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# 1. The politics of labour, work and employment

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this introduction is firstly to explain the rationale for *The Handbook of the Politics of Labour, Work and Employment*. That means explaining, in turn and in three parts, the rationale for (1) a handbook on (2) the politics of (3) labour, work and employment. Thereafter, the purpose of the introduction is to briefly introduce the chapters in terms of delivering upon the aforementioned multifaceted rationale.

Thus, over the last 15 or more years, various academic publishers, commercial and non-commercial, have pushed and promoted the concept-cum-configuration of the handbook. In the process, it has become a burgeoning business, with this book's publisher, Edward Elgar, having over 250 such titles alone in the business and management area (at the time of writing in early 2019). Palgrave, Sage and Oxford University Press are the other main players in this area for handbooks throughout the humanities and social sciences. So while there may have been an overproduction of such texts on already well-trodden ground, for academics and researchers there is often an opportunity to do with a handbook what is not possible to be done in other academic artefacts (most obviously the journal article and even if the handbook bears something of a resemblance to its near neighbour, the conventional edited book). Handbooks seek, in the main, to provide a comprehensive and unified overview and treatment of an area or topic in a deeper and more profound way than is normally possible in most edited books. In this sense, they can be a bit like a modern-day reader, and are meant as more than merely an advanced introduction. This overviewing and expansive treatment may be a factor of the length or wordage of the handbook but it may also be a result of the attempt to be more strategic in the thinking about the choice of chapters and contributors. Some handbooks are broad in their remit, with others being quite narrowly focused. When the opportunity arose to compile and edit a handbook on the politics of labour, work and employment, it appeared to be one of those opportunities where the total could be much greater than the sum of its parts because a holistic and integrated approach could be taken to the matter of the politics of labour, work and employment.<sup>1</sup> It is to be hoped this is borne out in the following pages.

Turning to the politics, it is believed that far too often contemporary consideration of, and analysis of, the politics of labour, work and employment is either missing from, or peripheral to, the study of labour, work and employment. Why is this, why is it significant, and why should there be consideration and analysis of the politics of labour, work and

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<sup>1</sup> The closest that a fellow Edward Elgar handbook title comes to this handbook is that by McGrath-Champ et al. (2010) on the relationship between work and employment, the politics of place and labour geography through an approach of political economy. From Sage, there is the handbook of the sociology of work and employment (Edgell et al. 2016). The edited collection by Hauptmeier and Vidal (2014), despite its title, is more concerned with employment relations than work (even if from a political economy perspective).

employment? If we understand politics as comprising both 'high' and 'low' politics with predominant concerns comprising the interplay of power, (often material) interests and ideology then a polity is any political entity where the process of decision making and associated outcomes apply to members of a group, be that in a workplace, an employing organisation, a community group or a nation-state. Of particular concern here is also the dynamic interplay between high and low politics. The salience of this is that politics as governance reflecting contending powers, interests and ideologies within subordinate and superordinate polities is critical to understanding and influencing the distribution of resources (like but not only including profits), who benefits from this distribution, and how citizens as labourers are treated in this process of the creation and distribution of these resources. So, in one sense, where democracy is simply defined as the will of the simple majority, there is no active or conscious democracy in the workplace and employing organisation. Whether there is democracy in the polity concerning the state is, at the very least, an 'open question', and this is of salience here for states still regulate capital and labour (albeit to varying degrees over time and space). This leads to the widespread notion of the democratic deficit, and its presence is not altered or ameliorated by employer initiatives of engagement, empowerment, involvement or participation. Although challenging as an academic endeavour, studies of labour, work and employment seldom seek to locate their subject matter in not just the circuits of capital (the economy) but also within politics (the polity) and, thus, within society. There seems to be two primary reasons for this.

On the one hand, there has been a trajectory in society towards the depoliticisation of the matters of labour, work and employment because, under the hegemony of neo-liberalism as embodied in the praxis of human resource management, the 'market knows best' mantra has seen the state consciously retreat from what seemed like considerable previous regulation of labour, work and employment as well as closing off many issues from contention. Even where there has been some re-regulation, it has been of a neo-liberal nature. To take a well-known concept and phrase, matters of labour, work and employment have become subject to the 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009) where 'there is no alternative' to the market so issues of contention and the latitude for contention have been heavily eroded, meaning that the basis for political debate and action over the salient issues has declined. This has had an impact upon the academy, with attention turning to management as the subject of study, especially through human resource management as a field of study in which the pursuit of organisational efficiency and effectiveness are increasingly seen through the lens of managerialism as matters of everyday 'common sense'. Yet, this has not been a phenomenon that has swept away all before it and so not only has the state not entirely retreated from regulation but others like academics (and policy thinkers, unions and so on) have promoted agendas of 'fair work', 'decent work', 'good work' and the like. These agendas have gained some traction but these kinds of engaged academics are the 'exception' and not 'the rule', and the primary means by which the agenda has been implemented has been through voluntarism and 'soft' regulation – in other words, in a business-friendly way and within the framework of neo-liberalism so that the degree of counter – and progressive change has been limited.

On the other hand, there seems to be something almost innate within the contemporary activity of academic thinking and writing – which is increasingly centred upon journal articles – that militates against such aforementioned consideration and analysis of labour, work and employment. It cannot just be the (restrictive) format of the journal article

although this does not help (see also Gall 2018). It cannot also just be that many journals are rather conservative and intellectually parochial. Taking an exemplar of this phenomenon but in the *prima facie* unlikely form of the *Work, Employment and Society* journal helps elucidate the issues at hand. Established by the British Sociological Association in 1987 with a remit to explore and understand the (wider) social relations of not just 'jobs' but also of work and employment within society as a whole (see Brown 1987), the journal began with a number of major pieces of 'sociological political economy' for want of a better term (see, for example, Hyman 1987). But it was not too long before this intellectually ambitious 'big picture' lens, informed by grand narratives and higher-level theory, of many of the initial articles was denuded and dissipated into a dominance of articles of much lower-level units of analysis in the form of empirically based, often case, studies of work and employment that eschewed broader theoretical concerns about capitalism and capitalist society. Occasionally, there have been exceptions that proved this rule such as those by Edwards (1994, 2006), Hodder and Edwards (2015) and Thompson (2003, 2013). More recently, this form of empiricism has taken the form of what could be best described as bringing forth a strong sense of 'case study workerism' (even though it may sometimes include more qualitative fieldwork using surveys). By this, it is meant the empathetic pseudo-glorification of workers' experiences of work at the hands of rapacious employers and management.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, 'case study workerism' draws from labour process studies with its implicit theme of the heroism of 'resistance is not futile' and 'no matter what, resistance is always possible'.<sup>3</sup> Industrial relations, as one formative field of study for the sociology of work and employment, has been under-theorised in an explicit sense and so this has, no doubt, played a part in producing this outcome. Industrial sociology, although to a lesser extent under-theorised, has also had a part to play. Yet together, they cannot fully explain the phenomenon (even with the addition of the journal factor). Nonetheless, this approach and practice of academic thinking and writing has contributed to the effective depoliticisation of the wider study of labour, work and employment even if there is sometimes a superficial sheen of what seems like political treatment because of the 'case study workerism'.

If the first two factors are of a more contemporary bent, there are also more long-standing ones in terms of understanding the 'non-politicisation' of the study of labour, work and employment. This non-politicisation is better expressed as the absence of taking a political economy approach to said study. Such study is often comprised – and compromised – by taking one of two perspectives, namely, either to approach the study of labour, work and employment as a simple matter of an unproblematic monetary exchange subject to the laws of orthodox economics or as a delimited bilateral relationship between employer and employed. Both approaches, consciously or unconsciously, omit to consider the salient issues as matters of political economy where political issues are generated in, around and by labour, work and employment, wherein labour, work and employment are subject to regulation by wider political processes and forces – with the actors within labour, work and employment themselves influencing these processes – and with labour, work and employment being situated as an essential component of the economic foundation of capitalist society (which in itself creates political questions and dynamics). Under

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<sup>2</sup> This sense has been strengthened by the introduction of the 'On the Front Line' section since 2009.

<sup>3</sup> While a truism, this does not take analysis very far, especially when the point is laboured.

this more holistic and grounded approach of political economy, labour is defined as both the active subject of those who carry out labour as well as the act of labouring itself (both of which are managed by management under capitalism); work is a matter of purposeful effort, whether remunerated or not but which serves a socialised purpose; employment reflects informal and formal relationships of contract to carry out specific work roles; and, more recently, the notion of the bilateral employment relationship between employer and employee as the mainstay of the contemporary employment relationship has ebbed away with its quinfurcation as a result of the widespread emergence of (1) employment intermediaries (such as employment agencies, subcontractors), (2) direct contact with customers who now play a regulatory role and (3) use of self-employment (whether bogus or not). Approaching labour, work and employment through a perspective of political economy (especially a radical one especially in the sense of the Greek derivation of the word from 'root') allows probing, deep-seated questions to be asked and answered about the nature of labour, work and employment in and under contemporary capitalist society. It reveals that (1) the nature and dynamics of labour, work and employment reflect issues of differential power, ideology and material interests between contending groups (especially between employers and employees, capital and labour) and (2) the shift towards the reconfiguration of labour, work and employment to ever more reflect and enrich the interests of capital and the neo-liberalised state. Approaching labour, work and employment in a conventional economic way or as a delimited relationship militates against, even prevents, the asking of these deep sociological questions about the nature of labour, work and employment. In particular, this proffered perspective then covers exploring and understanding why labour, work and employment make incursions into the political arena and how the subjects and actors of labour, work and employment engage in what are ultimately political acts – or at least acts with political ramifications. As a result, a further compelling reason is provided as to explain why labour, work and employment are regulated in an increasingly neo-liberal way. Out of this approach (and its attendant framework and salient questions), it is not just that an understanding of the links in the chain of how the political context and environment influences labour, work and employment can be gained, but also that how an understanding can be gained of the when, why and wherefore of how what happens within the relations of production, distribution and exchange influences politics, economics and society.

The definitions of, and differences therein between, labour, work and employment were alluded above. The order of labour, work and employment is a precise matter for the act of labour must come before work and employment, and work must come before employment. Work and employment may change but the labour and labouring may not. Labour is an act, a subject and an actor and, while labour is the foundation of work, it is not work per se. Work is not necessarily defined by any employment relationship or even any form of remuneration or contractual relationship (even through the most common form of unpaid labour, namely, domestic labour by women in the household has been subject historically to a form of contract through marriage and wider patriarchal relations). Both preceded capitalism while employment as a significant social phenomenon is almost synonymous with the workings of capitalism.

Putting 'politics' back together with labour, work and employment, under a political economy approach at any rate, brings forth the issues of social relations, whether that be class structuration (interests, dynamics and so on) or any others like those flowing from

race or gender and the ensuing inter-sectionality because, while the economy is the foundation (or base) of capitalism, politics, the state and society are its superstructure. But putting 'politics' back together with labour, work and employment also brings forth the particular epoch of capitalism that humanity currently exists under. For our purposes here, the 'neo-' in neo-liberalism is best articulated as effectively meaning that the state – which was relatively little developed under liberalism – has been captured and used by hard-right political forces to engineer a return to a kind of liberalism. This means using the state to roll back the advances of social democracy, specifically, regulation of the market and of capital, so that the market again becomes relatively unfettered as it was under liberalism.<sup>4</sup> In the current capitalist employment relationship under neo-liberalism, organised labour – not labour itself – remains the only actor that is subject to no less regulation or even more regulation than before.

Where is class in all this? Take a statement by Atzeni et al. (2017:1) that: 'Class is back at the centre of the debate across the social sciences. From political economy to anthropology, from development studies to geography and from sociology to feminist studies, questions related to labour, its contemporary composition, configuration and position within currently existing capitalism, have been increasingly framed in class relations of inequality. Moreover, the return of the working class at the centre of politics makes class a timely issue to be discussed. [We aim to make sure that] a class perspective [is added] to its traditional focus on work and employment relations in the broader political economy.'<sup>5</sup> In one objective sense, class had never gone away – although that would not have been evident in the academy of social sciences. But to proclaim that class is back was far more of an aspiration and not an attested reality in the subjective sense. Moreover, the study of labour is not synonymous with the study of class. Further, inequality can be studied without regard to class. Indeed, the current vogue is to study labour in terms of issues of fairness, social mobility and productivity – and not in terms of class formations. Even more outlandish is the declaration that there has been 'the return of the working class at the centre of politics'. Many would wish that this was so but neither the mantras of 'we are the 99%' (from Occupy!) nor 'for the many, not the few' (from Jeremy Corbyn) are class-based no matter how popular or well-intentioned they are. Instead, they are modern versions of the 'haves and have nots', 'rich and poor'.<sup>5</sup> This all testifies to the considerable intellectual and analytical challenges in articulating the linkages in studies between the sites of work and employment and the phenomena of the superstructure.<sup>6</sup> But it also testifies to a continued emphasis on lower-order empiricism and phenomenology. In any case, what this kind of site – in terms of its level and unit – of investigation may better lend itself to is the less challenging task of analysis of intra-class formations within the working class. This may help provide a bridge from the sites of workplace to that of class. But, it could also be ventured that starting with class formations and working down towards the site of the workplace might also be fruitful because class is not solely produced and reproduced in and at work and employment but also through the wider relations of the ownership

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<sup>4</sup> This also includes opening up space for the market to operate in when before there was never any.

<sup>5</sup> For the subaltern group, there is a commonality with the writings of Hardt and Negri (2004) on the multitude.

<sup>6</sup> In the event and despite its interdisciplinary heterogeneity and focus on work and employment rather than just the labour process, out of 243 papers at ILPC 2018, just 20 had 'class' in their titles, suggesting 'class' was very far from being 'back'.

of, control of, and benefit from the means of production, distribution and exchange. For the working class, this might help focus upon its key variables, namely, states of political consciousness, collective confidence and collective organisation and ability to exercise strategic leverage (industrial, political). Just as the dynamic ramifications between classes must be part of the study of the politics of labour, work and employment so too must the dynamic ramifications within classes. In other words, inter-class analysis must be supplemented and fine-tuned by intra-class analysis. The importance of intra-class analysis lies in its portent for explaining inter-class analysis in terms of the ability to define collective interests and collectively pursue them. This level of sophistication allows an analysis to be posited, which shows that while there is argument to say that all labour, work and employment is degraded under capitalism, it is also the case that there are those, albeit a minority, who live to work (rather than work to live) and are 'cash rich, time poor' as well as those who benefit financially from being on zero-hour contracts, having bogus self-employment and working in unpaid internships and so on.

## THE CHAPTERS

The handbook begins by laying out a number of themes in the study of the politics of labour, work and employment. This process begins by presenting chapters on different theoretical approaches to studying labour, work and employment in the context of capitalism, and by examining the characteristics of labour, work and employment in pre-capitalist and post-capitalist societies to provide a useful lens by which to look at labour, work and employment under capitalism. Chapters 2 and 3 are effectively each double chapters, signifying their importance in terms of providing an intellectual foundation for the rest of the chapters in the handbook given that they focus upon the politics of labour, work and employment under capitalism. In Chapter 2, as the employment relationship and cash nexus predominate, a thorough and comprehensive foundation for the subsequent chapters is provided but it is not – and probably cannot be – a total foundation for it can rightly be observed that (unpaid) domestic labour could not easily be located within the framework provided (even though the four frames of reference might have different things to say about it). Moreover, it remains a point of debate as to whether intersectionality can be accommodated, and productively so, within said framework and, whether under a post-/future non-capitalist society, extant theories may need revision as they may not stand up to empirical use and scrutiny. In Chapter 3, and as acknowledged in the chapter itself, considering what labour, work and employment will and could look like – as well what the politics of these will and could be – is a fraught endeavour as there may be thought to be relatively little in the way of an empirical basis upon which to answer the salient questions (even though the birth pangs of a new society must necessarily be created in the old society no matter how revolutionary the rupture is). Consequently, the chapter is, in part, necessarily speculative but it is also surprising just how much evidence and associated thought has been commandeered so that what is speculated upon is commanded upon in an informed, rigorous and robust way. For example, social experiments in 'dual power' as well as 'socialist' or 'communist' societies are explored. What the chapter is able to do is raise a set of highly relevant issues by which to judge any future labour, work and employment and associated politic after the demise of capitalism.

These two chapters are followed by others on the purpose, roles, rights, interests and powers of employers and their representatives (management), of workers and their representatives (unions), and of states and governments – alongside chapters on labour, work and employment in the age of globalised neo-liberalism (also known as the liberal market economy), different, alternative types of societal regulation (such as the coordinated market economy, social democracy, and possible proto-socialism in terms of ‘actually existing’ worker control like worker directors, cooperatives and co-determination), the legal regulation of the employment relationship and the moral economy of labour, work and employment. This collection of foundational chapters is followed by those delving into a number of aspects such as the management of labour and the labour process, the management of managers, and the influence of civil society organisations over labour, work and employment. The handbook then moves to consider types of work and labour, non-standard work and non-standard workers and non-remunerated work. This group of chapters is followed by chapters on skills and the social value of work, labour markets and migration, gender segregation, racial segregation, training and development, and kinship and community networks. Any handbook will necessarily have gaps in it for it is not an encyclopaedia. And so, it is the case with this handbook. Moreover, the present roll call of chapters was cut down slightly by some contributors having to pull out so that there are no chapters on global or international/transnational labour standards, the precariat and the unemployed, career paths and ‘dead-end’ jobs, the impact of new technology (robotics, artificial intelligence) or the phenomena of working to live and living to work. There is also no chapter on class per se – but that is a theme that runs through a number of the chapters in more or less explicit ways.

## CONCLUSION

Seldom do political science and the social scientific study of labour, work and employment meet. This handbook is not an attempt to enjoin them as such but rather seeks to help (re)locate the study of labour, work and employment in such a way as to see the ‘bigger (political) picture’. This approach is often sadly lacking from academic research and writing within the field because it has limited horizons, especially in an age of concentrating upon subjectivity, social identity and the so-called ‘lived experience’. It is to be hoped that the linkages established in this handbook between different levels of politics that shape and influence labour, work and employment, and their influence back upon different levels of politics, themselves help to shape and influence the study of labour, work and employment and can help open up the study of labour, work and employment to a wider ambit. In this, many thanks are due to all the contributors because, in an age of increasing workloads and working weeks, each of the writers collected here has taken the time to produce an academic artefact that is not a journal article and so does not carry the same and ever more managerialist cachet. It is to be hoped that the format of a chapter in a handbook has allowed the contributors to make up for that by elucidating their thoughts at length and in a freer manner than is the case in a journal article.

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