

Valuation and Exploitation of Work(ers) at the Bottom and the Margins of Labour Markets

What happens at the bottom and the margins of labour markets often anticipates general trends. This workshop therefore focusses devalued categories of labour and workers in these segments. We start with the premise that the value of work(ers) is not a given. It depends not only on the nature of the activity itself but rather on societal categorization and valuation processes. By «valuation», we mean the changing material and symbolical values conferred to work activity, labour power, and categories of workers. For instance, the dividing line between «skilled» and «unskilled» labour is highly contingent. It results from a complex interaction of forces determined by political struggles and governmentalities on the one hand, and by socioeconomic transformations on the other hand. The exploitation of labour (i.e. the production of economic value by the use of labour power and its exchange in markets) requires attributions of value, which are shaped by societal categories. Legal codification is a crucial aspect in this regard.

Current transformations of work are profoundly affecting the social fabric of labour markets. New categorizations can be observed at the structural and symbolic levels, as well as regarding the identities and subjectivities of workers. For instance, we observe a powerful discursive reframing of the world of work in terms of «digitization» or «knowledge economy» and the like, displacing older categories like «blue collar» vs. «white collar» work. The flexibilization of labour law and collective bargaining are other examples of unsettling the former «Fordist» architecture of labour markets. Social policy has shifted «from welfare to workfare», and education systems produce ever higher average education levels, resulting in crowding out low- and unskilled workers. The combined effects of these processes are not only multiple re-categorizations of work, but also the devaluation of entire categories of workers and profoundly transformed conditions of labour force exploitation in different sectors.

We welcome empirical and theoretical papers dealing with the transformation, re-valuation and exploitation of different kinds of marginalised labour. Contributions may focus unskilled, deskilled, low paid and/or precarious work, as well as work in complementary state-sponsored markets for the unemployed, the disabled, and other categories of welfare and social insurance beneficiaries working in sheltered employment, integration programmes, and other welfare-to-work measures. Of particular concern are the interactions between the so-called “first” and the “second” or even “third” labour markets, with the latter often being regarded as outside the “real” productive economy. From a social-legal point of view we are also interested in the emergence and the actual contract design of new and hybrid legal (work) relationships, affecting (human) rights, obligations and the entitlement to welfare benefits and access to social security in general. Do these new forms of valuation and exploitation in the long run affect how we think about and legally organise workers rights also in the first labour market?

Contributions may focus specific aspects and fields, but they should also address the broader issues of the transformation of labour markets and/or social policy respectively. Please submit your proposal in English (max. 500 words) by April 15, 2019 to all the organisers. At the workshop, papers may be presented in English, French or German; however, there will be no translation available.

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