

SOCIAL ISSUES IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL

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Abstract

In recent years Knowledge Management (KM) practices and Intellectual Capital (IC) as an asset became more and more important in the world economy. The aim of this paper is to analyse if, and how, consequently, KM and IC have contributed to the evolution of some old and well known social questions, namely 1) class conflict ; 2) social policies The paper will be divided in five main sections: 1. Introduction. 2. Main concepts 3. History and present situation 4. Analysis 5. Conclusions. The two main ideas that will emerge from the paper are the following: 1) IC augmentation and KM practices' extension drastically changed the nature of the class conflict; 2) in order to become widely used, KM and IC need the backup of a potent and vast Welfare State, which in turn, is a characteristic of peaceful, developed and democratic societies, in which class conflict is somehow controlled.

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1 Introduction

It is said that if Karl Marx was alive today he would have written The Information, or The Knowledge, and not The Capital. That single idea is enough to give to IC and KM a formidable social meaning.

Thus, it seems to be hugely pertinent to try, somehow, to analyze the present face of the class struggle, having in mind the IC and KM existence; and, as a corollary, given that social policies are often seen as a remedy to the class struggle, it seems most interesting to view them (which, very importantly, were almost inexistent when Marx made his analysis) in the context of the IC and KM development.

2 Main concepts

2.1 Intellectual Capital

Although very recent, Intellectual Capital (IC) is a complex notion, which adds up previously known notions which are usually studied in Human Resources Economics and Labor Sociology (human capital, education, training, experience, know-how, competencies, skills) Industrial Economics (Research and Development (R&D), innovation, science, technology, patents) and Human Resources Management (organizational intelligence, critical success factors, social capital) (see among others, MORTENSEN, 2000, STROOBANTS, 1993, HUSEMAN and GOODMAN 1999, KAPLAN and NORTON, 1992, SVEIBY, 2002).

From the scientific analysis of IC it is fundamental to extract three very important ideas:

- a) IC constituents are assets possessed by the individuals, by organizations, by regions or by countries; the effect of IC in society can thus be analyzed at various levels;
- b) IC consequences in its possessors' situation are thought to be decisive in economic, social and even political terms; IC is said to be the tool of power (in all aspects) of the XXIst century.
- c) Some assessments, recently made, seem to confirm statistically the theoretic intuition stated in b) (see WORLD BANK 2002 for traditional economic indicators, EU 2002 and OECD 1999 for internationally sponsored experiences in the field, SVEIBY 2002, for a survey on the most important management studies and VIEDMA 2003 for a survey of the application of those management studies in regions and countries).

An important distinction may be made between Intellectual Capital, and Intangible Assets, the later also including brands, distribution channels, and consumer loyalty (ANDERSEN and STRIUKOVA, 2002); somehow those last assets are more a costumer/market based product of "intelligence", rather than "intelligence" itself.

2.2 Knowledge Management

Knowledge Management (KM) being a relatively new concept, almost every person interested has its own definition (see among others LEIBOWITZ 1999 and SCHUTT 2003).

In this paper KM is going to be considered both as a science field and as an economic activity and sector.

As a scientific field, KM is the analysis of the way people, organization and countries deal with Knowledge, at the beginning of the 21st century, Knowledge being defined as digested information (MAURER, 1999). KM is, thus, the study of the application of Knowledge. In this context it is very important to note that KM is made with the contribution of many specific sciences, like engineering, economics, psychology, sociology, social policy, management, informatics, and logistics: every one of these sciences can contribute to the understanding of Knowledge in society; consequently, every important scientific conference or publication on the field gathers people from all those areas, that share a common interest: the application of Knowledge.

But, KM is not only a science but also a economic sector, made by practitioners. Nowadays, KM activities are increasingly being developed and assessed in the industrial world and specially in big companies (see among others MERTINS, and al 2001, KUKKO and al, 2003, KAGELMANN, 2003, NORTH and HORNUNG 2003). This particular topic will be addressed again in 3.2.

In the 21st century Knowledge will be seen as the distinctive characteristic of every possessor of IC, be them individuals, companies, regions or Nation States, IC being defined as above. The link between IC and KM is, then, very strong, those notions being like the two faces from the same coin.

2.3 Social Policy

In a broad sense, social policy is almost equal to economic policy, given that every economic policy is social and has social ramifications; in this large conception, social policy can include macroeconomic and sector aspects; this may be considered somehow an exaggeration; but, anyway, even if one considers that this is not the right definition, it is important to bear in mind that a stable set of macroeconomic policies is essential as a background to the well-being of every society.

In a strict sense, social policy means the public policies which have a direct impact on people lives like education, health, social security, employment, environment, and crime, among many others (ALCOCK and al 1998, HILL, 1996, LE GRAND and al, 1992). These policies make the so-called "social sector" and are at the core of the

“Welfare States” (WSs) (ESPING-ANDERSEN, 1990, FERRARA and al, 2000). This is the definition that will be mainly used in this paper, and that, most of all gives much importance to the WS notion.

Finally, in a excessively strict sense, social policy is sometimes considered as social care, referring only to the support that is given to the poor and the disadvantaged in every society (KNAPP, 1984, ANDER-EGG, 1992). It should be stressed that, although this is a weak and limited conception of social policy, it points out to the margins of society, where so much social conflict takes place. So, in a way, this is an important idea to this paper – social care being an extreme and ultimate way of intervention, and thus, of trying to conciliate IC, KM, and social conflict.

2.4 Class Conflict

Cooperation and conflict are usually seen as the two fundamental impulses in every social process (GIDDENS, 1997, 570-1). Thus, social clashes are one side of the coin of social life, the other being negotiations, mutual understandings and reciprocate consent. More important, even in negotiations and understandings different interests and strategies are always in place. So, the economic, social and political life can be seen as a never ending struggle, at least because individuals, organizations, regions and States have to make efforts (cooperating or conflicting) in order to obtain a position in society they judge as fair.

3 History and present situation

3.1 Intellectual Capital

Although intelligence was since long ago considered a very well distributed things (remember the famous way Descartes began *Le Discours de la Méthode* “Le bon sens est la chose la mieux partagée au monde” - DESCARTES 1970 25), all the Intellectual Capital constituents had a very limited evolution until the beginning of last century, and only incurred in an enormous surge in the last four or five decades. On education, of course every civilization since Antiquity had a strong intellectual base, but and even considering that Athens, Sparta, Rome, the Medieval Scholastic, the Renaissance and the Illuminist, China, India and Japan all had different schooling traditions, anyway, people only began to have massive access to basic studies in the 20th century. On

science, it is said that the majority of discoveries made by mankind were made last century, and technology can be considered as the application of scientific discoveries.

Nowadays, IC is positively linked with high levels of income and of human development (HD). Table 1 summarizes the situation (UN 2003).

Table 1. Intellectual capital nowadays

IC constituent	Indicator	Low Income	Middle income	High income	Low HD	Middle HD	High HD
Education	Adult literacy rate (%)	63	87	100	55	78	100
Science	Patents per million	0	10	346	0	7	273
Technology	Net users per thousand	6	37	397	3	22	328

Note: Data for education and science refer to 2001, for Technology refer to 1999.

3.2 Knowledge Management

There is no doubt that at the core of Taylorism, and of every subsequent analysis of the working activity, was the idea of managing people, that is brains; but for Frederick Taylor, the management of knowledge would be done centrally, by a “command department” and so would be strict, limited and easy to make (TAYLOR, 1964). Taylorism was of course at the core of the second industrial revolution, and of the fantastic economic evolution that the world experienced from the 20s to the 70s of last century (REICH, 1991).

But KM became an important sector of activity in the last decade of the 20th century (SCHUTT, 2003) when the computer based, internet centered “revolution” made it clear that from then on “information”, and “knowledge” would be central for the economic activity, for the organization of companies, for the well being of people and the wealth of nations; the “Third Industrial Revolution” is also the “Information Age” and the “Era of Knowledge” (ACS and al, 2002).

Nowadays KM activities are common in the developed world, and are spreading fast in the developing world, the reason being that firms that use more KM are big, high tech ones, which themselves are characteristic of very developed nations (TOMÈ 2003a). KM is also common in public organizations which characterize developed WSs.

3.3 Social Policy

Social Policy is a recent phenomenon (ROSANVALON 1992):

- although all big civilizations (in Europe and elsewhere) had some strong social basis, usually it is considered that historically, social policy appeared in the European Middle Ages, with some mercy measures which were made in order to help the health and employment situation of the poor and the needed, in the main European Kingdoms;
- those initial experiences were followed by the Protective State; which in generically the same European countries, tried to guarantee some peace, law, and order, and also give to the labour force and to the less advantaged some public support; the Bismarck laws, in the 1880s were a good example of this limited, even if seriously committed, course of action;
- but social policy only became an important matter after the Second World War, with the American New Deal, and the rebuilding of Western and Eastern Europe, when social rights were widely guaranteed to workers and citizens.

Nowadays, social policy is mainly a feature of the developed world, the 80 percent of poor people that exist lacking precisely the rights the other 20% truly have, and even if, since the seventies, with neo-liberalism and globalization, social rights and social policy became to be under strong pressure in the developed societies.

In Europe, Australia, the United States and Latin America several well established forms of Welfare State exist (Conservative, Liberal, Social Democratic and Latin – see ESPING ANDERSEN, 1990, FERRARA and al, 2000, KAY 2000, USAMI, 2003). Without doubt a Marxist WS existed in the Eastern Countries before 1989 (DEACON, 2000), and it seems that these countries are slowly converging to the “Esping types of WS”, that is the first three mentioned above (SVETLIK and IGNJATOVIC 2003). In East Asia, where the WS (and above all Japan) are essentially limited and Conservative, public social support schemes have been built essentially since the 70s (ASPELTER, 2002); in fact Social Security began after World War II and the existing WS were built essentially as consequence of the democratisation process that itself was a consequence of the “economic miracle” that happened in those countries (HORT and KHUNCLE, 2000). Social policy, democracy, peace, development and integration seem to be important features of the regional development (TOMÈ 2002), in the perspective that the world is slowly being divided in several big democratic, peaceful, integrated and developed continents (TOMÈ 2003b).

3.4 Class conflict

The history of mankind was certainly marked by social and class conflicts (BEER, 1957, FOURNIER and QUESTIAUX , 1976):

- social conflict existed in every pre-industrial society, mostly in the form of the peasants revolts against their landlords;
- in the last decades of the 18th century and in the 19th century the Industrial Revolution gave a new meaning and dimension to those struggles based on wages and on volatile working relations;
- in the 20th century the second form of conflict was extended to the entire planet as long the market economy became a worldwide fact.

Nowadays, class conflict continues to exist, but some news factors contribute to give it a different meaning:

- the disappearance of Soviet Union and the decline of the Communist parties,
- the emergence of a “popular capitalism”, of a skilled labour force based on knowledge, and of an economy based on services;
- the new importance of the public social sector, of the nonprofit sector and of small companies based on knowledge workers;
- the possibility of non-tayloristic structures of power, organizations and labour relations.

Class conflict now is much more individualistic, flexible and immaterial, but it is almost impossible to deny that between the worker and the company owner (be it public or private) some tension will ever exist, based on necessarily different points of view, goals and strategies.

4 Analysis

This section will be divided in two main parts, the first one (4.1) dealing with class conflict and the second with social policies (4.2). The first section will be divided in two parts, the first on the analysis of the social consequences of IC and KM at a company level, and the second about macroeconomic and societal questions. The second section will have only one main topic: the IC and KM markets and its relation with social policy and the level of economic development.

4.1 - Social class and struggle aspects of KM and IC.

4.1.1 Analysis at the company level.

The possessors of intellectual capital are progressively becoming the fundamental people in the 21st century' organizations; this situation is completely at odds with the 19th century organizations, in which labour was cheap and homogeneous and when physical capital was the main source of wealth and production (TOFFLER 1991). The diffusion of KM practices strengthens the tendency defined by IC.

From that well established fact it is possible to derive that IC and KM are effectively framing the class struggle within the firms and the organizations.

This situation can be detected in several ways, namely the following:

- a) IC possessors tend to have much more bargaining power than people that don't have IC;
- b) IC is a factor of change regarding the employment policy of the organizations;
- c) IC and KM contributes to a change in the center of power within firms;
- d) IC and KM are also forcing a change in the nature of the class struggle within the organizations, centering it in the new decisive tools, that is, knowledge and information.

Those questions will analyzed in succession.

a) The bargaining power problem may be considered in wage terms, but also in what concerns the employment security of workers, and their working conditions.

On wages, and employment prospects, theoretically, IC is somehow like specific training (BECKER 1962) or transferable training (STEVENS 1996). IC differentiates workers, and differentiates the company's needs. If a company has specific needs it will pay for them. If a worker has specific attributes he will make them worth. And due to the importance of company routines, and learning in the working place, a worker now is much valued by what can't be learned outside the company. Also, IC workers must be poached, kept and guarded. They are "the jewels of the crown".

And, continuing with the theoretical analysis, in what concerns the working conditions IC puts a very strong pressure in traditional management, for at least two reasons. First, in comparison to traditional workers, knowledge workers need improved working conditions in order to develop their skills and to perform their "soft" competences. Second, if traditional workers where essentially submitted to "one best ways" that were

directed by the central management, knowledge workers (even if they are managed, directed, controlled and evaluated) can have a essential word on the definition of the way they work.

Those theoretical intuitions have been somehow confirmed empirically:

- In human capital studies, usually, wages, wages dispersion (cross sections), and wages' evolution (time series) are generally much higher regarding educated and skilled workers than the contrary (skills and education being two proxys of knowledge);
- In the same type of studies skilled, educated and knowledge workers tend to be found as more stable and less prone to be fired then the other workers;
- Finally, knowledge workers usually use much intensively laptops, and the internet than traditional ones, their working space and facilities being much larger and substantial. And knowledge workers also have much more opportunity to work at home, being at the core of the development of “e-working” and “tele-working” .

b) IC began to dominate the activities of recruiting, maintaining, firing, training and rewarding workers, as long as knowledge workers became more and more decisive, wanted, disputed, needed and rewarded. This is apparent analyzing the structure of the HRM departments and companies, which become drastically centered in IC possessors.

Consequently, in modern firms workers may be classified not by the usual grids which reside on the workers administrative nature (by sector: administration, sells, production etc) or skills degree (from superior managers to not qualified workers), but by the relation with the cycle of knowledge (create, disseminate, store, use, etc.). The interesting thing is that the use of this third and new grid may promote wealth and profits – even if it may result in further changes in the company organization and power structure.

c) If knowledge is decisive, analyzing the knowledge nature is important to define the power structure of knowledge centered organizations. Knowledge may be divided in Already Acquired, Just in Case, Just In Time and Latent Knowledge, the later form being the one that literally drives companies forward (MURDOCH, 2002). So, knowledge workers not only possess the decisive tool, they also effectively drive the company. And, if the main producers and possessors of IC eave the firm at 6 o'clock each afternoon, the real power of the company CEO, owner or shareholders is then somehow diminished.

Evidence of those two facts may be obtained from the importance of innovation in knowledge companies, and from the dependence of the market value of the most important knowledge companies from the making of new successful products.

Furthermore, KM as an activity is very much enhanced by cooperation and participation within the firm, honesty and trust being two important themes in the analysis of KM. And in the knowledge companies, the management is done relying more on the workers' empowerment than in traditional ones.

c) KM practices in the firm may result in the need of controlling, monitoring, and evaluating the knowledge and the information used by each worker. This has been apparent recently with the tries some companies made in order to prevent workers using the internet while working. One other problem originated by the dissemination of KM practices was knowledge sharing; again, tensions appeared because many times people are reluctant to share their "secrets"; in fact they fear for their own future and try to defend themselves omitting their own know-how; this situation is in line with the idea that tacit and not written knowledge is at the center of KM, and with the need of collaboration and trust that is usually related with KM practices.

4.1.2 Analysis at the society level.

The situation just described at the company level can be also viewed in what respects to the whole society.

In fact:

- the increased bargaining power of knowledge workers, contributes to a more democratic society;
- the extent of the social power and the social dimension of the wealth of the owners of companies is much mitigated; It seems that in the virtual world, intellectual assets, make power and wealth to be a little bit virtual also;
- IC contributes to the decrease of collective bargaining, because it differentiates workers, and thus implicates a change in the unions' action;
- IC can have many political implications, in the sense that it generates and amplifies a world without farmers, and industries, a situation that can be very damaging for the political parties which normally were supported by industry workers and farmers.
- IC and KM may increase the formation of companies because people try to obtain a return from the knowledge they possess; this helps to explain the self-employment of

knowledge workers and the intense use of IC and KM in many knowledge intensive small companies that recently appeared (mainly) in the developed world.

4.2 KM and IC influence in social policies

IC can be viewed as a good, which is possessed by people, organizations and nations. In economic terms, IC demand is made by companies and organizations, usually big private companies, the social public sector and also the most important NGOs.

But IC supply can't be only made by the private sector, in the sense that many of the basic competences that are embodied in IC can only be acquired by the majority of the population with the frequency of public funded institutions. So, IC requires a huge development of social policies, specially in the education, training, employment, social security, health, science, and research and development markets. That is, IC requires a Welfare State as a counterpart.

That need is felt both, in the developed world (in order to adapt the already qualified labour force), and in the developing world (in order to build a qualified labour force that may profit from IC investments).

In developing countries a weak market, with low demand and little public supply exist, generating a low equilibrium and a vicious cycle of investment. On the contrary developed countries are characterized by a strong market, with high demand, huge supply, a big equilibrium and a virtuous cycle of investment.

The European Strategy for Employment, is, probably the ultimate demonstration that even in developed countries, a need is felt for massive public investment in IC.

IC is thus, nowadays, seen not only as a way of obtaining profits, but also of combating important non-economic problems like social exclusion.

Finally, in this kind of analysis KM and IC are seen as inter-dependent:

- KM depend on IC to exist and to be profitable;
- KM is a way of enhancing the impact of IC investments.

5 Conclusions

This paper was an attempt to link some distant subjects: IC, KM, class struggle and social policy. Summing it up, it can be said, that IC, KM, social conflicts and social

policy will be decisive notions in the 21st century evolution. Firstly, IC and K M will probably frame the social dynamic and struggle in the 21st century. Secondly, active social policies may well be the decisive instrument in order to make that dynamic and struggle more smooth and more profitable. In fact, making the relation between the four concepts analyzed in this paper work positively seems to be one of the challenges that humanity, or at least the developed world, faces nowadays and will face in the future.

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