

Exploitation Isn't the Only Thing Wrong With Work

AN INTERVIEW WITH
RUTH DUKES / WOLFGANG STREECK

Many people's social status and identity are intimately bound up with the jobs they do. That's not just pernicious capitalist ideology, Ruth Dukes and Wolfgang Streeck argue: it can offer the basis for worker resistance to the power of employers.

INTERVIEW BY

John-Baptiste Oduor

In a recent paper, Ruth Dukes and Wolfgang Streeck discuss the now quite arcane concept of industrial citizenship and the changing status of work in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For many on the Left, concern with the social status accompanying work takes second place to an interest in the exploitation that takes place within the workplace. This dismissal is understandable, given that the social status of work has often been used to justify forms of oppression.

However, earlier this month, Dukes and Streeck spoke with *Jacobin's* John-Baptiste Oduor about the complexity, and the political necessity, of defending a vision of the status of work and workers. The authors reflect on several issues important to the Left, including the legacy of left-wing opposition to social democracy and the possibility of combating the low-waged and ostensibly status-free gig economy.

The ideas discussed here emerge out of the authors' ongoing joint research project on the social and legal norms governing work. Part of this project will take the form of a forthcoming book, *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status, and Post-Industrial Justice*, from Polity.

JBO | In your recent article, “From Industrial Citizenship to Private Ordering,” you look at the transformations of the contractual and social status of labor. Specifically, you distinguish between status and contract as two different ways of regulating the treatment and rights of workers. Could you explain the distinction between status and contract and how it has developed within the history of European labor law?

WS | The terms “status” and “contract” have long been used to distinguish between different kinds of social relation. In a status relation, as defined, for example, by Max Weber in *Economy and Society*, rights and obligations are attributed to the parties by the law, by reason of their belonging to a particular social category: father, wife, master, servant. A contractual relation, in contrast, is “freely concluded according to the free choice of the parties.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sociologists observed a historical tendency for status relations to be gradually transformed into contractual ones.

According to Henry Maine’s famous dictum, this tendency — “a movement from Status to Contract” — was the marker of “progressive societies.” By the middle of the twentieth century, however, when trade unions were strong and working relations governed primarily by collective bargaining, it might well have been argued, that in the *most* progressive societies, working relations were now status relations, albeit of a quite different sort to the master and servant of old.

In this age of “industrial citizenship,” it was not only the law, as such, but also collectively agreed rules and the *right to participate* in the negotiation of those rules that gave form to the workers’ status. Like other kinds of status, industrial citizenship did not fail to be determined by the parties involved but was, rather, *public* in nature. It was not merely social, like master and servant, but *political*, established in the democratic class struggle to regulate the social relations between capital and labor, the most important arena of conflict and cooperation in a capitalist society.

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RD | In our article and forthcoming book — *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status, and Post-Industrial Justice* — we suggest that, in capitalist societies, working relations necessarily have elements of both contract and status. Working relations are invariably contractual, meaning that the parties exercise formal freedom of contract when entering into such a relation. But the regulation of working relations by means of contract *alone* is unsustainable: elements of status — rules and understandings that apply regardless of the volition of the parties to the contract — must always be present if the work is to be performed and paid for as the parties require it.

To argue otherwise, as platforms such as Uber do when they claim to create labor markets without search frictions and only minimal transaction costs — contracts without status — is to assume an undersocialized model of (monadic) social action that has no basis in the reality of social life (Émile Durkheim). It is to overlook Karl Polanyi's teaching that, without some form of protection from the vagaries of the market, the "fictitious commodity" of labor will ultimately be destroyed.

Like Polanyi's countermovement, status may come in a variety of forms that are more or less desirable from the perspective of workers, employers, and society at large: servitude, industrial citizenship, membership of a particular profession or occupation. In the article, and in the book, we're interested in how status and contract have been differently configured, and differently understood, at various points in time. We're interested in understanding the changing role of law and other public institutions in shaping working relations both directly and indirectly, ever conscious that even apparently "private" contracting proceeds within a context that is structured in myriad ways by law and by the state.

JBO | During the twentieth century, some analysts started to employ the concept of industrial citizenship to make sense of the attempt to institutionalize labor rights through collective bargaining and other corporatist arrangements. Industrial citizenship was, in your view, an attempt to tie together labor and status in a progressive way. Could you say something about its achievements?

Industrial citizenship involved recognition of the worker as a bearer of rights, and recognition of

RD | industry and the economy as spheres of public interest and democratic decision-making. In contrast to the stark hierarchy of the master and servant model, *citizenship* implied here, as elsewhere, egalitarianism and mutual respect. As detailed in the article, public policy arguments in favor of industrial citizenship, or industrial democracy, tended to rest on a functionalist logic that characterized workers' rights and collective bargaining as the price that capital had to pay to ensure economic productivity and social stability.

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Reconciling collective bargaining with a Keynesian responsibility for the government to provide for full employment turned out to be difficult, however, since full employment empowered trade unions to make gains in collective bargaining and at the workplace that capitalist employers were unwilling to concede, laying bare the fundamental distributional conflict inherent in a capitalist political economy. Ultimately, this resulted in the neoliberal revolution and the re-privatization of contracting for work, not least because states and governments felt that they had to give in to capitalist revisionism under the pressures, mainly, of “globalization.”

We believe, and this is what we argue in our work, that it is high time for restoring the public dimension to contracting for work. Governments will have to learn anew how to make capital live with a citizenship-like status of labor.

Viewed from today's perspective, the most striking success of industrial citizenship was its narrowing of income and wealth inequalities between the poorest and richest in our societies. Considering the much greater inequalities of today, the weakened state of our trade unions, the casualization and “precarization” of working relations, and the reappearance of the Victorian phenomenon of the working poor, it is clear that the great challenge of our time is for governments and politics to rebuild a capacity to domesticate capital by way of public policy. This must inevitably include a reorganization of that “second tier of government,” namely industrial relations in the sphere of production.

JBO | Critics of industrial citizenship on the Left have often argued that, because it still aimed to ensure the smooth operation of capitalism, it could not overcome what you call the “feudal legacy of master and servant” bound up with any politicized conception of the status of the

worker. This led many on the Left to celebrate the breakdown of postwar attempts to institutionalize class conflict. What do you think has been the effect of this kind of left-wing critique of industrial citizenship?

RD | In the article, we reference the work of Alan Fox in the 1970s, and his identification of fundamental class conflict, irreconcilable with even the most sophisticated of institutional arrangements. For Fox, writing in an era of apparent industrial democracy and industrial citizenship, working relations retained elements of hierarchy and of master and servant, which set in motion a “spiral of low trust” between the two sides of industry. The only effective remedy, he argued, was the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. The problem with this, of course, is that it didn’t happen. It was the neoliberal revolution that overthrew industrial citizenship, not the revolutionary proletariat.

Even from the perspective of workers, moreover, the version of industrial citizenship that existed in the era of high industrialism suffered from a number of shortcomings — which partly explains why it was not more vigorously defended. An important critique, voiced with different emphases and to different ends from the right and the left, takes aim at the rigidities, confinements, and restraints of the work regime as it developed in the 1960s and ’70s. Taylorism and Fordism rested on the willingness of workers to accept often extremely monotonous work in exchange for job security and the promise of “career,” or at least wage, progression.

Industrial citizenship was constructed upon the basis of a male-breadwinner model and, while it channeled men into full-time, stable employment, it assumed that women needed only part-time and lower-paid work: pocket money. Trade unions chose at times to protect and promote the interests of existing (white, male) members over the interests of other (female, racialized and immigrant) workers. Social protections premised on the “family wage” and on androcentric views of “work” and “contribution” served less to protect “society” *per se*, as Nancy Fraser has argued, than to protect male domination. When the rights and protections afforded by labor law, social welfare, and trade unions are understood in this way, even workers may develop a preference for freedom of contract — not as an end in itself, or as a route to total marketization, but rather as a means to emancipation, broadly conceived.

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JBO | You observe that the transition to what you call a status-based-in-contract served to depoliticize the regulation of labor contracts. Is this just a product of the current weakness of organized labor, or is there something more to consider?

WS | There is more. It's not just the weakness of labor but also the policies of states and governments under the impact of the increasing strength of capital. To date, we've not always understood the nature of what we call globalization. This is not just a process of worldwide economic and social integration but was and still is shaped by complex strategies of capital to bypass the democratic power of organized labor and blackmail industrial societies, states, and politics.



The attachment of the worker to his or her work is often overlooked or even ridiculed. (Oladipo Adejumo / Unsplash)

That blackmail eventually produced the “Third Way”: state policies aimed at the re-privatization of political economy as a way of endearing themselves to capital. Essentially, this meant that governments gave up on their responsibility to protect citizens from the uncertainties of a now-

global marketplace and instead exposed their societies to international competition as a way of rejuvenating capitalist national economies. Contractualization is at its core privatization, which means leaving it up to workers themselves to look after themselves, perhaps with a little retraining assistance from their former social-democratic friends, always in the spirit of capitalist competitiveness. One result of this was an erosion of industrial democracy and collective bargaining, which in turn resulted in a further weakening of organized labor.

JBO | Many people on the Left prefer to think of work primarily as a site of exploitation. What do you think is wrong with abandoning a discussion of the normative value of work? Is that compatible with seeing wage labor as inherently exploitative, as Marxists would?

WS | Karl Marx's historical materialism began with the idea that the human being produces itself through work, for which he used the Greek term, "praxis." Praxis means production, not just of things and ideas, but also of the human being itself as a social being, who develops with and out of work. Capitalism, like other exploitative regimes that preceded it, defaces and distorts praxis by turning work into a commodity, commercializing it, subsuming it under a market value.

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This is what, in the Marxist philosophical tradition, is called alienation: humans encounter the product of their praxis, including themselves and their society, as something that is alien to them, not theirs controlled by someone else. In the world of the Manchester factory and later of Taylorism, this gave rise to the idea that proletarian class consciousness must involve a deep emotional, wholesale rejection of the kind of work capital forces the worker to do for his livelihood. One way of doing this was having a purely instrumental attitude to wage labor.

Indeed, unions often considered this a precondition of successfully confronting the employer over the price of labor: my only satisfaction from work is the wage, all extrinsic, nothing intrinsic; my only relationship to my work is hateful; and if it is not, it is the job of socialist consciousness-building to make me hate it, so that I minimize my input in order to work only as much as I get paid for, which improves my

bargaining position in the wage struggle.

This was the time when industrial work was seen as entirely deskilled, and workers were considered entirely fungible. Taylorist industrial engineering was deeply contemptuous of workers as human beings, you might say: it considered them lifeless automatons constitutively incapable of praxis. Somehow this view was internalized by radical socialism in self-defense against employers trying to change the wage-effort bargain to their advantage, by getting more effort out of workers for less by allowing them opportunities for intrinsic, i.e., unpaid gratifications.

Our point is that this could never succeed. It is only in marginal cases that work, even under capitalism, is entirely devoid of praxis — that it does not come with some sense of pride and accomplishment, some intrinsic satisfaction and a desire to prove oneself by getting it right, to do the job well. Even work that is dehumanized by commercialization remains praxis at least to some residual extent. Indeed, for some, especially today, doing paid work is the primary or even only opportunity for social integration, for finding a respected place for themselves in society.

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Marx, one can say, ended his sociology with his account in the chapter on primitive accumulation, in Volume 1, of the maturation of the modern working class as one of the two main classes of the capitalist political-economic system. He did and could not foresee that craftsmanship and the craft ethos would not disappear but, to the contrary, penetrate into many proletarian occupations, giving rise, for example, to occupational communities as centers of collective identification and self-

respect, as well as to trade unionization and left politics. Indeed, more often than not, dissatisfaction with work under capitalism was not over its price, or not only, but also over its failure to offer opportunities to do a good, a better job, to put more of oneself rather than less in one's work.

The attachment of the worker to his or her work is often overlooked or even ridiculed by people in privileged social conditions who cannot apparently imagine how much skill is required, for example, of a bricklayer, truck driver, or care worker, deskilling policies by employers notwithstanding.

RD | Socialist theories of the labor process do have a point here: many people work harder at their job than their contract requires; they work “beyond the call of duty” because they do not like to be seen as sloppy and want to take pride in their work. Employers know this and must be prevented, for example by industrial democracy, from capitalizing on it by underpaying their workers. But this doesn't mean that progressive politics must aim at reinforcing workers' alienation.

To the contrary, often it is the desire to be allowed to do one's work well that make workers oppose management, in particular in personal services where clients are involved, where workers are ashamed of doing bad work because they want to help people in the practice of their daily work. In a modern capitalist society, one can go as far as to say that, for most people, having a job and doing it well is their principal, if not their only, access to social recognition and self-esteem, and defending that access against abuse by the buyers of their work is something that also, and we think, especially, Marxists can consider a central political objective.

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JBO | Critics of attempts to return to a reformed version of the postwar social settlement have pointed out that this arrangement broke down in the face of instability, worker militancy, and a decline in profitability, and not just the political defeat of organized labor. If this is the case, then how can we salvage the benefits of industrial citizenship in the context of a global decline in rates of profitability?

WS | There cannot be a “return” to a “reformed version.” A “reformed version” lies ahead of us, not behind. Rebuilding a public dimension in the contracting for and the regulation of work must include new thinking about the context in which work is performed today, above all about internationalization and globalization, about financialization and its discontents, as well as about new forms of productive capital. It must be part of a general program of social reconstruction that is urgently needed after the devastations of neoliberalism.

Labor reform can ultimately succeed only as part of social reform, and no social reform is possible that doesn't include holding capital accountable for what it does and fails to do for society.”

In the first place, this would involve holding capital responsible again for the societies in which it wants to grow into more capital — making the modern economy *sustainable*, not only in an environmental but also a social sense. Whether in the process it will and can remain capitalist, and to what extent, will have to be seen. Labor reform can ultimately succeed only as part of social reform, and no social reform is possible that doesn't include holding capital accountable for what it does and fails to do for society. The meaning of social and economic “stability” and “profitability” will have to change in this process, which is something we know already from the battle over the climate.

What we are adding here is to remind others (and ourselves) that the battle over what can remain of capitalism today must encompass what we call the labor constitution, and for the same reasons. The market-driven global capitalism of the Walmart and Goldman Sachs version is no longer sustainable, and labor reform is one of the fields where the declining social utility of capitalism will have to be addressed.

Ultimately, this would involve an international framework for our economy in which profitability would (again) be of secondary importance to social sustainability — a matter to be addressed only after capital has paid its dues to human society and to nature. Whether this would still be capitalism is a question that capitalists have to answer.

JBO | Does the working class still need to be the linchpin of any renewed social-democratic or mass socialist politics?

WS | There is no sharp definition of “the working class” these days, and we won’t even try to suggest one. We stick to a broad provisional concept, good enough for our purpose, which is to develop a practical idea of a new, updated, repoliticized mode of regulation for contracting for work. That concept is based on what we call *the proletarian condition*: a location in the social structure that engenders a specific *proletarian anxiety* reflecting, first, a position in the *market* that forces you always to find someone who will buy your labor, and second, a position in the *hierarchy* of the organization of production that does not allow you to unload the uncertainty of your market situation onto subordinates, and indeed makes you subject to others unloading their uncertainties onto you.

In a proletarian condition, the risk is ever present that economic change may disrupt your *work-income nexus*, depriving you of your livelihood, your accustomed way of life, of the ability to raise your children in a way that allows them to grow into full members of the community, of the respect of others, or of the possibility of finding the kind of friends you want. Pensioners are included among the working class, so defined, since they live on wages earned under the proletarian condition and withheld for their retirement by the welfare state.

We draw the line where people, employed or not, have sufficient assets to exist outside of labor markets and hierarchical chains of command — people who can choose to withdraw from wage labor, who can live comfortable lives without it and without a social welfare state derived ultimately from the work-wage nexus. Note that we anchor the proletarian experience in *both* markets *and* hierarchies, and that we do not limit it to wage workers in a narrow sense; anybody at risk of losing their income at the receiving end of capitalism’s “creative destruction” is included and assumed to be in need of socially regulated labor markets in the society at large and of industrial democracy at the workplace.

Is this an adequate concept on which to base mass socialist politics? What it emphasizes is a need for protection from the uncertainties of labor markets and the pressures of hierarchical work organization, a need for people and families and regions that do not have the resources — material, social, whatever — to isolate themselves from the destructive impact of rapidly shifting relative prices for the labor they have to sell — so that they have permanently to watch out for the unexpected, to be ready to adjust and change, unsettled forever. This situation of dependency on the

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unknown — the proletarian condition — makes you depend upon political remedies outside of the market, on the politics of social rights, social solidarity, and social protection — which is what a renewed social democracy might offer, even though in the recent past it often enough failed to do so.

Where social democracy fails to do its job, or can no longer do it because of circumstances that have finally disempowered it, “revolutionary” politics — social unrest, massive expressions of social discontent — have their legitimate place.

Let me put it this way: where social-democratic reformism, including a progressive development of labor law to match the new world of work, fails to address the proletarian condition, a new kind of social democracy would have to come from mass political mobilization. Whoever must fear for his or her material and social life as a result of the market turbulences that come with capitalist “creative destruction,” especially today, where such destruction has become more rapid and unpredictable than ever before, is effectively part of the working class and can grow into, as you put it, a “renewed social-democratic or mass socialist politics.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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