theory of "transition work", where "transition" indicates a shift from a model of production based on economic growth and consumption to one informed by the principles of "starting with ourselves" and "taking the side of life". Indeed, the main reasons why these ECOautonomous workers pursue a change in their lives/work are related more to a compelling need to find a space of autonomy outside the dominant capitalist system – which forces us into the role

of consumer – and to give expression to a profound ecological sensibility, which emerges as an ability to recreate a network of relationships between the worlds of humanity and nature. "What I am talking about is a shift from 'sustainable work/enterprise' to 'practicable work/production' in the sense of forms of work developed through living practices that are consistent with the harmony of living beings in a zoocentric order. (…) 'Transition work' in other words: a transition that shifts us away from the current way of being towards a form of everyday resistance to the subsumption and homoeostatic re-signification effected by the dominant system. This can be brought about, to some extent, by achieving a 'practicability of life', and consequently a 'practicality of work', through everyday actions performed with a certain kind of autonomy – in which individuals put what they believe into action, from the ground up, starting with the fact that they are part of a wider, living world – ECOautonomy" (Bertell: 122–123).

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