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Democratic Citizenship: A political-philosophical account[[1]](#footnote-1)

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If one takes the democratic principle of equal political rights seriously, it follows that democratic states have a binding obligation to guarantee fair, sufficiently good organized and participatory working conditions for all their citizens. This additional obligation results in my view from the meaning of those political rights that are meant to allow a population the full and unrestricted exercise of its political power: If those rights are to enable each citizen to participate at the democratic will-formation, then they also have to ensure that the given working conditions do not inhibit such participation. In other words, the procedures of a democratic will-formation by their very nature depend on fair, participatory and well-enough organized working conditions; a political democracy is worth so much as its own working conditions allow all employees to participate without any shame, restrictions and anxieties in the public opinion formation.

This normative dependency of democratic states on fair and participatory working conditions has far reaching consequences for both democratic theory and business ethics. For democratic theory it implies taking the conditions of work and employment no longer as an external factor laying outside of its own field of expertise, but as a constitutive factor within it; and for social theory it implies taking the facilitation of full political participation as the normative viewpoint under which employment relations are to be analyzed and studied.

I.

During the 18th century, a new understanding of society developed simultaneously with an entirely transformed notion of the value of human labor. In the course of the Enlightenment, people ceased to understand societies as hierarchical orders in which a small minority could exercise political mastery over a much larger majority thanks to their entrenched social position. Instead, they came to conceptualize societies as voluntary associations of citizens who are equal before the law and, at least in principle, enjoy an entitlement to political participation in virtue of membership alone. Given this revolutionary reinterpretation of the legitimacy of social orders, it was also necessary to forge a different, indeed an entirely new conception of the labor with which people secured their livelihoods. For, unlike in antiquity and the Middle Ages, labor could no longer be understood as a pure duty owed to God or one’s political rulers. Rather, it now counted as a proof of the individual’s willingness to make an active contribution to the common welfare and prosperity of the political community. This gradually unfolding idea of the democratic sovereignty of the people went hand in hand with another, which remains dominant today: society represents a cooperative enterprise in which each contributes to the subsistence of all through their labor and thereby proves themselves worthy of membership in the political group. In other words, what had been established was nothing less than an indissoluble conceptual bond between political democracy and the social division of labor.

Few provided a better theorization of this connection between political equality and the division of labor than Hegel. In his *Philosophy of Right* of 1821, he devoted an entire chapter to labor’s new significance as a condition of membership in the constitutional order. In this chapter, we read that every (male) member of civil society “is somebody” by means of “his competence” and “his regular income and means of support”, that is, he possesses the social status of a full-fledged citizen and will find “his honor” in this recognized existence as the representative of a trade or profession (Hegel 1821/1991, § 253). As we know, however, Hegel’s grandiose assertions did not correspond to the reality of early capitalism. Around 1800, the greater part of the populations of western Europe spent their working days engaged in oppressive factory work that was anything but free, as dependent service providers subject to the arbitrary will of the rich bourgeoisie and aristocrats in whose houses they worked, or suffering the hardships of the agricultural day laborer. There was an all-too-obvious tension between this tawdry reality and the Hegelian promise that gainful employment would henceforth be not only free from coercion but, on the contrary, a credential of independence and honor: on the one hand, the social reality of drudgery, unrestrained exploitation, subordination and coercively imposed contracts; on the other, the modern ideal of “free”, self-determined labor guaranteeing a secure status. It is this contradiction between social reality and normative ideal, between facticity and validity, that will be my topic in this lecture; the reason for doing this seems obvious to me, only a Iittle bit has changed over the last two hundred years with regard to the discrepancy between the normative promise of democratic citizenship and the prevalent working conditions.

I want to begin by explaining a little more precisely what it means to speak of a complementary relationship between political democracy and fair working conditions. To this end, I want to briefly call to mind the tradition of social philosophy that developed the arguments for this reciprocal dependency (I). I will then offer a brief attempt at diagnosing why contemporary theories of justice have largely tended to lose sight of this connection. Contemporary discussions of the necessary presuppositions of a functioning democracy generally have a great deal to say about the necessity of an inclusive public sphere, a functioning party-political system or a proper division of powers. But hardly anyone mentions how labor conditions also form a part of this institutional structure (II). In the third part of my talk, I’ll then differentiate various properties of working conditions that might prevent employees from making effective use of their right to democratic participation. As will become clear, we can isolate five dimensions along which the character of a workplace can prevent or impede participation in political decision-making (III). In the fourth and final part, I will then sketch out the normative contours along which working conditions would have to be transformed in order to satisfy the normative aspiration of providing every employee with a fair opportunity for democratic participation (IV).

I.

Surprisingly enough, it was none other than Adam Smith who first voiced concerns about how the ongoing mechanization and specialization of labor could be deleterious to the body politic. In what is almost as an aside in *The Wealth of Nations*, we find Smith confessing his worries about the consequences of the growing division of labor (Smith 1776/1989, 368-369). He feared that the resulting one-dimensionality and emptiness of the tasks assigned to workers would lead to their spiritual and intellectual impoverishment, thereby compromising their ability to act as informed participants in a common political life. Barely fifty years later, this peripheral observation would become the key to Hegel’s analysis of the modern market economy. The *Philosophy of Right*’s chapter on labor works with the idea that the laboring classes would be in a position to participate in a “universal life”, and thus in a “rational whole”, only if their professional activities were sufficiently complex and secure. Moreover, they would have to be integrated into specialized “corporations” that celebrated and enforced the ethos of their respective trades or professions. With this thought, Hegel planted the seed of the idea that a functional democracy and fair working conditions stand in a necessary and complementary relationship. The interrelated specialized occupations of the mass of the population have to satisfy in Hegel’s view the following normative requirement: they must equip all workers with the sufficient self-confidence, knowledge and sense of honor necessary to participate in collective political decision-making without shame or fear. Following Hegel, this conception would become a cornerstone of an entire tradition, albeit a rather subterranean one. In France, it was established by Durkheim’s theory of solidarity and the thought of his followers (Durkheim 1893/2014), and in Britain through the guild socialism of G.D.H. Cole who, from his base in Oxford, had an influence on the English workers’ movement (Cole 2015). Both wings were united by the idea that a living democracy presupposes a fair and inclusive division of labor. And a further condition was especially important to both strands of the movement; namely, that various provisions be made to ensure an enduring common consciousness of the reciprocal dependencies involved in the division of labor – this alone, they believed, could cultivate a spirit of democratic cooperation. The essence of this tradition’s normative argument for the necessary interdependence of democracy and a fair division of labor can already be found in Hegel: in order to possess the cognitive capacities and sense of self-reliance necessary to engage effectively in the kind of collective decision making demanded by the idea of an active, sovereign citizenry, citizens need to be employed in professions that are both worthy of and actually enjoy social recognition. And these professions, moreover, must afford them an overview of their role within the overall network of the social division of labor. Socially required forms of labor count as adequately or sufficiently well-organized only insofar as they enable every employee to freely play their part in the democratic life of a society. Democratic citizenship, to formulate it differently, requires the presence of social conditions also in the working sphere that allow the exercise of self-determination. What this means in detail – how exactly, that is, the vast multiplicity of tasks and functions of social labor should be organized – will of course be determined by empirical assumptions about which aspects of existing social conditions are particularly inimical to people’s abilities to participate in social decision-making. Consequently, the various representatives of this tradition frequently differed in their recommendations regarding how best to alter the conditions of labor in the direction of improved democratic participation. Nevertheless, when it comes to their critique of prevailing labor conditions, they are unanimous. They all identify conditions that prevent the working majority of the population from participating without interference in the deliberative activities of democratic societies, be it overwork or a lack of recognition or transparency.

When one considers that this tradition almost took the connection between democracy and fair working conditions for granted, it is hard not to be amazed by the extent to which it has been lost sight of today. Hegel, Durkheim and Cole saw the internal link between the two spheres as inherent within the normative content of a certain mode of political sovereignty, one that is not secured exclusively by a purely legal entitlement to participate in democratic decision making. Instead, fair conditions within the social division of labor are needed to guarantee that every citizen can also in fact participate effectively in practices of public deliberation and consensus-building. Their argument for this thesis derived from the observation that the intensification of the division of labor would be so damaging to the cultural and intellectual lives of the working population as to prevent them from making any effective use of their rights to political participation. For this reason, this intellectual tradition insisted that it was nothing less than a duty of democratic states to ensure that labor conditions on their territory were at least sufficient to enable employees to participate, without restrictions, in public processes of democratic decision-making. However, none of the authors who subscribed to this line of thought advocated an idea championed amongst the more radical, Marxian-influenced, wings of the labor movement; none, that is, thought to level out entirely the differences between the political and the economic sphere and to subordinate both to the principle of democratic majority decisions passed by public assemblies. Such ideas ran contrary to the conviction that the tasks peculiar to each of the two sub-systems were far too different to be subject to the same method of normative regulation: The business of the political sphere, they thought, is the democratic negotiation of legitimate legislation, in which all citizens must be involved as equals. By contrast, the business of the sphere of labor is the social coordination of the economic activities of workers, who are to contribute in as efficient a manner as possible to the material wellbeing of the community within an overall division of labor. It was this constraint of economic efficiency which prevented the representatives of this tradition from drawing the inference of their more radical counterparts and arguing that the model of direct democracy should simply be carried over to the sphere of the division of labor. They all believed that, from the perspective of profitability, it would simply be too risky to organize business, governing authorities or administration on a model of collective autonomy. At the same time, however, these authors had very different conceptions of how far one might go in reorganizing the sphere of labor in order to guarantee its compatibility with the principle of democracy governing the political arena. The options ranged from the reformism of a Hegel or a Durkheim, who wanted to further socialize the labor market through professional groups and state regulation, to the meliorism of a Dewey, who wanted to leave it to future experiments within the economic sector to determine up to what point it might be possible to democratize the world of labor without disobeying the command of economic efficiency. Yet once on this theoretical path, it was only natural to begin wondering whether the standpoint of economic efficiency was in fact as value-neutral as the official doctrines of economic theory had always implied; and the further the discussion developed, the clearer it became that one’s standard of economic productivity depended upon whether one was looking at the rate of capital gains or rather at the relation between production costs and the supply of consumer goods. In the first case what counts as “efficiency” is measured in terms of the financial earnings of a company or organization and in the second case it is measured in terms of the benefit for the satisfaction of the needs of consumers. In using the notion of “efficiency”, everything depends on the criteria in reference to which an outcome is counted: is it the economic success of the enterprise or the well-being of those whose wants the enterprise aims at satisfying?

Yet independently of these questions, which indicate the range of this increasingly forgotten tradition, we must first of all recognize that its central argument for fair and decent working conditions possessed a purely immanent character. Democratic regimes require that all members of society be involved in political decisions; and this requirement, by its own logic, entails a further demand: working conditions must be subject to normative rules that allow each and every employee to make a real use of their right of political co-determination. This thesis sounds so self-evident, so overwhelmingly plausible and convincing that one has to ask why contemporary democratic theory seems to take so little notice of it. The reason can hardly be mere ignorance; rather, we need to look at the underlying conceptual trends that led to our losing sight of the importance of a fairly and properly constituted world of work in enabling successful democratic participation. In the second part of this talk, I will therefore offer an analysis of the conceptual causes of this blind spot, which will at the same time elaborate on the fundamental assumptions of the complementarity thesis.

II.

In what are probably the two most important contributions to theorizing the moral foundations of the modern constitutional state – John Rawls’ theory of justice (Rawls 1999) and Jürgen Habermas’ discourse theory (Habermas 1998) – we find a train of thought that comes very close to recognizing the need for working conditions that enable and promote political democracy: In Rawls, we encounter the insight that equal political liberties must possess a “fair value”, meaning that the actual recourse to and exercise of these freedoms presupposes the elimination of social and economic inequalities; and for Habermas, the democratic practice of civic self-determination is normatively enjoined to guarantee the conditions of equal participation in its own procedures. The same observation motivates both authors to insist on the elimination of actual inequality and stands to reason: a person or group of persons that face discrimination or suffer from social disadvantages in everyday life will not be able to take part in public decision making on an equal footing, as is normatively mandated by the idea of a democratic constitutional state. Nevertheless, before the adverse effects of dominant labor conditions can so much as come into view, both authors break off this train of thought. Neither Rawls nor Habermas raise the question of whether the mode of organization of social labor plays a significant role in shaping the distribution of opportunities for equal participation in democratic decision-making.

In my view, this blind spot of both theories can be traced to two background assumptions. The first, shared by both Rawls and Habermas, is the sociological supposition that in highly specialized societies there is no functional alternative to the allocation mechanism of the labor market. Yet the notion that the distribution of socially necessary activities can ultimately be governed only with the help of the mechanism of supply and demand by no means precludes thinking that the market can be legally structured or is in need of regulation. And in fact, neither Rawls nor Habermas exclude state intervention in the labor market in principle. On the contrary, whenever such interventions contribute to eliminating contraventions of the imperative of equality, both regard them as normative requirements: for both Habermas and Rawls, if a person, be it in the public or private sector, faces discriminated on the basis of their gender, skin color, culture or sexual orientation, be it by receiving a comparatively poorer wage, by being assigned an inferior workstation, or perhaps by not being granted employment in the first place, this counts as an instance of social harm that requires intervention on the part of the state. This equation of social disadvantage with unequal treatment or discrimination, however, conceals the second background assumption that both authors would appear to share; namely, that an individual’s opportunities for democratic participation depend solely on their position relative to all other participants in the social structure. A person is “disadvantaged” in the democratic process, they assume, only when they are worse off in some respect or mistreated in comparison with *other* groups of persons, who possess some kind of default status.

This one-sided concentration on the principle of equality, however, has some highly unfortunate consequences precisely with regard to the world of work. For, it can be the very nature of a variety of work or the rate of pay as such, regardless of any comparison with others, which precludes or virtually precludes adequate participation in democratic decision-making. And the idea of a “minimum wage”, therefore, already contains the insight that earned income can be ‘absolutely’ and not merely ‘relatively’ inadequate for individuals to participate in universally valued practices of social life. In such cases, the task is not so much to eliminate forms of discrimination from which others remain unaffected; rather, it is to transform particular activities or aspects of the organization of labor so that employees are in a position to participate freely in democratic processes of public consultation and decision making in the first place. Equality and empowerment are normative principles belonging to very different registers. And they can therefore lead to very different perceptions of the same social reality: if one’s focus is on the first principle, the kinds of disadvantage that stand out will inevitably be those in which one social group is worse off in relation to another; by contrast, if one is guided by the second principle, one’s attention will be drawn instead to forms of social disadvantage that consist in falling below some recognized measure of absolute minimal sufficiency. In favor of the second principle, one might adapt a famous formulation of the influential philosopher Harry Frankfurt on this topic and note that much more depends on whether a place of work allows for participation in democratic practices at all than on how it fares relative to others.

This is not to say, of course, that the principle of equality is without any normative relevance to the question of how working conditions should be organized. The application of this principle is fully appropriate wherever individuals receive worse pay or treatment at the workplace or have more limited access to particular professions, offices or positions compared to other groups purely on account of their contingent characteristics and where this hinders their prospects of being full participants in the democratic process. And there is no shortage of such forms of discrimination in societies in which skin color, gender or sexual orientation continue to be occasional grounds of debasement and vilification. But these kinds of unequal treatment by no means exhaust the ways in which the world of work can impair individuals’ abilities to act as free and self-confident participants within the democratic process. Some kinds of work can be too grueling to allow time for reflection on political matters or they can bring in too little money to enable the kind of life that leaves any time for political engagement. In still other occupations, workers’ dependence on their superiors can be so great that they are compelled to engage in continual displays of good behavior. All these forms of injury and impairment consist in a deprivation of the minimum necessary capacities required for democratic participation. Indeed, formulations such as “too little such and such in order to” and “so great that such and such” already make clear that we are dealing with an absolute rather than a relative lack of valuable goods or resources. Rawls and Habermas seem to share an implicit assumption to the effect that the labor market will fulfill the normative command of the effective provision of democratic rights so long as it secures social equality. As a consequence, they lose sight of these kinds of “absolute” disadvantage and ignore the actual nature of particular occupations or the makeup of particular places of work. Because there is no comparative measure to appeal to here, they cannot recognize when a certain class of occupation or even a given mode of organizing labor require fundamental changes to facilitate democratic participation. The conditions that need to be in place for individuals to be autonomous and self-assured participants in democratic practices depend just as much on the acquisition of certain basic resources and capacities that do not admit of comparative measurement as on enjoying social equality with other employees. Indeed, one could even go a step further and argue that the second condition presupposes the first: only someone in possession of the necessary capacities and resources will be able to develop the sense of being a genuine member of a group of equals. In the next part of my talk, I now want to elaborate on certain key respects in which labor conditions can impair one’s ability to participate in processes of democratic decision-making as a self-confident and autonomous individual.

III.

In order to get a clearer idea of the extent to which working conditions can influence opportunities for democratic participation, we need to consider the dimensions along which the character of an occupation can affect a subject’s capacity for such involvement. To do so, I want to identify certain thresholds that a place of work or social activity has to meet if subjects are to engage freely in practices of public decision-making, as the idea of democratic sovereignty demands. Admittedly, it is almost impossible to determine such thresholds with much precision: they are so dependent on the cultural and economic conditions of a political community as to preclude ready generalizations; where the threshold exactly lies is variable relative not only to the gross national product of a country or region, but also to the cultural living conditions of its population. With that in mind, my attempt to distinguish respects in which the character of work can represent considerable obstacles to democratic participation should be therefore understood only as a general heuristic; this has empirically to be filled by taking into consideration the cultural and economic circumstances of the specific political community in view. My list is meant to provide a framework specifying which facets of a given occupation can be inimical to developing capacities for democratic participation. Specifically, I will be flagging five facets: economic, temporal, psychological, social and intellectual, in that order. Each case concerns qualifications or resources of which individuals need to possess a certain minimal level in order to be effective democratic participants – it is less important whether they possess them in greater or lesser quantities in comparison with others:

a) The principal precondition of engaging in political debates in public democratic forums is economic independence. If someone owes their livelihood to the decisions of others and cannot exercise any control over those decisions in turn, they will, whether deliberately or not, primarily be concerned with behaving in ways that will not provoke any threats to their income stream. This preoccupation can affect a person’s thought and action to such an extent that it becomes impossible to think clearly about which political goals they themselves endorse, without continually worrying about their own good behavior and factoring in the expectations of others. This kind of negative, one-sided dependence on others is incompatible with the conditions of free and unselfconscious participation in public decision-making. It precludes the existentially fundamental faith in a secure and carefree future, which is a precondition of being able to contemplate alternative modes of organizing one’s own political community. For as long as the possibility of securing a livelihood is tied to the condition of gainful employment, a secure, subsistence-guaranteeing occupation is an elementary presupposition of participating in democratic decision-making. Guaranteed employment, a minimum wage for accomplished work and corresponding compensation for periods of unavoidable unemployment are minimal conditions of the necessary independence from destructive anxiety about one’s own livelihood.

b) Secondly, regardless of one’s own willingness to participate, engagement in democratic decision-making always also presupposes a certain quantity of free time. Taking on the role of such a participant requires a series of time-consuming operations. These begin with acquiring the information necessary to form an opinion about some political matter in the first place, continue with the business of processing this information through discursive exchanges with others, and ends with adopting a public position, where this usually has the form of a verbal proclamation, participation in a political demonstration or joining a political association. Yet the time one has at one’s disposal to devote oneself to these commitments is a function of how much remains once work and private life have been taken into account: the greater the physical and mental effort expended during working hours, the greater the need for leisure and relaxation and the smaller the amount of time available for the various demands of public engagement.

The consequences are obvious enough: work that is repetitive, mentally exhausting, monotonous and entirely directed by others consumes more of an individual’s time and therefore leaves them fewer opportunities to become active in the public sphere. If the time remaining for such activities falls below a certain threshold – a threshold, to be sure, on which it is hardly possible to put a quantitative value – it will hardly be possible to engage in them at all. If workers are to have time both for leisure and to involve themselves in the political sphere, their working hours will therefore need to be limited in proportion to how grueling and energy-sapping their work is.

c) Third, besides economic independence and time, participation in the democratic public also requires a certain measure of self-respect and a sense of one’s own value. Without a stable sense that one’s own political utterances are worth being heard by the wider public, citizens will lack the courage to take part in democratic debate. Wanting to take a public stand on an issue of political importance presupposes a belief that other participants in the debate will take one’s own views to be significant, useful, and of value. Within the public sphere, the feeling of being a reliable discussion partner in the eyes of others does not arise out of nothing; one only enters the political stage to begin with if one already has a sufficient faith in the public value of one’s own contributions. Such epistemic self-confidence is the product of a long period of development, and the skills and aptitudes it presupposes are determined in no small measure by one’s position in the overall network of the division of labor: if somebody does not already enjoy some measure of social recognition through their labor, if they are not counted as someone with generally valued abilities who makes a recognized contribution to society, they will hardly possess the sense of self-worth required to voice their own opinions in political exchanges without a feeling of epistemic self-doubt and inner inhibition.

d) Fourth, besides economic independence, free time and a sense of self-worth, engagement in political decision-making always also requires a precursory initiation into the practices of democratic cooperation. By this I mean something more and other than the fact that dependent employees need to possess a certain amount of bargaining power if the terms of their work contracts are not to be subject to the arbitrary whim of those who own the enterprise and thus possess greater assets. Having a say in these matters, usually through membership of a body representing workers’ common interests, does indeed provide workers with an assurance that they are not purely at the mercy of given labor conditions. But it contributes little to building habits of democratic cooperation. In order to develop a faith in the benefit and purpose of democratic procedures, people need to see that their intentions are taken into account when it comes to organizational decisions about the why and wherefore of their own activities at their own place of work. If someone, be it within a corporation, factory or administrative body, does not already have a sense that their own view of what constitutes a correct goal or a worthwhile work process has a bearing on the organization’s internal decision-making, they will not have any faith in the efficacy of their personal convictions in the political domain either. The spirit of cooperation required for democratic deliberation therefore also needs to be developed at the workplace. Someone accustomed only to receiving instructions and commands cannot be expected to evidence an openness to dialogue and collective concern as a political citizen.

e) A fifth and final dimension along which the character of the workplace strongly influences the capacity for democratic involvement is the scope and intellectual demandingness of one’s labor. This touches on a topic that was not only particularly pressing for sociologically oriented theorists of the division of labor, but was also pursued by a variety of individual disciplines after the heyday of classical social theory. As we have seen, at the beginning of the industrial age, Smith, Hegel and Durkheim already suspected a link between the increasing mechanization of work and decreasing capacities for social participation. In Hegel’s concise formulation, the increasing “specialization and limitation of particular work” would see a drastic decrease in the capacity to enjoy “the spiritual advantages of civil society”. In the intervening years, a series of psychological and sociological studies have been able to demonstrate that this initial suspicion was not wholly far-fetched: The more monotone, intellectually undemanding and repetitive a person’s work is, the more restricted their ability to change their personal circumstances and social environment of their own initiative. Naturally, this is not to say that employees tasked with simple and monotone tasks necessarily possess lesser powers of comprehension or intelligence than those engaged in more challenging work. Rather, these studies show how the content and scope of such work may have deleterious effect on people’s autonomy, creative powers and sense of self-efficacy. It seems that, after a certain time, its repetitive, uniform and unstimulating rhythms begin to leave their mark on workers’ intellectual habitus and general relation to the social world. The resulting rigidity of thought and action represents a huge impairment of individuals’ ability to take part in practices of democratic decision-making. As Smith, Hegel and Durkheim already suspected, these workers find themselves virtually unable to keep up with the professionally trained or wealthy part of the population in acquiring and processing politically relevant information; but they also lose any drive to take up public stances of their own initiative. Again, this kind of inflexibility and inability to make active interventions in political affairs, is by no means self-incurred or an expression of a lack of intellect. Rather, it is the internalized precipitate of labor that, in the interests of profit and in order to make savings on time and costs, has been reduced to a limited set of simple performances. Once internalized, the effects of such labor can develop into something like a second nature. The principle of enabling all members of society to participate in democratic decision-making therefore demands interventions that determine the character and allocation of different domains of social activity. If these are too unstimulating, uniform and repetitive, it will be extremely difficult for employees to exercise their rights and participate in the negotiations of the public sphere. In the final part of my lecture, I now want to ask which institutional improvements in working conditions might prevent these kinds of severe compromise to workers’ capacities for democratic participation. Or, to give my question a positive formulation: what would have to be done to bridge the chasm between the world of work and the political realm of democratic decision-making?

IV.

Before I move on to the constructive part of my talk, however, let me first quickly recall the dimensions of working conditions in which, I believe, we can find possible impairments of the capacity for democratic participation. I have just distinguished five respects in which the form of organization of an occupation can affect people’s opportunities for such engagement. Firstly, it represents a form of economic injury when an occupation does not guarantee the financial independence necessary for individuals to develop their own political opinions without worrying about the expectations of their superiors. Secondly, I mentioned the issue of time; that is, of how work and its concomitant burdens can leave insufficient time for political education and activity. Thirdly, I considered the psychological damage that occurs when a form of work does not meet with sufficient social recognition and esteem for its practitioners to develop a sense that their political convictions are of epistemic value to the wider society. Fourth, it always constitutes a form of social disadvantage when a place of work offers insufficient possibilities for initiation into democratic practices; in particular, when it fails to expose workers to “pre-political” procedures of cooperative decision-making, prior to their entry into the political sphere. And finally, I mentioned kinds of activity that, due to their general character, are inimical to mental or intellectual development: tasks can be too unstimulating, uniform and monotonous for the individuals performing them to acquire a sense of their own creative powers and efficacy, a sense that is a precondition of any not-merely-defeatist form of public and political engagement.

These, briefly recapitulated, are five respects in which the constitution of a workplace can compromise or promote capacities for democratic participation. Any labor policy, therefore, that seeks to shape working conditions with the goal of rendering them more compatible with democracy will have to regard these factors as setting parameters within which the desired realignment can occur. To this extent, it might be useful to survey these factors in view of the question of which reforms or changes might be required to reduce or even remove their damaging effects on capacities for democratic participation. Doing so will not only make clear that such interventions in the labor market would demand heavy restrictions on the power of corporations, but also that some of these influencing factors are interdependent. Moreover, I should stress that the purpose of the following list of measures can only be to set out certain procedural perspectives from which we might envisage improvements along the five parameters in question. A survey of this kind can only deliver a rough normative orientation, since any more specific stipulations would have to make reference to concrete historical circumstances.

To begin with the first factor: it seems to me beyond question that economic independence is a precondition of free and uncoerced participation in democratic decision-making. At the same time, it is extremely difficult to encapsulate exactly what this fact entails under the conditions of a labor market and to specify which properties a labor market would have to possess in order to guarantee the requisite independence – at least in a set of necessary and sufficient assumptions. Nevertheless, two intuitive conditions quickly come to mind, even if they are certainly far from sufficient: First, wages must be substantial enough for individuals to secure their own livelihood and to support their non-gainfully employed dependents. Of course, calculations of necessary incomes need to take cultural standards into account as well as the number of persons someone has to care for who, for whichever reason, are not able to secure their own livelihood. Second, it is clear that wage earners must not be forced by their supervisor or employer to adopt the political or private views that the latter would prefer, through the threat of sanctions, for example (such as wage cuts or the termination or employment). For under conditions of wage labor, economic independence above all means the freedom to form opinions according to self-endorsed principles, despite one’s subjection to an employer. These two requirements, however, which include not only a guaranteed right to a minimum income and corresponding compensation in cases of illness or injury, but also a guaranteed right to free expression at the workplace, evidently do not exhaust the means for securing the economic independence of wage earners. In order to be actually free to form one’s own will without negative economic consequences, it is also necessary that individuals face no obligation to remain in occupations to which they have an aversion or for which they do not feel that their talents align. This kind of (“self”-) obligation, which is indeed a condition of receiving unemployment benefit in certain social systems, already contradicts the formal legal principle of the free choice of occupation. But it also subtly compels individuals towards behaviors of acquiescence and adaptation that are incompatible with democratic expectations on responsible, mature citizens.

Turning to the second factor, the amount of time individuals have to devote to their work: the situation in the capitalist countries of the west is currently marked by a considerable ambivalence. In the more than 150 years since Marx wrote his famous chapter on the “Struggle for the Normal Working-Day”, it has become clear that the number of working hours is not the only decisive factor behind economic growth and social welfare; technological innovations, the restructuring of the organization of labor and the colonial plunder of land and manpower in the global South have played just as great a role. From the middle of the 19th century to the highpoint of industrial capitalism in the 1960s, a combination of just these factors has led to an almost 50% reduction in working hours in all western countries, whilst in the same period their economic productivity has increased enormously at the expense of the “global South”. Today, however, this general trend of a continual reduction in working hours seems, astonishingly, to be undergoing a gradual reversion (Schor 1993); in part, this is because the amount of precarious and underpaid work has produced a class of “working poor”, who, in order to make ends meet, find themselves working several insecure jobs at the same time; in part, this is due to how digitalization, especially in the service sector, has begun to blur the boundaries between working and non-working hours, and as a result, people in a great many professions are working for longer periods than they were around forty years ago. Those affected therefore have less time at their disposal, be it for their private lives, social engagement or political activity. And it is not merely the quantitative reduction in free time that plays a role here: above all, it is today the intensification of the mental burdens resulting from holding down multiple jobs and the increasingly vague boundaries of the working day, which have such negative impacts and eat away at the time that would be required for political participation. A contemporary democratic labor politics therefore faces a difficult task: it must drastically reduce working hours in those sectors in which continual mental and physical demands on workers make labor particularly exhausting, whilst at the same time ensuring that such reductions are not bought at the expense of tolerating an increased exploitation of cheap labor. Here, both temporal and mental aspects seem to be playing a similar role, as is labor from the poorer regions of the globe. In any case, the common notion that all social activities should on average encompass roughly the same number of hours per day, has proven false. It fails to take account of how an exclusive consideration of sheer units of time says nothing about the strains of a given type of work and thus about how much recreational time workers need as a result. If the struggle for shorter working hours fails to take account of such differences, there is a considerable danger that entire groups of employees, such as the “working poor”, migrant workers, and so-called “entreployees” (entrepreneur employees) will be permanently deprived of the prospect of participating in democratic decision-making to any normatively desirable degree. Because of the substantial pressures involved in their working lives, they simply lack the time to occupy themselves with political questions to anything like the extent required for well-informed participation in democratic practices of deliberation and debate. This is, however, only true for the “normal” or routine processing of such public will-formation in today’s democracies; as soon as workers are either represented by a strong labor-movement or are confronted with authoritarian tendencies in their political community they might quickly develop a high degree of political engagement.

Thus far, one might have the impression that the reforms required by a democratic labor politics boil down to nothing more than a “restoration of the wage labor society” in the style of the 1960s. And it is certainly true that the measures needed to address both the economic and temporal forms of damage that result from insecure employment in the labor market and the intensification of work do indeed resemble a recapturing of previously occupied terrain more than an exploration of new forms of the division of labor. We get a very different picture, however, when we begin to look at the transformations in the organization of labor that are necessary to remove those hindrances to democratic participation that stem from the character of employment itself. A consideration of these factors makes particularly clear how interventions within certain parameters would simultaneously demand ameliorating measures within others. In the rest of my talk, I therefore want to restrict myself to addressing the third and fifth determining factors, those I have labelled respectively “psychological” and “intellectual”, in order to clarify their internal connection.

The harms I designated as “psychological” result from one’s labor being held in low esteem by the community. When a form of labor enjoys no social recognition, its practitioners will struggle to understand themselves as suited to participation in democratic decision-making: If the public imagination associates a certain kind of activity with limited intellectual abilities and thus with inadequate capacities for epistemic judgment, those employed in the profession will begin to doubt whether others see them as having a legitimate voice in democratic debate. This feedback loop between social disparagement and epistemic self-doubt is not an iron law. It can, for example, be circumvented through “countercultures of respect” (Cobb/Sennett) or through membership of special organizations. But in their absence, its damaging effects are unavoidable, and employees in such disparaged sectors will have to struggle with considerable psychological impediments to participating in democratic decision-making. A democratic labor politics must therefore see itself as confronted with the task of remedying this unjustifiable condition. It has to seek ways and means of influencing social value systems so that those who perform strenuous, indispensable and self-sacrificing work for the community receive the esteem that is their due.

To be sure, any such “revaluation” of the dominant value order cannot simply be enforced by state decree. There are at least two obstacles standing in its way, both of which make clear quite how difficult the aforementioned task of a democratic politics really is. Cultural value systems are historically emerging webs of broadly shared beliefs, which cannot simply be corrected and reformed through the public exchange of reasons. Because they form part of our second nature and come to form internalized patterns of reaction, they resist the immediate pressure of demonstrative argument and can be broken only through long-term processes of education and discovery. In the case of cultural valuations, the problem lies still deeper: here it does not suffice to rearrange the existing rank-ordering of values to the benefit of those activities that have an elementary importance for our wellbeing. For, those who perform these activities would first of all have to be convinced *themselves* that they really merit such esteem. Adam Smith already understood that we are not usually satisfied with praise and recognition alone. Rather, if these are to translate into self-respect, we must also have the feeling of being worthy of the praise we receive on account of having achieved something of genuine merit. Applying this insight to the widespread disparagement of so-called “systemically relevant” professions, we can see that simply raising their public profile would achieve rather little; for, the same working conditions would still remain in place – working conditions that cannot provide the workers themselves with any sense that their increased recognition is in fact justified. A shift from disparaging a given branch of the economy to raising its status in public consciousness is effective only when that branch’s conditions and forms of organization themselves undergo a sustainable improvement.

It is precisely at this point that we can observe a significant interaction between two different factors: the “psychological” obstacles to democratic participation that stem from a lack of recognition and the factors I have labelled “intellectual”. I spoke of “intellectual” forms of disadvantage in relation to kinds of work that are either too repetitive, unstimulating and cognitively undemanding or too overintense and multidimensional to give one a sense of one’s own creative powers and capacities for intellectual stimulation. These forms of labor are detrimental to democratic engagement because they inevitably produce a certain feeling of impotence in workers, of being unable to alter given conditions through their own initiative. The connection between this kind of disadvantage and that resulting from a profession’s being held in low esteem is that the one cannot be changed without changing the other: If work remains as mindless and monotonous as it currently is at the lower end of the service and industrial sectors, for example, employees will not be able to derive much self-esteem from their activities, even if they begin to enjoy more recognition from wider society. For their labor itself – be it the endless, strictly surveilled shifting of packages in a warehouse, the uninterrupted delivery of online food orders, or the provision of perfunctory care to fatally ill patients that leaves no time for empathy or compassion – is so grueling and wretched as to make it well-nigh impossible to derive any pride in or feeling of merited recognition from one’s work. All these forms of labor still suffer from the reputation of being unskilled and simple, but they not only demand enormous energy and sacrifice, but are of inestimable worth for our general welfare. And to this extent, their social revaluation has to go hand in hand with an enrichment and reorganization of these occupations themselves.

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1. This article is an elaborated version of a lecture I delivered on July 21st 2022 at the ISBEE-conference in Bilbao, Spain. I would like to thank Prof. Gazi Islam for helpful comments and suggestions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)