

Conference IN SEARCH OF THE LOST MEANING OF WORK

The job market finds itself today in a historically unprecedented situation where unemployment is at its minimum. The traditional roles of the employee and the employer are shifting: it is not the case anymore that people have to look for work, but work now has to look for people. Thanks to this, the question, whose solution is becoming more urgent and more important than ever before, arises: what is the meaning of work?

While the laws of profit and production efficiency remain the staple of the market, many industries are undergoing changes in the domains of work organization, employer-employee relationships, as well as the management of the means of production. At the threshold of the 2020's, new business models are emerging that are placing top priority not on profit, but on personal well-being, self-realization, motivation, freedom, and meaningfulness.

The history of capitalism has been driven by the push for ever-higher profits. The meaning of work itself, however, seems to have been drowned out by this pursuit. Today, the situation is changing with society successfully transitioning into the phase of knowledge economy, and, facing an unfulfillable demand for professional employees, seems to be putting an increasingly large emphasis on the meaningfulness of work itself. In other words: people living in the Western world today can afford to want not just to work, but to work meaningfully.

If a pin is wholly made by a single worker, production efficiency will never be higher than if the process of making the pin is divided into separate parts and each part is realized by a different, specialized worker. There is, however, one significant difference between these two modes of production: the worker who makes the whole pin will care about the finished product.

The anthropology of Karl Marx establishes man as a species being that creates itself in the process of work. The alienation of man from both society and from himself is then the result of the so-called estranged work, a specific accompanying phenomenon of the capitalist structure of production, in which the worker loses the products of his or her labour, and his or her being is degraded to that of an expendable work tool. The economic models of the past decades are changing rapidly, however. The questions thus are: how do the phenomena of alienation and the emancipation of man manifest themselves in contemporary managerial methods of work organization and the management of means of production? Is the search for happiness in work a path to the emancipation of man? Are today's top business managers really making efforts to give back to the employees the products of their work? Is it true that "human resources" are becoming "human relations"? And do these phenomena enable the return of man to his nature as a species being? Or is all this just another example of a more skilfully masked false consciousness?

The aim of the conference In Search for the Lost Meaning of Work is to summarize and present the results of contemporary Czech and Slovak academic research in the domain of alienation and emancipation of man with a specific emphasis on the conceptualization of these terms in their anthropological and humanistic meanings. For the first time in the history of Czech academia, the conference will offer a space for discussion between two seemingly distant viewpoints on the topic. The goal is to initiate a dialogue between the world of contemporary practical management and Marxist anthropology, and also to create a platform for mutual interconnection of academic research with professionals working as business owners, corporate managers, HR specialists, or business coaches.

The conference is expecting interdisciplinary contributions from the academic public in the sphere of humanities and from the community of experts in the domain of applied management. The output of the conference will be, apart from the conference itself, the publication of peer-reviewed articles in a special issue of an academic journal, or in a self-published compilation.

The conference will take place from 24th to 25th October 2019 in the Prague Creative Centre in Prague. The conference is under the patronage of the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague and the Society for Philosophical Anthropology.

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ABSTRACT