Introduction: studies of work and identity beyond the epochal

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The nexus between identity and the organization of work life has been explored in a diverse array of social science traditions, from Weber’s link between bureaucracies and protestant ethics to Giddens’s link between disembedded, globalized institutions and self-reflexive identities.

In the past decade, there has been a sharp increase in a particular kind of story about identity and work life. The story, told with increasing frequency, suggests that there has been a rupture with a more stable past; work life has changed quite dramatically, and the consequences for identity are only beginning to dawn on us. The story comes in various versions:

- It is argued that careers are becoming boundaryless as opposed to the bounded careers of earlier times.
- It is argued that lifelong employment will be replaced by ever more short-term employment, contracting, and freelancing.
- It is argued that working is increasingly about individual networking as opposed to the formalized and bureaucratic work organization of yesterday.
- It is argued that a pervasive scattering of communities is taking place as opposed to the more coherent and consistent communities of the past.
- It is argued that a new economy is superseding an old economy.
- In general, it is argued that organizations are becoming much more flexible and thus demanding much more flexibility of their members.

What then, does this supposed rupture mean to identity? The disagreement in the social science literature and the popular press is considerable. On the one hand, a number of authors suggest that nothing less than a social disaster is developing. In the past, the labour market was characterized by a relatively large core of stable employment. This middle class haven was surrounded by a periphery, a secondary labour market with unattractive working conditions: more tedious jobs, lower wages, less education, poorer promotion possibilities, and primarily lower job security. What is happening at present is
the flooding of the core by the conditions of the periphery. Working people in all segments of the labour market are forced to change jobs, future plans, colleagues and location much more frequently. Insecurity is thus spreading everywhere. This development, it is argued, has profound consequences at a social psychological level. Constant changes and the impossibility of long-term planning lead to disorientation and, in the words of Richard Sennett, the corrosion of character.

There are others authors, however, who take a completely opposite view on identity and recent changes in work life. They argue that we are currently witnessing the emergence of a new heroic figure in the labour market, which they call ‘free agents’. These are typically highly skilled professionals, who sell their expertise to the highest bidder. This élite workforce migrates from business to business and reaps the benefits of flexibility, variation and extremely high salaries. The increased flexibility of the labour markets thus enhances rather than undermines the possibilities for human self-actualization. The creativity, responsibility and energy of the individual is finally being liberated from the embrace of too big and too bureaucratic organizations.

Which of the two suggested trends should we believe? Will people become corroded characters or free agents? Will they break down or will they break free? Rather than siding with the pessimists or the optimists, the authors of the present volume dispute the basic premise of this polarized debate. We challenge the idea that a rupture has taken place, and that the development of work life can be adequately conceptualized as the spectacular shift from one epoch to the next. More specifically, we challenge the kinds of stories – epochalist stories – that dramatize present changes by making a contrast to a stable past.

A brief reflection on the history of work organization makes it plain that epochalist stories do not hold up to a closer scrutiny. First of all, the notion of work as a stable job within a stable organization seems to draw mainly on the particular bureaucratic organization of work, which became widespread after World War II in most western countries. However, this organisation of work hardly became an all-encompassing order.

If one goes further back in history, it is obvious that ‘stable jobs in stable organizations’ become an even more problematic shorthand for ‘work in the past’. One merely has to mention the ‘boundaryless careers’ of travelling journeymen, the ‘project organizations’ of theatre companies, or the ‘networking environments’ of medieval markets, to make clear that the so-called new forms of work have been around for quite a long time.

For this reason, the study of contemporary identity and various non-bureaucratic forms of work should not seek justification by pitching itself against a spurious assumption about a stable and well-ordered past. Quite the opposite: the relevance of this area of study is precisely that work has been
done and identities constructed in this way for a very long time. What is important then, is to tell stories of the current transformation of work and identities that recognize the heterogeneity of work life and that build a theoretical agenda beyond grand-scale epochalist claims.

In order to make a collective contribution to this project, the authors of the present volume have made certain theoretical choices. The first has already been mentioned. It is the enabling negative of not doing epochalist explanations. However, since epochalist stories are very much a part of present social science debates, it would be unproductive simply to ignore them. For this reason, each author addresses a specific epochalist assumption, which is then challenged and complexified by means of a thorough empirical analysis. The authors frame their analyses and develop their arguments along particular lines, which we will briefly sketch out.

The first, and perhaps most obvious way to challenge epochalist assumptions, is to do a historical analysis. Does the projected image of the past really hold up to closer scrutiny if one digs into the archives? This type of analysis often results in surprisingly rich and complex accounts, which not only challenge epochalist simplifications but also makes one wonder how these simplifications became so convincing in the first place. Unfortunately, historical analysis is sadly underrepresented in the contemporary academic world, which seems obsessed with present events.

The second approach of the authors of this volume is to explore contemporary work and identities in ethnographic detail. Through these accounts and this form of analysis, the authors develop empirically grounded discussion of epochalist claims. How are the putative great shifts performed in practice? What specifically do people say about recent changes? Does the new really displace the old, or is the empirical reality better described as complex patterns of interference?

The third approach is to make epochalism itself an object of study. Epochalism is not merely a feature of the talk and texts of professional theoreticians. It is just as much a part of the daily discursive practice of working life. By studying epochalist discourse in action, it is possible not only to make an interesting account of practice, but also to deconstruct the universalistic claims that epochs are simply the way things are. Rather, epochs are the way things get constructed in particular moments at particular locations by particular actors.

A fourth approach, which overlaps with several of the above mentioned, might be labelled the critical case approach. Epochalist accounts often trade on stories of particular professions or segments of the labour market (for example cultural intermediaries) that signify the advent of a New World. This makes a closer investigation of these cases particularly interesting in order to evaluate these claims and search for possible alternative interpretations.
In sum, one may characterize the analytical stance of the book in the following way. The authors are scaling down in the sense that they refrain from making sweeping, broad scale claims about the new world order of work. But at the same time, they are scaling up in the sense that they increase the amount and the quality of the data used to discuss particular developments in work and identity.

The challenge of epochalism is the first theoretical choice that informs the authors. The second is the focus on identity, or to be more precise, relational identity. The authors partake in the broad constructionist movement, which takes identity to be an emerging effect of on-going relations rather than an internal, pre-given essence. The construction of identity is a matter of making, distinguishing or identifying people in a field of relationships. The emergence of relational identity depends on immediate interaction with people and physical surroundings. But relationality also includes mediated interaction that stretches far beyond the current situation in time and space. Talking about relational identity is thus a rather open agenda, which makes it possible to explore the construction of identity through a wealth of empirical materials.

Where on earth would one expect to find the dramatic effects announced by epochalist commentators? Where in the economy? And in which segments of the workforce? Although the answers to these questions vary to some degree, the general belief seems to be that highly innovative endeavours and ‘the economy’ are driven by the western world, the private sector, and the highly-skilled segments of the workforce. These assumptions may be questioned or criticized, but if one wants to argue with epochalist accounts, it is nevertheless productive to direct the focus toward the same empirical field. This is what the authors of the present book do: all cases are in the private sector, all cases are located in Western Europe or North America and all cases relate to the higher-skilled segments of the workforce. Within this shared focus, however, a broad variety is covered. The topics include technical work, creative work, communicative work and managerial work. The degree of institutionalization differs considerably: on the one hand there are studies of old and well-established fields such as journalism, graphic design and advertising. On the other hand there are analyses of relatively new or relatively ill-defined areas, such as software development or the work of starting up a ‘new economy’ firm. In addition, the cases cover almost the entire spectrum of employment relations: the chapters are populated by company owners, middle managers, employees and consultants, as well as temporary workers.

The diversity of empirical material, even within the narrow overall frame, is an important part of the non-epochalist story. What is evidenced throughout the chapters is a striking variety in the development of (western, professional, private sector) work life. An assumption about a single all-encompassing developmental trend simply does not do justice to the empirical material.
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combination, the chapters suggest a multi-faceted view of contemporary work that questions a number of the epochalist myths related to the so-called new economy, knowledge society or network society. In the next section, we shall briefly introduce the chapters.

In the first chapter, Liz McFall challenges the notion that the ‘new’ economy is distinct from the ‘old’ economy because it is based on non-standard manipulation of symbolic or cultural knowledge and information. The proponents of the thesis of ‘culturalization of work’ have described the appearance of new categories of worker such as ‘symbolic analysts’ and ‘cultural intermediaries’ that perform this ‘new’ blending of culture and work. Furthermore, these authors have argued that the culturalization of work entails the demise of work-based identity and the advent of identity based on consumption. McFall questions this entire line of reasoning by investigating the root assumption that work in the past was separated from culture. Through empirical examples of historical advertising practices and theoretical analysis, McFall argues that work is necessarily culturally constituted. In this way she argues against the notion of a major shift and for a more multifaceted view of identity.

Gill Ursell also challenges the assumption that ‘cultural intermediaries’ represent a new and victorious type of worker in a transformed labour market. Ursell traces the development of journalistic work through a historical analysis of public ideals of journalism, media ownership, work organization and career patterns. Rather than the persistence of a creative and independent ideal, Ursell’s account reveals the serious undermining of traditional ideals of public journalism. The analysis of journalism is an interesting counter-story to the prevalent claim that ‘cultural intermediaries’ represent the most innovative and flourishing part of the labour market. On the contrary, Ursell suggests that a remarkable standardization and trivialization has taken place.

Torben Elgaard Jensen investigates the idea of networking, which is a recurrent element in epochalist accounts of the labour market. In many of these accounts, networking is depicted as the novel organizational principle of connecting everything with everything. Elgaard Jensen, however, questions this idea through an ethnographic study of a particular network environment, an office hotel for small innovative firms. In this location, the term networking seems to cover a number of different and to some extent irreconcilable organizing efforts. It is simultaneously the construction of an exclusive club, the establishment of formalized relations between buyers and sellers, and the generation of a loose assemblage of acquaintances. Elgaard Jensen explores the conflicts and synergies between these different versions of networking, and he argues that this tensioned pattern forms particular conditions of possibility for the construction of identity.

Ola Bergström and Lars Strannegård examine the practical workings of the...
epochalist discourse through a case study of the rise and fall of a talent agency. The agency draws heavily on epochalist ideas and rhetoric in the construction of claims about its unique identity as a company. It argues that there is a gap between the old and the new economy, and that the talent agency is able to bridge this gap for a number of actors. Investors will want to place their money in a new economy firm such as the talent agency. Clients will need the talent agency to recruit the business talent that will transform companies and help them survive in the new situation. Talents will need the agency to maximize their market value. By following the company and its epochalist discourse from the beginning to the end, Bergström and Strannegård examine the stability and vulnerability of this particular construction of organizational identity.

In creative professions, the ‘need’ to express creativity and individuality is often quoted as the reason for becoming self-employed. In Ellen van Wijk and Peter Leisink’s study of graphic designers, the construction and workings of this need are explored, from the ideals conveyed at Art College through the narratives of employed designers, to the accounts given by designers who have recently started on their own. Van Wijk and Leisink’s analysis demonstrates that independence seems to be a normative and conversational ideal, which is adhered to despite fulfilling working conditions as an employee, and despite obstacles related to self-employment. It suggests that the yearning for independence might be better explained by long-standing professional ideals than by recent economic pressures.

Ann Westenholz scrutinizes the relation between identity and organizational boundaries in her study of IT professionals. She identifies four identity stories which are widely known and available in the IT field. One of these stories, ‘the citizen in the company’, depends on a clearly bounded organization, whereas other stories – ‘the open-source grassrooter’, ‘the free agent in the market’, and ‘the project maker in professional communities’ – do not. Through her analysis of specific negotiations of meaning and identity, Westenholz demonstrates how a number of extra-organizational narrative forms are employed, combined and developed in the situated construction of identity. The assumption that a recognizable identity by necessity depends on organizational boundaries is thus rejected.

In the afterword Paul du Gay reflects on the previous chapters and the issues of organizational change, work identity and the ‘tyranny of the epochal’.

In this final part of the introduction, we would like to indicate our ideas about the location of the present book in a broader theoretical landscape. This book, we believe, is related to a number of well-established academic fields, such as Identity Studies, Human Resource Management, Industrial Relations and Organizational Studies. But the approach differs from the mainstreams of these traditions, and partakes in recent developments within these. In Figure
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0.1 and the next section, mainstream and recent developments are described.

The essentialist perspective on the individual, which is well known from psychology, characterizes a major part of identity studies. *Identity in the Age of the New Economy* deviates from the essentialist perspective and follows the path of recent years’ sociological/social-psychological analyses of identities. The latter analyses evoke a relational perspective, and have been predominantly theoretical in addressing the situation of the individual in contemporary society. In contrast, the present book presents thick empirical studies of relational identities in scattered and temporary work practices.

Within Human Resource Management, identities are often seen as exogenous variables and analyses tend to be governed by managerial perspectives. In that context the contingent labour force is often characterized as disloyal. Based on empirical studies of temporary and scattered working life, this book demonstrates how identities are endogenous variables. Identity, for example loyalty/disloyalty toward the company and the work, is not something the individual ‘is’, but something that emerges through relations. The focus is thus directed away from the employment contract as being decisive for loyalty and toward studies of relational situations in diverse types of practice (work practice, education, and so on).

Many scholars within the tradition of Industrial Relations are deeply engaged in studying the growth in contingent labour, especially in low-
skilled labour. The assumption is that contingent labour is driven away from the primary labour market into a secondary one, and that the interests of this group are poorly safeguarded. In this context, the book focuses on highly-educated contingent employees and directs the analyses from the politics of interests to the politics of identities.

Mainstream Organization Theory assumes organizations to have boundaries delimiting the internal from the external. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in studies focusing on actors crossing the boundaries between internal and external. This book aims to demonstrate that boundaries are emerging concurrently with the development of identities: there is a concern with fuzzy organizational boundaries, which is not found in most organization studies.

We believe that this book will be of interest to scholars within these four academic fields. It is aimed primarily at people working within the disciplines of sociology and social psychology, although it will also be of interest to those within the field of economics.