Author(s): Paul John Taylor ; Paul Wagg

Title: Introduction - Work and society: Places, spaces and identities

Date: 2014

Originally published in:


Version of item: Published version

Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10034/336504
INTRODUCTION

Paul Taylor and Paul Wagg

Unlike many traditional explorations of work, this book presents a series of empirically based studies and theorisations that attempt to elicit a re-imagining of what work is, how work is undertaken, and the impact of work on those who undertake it. However, we must raise caution that understandings of the term ‘work’ in this edited collection are not necessarily seated in standard Fordist models of full-time permanent employment; rather the following contributions take a much less restrictive approach to conceptualising work. In doing so, the authors have overcome outmoded scholarly blockades and bastions to deconstruct the nature and definition of work in their respective areas of inquiry. Readers here are privy to a suite of critical analyses that examine work in a context of how it is socially organised, its occupying of space in a given society, and how it relates to and interacts with societies.

Traditional studies of work are synonymous with studies of labour markets, organisational functioning and employee relations. This ‘standard view’ of understanding work in a context of industry is slowly being left behind; indeed authors such as Watson (2012) have made deliberate shifts in their theorisations to incorporate an appreciation of the moving goalposts of inquiry, evaluation and knowledge that complement contemporary modes and forms of work. Likewise, understanding work from the perspective of routine, sustained employment and employee behaviour is somewhat anachronistic given the multiplicity of environments and contexts in which work occurs. Considering work in multiple guises and formations is no longer simply confined to radical writers, rather the study of work, occupations and society has
Work and Society

exploded beyond traditional boundaries; something that we as editors of this book applaud.

Work and Society: Places, Spaces and Identities aims to elucidate and expose the topic of work further through its eclectic yet focused selection of content. It will equip readers with ideas beyond the conventional and almost certainly serve as a springboard to developing a critical and broadened imagination. The book brings together converging analyses drawn from the sociological, criminological, victimological and (international) political economy traditions. Insights such as these are ideal for unpicking, deconstructing and re-evaluating how and why particular phenomena occur. Challenging entrenched or myopic views of work is a principal aim here and through the use of exciting new examples, the volume gains more importance through an expansion of the critical context present in this domain of inquiry.

As can be seen throughout the chapters of this book, the nature and definition of work is malleable and is often shaped by key determinants of the society in which it exists, or the imposition of labels by those with authority who hold credence in defining it as legitimate or illegitimate. Granted, work and its multiple identities are contingent on place, space and character, and we advise readers of this book to reflect on this as they immerse themselves within the eight chapters that follow. The diversity of what constitutes work is captured here and its conceptual boundaries demystified. Indeed, understanding work outside the definitions of employment is nothing new (see for example, Horne, 1987), but at the same time, we should reflect that there is often a great deal more to know about work than has come before. This area of study will never become arid due to the wonderful ambiguity captured in the diversity of definitions. Moreover, those who are engaged in work – whatever its form – will always have
more to say on this subject. Given a multitude of experiences, issues such as determining contexts (for example, age, class, gender, disability, culture, capitalism, economics, nation, globalisation, etc.) are an important avenue for researchers to explore and explicate. Similarly, unemployment, informal work, illegal work and household work are fundamental areas of contemporary global societies and economies that have, at times, been largely ignored. Restricting ideas of work to paid labour has been the shortfall of many reflections and explorations in the past; something that we address through this book. The area of analysis of non-standard work is one of growth, not least emanating from a firm scaffolding provided by Beck (1992) and later Castells (2001).

Taxonomies of standard and non-standard work have been used and developed for some time now, and their utility in acknowledging contractual, spatial, temporal and gender activities and relations is important. Undeniably, many of the chapters here tap into this rich vein of critical analysis and approach their enquiries and conclusions with flexibility, while preserving scholarly rigour and integrity. Increasing flexibility in the approach to understanding work and its many incarnations should not be regarded as increasing ambiguity. On the contrary, such an approach fosters a departure from codified narratives of work and its position in and relationship with society, opening up the way to more insightful and useful findings.

As Grint (2007) astutely reminds us, work is not simply a process of providing labour in return for remuneration of some kind. Interwoven in this process is the production and/or accumulation of status (which can be a positive or negative experience). Work is a vehicle through which self-potential can be recognised and a symbol of personal value. Likewise, other authors have sought to convey the interconnectedness of work with other social phenomena such
as the economic context of society (Edgell, 2012) and gender relations (Cooper & Lewis, 1999; Heiskanen, 1997) whereby the behaviour of a pervading societal ideology or institution can influence the spheres in which work takes place. Moreover, at an interactional level, work can also be viewed as being embedded and having an effect on personal well-being and social relations such as family, friends and other social ties (Leon, 2005).

The following chapters begin with Alessandro Pratesi’s exploration of care-giving. In this chapter Pratesi considers how the actions of caring for another can be conceived of as a form of work. Whilst care is not usually explained as an occupation or a kind of work, Pratesi argues that certain intrinsic factors involved in caring are in fact similar to those found in traditional considerations of work and can inform understandings of the complexities of caring within specific cultural and social contexts. In doing so, distinctions are made between care work and work for the market and the challenges that may be encountered for individuals and families in reconciling these differences. Moreover, Pratesi illuminates how emotional energy and ‘drive’ are key aspects of the caring process in addition to successful interactions between the care-giver and recipient. Here Pratesi’s theorisations are grounded in data from a study of heterosexual and gay/lesbian partnered and single parent families and care-giving towards children. This study, illustrates the multifarious and complex dimensions of ‘care as work’ and the experiences of those engaged in it.

The theme of care as work is continued into Chapter Two. Here Karen Corteen, Paul Taylor and Sharon Morley discuss the potential for those in professional care/supervision roles to be victimised by aspects of their work. The focus of this chapter centres on the official state processes that follow instances of self-inflicted deaths by health and social care
service users; that is the Coroner’s Inquest. The participation of public service workers, for example, doctors, nurses and social workers, as witnesses in the Coroner’s Inquest may well be unsettling, and as is deliberated here, potentially victimising. The study does not detract attention away from family, friends and significant others of the deceased, but rather situates the potential problematic fall-out of coronial processes on individual health and social care practitioners. The authors here utilise the theoretical lens of victimology to shed new light on a research-arid area whilst, at the same time, draw the reader’s attention towards not only the official processes of the state, but also other influences such as legal liability for service user deaths and the role of media reporting.

While Chapter Two focuses upon the interaction between those working on behalf of the state and official state processes, Chapter Three continues with the theme of citizens whose work represents the state by exploring the experiences of members of the British military. In this chapter Ross McGarry unearths the complex and critical aspects of the decision to join the British military. He approaches this analysis victimologically and details the impact of soldiering on those who do it. McGarry explains the centrality of risk within this particular occupation, where injury and death are very real prospects. Using data collected from a three-year empirical research project with British veterans, reasons and rationales for joining the British military are presented. Issues of social class and hierarchical structures of the military are critically evaluated in this chapter along with the responsibilities of the military to act as a responsible and capable guardian of those ‘employed’ in this particular ‘employment’.

The subject of social class bridges Chapter Three and Chapter Four. In Chapter Four Carolyn Downs provides a
comprehensive historiography of gambling as a form of work. Attention is drawn towards how gambling can be conceived of as a normalised behaviour with commensurable risks to other activities in the lives of men and women. Gambling then is argued to be a form of enterprise and as such can be considered as a source of income generation as well as labour. Regulated and unregulated gambling, the risks attached to these forms of entrepreneurialism, as well as the advancements in techniques and technologies in gambling are all discussed here. The subject of gambling, be it betting or lottery ticket purchasing, is considered in the context of social class and labour, arguing that gambling, in some cases, has provided a kind of freedom for the working class to generate income and to work autonomously.

Downs’s chapter eloquently engages the reader in the topic of social class and entrepreneurial activities. Chapter Five also explores the risks of entrepreneurial methods of income generation through an analysis of career criminality. Like the chapters that precede it, Karen Corteens and Eric Allison’s contribution considers work in an alternative form. In this chapter, Allison, the Prisons Correspondent for *The Guardian* newspaper, and criminologist Corteens, reflect on offending as an alternative to legitimate employment. With experience of being a prisoner who served multiple sentences for robbery, Allison provides a testimony of why he chose to offend and re-offend in the context of providing an income. Corteens situates this testimony in the criminological literature within the spheres of risk-taking and ‘edge work’, unveiling some of the attractions of involvement in deviant and criminal enterprise and debunking the notion that crime does not ‘pay’.

By way of contrast, Chapter Six deliberates over the multidimensional issues encompassing pathways to legally ‘legitimate’ work through education. Here Paul Wagg interrogates current education policy set against his own
findings from an empirical study of students on a UK-based Prince’s Trust educational programme. With a focus on the experiences of non-traditional, ‘hard to reach’ adult learners, this chapter considers the components of those learners’ experiences, past and present, and encourages policy and professionals to adopt approaches that foster inclusive and insightful decisions when engaging with this particular group. Wagg’s study insightfully critiques the prevailing neoliberal notion that education is for employment and troubles the emphasis on the acquisition of transferrable ‘skills’ for the workplace that pervades contemporary Further and Higher Education in the United Kingdom.

In a similar vein to Wagg’s analysis of the social economy of work (and its antecedents), Chapter Seven considers the issue of disability – socially, culturally and politically – through a lens of resilience. Katherine Runswick-Cole and Dan Goodley articulate the contemporary social factors that are considered as the foundations of ideas of resilient identities and how those with impairments may be abstracted from or absorbed within this context, with repercussions for their ability to work and the perceptions of employers and colleagues. In this chapter, the authors deliberate upon the links with employment, social justice and disability, challenging the construction of notions of resilience based upon normative ideas. Runswick-Cole and Goodley astutely remind us here that resilience is a complex subject, yet when considering it in terms of disability, impairment and work, there are frequent opportunities for such analyses to shape popular understandings and areas of social policy.

To close the volume, and, simultaneously, to problematise the concept of work still further, Chapter Eight critiques the neoliberal world view that informs common sense understandings of the spaces in which work takes place. In this way, the book concludes with a theoretical contribution
that unsettles the very ideology through which we may conceive of work. Jonathon Louth argues that neoliberal institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, are informed by an unstated Newtonian worldview, which is communicated through scientific metaphors of space, that produce notions of ‘capacity’ for capitalist expansion and dominate how economies (and from that societies) function. Such worldviews are guilty, Louth argues, of promoting a capitalist economic ontology as an ideal, final and natural form, an ‘objective truth’, like Newton’s physics. However, the manner in which Newtonian space or spatial ‘imaginaries’ are conceived in neoliberal discourse is dependent upon foundational assumptions that delimit both the conceptualisation of emerging markets (such as the Cambodian case study used here), and the potential for resistance. Louth’s chapter accounts for the ‘schisms’ or crises that occur within the global economy where a disjuncture exists between the economic orthodoxy of infinite ‘capacity’ for the generation of capital and the actuality of many citizens’ working lives.

Taken together, the chapters in Work and Society: Places, Spaces and Identities constitute a substantive reconsideration of work, emphasising its unconventional, illegitimate and unrecognised manifestations and defining conditions. Each chapter is a signifier in itself of the complex phenomena that constitute work and society; a multiplicity of facets through which we glimpse something of the whole and begin to identify and name the systems of thinking and practice that would thwart human potential and harness it to a singular capitalist economic goal. The sociological, criminological, educational and political imaginations of the authors, challenge the reader to push their understanding beyond the habitual outmoded patterns of thinking and experiencing, and beyond dominant monetary discourse. Ultimately, the book
Introduction

offers an expansive vision of the perpetuation of a non-evolved, stagnated economic market system coming face to face with a postmodern global consciousness. It is this whole global market backdrop, explored by Louth in Chapter 8 and against which the other chapters and ultimately the real lives of individuals are played out, that is held aloft for the reader’s scrutiny of the state of contemporary work and society.

References