

WORK AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

To begin, let's remind ourselves of a particularly famous diagnosis about the place of work and labour in contemporary politics. In "The New Obscurity", a text in which Habermas bade his own farewell to the working class, the great European social theorist cited approvingly the work of Claus Offe on the demise of work and social labour as relevant sociological and political bases for a future progressive politics. Offe, Habermas claimed, had demonstrated: "the objectively decreasing power of matters of labour, production, and earnings to determine the constitution and development of society as a whole". Offe's research, Habermas claimed at the time, demonstrated the fact that "the utopian idea of a society based on social labour has lost its persuasive power".¹

This was a paper written at the time of the neoliberal wave was swelling, attempting to take stock of the situation from the perspective of social theory (that is, as a particular juncture in modernity), and charting possible paths of development for the middle term. It might seem unfair to recall that paper, given that we are now situated at a completely different conjunction in history, one where neoliberalism has run its full course, both in the sense that it has been allowed to fully develop its programmatic intentions, and also in the sense that it might be on the verge of being replaced by a new phase in capitalism's history. Habermas's vision in the paper, however, was itself over a fairly long view of historical development, reaching back to the premises of the labour movement, and its condemnation of the reference to work and labour is also clearly intended as a definitive farewell. For Habermas, in the conditions of late modernity, the complexity of the structures and institutions of economic reproduction combined with the lack of transparency in the state's relationship to society definitively condemn as outdated and out of touch any progressive politics that pretends to retain substantial connections to norms and values attached to work as self-directed activity and to social labour. The tone of the paper leaves no doubt that Habermas thought that these structural features of late modern societies have become basic facts which further development will not overhaul, in fact will most likely entrench further.

Twenty five years later, we have the benefit of having witnessed the full unfurling of neoliberal policies. And one of the striking consequences of this unfolding is the return of the work

¹ "The New Obscurity", in *The New Conservatism*, pp. 48-71.

question. Admittedly, the return of work and social labour as core references is now defensive rather than utopian. In this, Habermas's assessment remains accurate. However, it is no longer true, as Offe had claimed, that "matters of labour, production and earnings determined the constitution and development of society as a whole".² These issues no longer form a set of self-evident references for a clear political programme. But they have become powerful reference points once again in the political context, issues around which political battles are as a matter of fact being waged. Work and social labour are again key principles in the name of which political battles are fought. This would be easy to show in other national contexts. In this paper I want to focus specifically on the Australian context.

1. Work issues in recent Australian politics

For any observer of politics in Australia in the last decade, since the first Howard victory in 1996, it is obvious that the work question has returned with a vengeance, if only in defensive form. A decade of hard-core neoliberal government radicalised and took to their extreme conclusions the initial neoliberal reforms first introduced by Labour in the early 1980s. These brought massive upheavals to Australian social life.³ I would argue that of all these upheavals, those directly linked to work and the organisation of labour are the ones that have had the greatest political impact in the last decade. The most substantial battles of the Howard years, that is, those that have mobilised the largest social bases (both pro and against) and have involved the largest expenditure of financial and ideological resources, have been without a doubt battles around work: from the first battle around union rights in 1998 (Waterfront dispute), to the great battle around Work Choices, which saw an unprecedented level of mobilisation by and around the unions, and culminated in the personal defeat of John Howard and a collective disaster for the Liberal Party in the 2007 elections.

There is no doubt that the union's contribution to Labour's victory in 2007 was substantial.⁴ We must begin by simply taking stock of the fact, totally unpredictable from the point of view of the lofty social theory and political philosophy that accompanied the rise and fall of the welfare state, that the most burning issues in 2007, questions which decided the political fate of the nation,

² Cited in "The New Obscurity", p.53. The sociological literature on the "end of work" and its close relationship to cycles of economic downturns is particularly well studied in Shaun Wilson's classical *The Struggle Over Work. The 'End of Work' and Employment Alternatives in Post-Industrial Societies*, Routledge, 2004, in particular chapters 1 and 2.

³ Many of which have been famously described and analysed by Michael Pusey in *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform*, University of New South Wales, 2003.

⁴ Kathie Muir, *Worth Fighting For. Inside the YourRightsAtWork Campaign*, UNSW Press, 2008.

were questions about the fair treatment of workers by employers, the place reserved to union representation, the limits that had to be put to flexible work arrangements, the moral and social scandal constituted by the rise of a class of working poor, and so on. Even though class struggle is no longer an undisputed conceptual reference in social theory let alone in public discourse, the battle around Work Choices gave a very clear sense that there was a direct clash of interests between social groups, based on their place within the productive order. While Habermas's talk of "obscurity" remains relevant if applied to the possibility of a utopian project, it was certainly not accurate at the descriptive level in the 2007 election in Australia.

Indeed, if we think about the defining political issues in today's Australia, it can be shown that a great number of them relate, one way or another, to work and social labour.

The 2010 election was decided largely on the perception of Labour's incapacity to manage the large projects it introduced to counter the threats of the financial and economic crisis developing in all the other parts of the developed world, notably the insulation and "Building the Education Revolution" programmes. In this latter case, however, work and social labour are at the core of the political issue, although admittedly in more or less hidden form. The generally accepted narrative framing the debates around these programmes was that of government incapacity. However, as a number of critical commentators pointed out at the time of the polemics, and as has emerged subsequently from the auditor-general's report, the most striking aspects about the so-called "insulation", or "pink batt debacle", was not so much the incapacity of labour people to manage large government programmes, but rather the parlous standards and dodgy practices of large sections of the building and electrical industries. The labour government was almost brought down by what these industries call the "cowboys".⁵ But even the critical counter-narrative developed at the time, which focused on the state of the "sparky industry" *before* the insulation programme was put in place, seemed to miss the most fundamental aspect about the issue. The incredible amount of frauds reported over a very short period of time,⁶ the incredibly

⁵ In her previously cited book, Kathie Muir provides revealing accounts, gleaned from interviews with insiders from the building industry, about the prevalence of malpractice in the building industry. The theoretical importance of these pages is that it enables outsiders to understand the structural factors that give rise to the particular ethos and collective culture of the building industry. Faced with wide spread, disloyal competition from "cowboys" who run down costs by cutting corners and often default on payments, the people representing workers and attempting to give a framework to the industry have no other choice but to make a show of toughness, in particular when it comes to installing minimum safety standards on building sites, p. 172-173. This is a striking illustration, in a totally different context, of Christophe Dejours' analysis of "collective defence strategies". For a presentation, see my "Work and the Precarisation of Existence", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11(4), 2008, 443-463.

⁶ The Auditor-General's report identifies in excess of 4,000 cases of potential fraud.

large proportion of faulty installations that were apparently made,⁷ again in a very short period of time, the speed with which government funded programmes immediately attracted large numbers of people ready to use incredibly devious means to defraud members of the public, all of this raises the suspicion that the “cowboys” are more than just a few loose elements operating in the margins.⁸ There seems to be something structurally deficient with the organisation and regulation of some of the trades in Australia. As I will argue in the next section, in order to understand this phenomenon fully, one would have to develop methodological strategies to describe the history of organisation (and possibly dis-organisation) of specific Australian trades and crafts, which resulted in the current state of partial deregulation. One would guess that the rise of franchise organisations, the legal frameworks enabling the rise of contract work, combined with the larger history of Australian trade unions, as well as fundamental structural economic tendencies of neo-liberal economies, would all play a role in the current state of many industrial trades in the country.

Other important issues in recent politics also relate directly to aspects of work, whether or not they are explicitly identified as such. The debates around an ETS and Climate Change action crucially involve the nation’s self-representation about the ways in which it can reproduce itself materially and flourish in material terms. The environmental challenge is a challenge not just to established economic interests, but more fundamentally to the core of the nation’s self-understanding of how it can sustain itself. For this, the young Hegel used the image of society itself as a form of work, of society’s work upon itself (*Werk*).⁹ The debate over big or small Australia obviously relates to similar questions. The debate around the mining tax involves representations, and of course conflicts of representation, also linked to the Australian imaginary about the aims and principles of economic activity as an overall social action, but also about that very specifically Australian issue of work on the land, or indeed work of the land. What seems to have saved the government from electoral annihilation was the proposal of an ambitious broadband network. Here, the core issue relates to representations about the nature of relevant productive activities in rapidly changing technological and economic contexts.

⁷ The Auditor-General’s report states that by March 2010, the number of inspected roofs revealed 29% “were found to have some level of deficiency”. 36% of dwellings with foil insulation had to have the work removed due to safety concerns. The Age, 15 October 2010.

⁸ For instance, police were puzzled to discover truckloads of stolen Yellow Pages directories in Altona, Victoria, in March of this year (200,000 books, filling 140 pallets). Police suspect that these directories were going to be shredded to manufacture dodgy ceiling insulation.

⁹ In the first philosophy of spirit, during his *Werk* years.

What unites all these disparate issues are narratives of political economy, which take economic questions not just as separate, technical issues, but articulate them around broad cultural accounts, which, crucially, involve not just historical references, but are also organised around key normative principles, around the key questions of who works for whom, how, for what material and symbolic rewards.

2. Culture, economy, politics

The Australian public debate is shot through with representations of work and social labour that are mobilised, shaped and revised in response to structural challenges arising out of the need to adapt to economic shifts. It would be naive however to believe that these structural challenges can be identified in a strictly objective manner and separate from the lifeworld context. On the one hand, it is indeed essential to articulate the objective, structural conditions underpinning the specific perception of work issues in Australia, that is, in connection with the broader context of the current phase of global capitalism. The massive economic, financial, technological, geopolitical shifts of the last decade create constraining conditions for every nation. The re-emergence of the work issue and of questions concerning the structure of social labour in Australia has to be interpreted against this massive backdrop. On the other hand, however, it would be a mistake to reify these determining conditions, as though they determined the Australian response in direct, unmediated, and homogeneous ways. Cultural representations, specific interpretations of key normative principles, rooted on the nation's history, and more specifically the history of the different institutions shaping the experience of work in Australia across history, notably the history of industrial relations and labour law, all this thick cultural stuff filters the systemic constraints presented by the evolution of neo-liberal capitalism. My claim would be that this filter is not simply produced by the structural constraining factors, and is not just a subjective perception of an objective and thus separate structural reality, but that it in fact *co-determines* that reality. In other words, the objective reality of structural constraints, underpinning the re-emergence and determining the sense of work issues in Australia, is also (but of course not just) a product of the Australian perception of them.

The way in which I understand this cultural-historical underpinning, which gives particular meaning to systemic constraints, is different from other comparable accounts. To begin with, it is not directly equivalent to a classical notion of ideology. There are undeniably elements of justification of positions of domination at play in the cultural filters of systemic constraints, the filters cannot just be reduced to that. The cultural narrative is complex, shot through with

tensions, the historical reference is in fact always a point of tension between competing narratives. Very often, groups and communities suffering from social domination propose alternative narratives of the national trajectory. This is particularly true of course for the labour movement. Even today, when the labour reference is so much on the back foot, reference to the achievements of past struggles can sometimes retain strategic and normative power.

Also, I don't understand this cultural filter in a functionalist way, as the necessary complement to the general neoliberal project, as Boucher and Sharpe have argued in impressive fashion.¹⁰ Whilst I find their analysis of the functional role played by culture wars within the neoliberal project convincing, this account doesn't leave sufficient room for my key argument, namely that functional constraints don't exist on their own, but rather are co-determined by cultural representations, notably by historical narratives. Undeniably the neoliberal agenda relies immensely on such a narrative, but it can do so only by engaging counter-narratives, in particular by disqualifying the most potent ones inherited from the past, for instance the fair-go philosophy encapsulated in the Harvester case.

The key reference for me is the concept developed early by Honneth, in reference to some Horkheimer texts, of "cultural action", by which he meant the culturally determined perception of social reality of different classes, based on their positions in the division of labour. It is on the basis of this early idea of "cultural action" that Honneth's important critique of the Habermasian distinction of system and lifeworld was conducted. I have tried to show in some of my research, that Honneth in fact provides a highly original and fruitful model for renewing the critique of political economy by integrating the cultural and the systemic.¹¹

3. The welding of system and lifeworld in contemporary Australian work issues

To give a few examples of this mutual conditioning of the cultural and the systemic.

Workchoices.

The letter and spirit of the Work Choices legislation represents the core and culmination of the neoliberal agenda (which, as said, was first introduced in Australia by a "Labour" government): a reestablishment of the balance of power between labour and capital in favour of the latter. As a core platform of the neoliberal agenda, Work Choices could easily be shown to be anticipated

¹⁰ In *The Times will suit Them*, Allen and Unwin, 2008.

¹¹ *Beyond Communication. A Critical Study of Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy*, Brill, 2009, chapters 2 and 12. See also, "Critique of Political Economy and Contemporary Critical Theory", in Schmidt am Busch/Zurn, *The Philosophy of Recognition*, Lexington, 2009.

and indeed inspired by the key thinkers and policy makers of that movement, and in more concrete terms to have taken its inspiration from the core countries of the neoliberal revolution, the USA and the UK. Other readings by contrast insist on the experimental nature of many policies first introduced in Australasia, looking at this region as the experimental field for neoliberal policy-making. The point of these remarks concerns what they reveal about the systemic conditions that such policies respond to. Radical loosening of the work contract, drastic reduction of the power of workers to exert control through collective action and the exclusive ownership of expert skills, it could be argued, are *necessary* outcomes once certain *objective* features of capitalistic valorisation are in place: in particular, the absolute power gained by shareholders and their interests over the workers and their own interests; or the historical failure of the institutions, policies and philosophies of the welfare state to resolve the crisis of the late 1970s/early 1980s. Studying the introduction of real neoliberal policies in recent Australian history would then entail the study of the historical emergence and geopolitical organisation of this new phase of capitalism, and Australia's forced hand in responding to this emergence. This is the way in which Labour leaders justify the adoption of neoliberal policies in the mid-1980s.

In the case of Australia, however, the world-system perspective would only be partly appropriate. If we focus on the last decade of neoliberal policies, John Howard was well aware of the highly particular historical dimension of WorkChoices, and this historical dimension was one that was embedded in a specifically Australian historical narrative. It was about reversing not just any form of labour policy, but specifically the fundamental principles undergirding the way wages had been fixed in Australia since the Harvester case, despite all the shifts and transformations since then, notably the Accord in 1983. John Howard was very explicit early in the 1980s that his ultimate goal, which he fulfilled in 2005, was to "turn Higgins on his head". At play here is more than just the basic systemic logic of lowering of protections for labour, for the purpose of increased valorisation at the hands of shareholders and capital owners. The historical dimension plays a defining part. At play is a representation of Australian history, and more specifically of the norms and values said to be incarnated in such history: whether a particularly edifying version of the triumph of Western liberty; or a model of egalitarian social democracy. And such clash of narratives in turn revolves around clashing interpretations of key norms (notably freedom inasmuch as it is realised socially), and indeed a clash around competing norms (individual freedom versus social solidarity). In the end, the Australian example might well have served other purposes internationally, but from within the Australian context, the broad

neoliberal consensus around flexibilisation and precarisation of the work contract took on a very specific tone, it was a particular way of settling family affairs.

The same kind of analysis could be repeated I think with each of the other issues mentioned above. Different aspects of Australian history and cultural self-understanding would have to be mobilised in each case. In particular, to understand the cultural/historical underpinning of how work issues intervene in Australian politics, it is I think important to take into consideration the specifically Australian narratives and construals of what the German social theorists, and Honneth in particular, call the *Leistungsprinzip*. This is, according to Honneth, one of the key organising normative principles of modernity. It refers to the justification of social value afforded to particular individuals and groups on the basis of their contribution to social life, most notably through their participation in the division of labour.

The specifically Australian interpretation of, or rather clash of interpretations over, the *Leistungsprinzip* is the key to understanding the specificity of the Australian context regarding issues that face every nation as a result of the new capitalistic situation. For instance, the debate on the mining tax is shot through with normative, taken for granted assumptions, some of which seem to be largely shared and provide a kind of normative bedrock in the public sphere, capable of grounding arguments and dislodging opposite arguments. A pragmatic acceptance of the state of play (the central role of international investors) is opposed to a normative argument about a fair compensation to the nation for the one-off and increasingly profitable use of its very soil. The former principle however has a particular flavour in Australian history and culture. It is intimately linked to the realistic appraisal of Australia's isolation and lack of voice in international capitalism. This acknowledgement acquires a kind of normative force inasmuch as it is a decisive factor in Australian responses to the world. It plays a big part in Australia's fearful allegiance to the Anglo-Saxon world and its old values of radical economic liberalism. This nexus of reasons leads to an approach to the *Leistungsprinzip* that is self-consciously pragmatic and cynical: the question of fairness must not even be posed, because we are not in a position to pose it. Better to accommodate global capital and at least reap some benefits along the way. In other words, this kind of Australian response to proposals of mining taxes would be radically different, I would bet, from superficially similar responses in other countries rich in mineral wealth, like Canada. Against the pragmatic line, the fairness argument attempts to frame the debate by drawing attention to the normative issues surrounding that very specific kind of social labour that is extraction of wealth from one's own soil: here the highly specific form of work that is mining. And it is crucial to make the point that this is a kind of work that has shaped Australian

historical culture. This kind of work is now questioned on the basis of new moral questions: its fairness to later generations, its impact on climate change. With this questioning though the entire modern Australian history, in which mining has played such a big part, is opened up once more as one to be rediscovered and reinvented. Basically one way of realising a more democratic social life is suggested to be through better sharing of the proceeds of mineral extraction.

The fascinating question is the methodological one. What disciplines should be used, what documents consulted, to establish the specific cultural representations and normative interpretations, which always already frame the structural imperatives of contemporary capitalism? My guess is that social theory would have much to learn from the historical dimensions of many disciplines in the humanities: not just from the history of industrial relations and labour laws and economic history; but also from visual history and literary history. The point would be to identify the specifically Australian moral vocabulary that has grown out of a highly specific history, and which cannot be fully accessed using the traditional means of sociology.