

SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED ENTERPRISES – HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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By presenting the three development stages for SMEs – 1) as craftsmen workshops in early capitalism; 2) the small industrial workshops in the period of industrial capitalism; 3) the new stage of SMEs which is underway and is specific to knowledge-based economy, the authors are making an analysis of the economic and sociological thought with respect to the relation between large enterprises and SMEs.

The main productive units of mechanical industry capitalism were the large enterprises, which were endowed with “force” technology (running belt and standardized high performance machinery) which could endure better competitiveness through the growth of production and the decrease of cost price.

The evolution of western societies has generated in a new phase a complex process related on the one hand to the beginning of the passage to the knowledge-based economy and on the other hand to major changes in social behavior, the passage towards a market whose rules are set according to the social and cultural criteria of lifestyle.

Under these new conditions, SMEs are entering a new phase in which they become the “norms” of development, ensuring the transfer of technological innovation to the whole of the economy, ensuring new jobs and increased changes for the improvement of people’s living standard.

The study also offers a multi-dimensional analysis of SMEs’ role and place in the current age, with major implications on the strategies that Romania could also follow.

Understanding and – especially – promoting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) today needs a historical approach. As Hegel has shown, the historical presentation of facts permits us to understand them logically, because, by emphasizing the context, the factors and the consequences of these factors, we can see their current significance.

The first stage of analysis could be placed, for feudal Europe, in the context of craftsmen’s workshops and guilds. In other contexts than the European ones, we will be able to encounter “large enterprises,” a real “working machine”¹ which concentrate a large mass of people (the construction of pyramids in Egypt, of the first Temple in Jerusalem, etc.), but also technological means such as the copper foundry at Etion-Gheber (near Acala Gulf), big furnaces² and processing workshops and large manufacturers (for that time).³

In feudal Europe, the guild system has prevented the formation of big industrial production units. “The exclusive privilege of a profession organized into a guild is necessarily restricting competition in the town in which it is executed only to those admitted into the profession (...). The rules of the guild sometimes determine the number of apprentices

¹ L. Mumford, *Le mythe de la machine*, Paris, Fayard, vol. I, 1973, 258.

² P. Garelli, in vol. *Histoire générale du travail*, (coord. L. H. Panas), vol. 1, 1959, 67.

³ O. Hoffman, *Știință, Tehnologie, Valori*, Bucharest, Editura Lumina Lex, 1999, 39.