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**The Multiplicity of Meanings of Work**

Much research has identified and sought to explain changes such as the entry of women into paid jobs and the rise of zero-hour contracts. While in one sense novel, this research has been invariant in another way: it holds fast to the concept of work as defined at the heyday of Fordist industrial relations. Novelty is understood within the confines of “work.” This research project investigates whether social actors have come to draw the boundary around “work” in a way that is different from the way that social actors did 50 years ago (and which is still used by most researchers). The new approach promises to help explain phenomena that puzzle old accounts. For example, where traditional accounts ask why social actors do not mobilize more against poor working conditions, the new approach may find that social actors do not think of those arrangements as work and hence that these arrangements do not give rise to feelings of work-related grievances.

(1) Sociology of work

Within American sociology the topic of work currently experiences a renaissance. The topic for the 2020 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association is “Power, Inequality and Resistance at Work.” The description of that conference theme echoes the main driver of the new interest: the technological revolution in the American workplace through artificial intelligence, robots and the platform economy (Danaher 2019).

The focus of this literature is both new and old. The specific impacts of the new trend of technology differ from those trends that have sparked earlier waves of scholarship in the past decades, e.g., the decline of unions, the widespread entry of women into the labor force and the globalization of the division of labor. But the conceptualization of work employed by most sociologists of work has not changed. So the epitome of work continues to be the 40-hour well paid job with one employer that one employee holds down for decades (Rodgers 1978). It is against this backdrop of an industrial ideal type of work that an extensive literature on career patterns, wage premiums and work life balance has developed (Tilly and Tilly 1997). Even scholarship that investigates the moral meaning of work has focused on cases in which the research subjects share the industrial definition of a real job (Lamont 2002; Blair-Loy 2005).

Researchers have not been unrealistic: they have not assumed that all forms of work fit into this industrial ideal type. However, they have assumed that more and more of the work carried out in a society would conform to this ideal type and that hence research should not waste its time on traditional or intermediate forms (Benanav 2019). Instead, researchers analyzed the industrial kind of work in depth. This strategic choice seems less and less defensible. Sociologists have documented the disappearance of industrial type work from the United States. This can take the form of factories closing their doors (Goldstein 2017; Broughton 2016). It can also take the form of the fissuring of the workplace: the same work that was previously done through regular jobs with one large company is now increasingly done through more flexible, less protected legal alternatives to a labor contract that are issued by subcontracting firms (Weil 2017).

The (explicit or implicit) concern motivating this research is a desire to improve working conditions. Yet everything that has been tried so far has not really worked (Reich and Bearman 2018).

The proposed project takes the view that this explanatory weakness results in part from a discrepancy of how sociologists define work and how many Americans today define work. Many Americans who are in their 20s or 30s today have never held a job close enough to the industrial ideal type to let them develop a concept of work resembling that presupposed by the traditional sociology of work. These American may engage in activities that traditional sociologists would describe as (bad) work, but the social actors today conceive of these activities as something other than work.

Over the past decades, industrial type jobs have become widely unexperienced and partly unthinkable for many Americans. To find inspiration for how to study the novel conceptions of work that arose in this breach, I turn to two bodies of research outside the sociology of work: the sociology of non-work (e.g. of leisure and gender) insofar as it touches on work and the non-sociology (mostly history) of work.

(2) An alternative perspective

Important insights on how people define work can be gleaned, first, from several recent publications in sociology that position themselves in literatures on other topics, e.g., gender or leisure. Because these scholars do not position themselves in the sociology of work, they are not tempted to postulate the industrial ideal type of work, but are more open to following the definition of work that their research subjects use.

Rachel Sherman (2019) conducted an ethnography of elite life on the Upper East Side of New York. In a chapter with the pithy name “Working hard or hardly working–productivity and moral wealth,” she describes that even those who inherited wealth justify their elite position through those parts that of their wealth that they won through what they call hard work. Many women who live on the Upper East Side would not be counted as working according to the definition of work typically used in the sociology of work. However, in their conversations with Sherman, they describe themselves as working hard, referring to child care, vacation planning, house renovations, volunteer work, and management of nannies and tutors as real work.

Ranita Ray (2017) has studied people at the other end of the income distribution: mostly black working class teenagers. They have high aspirations and seek meaningful work. They see college as a necessary step on that road. They do not define their lifegoal as a stable unionized job, but sidestep this definition and instead focus on the content of a job that appeals to them, e.g., psychologist, cosmetologist, or a job in the fashion industry. They virtually all work as teenagers in jobs that are minimum-wage service jobs according to the conventional view, but which they do not yet view as their real jobs because they have not yet gone to college. Ray hints at the fact that most of her research subject will not be able to enter or finish college. The question how her research subjects will then adjust to the elusiveness of the jobs to which they aspired remains open.

Second, work has been studied outside of sociology by scholars who were more attuned to the changing definitions of work that actors use. Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt’s (1996) study of workers in the period between 1920 and 1940 illustrates an alternative to the ideal typical definition of work (with its attendant leisure through consumption) that could assert itself for some time. William Keith Kellogg, the founder of the company that brings you your breakfast, sought to increase the time that workers would spend outside of the factory and tried do get them to spend that time with things other than consumption. He held the belief that sharing work equally among the inhabitants of a town–to decreasing unemployment by splitting up shifts–didn’t only create social peace and income for everybody, but also free up time for other activities. For about two decades, most inhabitants of the company town Battle Creek, MI adopted this understanding of work as a handmaiden of social inclusion.

Michael Seidman’s (1990) study of workers in Spain and France in 1936 suggests that workers do not define work according to the industrial ideal type out of their own volition and then benefit from unions that improve the conditions of work so understood. Instead, unions played a crucial role in spreading that ideal typical definition of work. The people who are commonly described as workers in an important instance were unwilling to work at all. With the decline of the unions, we might ask today whether such challenges to work can arise again or whether there are institutions other than unions that today spread a different but possibly similarly potent definition of work.

(3) Measuring the meanings of work

Taking inspiration from Kozlowski, Taddy and Evans’ (2019) study of the meaning of social class over many decades, I will study how the meaning of work has changed. I am particular interested in the understandings of everyday-Americans, as opposed to union leaders or politicians. (My hunch is that the definition of work by regular Americans has changed substantially in the most recent decades while the definition used by union leaders has remained rather static. But this is a question for a follow-up project.) My goal is to capture the meaning that regular Americans ascribe to ‘work’ with as little mediation through, e.g., the categories used by journalists who wrote the articles available in newspaper archives or by the researchers of the past whose understandings of work shaped the questions that were asked in surveys. Hence, I will use a database of oral histories. The interviewers in oral histories are trained to keep their own worldview as far as possible out of the picture and to open conversational space for the interviewees to express themselves in their own words.

I will draw my data from “Oral History Online,” which contains 2700 databases with oral histories with up to several hundred oral histories each. Based on the methods that I have learned so far in this class, I am already able to, for example, identify left and right neighbors for the word ‘work’. As the quarter progresses, I will learn additional methods that will allow me to conduct more sophisticated analysis of how the meaning of work among regular Americans has changed, e.g., word embedding models.

Finding out what work means for people today will help to understand where their standards of justice come from and what the sources of meaning in their lives are.

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