

Chapter 4

Work and Emancipation in the Age of Precarious Labor: Thinking With Habermas and His Critics

Michael R. Welton
Athabasca University, Canada

ABSTRACT

The domain and status of work in the writings of Jurgen Habermas is highly controversial. Some of his critics accuse him of abandoning the emancipatory potential of non-alienated labor, a central axiom of classical Marxism. After analyzing his critics' arguments, the chapter examines the influential commentary of Axel Honneth. He provides a new philosophical grounding for thinking about emancipation and work. To translate this provocative philosophical argument into practice, the author considers Guy Standing's vision of occupational security and citizenship.

THE PROBLEM ANNOUNCED

At the Labour conference of 2005, former British Prime Minister, the often-maligned Tony Blair imagined the Global Transformation of work and life in the Neo-liberal economy as a hurricane sweeping away the old order. "The character of this changing world is indifferent to tradition," he declared. "Unforgiving of frailty. No respecter of past reputations. It has no custom and practice. It is replete with opportunities, but they only go to those swift to adapt, slow to complain, open, willing and able to change." In the Communist Manifesto, written in the year of revolutions in 1848, Marx and Engels spoke of the "pitilessly torn asunder" feudal "ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors'" (Harris, 2014).

Today Neo-liberal capitalism, emerging in the mid-1970s, has disembedded itself from legal, moral, ethical and spiritual forms of regulation in its quest for profit maximization through innovative use of computer-aided forms of automation (including robotization and digitalization). Particularly striking is the gargantuan shift of wealth to the 1% and the political class (a fusion of political and economic elites) and their imperviousness to inequality and the reduced insecurity of millions of workers round the world. Labour scholar Guy Standing has sketched out the new class formation of the Neo-liberal

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6086-9.ch004

era. He speaks of the precariat, who live on intermittent work, have uncertain access to housing and lack access to various benefits (Standing, 2008; 2009; 2012; 2014a; 2014b).

Voices are rising against the shredding and tearing asunder of the societal fabric and disintegration of social solidarity—from the global scene to our local communities. But, today in our age of hyper-globalization and identity politics, the workplace as the locus of emancipatory potential has all but vanished from our cultural imagination. All but vanished: in our Age of Precarious, some people here and there have tried to create co-operative forms of life and carve out niche forms of good, craft-based forms of work and life. Politicians, however, focus most of their easily distracted attention away from the unspeakable suffering of work, reformers mobilize energy mainly around ecological, identity or racial issues, and academics have been swallowed into black holes of hermetically sealed, obscure word games.

In this chapter, then, I want to make a modest contribution to our understanding of Neo-liberal work conditions by examining the thinking of Jurgen Habermas and his critics. I am in search of a philosophical foundation for rescuing the luminous idea that human beings need to be able to work (as opposed to merely labour) to express their capacities as autonomous actors. After I have set out this philosophical base, I will then look at a few ways we might bring philosophy back to earth by setting out considerations on how we can recover and build both a secure world and create a charter for occupational citizenship.

Habermas on Work

In one of his most influential early texts, “Technology and science as ‘ideology,’” Habermas (1970) sought to define deftly what he understood by “work.”

By ‘work’ or purposive-rational action I understand either instrumental action or rational choice or their conjunction. Instrumental action is governed by technical rules based on experimental knowledge. In every case they imply conditional predictions about observable events, physical or social: these predictions can prove correct or incorrect.... But while instrumental action organizes means that are appropriate or inappropriate according to criteria of an effective control of reality, strategic action depends only on the correct evaluation of possible alternative choices, which result from calculation supplemented by values and maxims. (pp. 91-92).

These seemingly straight-forward words capsulized a view of “work” (and its emancipatory potential) that released a storm of criticism and objections. In this chapter, we will consider some of the criticisms raised by Habermas’ critics along with his responses and examine at length Axel Honneth’s (2012) most recent attempt to locate moral norms as immanent in the organization of capitalist production itself. My goal is to pry open the production process and re-assert the necessity of systematically non-distorted work as an integral part of the striving for a just learning society.

In his “A reply to my critics,” Habermas (1982) addresses the concerns of Agnes Heller, a leading member of the Praxis group and the Budapest School (which included luminaries such as Georg Lukacs), who argued that Habermas had abandoned the emancipatory potential of non-alienated labour. Habermas observes that Heller took up the task of recovering the “emancipatory content of Marxian theory” by “way of rehabilitating the anthropological concept of non-alienated labour” (p. 224). In a brilliantly incisive manner, Habermas uncovers the romantic features of the young Marx flowing through his writings and Heller’s sensibility. Habermas (1982) argues that Marx

13 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/work-and-emancipation-in-the-age-of-precarious-labor/206127

Related Content

The Scholarship of the Black Academy

Mark Rose (2020). *Emerging Methods and Paradigms in Scholarship and Education Research* (pp. 179-197).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-scholarship-of-the-black-academy/236527

Five Principles for the Practice of Knowledge Exchange in Environmental Management

Fakhraddin Maroofi (2017). *Enhancing Academic Research With Knowledge Management Principles* (pp. 25-44).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/five-principles-practice-knowledge-exchange/179187

A Critical Overview of Digital Twins

Princess Adjeiand Reza Montasari (2020). *International Journal of Strategic Engineering* (pp. 48-58).

www.irma-international.org/article/a-critical-overview-of-digital-twins/243668

Teachers as Researchers: Participatory and Action Research

Patricia Cranton (2015). *Handbook of Research on Scholarly Publishing and Research Methods* (pp. 312-328).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/teachers-as-researchers/120344

Sustainability: An Overview of the Triple Bottom Line and Sustainability Implementation

Maria Salome Correia (2019). *International Journal of Strategic Engineering* (pp. 29-38).

www.irma-international.org/article/sustainability/219322