

The Working Sovereign: A conversation with Axel Honneth

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Abstract

In the summer of 2021, Axel Honneth was invited by the Centre for Social Critique Berlin to give the Walter Benjamin Lectures. The lectures have now been published in German under the title *Der arbeitende Souverän* (*The Working Sovereign*). In a conversation with the directors of the Centre for Social Critique, Rahel Jaeggi and Robin Celikates, Axel Honneth explains why he believes a political theory of labor is necessary, how the world of work has changed, and what opportunities and risks this entails for democratization processes.

Keywords

Axel Honneth, critical theory, democracy, division of labor, work

Rahel Jaeggi: For quite some time, work had mostly vanished from the agenda of political and even social philosophy. What caused a subject as important as work to no longer be as comprehensively discussed and mapped as other topics? And why do you think that now is the time to change this?

Axel Honneth: Forty or 50 years ago, work was still at the center not just of critical social theory but also of political attention. Back then—partly due to the strong presence of unions and the programs to humanize work—a certain clarity prevailed that employment relations co-determine society's condition and the political

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prospects of democracy. It is possible that the disappearance of work as an analytic concept was a reaction to an overvaluation of its influence on politics and society. In any case, it is true that for roughly 40 years the topic of work all but vanished from the attention of the political public as well as from the horizon of a critical social theory, being eclipsed by other foci and conceptualizations. The ecological question, which today is the question of climate catastrophe, rightly took precedence. As did the problems and concerns of minority groups. And only now the time seems ripe for the topic of work (understood in the broadest sense possible) to attract new attention. Today's working conditions are far more precarious, far more dismantled than they were in the relatively safe era of social democracy that prevailed until the end of the 1970s . . .

Jaeggi:

So, in a way, engagement with the topic is following a pendular movement, and you want to initiate the pendulum's swing back into the other direction?

Honneth:

Initiate, yes. I still remember the significance the "humanization of work" held—also in the public's perception—at the beginning of my own studies. At the time, your father, Urs Jaeggi, was researching literature that was written by workers covering the working world and the societal ills arising around it (*Literatur der Arbeitswelt*). As with everything that we did in Bochum, the focus was on work, primarily in the form of industrial labor, and how it was experienced. Curiously, we still felt as if we were living in a society determined and dominated by industry, although, that had already started to change at that point. Nonetheless, we believed that it was the workers' movement and the experience of work that were the mobilizing force and the realm of experience that one had to turn one's attention to. This went on until around 1975. That it stopped then came down to many developments that cannot be summarized easily. But it vanished and trickled away, both in the realm of theory and the political public. Surprisingly, it did not return to its former place when working conditions were completely and rapidly precarized. Instead, the topic of work continued its shadowy existence. That I turned my attention back to it is also related to my memories of a former topic. Yet, primarily, it was due to very different, partly time-diagnostic examinations that the relevance of work presented itself to me anew. If you read Didier Eribon, for example,—not that I am a huge fan of his—but if you read *Returning to Reims*, you realize, that industrial labor and certain sectors of work have ceased to be perceivable realms of experience within our societies. Furthermore, you see how drastically political mentalities have changed. And these changes require attention. Generally speaking, one could say that

those working in this classic sense are more likely to be exhibiting authoritarian, and conservative reactions, whilst liberal and left-liberal sentiments can be found rather among those employed in a different kind of work, such as academia.

Robin Celikates: The imagery of the pendulum might suggest that your aim is to simply shift the social-theoretical focus back to the forgotten topic of work, but this is just one aspect of your project. Your aim is more ambitious: you claim that the sociological engagement with work to date has been one-sided. The essential importance of work and of the division of labor for democratic societies has not or only rarely been sociology's focus. After all, the actual scandal, that you identify in your Benjamin Lectures, is that neither democratic theory nor sociology have adequately thematized the relationship between work and democracy.

Honneth: Indeed, the theoretical point of departure was that I realized how outrageous it is that, on the one hand, democratic theory, from the 1960s onward, stopped to regard proper working conditions as a necessary part of democratic societies, and that, on the other hand, this relationship between work and democracy remained mostly obscured and vague within sociology as well. For example, critical industrial sociology, that had its heyday in the 1960s and '70s, had no conception of its own normative orientation. Just think of the term "humanization," which concerned the humaneness of work understood as the individual welfare of the working person. Industrial sociology, then, too, failed to see a connection with democratic conditions. The scales fell from my eyes, and I wanted to put the focus of my own lectures on this connection.

Jaeggi: Before we continue to talk about the connection between democracy and work, we should perhaps take a step back and look at the concept of work that is at the center of your thought? What does work mean to you? What is the division of labor? And what is the role of work as a basic concept? I'm asking these questions against the background of the pendular movement you are outlining. The move away from working conditions was not only a departure from the workers' situation and how the working conditions manifest themselves for the individual. Far more, this was based on a fundamental decision in terms of theory. Back then Habermas differentiated between work and interaction, and everyone—to put it pointedly—threw themselves at interactions, whilst pushing aside work as an instrumental relation. This replaced a social theory that considered work—not just the fact that humans work, but "work"—as that power that produces society and holds it together. I would be interested in knowing to what extent you are reassessing the fundamental terms and directions of theory. And, therefore, my question is: What actually is work for you?

- Honneth:** That working conditions as well as the essential value work holds for the constitution and reproduction of society took a backseat was, of course, not entirely independent of this shift in focus. Due to Habermas, as well as the simultaneous rediscovery of Hannah Arendt, it suddenly seemed obvious that reflecting on ourselves as democratic societies and reassuring ourselves of the foundations of our political togetherness were public interactions. The signs, thus, pointed toward communication, and one began to think of society primarily as an outcome of specific structures and mechanisms of communication. This was a major turning point, and, before anyone really realized, the—today one would say “material”—foundation of these structures of communication vanished from our view. It simply disappeared. Which also explains the narrow-mindedness of democratic theory. It suddenly became a theory of those deliberations by which a democratic public reflects its own preconditions. The focus was put on the procedures of communication necessary for the facilitation of democratic decision-making and will-formation. And one stopped to consider that these structures of communication have material preconditions that need to be reproduced each day anew. To add a footnote here: Paradoxically, it is only John Rawls, who is free from this mistake, as he repeatedly states that political justice is preconditioned upon a fair system of cooperation. He repeats this on nearly every third page. This is how he starts all his further reflections on principles of political justice. Cooperation has many meanings in his writings, but first and foremost it means the social division of labor. Everyone contributes their part to the preservation of the community, which one desires to be organized in democratic and fair ways. And this precondition, meaning the anchoring of political justice in fair cooperation, was no longer considered at all.
- Celikates:** Then again, it is interesting that Rawls in return seems to more or less ignore the role of political participation.
- Honneth:** Yes, that is correct.
- Celikates:** Political justice presupposes fair conditions of cooperation, but at the same time the subjects of justice are not considered primarily as participating citizens, who are part of the sovereign in the strong sense. They only partake in relatively minor legislative acts, as the essential decisions on fundamental questions have already been made in the process of defining what justice requires.
- Honneth:** Yes, that is correct. At the same time, Rawls underscores, far more strongly than others, how the willingness to cooperate is anchored in the existence of fair conditions of cooperation. Yet, he fails to adequately reflect them. This, after all, is one of the paradoxes of his work.

- Jaeggi:** It is actually interesting that the conditions of cooperation are presupposed throughout without ever explaining: What is cooperation? How does cooperation arise?
- Honneth:** What does it mean to speak of fair cooperation in such a way that the fairness of cooperation precedes the fairness of political justice? I think that this is somewhat paradoxical.
- Jaeggi:** . . . and backfires when it comes to global justice.
- Celikates:** You need both sides for your approach: First, the strong thesis that we are living in a society that understands itself as democratic and has a strong concept of the sovereign. Second, the thesis that the vast majority of those who form the sovereign are first and foremost working subjects. Of course, they are also citizens, but not with the same degree of self-evidence with which they are working subjects in their everyday lives.
- Honneth:** And this has consequences for both approaches to theory construction. For those, who take a sociological approach to work, it means that the central normative question has to be how working conditions can be constructed in such a way that they can fulfill their promise of allowing active participation in political will-formation. And, on the other hand, this means that democratic theory, too, must consider this relationship and cannot pretend that it is some given precondition regarding which no further thought is needed. After all, for most of these subjects, the possibility to actually participate depends on how they work and under what conditions they do so.
- Jaeggi:** Yes, but how exactly? One could understand this in a way—which is quite different from the one you intend—that is disrespectful toward workers: they are all busy working, and working conditions are not really designed in a way that enables people to partake in democracy. They simply have too little time and energy for democracy. But, without denying the factors of time and energy, what you are trying to say goes much further. You are trying to say that there is another way in which working conditions are a part of what makes the sovereign a *democratic sovereign* and the subjects *democratic subjects*. But how exactly does one have to understand this? And what are the competences required for participation? Especially if you do not want to say that workers, due to the way they are working, are too dumb and too tired, which, in turn, would mean that the majority of the population would be incapable of democracy. So, what exactly is it that work should or could contribute, yet fails to?
- Honneth:** A remark in advance: One could cynically say that there is something to the claim that “those who work under certain conditions are incapable of democracy”—John Stuart Mill already said that as did Kant. That is extremely cynical, and during Mill’s and

Kant's time, it was furthermore utterly authoritarian and extremely undemocratic. Nonetheless, there is a spark of truth in it. Kant, who after all was not dumb, was aware that someone who works in extreme dependence, who is subjugated by their superior or foreman, by an entrepreneur or direct superior in the domestic sphere, and who is not granted their own opinion, cannot be a citizen. That was Kant's belief. And that—insofar as we are speaking of political practices and not of a formal status—is not completely wrong. The problem is that everyone at the time drew the wrong consequences from this. They limited suffrage and took the right to vote from those who they considered incapable of adequate participation. Instead, they could have said: we must change the constraining conditions of work. This would have been consistent with their own theory of democracy. If democracy presupposes the independence of each individual citizen, then we damn well must strive to redesign the working conditions in such a way that this independence is a given—which is an argument we can today, for example, find in Elizabeth Anderson's recent work.

Jaeggi:

But can one not also say, conversely, that the workers' movements themselves were great drivers of democracy, and that empowerment to democratic participation has historically arisen in the process of resisting bad working conditions?

Honneth:

At least the social-democratic movement was based on this impulse. I am not sure, whether one was always aware of the argumentative architecture of one's own position. However, as Thomas H. Marshall, for example, reconstructs this, the struggle of the workers' movement was a struggle against conditions that made it impossible for the working majority of the population to make use of the political rights they formally possessed. This means that the struggle for social rights was a struggle for rights that should in turn make it possible to effectively use political rights that had already been granted. This account offered by Marshall always made sense to me. Now, I do not want to claim that this was the self-understanding of the workers' movement. However, it is a way to reconstruct the moral logic of these struggles.

Jaeggi:

My question was intended in a slightly different way. When you say that, in a certain sense, it is correct that these people are incapable of democracy—an observation many have already made and have gone on to draw the wrong conclusions from—, then I wonder, whether it is not precisely in the course of the struggle against bad working conditions that they become capable of democracy? This would mean that the institutionalization of better working conditions is not a necessary prerequisite for people to become capable of democracy . . .

Honneth:

Sure, historically it was the case that the capacities for democracy grew with those struggles. The workers' movement did not just aim to create the conditions for participation. Instead, they emancipated the majority of the working class through the struggle against the status quo. This was done in the sense of developing their own structures for democratic action, such as proletarian counterpublics. These were all learning processes in democratic will-formation. This is how it actually took place. Today, the workers' movement is in bad shape. Yet, I also believe that a new politics of work can only be successful if it finds a foothold among those it concerns and empowers them to actually fight for improvements. After all, it is the experience of the struggle which goes hand in hand with the empowerment to political action. Everything hinges on the concept "politics of work," which I also scrutinize in the lectures as well as in the book. How do you actually describe "politics of work"? Is it politics done for workers? Or is it also politics that essentially creates the empowerment of the subject it simultaneously addresses?

Celikates:

Probably, one would need to make a distinction here: On the one hand, one would need to spell out the minimal conditions for political participation, civil rights, etc. Looking at your various criteria (time, education, character, dispositions), these would have to be formulated in rather minimalist terms to avoid those exclusions that Kant, for example, considered unproblematic. On the other hand—and distinct from this—, one would need to capture conceptually that the working subjects have used their political participation rights to shape working conditions in ways that enable and strengthen participation. This appears to be a dialectic development. However, I would like to turn to another central point that you consider at the beginning of your lectures: The politics of work also includes struggles over what counts as work. These struggles are about the appreciation of activities excluded from wage labor, meaning they are excluded from what is recognized by society as work. Furthermore, such struggles are also about extending the politics of work to capture subjects traditionally not included in this politics. Perhaps, we can return to this opening of the category of work and ask how you conceptualize work in a way that is simultaneously strong enough to allow for something like a politics of work, whilst at the same time acknowledging the fact that work is not a fixed but a socially contested category. This seems especially important since your own attempt to define work seeks to capture this social contestation.

Honneth:

In thinking about the lectures and working on the first draft, I found that the classic definition of work is rather restrictive.

First, work is tailored to capture forms of industrial labor. That is the dominant image. It took a long time for services to even be considered. But even after that, and that is the second point, work remained limited to those activities taking place in publicly visible spaces: in governmental agencies, factories, and similar institutions serving work. Third, work is usually only that for which there is demand—demand here being economic demand, meaning work is that for which there is a market. One first has to undo these restrictions step by step to see that the social division of labor, and thus the material reproduction of society depends on far more activities than those captured by the one-sided gaze permitted by the classical definition of work. And then one can reconstruct the history of the definition of work as a history of struggles for the recognition and visibility of activities that despite their existential importance for the survival of the community, have been ignored and neglected. We know these struggles from the feminist debates about domestic labor. I think this was the first active attempt to publicly show the existence of activities that are assigned to only one group or class—in this case women—without even counting as work. Retrospectively, one can identify many such types of activities that did not fall under the official definition of work. After all, the sociology of work was part of industrial sociology and not the sociology of domestic labor nor the sociology of cleaners. One part of the lectures consisted in widening the definition of work, so that it could cover these unmentioned activities and performances that did not fall into the classical spectrum. However, at the same time, and this was the real difficulty, I had to ensure that the spectrum did not expand so far that purely private activities and hobbies would automatically fall under it. In other words, I had to find a demarcation between social and private activities. That was a huge difficulty that I struggled with, and I remain unsure whether I succeeded in resolving it. My idea boiled down to the proposal to call all activities “labor” that are done for the sake of maintaining the social form of life as it is collectively understood at a specific time and in a specific culture. Most of the time, work is about the satisfaction of needs and demands, the question, however, is which needs and demands count as those that have to be satisfied by laboring activities and which are in need of public regulation. Here I took inspiration from John Dewey to develop the central idea that all activities and tasks which the political community regards as needing some kind of normative regulation should be called “social labor.” All activities, met by society with such an active interest, I wanted to call social labor. Nonetheless, to undertake

such a widening of the definition of work was not easy, as one is directly confronted with imminent difficulties. For example: Is one being sufficiently open to future changes in the understanding of what activities are necessary for the maintenance of the given form of life? That is, is one receptive to the possibility that activities, which today are considered self-evidently private in character will be seen as public in the future? However, I attempted to capture the need to extend the definition of work much further without falling into the trap of counting purely private hobbies and activities as work.

Jaeggi:

So, you neither want to completely widen and universalize the concept of work nor define it overly narrow. But does that not run the risk of leaving you with a conventionalist understanding of work? By conventionalist I mean that we can simply make a collective decision as to what work is. Thus, society simply defines what it is willing to recognize as work in the context of the reproduction of its form of life. One could oppose this by saying that it cannot be this simple. There have to be more substantive criteria for what counts as work, especially if its conception is tied to societies' ability to reproduce itself at—and expand upon—the level of cultural development it has reached. One could say, for example, that the fight for visibility is not only a struggle for recognition of work. Far more, the argument that is being made underlines that it is work that is needed. So, it is not limited to an intersubjective claim, but always has this societal focal point: Where would we end up if this kind of work was not done? And this seems to add something more substantial than that what is covered by your “conventionalist-politician” understanding of work—as one could almost say if one were to use your own terms against you.

Honneth:

I see the problem, but I do not think that a social theory or a political theory of work is able to draw this line by itself. I do not think that we can pre-empt the decision of a political community as to what it considers beneficial and not beneficial, necessary and unnecessary for its social form of life. After all, these are extremely far-reaching decisions, which are played out in political debates. And there are many more avenues open than we realize today. This means that a political community can conclude—and in the past political communities have come to this conclusion—that certain artistic activities provide a socially necessary aesthetic self-assurance of the community's cultural context. With the result—as could be observed in the GDR or the former Soviet Union—that artistic work is far better aligned and paid by the society than it is today. However, I do not believe that the theorist has enough or sufficient arguments

to make such a decision. There are just too many factors that need to be taken into account. And that is why ultimately the community itself has to decide in political disputes and democratic debates what it wants, and how much of it it wants. How many activities are to be turned into jobs although they are not jobs today . . . ? I am cautious about making such calls.

Jaeggi:

But can you not at least identify a core or range of activities of which *no* community would say this is *not* work?

Honneth:

Of course, there is something of a base that is unimaginable to not be work. And one can state what this base consists of: It starts with child-raising and also includes cooking, stretches from the building of housing facilities to some kind of agriculture. Cooking has been the most continuous activity since the dawn of humankind, as Jürgen Osterhammel observes. Cooking is the central social activity, the most consistent of all activities, that has always taken up the most space. But beyond this base there are many activities, of which we are unsure, whether they are a part of this core or not. We may be inclined to say that many business and finance operations certainly should not count as “labor” since we take them as being unnecessary for a valuable form of life. One can play in private stock exchanges, but, for the love of God, this is not something we should consider social labor nor something we should create demand for. At the same time, we can surely imagine that certain artistic activities can be seen as necessary—for example, to sustain a certain standard of cultural civilization. However, this does create follow-up problems: Who is the artist who is being paid? And who is the artist who is not? These are familiar problems. But these are all open questions, and I would like to have some more criteria to settle them. I just find them quite difficult questions.

Celikates:

I would now like to turn to the question of how your critique of working conditions and of the existing form of the division of labor is different from other philosophically and socially influential critiques of work. You aim to highlight that the ability of workers to participate in democratic will-formation is being undermined. Alternatively, one could draw on the critique of alienated, pointless work to claim that work should be something intrinsically meaningful. Another strategy is employed by critiques that underline the missing or at least underdeveloped cooperative character of work. You characterize these as two alternative strands of criticism of working conditions that you find problematic, because you consider them to be overly perfectionistic. Instead, in the lectures you favored your own rather instrumental model, which zooms in on the role that work plays for democracy.

- Honneth:** I have changed a lot of things in the meantime.
- Jaeggi:** In the Benjamin Lectures, however, you still decidedly distanced yourself from positions that formulate their critique of work in terms of alienation or based on a criterion of meaningful labor. Why is that? At first glance, one would think that these would be your natural allies. Yet, this does not seem to be the case.
- Honneth:** One could think some more about the expression “ally.” First, however, I have some rather philosophical and theoretical concerns. The whole idea of alienation originally starts with work that has a generative, producing character. And therein lies the actual attractiveness of the model. In a trivial sense it is correct that producing, generative work is all the more satisfying the more one can experience the fulfillment of one’s own intentions and wishes in the process of creation. This has an incredibly suggestive power and also corresponds to most people’s own experience. Thus, these are the forms of work that we all value most because they offer the chance to “objectify” oneself in the product. This also explains the attractiveness of the huge sector where hobbies and work intersect. These are forms of work that allow exactly this. One represents oneself in one’s own garden, even in the sausage one grills there in the evening. However, is this a reasonable model of employment relations altogether? Is it a reasonable model for the myriad forms of activities necessary to sustain our current mode of existence, the way it is developing right now? In my mind, these questions quickly reveal that the alienation model, or non-alienation model, is either far too demanding or far too trivial. It is too demanding if one really envisions the task of designing all these activities to be meaningful, or non-alienating, in such a way that they express people’s highest capabilities. Of course, the question remains as to what these highest capabilities are. But generally, imagination, planning ability, intentionality, creative capacities, and so on are considered a part of them. And I believe that not all tasks that need to be fulfilled can have this sophisticated character. This means that at this point the whole idea of meaningful, or non-alienated, work seems overly perfectionistic to me. Conversely, if we weaken the model, so that it fits, then we would be selling everything under value. Then it simply says that meaningful, or non-alienated, work is the kind of work in which human capabilities are articulated or represented. However, this happens in all activities, no matter how mucky they are.
- Jaeggi:** You are—purposefully—employing a very limited conception of alienated work. One that is incredibly perfectionistic . . .
- Honneth:** My point is that alienation and its opposite have to mean something objective—not just the feeling of the absence of alienation

or the feelings of contentment or meaningfulness. In those cases, one would be lost, as what I experience as fulfilling or unfulfilling depends on too many social and psychological factors. The sociology of work tells us that even the downtrodden cashier can find satisfaction in her work. That is why I think there has to be an objective criterion. And my worry is that if one tries to spell out this criterion, it will either be too perfectionistic or too trivial.

Jaeggi: In between subjective and objective criteria, however, there is also the question whether one has to start intrinsically, with the experience of work itself. Would it not be an alternative to say that meaningful or non-alienated work is that which contributes to the societal whole, to social cooperation? This could be experienced subjectively and assessed objectively. It would also fit well with the diagnosis regarding the prominent role the division of labor plays in modern societies.

Honneth: But that would still be insufficient, as it would entail that any work that can be experienced as contributing to the societal whole has to be described as non-alienating and meaningful.

Celikates: My sense is that the question of alienation revolves more around social relationships than the subjective level or an essentialist conception demanding that certain capabilities must be realized. When the social division of labor is organized in a rational, fair, reasonable, solidary, and transparent manner, then even those activities which you characterized as being by definition impossible to experience as meaningful can be performed in a non-alienated way because they are embedded in this form of division of labor.

Honneth: But this model is completely independent of any objective measure of alienation. And that roughly frames it in a manner that I myself would use to approach the issue. One first attempts to determine what fair, satisfactory, transparent forms of the division of labor are. Then one suggests that, subjectively, such working conditions are far more satisfying. This fully detaches the question from the intrinsic aspects of work, as it concerns well-organized, transparent working conditions that first and foremost make one's own contribution visible. If I can clearly understand my own work as a contribution to our community, then I am far more at one with it; I can experience a higher work-satisfaction and identify myself with my work to a higher degree. However, the normative criteria do not depend on the intrinsic elements of work but on the structure of the division of labor, on how the division of labor is organized. And then one still has to answer the essential question: What are the criteria for well-designed working conditions? Durkheim does not draw the

answer to this from the intrinsic components of the division of labor but rather uses a, possibly dated, model of organism as his framework. According to Durkheim, the division of labor has to be such that it can be experienced and formed organically as a self-reproducing whole. I share this sentiment, but would understand it somewhat differently, namely in such a way that it can be understood as an organic part of democratic societies. If the division of labor is exactly that through which a democratic community transparently reproduces itself, then this is my translation of Durkheim's criterion.

Celikates:

But how can you then continue to differentiate between your own approach and the other approach you reject that builds on a criticism of the conditions of work based on an ideal of solidary cooperation? Initially, your approach sounded far more instrumentalist. Your critique of the working conditions is based on something external to work, namely democratic participation. Now, however, it sounds as if you want to mediate between these two approaches: We do not critique working conditions in light of the degree to which they can be cooperatively organized but have to think of this in a macrosocial fashion linked to the democratic self-organization of the community. Is that your thesis?

Honneth:

Let me first say which strategy I consider to be implausible. On the one hand, one can draw standards from the intrinsic elements of either work or cooperation in order to be able to say what good working conditions are. When this is done in terms of alienation and meaningfulness, then one is primarily considering the individual process. In terms of cooperation, on the other hand, one can attempt to derive the criteria that allow one to formulate what good working conditions are from the intrinsic aspects of working together cooperatively. First, I believe that Durkheim employs neither of these two strategies. Second, I believe that both strategies lead to specific difficulties. We just spoke about the first one. Against the second I would argue that I do not believe that there exist intrinsic elements of acting cooperatively that can be applied to all possible working conditions. Now, I do also work with a notion of cooperation. However, my concept of cooperation arises much more from the idea of democratic will-formation. I ask myself which forms of cooperation should predominate in working conditions, so that those working there can understand themselves as participants in a democratic community. That is my divergent strategy. I want to move away from the intrinsic qualities of work, no matter whether it is individual or cooperative work.

Jaeggi:

We could, of course, continue to discuss whether Marx in his determination of alienated labor really does solely rely on intrinsic

criteria. However, I would like to get a better understanding of what it actually is that workers are to gain or learn from these improved working conditions. What are the competences that should lead toward democracy? Is work a form of education for democratic competences? And how should one picture this concretely? One learns to communicate, to cooperate, one experiences self-efficacy and self-empowerment. Are these the qualifying experiences? The politician thinkers among your detractors could always argue: I learn these things in a political context, in my civic volunteer work, for example. Why do I need work to learn this?

Celikates: Their claim could be that work just should not be an obstacle, as it is when we have to work too much . . .

Jaeggi: . . . and we cannot meet up anymore after work and organize ourselves in our districts. So, why does it have to happen through work? What exactly happens there?

Honneth: I would try to give a different answer and say that already in the role one performs at work one should be able to understand oneself as much as possible as a member of a democratic community. I believe that it remains an open question in how far it is possible to merge these two spheres completely. This is due to my conviction that both spheres, if one distinguishes them—and I do distinguish them—are subject to other standards of rationality or other organizational aspects. That is why I do not want to decide whether the end goal is a democratization of work. I would instead use a more procedural formulation to say that working conditions should as far as possible fulfill the conditions so that those working can already perceive themselves as democratic citizens.

Jaeggi: What does that mean concretely? When we talk about democracy in the workplace, then there is an alternative. One could either say that it is about the forming of democratic competences, or one could say that it is about the ability to decide within one's own working conditions about these working conditions, that is, to decide on what is being produced and how it is being produced. The latter does not seem to be a path you are following, as in that case work would be the place of democracy and in your thought work seems to be a precondition for democracy, which you want to keep differentiated from work.

Honneth: I distinguish these spheres only provisionally. But even if one aims to fully dissolve the differences between these two spheres, one should realize that they each have to provide something different and possess their own function. The one being the fulfillment of all existing needs, the other reasonable political decision-making. Considered thusly, these are two imperatives

or functions that need to be kept distinguished from another. In democratizing work relations, it is therefore best to proceed with a plurality of criteria. Those who work first need to be in possession of sufficient economic independence to even be able to make free decisions. This means that I am actually capable to support myself and my family or those people most important to me to the degree that we are not at the mercy of the arbitrary whims of others—which suggests that we will likely need more than the current minimum wage. Furthermore, workers should have a say in the conditions of their work as far as this is possible under the circumstances of wage labor. How to conceive of work conditions that manage without a market, and thus without the purchase of labor power, I do not know. And I also cannot image something like this because I am unable to imagine any labor relations that I consider justifiable and consistent with democratic societies that manage completely without some kind of labor market. But that also means that labor markets have to be controlled, designed, and civilized in such a way that they satisfy those conditions—which can be developed pluralistically—as far as possible. So, the criteria then are, as I said, first, economic independence. Second, I must already possess a say in the working conditions at my workplace. Third, if possible, teamwork should be the norm within the workplace. Fourth, my work should not mentally bore me, as that would rob me of my power to take initiative, which is necessary for being a democratic citizen. Fifth, all the working activities find sufficient public esteem and recognition independently from how intellectually challenging they are; to experience that my own contributions to the division of labor are seen as unimportant and are therefore not publicly appreciated, can lead to epistemic self-doubts that undermine my capacity to join the democratic debate and raise my own voice in public. Altogether I am working with these five criteria that should be met in order for the working conditions—and this I then mean in a stronger sense than you just formulated—to no longer stand counter to our democratic lifeworld but rather be a gateway to or a part of our democratic societies.

Celikates:

This is very helpful, and leads to two sets of follow-up questions, which we should at least discuss briefly. First, one can doubt that these criteria can be realized in the social reality of work under capitalist conditions. If this is the case, the gulf between these normative ideals outlining how the conditions should be and social reality is not only large but has even widened due to the structural changes affecting work these last decades. In your Benjamin Lectures you discuss the relevant tendencies: precarization, digitalization, increasing fragmentation, individualization, and atomization. The

Honneth:

second set of questions concerns how the democratic politics of work can react to this challenge. To simply return to the demand to abolish capitalism is, as you say, not very effective. Instead, you favor a pragmatic approach that aims to initiate radical change in the here and now. What starting points do you see for such change? I am still working on properly understanding the changes in working conditions. Nonetheless, there are a few tendencies that are clearly visible, that I find interesting, and that one has to become conscious of in order to really grasp what it is that we are currently talking about. First, there is the tendency that I think is the strongest, because it indicates the clearest trend: the individualization of work. In other words: the increasing destruction of any need for social cooperation. I would say that this is partly due to digitalization. However, work is being increasingly organized in such a way that it can be performed in solitary and solipsistic fashion, and thus monitored and controlled as an individual effort. This is an unprecedented trend, and maybe the most prominent one, because it stands in opposition to all Marxist hopes that one socializes in the workplaces and learns to cooperate there. Today, working itself is an increasingly individual activity. This goes as far as cleaning, as Philipp Staab has wonderfully demonstrated. Cleaning crews are organized in such a way that one does not clean one room together, but everyone is responsible for one room, and what little cooperation would be possible is being hampered. This makes it possible to control how much individual output you deliver within a given time. Performance monitoring, that is, the interest to increase individual productivity is next to digitalization one of the two driving mechanisms behind this huge trend to individualize work. A second trend is what I term the shift of work from the hand to the eye. This means that the registration of symbols is playing an increasingly important role compared to control by hand. Of course, some sectors in which the hand remains pivotal will persist, but the eye's registration of something is becoming increasingly central to working. This has been called the immaterialization of work, and despite this being a very vague notion it definitely corresponds to a trend. Precarization is the next trend that also goes hand in hand with another trend, that is, the increasing project-character of work. This change is an interesting development that one can consider both positively or negatively and it is due to the incredible growth of the service economy. In this sector, work can be completed best in the form of short projects. This in turn further increases the tendency toward individualization, as the project-character of work means that one no longer has lifelong colleagues. The old idea that one

makes most friends at work thus splinters. You are often changing your place of employment or are working from different places for your respective projects. This, too, leads to a disruption of the work-experience. Individualization, precarization, and disembodiment, these are three trends in the organization of work that I see as being predominant today. There are others, but I want to leave it at that for the time being.

Jaeggi:

Following these diagnoses, you proclaim in Deweyan terms that we should focus on “ends in view,” resulting in a pragmatic approach that can be implemented in the here and now. In this context, an unconditional basic income (UBI) is often discussed. You, too, discuss a UBI, but you reject this proposal. Its proponents see it as enabling a partial decommodification of work, which among other things puts individuals into an improved negotiation position when selling their labor power. What are the “ends in view” you have in mind? And why do you reject proposals for a UBI?

Honneth:

If one engages with work and the politics of work today, one must ask oneself what one thinks about the strategy to demand a guaranteed basic income. After all, within the politics of work it is the most visible and politically most active agenda. The most active movement then is the one that declares: let us minimize the impact of paid work as much as possible in order to gain new spaces for meaningful activities in the public sector. We pay everyone an unconditional basic income that frees them from the necessity to work and hope that the newly gained free time leads to the development of civic engagement. I have two objections to this: First, one must ask oneself whether this leads those that have thus far been working subjects, and as such knew themselves to be part of the social division of labor, to turn even more into consumers. The result would be a society of consumers and the social bond would finally tear. For I do not share the hope that consumers make good democrats. This classical objection contradicts the belief that civic engagement will increase with a decrease in paid work: You receive your money, become a surfer, do not give a shit about your neighbor, and stop caring about the plight of other social groups, and so on. My second objection is the flipside of this argument: The awareness of communal dependencies, and thus the focus on what should be central to democratic will-formation, is best kept up by being part of the social division of labor. The weaker this connection gets, the less awareness for the situation of others and generally for that what is essential to a community will be present. And that is what one always has to ask: What constitutes the commonality of a democratic community? Obviously, one would first and foremost

respond that one decides together how the polity should act and how the government should be constituted. But I believe that, prior to this, another form of commonality is needed. And this commonality stems from the division of labor and inclusion. And that is why unemployment is the true scandal of democracy. Unemployment, as John Maynard Keynes thought, is such a grave danger because it extinguishes the feeling of belonging to the democratic community. That is why all of economics has to aim at preventing unemployment. The theory motivating a politics of full employment likely hinged on such ideas.

Jaeggi:

I would like to consider on a more abstract level what democracy is within your framework. One could say the democracy is institutionalized reflection on what social cooperation is as well as on the problems of coordination and respective decisions that result from it. If there no longer was any work nor any cooperation at work, then there would not be any point left to democracy. However, as democracy in your model is the counterpole to work, once again the question arises: What understanding of democracy does your approach presuppose?

Honneth:

Not a very specific one. The idea is that democracy has to be anchored and that democratic societies have to understand their governments as agencies commissioned by the sovereign to ensure that publicly acceptable, just internal and external conditions persist. Thus, the pillars of democracy, that is, those who we would call the sovereign, are all those affected by the decisions of a political community whose demarcation has become increasingly vague. My worry concerns the inclusion into this democratic community.

Celikates:

Let me briefly return to political strategies: What strategies are better than a UBI in responding to the challenges you outlined above? Such strategies would have to either diminish the individualizing character of work by enabling more cooperation or open up possibilities outside of the structures of capitalist wage labor that allow for a supplemental experience of commonality. Regarding this latter strategy, you made the controversial proposal of a mandatory public service for socially necessary work. This would enable such experiences but, from a liberal-democratic point of view, appears to be both paternalistic and antiquated.

Honneth:

I work with the idea that we have two levers to transform and democratize the conditions of labor. The first lever is to consider democratic alternatives to the labor market. Of course, self-governed cooperatives come to mind first, but also proposals to socialize domestic labor and to make it more cooperative again.

Of course, this sounds rather utopian today, given the high level of commercialization of domestic labor. These are two models from the past that we should try to reactivate—although this might have higher chances in other countries than Germany. In France or the US, for example, self-governed cooperatives are much more common than in Germany. Beyond this, I actually do consider a mandatory year of public service or obligatory social work a resource democratic societies possess and with which they can preserve and strengthen the spirit of the division of labor. Debra Satz has delivered a wonderful lecture defending such a mandatory public service requirement. She calls the effects of such mandatory service “forced solidarity”. The less solidarity there is, the more we need means to maintain a communal spirit. And in that case, I am in favor of seriously considering to oblige every member at whatever age and of whatever gender to carry out public services for a short period of time. The arguments in favor are obvious: First, one assists those who usually carry out these works, and thereby provides them with a higher authority in their field of competence, as they get to instruct those who complete their mandatory public service. Second, it enables us, as members of our society, to discover aspects of our political community that we would otherwise never get to know due to the increased compartmentalization of living-conditions and work. The other lever is limiting private control of the labor market, meaning a redesign of the labor market in the indicated direction, thus creating more cooperative working conditions and, whenever possible, designing jobs in such a way that they do not consist of stupefying activities. All of these are realistic alternatives. They all presuppose limiting the control of private owners and instead authorizing public agencies to determine the conditions of work. The goal is to enable as much worker participation as possible—instead of creating empty slogans advertising self-determination. These days it is far too common that unions understand participation in terms of their functionaries possessing a vote in fundamental decisions taken by supervisory boards. I, on the contrary, think that for participation to be meaningful it must start on the lowest level possible, which would be at the level of what used to be called “semi-autonomous work groups.” The group present at a workplace should decide how it works together, what the best form of division of labor is, the best way to regulate time, and so on. This should be a bottom-up process.

Celikates:

Can such a democratic politics of work as you have sketched here actually exist in a single country or is that only possible as a global transformation?

- Honneth:** Without having given it too much thought, I think this depends on where the political agency with the biggest influence in a given geographical space is located. And the higher up this agency is located, the better. Meaning for us: the more EU, the better. At the same time, I am convinced that a democratic politics of work can even succeed at a regional level. Regional decision-makers, such as regional state parliaments, could make a difference here.
- Jaeggi:** The question also points to global economic constraints that could limit the organization of the division of labor and of working conditions. On a local level, this can already be experienced in group-work that fulfills your demand for co-determining powers of work teams. However, where such a shift of competences was put into practice, the results were quite double-edged. On the one hand, a great deal of self-efficacy was experienced, and a lot was achieved in terms of communicative, cooperative decision-making regarding work processes. On the other hand, workers and trade unionists told us that they quickly reached their limits in those moments where it was apparent that certain outputs had to be achieved.
- They reported: We are in competition with other groups within the company. Or across the board: We are competing with Romania, which was the go-to example of cheaper, outsourced labor back then. Thus, the autonomous organization of working conditions leads to the experience of both. On the one hand, there is more space for political decision-making than one might first expect, revealing a plurality of working conditions and their possible ways of organization. On the other, there are very clear limits due to competition and economic constraints. And in light of this conflict, we want to ask you: Is it not necessary to abolish capitalism after all?
- Honneth:** I consider the question of the international division of labor and the incredibly unequal circumstances between individual countries and states as the most difficult of all questions. I always have the inclination to say that our opposition can only start from the means available to us here and now, that is, starting from the Federal Republic of Germany or the EU and aim to reduce inequalities as far as currently feasible. Which means that legislation like the German supply chain act,¹ that now—thank goodness—exists, is a starting point to end low-wage labor and slave-like working conditions in other countries. We do not have direct influence in these countries and can only use our own legislation to create precautions and safeguards to oppose such

working conditions. Any other direct political means of influence-taking we only possess via the UN, if at all, an organization with its own pitfalls and internal inequalities. Beyond that, there is little we can do, I fear.

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