

Towards emancipatory politics of work

Report on Axel Honneth's Benjamin Lectures "The Working Sovereign"

The free and status-assuring character of work is commonly considered a central part of the democratic self-image of Western European societies since the end of the 19th century. However, current working conditions fail to live up to this ideal. Be it the dismantling of the legal protection of contractual employment through the cutback of legally guaranteed rights to wage and protection against dismissal, the systematic undermining of trade union representation, or the progressive outsourcing of work activities into the "black box" of the private sphere—a whole range of erosive phenomena seem to shape many peoples' experiences in the world of work in ways that put the hopes in its manifest democratic and democratizing power into question. In light of these circumstances, it was all the more promising that in 2021's *Walter Benjamin Lectures* the influential social philosopher Axel Honneth set out to illuminate the complex interrelation between conditions of work and the state of democracy.

Starting with the critical observation that most contemporary analyses of de-democratization neglect the sphere of work, Honneth's lecture *The Working Sovereign* ("Der arbeitende Souverän") aimed to offer a renewed conceptualization of the contradiction between the social reality of work and its repeated failures to contribute to a more democratic culture. In a nutshell, the central thesis was that those who are systematically denied a say in shaping their working conditions, who are not able to even imagine the social significance of their work, who work too long and are still permanently plagued by existential fears, are unlikely to be equipped with the tools necessary to become active and independent democratic participants in the public sphere. Conversely, those who engage in appropriately challenging, actively shapeable, and socially stimulating forms of work will be more likely to find themselves able to fulfill the demanding role of a contributing member of the political community.

On this basis, we should understand the widespread disenchantment with politics ("Politikverdrossenheit") and the rampant disinterest in the practices of democracy (at least partially) as symptoms of an erosive precarisation in a world of work in which isolation, ruthless overstrain (or, conversely, continuous underload), lack of independence and rigid hierarchies are ubiquitous and deeply embedded. If current political philosophy neglects this elementary importance of a fair social division of labor for the general ability to participate democratically, Honneth claimed, it not only stands in the way of a more appropriate understanding of current de-democratization tendencies but also of the material socio-political project of an emancipatory politics of work.

The emancipatory potential of work

Under the title “Die Arbeit (in) der Demokratie” (“The Labor of Democracy”) Honneth centered his first of three lectures around the normative question of how to ascribe value to work. To contextualize the main thrust of his thesis in the history of political theory, he began by distinguishing three traditions of thought, each with a different normative justification for a critique of working relations in capitalist societies.

The first model, the classical *critique of alienation*, whose paradigmatic case is, as Honneth described, outlined in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, denounces all working conditions that do not allow the working activity to find a self-determined and creative form. Alienated work, briefly put, is worthy of critique because its form determines that producers cannot recognize themselves in their product as the outcome of the planned, intentional, and productive use of their powers.

The second critical paradigm Honneth sketched might be called *critique of atomization*. From this standpoint, the ethical value of work stems from the realization of capacities either typical for the human species or at least psychologically and productively beneficial. Criticism in this respect is called for when the factual conditions of labor lead to working individuals not coming together in shared activities, but instead find themselves isolated and alone.

Concluding that neither option offers the convincing foundation necessary for a critique of current working relations, Honneth went on to present a third theoretical strand, which can be referred to as *de-democratization critique*. Building on Hegel’s insights in his *Philosophy of Right* as well as the works of Émile Durkheim and G. D. H. Cole, work in this tradition is not criticized for being opposed to the realization of an intrinsic value of the respective activity. Instead, the normative criterion for the justification of certain forms of work is shifted towards the question of whether they increase the capacity of the working subjects to make use of their right to democratic participation. In other words: Apt working relations must (at a minimum) be just and transparent in order to serve the purpose of promoting democratic participation. Subsequently, Honneth sketched out how such democracy-serving forms of work should be designed. *Firstly*, the work activity should serve as a source of recognition from which the working individuals can draw self-confidence and a positive relationship towards their abilities. *Secondly*, the significance of the work as a contribution to society should be as transparent and comprehensive as possible. *Thirdly*, working conditions should be open to rational rearrangements that allow workers themselves to contribute substantially. *Fourthly*, work needs to be prevented from becoming an energy-sapping experience of dependency,

unnecessary vulnerability, and insecurity—be it due to fixed-term employment, insufficient wages, or disrespect towards individual needs. *Lastly*, time resources besides working hours and recreation need to be sufficient for individuals to catch up with political issues, diligently forge opinions, and publicly express them.

On the concept and the current state of work

With the second evening's lecture "Die Wirklichkeit der gesellschaftlichen Arbeit" (*The Reality of Social Labor*) Honneth shifted the focus from the normative perspective of how to criticize the forms of work to the two issues of (a) the fundamental question of what should count as work and (b) the current state of work from a more sociological standpoint.

Beginning with the conceptual question, Honneth highlighted the importance of learning from past mistakes and recognizing domestic and care work as work, making sure the concept of work is not confined carelessly to the domain of market demands and the realm of contractually regulated wage labor. Yet, as Honneth stressed, it should also be avoided to think of work in such a vague and broad way that it ultimately covers all human activities. Navigating between these extremes, Honneth defined work as all activities necessary for the preservation of the cultural form of life (including all of its components) a society considers valuable. In other words, work stands for all those activities that contribute to the social reproduction of a given form of life.

Building on this understanding, Honneth set out to describe four significant sociological trends regarding the gap between the normative claim of a democracy-promoting form of work and the factual reality of the current state of work in Western Europe:

- (1) a tendency towards a fragmentation of activities resulting in the social isolation of workers;
- (2) an increasing sequentialization and fragmentation of the "normal working biography," manifesting itself in the rising numbers of disconnected short-term projects;
- (3) the transition from the primacy of manual activities to a "work of the eye," which is much more centered around processing symbols, organizing, and coordinating; and finally,
- (4) an increase in precariousness and insecurity in the sphere of classical wage labor, as can be seen in the ubiquity of fixed-term contracts or the increasing disconnection from trade union representation through isolation in self-employment.

Despite all instances of undeniable progress in working conditions since the time of industrialization (e. g., increase in real wages or expansion of the socio-legal status of wage

labor), Honneth drew the sobering conclusion that this current state of work is far from promising in terms of its capacity to promote democracy. Instead, the capitalist world of work is still characterized by a severe lack of independence, substantial recognition, and opportunities for participation.

Towards an emancipatory politics of work?

In his third and final lecture, “Der Kampf um die gesellschaftliche Arbeit” (*A Democratic Politics of Labor*), Honneth elaborated on realistic possibilities for correcting the course of existing working relations. Beginning his discussion with reflections on the term “social division of labor,” he pointed out the theoretical (and political) importance of a universal possibility for every working individual to experience the interwoven and mutually constitutive character of all socially necessary work. The particular form the division of labor takes in a given historical situation should neither be seen as endlessly malleable nor as technologically predetermined: Neither do technical constraints determine how activities can or cannot be divided into professional profiles nor is a given factual arrangement entirely arbitrary. The inertia of factors such as different milieu-related socialization and/or hegemonic ideologies about the abilities of different social groups cannot be overcome without constant and profound political resistance.

Yet, Honneth estimated that the chances for such constant and political resistance, that would transform the world of work to be more inclusive and enable fair participation of all groups and individuals in the process of democratic deliberation, are extremely limited. One reason is that public attention, in Honneth’s view, has significantly turned away from issues of work. In addition to this, Honneth recognized that there are narrow boundaries for any substantial transformation of the world of work set by the requirements of climate protection.

With these severe restrictions in mind, Honneth limited his suggestions for the democratization of work in today’s world to a set of “ends in view” (Dewey) primarily relying on the levers of politics and law. What is most essentially needed today, he claimed, is (a) to drain the low-wage sector as well as (b) the development of non-market-driven forms of allocating work—e.g., through temporary state service obligations for a fairer distribution of particularly disagreeable and laborious activities—, and (c) the expansion and promotion of cooperative and self-managed associations. Ending his lecture, Honneth recited two additional criteria by the French sociologist Durkheim: Firstly, the enrichment of individual professional profiles by so many tasks that their respective role and social significance become appropriately transparent. And secondly, making work for each individual a stimulating compound of diverse

activities in order to counteract deadening monotony, since the preservation of mental flexibility has to be regarded as an essential prerequisite for any vital participation in the public sphere of democracy.

Questions and Critique

While being as thought-provoking, insightful, and timely as expected, Axel Honneth's examination of the interconnectedness of democratic potentials and the state of the sphere of work still left room for questions and further elaborations. To end this report, this section will provide a brief overview of some criticisms as well as invitations for further clarification—partly taking up the very fruitful commentaries delivered by Ruth Yeoman, Christine Wimbauer, and Andrea Komlosy, partly going beyond them.

- (1) Concerning Honneth's heuristic distinction between the three traditions of *alienation critique*, *atomization critique*, and *de-democratization critique*, one might ask whether Honneth's reading does justice to the authors' original positions. Or, if it doesn't, whether his typology might even unnecessarily rule out productive paths of social critique of work. This reconsideration might be especially worthwhile since it does not seem self-evident that Honneth's main argument for an empowering and democratically enabling spill-over effect from the sphere of work necessarily relies on such a clear-cut distinction of the three types of critique he distinguished in his first lecture. On the contrary, it might be compelling to pursue the possible overlaps and inter-dependencies of these types as critical dimensions in his line of thought rather than choosing one of them from the get-go. Couldn't the rightfully criticized de-democratizing effect of the current state of work for example be taken as the starting point of a revitalization of the concept of alienation?
- (2) Approaching the malaises of the current state of work from a different theoretical tradition, Ruth Yeoman critically highlighted that Honneth's decision to look for the meaningfulness of work primarily outside of work itself—i.e., in its democratizing effect— neglects the collective, social, and political dimension of the production of meaning in the process of work itself. According to Yeoman, meaningful work is to be understood as a regulative idea that—even if it can hardly ever be fully realized—shapes people's thinking and actions significantly when it comes to changing working conditions for the better. Consequently, the crucial question for Honneth's project of an emancipatory politics of work is whether he might lose an important resource if he leaves out the production of meaning in work and merely focuses on meaning as a secondary effect.
- (3) In reaction to the second lecture, Christine Wimbauer took a critical stance on Honneth's

concept of work. While being generally in favour of Honneth's line of argument, Wimbauer warned that the image of the communal determination of either necessary or non-necessary activities within a form of life might run the risk of tipping over into a kind of social romanticism, thereby obfuscating existing power and inequality relations in pluralistic, intersectionally stratified societies.

- (4) A rather surprising turn for some audience members seemed to have been Honneth's rejection of the proposal of a universal basic income (UBI) during his third lecture, which was premised on the assumption that the proponents of UBI expected it fulfill the ambitious goal of equipping people with the experience that makes them fit for democratic practices—instead of simply setting up a safety net for people not to fall below the poverty line. However, this comparison begs the question, whether any of the proponents of UBI would actually understand this as the goal of UBI. Here a clarification would help: Was Honneth's dismissal of a UBI rooted in this premise or was it driven by realist political-strategical calculations (e.g. that it appears fairly unlikely to push through both—a substantial reform of the work sector *and* a UBI; or that many of the current proposals for a UBI in Germany are bound to re-finance-plans which include problematic cuts of other services of the welfare state and might therefore end up as a “net negative”)?
- (5) In her comment on Honneth's third lecture, Andrea Komlosy remained sceptical about the idea of entrusting the state with the task of distributing compulsory services to sustain the common good and create more democratic participation. Her counter-proposal was to institutionalize decentralised decision-making powers at the local levels of political administration in conjunction with operational self-administration. Here, it would have been illuminating to hear Honneth contextualize his political proposals even further, especially clarifying the role of the state.
- (6) Lastly, and more of a wishful inspiration than a follow-up question or critique, it might have been enormously instructive to see Honneth build a bridge between his considerations about the de-democratization-effects of deficient working conditions and a social-psychological analysis, as has been a substantial part of the early Frankfurt School's interdisciplinary attempts to understand the affective-motivational dimension of anti-democratic sentiments, attitudes, and susceptibilities. Thereby, Honneth might link the structurally missed chances for building democratic capabilities to the psychologically damaging effect that an undemocratically structured sphere of work has on its workers. While such a multi-layered approach would most certainly have exceeded the scope of the already ambitious and dense line of thought that Honneth presented at the Freiluftkino

Hasenheide, it would be a fascinating future extension of his current project to look forward to.

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