

Interdisciplinary research seminars on WORK, first semester 2019, to mark the 100th anniversary of the ILO (1919-2019), organised by the Contact Group FNRS – Work and social emancipation

## **Can the Future of Work become its past?**

The transformation of the most fundamental social relationship of contemporary society

*Call for a wide ranging interdisciplinary, free and open-minded debate*

In the occasion of its centenary, which will be celebrated in 2019, the International Labor Organisation has called for an international debate, between representatives of trade unions and employers' associations, governments and researchers about the Future of Work.

Such a call is justified in light of the important changes that employment relationship has undergone during the last decades. As the ILO website puts it: "*The world of work is undergoing a major process of change. In order to understand and to respond effectively to these new challenges the International Labour Organization has launched a "Future of Work initiative" in order to be able to advance its mandate for social justice*"<sup>1</sup>.

By mobilising the concept of "major process of change" in a context concerning a specific political approach, this statement suggests that the instruments put in place by such an approach are wholly or partially called in to question by these major changes. What does this mean for the ILO?

Does it mean calling into question the universal character of the international management of Work, and, therefore, the universal nature of ILO norms? Which kind of radical transformation could justify this, while policies fostering the constant increase of economic globalisation propose a supposedly universal doctrine, namely the one of the free market?

Does it mean calling into question the fitness for purpose of the very idea of regulation, in the name of a globalised economy in constant mutation, and therefore intrinsically incompatible with every effective legal constraint?

If, on the one hand, such questionings can be read in the context of the ILO, on the other they are evidently applicable to national contexts. Indeed, the latter represent at the same time, the place where work is performed, the legal order of its regulation and the space for enforcing these rules. Those who think in terms of a necessary adaption in light of a "major process of change", so as to be able to unlock the potential of the future, risk forgetting social history, with its lessons and advancements. At the same time, they risk losing sight of the deductive approach which characterise scientific analyses, able to highlight the link connecting the same events to the same causes, and to analyse the present evolutions of the world of work in light of previous socio-historic experiences.

This is a radical approach, which considers that changes are such that they call for a *tabula rasa*, followed by a rebuilding process grounded on a completely different basis. "Nothing is taboo anymore" as Belgian minister Kris Peeters announced at a conference held in march 2016 at the Ministry for "Work, Employment and Social dialogue" in preparation for the centenary of the ILO.

What if one would effectively jump on this opportunity to think, in a free and broad way, without *any* taboo, the question of the organisation of Work?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/future-of-work/lang--en/index.htm%3C>.

At the heart of the abovementioned questionings lie, albeit implicitly, the debates over Equality, Freedom, and on the relationship between these two in their role of overarching principles of government and society.

Relativism of labour regulations can be of regional nature (for instance, less developed economies might have less protective rules, either on a North/South or West/East divide, depending on the global or European perspective); it can be sectorial, dividing between sectors exposed to competition or not ; it can be based on social classes, castes, gender, race, with wages and working conditions varying on the basis of social hierarchies; it can also be temporal, when wages and working condition are based on market performances, such in the case of “point based” pensions and wages paid in shares.

All these forms of relativism tell us *in fine* that it would be obvious to accept inequalities as the reality principle because they would constitute the nature of human being. The tension between viewing Equality as essentially relative, or, on the contrary, absolute, is in fact at the heart of political divides.

The debate over the origin of labour regulations, on the other hand, calls into question the concept of Liberty. For those who would want the level of regulation to be the closest possible to the employment relationship (company level agreements, individual contract or even contract for services), the guiding principle is the adaptation of work to the specific company. Indeed, companies and entrepreneurship would otherwise be crushed under “red tape” and top-down regulation from outside the company itself, decided by political actors detached from every-day reality and hence prone to adopt excessively rigid regulations. Freedom is thus construed as an absolute principle, on the basis of the dividing line between individual freedom and social determinism. From the perspective of the latter, Freedom is to be seen as a relative value, in light of the obligation to live in a society, that is, the imposition of general institution which are at the same time global limitations and limitations of the individual freedom to act. Work being the social relationship at the very heart of human society, it would necessarily be construed as a collective relationship to be organised at the highest level possible. Individual freedom cannot be but relative, as conceiving it otherwise would make it impossible the very principle of society. Society is more than the mere addition of its composing individuals, and some limitations to their absolute freedom in fact ensure their access to broader rights.

This debate refers to a broader (and just as essential) one: is the economy the most important aspect of a given society, to the point that all other social areas must be subordinated to it? Or, on the contrary, is Work such a fundamental activity, both for the personal fulfilment of every adult and for the existence of society that it must be organised politically through general and mandatory laws? The answer to these questions necessarily shapes the role of workers in a given society. The present capitalist transformation of society reinforces its domination over workers by reducing them to mere workforce (cfr. the notion of “human capital”). Consequently, such an economic factor cannot be remunerated too much in light of the needs of the market. On the contrary, a political understanding of Work considers the human being at work not as an individual but as a social being. Following this approach, the worker is the producer of both wealth and society, of its own protection and social security, so that social developments depend on her remuneration. In the capitalistic vision, which only sees Work as an expensive factor of production whose cost should always be limited (or eliminated, through automation), capital is seen as the only productive factor. Hence, the company is seen as the institution which embodies the general interest, whereas the State represents special interests threatening the free flow of investment.

For some, social inequalities represent the necessary fuel for economic development, stimulating entrepreneurial spirit and the freedom to conduct a business, and ensuring a low price of labour. For others, in the relationship between Freedom and Equality, the former should be limited in order to strive for the latter. Thus, the underlying issue of the transformation of Work is the very nature of democracy, which finds itself at the crossroad between openly unequal systems and the deepening of democracy through the redistribution of resources.

The important changes signalled by the abovementioned text of the ILO, are essentially policies adopted by governments and not natural processes -although they might also have an impact in this sense, through climate change. Hence, they can be changed and cannot be taken as a justification for the lowering of labour and social security standards.

### *Practical organisation*

We propose to gather for a series of 5 study days. 4 of these would be devoted to a specific topic, the final day being instead the occasion to present the summary of the debates taking place in the previous 4.

These study days will be organised monthly between **1 February 2019 and 3 June 2019**.

A call for working papers is then opened for each of the topics described below. Texts should not be longer than **5 pages (2500 words)**, eventually making use of references and bibliography to refer to larger publications of the author for further reading.

Every study day will be chaired by a member of the Contact Group, who will organise the event. A general rapporteur will be identified, tasked with the presentation of a summary of all the text submitted for the study day. Two/three discussants will then debate the general report. These will be chosen to represent different academic disciplines and non-academic actors.

The final day will be organised in the form of a conference open to the broader public.

Topics (each topic = one study day)

#### **1. Who is a « worker » ? (ULiège, February 2019)**

This study day is devoted to the role and status (political, legal, philosophical, economic, historical) of workers, both in the past, in the present and in the future... Is the very notion of « worker » doomed to disappear, or will everyone be a worker, whatever her social and physical condition? How should the social definition of such a role be translated in a specific status? Is the final objective of labour standards to ensure the emancipation of workers from all employers? What is the relationship between work and its remuneration?

#### **2. Which working conditions and which organisation of work? (KUL, march 2019)**

This study day will focus on the organisation of the social relationship on the workplace, be it public or private (company, home, building sites, public administration...), in its relationship with other social activities. Which working time and workplaces? Which risks? Which mobility, flexibility and security? Which wages? Which responsibilities, limits and possibilities for emancipation?

#### **3. Struggles and collective representations? To what end? (ULB, April 2019)**

The third study day debates struggles, bargaining and defeats in the context of work relationships. Have all struggles been useful? Are they useful in the present days? Are all means of struggle allowed? Do trade unions still represent workers? What's the destiny of tripartism without leftist governments? Has the very meaning of struggles, and of their methods, changed?

#### **4. The present role of the spatial dimension in the (re)composition of work relationships (UCL, May 2019)**

This study day focuses on the multiple interrelations between political and legal protection at the international level and those at the national level -in its different levels: interprofessional, sectoral, local, company. Does economic globalisation necessarily bring about the de-structuration of work? Does it necessarily disrupt labour laws? Will this disruption ultimately bring down globalisation itself? What is the role of the European

Union economic governance in this process?

### *Call for papers*

Texts should not be longer than 5 pages (2500 words). They can be written in English or French, working languages of the study days.

The aim of these texts should be to encourage the debate, on the basis of specific data and observations or of a broader synthesis, and not the present descriptive literature reviews.

#### **Making reference and/or use of the work of the ILO is particularly appreciated.**

The focus on the temporal (what is changing? What remains the same?) and/or spatial (do Work need international or local standards? Is work necessarily alienated everywhere / alienated in the same way everywhere?) dimensions is also encouraged.

Texts should mention the name of the author, her institutional affiliation and the study day for which the text is submitted. A single text can be submitted for different study days.

#### *Calendar*

- Opening of the call: Juillet 2018
- Return abstracts submissions (**200-250 words**): 15 October 2018
- Information on acceptance: 10 November 2018
- Submission of final texts: 15 December 2018 (first study day); 15 January 2019 (second study day); 15 February 2019 (third study day); 15 March 2019 (fourth study day).

#### **Contacts are underway to ensure publication of the selected texts.**

Organising Committee

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