

Book Review

Political Theory

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The Working Sovereign. Labour and Democratic Citizenship, by Axel Honneth.
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024, 238 pp.

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DOI:10.1177/00905917251359303

The book is based on the Benjamin Lectures that Axel Honneth delivered in Berlin in June 2021. Honneth returns to the question of **justice in work and the division of labor**, issues he has examined regularly throughout his extensive body of work.¹ The book's central thesis is that a **fair and decent organization of work is an indispensable condition for a healthy democracy**. It aims to demonstrate that the status **of democratic citizenship depends directly on the status of labor**.

The book cites a wealth of historical, sociological, and philosophical references and contributes many substantive insights that will be valuable across democratic theory, workplace democracy, and the philosophy of work. From this point of view, it is a major ~~contribution to these areas of~~ scholarship. At the same time, some significant **questions of justification** might be raised regarding key aspects of its argument.

Part I establishes the conceptual foundation of the book. Chapter 1 reviews three normative approaches—the “alienated labour,” “**labour republican**,” and

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1. A. Honneth, “Work and Instrumental Action: On the Normative Basis of Critical Theory,” in *The Fragmented World of the Social*, ed. A. Honneth (SUNY Press, 1995 [1980]), 15–49; A. Honneth, “Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today,” *Political Theory*, 26, no. 6 (1998): 763–83; A. Honneth, “Work and Recognition: A Redefinition,” In *The Philosophy of Recognition: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. H.-C. Schmidt am Busch and C. Zürn (Lexington Books, 2010), 223–240; A. Honneth, *Freedom's Right. The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

“democratic foundation” approaches—commonly used to criticize working conditions and the existing division of labor. Honneth highlights problems with the first two and defends the third. Chapter 2 recovers a “forgotten” intellectual tradition that supports Honneth’s approach, whose key figures include Hegel, Durkheim, and G.D.H. Cole. Chapter 3 opens with a critical engagement with Rawls and Habermas, two prominent theorists of justice who, Honneth argues, failed to connect the state of democratic life to the conditions of work. The rest of the chapter constitutes the conceptual core of the book’s overall argument. Here, Honneth outlines five dimensions of a person’s position in the social division of labor that “determine that person’s opportunities for participating in processes of public will formation” (38). Each dimension establishes a threshold below which, Honneth argues, an individual is no longer able to actively and fully participate in democratic life. These conditions are: economic independence, secured through minimum wage provisions, guaranteed employment, adequate unemployment benefits, and supported by individual and collective bargaining power; a sufficient amount of free time; a sufficient degree of self-respect and self-esteem, linked to the social recognition of one’s occupation; practice in democratic interaction, which can be developed through having a voice in the work process; and work that is not overly strenuous or repetitive, as such conditions limit a person’s ability to take initiative and to maintain a sense of agency.

The two normative approaches that Honneth briefly considers before rejecting them—the “alienated labour” and the “labour republican” approaches—do not appear to receive fair hearings. A more generous reading would likely recover what Honneth claims is missing from them. For example, a decisive feature of good work for Marx is being attuned to the welfare of others.² This emphasis remains central for contemporary proponents of the “alienated labour” approach,³ and it need not exclude other dimensions. Similarly, while labor republicans emphasize autonomy, this focus does not preclude attention to other aspects of work,⁴ and it seems inaccurate to suggest that they are “blind to the qualitative aspects of labour relations” (22).

2. K. Marx, *Selected Writings* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 124–133.
3. J. Kandiyali, “The Importance of Others: Marx On Unalienated Production,” *Ethics*, 130, no. 4 (2020): 555–587.
4. E. Anderson, “Equality and Freedom in the Workplace: Recovering Republican Insights,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 31, no. 2 (2015):48–69; K. Breen, “Meaningful Work and Freedom: Self-Realization, Autonomy, and Non-Domination in Work,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work*, ed. R. Yeoman et al. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 51–72.

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The approach Honneth favors rests on the assumption that poor working conditions undermine the capacity of individuals to participate in democratic life, while decent working conditions provide essential cognitive, moral, and material resources enabling them to be good citizens. His fundamental strategy is to argue that, given the limitations of other models, a critique of **labor must rest on an instrumentalist justification**: improvements in working conditions are to be justified with reference to the conditions necessary for all adult individuals to participate fully in democratic life. Honneth's new book thus adds to the rich literature on workplace democracy and continues a line of argument opened by **Carole Pateman in *Participation and Democratic Theory***, but his focus is on the critique of work, not democracy itself.

Such an instrumentalist approach to criticizing bad and unjust work is puzzling from a normative point of view. It treats the harmful aspects of work solely in terms of their effects on democracy, rather than for what they do to individuals' minds, bodies, psyches, and relationships. Yet physical, affective, mental, and social well-being matter independently of whether they enable people to be good citizens. This is precisely the intuition that the "alienation" approach seeks to capture, and other approaches not considered by Honneth also aim to **establish the link between good work and individual and collective flourishing**. This instrumentalist strategy is especially surprising coming from Honneth, given that his earlier model of social criticism was grounded in the idea of individual self-realization. In that model, democratic rights were understood as **conditions for self-realization**, rather than individual capacities being treated as conditions for democracy.⁵

Following part I, the first excursus clarifies the concept of work that underpins the book's entire argument. Returning to Locke and Smith, Honneth identifies a surprisingly narrow conception of work in the classics of Western social and political philosophy, one that restricts work to the production of material objects or commodities for exchange. Against this view, Honneth offers the following definition: "any regularly performed task that helps to maintain generally desired elements of a society's form of life" (59) and that is expected to follow "generally accepted standards" (60). This constitutes a significant intervention in conceptual debates within the emerging field of the philosophy of

5. A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Polity, 1995).

work. That said, feminist critical theorists and scholars in social reproduction theory have long criticized the narrowness of classical definitions of work.⁶

Chapters 4 to 6, which make up part II of the book, offer an overview of developments in working conditions across major sectors of the private and public economy in Western countries, from the first industrial revolution to the present. The aim of these chapters is to highlight the difficult conditions faced by the majority of the working population, which, Honneth argues, have prevented them from engaging in democratic practice, for the reasons outlined in chapter 3. This part seeks to evidence the persistent gap between the ideal composition of a democratic polity and the historical reality of two hundred years of modern capitalism, during which the majority of workers lacked autonomy, participatory rights, social recognition, adequate pay, and decent working conditions. With respect to the present, Honneth identifies five traits of contemporary labor markets that undermine democracy: increasing isolation in many occupations; **deprofessionalization driven by project-based work patterns**; dematerialization, with the transition from hand-eye coordinated work to cognitive-symbolic tasks; the commodification of public and household services; and **general precarization**.

Another problematic aspect of the book's overall strategy becomes apparent in this historical part. The thread that ties together the three descriptive chapters is the claim of utter depoliticization of the working classes. While Honneth offers an original perspective on the development of modern working conditions, his account arguably distorts the historical record by placing too much emphasis on depoliticization. Throughout modern history, there are countless examples of workers suffering from unjust or indecent conditions who nonetheless engaged in work-based struggles, many of which displayed clear democratic features: in their methods (e.g., workers' councils), the normative claims they advanced, and the aims they pursued (e.g., the Chartist movement). Honneth mentions a few such revolts in passing (the Silesian weavers revolt, the canuts rebellion in Lyon, 70), and he refers generically to the early labor movement (74), but he does not acknowledge how these and many other worker-based movements challenge the central thesis advanced in part II. Particularly striking is Honneth's blanket characterization of agricultural work as inherently apolitical, which overlooks the long-standing efforts in the sector to organize and make political demands.

6. N. Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New German Critique*, no. 35 (1985): 97–131.

Honneth attributes improvements in labor laws and working conditions over the nineteenth century to the “moral force of generally accepted norms” (79). But if exploited workers were and continue to be incapable of political engagement, then which **social classes were responsible for translating this moral force into institutional reality?** This can only be the achievement of more **privileged classes**, as if the latter did not engage in politics to support their own material interests. This reflects an idealistic view of politics, one in which ideas alone drive historical transformation. At the same time, it adopts a paternalistic stance toward the working classes, who appear as passive beneficiaries of elite benevolence rather than active political agents. This vision sits uneasily with Honneth’s earlier recognition-theoretical model, which advanced a conflictual account of social change rooted in sociological analyses of class struggle and collective action, as found in the writings of E. P. Thompson and Barrington Moore, for example. Indeed, later passages in the book acknowledge the existence of work-based conflicts.

These idealistic and elitist tendencies stem from the maximalist conception of democracy that underpins the book’s argument, where democracy is defined exclusively as the participation of fully autonomous and capable adults in transparent processes of reason-giving. By using this normative ideal as a descriptive standard, Honneth overlooks alternative meanings and instantiations of democracy, particularly those based on social antagonisms and collective struggles.

Excursus Two addresses the social division of labor, the second key concept underpinning the book’s argument. Honneth rejects what he calls the “deterministic fallacy,” the assumption that technical and efficiency factors alone determine how the total amount of work required for the reproduction of society is distributed across occupations and professions and thereby the content of individual tasks and work processes. Against this view, he argues that the boundaries between occupations, and the internal organization of each, reflect “an **institutional crystallization of a temporary compromise** between various interests at play” (126), in particular the interests of employers and workers. This insight underlines a point that is foundational to the normative proposals advanced in part III of the book: that any given organization of labor is, in principle, open to transformation. Like the first excursus, this second one offers important conceptual contributions for the philosophy of work.

Part III outlines measures aimed at correcting aspects of the current division of labor, as described in chapter 6, that would transform work from an obstacle into an enabling condition of democratic life.

Vygotsky's ZPD = conflictual model

Chapter 7 opens with a critique of universal basic income proposals, which are often based on the claim that work has lost its moral significance and can no longer serve as a site for democratic politics. By guaranteeing financial security for all, a UBI is thought to provide the material foundation on which democratic practices could emerge elsewhere. Honneth rejects this view, drawing on a line of argument already found in Hegel and Durkheim: that, apart from public education, employment is the only social institution through which individuals come to experience shared burdens and responsibilities and where they encounter others with different interests and world-views. Even the possibility of “exit” that a UBI would offer in response to poor working conditions undermines democracy, since exit, by definition, is an individual rather than collective solution.

Chapter 8 explores how democratic dispositions might be fostered through forms of social labor outside the traditional labor market via cooperatives and state-financed, legally mandated public services, such as compulsory social work for young people. The virtue of the latter is to bring individuals from diverse backgrounds together to contribute to shared social needs. In doing so, they would have the opportunity to cultivate what Honneth calls “the cardinal virtue of empathy for people from other social groups” (148). As for cooperatives, Honneth views them as “a direct path to a world of work that is compatible with democracy” (154). However, he acknowledges that the current capitalist context presents significant economic obstacles, making it unrealistic to expect this model of work organization to be widely generalized.

Chapter 9 examines ways to make work more democratic through improvements to the labor market. The “levers” discussed are measures aimed at mitigating or eliminating the negative effects associated with the five dimensions identified in chapter 3. Economic independence requires not only sufficient wages but also the right to freely express opinions in the workplace, the freedom to reject repellent jobs, and participatory rights in negotiating work contracts. Reduction in working time must consider the duration necessary for workers to restore their capacity to work. The recognitive and cognitive dimensions are deeply intertwined: changing cultural patterns of evaluation regarding particular occupations to enhance workers’ self-respect and self-esteem can succeed only if the tasks themselves allow them to develop the capacities essential for full participation—most notably, the ability to initiate change. Therefore, increasing social recognition for undervalued jobs must go hand in hand with a “qualitative reorganization of these

professional areas,” leveraging the malleability of the division of labor (164). Finally, the social dimension can be addressed through measures originally identified by **Durkheim**: expanding roles with additional responsibilities so workers can **perceive how their tasks fit within the broader network of roles**; ensuring work is sufficiently complex and engaging; countering worker isolation by strengthening group and **team collaboration**; and enabling worker participation in the organization of the work process.

The range of measures proposed by Honneth amounts to a concrete program for a progressive “politics of labour.” However, his assertion that these measures can be **“realistically deployed”** (145) is not entirely convincing, given the enduring power asymmetries between labor and capital, both within nation-states and across global value chains. While questions of implementation do not necessarily constitute a decisive objection within normative political philosophy, they do pose a challenge for critical theorists like Honneth, who reject ideal theory and ground their approach in the method of immanent critique.



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