On paternalism: A brief critique of a too doctrinal and culturalistic approach

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Response to A. Villéger's article, "From paternalism to 'patronhumanism'".

Amélie Villéger's article "From paternalism to 'patronhumanism'" examines the history of labor relations in France from the angle of paternalism. According to it, the values (mainly coming from Catholicism) of French employers explain this history. This thesis draws, in a way, on Weber: "*Writing about the 'spirit of capitalism', Weber (1905) pointed to the need to associate ethical justifications with economic activities.*" Weber does talk about a "*spirit of capitalism*", relating it to the values of Protestantism; but the core of his analysis (of writings by Benjamin Franklin) is not, in fact, "*the need to associate ethical justifications with economic activities*".[1]

Despite its interesting contents, this article can, in my opinion, be criticized for what it does not contain. This is a matter neither of a lack of space (as is always the case for published articles) nor of the choice of a particular perspective (a choice that is the academic's prerogative and duty). The problem is epistemological, namely, the risk of circularity (DUMEZ 2013). According to Popper, who clearly identified this, almost any theory can be said to fit some facts. Or, in Thomas Jefferson's (1829) words: "*The moment a person forms a theory, his imagination sees, in every object, only the traits which favor that theory.*" If the intention is to demonstrate that paternalism is a trend to be interpreted as the attempt to improve the condition of workers due to Catholic values, research will turn up documents for backing this argument. And this has been done: the author has found discourses and accounts that tend in that direction. What is problematic are the many other facts that have been omitted, facts from economic history and the history of doctrines, which a comparative perspective, even a minimal one, should have reported.

As for doctrines, this focus on Catholicism has overlooked the importance of Protestant business circles in France's industrial development during the 19th century and their part in changing mentalities (about child labor, for instance). The author has also overlooked Saint-Simonianism and its key role in the history of French society and industry. Is it possible to talk about the paternalism of business circles in France without mentioning either Protestantism (The reference to Weber should have suggested this orientation) or Saint-Simonianism?

As for economic history, the article does not start from the development of industry. It is necessary to recall Joshua Freeman's work (2018). In the 18th century, mills were built along waterways or near deposits of raw materials. They were not usually near labor basins. Means of transport were barely existed, and workers could not spend twelve hours a day at the mill while dwelling so far away. Mills were thus forced to provide housing. Initially, the workers were children and women, or peasants who were not used to regular work and very easily quit. So, the "bosses" had to organize living conditions: housing, curfews, and leisure activities to fight against alcoholism and gambling. This occurred in England, France, Germany and the United States, in Catholic as well as Protestant lands. Values were a minor factor. The emergence of mills and factories in all countries required that the employer organize the living conditions for his workforce. In fact, exactly the same pattern can be observed in the former Soviet bloc, where factories managed housing, schools and leisure activities. Likewise, in contemporary China, giant factories have spawned cities that provide housing accommodations, centers for leisure activities and hospitals, and exercise a moral control over workers' lives. Chinese dormitories for workers do not have WiFi installed so that workers have a good night's sleep and be in shape to work in the morning. This is a far cry from social Catholicism.

[1] This article, including quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France).

Without being a certified Marxist, I do not think that paternalism can be analyzed without paying attention to the concrete, material conditions of production. If contemporary firms open daycare centers, this has nothing to do with paternalism (despite any proclamation of values of that sort). It is an effort to solve concrete problems that impinge on the organization of work. To understand this, we should move beyond discourses and values, and focus on the concrete conditions of economic production. This provides a transition toward my third point.

A comparative approach is, in my opinion, indispensable for this analysis. Throughout the 19th century, personnel turnover was the major problem in all factories. Skilled workers changed their place of work to acquire new skills (a phenomenon clearly described by Zola); and unskilled workers left to see their family, because they fell out with the foreman or wanted to take time off despite the boss's refusal. In 1913, when Ford introduced a revolution in production with assembly lines, the turnover rate in the factory making the Model T rose to 370%. To fill 14,000 work stations, 52,000 hires per year had to be made! So, Ford shortened worktime (to eight hours per day six days a week) and doubled wages. Measures of this sort can be interpreted as the cost of paternalism, which is what the author has done while discussing the situation in France. However the intent of such measures was to bring under control the much high cost of labor turnover. To benefit from working conditions at Ford, workers had to be married, productive on the job, and known to be sober. A "sociological department" was set up to train the personnel for verifying whether these criteria were met and to select workers accordingly. In Gramsci's words, "*the American industrialist is preoccupied with maintaining the continuity of the worker's physical efficiency, of his muscular and nervous efficiency. It is in his interest to have stable manpower, always in shape, because the firm's whole workforce (the collective worker) is a machine that must not too often be taken apart or have its parts replaced lest enormous costs ensue*" (*Cahier 5*, "Américanisme and fordisme", 1934, quoted in DUMEZ 2018). Despite Ford's well-known religious convictions, the major problem he faced, a problem exacerbated by the assembly line, was the same as the problem faced by all heads of industrial firms during the 19th and 20th centuries. Even in Soviet factories in Russia, the peasant workforce had to be disciplined and retained after having been transplanted into a world that was new to them and hard to live. The solutions adopted to solve this problem resemble those that Villéger has described in the specific cultural context of France as paternalism, namely: housing, training, libraries, leisure activities, company stores with low-cost wares.

A clarification: this critique does not at all intend to state that values and discourses are of no importance when analyzing managerial phenomena, nor to affirm that social Catholicism played no role in France. Instead, my argument is that these discourses must be situated in relation to the concrete situations with which management had to deal, that they have to be analyzed as "language games" in the sense of Wittgenstein. In other words, what is to be analyzed is not the discourses as such but the way in which actions are "*woven*" into language (Wittgenstein 2004, §7); and the perspective to adopt should definitely be comparative. From a methodological viewpoint, the intent is to spare ourselves the risk of circularity, lest our theoretical perspective be skewed and the explanation given of a phenomenon (in this article, paternalism) come to be unraveled.

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