Society, Work and Precarity

Subjects: Social Issues

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One of sociology's core tasks is to explain how societies work and change. Work plays a crucial and fundamental role in the formation of societies and is also a major driver of social change. It is therefore of key sociological interest to understand how work creates and changes the social conditions we call societies. However, work also creates different levels of freedom and equality; which manifest as different types and degrees of precarity in what I call 'work societies'.

work society employment precarity freedom equality

When we use the word society, we easily take its meaning for granted. However, sociology is about precisely that: looking at that which is taken for granted. If societies are the subject matter of sociological thinking and if part of that thinking is to elucidate what is taken for granted, then we need to define in the first instance what societies are, where they come from and why we not only have but need them. Work plays a crucial role in this. However, the purpose and meaning of work and employment are also assumed to be clear. To gain fundamental insights into the relationship between society and work, this entry focuses on where societies come from, what the role of work is in them and what kinds of precarities, freedoms and inequalities can result from the relationship between society and work.

The fact that humans need to work in order to make a living is stating the obvious. We should not forget though that the 'the struggle for subsistence' [1] (p. 366), the economic problem, is an existential question about survival rooted in the human condition. The human condition for our purposes can be defined as the human lack of instincts, the lack of physical strength and the absence of a pre-existing, stable social environment [2] (pp. 65–66) [3] (pp. 125–126). Together these lacks depict a situation of *existential precarity*. We overcome this existential precarity with '[w]ork' which, as György Márkus explains, 'constitutes the real, historical relation of man to nature and at the same time it determines the fundamental relations between man and man, so it forms the basis of all human life' [4] (p. 15). Work is at once a quintessentially human activity and the origin of society, the social conditions with which we ensure *the material satisfaction of needs* such as food, shelter and clothing. Work is also the activity with which we overcome existential precarity. Modern scientific and technological progress, though, has brought us to a point in contemporary late-modern societies where we can not only overcome existential precarities with the aid of technology, but also to a large extent replace the human labour otherwise required to do so. Above all, this tells us how far we have come as societies in shielding ourselves against existential precarities.

Many of the core issues and questions around contemporary precarities that are the subject matter of the sociology of work today were in essence already identified by the sociological classics, in particular Marx, Weber and Durkheim. All of them share the view that work is the primary social fact that fundamentally defines modern

societies and their central dynamics as ‘work society’. In particular, Marx defined work as a necessity of social life [5] (p. 129). Marx’s main concerns were the alienating and exploitative consequences of a capitalist organisation of work on what he calls ‘species being’. By that Marx meant that humans and nature need to be in ‘continuous intercourse’ [6] (p. 75). Alienation for Marx can be described as a human cost where the human abilities to think, act, coordinate and cooperate freely and creatively are distorted and split and estranged from nature on the basis of a capitalist division of labour. The economic cost of this process can be referred to as exploitation, which is based on the fact that human labour itself is treated as a commodity. The very fact that human labour becomes a commodity forms the basis for paid work. Under capitalism, this also opens the door for what today is referred to as wage theft, which defines the essence of exploitation [7] (p. 171). Alienation and exploitation cannot be separated, and, as we will see a bit later, the alienating and exploitative nature of capitalist work plays an important role in defining contemporary precarities. While Marx welcomes emancipation from feudal ties, under capitalism, it is the emancipation from any alienating or exploitative work processes that remains a concern in contemporary work societies.

From a Weberian view too, the release from premodern religious and feudal ties into a capitalist organisation of society is understood as emancipation. However, the result is a new unfreedom which Weber refers to as the ‘whip of hunger’, or the structural compulsion under capitalism to earn a living and to accumulate wealth [5] (p. 131) in order to satisfy material needs. It is in particular the changing ethical status of work that Weber highlights and which manifests as specific work ethics that today also can underpin what precarity means, as we will see. One of Weber’s main contributions to the sociology of work is the idea of modern rationalisation. Rationalisation can be defined as an ongoing process of quantification and calculability of all aspects of life [8] (p. 9). This relentless rationalisation of everything that Weber describes as an ‘iron cage’ becomes a hallmark of modern work societies and a considerable force behind the increase in certain precarities, which we will discuss later. Emancipation, therefore, for Weber means an escape from instrumental rationality, which in the case of work is defined purely by the pursuit of profit.

One of Durkheim’s major concerns with the rise of modernity is changing forms and sources of integration. He explains this in *The Division of Labour in Society* [9] by distinguishing between mechanical and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity is defined by social units that are all similar and largely independent when it comes to satisfying material needs. What mainly integrates them is a shared value system to which Durkheim refers as ‘conscience collective’ and which we today would refer to as shared norms and values. With the rise of modern capitalism, the division of labour changes, giving rise to a different form of integration, namely organic solidarity. Now every sphere, organisation and individual throughout society plays an important role and has a specific function to fulfil. What integrates social spheres, organisations and individuals in highly differentiated modern societies are functional interdependencies. If one element fails, it affects the overall system like a malfunctioning organ. Norms and values as an integrating force are also important in modern societies. However, because of an intensified functional division of labour, these norms and values start to pluralise and fragment and are thus harder to identify and maintain. The risk that Durkheim sees here is what he refers to as anomie and normlessness, which means a loss of direction or normative orientation because of fast-paced changes in the division of labour or what we can today call hyper-differentiation. Hence, we can say that emancipation for Durkheim means to avoid a state

of anomie on the basis of not only strong functional interdependences but also the struggle to maintain a strong normative bedrock. An intensifying capitalist division of labour is, as we will see later, also a contributing factor to precarity in the sense that it renders societies' integration fragile.

What is also crucial for understanding the relationship between work and society on the most fundamental level are the ideas of freedom and equality, as they define to a large extent the quality of the social conditions we ourselves create. Originating in the Enlightenment period, the modern ideals of *freedom* and *equality* mean not just economic and technological progress, but also emancipation, liberation and release from rigid economic, political or social structures, such as the shift from feudalism to capitalism, from religious to secular worldviews, and from simple forms of differentiation to highly individualised, fragmented and hyper-differentiated lifeworlds [10][11][12]. It includes the emancipation from the yoke of alienating forms of modern labour and bourgeois forms of power as Marx saw them [6][7], as well as freedom from large-scale social processes that are ever more rationalised, administered and bureaucratised and that Weber referred to as the 'iron cage' [13] (p. 217). The fact that norms and values that integrate societies are increasingly pluralised and fragmented as a result of an ever-increasing division of labour was Durkheim's main concern, which he described as 'anomie'. The themes identified by Marx, Weber and Durkheim are very much present in today's work societies. The risk of alienation and exploitation of a one-sided and mainly profit-driven rationalisation and a rapidly changing or intensifying division of labour, which challenges contemporary forms of integration, are all contributing factors when it comes to rising precarities. In particular, Jürgen Habermas not only captured the risks that the classics saw with the idea of the 'colonisation of the lifeworld' [14] (p. 305) but also strongly advocated for a form of emancipation anchored in what he calls 'communicative action', an ongoing negotiation of the norms and values underpinning our actions, including the meaning of work and the purpose of technology. These brief introductory remarks sketch the fundamental issues that the sociology of work addresses and that underpin the following discussion of contemporary precarities.

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