



## **Work, employment and society sans frontières: extending and deepening our reach**

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*Work, employment and society (WES)* was launched in 1987 in a period in which a number of features of British society were changing rapidly. The vibrancy and the optimism of the 1960s looked increasingly remote and sociology and the study of work reflected the more straitened times that came with the social transformations wrought by Thatcherism. The early 1980s had seen savage deflation, a consequent sharp contraction of the manufacturing industry and a series of set piece confrontations with unions (in the print and steel industries and on the docks) culminating in the defeat of the miners' union after a year-long strike (1984–5). A further result was rapid contraction of the numbers of trade union members and the demoralization of those that remained. One focus of industrial sociology, shopfloor trade unionism epitomized by Beynon's (1984) study of Ford's Halewood plant, became difficult if not impossible to repeat. The differences to and implications for the current sociology of work are discussed in the recent *WES* book review symposium of Beynon's study.

Richard Brown's editorial introduction to the first issue drew upon these societal developments to explain the rationale for the journal. Reviewing the sociology of work he noted that it had traditionally focused on male, manual workers in manufacturing industries and to a lesser extent on those who supervised and managed them, exactly the constituency hit hardest by the ongoing changes. The limitations of the focus on one gender, in one predominantly UK-based sector, became obvious with the relative and absolute decline in UK manufacturing and the new international division of labour; the growth of unemployment; the increase in women's employment; and employer attempts to establish more flexible patterns of employment.

The limitations of more traditional approaches were also heightened by developments in other areas of social science with broader concerns. The persistence of unemployment and the increasing North–South divide, along with entrenched patterns of low pay, had expanded interest in labour markets; discrimination against women and minorities was made more visible; and, following the impact of Braverman's *Labor and*

*Monopoly Capital* (1974), not only the capitalist labour process, but also the place of work within wider capitalist relations, including the state and social reproduction, were, for many, a prime focus. Recognizing the impact of feminist scholars, Brown also made clear that the study of work could not be restricted to activities within the social relations of employment: domestic work, voluntary work and communal work were all legitimate areas to be included. Finally, Brown (1987: 6) contended that the journal should encourage comparative analysis and have international coverage: 'We hope in future to include papers concerned with "socialist" societies and the "Third World" as well as industrialised "Western" countries' and from the outset the journal enshrined these orientations. For a later contribution to theoretical and methodological debates in comparative cross-national research see Crompton and Lyonette (2006). Issues appeared that carried a mix of quantitative and qualitative articles, theoretical and theoretically informed empirical pieces, some internationally focused and many comparative. Content frequently covered gender and work, discrimination against minorities, flexibility and employment.

It would be satisfying to claim that the world at the time of the launch has changed fundamentally and that new approaches are again demanded. There would be little substance in the claim. The tendencies that Brown highlighted have, if anything, continued and strengthened and the analysis of them deepened. De-industrialization of significant sections of the western economies has continued with the associated relocation of manufacturing in lower cost countries such as China, and the Global South to a lesser extent. Global economies, including 'post-socialist' societies, have also been subject to significant transformation following the emergence of neoliberalism and financialization. In recent years significant contributions to *WES* have examined how financialization disconnected the circuit of capital, its association with particular fractions of financial capital and why these developments do or do not create a financialized regime of accumulation.

Contemporaneously, the neoliberal attack on the public sector has intensified under the cover of post-crisis austerity in much of the Global North, where different capitals and governments have weakened workers' rights and driven down wages while reconfiguring the role of the state and privatizing risk. Trade union decline across western economies has yet to be arrested with further losses in membership numbers, density and influence. In the UK, the latest Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS) data indicate that the percentage of workplaces with recognized unions fell to just 9 per cent in private sector manufacturing (once a bastion of British trade unionism) and 12 per cent in private sector services. More broadly, insecurity at work has increased, reflected in growing attention to gender and racial discrimination, the exploitation of migrant labour and the precarity of employment.

All these issues have been reflected, if unevenly, in recent volumes of the journal, unevenness always being the case in a journal that does not commission works. Analysis of *WES* content over the past four years highlights a number of trends. Industrial restructuring, the demise of manufacturing and prominence of the service sector in most western economies were reflected in the overwhelming dominance of published workplace studies in areas such as private services, finance, retail and health care. These areas carried research on a broad range of topics ranging from skill formation and change, emotional labour, call centres, customer and trust relations and bullying to those focusing on

the body. Very few articles featured manufacturing and other traditional industries; even less explored work and workplace relations in new global manufacturing centres such as China (just three articles).

The implications for gender relations and women's employment that arise from industrial recomposition constituted by far the largest body of work published (at 40 articles). As we might expect, these incorporated many themes that include theories of intersectionality, sex segregation and discrimination, work–life balance, access to welfare and research focusing on housework and child care patterns. In addition, the journal continued to publish work on trade union organization, voice and mobilization (at least 16 articles) while international comparative work investigating the impact of national institutional regimes on jobs, work organization, welfare, multinational companies and trade unions also featured regularly.

Our analysis also shows that scholars publishing in the journal have indeed responded to recent shifts in the political economy of work and employment, albeit with a focus on the UK, North America and Europe. For instance, over the past four years, 20 articles relating to recession and job loss have been published covering such themes as job insecurity, psychological and financial distress, training opportunities, re-employment strategies and trends in work-time. It is notable, however, that in the context of global recession, while *WES* published an increasing number of articles that look at various dimensions of the ageing workforce relatively few featured the experiences and condition of young workers. This absence seems surprising given the salience of youth unemployment and poor working conditions in sectors where young workers predominate. Another related trend is the growth in articles covering labour migration and the employment of ethnic minorities (in combination nearly 25 articles) focusing mostly on discrimination in access to labour markets and in the workplace.

Finally, this content analysis shows that the journal remained committed to publishing research that rests upon a diversity of research techniques and methodological innovations. Fifty-six per cent of the empirical articles published drew upon qualitative databases; 37 per cent were purely quantitative and adopted a variety of statistical modelling techniques; another 7 per cent adopted mixed methods. Seven papers focused upon new methodological approaches (such as the use of email data, blogs and gossip). The journal, moreover, was not a repository for empirical work alone. Over the past four years, and with the help of the introduction of the Debates and Controversies section in 2003 under Paul Stewart's period of editorship, the journal has published at least 20 articles that were either primarily theoretical in content or which engaged conceptually in debates concerning important contemporary themes in the sociology of work and employment.

As editors, while we cannot determine the content of the journal, we can reflect on and encourage the development of contributions. Moreover, in order to become the editors we had to offer our perspectives on the development of the journal. The main purpose of this editorial is to reveal these perspectives to both readers and potential authors.

We see four main aspects of distinctiveness and excellence of the journal that we wish to continue and extend in the future. Specifically these are: (1) the extent to which conventional categories of 'work' and employment incorporate concepts of unconventional and unwaged work; (2) international perspectives, and in particular, those that include the Global South; (3) the degree of heterodoxy of the journal; and (4) public sociology.

The remainder of this editorial outlines how we understand these areas of distinctiveness and explains specific proposals for development in what will be a fast-changing context bringing related challenges of Open Access and resourcing to the journal, to the BSA and to SAGE as the publishers.

## **Unconventional/unwaged work**

New forms of work have proliferated in the western economies. In some European countries a deterioration in conditions was seen as the necessary trade-off to tackle persistent unemployment. Temporary contracts, part-time and agency work are different from each other but taken together illustrate the extent of the move away from the standard employment relationship and the diminishing power of workers. Equally, we have seen growth in the scale of informal work across the global workforce (Williams, 2013). The existence of these forms of work and their place in the labour market hierarchy are central issues that *WES* has covered, as are the conditions and prospects of the workers for whom there is no alternative to these types of work. The more extreme variants of these non-standard forms deserve further coverage in *WES*: for example, the German mini-jobs, the term used to define jobs of fewer than 15 hours per week, and the UK's zero-hours contracts have attracted vast media attention but less academic interest. Zero-hours contracts covered only 2.3 per cent of the UK workforce (697,000 people) in 2014 (ONS, 2015), but they have become an entrenched form of employment relationship, particularly in sectors such as hospitality, food services and education (ONS, 2015). Moreover, there has been rapid growth in underemployment with the use of contracts with very low or no guaranteed hours (see, for example, Warren, 2015). Both zero-hours contracts and mini-jobs are relevant to the wider issue of lower-skilled workers not being able to work their desired hours. In illustration, about a third of workers on zero-hours contracts would like to work longer hours with the same employer (ONS, 2015). In Germany low wage work has become almost as prevalent as it is in the United States (Applebaum et al., 2009).

Related to these non-standard forms of employment is the diminishing ability of a range of workers to negotiate adequate recompense for the costs they incur from working non-standard hours. Research has clearly documented the costs of working non-standard hours on health but much less research has examined the change in the terms of negotiation between workers and employers. Many workers, particularly health sector workers, who are required to work non-standard hours, are located in the public sector. At one time public sector workers were more shielded in a range of ways than private sector workers. This is no longer the case in the UK where, aided by privatization and competition, the number of public sector workers has fallen dramatically in recent years with deteriorating conditions for those who have remained.

These concerns are essentially about informalization or the growth of precarious work and have mainly arisen in industrialized countries. They are nothing new in lower-income and newly industrialized countries where the extent of the informal sector is vast and the idea of a standard employment relationship distant. Making sense of these differing perspectives on formal, informal, precarious and secure work is an important challenge we would hope to encourage. The links between forms of work in the industrialized

countries and the Global South, an issue to which feminists have long drawn attention, has been the subject of various conceptualizations sometimes related to global value chains but deserves further analysis.

In recent decades *WES* has made large steps to address the paucity of work on women and employment which we have noted was characteristic of *WES*'s earliest phase. A call for continued attention to the gendered nature of both paid and unpaid work is hardly likely to surprise. Indeed events have intervened to make the increased participation of women in formal paid work one of the most significant labour market changes, and this is true across many industrialized countries. In addition to the continued interest in women and employment is the need to focus on how men's experiences at work are also highly conditioned by the fact that they are men, who operate in the context of gendered norms of different types of employment. Clearly, not all men are the same; neither are all heterosexual couples the same in the way they divide paid and unpaid work. Attention to the differences in the gendered division of paid and unpaid work across a range of country contexts, and as differentiated by socio-economic group, has been a particular strength of *WES* and we would hope to be able to continue this work. Perhaps still further attention could be paid to how the division of labour between men and women in work is an outcome of a larger division of power between men, women, the state and the market (see Fraser, 1994), particularly through more internationally comparative work.

Women's increased entry into the formal labour market has, as Pollert (1988) and Vosko (2000) argued, made visible what was already a precarious position for many women. Women predominate in sectors such as child and elder care, representing the market face of work that also takes place in the domestic sphere. At the same time that many more women work in formal employment, they continue to shoulder the burden of domestic work, child care and elder care. Their position in formal work, although improved, is certainly not on the same terms as that of men. The position of women in the domestic and public spheres continues to be inextricably linked. Although it is not the case everywhere, in the UK part-time work is women's work and it is inferior in its conditions. The move to part-time work from full-time work is often accompanied by occupational downgrading (Connolly and Gregory, 2008). Indeed, the deterioration in workers' conditions of security and job quality on the one hand and gender on the other are inextricably linked, although not necessarily in the most obvious ways. Gender, social status and education are all key intersecting factors that require consideration in analysing work outcomes.

## **International perspectives and the Global South**

Brown's (1987) original editorial still serves as an important reference point with regard to work and employment outside the Global North. While *WES* has published e-specials on 'informal economic activities' (2012) and 'work and industrial relations in the post-Soviet bloc' (2015), debates on work and employment in the Global South no doubt merit more intense engagement. Since the launch of the journal, globalization, structural adjustments and the fall of the Berlin Wall have provided further impetus to the contested and often adverse integration of regional and local economies and societies into neoliberal capitalism. Consideration of work, employment and society in the Global South plays a crucial role against 'flattening' accounts of globalizing capitalism, both conceptually as well as in practice. Engaging with the debates and literature from the Global

South is a useful starting point and to this end we will be inviting (English language) reviews of books published in other languages to provide insights into more varied accounts of these developments.

The specific shapes of these globalizing processes have implications regarding content as well as methodology and the editorial team supports a more explicit engagement of debates in *WES* with adjacent ones led by anthropologists, human geographers and feminist political economists. While we are not able, nor want to, provide an exhaustive list, key foci of debate might revolve around the following themes.

First, work, employment and society are part of networked and unbound processes. Research on the changing faultlines of work and employment in the South are not simply relevant on their own terms but because it has become increasingly difficult and undesirable to assume a standard model and to specify its 'centre'. In the same way as capitalist dynamics have become unbound, linking rural China or Latin America with the migrant working and service class in the North, new spaces have opened opportunities for new forms of collective agency.

Second, the consideration of work and employment in the South encourages heightened attention to the interrelations between production and social reproduction, an issue where a more intense dialogue with adjacent disciplines might be fruitful. While the management of the sphere of reproduction might be striking in the case of migrant labour, it is in fact central in understanding *any* of the transformations of work and employment, including the role of households and communities as resources for new (or newly emerging) forms of resistance.

Third, the changing character of the research object necessitates developing established methodologies further, for example, in going beyond workers in precarious or informal employment relationships and workplaces to different forms of informal employment as well as households. The restructuring of global production requires international comparative work *as well as* research focusing on the interlinkages of production and reproduction processes, including the ensuing hierarchies of capitals, workers, gender and racial orders, localities and different stages in the functional division of labour.

## **Heterodox, eclectic and innovative**

Since its inception, *WES* has been a journal that espoused theoretical heterodoxy (Brown, 1987: 4) and methodological pluralism (Rainbird and Rose, 2008: 204). Over the years, the range and degree of heterodoxy has increased. In large part this is due to the steady 'internationalization' of *WES*'s contributions and readership (Stuart et al., 2013), thereby expanding the range of phenomena and perspectives covered by the journal. Alongside this expansion is the emergence of a more diverse politico-intellectual terrain upon which to build understanding and explanation of, and often challenge to, developments in work and employment wrought by contemporary neoliberal capitalism. *WES*'s content, therefore, is not just heterodox but also increasingly 'eclectic' in its theoretical orientation and methodological approaches (Stuart et al., 2013: 381).

One indicator of *WES*'s heterodoxy and eclecticism is the healthy growth over recent years in the number of submissions to the Debates and Controversies section. We are keen to maintain this, and to achieve a similar growth in its sister section on methodology, Research Notes. Such growth suggests a healthy appetite for debating the content, forms

and approaches to the study of work and employment. We also recognize that building on this good health requires a commitment to ongoing critique and debate, within and outside of *WES*, on the wider questions concerning the sociology of work, including its future direction (Halford and Strangleman, 2009), conceptual robustness (McGovern, 2014) and even its institutional location (Parker, 2015). We believe *WES* is well established to achieve this goal, with recent volumes containing a thriving number and range of contributions devoted to theoretical and methodological debate. Recent notable examples include: McBride et al.'s (2015) intervention on the underuse and misuse of intersectional analysis in studies of work; Bolton and Laaser's (2013) development of a *moral economy* approach to workplace analysis; and Ram et al.'s (2015) forensic examination of the practice of *critical action research*.

### Public sociology on the front line

When the On the Front Line (OtFL) section was launched in 2009 by the Strathclyde editorial team, they stated that its purpose was to publish articles in which workers 'speak for themselves', thereby enabling their voices and stories to 'convey sociological insight' into the experience of work and employment (Taylor et al., 2009: 7). Six years on there is encouraging evidence that the value of OtFL is increasingly recognized by *WES* authors. During 2015 five OtFL articles were published and the current rate of new submissions suggests this is a continuing trend.

While OtFL is modelled principally on Studs Terkel's (1972) approach in *Working* – a collection of ordinary people's accounts of their work – it also draws on sociology of work's rich tradition of ethnographic study, often iconically represented by Beynon's (1984) *Working for Ford* and Pollert's (1981) *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*. This tradition focuses on workers' agency and, because it is largely a monograph-based tradition, is able to give substantial space to reporting the voice of the worker in detail (Taylor et al., 2009). This stands in contrast to the now common need for truncated, 'sound-bite' reporting of qualitative data in much journal article writing (Grugulis et al., 2012). The ethnographic tradition is also commonly *engaged* research (Edwards, 2015) in that it overtly takes the side of the worker and labour as a whole (Brook and Darlington, 2013). Indirectly, OtFL articles can be understood to do the same by bearing witness and giving a public voice to workers' own testimonies of the inequalities and injustices inherent to the employment relationship and labour market. In this way, OtFL meets *WES*'s purpose of being a journal of *challenge* and in some cases implicit *opposition* (Stewart, 2004). An example of the latter is Lundberg and Karlsson's (2011) account of the indignities experienced by a cleaner in a Finnish five-star hotel.

OtFL also offers the potential for *WES* to pursue its long-standing commitment to public sociology. Over a decade ago, Paul Stewart (2004) opened his editorial with Michael Burawoy's (2004) high profile call, as President of the American Sociological Association, for public sociologies 'that transcend the academy and engage wider audiences' by being a 'mirror and conscience of society' in an era of deepening inequalities and rampant market capitalism. Since Burawoy's call, there has been vibrant debate over the political, methodological and practical ramifications of public sociology across the sociological tradition, including in *WES* (see Brook and Darlington, 2013; Holgate et al., 2014; Ram et al., 2015; Stewart and Martinez Lucio, 2011).

While this important debate on the purpose, limits and ramifications of public sociology is ongoing, there is a widespread desire to reach beyond the academy through forms of popular sociology. We believe that OtFL articles can fit that bill, as many people outside of the academy will be able to relate to the featured workers. Even where the worker's job or circumstances are extraordinary, their stories are pitted with experiences common to many in work, such as insecurity, discrimination and camaraderie. The result is that each one is a human drama, brimful with incident and emotion; from satisfaction, hope and joy to frustration, anger and fear. In addition, because OtFL articles are primarily reportage they are written in everyday language, with only minimal amounts of jargon to deter the non-specialist.

For these reasons the entire OtFL collection of current and future articles has now been made permanently *free access* from the *WES* website. We hope to introduce individuals and groups outside of the academy, especially young people, to the richness of what C Wright Mills (1959) evocatively called the 'sociological imagination' and its capacity to engage sensitively with workers to reveal compellingly their working lives. We want to encourage more scholars to work *with* workers, especially the less powerful, and to make a small contribution to ensuring that their unscripted voices do not suffer the 'enormous condescension of posterity', as EP Thompson (1968: 12) claimed was the fate of earlier generations of workers.

Overall, we will continue to work to extend *WES*'s geographical reach, build connections beyond the academy and further develop our understanding of work in a contemporary global context. We look forward to receiving submissions that critically assess and challenge current trends and assumptions in the fields of work, employment and political economy. Finally, we would like to take the opportunity to thank our current and past Editorial Board, Associate Board and International Advisory Board members along with our growing pool of external reviewers for the immense amount of work and commitment they have shown in maintaining the quality and excellence of this journal.

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