Working Democracy. A philosophy of work for democratic societies

The world of work in Western democracies is undergoing rapid changes, and as a result, the topic of work is making a comeback in philosophy. The use of digital technologies and legal changes threaten to erode the regular work contract and the security and benefits it had offered. In sectors such as agriculture, migratory workers often labor under difficult conditions. At the same time, the (often gendered) question about the relation between paid and unpaid work, e.g., family work, remains an open issue, with repercussions for democratic participation. Most philosophers address such problems from a perspective of *justice.* The first innovation of this project is to address them from the perspective of *democracy*: What does it mean for the stability and flourishing of democratic life if the world of work changes? What normative requirements on the organization of work can be derived from key democratic values such as equal respect and fair treatment, and from the need for individuals to develop sufficient capacities for democratic citizenship? The second innovation is to address these questions by bringing philosophical analysis into dialogue with qualitative empirical research, to understand the first-hand subjectivities and perspectives of individuals who experience these changes. Three forms of work in particular will be addressed: "digital work," which is mediated by online platforms and algorithms, "precarious work," where individuals patch together different short-term sources of income, and "migrant work," for which individuals temporarily live in other countries. Moreover, the relation between paid and unpaid work and the history of ideas of the relation between democracy and work will be explored. The results will be synthesized into a philosophical theory of democratic standards of work and of sustainable futures of work, to shape the research agenda on the future of work in dialogue with various societal actors.

Subprojects to be undertaken by PhD students

Subproject 1

"Precarious work" is here used (following Standing 2011) to denote work that is unstable and short-term, with individuals often patching together different sources of income. Sometimes they do so in contracts that are not legally speaking employment contracts (and lack the protections that the latter bring). While the increase in flexibility may be advantageous at certain points in life (and is certainly advantageous for employers), precarious work can massively limit the agency of employees. Sometimes, precarious workers are directly "pitted against each other" (Hussain 2020), with permanent employment as the prize that only some can win. A central philosophical question here concerns the kinds of social relations and the sense of standing (or lack thereof) that precarious work causes among employees, which can have far-reaching repercussions for their ability to commit to other social relations or engagements (e.g., parenthood, social engagement in a certain locality; see Land 2019 for an autobiographical account). And while these are precisely the problems that work contracts protect people against, a sense of insecurity also seems to creep into many regular employment relations, because employees fear that their employers are exposed to global market fluctuations and might react by relocating or closing plants. To reflect on the empirical material (both from other literature and from own research), the subproject will draw on philosophical work about conditional

vs. unconditional benefits (e.g., Segall 2005), as well as the ability to live an autonomous life with a "life plan" (e.g., Larmore 1999) and their relation to democratic citizenship.

Subproject 2

"Digital work" is here used to denote work that is mediated by online platforms and managed by algorithms (sometimes therefore also described as "platform work"). Employees are often formally self-employed, taking "orders" from digital "bosses," e.g., on Amazon Mechanical work (Gray and Suri 2019). They have no colleagues or workplaces in the traditional sense, even though they often find ways of creating informal networks, which are often also digitally based (e.g., Facebook groups). A central puzzle about this kind of work is that it seems to increase individual autonomy because it allows working whenever one wants and wherever one wants, and yet it also seems distinctively unattractive because workers are denied the sociability that usually comes with work. The use of digital tools and the ensuing decrease of (the necessity of) social encounters also affect many other forms of work, which can be done from one's "home office," as the Corona crisis has shown, leading to many predictions about the "end of the office." But how can "citizenship" be philosophically conceptualized for individuals who spend almost all of their working life in their private home (or self-chosen spaces such as cafés); does this require a new conception of "the democratic public"? The empirical material (both from other literature and from own research) will be integrated with philosophical work about sociability and loneliness (e.g. Brownlee 2020). The project will also explore whether older accounts of democratic citizenship and social spaces of participation (e.g., Pateman 1970, Mansbridge 1983) can be revived in the light of new findings and tied back to democratic theory.

Subproject 3

"Migrant work" denotes work, often in unskilled areas, that is done by temporary migrants, e.g., from Eastern Europe. These workers are often particularly vulnerable (e.g., because of bureaucratic hurdles) and experience culture clashes, both features that are also relevant for thinking about regular work in increasingly multicultural societies (also including the work of skilled migrants who get called "ex-pats"). From a perspective of justice, such work raises complex questions, because wages that are advantageous for workers from countries with lower living costs and wage levels might still appear exploitatively low in the richer countries in which this work takes place, and thus raise questions of unfair competitive pressures to the bottom. With regard to democracy, migrant work raises questions about the rights of non-citizens, but who might be co-citizens in larger constituencies such as the European union, and also about the impacts on non-migratory workers, e.g., in terms of mutual respect between different cultures. It suggests itself to use the philosophical frameworks of "structural injustice" (Young 2011) and "vulnerability" (e.g., Luna 2009, Mackenzie et al. 2013) for relating these work experiences to questions about democratic values and practices. In terms of the choice of empirical field for this subproject, after an initial literature review one specific migrant communities in the Netherlands will be chosen in order to get an in-depth picture of their experiences of work, while additional empirical evidence about other migrant communities from the existing literature will be used for triangulation.

These three "applied" subprojects will be supplemented by three projects that **embed them in a broader philosophical perspective.** The latter will also help to provide additional theoretical considerations (conceptual analyses and frameworks, argumentative patterns that show parallels, etc.) to the former.