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Marie-Anne Dujarier

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How Work as a Category of Thought Has Been Disrupted in Neoliberal Capitalist Societies

Marie-Anne Dujarier, translated by Hilary Koziol

Université Paris Cité, Paris, France, madujarier@outlook.fr, <http://lcsp.univ-paris-diderot.fr/Dujarier>

Abstract: This article summarises and presents the main findings of Marie-Anne Dujarier's French book *Troubles dans le travail* (2021). It focuses on the "travail" category of thought and practice in France, where it has become a ubiquitous and moral notion. The article traces the history of its social uses, highlighting its polysemy with respect to vernacular and scientific uses, then its limited meaning when used in institutions. It examines contemporary situations in which activity requiring effort, the production of use or exchange values, and the status of employment and remuneration are disconnected. Their frequency and importance cast doubt on who is working and when. This disruption in the "work" category of thought indicates that the eponymous institutions do not adequately accommodate real practices. They are therefore questioned. This observation is also an invitation for researchers to unpick this word for a better analysis of contemporary social, psychological and ecological issues. In France, the word "travail" is ubiquitous in our day-to-day exchanges, as well as in our scientific and political discussions ("travail" is often translated as 'work' or 'labour', translations are part of the history of the category). Although regularly given only one value, it also has a moral domain. But what does it mean? This article offers Anglo-Saxon readers a summary of in-depth sociological research on this issue, published in the book called *Work Troubles. Sociology of a category of thought* (French original title: *Troubles dans le travail. Sociologie d'une catégorie de pensée*) by the author of this article.

Keywords: category of thought, category of practice, work, labour, digital, free labour, employment, institutions, Capitalocene

1. What is Work? Topicality of the Question

Many academic articles have sought to answer that question. Theories do not converge, however, some say that the word cannot be defined substantially; others propose a unified and universal definition (but paradoxically, the suggested definitions all differ), while a third group underlines the diversity of possible answers. Recent research, and especially *tripleC*, has regularly reported on the polysemy of the terms "work" and "labour" (Lund 2014) in various languages (Frayssé 2014). Current uncertainties over whether practices such as the use of internships (Rodino-Colocino and Beberick 2015), volunteering and workfare (Krinsky 2008), video game testing (Briziarelli 2016) and internet practices more generally (crowdsourcing, social networks, etc.) should be qualified as "work" or "labour" (Fuchs and Seignani, 2013; Scholz 2012; Andrejevic 2012), or "free labour" (Terranova 2000), thus updating the demands of feminists since the 1970s, for tasks of domestic production and reproduction outside the context of formal employment to be called "work".

These debates remind us that "work" is not a universal essence but a category of thought whose boundaries are socially debated and shifting. The perimeter of "work" is entirely political, since an eponymous institution frames concrete activity, the distribution of wealth and solidarity. The word therefore designates a thing that does not

exist substantially, yet which has a social and subjective existence. “Work” can therefore be grasped as a *category of thought and practice*, that is to say, a social representation historically constructed by human groups based on their material experience (Durkheim and Mauss, 1903/1963). It expresses the state of society and imposes itself on its members to equip their way of thinking, acting and feeling. It persists through a ritual and technical institutionalisation – law, public policies and statistics (Bourdieu 1993). By becoming a “mental structure”, a category seems self-evident and “located on the side of nature, the natural and the universal” (ibid. 34-35), forgetting its relative historic nature. Institutionalised categories of thought are performative: they can create the realities they describe, also becoming categories of *practice* (Douglas 1986).

Taking the case of France, this article proposes an empirical analysis of transformations in the category of “travail”. It first summarises the genealogy of the term, then, by mobilising the existing sociological literature, demonstrates that we are witnessing a disruption of the category of thought, and consequently, a calling into question the institutions of work.

2. Sociohistory of the Meanings of “Travail”

2.1. Polysemy in Ordinary Uses

A systematic consultation of French dictionaries since the 8th century teaches us that the word “travail” appeared in ordinary language in France in the 11th century.¹ Its meaning was close to its etymology based on the Latin prefix *trans*, with the idea of overcoming an obstacle, as *travail* was used to mean the *trouble or the effort that one puts into doing something*. The word was also used from the Renaissance onwards to mean the product of the activity: *the resulting piece of work (ouvrage)*, as well as the task to be accomplished and how it was carried out. Since the second half of the 20th century, this production has been deemed *useful*. Since the 16th century, the word has also been used to mean *an occupation providing a means of livelihood*. It was associated with the idea of the “breadwinner”, then in this same vein with employment and more specifically with its extension, salaried employment.

When historians and anthropologists tell us that the category of thought “travail” cannot be found in other societies and that it did not exist before or anywhere else than in capitalist societies, they are talking about this original accumulation of three heterogeneous meanings in a single word. Only the French notion of “travail” combines these various meanings into one category on the one hand, and makes them a keystone of the economic, social and moral order on the other. Moreover, these three major historical meanings have branched out abundantly over time, to the point where the word now has 88 synonyms.² This polysemy is also found in the field of human and social sciences, in English, French and German.

2.2. Late and Fragmented Uses in Disciplines

“Travail” became a central category of thought in the sciences from the time they were established (Jung 2000; Vatin 2008): in economics, physics, physiology, psychology,

¹ Before this date, the category of thought did not exist: neither the Bible nor the ancients spoke of *travail*. They used other words, in other languages, that have been translated as *travail* – expressing above all the ideology of the translator and the time they lived in.

² D’après le Dictionnaire électronique des synonymes (DES) du CRISCO (Centre de recherche inter-langues sur la signification en contexte), see: <https://crisco2.uni-caen.fr/des/synonymes/travail>

psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, ergology, etc., and in philosophy from the 19th century, the word became a concept within theories. But its meanings are fragmented: some reinforce the idea that “work” designates an activity – of the body, cognitive and/or psychological; others use the word to describe a useful product for subsistence or profit; the word also takes on the meaning of employment or even salaried employment.

There are clear differences in meaning *between disciplines*. For example, the “work” of economists is clearly not the same as that of psychoanalysts. However, even within the same discipline, a variety of uses can be seen; for example, in philosophy, the concept of “work” formulated by Hegel is very distinct from that put forward by Arendt. To add to the confusion, the same word can have various meanings even within the work of a single author, as was demonstrated, notoriously, for Nietzsche (Porcher, F 2021), Marx (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013) and Freud (Lhuillier 2013), creating a risk of theoretical misunderstanding, as the word is central to their theories and those of their epigones.

2.3. Work as Employment as Used by Institutions

Finally, since the end of the 17th century, but especially since the 19th and 20th centuries onwards, “travail” became a major *institutional* category of thought. Yet in the French Labour Code (Called “Code du *travail*”), or in the area of statistics, medicine or the Ministry “du *travail*”, the word has very limited meaning since it is a quasi-synonym for employment, and even of salaried employment. Whereas in ordinary and scientific language, “travail” has taken on a polysemous and widely extensive meaning (since almost everything – animals, money, crowds, the unconscious, wood, house, etc. – is capable of “working”, in the sense of achieving transformation through effort), conversely, institutional uses of the word “work” reduce it to employment and sometimes to salaried employment. Here, it regularly has “one” value (“*la valeur travail*”) associated with it, whereas because of its polysemy, the word necessarily carries along a multitude of values.

2.4. The Disruption Hypothesis

Until the 1980s, the vernacular meaning of the word combined the three historically constructed meanings: “travail” was understood as an arduous activity, producing use value and exchange value, in the framework of a living wage. The feminists of the 1970s were the first to observe that painful and useful production goes beyond employment, introducing a debate around the definition of “work”. Current social practices also create increasing doubts and conflicts when it comes to knowing *who* is working and *when*. As we shall now demonstrate, in neoliberal capitalist societies, activity, pain, use value, exchange value and living wage are so often so dissociated that as a result, the category of thought and of practice is disrupted.

3. When Producing Subsistence is not Considered Work by Institutions

3.1. The Vital Tasks of Reproduction

For human life to perpetuate itself, daily attention and effort is required. In the French language, giving birth (“accoucher”) has been the first and most constant meaning of the word “travail” for ten centuries. According to the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1998), tasks of reproduction that are useful for supporting life, in their eternal recurrence, are the exact definition of “work”. However, institutions seem reluctant to consider it in this way. Reproducing the labour force is classified in our wage societies as “outside work”.

And yet, in some countries, like India for example, surrogacy can be covered by a formal contract setting out what the surrogate mother must and must not do (Rozée, Unisa and de La Rochebrochard 2016). In this case, surrogacy seems to be a simple extension of the commodification of the labour force. These questions are part of a feminist intellectual history which argues for designating what the “reproductive body” does as “work” (Tain 2013; Mathieu 1991) appropriated within the couple, by the family and society (Guillaumin 1978).

This “work” is mixed with domestic tasks, which in France represent between 42 and 77 billion hours, i.e. more hours than are spent in formal paid employment (38 billion hours). If households were to delegate the domestic tasks for which there is a market substitute to professionals, gross domestic product (GDP) would increase by a third (Insee 2012). However, 71% of household tasks are carried out by women (Insee 2015). When a woman is classified as staying “at home”, she is considered by the state, and probably by citizens, as being inactive, “doing nothing” (Crittenden 2010). Household and parental tasks are not recognised as “work” (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and von Werlhof 1988) except if they are formally sub-contracted, that is to say, commodified and legally subordinated.

3.2. Family Caregivers: “Neither ... nor”

The issue of family caregivers is an interesting case for understanding the state’s ambivalence in describing care as “travail”. Care work involves carrying out time-consuming, tiring, repetitive and risky tasks, which require administrative, practical and relational know-how. Since it aims to ensure subsistence, care produces use values that could be described as “maximum”. Care work cannot be counted, yet it is what counts most in order to live. From the point of view of the activity and its social utility, therefore, care can be considered as “travail”. When it is entrusted to (poorly) paid professionals in the context of a job, whether formal or not, these tasks are then experienced and counted as “travail” by all social stakeholders.

In France, however, alongside these employees, we also find 9.3 million family members who are equally involved in the care of their loved ones, in their homes. 56% are women with no specific diploma, according to the state.³ Their skills complement those of the professionals: they know the person, their story, the places they have known, their social ties, etc. In this, they are very useful, even indispensable, for carrying out acts or activities of daily life. These caregivers must make themselves available on a regular basis, but must also be on call, in case of necessity or emergency, although 47% of them are employed elsewhere (idem). This arduous practice, prescribed, risky and with a very strong social utility is not attached to the Labour Code. Caregivers are not counted as workers. Nor is the monetary value of their productive activity, estimated at between 12.3 and 15.6 billion euros per year, or between 0.6% and 0.8% of the GDP (Paraponaris, Davin and Verger 2012), included in the “labour statistics”.

However, since the early 1970s, in the context of an ageing population, relatives of so-called “dependents” are encouraged by the authorities to play an increasing role, so that family solidarity can ease national solidarity and its cost. Successive laws have established the status of carer, and “caregiver assistance” schemes, the purpose being to transfer onto them an increasing burden of care. Legal texts cite skills and encourage carers to “become professional”. They create a right to training and a formal recognition of their experience. If institutions go so far as to pay these caregivers, it is only

³ See: <https://www.cidj.com/actualite/la-france-comptabilise-9-3-millions-de-proches-aidants>

very modestly⁴ and without reference to labour law, although they must contribute to social insurance. This payment is therefore not that of an employee, nor that of a volunteer. It arouses strong controversies among those concerned (Trenta 2019) and expresses a shared social and political hesitation when it comes to describing care as “travail” and incorporating it fully into its eponymous institutions. Another instance where there is a debate as to whether useful off-the-job production is “travail” or not is the case of self-production.

3.3. Self-Production: Work or Leisure?

Self-subsistence, or its more limited version, self-production, consists of setting oneself to work in order to produce what one consumes, in groups of limited size. Cultivating one’s vegetable garden, raising chickens, repairing one’s belongings (sewing, welding, screwing, etc.), building one’s home, cutting firewood, building furniture with a saw or a 3D printer, self-training, self-healing, etc. are all productive practices useful for subsistence, which require skills, trouble and effort. They are therefore “work”, in the vernacular sense.

However, when the “work” category of thought began to merge into that of employment in institutional uses, the practice of self-production changed status. From being the rule, it became the exception, according to the dictionaries.⁵ Although self-production has been the dominant form of self-employment in the history of humanity to ensure subsistence, it has now been classified as outside the scope of work since the industrial wage revolution. Whether complementary, compensatory or critical of salaried employment, it is not described as “travail” by state and market institutions. They rather categorise it as leisure – “do-it-yourself”, leaving the practice and the monetary as well as the physical flows that it generates in legal limbo.

Our society is therefore characterised by many social practices that ensure our subsistence but that are not considered as “travail” by the institutions. In addition, there are practices that produce use value and exchange value at the threshold of employment or outside the scope of its institutions.

4. Extension of Voluntary Productions That are Profitable to Companies

4.1. Working in Order to be Hired: “Hope Labour”

The wage-earning societies of the North do not provide employment for everyone, even though it is set out as a condition for survival. This situation leads to a significant investment in training, self-marketing and the gruelling activity of job hunting. It also generates massive voluntary production, in the hope of being hired, contributing here again to uncertainty over what falls within the perimeter of work.

It has long taken the form of internships. This productive and profitable activity, with real subordination but without the support of labour law and without pay, has become a prerequisite and a pre-condition for being hired. Every year in France, 1.6 million interns, (compared to 600,000 in 2006) are enrolled in productive organisations. For them, the advantage of an internship is to gain “work” experience. However, with their student status, interns are not counted by the state as “travailleurs” (workers). They

⁴ 3.65 euros per hour or 5.48 euros if the carer has had to give up their professional activity, or 50% of the net hourly minimum wage (SMIC) capped at 941.09 euros per month (2019).

⁵ “Production by economic agents of goods or services *which are not normally their responsibility* (repairing one’s car, renovating one’s home oneself, etc.)” says the *Larousse* dictionary in 2019.

are not dependent on labour law but on education law. Another oddity: even though the ILO groups interns in the “active occupied population” (thereby lowering the unemployment figures), the number of interns and the duration of their internship are not counted at a national level in labour and wealth statistics. Thus, interns may well be selected, supervised, monitored, sometimes exploited and even eventually rejected (Rodino-Colocino and Beberick 2015), but in official terms, they do not “work”.

However, internships are a traditional form of a wider and rapidly growing system that can be referred to as “hope labour” (Kuehn & Corrigan 2013). An “economy of promise” (Bascetta 2015) leads men and women to work without pay to ensure the visibility of their know-how on the job market, in the hope of landing a paid contract where they will do the same thing, or almost. This “sacrificial labour” (Ross 2017) is well-known to interns but also to those who agree to be unpaid in order to gain valuable experience in the job market. Indeed, the “professionalisation” of volunteering makes it not the reverse of employment, but rather its antechamber, its precondition, even its competitor or its substitute (Simonet 2010).

Hope labour can also be seen on the internet. The self-publication of videos online and the resulting audience measurement constitute an indication of their authors’ talent, enabling them to build an embryonic reputation and links within the professional world (Beuscart and Mellet 2015). More generally, with the practice of “user-generated content” (UGC), one can show off one’s skills on a larger scale, in the hope of being hired or paid. In doing so, men and women work on a voluntary basis and outside work institutions for the benefit of companies, whether in the music sector, in videos, journalism, online gaming, design, beauty, care or cooking. “Aspirational labour” (Duffy 2017) carried out in the name of “passion” is becoming a social norm in particularly asymmetrical labour markets. In sectors that have the reputation of being “creative” (Peuter Cohen and Brophy 2015) and as such attractive, such as art, entertainment, research, sport, politics, fashion, design or video games, hyperproductive and unpaid men and women agree, in the name of “passion”, and especially in the hope of obtaining an employment contract, to work in a productive capacity, sometimes over long periods, without pay or any decent compensation. This practice of self-exploitation (Mensitieri 2020) has become a professional norm.

Here, we observe a disarticulation between activity, production of use value, exchange value and employment. This is reinforced further in the new economic models that use digital technology, further blurring the notion of “travail”.

4.2. “Free Labour” in Digital Technology

In 1977, Smythe (2014) talked about “audience commodity” to refer to the fact that our attention has become a commodity that generates profit, and which should, in his opinion, for this very reason, be considered as “work”. This assumption has been taken up and updated on the internet when the capture of personal information is used to create ‘commodities’ for the advertising industry (Andrejevic 2012). This would then be a “work of watching”.

Since 2006, crowdsourcing within this crowd has generated a vast amount of user-generated content, including photos, videos, texts (ranging from journalistic, scientific, encyclopaedic, documentary, militant, or other), drawings, music, notations, and comments, all contributed voluntarily and without cost. Crowdsourcing also consists of participating in research projects, inventing new products or markets, contributing to the development of video games, designing clothes, translating games and websites, or promoting brands on a personal blog, to name a few examples. “Fans” cooperate with cultural firms via their actions in fanclubs, “street teams” and other digital communities

(Hein, 2011). The “work of the fans” would appear to be “free labor, pleasurable and voluntarily done” (De Kosnik 2012). Neologisms have been suggested to designate productive gaming practices as a type of free labour that fits neither traditional definitions of work nor the categories of play or leisure, such as “playbour”. This play labour creates data that is sold to advertising clients as a commodity (Fuchs & Sevignani 2013, 237). “Digital work”, as an organised and productive cerebral activity, is therefore valued as “digital labour” (Idem).

This production of usage value and market value, outside of employment, occurs without the producers having the feeling that they are “working”. This “work” is doubly “free”: both freely agreed to *and* unpaid. It is therefore a political choice to call this “labour” or “work”, recalls Terranova (2012). Since this activity is carried out over the internet, it is also sometimes described as “digital labour” (Scholz 2012; Fuchs and Sevignani 2013). However, internet users who produce value are not recognised institutionally as workers. In addition, only exceptionally do these practices enable workers to “earn a living”. These practices can even be experienced as the reverse side of “work” when they are part of a passion, a hobby, a way of meeting people and creating social ties. These activities do not “feel, look or smell like labour at all” (Scholz 2012). Also, productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited (Terranova 2012) are not experienced as exploitation (Ross 2012). Even worse: exploitation grows with the feeling of not working and of de-alienating oneself (Fisher 2012) contrary to what was established about Fordist work in Marxist theory. Describing this task and production as “work” (digital work or digital labour), is then problematic, hotly debated and in fact undecidable. The debate suggests notably that “work” or “labour” are categories of thought that are disrupted when it comes to real practices. This disruption can also be seen in bioeconomics.

4.3. Biocapitalism: Who and What is Working?

Since the 1970s and with the arrival of recombinant DNA technology (RDT) a new economic sector has emerged, that of biotechnology. Favoured by investors, states, the law and international public policies, “bioeconomics” (Rose 2007) has developed (Sunder Rajan 2006) and is entering a phase of industrialisation and diversification. “Clinical labour” – and the commercial reproductive practice of surrogacy – constitute the very symbol of “labour” in the contemporary neoliberal economy (Cooper & Waldby 2014).

These technologies use the properties of living organisms for profit, and in particular their ability to reproduce: organisms (humans, animals and plants), and also organs and cells. The generative and transformative qualities of living matter are used for applications in the medical field, diagnostics (e.g. preimplantation genetic diagnosis), surgical operations (implantation of organs, oocytes, tissue, etc.), advice and care (therapeutic DNA, proteins and molecules). They are also used in the food sector (GMOs, cloning, genetic species optimisation) and the production of energy, such as biofuels.

Providing cells, organs or bodies for another person is profitable for companies. On the biomarkets, organs, tissues, cells and molecules are identified, captured, extracted, transformed, stored, marketed and finally sold to satisfy a purpose and to make a profit. Is the person “working” when they donate a heart, skin, cells, or their body, or when they take part in paid clinical trials? This biological material has no clear legal status. It comes from individuals, from their very bodies, but it is not them, nor their labour power. Using the indigenous and institutional language, this is not a question of “work”.

Analysts of this phenomenon, whether they are part of the intellectual currents of Marxist, Marxo-Weberian or Foucauldian feminism (Helmreich 2008) similarly question what these practices have to do with “work”. According to Waldby (2000), “biovalue” is a value produced by the use of the generative and transformative productivity of living entities to produce an “added value” or an intensification of vitality. For Helmreich (2008), biological generativity is configured as an *accumulated labour power* whose products are exploited. The difficulty in mobilising Marxist theory in this field is that it tends to avoid the theory of labour value (Birch and Tyfield 2013) and hence its place, nature and meaning in the value creation process.

Categories of thought are put to the test here: “work”, “capital”, “value” and even “commodity” no longer correspond to the meanings of industrial capitalism. This practice today does not come under employment law and takes a very different form from Fordist salaried employment. The form of remuneration for “professional guinea pigs” (Różyńska 2018), for example, is the subject of debate. This “work of ingestion and metabolic self-transformation” (Cooper and Waldby 2014, 135) is very different from what salaried employment traditionally remunerates. In these practices, citizens, researchers and lawyers do not know who or what is “working”. At the same time, using non-human labour also challenges the humanist category of “working”.

5. The Useful and Profitable Employment of Non-humans

5.1. The Many Uses of Animal Labour Power

Although for centuries the ordinary “work” category of thought included the productive activity of other living things, current institutions seem reluctant to treat it that way when using it.

Animals are used for their strength (e.g. draft horses, forest elephants), for their singular skills (guide dogs), to entertain humans (zoos, horseback riding, circuses, dolphinarium, bullfighting, etc.), or as laboratory guinea pigs. On an even larger scale, animals are used to produce substances that we consume, such as milk, eggs, honey, leather, hair, fur, ivory, etc. They become literal consumer products when we eat them. Humans also use plants in various ways, in addition to their vital use which is the production of oxygen, for food, building materials, energy and decoration. They are selected, trained, reproduced, handled, and maximised for these purposes.

Thus, other living things produce goods that are essential to our subsistence, and/or are useful for making a profit. We can also hypothesise that their production also presupposes a specific form of activity that requires effort or exertion. What a horse does when working in a mine, or a dairy cow, a pollinating bee, a laying hen, intestinal bacteria, or even a tree as it extends upwards, all depend on subtle physico-chemical processes. The physical and biological sciences, like everyday language, use the word “work” to denote the processes involved in production carried out by other living things and scientific research seeks to “optimise” it, in order to improve its performance. Jason Moore (2014) talks about the “work of nature”. Jocelyne Porcher shows that animals “work”: they are selected, trained, supervised and evaluated to carry out specific productive tasks. However, she demonstrates that, far from performing their tasks mindlessly, mammals invest their form of intelligence, their body and even their “subjectivity”, and construct conditions of cooperation: they implement “practical intelligence” (Porcher 2021, 19).

While the common and scientific language talks about the “work” of plants and animals, this is not the case for their employers, nor is it the case in law. The use we make of the productive activity of living things is rationalised, automated, accelerated

and finally brutally exploited, in a way that goes beyond what is required to reproduce their own labour power. Notwithstanding their great diversity, these “employees” cannot organise themselves in order to obtain rights. The current debate about what rights should be granted to other living things focuses on their “preservation”, the “respect” we owe them, and their “well-being”. Surprisingly, this debate does not touch on the question of *employment* and law which, as in the case of humans, could limit their exploitation by creating legal responsibilities for employers. The productive and gainful activity of other living things then questions the institutions of work (*travail*). The same happens with the production being carried out by increasingly intelligent machines.

5.2. Machines Replacing Human Work?

Robots are said to be stealing work from humans. Machines and algorithms would then ultimately be doing the work. However, although robots act, they have no psychological activity. Thus, their actions are limited compared to human action: they sense information but do not appreciate it, they act but do not produce, they speak but do not say anything. But since they are becoming more and more autonomous and productive, this is where the problem lies.

We use things that produce. However, there is no employment code for robots in which humans would be considered, from a legal point of view, as the employers of these things that “work”. Robots may very well work, but they are not dependent on “labour law” and do not contribute to Social Security.

This confusing situation has found political expression: in 2017, the European Parliament’s Committee on Legal Affairs (JURI) suggested that the employment of robots could give rise to the payment of pension contributions and the application of a tax on the work they carry out in order to fund the unemployment that they generate. This same body also seeks to frame the legal liability of robots in civil law. In short, the continuing automation of human activity examines the rights and duties of the human subjects that design them, market them and maintain them. “Labour law”, understood as the “duty of employers”, must therefore once again be scrutinised in the context of increasing automation of production and products.

While the utilitarian and profitable use of animals and robots is not enshrined in the labour code, at the same time, at the very heart of formal employment, there are recurring debates to find out whether professions or jobs that are considered unproductive, harmful or even threatening for our subsistence, can continue to be classified as “work”.

6. Unnecessary, Abusive or Harmful Jobs

6.1. Usefulness of Employed Activity in Capitalism

One in four French people in employment expresses doubt about the usefulness of their tasks and function.⁶ And this is even the case for those who chose professions in public service *for the very purpose* of being useful to others – teachers, nurses, police officers, local government employees, social workers, etc. – when they realise that, in the name of quantified and proceduralised “performance”, their activity regularly becomes meaningless, or even abusive. In such cases they say that what they do “is not work” (“ce n’est pas du travail”), because they consider that they are not producing anything useful, or that they are “prevented from working” at their job – although here

⁶ According to the survey “*Conditions de travail*” (Working conditions), carried out by the French Ministry of Labour in 2016.

again, the institutions describe them as and treat them as “workers”. Thus, in employment (“travail”, as the institutions would say), destruction and disutility can occur. Is destroying our livelihoods “work”?

6.2. Paradigm Shift With the Capitalocene

This destruction and disutility take on an unprecedented dimension in the context of the Capitalocene (Moore, 2016). Our current ways of producing and consuming are threatening the habitability of the planet through the pollution and devastation that they cause to living things. Designing, manufacturing, distributing things (cars, yoghurts, plasma screens, hamburgers, etc.) and services (internet, medical care, tourism, hair-dressing, transport, etc.) are tasks performed, for the most part, by employees. These “workers” (*travailleurs*) therefore generate, directly or indirectly, the greatest disutility. From a systemic point of view, in contemporary capitalism, the more we “work”, the more we commit ecocidal acts, the more we reduce our subsistence. It is therefore no longer possible to say that work contributes to producing use values for our subsistence.

This disruption in the “work” category of thought is reinforced by the observation that on a regular basis, it falls far short of enabling a “breadwinner” to make a living.

7. When “Work” Does not Provide a Living

7.1. Working Poor: Employment Without Subsistence

Our capitalist society remunerates structurally inactive or idle social players, first and foremost of whom are shareholders or people of independent means in general. At the same time, 300 million male and female “workers” around the world live in extreme poverty (ILO, 2018). In Europe, 17.2% of employees were “poor” in 2014, and 7.6% in France according to Eurostat, where one million employees live below the poverty line. Paid work does not provide a living in these cases.

The category of the working poor encompasses self-employed individuals, especially in the agricultural sector. In 2015, in France, they expressed their challenging situation with this meaningful slogan: “On vous nourrit mais on crève” (“We feed you but we’re starving”). Although farmers work day and night, without respite, to produce food, this “work” does not even provide them with their own livelihood: in fact, one in four was below the poverty line in 2018 (Insee 2019). Among independent artisans in France, this figure is one person in five.

Yet this growing dissociation between productive activity and remuneration to make a living is increasing steadily under the effect of unemployment and neoliberal policies.

7.2. Legal Status of Employing Workers Outside Labour Institutions

In the Northern capitalist countries, there are more and more forms of legal status that give the right to employ people in abysmal conditions, when they have no chance of getting a job covered by the Labour Code, with the rights and social protection this brings. These types of institutionalised jobs pay wages that are impossible to live on.

The case of prisoners is a longstanding issue. In France, they are allowed to work for non-profit companies, agreeing to take on underpaid, repetitive, non-qualifying tasks⁷ for pay⁸ of between 20% and 45% of the minimum wage – or between 1.50 and

⁷ According to the International Observatory for Prisons.

⁸ Fixed by Article 432-1 of the Code of Criminal Procedure.

3.40 euros gross per hour. This constrained and arduous productive activity is not covered by labour law. The hours worked cannot exceed those practised in a free society, however, prisoners have neither the right of expression, nor union rights, nor rest days, nor guaranteed working days, nor the right to sick leave, the recognition of accidents at work or occupational medicine, and nor do they have any compensation if they are laid off. When they are hired, the suitability of the job in relation to their qualifications is not the foremost criterion. Thus they “work” but outside the institutional frame of “work”.

Also in France, as in other European countries, anyone recognised as “disabled” can sign a “labour assistance and support contract” with specialist establishments. This comes under the Public Health Code and the Social Action and Family Code. This is therefore “work” that does not depend on eponymous institutions and manages to escape “labour law”. Subject to the imperatives of economic profitability, this system in no way promotes “integration” into the so-called “ordinary” labour market and nor does it train people, thus running the risk that they will be kept in this so-called “protected” sector. Ultimately, this scheme creates an institutionalised pocket of employment outside institutions and labour rights. This is work and yet not work at the same time. It is also as a result of the “very little rather than nothing” attitude that neoliberal public policies favour the extension of “activation”.

7.3. Activation Policies: Working Because One Does not Have a Job

Activation is a question of occupying those who are excluded from the salaried job market by making the payment of social aid conditional on the performance of productive tasks said to be of general interest, but which are outside the scope of labour law, and hence pay below the minimum wage. In the United States, this workfare moves from solidarity based on social rights and redistribution, to assistance based on the morality of work (Krinsky 2008), combining the logic of merit and that of punishment. However, “workfare does not refer to the idea of creating jobs for people who do not have one, but to the idea of creating workers for the jobs that no one wants” (Peck, 2001, 6). In Germany, the Hartz activation reform (2002-2005) almost doubled the share of “working poor” – 5.5% in 2005 to 9.5% in 2015.⁹ In Germany, Italy and Switzerland, the creation of “jobs” for migrants, combining very low incomes with extreme insecurity, has been linked to requests for asylum. Their productive activity is not work in the institutional sense, and yet it allows them to obtain the equivalent of an official “work certificate”.

In France, the Council of State has authorised these activation schemes since 2018. In this case, men and women carry out arduous but useful tasks, but which do not enable them to live decently nor to take advantage of “workers” rights and institutions. The institutionalisation of pay that falls below the minimum wage (Brown 2015) goes against the idea that what we call “work” provides an income which in turn provides a livelihood.

8. Conclusion: “Work Trouble”

We have seen in this article that in the neoliberal capitalist society, useless, even ecocidal jobs, are described as “work” by institutions, while many of the arduous practices that sustain us are not. Significant income can be obtained without doing anything,

⁹See: <https://ec.europa.eu/statistical-atlas/viewer/?config=Ryb-2019.json&mid=BKGCNT,C02M01,CNTOVL&o=1,1,0.7&ch=POP,C05¢er=43.1759,-24.14356,3&#>

whereas for a growing number of men and women, constrained employment is not sufficient to provide them with a livelihood; at the same time, statutes allowing them to be put to work beyond the scope of formal institutions of work are multiplying. Meanwhile, practices that are productive and profitable for companies, but carried out simply in order to obtain a job or in the social uses of digital technology and biology, are also being deployed outside the institutions of work. And while other living things and machines produce and generate huge use value and exchange value, there is no Labour Code that enshrines the rights and duties of their employers.

The ordinary, scientific and institutional uses of the word “work” are then put to the test, to the point where, in all these cases at least, it is no longer possible to agree when it is time to decide who works and when. In this respect, the trouble in the category of thought and the practice of “work” is a watchword, where any disruption would suggest that it is the institution itself that appears to be cracking or at least needs to be challenged. The political nature of the definition of work – excluding domestic tasks – is therefore more than ever brought to mind.

In the course of this reasoning, the following questions arose: should we exclude destructive and harmful practices from the institutions of work, such as those which do not provide a living... or should we consider from now on that what we call work does not necessarily contribute to our sustenance? Should we include in the institutions of “work” the social practices that produce use values and profitable economic values, such as psychological processes, the construction of social links, care, education and material self-production? With profitable production by interns, YouTubers, modders, consumers, organ donation, and surrogacy, should we note that, institutionally, most of the production that is useful for our subsistence and profitable for companies is done outside formal employment? What employment law should be put in place for robots, animals and plants to continue to legally objectify the figure of the employer, and his responsibilities in their exploitation? And what transformations will this disruption in work lead to in the professions of inspectors, lawyers, doctors, safety managers, statisticians, and those looking for “work”?

The disruption in the “travail” – and probably “work” and “Arbeit” – category of thought also challenges scientific practices and our routine theoretical frameworks. The split between real practices and the “work” category of thought, like the confusion that reigns in the conceptual field around this word, are such that we should no longer feel obliged to use this fairly polymorphous normative category of thought, which is manifestly inadequate to describe the contemporary world. Assessing the scale of the theoretical issues raised by these empirical transformations, we would need to distinguish the many meanings and values that the word “work” carries along with it, and the relationship between them.

Whether we are researchers or citizens, by unfolding this word and its meanings in the category of thought that we have inherited, we can bring more intellectual discernment to the questions that we have to answer, as men and women of a world that is coming to an end: what must we produce (or stop producing) in the current ecological context to ensure not only our material sustenance but our social and psychological sustenance as well? What do we do in the face of common negative occurrences (pollution and threats to vital resources)? How should we organise the productive tasks of robots and living things? What forms of employment or self-employment should be invented and instituted, which would make it possible to direct production and organisation towards a more desirable, or more modestly, more possible future? What forms of solidarity should be introduced? These questions make no mention of “work”. And

the answers have no need for this category of thought. They can then also envisage the relationship between these dimensions more easily.

This escape from inherited categories of thought can form part of an epistemological revolution that subverts the incorporated and naturalised foundations of neoliberal capitalism. It accompanies the social change that we are currently experiencing, so that we can better feel it, think it and then act.

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About the Author

Marie-Anne Dujarier

Marie-Anne Dujarier is professor of sociology at Université Paris Cité. Her research examines contemporary activity in employment by states and capitalist firms, in market places, and also in consumption practice. She is the author of many books in French and articles in English, such as: "The three sociological types of consumer work", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, April 8 2014, 1-17, "The activity of the consumer: strengthening, transforming or contesting capitalism?", *The Sociological Quarterly*, Volume 56, Issue 3, 2015, 460-471 and "Up to the financial elites, or Out to the menial world: Figuring out companies as commodities: a key to stay in the M&A sector", with V. Boussard, in *Finance At Work*, Boussard (dir.), Routledge, 2017, 29-41, also "Vertical division of labour: A sociology of work of remote organisers", *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, 2019, 7-19.