

# Introduction: Axel Honneth's “The Working Sovereign”

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## Abstract

In his 2021 Walter Benjamin Lectures, Axel Honneth questioned the displacement of work from the center of contemporary political theories. This special issue collects an interview with Axel Honneth on central theses of his lectures and a number of commentaries that discuss issues like Honneth's extended definition of work, his inclusion of long neglected care activities in the definition of work, the requirements for non-detrimental, meaningful work, Honneth's criticism of contemporary trends in the division of labor, as well as his rejection of traditional critiques of working relations and conditions such as above all the critique of alienation. The special issue closes with a rejoinder by Axel Honneth.

## Keywords

Alienation, democracy, labor, political theory, work

Work is a central element in the structure of modern societies. For the majority of the population work regulates the share of the socially created wealth they can acquire. Moreover, it is also the dominant mode of social integration. Although the debate on a democratization of the workplace has never really broken off—and has indeed gained new attention in the last years by the initiative #DemocratizingWork—it had disappeared

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completely from the center of political and in particular democratic theory. Political theorists treated work as if it constituted a separate sphere of modern life—a sphere with its own rules and norms, which more often than not are incompatible with the widely accepted standards of democratic participation. Yet, at the same time democratic theory seemed to suggest—if not actively, then through its active dismissal—that the relations in the economic sphere had little or no influence at all on the political constitution of the commonwealth.

When Axel Honneth accepted the invitation by the *Centre for Social Critique* (formerly known as *Humanities and Social Change Center*) to give the 2021 Walter Benjamin Lectures, he proposed to question the displacement of work from the center of contemporary political theories. It's beyond doubt that workplace relations and conditions are not only open to criticism when they undermine the physical and mental health of those working, but also when they do not allow the working access to a share of socially produced wealth large enough for them to survive, make a decent living, or participate in society. The same also holds true when they force workers into dependencies that are more reminiscent of slavery and servitude than the ideal of the free labor contract. Honneth's initial hypothesis, however, goes a step further: Work relations and conditions must be subject to criticism if they subvert the participation of those working in the democratic processes of a community, and even when they fail to be "schools of democracy" (to borrow one of John Dewey's expressions). Melting the critique of contemporary working conditions into a theory of democracy might appear as if it aims at getting new attention to an aging field of social critique by borrowing from debates that are presently more popular. Yet, Honneth's project amounts to more than just a move on the theoretical playground. If he is right, then the relations and conditions of work are a central source of the crises that modern democracies are facing today.

We open this special issue with a conversation with Axel Honneth, who presents to an English-speaking audience the central ideas of his lectures, which were published in German earlier this year in a thoroughly revised version. Part of the preparation for the lectures was a series of discussions with leading experts in the field at the *Centre for Social Critique* Berlin debating issues including Honneth's extended definition of work, his inclusion of long neglected care activities in the definition of work, the requirements for non-detrimental, meaningful work, Honneth's criticism of contemporary trends in the division of labor, as well as his rejection of traditional critiques of working relations and conditions such as above all the critique of alienation. The comments on Honneth's approach assembled in this special issue are the result of these debates at the center. We are grateful to Axel Honneth and the commentators Emmanuel Renault, Nial Tekin, Christine Wimbauer, and Ruth Yeoman for sharing their insights and thoughts with us turning the spring and the Walter Benjamin Lectures 2021 into a fascinating intellectual learning process. We also like to thank Louis Leary who has translated our conversation with Axel Honneth and assisted in the copy-editing and proofreading of the materials presented here. Furthermore, we would like to thank Theresa Rürger for proofreading the translation of the conversation with Axel Honneth. And finally, we wish to express our gratitude to Simon Susen of JCS who early on invited and encouraged us to edit this special issue.


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