

## Reseñas de publicaciones

### *Desire, utility and virtue: formation of modern work idea*

Fernando Díez. 2001. Península, Barcelona., pp. 303, CCCIII.  
ISBN 84-8307-329-3

**Maximiliano Korstanje**  
mkorst@palermo.edu.

The following review is intended to discuss in detail a book authored by Fernando Díez relating to the formation of the modern thought about work and luxury. Published initially in the year 2001 by Editorial Península, this work focuses on the inception of natural economy and wealthy distribution in nation states. From an historical perspective, Díez creates a conceptual frame between mercantilism and illustration. Albeit we are aware about the limitation to review a text 8 years older than standardized reviews, but since in philosophical literature the attention given to the history of economy is low, we think that our efforts are worth. In recent years, many scholars in tourism academy referred to tourism as an expression of leisure and luxury but the reminiscences of both phenomena in these studies still remain under-explored. Anyone who entered in the field work at a hotel will realize tourism is invested by luxurious and golden decoration at rooms and other parts of establishment. Luxury of course represents for tourism a valuable ally to emulate the “lost paradise”.

Basically, popular wisdom valorizes the idea that tourism in industrialized societies often is associated with luxury and status tourists emulate. It is not surprising that architectonic buildings in this industry are

endowed with decoration that highlights a high level of purchasing power or consumption. Under such a circumstance, many scholars argued that tourism contrasts more and more in tourist-generating and tourist-receiving countries. By the way, economic imbalances are one of more important factors to keep in mind how conflicts between hosts and guests surface.

Divided only in five chapters, *Desire, Utility and Virtue* emphasizes that modern idea of work is enrooted in the belief what people accomplish had a reward or punishment in this life. That way, in a world characterized by religiosity medieval thought encourages that austerity and work transformed in vehicles towards the virtue. On the introductory chapter, author describes as to how the conformation of work comes from Mercantilist tradition in hands of scholars such as A. Muñoz and Genovesi. In regards to this issue, Díez contends that productive work as known today was a construal surged a mid of centuries XVI and XVII respectively. It is fundamental to know how political discourse and economy have historically converged in the discourse of humanism. The wealth of nations was considered the only pathway to denote the boundaries between a civilized or uncivilized society. In foregrounding, development was a term associated to rich-

ness as well as poverty to laziness (Díez, 2001:28).

The possibility to satisfy human necessities regarding the value of goods was one of the remarkable formulas that mercantilism encouraged in Europe. For that instance, professions played a pivotal role in the social imaginary and also they were classified two-fold: productive and unproductive. The process of civilization should purify the unproductive occupations and increase efficiency in the productive process. For the scholars of this century, arguably the work will be supported in accordance to the production ways following the criteria that circumscribes production to an international division of labor. In such a process, social relationships should be ruled by the search of surplus and wealth which were feasible with means of the intervention of Government upon workers. The process of work can be encompassed in three stages, production, accumulation and utility.

The odds in satisfying the needs of population were inextricably linked to the worth of merchandises in the market. Not only the concept of neat product was new for academicians of this period but also had no precedent in other past times. For that reason, the term work gradually is being appraised as positive and abandons the pejorative conditions it had; at the same time, the richness became strategically in a new way of intellectualizing the economy. It is strongly important to denote that conspicuous consumption should be rejected since it encouraged the laziness and social fragmentation.

In turn, for physiocratics surplus should be deemed as a balance resulted from incomes and expenditures that a society experiences after a period of time. Following this, the main thesis was in XVIII century European scholars consolidated a new form of thinking that stressed in production as a form of alleviating poverty and gaining emancipation for people. Like a new moral doctrine (part of ethic) leisure was put under the lens of scrutiny. Ethically, the vagrancy, idleness and inactivity were seriously penalized by the law in Europe because of illuminist influences the poverty was considered as a result of inactivity.

As the previous argument given, in second chapter Díez explains as to how

mercantilism arose in a system that combined limits in the wages with a declination in conditions of subsistence. Furniss and Hecksher suggested an interesting but unethical thesis: a worker embedded in a lump of material deprivations was more fruitful for societal purposes than a handful of organized workers who can constantly fight by their rights promoting high degree of inflation. Under this point of view, material improvement for working class should be a self-defeating issue. Suppositions of this caliber are also based on two clear doctrines: at a first instance, costs of subsistence determine the line in which should be fixed the salaries; secondly, higher wages generate a rise in added value in goods and inflation. Ultimately, things come worse to worst because lesser salaries shape a much more lucrative society.

After further examination, Díez argues that *“the goal of poverty encompasses the subordinate role that plays humankind in national prosperity. Workers are needed to work always in order for them to satisfy their necessities because of simplicity and ignorance”* (ibid: 99). If we take from the basis, that all workers had satisfied their basic and superior necessities, they will have any motivation to work harder. Mandeville focuses his analysis in the luxury and consumption into a similar pathway. For him, private vicious or bad habits not only impact directly towards economy but also merit an immediate intervention of States. It may seem odd that Mandeville argues individual actions in the sphere of working have to be oriented to motivate the self-conservation of worker. Sentiments like “pride” leads lay-people into ambition, hedonism and luxury going too far from an efficient production.

Like in Mandeville in many others scholars else, the virtue played a crucial role in increasing and improving the labor propensity while luxury elicited social fragmentation. Consistent with this reasoning, the paradox was that the State had to repress luxury in popular classes. In sharp contrast with Furniss and Hecksher, for Mandeville the consumption constraint must not be applied on whole of society but just on manual workers. This reminded that even though leisure works by alienating humankind in respect with the hard-working ma-

nual class due to ignorance and excess, Mercantilism argues that the luxury was an indispensable prerequisite to accomplish the goals of an efficient production and paved the pathways towards development and betterness emphasizing on the happiness is based selectively depending on the class subject dwell on (classism).

In Hume for example, the luxury takes an implicit negation for Mandeville's posture. *The concept of the luxury for public prosperity does not provoke bad habits, but in a virtues of the commercial company. The luxury is not a useless custom, but an innocent phenomenon which accompanies with the refined societies (ibid: 133).* As whole, the thesis of Hume is followed by certain Catholic Church sectors which backed the thesis that the luxury should not be morally condemnable by the grace of the Lord. These scholars interpret that comfort and the ostentation must not be contemplated as sin which triggers inception for a new much more important expression of pleasure: *The self-motivated work.*

In the fourth chapter, Diez introduces in the discussion the detail of how moral character of Europe deals with production in the so called "Century of Lights." The concept of mediocrity is indispensable for understanding the reasons why virtue takes place in the mind of these scholars. The luxury that distinguishes the bourgeois from other classes has been constituted as a mechanism in triggering to manual workers on whose shoulders fall the oppression of pauperism. In contradictory to mercantilism which promoted the continuous exploitation of the psychological needs, the self-motivated work is aimed at highlighting potential rewards for involved stakeholders introducing the idea of betterness and happiness.

The perfection of goods in the usage of affordable productive techniques entail more free-time and a reconsideration of salaries in working class. Like in Condorcet and Smith, modernity carries implicitly that education is one of most significant in moderating the "stupidity." Even though we cannot explain this by now, it is noteworthy that mental retardation was a moral impediment to produce and for that overtly condemned. In general once and

once again throughout the book, Diez reminds that development and richness allowed humanity a privileged site in the continuous search for utility. Luxury and consumption determined the modern styles of production not only in Europe but also in the rest of industrialized countries. The upshot for Desire, Utility and Virtue is that modern luxury, leisure and education comprised the necessary platform toward the present style of mass-consumption that characterizes the post-modernity. Typically, the spirit of modern work looks to be based on a previous historical background in mercantilism and iluminism. Both very well precede in the thread of history in modern leisure and tourism. In a context in where consumption is under debate because of ecological issues. A book of this nature represents an invaluable contribution since it not only achieves explaining the inception of modern luxury but also how capitalism by means of tourism and cultural consumption reproduces the hegemony of pleasure. In addition, a work of this nature would be catalogued as one of most important and critical perspective in economic philosophy and history, highly recommendable in extensive to philosophers, economists, anthropologists, historians and other specialists concerned in these kinds of topics.

*Recibido:* 13/02/2010  
*Aceptado:* 13/03/2010