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Abstract

This editorial offers an overview over anthropological, historical and sociological debates on the topic in order to locate the contributions in them.

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The Anthropology of Work and Labour: Editorial Note

Christian Strümpell

There are few issues in contemporary society that are considered as important as "work". Work forms an essential part of our personal lives. We spend large amounts of time working (or learning how to work) and organise our lives around it (Spittler 2015: 1ff). Work also belongs to the most widely debated topics in politics, especially since the world of work has been subjected to massive technological and legal transformation over the last decades (Eckert 2015b: 3ff). However, as Gerd Spittler (2008: 11) complains, the centrality of "work" in social life is yet to provoke a sustained anthropological engagement with the topic. He points to the conceptual problem that in all societies work is an essential activity, in the sense that it secures livelihoods and that it keeps people engaged for large parts of their lives, but that – at the same time – the abstract notion of "work" does not necessarily form a domain of life distinguished from others, such as "non-work" or "leisure". Furthermore, even if there exists an abstract notion of "work" this does not mean that it subsumes similar kinds of activity (Wallmann 1979; Gamst 1995; Spittler 2015: 1ff). Historians face the same problems, but there exists a broad consensus – which anthropologists share (cf. Godelier and Ignatieff 1980) – that from the 16th century onwards reformation, mercantilism and commercialisation profoundly transformed the meaning of "work" in Europe.[1] Cumulatively, these processes helped to produce an abstract concept of "work", that came to connote an (usually tedious as well as obligatory) activity undertaken for a purpose outside itself, i.e. to produce or achieve something, for oneself or someone else, and an activity that was valorised (Kocka 2006: 5f). Furthermore, in the 17th and 18th century enlightenment philosophers celebrated "work" as the source of civility, self-realisation and as the core of human existence while national economists saw in it the source for wealth as such and consequently as the main concern for their theorising (ibid.: 7f). As Kocka (ibid.) elaborates, the celebration of work by philosophers and other intellectuals should not obfuscate the fact that for the large number of people who worked with their hands work remained toil and trouble. Moreover,

1 As Kocka (2006: 5f) elaborates, these developments include Luther's equation of the work of kings, priests, rustic labourers and housewives as "vocation", the fight of absolutist states against poverty including their programmes of an "education for work", as well as the increasing commodification of labour effected by commercialisation.

the high value attributed to "work" did not necessarily entail high regard for manual workers, rather the opposite (Ehmer 2014: 102).

At the start of the 19th century, emerging industrial capitalism again thoroughly transformed the world of work. Capitalists employed large machinery, built large factories for them, and brought the workers operating them under direct control there (Carrier 1992: 544f; Parry 2005). With the factories the "workplace" was created as a place segregated from "home" and in its wake paid (men's) work outside the home came to be distinguished from unpaid (women's) work at home. The spatial divide also fostered a new sense of time. Working hours were distinguished from leisure and in accordance with the repetitive tasks of factory work they were governed by the repetitive rhythm of the clock, not as before by the varying rhythms of the tasks at hand (Thompson 1967). In more general terms, production came to be segregated from reproduction and "work" from "life" (Kocka 2006: 15f; Eckert 2015b: 6). James Carrier (1992) further argues from a Maussian perspective that the segregation of workplaces from homes effected the differentiation between two opposing sets of relationships. At the factory, workers were employed as wage labourers, who are – as Marx (2015 [1887]: 120) famously pointed out – free to dispose of their labour-power as their own commodity as well as free from any other means to make a living. At work, people produce and exchange commodities and experience their relationships to themselves, others and objects as alienated, impersonal, and temporary while at home they maintain unalienated, personal and permanent relationships through the exchange of gifts.

This narrative delineates larger tendencies that were of course accompanied by various exceptions and opposed developments.[2] Lis and Soly (2012: 13-97) e.g. point to the praise of "worthy efforts" and condemnation of idleness already in antiquity. Spittler (2015: 281ff) argues that the segregation of "work" from "life" can be observed among traditional peasants and pastoralists, too, not only in capitalist economies.[3] More importantly, research on work and labour in regions outside Europe, on the impact of colonialism, and on the global interlocking of labour regimes in the capitalist world system, has complicated the above narrative (cf. Wolf 1982; Komlosy 2014; Eckert 2015a). Marcel van der Linden (2008) makes the important point that capitalism doesn't necessarily require labour to be "free" in the double sense, but

2 For an overview over academic debates surrounding industrial labour, see Mollona, De Neve and Parry (2009).

3 Spittler criticises many other assumptions about work, too, most importantly, the Western understanding that work as an instrumental action on inert material conceals its relational aspect, although in daily routine work is often primarily an interaction between the working subject and objects of work that also possess autonomy, be it the customers a cashier deals with, the animals a herder tends to or be it "stubborn" photocopiers office assistants and mechanics struggle to operate in vain (ibid. 2015: 287ff).

that it historically equally thrived on various forms of unfree labour including slavery.[4] Furthermore, historians, but also sociologists and anthropologists note that the trajectory of labour over the last decades has revealed the historic specificity of the standard narrative on work. In mid-20th century, the expectation was widespread that people would primarily work in large enterprises, earn a living wage (usually also a family wage), enjoy relatively good social benefits and working conditions governed by labour laws and protected by trade unions, and that they would have such employment until retirement (Ahuja 2004: 349ff; Eckert 2015b; Mayer-Ahuja 2017). This "formalisation" of work had taken place in the advanced industrialised countries and was to be exported into the Third World by modernisation and development. As is well known, these expectations were soon disappointed. James Ferguson (1999) has given a vivid account of the dismantling of the copper industry in Zambia since the 1980s that forced urbanised miners back to ancestral villages that they had abandoned decades ago and where they could now barely gain a foothold.[5] Similarly, in the wake of the structural adjustment of the Indian steel industry in the 1990s, its relatively securely and gainfully employed workforces were downsized to half their former strength forcing thousands of workers into casual employment (Parry 2013; Sanchez 2016; Strümpell 2014, 2018). Furthermore, from the 1980s onwards when neoliberal reforms began to bite, also an increasing number of jobs in the Global North undercut the norms established after the Second World War.[6] This process continues unabated and is described as precarisation (Standing 2014 [2011]). Hence, instead of the "Rest" following the allegedly inevitable trail the "West" had taken (Breman and van der Linden 2014: 920), the latter now faces a "Brazilianisation", i.e. the incursion of the precarious and the informal into the Western world of employment (Beck 1999: 7ff). Thus, Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden (2014) argue that the "norm" of relatively stable, gainful employment during the mid-20th century was nothing but a historical exception that also remained – relatively speaking – geographically confined to the Global North. This reveals that despite liberal claims to the contrary the insecurity of labour remains the hallmark of capitalism.

In addition to this important general thesis Mayer-Ahuja (2017: 284f) emphasises the need for an attention to the historic specificities of current processes of precarisation. She underlines three specificities in particular: first, precarious labour nowadays goes against widely established expecta-

4 For a discussion of "bonded labour" as a global phenomenon see Tappe and Lindner 2016, and for a recent case study on a prototypical case of "coolie labour" see Varma 2016.

5 For the somewhat different scenario in the Copperbelt mines the Chinese have taken over after the crisis, see Lee 2009.

6 As Mayer-Ahuja emphasises the "standard employment relationship" was in fact only "detected" in the mid-1980s when an increasing number of jobs started undercutting the norm (ibid.: 272).

tions of "good" regular, formal employment; second, because of a lack of other options people nowadays depend more heavily on wage labour for their livelihood than earlier (as also the examples of Zambian miners and Indian steel workers show), and, third, informal labour is nowadays an integral part of a formal sector of the economy (cf. Parry 2013; Mollona 2014). Furthermore, Mayer-Ahuja argues that even though on a general level all this applies to India as much as to Germany; the global moments of the formalisation of labour in mid-20th century and its informalisation since 1975 do not entail a global convergence of what she calls the "social substance" of labour. Labour is also regulated socially e.g. by notions regarding gender, age or status as well as economically e.g. by management strategies, and not only politically by state laws and policies. The interlocking of these different regulatory frames remains specific to particular states or regions and a transnational perspective on labour, and one that also contributes to the development of interventions and alternatives, can only thrive on the grounds of analyses that take these local specificities seriously (ibid. 2017: 295f).

In a similar vein, anthropologists Kasmir and Carbonella (2008) argue for grounding labour struggles in their specific historical and regional contexts in order to counter sweeping assumptions about the political behaviour of workers divided by regulatory frames or as they call it categorical fixes (cf. Sanchez and Strümpell 2014). A case in point are relatively securely employed Fordist workers who are often assumed to act like a "labour aristocracy", concerned about defending their privileges vis-à-vis marginalised workers and the urban poor, a divide that is often assumed to overlap with further distinctions regarding gender, ethnicity or the Global North and the Global South. Though workers' struggles in or against capitalist development indeed often exacerbate or produce intra-class hierarchies, they also regularly forge cross-cutting alliances (ibid.: 20). Historians and anthropologists have criticised since long static models of class that regard gender, race, nation etc. external to it (cf. Thompson 1963; Wolf 1982). In a programmatic article, Frederick Cooper (2000: 216) argues that such models often severely suffer from the notion that class, gender, race etc are distinct, but cross-cutting "identities". The problem with this conceptualisation is threefold: first, it suggests that they are alike and operate in the same way, secondly, it describes them as end products of contested constructions but usually without taking into account identities that were equally constructed, but discarded in the course of time, and, thirdly, it conflates historically contingent cultural notions of difference with political projects that aim to persuade people that one dimension of their lives defines them more than others (ibid.: 219).[7] Hence, Cooper (2000: 224) emphasises the need to focus on networks, and the connections and

7 In a similar way, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar (1997) has criticised the Subaltern Studies Collective for essentialising the "culture" of India's peasants, workers and "tribes" by presenting their consciousness as governed by a pre-capitalist village culture allegedly unaffected by colonial capitalism.

disconnections forged here, rather than on identities of groups, because that is more promising for opening up analyses to the possibilities that existed for people at specific historic junctures, and how they made or not made use of them under the constraints of capitalism (ibid.: 219f).[8]

For the topic of this issue, it is particularly relevant to relate the above discussion to "work" itself, to the ways how people actually work, how they connect with others at work, and how relations of inequality and solidarity, or notions of difference and commonality are produced, contested and rejected there. Influential in this regard has been the distinction Michael Burawoy (1979) made between "relations of production", i.e. the larger structural relations between capital and labour, and "relations in production", i.e. the social relations that develop between and among workers and managers on specific factory floors. Though both dimensions are obviously related, Burawoy argues for a separate analysis of the latter, because social relationships at work do not directly spring from the wider relations of production. Social life at the Chicago machine shop where he undertook ethnographic research in the 1970s illustrates the point. Workers there were obsessed with the game of "making out" (ibid.: 51-73). The aim of this game was to produce beyond the daily piecework targets set by management, but to keep one's overproduction within certain limits to avoid the setting of new targets. Workers were motivated to engage in this game by bonuses on overproduction, but also by a desire to overcome boredom and fatigue at work. An obstacle for successfully making out derived from the fact that to save costs management employed far too few auxiliary workers. However, operators depended on auxiliaries for tool supplies etc. and competed among each other for their support. This triggered conflicts between auxiliaries and operators as well as among the latter. The result of "making out" was hence not only that workers were eager to meet production targets, but also that the antagonism between management and labour translated into a lateral antagonism among workers and, moreover, that workers implicitly accepted the rules of the game while engaging in it (ibid.: 81). Therefore, Burawoy argues, it is "at the point of production" where consent to the capitalist system is produced (ibid: xii).

Burawoy makes clear that the game of "making out" occurs under specific relations of production, under monopoly capitalism in which large integrated, bureaucratically organised firms control markets and allow labour some leverage for self-organisation.[9] Under different conditions also differ-

8 As Patrick Neveling (2015) powerfully argues such a focus on connections must entail an attention to places were "local" class formations are shaped, too, but that are beyond the usually localist scope of anthropology, like e.g. World Bank working groups or conferences of investors.

9 As Mayer-Ahuja (2017: 289ff) points out, this was also the typical context in which the "standard employment contract" prevailed, while the outsourcing of production to smaller firms or a whole series of subcontractors go together with the precarisation or informalisation of labour.

ent social relationships are produced at work. Massimiliano Mollona (2005) e.g. shows that the obsolete workers producing drills on second-hand machinery in a small, run down workshop in the British steel town Sheffield follow two different games and set of rules at work, and that only through one of them consent to capital is produced.[10] Furthermore, anthropologists (and sociologists) working on industrial labour also highlight how the relations in production prevailing on specific factory floors also manufacture notions of gender, ethnicity and class (de Neve 2001: 134ff; Salzinger 2003; Cross 2012).

That through work people produce specific social relationships, not only goods, applies of course more generally (cf. Harris 2007). As the above discussion has shown, *how* relationships are produced depends on the ways political, economic and social regulatory frames are interlocked in specific workplaces at specific historical junctures; and an analytic focus on how they are interlocked, how this is contested or consented to, what connections are sought or severed at work, and what categorical fixes are reconfirmed or rejected in this context, requires an approach that is attentive to local details. The contributions brought together in this volume share such an approach to work and the relationships produced there. **Tiana Bakić Hayden** deals with street vendors in Mexico City whose struggle to survive economically entails a struggle against the legally ambiguous status in which state agencies keep them. The symbolic and affective labour of disambiguating their status requires them to re-interpret and shift legal boundaries, but by doing so they also partake in reinforcing them. **Katharina Schneider** analyses conflicting perspectives on fishermen's work in a Malayan fishing community that evaluate them either by the amount of cash it reaps or by the satisfaction the actual work process provides. She shows that the different modes of evaluating fishing are highly gendered, how this derives from the different rhythms men's and women's work are geared to respectively, but also how they are realigned in everyday household life. **Karla Dümmler** analyses controversial debates about and practices of work prevailing in an intentional community in an Eastern German village. The controversy revolves around the question what makes "work" communal, when does it turn into a self-interested activity and what role money plays in distinguishing between both forms of work. **Hasan Ashraf** criticises the local versus global dichotomy to which global garment brands resort whenever fatal accidents in Bangladeshi factories expose the working conditions there. By contrast, he describes the global connections that shape these factories as well as the local notions of morality with which Bangladeshi management aims to control the workforce, and emphasises that garment workers reject both management's bigoted moral-

10 As Mollona (2005: 179f) works out in detail, workers at the lathes in the "cold department" perceive their labour as a commodity that they exchange anonymously while workers at the ovens in the cold department (*pace* Carrier 1992, see above) consider their labour as a gift that circulates among related individuals.

ity as well as the brands' strategies to hold Bangladesh's culture responsible for their plight. **Frauke Mörike** takes on another binary, the contrast the philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri draw between what they call "immaterial" and "industrial" labour. Based on her ethnographic research in an exemplary site of the former kind of work, a professional services firm in India, she shows how at the office employees are indeed primarily engaged in immaterial labour, but that their performance is evaluated by ascertainable deliverables akin to industrial products. Thus, the contributions to this volume all share a commitment to an ethnographic approach to the ways people actually go about working and they reveal how they engage with different binary categories regulating their working lives.

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