

About workforce control on a higher level (Commentary on Hornung & Höge)

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Severin Hornung and Thomas Höge are to be congratulated for their thorough and critical examination of workplace flexibility as a Janus-faced, paradoxical but also dialectical societal phenomenon. They highlight the humanistic potential of *employee-oriented individual flexibility* by scrutinizing the task-related dimension of flexibility. With the help of action regulation theory and activity theory, Hornung and Höge explain how workplace flexibility may enhance the allocation of real control to employees over their work tasks and over other characteristics of their jobs as a bottom-up process. On the other hand, they point to harmful effects of *employer-oriented organizational flexibility* which „demand employee adaptivity and restrict their autonomy“ (p. 75). The authors demonstrate impressively, how employer-oriented flexibility is permeated by neoliberal ideological beliefs. Using the example of idiosyncratic deals and „new“ psychological contracts they exhibit how values of „old“ employer-reliance have shifted to the neoliberal belief of employee self-reliance. Based on psychological defense mechanisms, employees internalized this ideology, purporting that they are fully responsible for their own career, their employment and their development. „Old“ employer obligations, like responsibility for the development and well-being of employees, are seen as not realistic anymore and employee self-reliance is perceived as normal, increasingly, also from the vantage point of employees. Based on this perspective „...breach of psychological contracts in the interest of employers and shareholder is interpreted as a ‘new type’ of psychological contract, while normative employee expectations based on ‘old’ contracts are de-legitimized and invalidated“ (p. 76).

The theoretical essay of the two authors leads to a dialectical conceptualization of workplace flexibility. The employer-oriented organizational flexibility aims at „institutional control over short-term changes in financial, numerical, temporal, locational, and functional parameters of the workforce, and HR management

systems“ (p. 73). It is primarily oriented towards the interests of entrepreneurs, senior management and investors and is empirically linked to deregulation, outsourcing, the reduction of employee rights and a deterioration of working conditions, e.g. psychological strain, alienation and impaired mental health. In contrast, employee-oriented individual flexibility is focused upon needs of the employees because it offers „possibilities for personal growth and ‚individuation‘“, specifically, for the „realization of humanistic ideals of individual autonomy, self-actualization and self-determination“ (p. 74). Such an *individual-centered* view of the *humanistic* ideal of self-actualization in work is representative for many researches on Quality of Work-Life and Humanization of Work and also includes contemporary humanistic criteria of decent work. Nevertheless, we suggest to enrich the definition used by the authors along three conceptual additions.

First, representative proponents of contemporary humanism, in their definition of the concept of personal self-actualization (in connection with basic human rights), always emphasize that individual self-actualization is inextricably linked with the individual’s consideration of the rights of others and with the individual’s responsibility for the community. This results in an expanded concept of *collective* self-actualization, namely self-actualization through shared commitment, in which groups of employees pursue meaningful goals or work activities by mutual perspective taking (e.g., Fromm, 1968; Quaas, 2006; Ulrich, 2008). In our opinion, this necessary complement fits well into the dialectical conceptualization of workplace flexibility. Because this conceptualization is based on the ethical demand for social responsibility of companies and of the economy as a whole. To better utilize the potential of the conceptualization presented by Hornung and Höge, we consider it reasonable to supplement the concept of employee-oriented individual flexibility in the sense of a “more complete humanism”. If the individual-centered humanistic perspective is trans-

formed in favor of a Kantian universal, cosmopolitan perspective, the dialectical conceptualization will better withstand the theoretical temptations of the neoliberal ideologue of „employee self-reliance“.

Second, impelled by neoliberal management principles, the digitalization of labor may effect a considerable net loss of work places, especially in countries that have maintained a welfare state system, until now. Thus, weakening the power of the organized labor force, digitalization will strengthen the negative potential of employer-oriented organizational flexibility. The authors mention negative effects like mass layoffs, downsizing, impaired psychophysical health, exclusion of lower performers and, finally, decreased social cohesion. However, they do not discuss that, under the aegis of digitalization, a high risk exists that employer-oriented flexibilization together with further practices of neoliberal management may seriously weaken the countervailing power of the union and further representative institutions of employees (see Schmalz & Dörre, 2013). Co-determination laws or labor protection acts and institutions of the organized workforce like unions and chambers of labor may lose their power to mitigate the application of employer-oriented organizational flexibility. Thus, we propose to take the countervailing power of the organized workforce as a possible moderator but also as a possible endangered resource into consideration in a further refinement of flexibility as a dialectical concept. Especially, if these processes go hand in hand with an expansion of government-run monitoring technologies („Xi Jinping state capitalism“) and with an automation of strategic decision making on the level of the economy and of the enterprise under the control of the employers, investors and senior management („Black-rock democracy“).

Third, against the background of this threat, we propose a third conceptual addition. Discussing a dialectic example of workplace flexibility (on p.74), the authors refer to long-term, system-changing possibilities of how originally neoliberal ideological interests may be transformed into humanistic, socially responsible and solidary societal behavior. Hornung and Höge exemplarily illustrate the just recently emerged phenomenon of co-working spaces for the self-employed. Such co-working spaces emanate from precarious working conditions, sparse resources and from the simple need of self-employed to economically survive within the neoliberal ‘rat-race’. However, the authors see also a chance in this phenomenon insofar that self-employed may join forces and „develop a new ‘class-consciousness’ of professionals sharing similar constraints and interests...“ (p. 75). A strong solidarity movement of self-employed, who are sharing similar political attitudes and human, ecological and socially responsible value orientations, can emerge as a new

generation that has the power to transform a society: from neoliberal to social-ecological. Full in line with the authors’ proposal we consider it important to focus research also on those co-working spaces whose collaborating ‘employees’ are embedded in organizations of the laborforce. Several unions have changed their statutes to absorb self-employed and precarious workers (see Pernicka, 2006), forming regional, nation-wide or even international networks trying to develop workers’ negotiation and countervailing power in the long term (Schmalz & Dörre, 2013).

In accordance with the authors’ proposal to research workplace flexibility in alternative forms of organizations, we propose to investigate in how far interorganizational networks of democratic companies or social enterprises are better able to implement employee-oriented workplace flexibility and in how far this fosters the employees’ collective self-actualization and self-determination compared to companies practicing neoliberal management or autocratic forms of leadership. Further, we encourage researchers to conduct transdisciplinary studies whether several networks of democratic and social enterprises are contributing to a high-level workforce flexibility in allowing their employees not only „control over work tasks and other features and conditions of their jobs“ (p. 74) but also real control over ownership and strategic concerns of their company towards a „social-ecological transformation of society“ (p. 79). Such interorganizational networks like the democratically structured Mondragon Cooperative Group (Wright, 2010) or the current „Reinventing the Kibbutz“ communities (see Palgi & Reinharz, 2014) are still following ideals of humanism and alternative economy, despite all historical setbacks and limitations. Networks of democratic companies and social enterprises are oriented toward an economy of the common good, on the one hand, and have to cope with high dynamics of international markets, on the other hand. More research is warranted to evaluate in how far their collective management endeavors will be able to overcome the paradoxical relationship of the Janus-face of flexibility (see p. 77) and whether they will be able to decrease the risks for both employees and society by indeed exploring „emerging dialectic potentials for individuation, solidarity, and emancipation at work“ (p. 80).

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