




A Chave de Luneta, de Primo Levi (2021)

[10.29073/naus.v7i1.894](https://doi.org/10.29073/naus.v7i1.894)

Recebido: 2 de fevereiro de 2024.

Aprovado: 24 de junho de 2024.

Publicado: 27 de junho de 2024.

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“The act of thinking and acting in a creative and autonomous manner is inscribed in all areas of human activity, from the foundations of language to the division of labor—and in all relevant spheres of life.”

(Varela and Della Santa, 2023)

A Chave de Luneta, a literary work by the Italian writer Primo Levi (1919–1987), published in Italy in 1978, representative of testimonial literature of the 20th century, offers an extraordinary plot about various “relevant spheres of life.” His perspective, as both scientist and writer, leads us to places of encounter and interaction between scientific thought and narrative, memory and history, different cultures, and the individual and the collective. Undoubtedly, a humanistic, multicultural, and universalist message, “*the world is beautiful because it is varied.*”

Primo Levi was one of the Holocaust survivors from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, and his traumatic experience led him to write as his own interpreter. Thus, this work serves as a document for studying certain aspects of the human soul, contributing also to the fields of Literature, Philosophy, Social Memory, Politics, and Sociology.

The narrative consists of dialogues between two Italian characters who meet in Russia at the canteen for foreign workers in a factory where they were both employed. An ego and an alter ego. Two men, three trades. Both connected by the same links: travel, work, and freedom.

The encounter between the chemical scientist who is simultaneously an apprentice writer, a narrator skilled in listening, identifying with the author himself, Primo Levi, and Libertino Faussonne, a mechanic and assembler of structures, who narrates his stories and adventures skillfully, serves as the starting point for a reflection on the theme of work—free, well-done work capable of enriching the one who practices it.

This conception of “work” contrasts with the message inscribed at the entrance of Auschwitz camp: “Arbeit Macht Frei” (“Work sets you free”¹), ironic and cruel, where those who entered and were subjected to forced labor would hardly regain their freedom.

Faussonne is a traveling worker who chooses to roam the world from West to East, erecting buildings and installations with his *Chave de Luneta*, a tool of his trade. This protagonist constructs scaffolding in the form of towers, bridges, dams, and tunnels, much like many Italian technicians who, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, traveled as representatives of industrial and economic growth in Italy.

Through his profession, Faussonne reveals his identity, showcasing the values, expectations, practices, dedication, responsibility, and enthusiasm that guide his life.

The protagonist compares work to first love and happiness: “The problem is that I give my soul to every job, you know, even the stupidest ones; in fact, the stupider they are, the more I give myself to them. For me, every job I start is like a first love” (p. 48).

¹ Levi, P. (1998). *Se isto é um homem* (1st ed.). Dom Quixote.



It is important to highlight the etymology of the word “work,” as well as some of its main meanings acquired throughout history. “Work” comes from the Latin “tripalium,” meaning “three stakes.” The term was used to name a torture instrument consisting of three sharp wooden stakes. Thus, work was seen as punishment or as an unworthy activity for free men.

Throughout history, humanity has developed different modes of work, including primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist, each reflecting the historical, political, social, and economic characteristics of their respective societies. For instance, in primitive work, there was little division of labor and individuals held equal power positions. In slave labor, men and women were considered the private property of their masters and performed exhaustive manual services. In feudal work, serfs worked on the lands of feudal lords in exchange for protection and a share of the production. In capitalist work, workers sell their labor power in exchange for a wage and are subject to market laws. In socialist work, workers own the means of production and seek a more egalitarian society.

However, there is another etymological origin of the word “work,” which derives from the Latin word “labor.” The Latin root is commonly found in words related to work, such as “laborious” (hardworking, diligent) and “laboratory” (workplace).

The difference between work and labor is that work emerges as a rational activity involving organization, strategy, and creativity, while labor is a physical activity involving effort, suffering, and repetition. Work produces exchange value, meaning work is a commodity that can be bought or sold. Labor produces use value, meaning labor is a means to satisfy human needs.

Both words are concepts used by different thinkers to analyze the social, political, and economic relations involving human work.

Primo Levi states:

“[...] to love one’s own work (which unfortunately is a privilege of the few) constitutes the best concrete approximation to earthly happiness: but this is a truth known to few. [...] it so happens that the people who talk the most [...] are precisely those who have traveled it the least. [...] as if those who know how to work were by definition servants, and as if, conversely, those who do not know how to work, or work poorly, were for that reason free men.” (p. 100)

Faussone mentions that “I wanted to see other countries, to work with pleasure, not to be ashamed of the money I earn, and I achieved what I wanted. Of course, there are pros and cons [...]” (p. 40).

Karl Marx² used the concept of work to criticize capitalist exploitation, which alienates workers from the product and process of their labor.

Hannah Arendt³ used the concept of labor to distinguish vital activities that ensure human survival from political activities that ensure human freedom.

Contemporary models and conceptions of work are characterized by this duality, negative and positive. In its negative version, according to Marx, the capitalist system is seen as a form of torture, sacrifice, and confinement, associated with subordination, which values the final product more than the production process and the effort of the worker. The Marxist ideal argues that work or labor should value the process and construction of

² 1818–1883, German philosopher, economist, and political theorist, author of *O Capital*.

³ 1906–1975, Hannah Arendt was a German Jewish political philosopher who became one of the major figures in contemporary political thought. She studied totalitarian regimes, the banality of evil, the human condition, revolution, and democracy. She was a refugee from Nazism, which revoked her German nationality; she acquired American citizenship in 1951.



production, denouncing the corruption of the system and the perverse exploitation of the labor force of social subjects.

According to the professor and historian Raquel Varela and the social scientist and researcher Roberto Della Santa, the world we live in:

“[...] is hierarchically divided between those who conceive and those who execute, between those who appropriate the labor of others and those who produce social wealth, between those who govern and those who are governed. Unfortunately, the world has been this way for a long time, but Brecht would say, rightly, ‘a long time is not always.’” (p. 18, in the Preface to *Breve História de Portugal*, 2023)

Primo Levi confirms that if those who govern: “[...] are the ones who want to show cats how to climb, [...] Well, it’s tiresome, it doesn’t give us our independence. And if a person doesn’t feel independent in their work, then goodbye, all pleasure disappears, [...]” (p. 51).

Work emerges between the spontaneity of everything that is original and creative and knowledge, the scientific result of experience, and it is from this that man produces his existence.

Undoubtedly, the ethos⁴ of intellectual, manual, and technical work is one of the structuring elements of this work.

A Chave de Luneta is a “construction,” a literary monument, in which human work, besides being edifying, makes man free, where confinement gives way to freedom and the possibility of coming and going. The accounts of travels and experiences, lived by Faussonne, are the life that renews itself, in each project realized and constructed, in each new space visited.

In *A Chave de Luneta*, the conception of work is quite interesting and humanizing, as it contributes to the full realization of men, as can be read in some statements by both characters:

“[...] our three trades, my two and yours, on their best days can give us a feeling of fulfillment. Your trade and the trade of chemist, which resembles it, because they teach us to be whole, to think with hands and with the whole body [...] and teach, finally, to know the matter and to face it. And the trade of writing, because it grants some moments of creation [...]” (p. 173)

And:

“[...] the term ‘freedom’ notably has many meanings, but perhaps the type of freedom most accessible, most subjectively enjoyed, and most useful to human society, coincides with being competent in one’s own work, and therefore, in feeling pleasure in performing it.” (p. 173).

The truss assembler⁵ and the chemist-writer demonstrate how the head and hands are connected, and how intellectual or manual activities cannot be dissociated from the act of thinking or creating, allowing man his own improvement. Doing something well just for the sake of doing it is a capability within reach of most human beings, although in modern society this skill may not be valued.

For the varnish chemist, narrator-listener, the key to freedom is the art of writing, the creative force capable of producing something new from a narrative, in this case of oral tradition:

“In fact, just as there is an art of narrating, solidly encoded through a thousand trials and errors, there is likewise an art of listening, equally ancient and noble, for which, however, as far as I know, no rule

⁴ Greek word: moral value, ethics, attitudes.

⁵ In engineering, it refers to a system of intersecting beams used in the framing of bridges and roofs.



has ever been formulated. Nevertheless, every narrator knows from experience that with each narration the listener adds a decisive contribution [...]” (p. 47)

In *A Chave de Luneta*, the narrator Faussonne finds the essence of freedom reflected through the name of the character Libertino:

“My name is Tino, which means Libertino. In fact, when my father went to register me, he wanted to name me Libero [...] My father wanted to name me Libero because he wanted me to be free. [...] For him, being free meant not working under a boss’s orders [...] not in a factory doing the same gestures for the rest of life, clinging to the assembly line until the day they are no longer needed and are given severance and retirement to sit on benches.” (p. 101)

The family wanted to name him Libero, but were hindered by the fascist regime. Nonetheless, Libertino is a celebration of freedom (as manifested in his many travels).

However, Faussonne’s surname derives from “faus,” a word in Piedmontese dialect meaning false. If freedom is present in the name of this character, the notion of falsehood is equally true. In numerous pages of Primo Levi’s book, what is done and produced by man gains value and signifies freedom, but it is also true that the work, experienced by the author in other circumstances, refers to the horrors lived in the Nazi labor camp and to servitude: “Anyway, I’ll tell you, I’ve never taken a job in Germany, it’s a land I’ve never liked” p. 21 or “[...] in distant times, I also got involved with the gods in their quarrels; I too had found snakes on my way, and this meeting made me change my condition” (p. 67).

The central notion of work, which runs through the entire work, is already in a society of increasing individualization and constant change, “[...] and so the will to change jobs arrives. [...]” (p. 55), where people have more freedom to make choices, but also bear the responsibility for those choices, “[...] someone like me cannot start a family, nor have friends. And maybe, I even make friends, but they only last as long as the construction site lasts [...]” (p. 40).

Primo Levi suggests that alienation in work also exists and can “weaken and hinder the homo faber, the maker man” (p. 55).

The idea that human beings are homo faber is related to the fundamental role of productive activity in realizing human potential. Hannah Arendt, in the 20th century, developed this idea, especially in her work “The Human Condition” (1958). Arendt explored different human activities, such as labor, action, and thought, and how they contribute to the human condition. She emphasized the distinction between labor (work necessary for survival), action (political activities and social interactions), and contemplation (thought).

Hannah Arendt resumed Aristotle’s⁶ ideas in the work *Política*, in which human nature exists in relation to practical and productive activities. The Greek philosopher highlights the importance of practical action (praxis) and production (poiesis) in human life.

According to Primo Levi, it is necessary to be a witness, whether from the point of view of one who experienced it or one who observed it:

“An assembly is a job that each person must study on their own, with their own head, and above all with two hands: because it makes a big difference whether you see things from an armchair or from the top of a forty-meter tower.” In any case, “the only solution was to think” (p. 79).

However, he also opposes:

⁶ 384–322 BC, Greek philosopher, disciple of Plato.



“The things people think when they dare to judge without reflecting on issues outside their field of competence! Assign responsibilities according to competencies? But are we joking? It would be worth seeing if this system could be tolerated by assemblers, and it would be more complicated if applied in other much more subtle and complex activities.” (p. 83)

“Should the educator take [...] as a model the pelican, which plucks and strips itself to make its nest softer for its young, or the bear, which encourages them to climb to the top of the firs and then abandons them up there and turns away without looking back? What is the best didactic model: that of tempering⁷ or of annealing⁸? [...] and after three thousand years of discussion, we still don’t know which is better.” (p. 97)

Historically, the concept of comprehensive education is extensive and presents various interpretations. Aristotle, Marx, Freinet⁹, and Gramsci¹⁰ are important figures in the context of social and educational theory, each making a significant contribution to different aspects of social, political, and pedagogical thought.

Aristotelian view of education remains an important basis for Western educational thought. In his work *Política* and in his essays on ethics, Aristotle sees education as a means to prepare man to live in society, developing his physical, intellectual, and moral potentialities. Ethics and political participation are valued, and the dialectical method is an essential element of education, aiming to form virtuous citizens who promote the common good and excellence in all areas of life.

Marx analyzes education as a reflection and instrument of the capitalist system, which reproduces inequalities and class relations in society. This theorist advocates critical and emancipatory education that contributes to overcoming capitalism and building socialism. Terry Eagleton¹¹, in *Versões de cultura*, p. 36, defends the same theory: popular culture is a form of creative energy of the working class, which can transfigure the social order, which it itself is a product of.

Freinet proposes an education centered on the student, valuing his experience, participation, and cooperation through practical and innovative educational methods that stimulate creativity, autonomy, and citizenship, with the aim of making education liberating, capable of breaking with traditional and authoritarian models.

Gramsci conceives education as an instrument of social emancipation, which contributes to the formation of the cultural hegemony of the popular classes, advocating the unitary school, which balances work and culture, and that forms critical citizens and aware of power relations in society.

Piaget¹² proposes education as a process of knowledge construction, respecting the cognitive development of children. In his constructivist approach, the active, creative, and discoverer role of students is valued and is one that provides challenging and meaningful educational experiences.

All, in some way, reinforce the idea of an omnilateral education (expression of Frigotto¹³, 2012), whose term comes from Latin and whose literal translation means “all sides or dimensions”.

Omnilateral education is a conception of education that aims at the integral and emancipatory development of the human being, in all its dimensions and senses. This type of education proposes to articulate school and

⁷ Tempering—a process that increases the hardness and resistance of steel.

⁸ Annealing—a process that reduces the brittleness of steel and enhances its qualities, making it more useful and tough.

⁹ 1896–1966—French educator and creator of Freinet pedagogy.

¹⁰ 1891–1937—Italian philosopher and political theorist.

¹¹ British philosopher, professor, and literary critic.

¹² 1896–1980—Swiss psychologist known for significant contributions to the field of cognitive developmental psychology.

¹³ Frigotto is a Brazilian professor, philosopher, and educator known for his pedagogical theory of Historical-Critical Pedagogy. He criticizes the capitalist system and traditional education, advocating for an emancipatory education that integrates work, culture, and citizenship.



society, work and culture, knowledge and experience, collaboration and participation, with the aim of not only transmitting information, but also allowing its access and the construction of knowledge, breaking with the hegemony of systematized knowledge and promoting significant and emancipatory learning.

Faussone, with his critical gaze, questions and asserts:

“Much of the installation was stainless steel, and you know, stainless steel is an excellent material, but it does not bend, I mean it does not yield to the cold... Didn’t you know? Sorry, I thought they taught you these things at school.” (p. 26)

“In school, they taught me about concave and convex: well, I became a convex assembler, and I don’t want concave jobs for myself.” (p. 39)

According to Dermeval Saviani¹⁴, the systematization and socialization of knowledge are idealized from the relationships between theory and practice, in an educational model that calls for the conception of comprehensive education, emphasizing that the core activity of the school and the “provide students with access to learned culture ensuring the acquisition of the tools of access to elaborate knowledge” (Saviani, 2016, p. 57).

In *All Men Are Philosophers*, Antonio Gramsci states:

“It is necessary to destroy the prejudice that philosophy is something very difficult because it is the intellectual activity proper to a certain category of scientists [...] it is necessary to demonstrate that all men are philosophers [...] since in the simplest manifestation of intellectual activity, in language, a certain conception of the world is contained.” (Gramsci, 2001, p. 93).

According to this author, school work is a necessary element for cultural development, which allows human development in general. There is no doubt that human productions, whether manual or intellectual, are what simultaneously makes us social beings and can lead us to destroy or reinvent Humanity itself.

“In all cases, Literature remains floating above social life, fulfilling an integrating mission.” (Figueiredo, 2016)

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¹⁴ 1943–80 years old, Brazilian professor, philosopher, and educator.



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Declaração Ética

Conflito de Interesse: Nada a declarar. **Financiamento:** Nada a declarar.



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