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The struggle over work: The ‘end of work’ and employment alternatives for post-industrial societies

Shaun Wilson, London, Routledge 2nd ed. 2012 (paperback), pp. 228,
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When unemployment rises along with declining labour movements, the ‘end of work’ as Jeremy Rifkin claimed in 1995, seems close and the significance of work in a post-industrial society is decreasing – so goes a popular argument in labour studies. However, almost 20 years later this idea is far from reality: work is still deeply embedded in society, unemployment rates in advanced capitalist societies have even gone down in the neoliberal post-industrial era, but union power seems under constant scrutiny. Shaun Wilson evaluates the ‘end of work’ thesis in his book, *The struggle over work*, first published in 2004, in which he investigates three different labour market policy directions. Undoubtedly, the usefulness of this book has not diminished since its first publication, as it was relaunched in 2012 in paperback format. The book presents a well-established critique of the ‘end of work’ thesis and argues for a strong labour movement to combat inequality and unemployment within a work-centered society.

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The book is divided into two parts: the first part engages with the classical theoretical roots of the future of work by scholars such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim, as well as the post-industrial scholars Habermas, Touraine and Offe. What the latter group have in common is a negative and pessimistic view of work. Habermas characterises work as ‘instrumental’, tied to the logic of the system, and hence socially constructed (p. 38ff); Touraine develops a theory of declining labour movement as the conflicts of the industrial age fade and he notes the emergence of new social movements (p. 45ff), such as the environmental movement. However, the author largely supports Offe’s analysis about the dilemmas facing the current work society, and his ideas on disorganised capitalism (p. 55), the rise of informal and service sector employment, the decline of the welfare state, and unions’ loss of informal power which is undermining collective organising (p. 53ff). But Wilson disagrees with Offe’s proposal that a work-based society is no longer possible, and that a basic income model would be feasible. In addition to his criticism of the theoretical concepts of the ‘end of work’ scenario, Wilson uses empirical evidence such as the employment to population ratio, which shows that between 1973 and 2000 employment rose in six out of ten Anglo-Saxon countries. But the employment to population ratio between 1990 and 2000 shows stagnation in nine out of ten countries, suggesting that the ‘end of work’ scenario did have some evidential ground during the 90s. However, the 2012 edition of his publication would have gained further validity through data updates, as the employment to population ratio in advanced industrial societies is up to 70 per cent (OECD, 2014).

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The second and major part of the book investigates three labour policy models in depth: the US workfare model, the basic income model, as well as a full employment model through union movement power. Wilson conceptualises these policy ideas as alternatives to the ‘end of work’ scenario, taking into account that employment levels are rising and the importance of work for society is everything but diminishing. The US model is described as a ‘major experiment in returning work to the centre of society’ (p. 65), because it supports people in work rather than the unemployed. The quantitative evidence of structural employment data, such as decreasing unemployment rates and increasing working hours, is dismissive of the ‘end of work’ scenario. Wilson engages with the processes of so-called labour-market deregulation and the structural problems of the US employment model, concluding that the model is unique and has not been established elsewhere (p. 99). The next chapter investigates the basic income model. Wilson returns to the post-industrial thinkers, arguing that proposed changes to the labour market have been overestimated. He again disproves the ‘end of work’ scenario in a convincing way using numeric evidence, introducing feminist ideas into the discussion and providing evidence from survey results, to show the continuous importance of work in peoples’ lives, even if such a basic income model were to be introduced. However, the link between the ‘end of work’ scenario and the basic income model could have been explored further. He argues that ‘most supporters of basic income hold pessimistic views about the future of work’ (p. 121) but this might have more to do with the organisation of work, than work itself. However, the recent case of wide support for a referendum about the introduction of a ‘basic income’ in Switzerland, which has an unemployment rate of four per cent (OECD, 2014), shows that tackling inequality rather than opposing work in general, has much wider popular support.

The last chapter deals with Wilson’s preferred scenario for solving the problems of work – a return to Keynesianism, with full employment policies and job equality (p. 123). After an investigation of the rise, the achievements and the decline of workers’ unions in selected European and Anglo-Saxon countries, some recommendations for organisational changes are made. The evidence for declining union power is shown through membership and strike days data as well as policy alterations in the political environment of deregulating labour markets. Wilson recommends changes in organisational structures, tactics and strategies for unions, such as a return to grassroots organising to help return union power to full strength. These ideas might remind the readers of *AREF* of the 2011 article by Moses Mpuria Kindiki, who argued for minimum labour conditions through grassroots social movements in Kenya, and who indicated that labour movements are required globally.

The book criticises the arguments of some great scholars of the post-industrial left’s ‘end of work’ scenario, while offering three models through which to regulate work. Overall, the book combines great sociological theories with policy analysis; however at times it seems disparate and not consistently applied. I would have liked a return to the Marxist origins of work in the second policy part of the book. Furthermore,

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the one difficulty seems to be located in the case studies: while one is from the real world, the other two cases are possible scenarios. Yet Wilson does not engage with a work model from Europe, despite referring to the origin of work pessimists from there. Overall, however, the merits of the book outweigh the downsides. The strength of the book, in particular, its strong arguments demonstrating that the ‘end of work’ scenario is far from a reality in Anglo-Saxon advanced economies. This argument remains valid, hence the republication of this book in 2012.

Biographical note

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