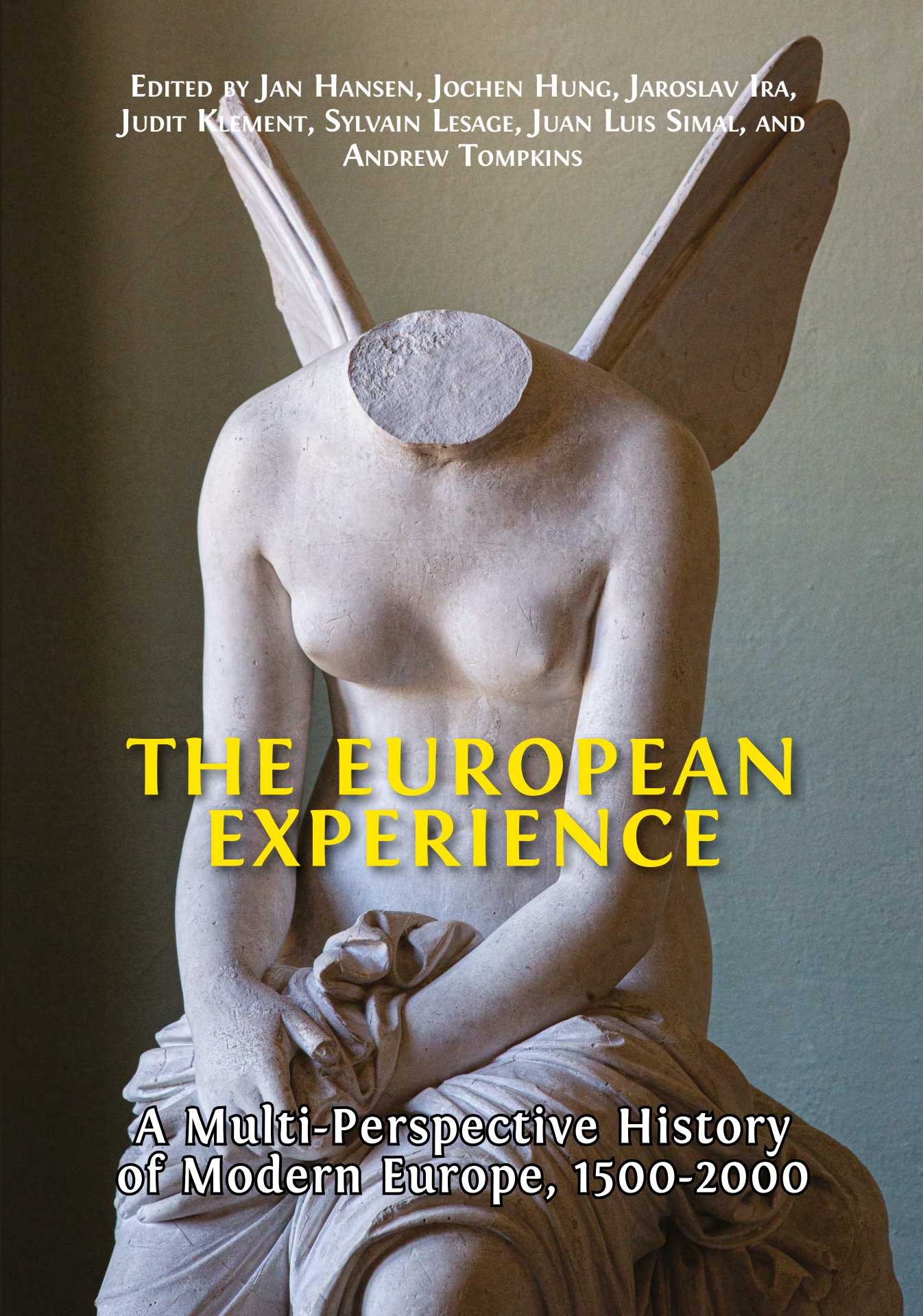
Edited by Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal, and Andrew Tompkins



The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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5.4.3 Labour and Forced Labour in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

Ondřej Daniel, Jürgen Schmidt, and Zsuzsanna Varga

Introduction

Through the twentieth and early twenty-first century, changes in patterns of work and labour in Europe occurred on a tremendous scale. At the beginning of this period in most of the European states the majority of people still worked in agriculture. By 2020, in the countries of the Eurozone only three percent of the employed labour force worked in agriculture, but seventy-four percent worked in the service-oriented tertiary sector. Work in industry declined, as did physical and manual work more generally. In this respect, the characterisation of the Global South as workhouse for the West has a lot of truth. However, one should bear in mind exceptions to the rule, such as—for example—the fact that in Europe in 2018, 3.65 million people still worked in the automobile industry, with many still performing manual work on the shop floor.

Besides these socioeconomic changes further developments reshaped practices of labour in Europe. The male breadwinner model was contested, and the proportion of female workers in the labour force rose. However, this trend did not follow the same pattern everywhere, with significant national divergences after 1945. In Western Europe, France and Germany stood for different paths in female employment. In Eastern Europe—to a much higher degree—female labour was part of the system.

The organisation of work accelerated under mass production, and researchers often divide the twentieth century into Fordist- and Post-Fordist eras. Work became more productive, intense, and demanding. On the other hand, working hours per week and over the life-course decreased, and leisure time grew (see Figure 1). However, the experience of 'non-work' is mixed. Labour markets since 1900 underwent several periods of mass unemployment. Different forms of social insurance schemes throughout Europe sought to

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minimise the risks of lost paid work due to unemployment, illness, or work accidents. Finally, work as a central value changed. Consumption, excitement, and experience became values to be pursued, beyond work as an end in itself.

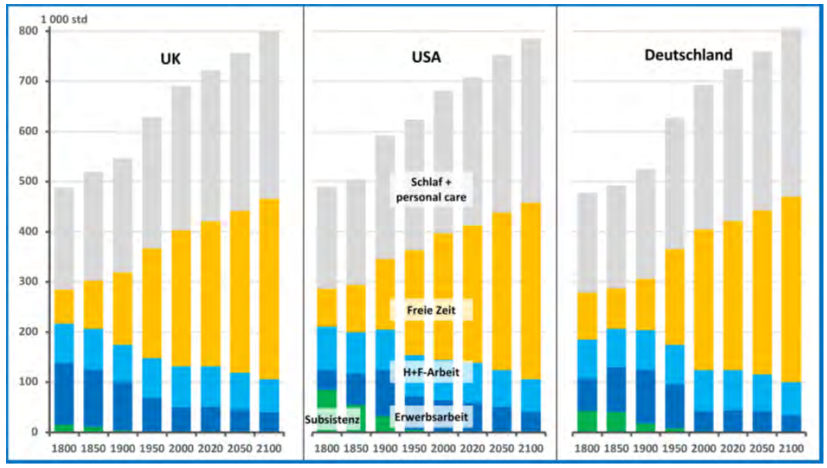

Fig. 1: Use of lifetime in Great Britain, the United States and Germany 1800–2100. Description: Grey—Sleep and personal care. Yellow—leisure. Light blue—Home and care work. Dark blue—Wage work. Green—Subsistence Work. For example, in 1900 life expectancy was about 540,000 hours. Of these hours about 100,000 hours were dedicated to wage work. *Source:* © Institut für die Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit (IGZA), *Matrix der Arbeit. Materialien zur Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 2022) (in print).

Free and Unfree Labour

The First and Second World Wars, combined, ended about sixty million lives in Europe. Over this period, technological research was oriented towards the goal of building up military advantage, and—consequently—brought production, processing, transport, and storage to much more sophisticated levels. The introduction of supply chains increased both output and quality in practically all fields of the economy. This statement is true for the capitalist areas of Europe, but the Soviet bloc was also inspired and fascinated by the Fordist production regime.

Just as the Nazis or fascist dictators in Southern Europe decided to defame their local minority groups, whom they classified as enemies, and forced to work in labour camps, in some cases later death camps, Stalin and his subordinates did not hesitate in forcing those labelled as 'class enemies' into forced labour camps. There were hundreds of labour camps in the Soviet Union between 1930 and 1953, in which first internal enemies and then, after the Second World War, prisoners of war and civilians deported from the occupied territories were forced to work under extremely poor conditions. The wider world knew about everyday life of exiles in the Gulag, the Soviet forced-labour camp system from works such as *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) by Russian author and political prisoner Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008).

In Eastern Europe, in countries under Soviet influence, the average citizen also gained new experiences of work during the decades of socialism. Through nationalisation and collectivisation, the state became the main employer. In the rhetoric of these regimes, this put an end to exploitation, and as a result, the worker's attitude to work also changed. Work became a moral duty and the source of self-pride. The planned economy achieved full employment. However, if someone did not want to work under the socialist system, it was a criminal offence. In socialism, more women took up places in the workforce than ever before. The lack of male labour due to the Second World War played a crucial role. However, state discourse emphasised employment as a prerequisite for female emancipation. The female tractor driver became a symbol of the modern socialist woman. Conversely, the woman who ran her household and raised her children became a symbol of anachronism. From the late 1940s, large masses of women were undertaking paid work not only in the socialist industry but also in collectivised agriculture.

Following the great migrations which took place after 1945 within Europe, it is worth noting the beginning of postcolonial migration. The collapse of colonial regimes outside Europe triggered a massive flow of immigrants, who started to change the community models in most Western European countries. In most cases, the newcomers were given the opportunity to find employment only in low-paid sectors of the economy. In other cases, local entrepreneurs found new business channels, established through those who were privileged to have good personal contacts in their countries of origin. During the post-war reconstruction, labour migration was also organised in different states according to the model of guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*).

Fig. 2: Factory workers working on bathroom fixtures to be baked in tunnel ovens at Royal Sphinx in Maastricht, the Netherlands (ca. 1960–ca. 1970), CC BY 3.0, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sphinx_sanitairproductie,_jaren_60_%285%29.jpg.

The collapse of socialist systems in 1989–1990 led to a complete restructuring of their economies. After previous full employment, the emergence of mass and long-term unemployment caused a huge shock. After 1989, the flow of labour from Eastern Europe to the West was very diverse. Many of those who moved from the East to the West had solid skills, and thus were able to receive well-paid jobs. Some of them found positions as executives in newly formed enterprises in emerging markets. Women from Eastern Europe in some cases found employment as sex workers. Migrants from the East also found themselves caring for the elderly. The accession of the former socialist countries to the European Union (EU) has made labour migration from East to West a mass phenomenon. Forced labour in the form of human trafficking, as well as new and less organised forms of exploitation of migrant workers in the EU, can be highlighted at the end of the twentieth century. Intra-EU labour migration has taken on such a scale that some regions and countries—typically those in the South and East of the EU—provide the workforce for the service-based industries in the economic centres of the EU. There were also special regimes negotiated for workers from non-EU countries, in order to enable large segments of industries and agriculture to profit from their workforce.

Since the mid-1970s, finding countries with cheaper labour became a prime target for many European companies, and this cost-cutting strategy became a vital element of industrial competitiveness. These processes led to the de-industrialisation of the West from at least the second half of the 1970s and accelerated in the fully globalised economies at the end of the twentieth century in the form of offshoring. This meant simply closing down sites of production (typically factories) in one part of Europe and moving them either within the enlarged EU to countries with lower wages or beyond (for instance to Turkey, Morocco, China, or Indonesia). The automotive industry is an illustrative example of this process, with many automotive factories closed in France and Belgium and re-opened in the Czech Republic, Romania, and beyond.

It took the decision-makers around fifty years to realise that by offshoring production and reaching the target of lower labour costs, they were undercutting the economy in their own countries. This is because those who were made redundant due to the closure of their workplace could not so easily acquire new skills and find an alternative source of income. This issue has become far more visible lately, with the widespread introduction of artificial intelligence, bots and algorithms.

In the present day, the rhetoric of free and unfree labour has received new momentum. Over the past decade, there has been a growing pressure to replace human labour with artificial intelligence. At first this pressure was applied to manufacturing and assembly plants, to gradually make them more

and more productive. Just as military conflicts—like the two World Wars and, later, the local wars of the Cold War period—triggered technological leaps, the Covid-19 pandemic has revolutionised office work. Online activities have transformed private households into both family and office premises, with undefined legal frameworks for this new and unforeseen situation. It remains an open question as to whether this new development will open new doors to autonomous, self-determined, and fulfilling free labour.

Involuntary Non-work and the Welfare State

Depending on wage work means that periods of non-work in which one does not earn money can lead to existential crisis. Hence, the welfare state is here understood with regard to the risks of non-work. Aspects of the welfare state relating to housing, distribution, education, and tax politics are set aside. The risks which could cause one to fall into the existential crisis of non-work are omnipresent. However, how these risks are perceived and how one may seek to avoid their negative consequences have changed over time. The steps by which different risks were protected through social insurance schemes show which dangers were perceived as more legitimate than others. The introduction of nationwide, compulsory social insurance schemes shows a process whereby first work accidents, then illness, old age, and unemployment and, finally, late in the twentieth century, long-term care and phases of upbringing were insured in succession.

In this long process we find many different actors. The labour movements were spurring governments on with their demands and growing power. But many different political tactics and power considerations coincided in the emergence of social insurance schemes. In addition, discourses about work were important. An agreement that entrepreneurs and the state had responsibility for workers who were injured during their workday or could not attend work due to illness was easier to reach than an acknowledgment of similar responsibilities regarding unemployment. That nationwide unemployment insurance was often the last type of insurance to be implemented had a lot to do with the long debate about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Was someone who did not find work simply lazy, and therefore undeserving of support? It took a long time until the view that unemployment was a permanent threat to (property-less) employees in the capitalist era was accepted (and even then, it was not accepted everywhere).

The importance of insurance schemes is illustrated by the fact that public unemployment protests have gained little success and that the interests of the unemployed are difficult to organise. In addition, not being a supplicant, but an active person with legal entitlement gave individuals self-consciousness in

a period of crisis marked by doubts and fear, as the pioneering social study about the 'unemployed community of Marienthal' in 1933 demonstrated.

Due to economic cycles, unemployment varies across time and space. In a broader perspective we can define four phases of unemployment patterns (see Figure 3). From the late nineteenth century to the First World War, unemployment rates were relatively low and cyclical variations were moderate. This changed after 1918 and shot upward in the years of the Great Depression. After the Second World War, development was different: for about twenty years most Western European states faced an economic boom with very low unemployment rates. Since the 1970s, with the oil crisis, over-production and economic change, unemployment increased. Further increases hit after 1990 in the Eastern European states—where unemployment had previously been low and relatively hidden from view—and the peaks of the economic cycle were higher than at the beginning of the twentieth century.

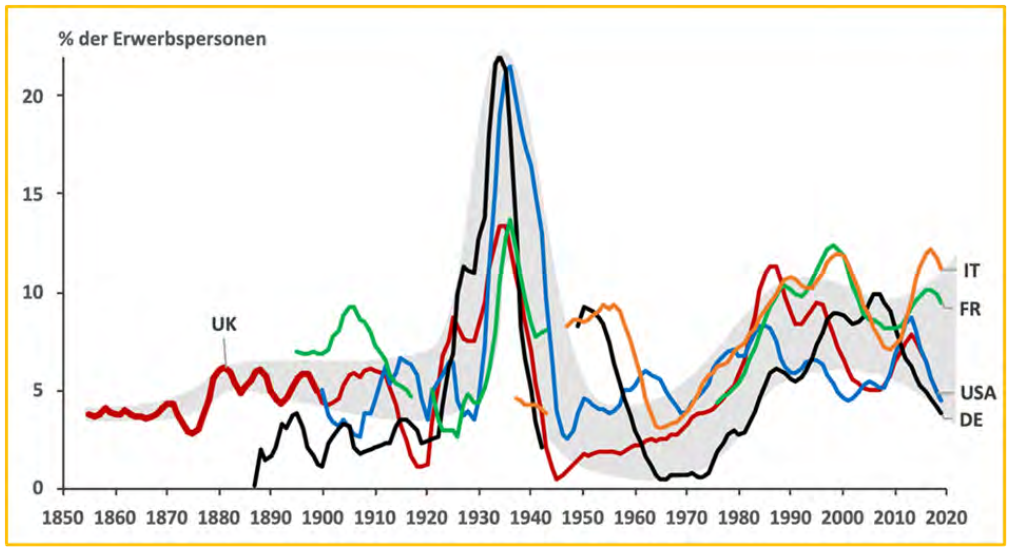

Fig. 3: Development of Unemployment in European Countries and the US 1850–2020. Unemployment in percentage of people in the labour market. DE—Germany. FR—France. IT—Italy. UK—United Kingdom. USA—United States of America. *Source:* © Institut für die Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit (IGZA), *Matrix der Arbeit. Materialien zur Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 2022).

Especially from the 1950s onwards, social insurance was impressively extended. Coverage rates rose and benefits became better and higher. The number of days without paid work secured by insurance was also impressive. For instance, the number of paid sick days among the approximately 14 million members of the health insurance system in Germany already amounted to almost 114 million in 1910. And in 2000 in Europe, each person got between six (Lithuania) and twenty-four (Czechia) paid sick day allowances (see Figure 4).

Number of paid sick days per person and year

Country	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Austria	14,4	13,3	12,7	12	13	12,9	12,8	12,3	12,5	13,1
Belgium				9	9,7			12,3	13,4	
Czech Rep.	23,6	24,7	21,4	21,2	19	13,7	12,6	13,5	15,4	16,3
Denmark	8,3	8,5	8		9	8,6	8,1	8,3	8,4	8,5
Estonia	9,8	9	9,9	10,3	11,3	8,2	7,3	8,1	8,5	9
France	8	9	8,8	8,4	7,8	8,2	8,3	8,3	8,4	8,8
Great Britain	7,8	6,8	6,8	7					6,3	5,9
German	16,5	16,3	14,2	13,3	14,6	15,9	17,6	18,1	18,6	20
Hungary	14,7	15,4	13,8	12,7	11,9	10	6,9	7,2	8,4	8,8
Ireland						17,2	15,2	11,7	10,4	9,4
Lithuania	6,1	5,2	4,9	6,3	7,4	5,4	5,9	6,5	8,2	8,9
Luxembourg	11,7	12,4	13,3	9,7	10,1	10,8	12	11,7	11,8	12,1
Netherlands	14	14	11	11	11	11	10	10	10	11
Norway		18,6	17,4	17,2	17,9	17,1	16,4	16,2	15,9	15,8
Portugal	10,6	12,4	7,2	7,8	6,8	6,5	6,3	6,6	7,2	
Slovakia					12,6	14,7	15,6	11,9	12,1	14,2
Slovenia	13,8	14	13,4	11,5	10,8	12,3	12,2	11,3	12,2	13,5
Spain	9,2	10,6	11,8	12,4	11,7	10,7	9	9,4	11,1	12,3
Sweden	16,8	20,9	18	14	10,2	6,7	8,6	10,6	12,5	11,3

Fig. 4: Number of paid sick days per person and year, 2000–2018. *Source:* https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=30123. The OECD adopted the national data referring both to insured persons and in other cases (Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Slovenia, UK) to the labour force (OECD Health Statistics 2020. Definitions, Sources and Methods, ibid.).

But the insurance of involuntary, non-work time was not a permanent success. As early as the late 1970s, with changes in the political economy (neoliberalism), political and social forces sought to roll back the social insurance system. After 1990, the end of the Cold War reinforced this trend.

The years after the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021) demonstrated the need for a strong welfare state. Short-term compensation prevented mass unemployment. In 2020, thirty-three out of thirty-six OECD countries used this labour market policy instrument during the Covid-19 crisis. Securing and improving the welfare state to protect people in times without paid work should be a European aim for the future.

Workers' Struggles For and Against Work

One can observe several patterns as the workers' movements of the twentieth century fought either for reform or revolution. As discussed in the previous paragraphs, labour movements, whether unionised or not, successfully

managed (depending on economic cycles) to put pressure on owners and the state in order to soften the most flagrant conditions of precarity, winning—for example—reforms such as health or social insurance. During the Cold War, the labour movements managed to effectively harness the fears of western states in order to create and maintain welfare state models that guaranteed steady wage growth and thus the overall improvement of working conditions, at least during the thirty years after the Second World War.

However, the role of trade unions as a mediating body between workers' and owners' interests was deeply questioned in some parts of Europe, for example in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. The experience of workerism (*operaismo*) as a particular kind of labour movement resulted from the tumultuous industrialisation of the Italian Peninsula and the massive influx of labour migrants from the Italian South to the North (Lombardy, Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna). These workers started to question their working conditions as well as their living conditions, and began to formulate a particularly strong critique against the alienation of their work. By the end of the 1960s, Italian workers joined forces with the student movement, which defended the former against the interests of the owners, which were enforced by the police and fascist violence. Their critique of the social factory—an entire society organised as a place of production—enabled the spread of the workers' struggle into working-class neighbourhoods, and the creation of a self-help movement based on a collectively agreed reduction of the prices of food and services such as gas or electricity. In the East, a similar workers' struggle can be found in the independent and free-trade union 'Solidarity' (*Solidarność*) in Poland.

Nevertheless, after the 1973 oil crisis, a new political economy of radical liberalism began to dominate in the West and eventually broke both the welfare state and the labour movements. The results of this new ideology were the destruction of the centralised workplace (such as factories) by a fragmentation of the production cycle and the extensive use of sub-contracting. Some of the reforms achieved during the post-war decades were kept, but their distribution was deeply uneven among the different countries of the EU. The process of dismantling the welfare state in Europe was accelerated by the fall of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s and the enlargement of the EU to include countries whose economies had been transformed by neoliberal shock therapy.

Changing Working-class Cultures

The changing nature of work in the twentieth century carried with it important shifts in working-class cultures. The gradual improvement of workers' literacy was an important trend with transformative results for both the nature of work itself and the conditions of the workers, who started to engage more

in the intellectual spheres of culture and politics. Popular culture emerged as a hybrid form situated between elite and folk culture, with an important element of consumerism to which workers were attracted in the periods of economic growth.

Generally, during the twentieth century, one can also observe the convergence of workers' culture with that of the 'middle classes'. Ideologically motivated critiques described these processes as 'embourgeoisement', with a new class category called the 'new petty bourgeoisie' and formed of supervisors and highly skilled workers. Different cultural changes among workers can nevertheless be observed according to generational divisions, as well as the geographical division between Western and Northern Europe on one side and Eastern and Southern Europe on the other. An illustrative model of these processes can be provided through the representation of workers in two movies depicting different working-class experiences, first in half of twentieth century and second at its end. The film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) presented a social critique through the aesthetics of Italian neorealism. Its story centres around a long-term unemployed worker from Rome who suddenly receives a job offer with the condition of owning a bicycle as a means of transport to work. The bicycle is eventually stolen and the drama of the worker and his son searching for it in the streets of Rome underlines the critical necessity of work as a means of survival in the city. Shot almost fifty years later, the British film *The Full Monty* (1997) presents a similar picture of psychological suffering due to unemployment. The context here is deindustrialised northern England, and the city of Sheffield in particular. A group of former colleagues from a closed steelworks copes with their boredom and threatened masculinity due to the loss of their roles as breadwinners. They eventually find a way out of their isolation and depression by performing male striptease.

The evolution of working-class cultures in the second half of the twentieth century was due to an increased share of university students from working-class environments, particularly from the mid-1960s onwards. This phenomenon was evident in most European countries and found its expression in particular in the movements active in the 'long 1968' in France, Germany, Italy, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. In the following two decades, close cooperation and connection between students' and workers' movements followed in other European countries, for instance in the Athens Polytechnic Uprising in November 1973. What young workers shared with students was an emphasis on culture as a political expression. This focus manifested itself in different, individualised (but collectively celebrated) lifestyles, particularly related to protest and rock music. Certain factions of workers were however not too enthusiastic about cooperation with academics, due to their different work roles. This tension was illustrated in the deployment of industrial

workers and miners in Bucharest in June 1990 to physically confront the mainly urban, academic protesters marching against the Romanian post-communist government.

Conclusion

Work in the twentieth century did not lose its multifaceted nature. Especially during the first half of the century, devastating impacts of different kinds of work abounded in Europe: alienated work in Fordism, forced labour in camps, or involuntary non-work as mass unemployment. The situation improved in some ways during the second half of the twentieth century thanks to a powerful and vital welfare state, strong unions guaranteeing better working conditions, and a decline in forced labour. On the other hand, there were new, onerous changes. Low-paid jobs which did not guarantee a living kept many in precarity, with a declining, but still indisputable gender pay gap, job insecurity in a period of growing automation and artificial intelligence, and the exploitation of work and workers in the Global South in the name of lifestyle and consumption in Europe.

While European demographic growth is in decline, this will create pressure to increase social security for retired pensioners. Sooner rather than later, this will bring either a sharp increase in corporate income tax (CIT) or a further loosening of fiducial restrictions. Finally, as the fastest growth of GDP is observed in regions other than Europe, boosting production should be the ultimate focus to meet growing expectations for a better standard of living. It is as yet an open question whether or not such a development will occur in Europe, the birthplace of capitalism.

Discussion questions

1. How did the world of work differ in Eastern and Western Europe during the twentieth century?
2. In which ways were the 1970s an important turning point in the history of labour in Europe?
3. What are the most important differences between work today and in the twentieth century?

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