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What is work?

Socio-historic approaches to the future

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“Drifts or Connectivity?”

Our understanding of work is undergoing fundamental change

- **1880s – 1980s: we got used to associate work with gainful employment – ideally entitling to social welfare**
 - Coming (more or less) true in the capitalist West and socialist East
 - Only reached by a small percentage in the Global South
 - However: formal, gainful and socially secured work was aspired by liberation movements and governments in the decolonial and developing world

From the global crisis to a new cycle of accumulation

- **From the 1990s: work is facing fundamental re-structuring:**
- **Automation and relocation to NIC, some emerging from contract manufacture to higher ends of GCC**
- **The welfare state nexus between wage & social inclusion is replaced by**
 - flexibilisation and precarisation
 - Polarisation into post-industrial upward mobile employés (profiting from automation and globalization), while downgrading blue collar workers to jobless or multi-job holding working poor,
 - depending on public social transfers (if eligible)
 - Non-paid work (household, subsistence, makeshifts ...)
 - If this is not feasible either, on migration

Reflecting the future of work requires considering all working characters

- **Employed – self-employed; Socially secured – precarious; Formal – informal; Paid – non-paid ...**
- **It would be a great mistake to concentrate just on gainful labor.**
- **According to the receiving framework work can be divided:**
 - Labour for the market (product or labour force) **(commodified)**
 - Work for subsistence (direct use, without money) of a household or a collective/community **(reciprocal)**
- **Language is reflecting the dual character of work and allows to assess the tension between toil and fulfillment**
 - Labour, Arbeit, travail/labeur (labor)
 - Work, Werk, oeuvre (opus)

Reciprocal work disappearing from the history of work

- For a historian the coexistence and combination of labor relations and working characters is no surprise. It is a typical feature of market economies.
- Precapitalist, preindustrial societies: Work for the market (commodified) and work for subsistence (reciprocal) were both undivided parts of the family household
- With the advent of capitalism, mercantilism and the factory system, work was
 - **Separated** into „work“ and „family home“
 - **Re-valued** (value assigned to commodified work, while reciprocal work was devalued)
 - **Re-assembled** as two complementing forms of labor
 - Surplus value created by wage-workers
 - Values created by non-paid workers producing and reproducing wage-workers

Nature versus work

- **Non-paid work was no longer perceived as work, but ascribed to nature, and women: natural goods for free use, appropriation, and transformation into sources of value**
 - Female and male household work
 - Non-paid work of indigenous people and traditional societies
- **Only when certain activities became object of commodification (nursing, caring, cleaning, cooking, farming, teaching ...), they entered the realm of work and became part of**
 - National social product
 - Labor codification, legislation and protection
- **However, in the Global South reciprocal household work remained important for survival in spite of the rise of commercial extraction and manufacturing industries in the 20th c.**

Western households were not freed from work by house-work commodification: it only changed output

- **Career support (for the better off)**
 - Help to work one's way up, to fit into new work patterns, getting affection, styling and self-styling
- **Income compensation (for the working poor)**
 - Compensation for low wages by home-production and makeshifts, esp. in periods of crisis and transition
- **New forms of unpaid work**
 - Automation and digitalization do not only produce new forms of waged work, but also new unpaid work („shadow work“)
 - Self (e-) – banking, administration, styling, shopping, marketing, communication ...
 - Workworkwork: Leisure can no longer be distinguished from work
 - Look how digital crowd work enters into one's life

Back to normal?

- **After the decline of the welfare state: Are we heading back to the old family-household with its undivided entanglement of paid and unpaid work?**
 - Hardly: today's households often lack family ties, they lack means of subsistence (land, devices, skills)
 - Once precarized, they risk severe impoverishment
- **Basic income?**
 - Some suggest providing jobless and working poor with a basic income without work obligation, substituting previous forms of social assistance.
 - Risk of being a dead end: implosion or explosion of society

Conceiving new forms and combinations of work beyond labor supply

- **Combining work with fulfillment**, both in gainful employment and in non-paid sectors
- **Combining remunerated work with non-remunerated work** (family and care, community and honorary, learning and education)
- **Including non-remunerated work into our perception and valuation of work:**
 - Time for non-paid work -> reduction of working hours in paid work, new proportions between paid and non-paid work
 - Welfare state benefits -> not only through employment, but also through non-paid work
- **Many concepts for a new understanding and distribution of work, remuneration and social welfare have been developed -> we are not lacking concepts, but the willingness to accept work beyond labor supply**

Read more:

Andrea KOMLOSY:

**WORK
THE LAST 1.000
YEARS**

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