

# Working futures

*A Scholarly Platform*

**Web :**

<https://www.wiko-berlin.de/en/institute/projects-cooperations/projects/working-futures/>

**Contact :** Bénédicte Zimmermann, [bzim@ehess.fr](mailto:bzim@ehess.fr)

The objective of this project is to create a space for mutual exchange and understanding on the futures of work among scholars from different disciplines and countries while centered around a Franco-German nucleus. It endorses the premise that thinking about the futures of work requires an indepth knowledge and analysis of its contemporary mutations (the concrete forms they take, their causes and repercussions) and rests on two preliminary considerations.

The first is of an empirical nature and takes into account the fact that these mutations go beyond the sphere of work and signify a reassessment of the ways in which one can “build society.” Because work is not just a source of income but of integration, affiliation and social recognition (Castel, 2003) we cannot separate the analysis of its transformations from those of society in general.

The second consideration that underpins this project is of an epistemological nature. To analyze the changeover is to confront the social sciences with the relevance of their analytical categories while also issuing the challenge of reinventing themselves methodologically.

Thinking about the mutations that work has undergone thus informs the question as to the transformations of contemporary societies and their normative foundations along with that pertaining to the renewal of the social sciences and their toolbox. So that this project deals both with *work as an object of empirical study* and with the *work of the social sciences on themselves*.

## **The Transformations of Work**

The ways in which the transformations of work manifest themselves are numerous and multidimensional. They include the diversification of statutes in the labor market, the enduring establishment of what is now called the “precariat,” the rise of work on others (care and services) through to the diffusion of a post-Taylorian management logic whereby autonomy is linked to greater responsibility or to the integration of consumers into the chain of production of value by “getting down to work” under multiple forms.

The diversity of these expressions can be synthesized by employing two key notions that we should like to place at center of the discussion: “siliconization” and “financialization”. Whereas these notions and the processes to which they refer are usually studied separately by dedicated disciplines, sub-disciplines and scholars, contemporary transformations of work are however a product of their entanglement. This is why we deem it necessary to consider them as an ensemble in thinking through the ongoing transformations and the challenges for the future emerging from them.

**Siliconization** refers to Silicon Valley and above all the technological revolution. The digital revolution has had an impact in a variety of areas, from collaborative to platform economics to automation, as well as new forms of human liberation and submission to the machine. Siliconization is not limited to technological and economic dimensions, it is also characterized by a transformation of human beings' relationship to work (Sadin, 2016). Today, by extension, one refers to it so as to designate in an emblematic manner a way of working that is organized around a "project" mode (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). This mode is featured by the blurring of the time and space boundaries of work, impacting the others spheres of life and the way individual biographies unfold (Sennett, 2006), whereas the semantics of work takes on the contours of a semantics of liberty which links flexibility, autonomy and innovation to an assumption of responsibility. Apart from economic and technical considerations, siliconization is associated with a vision of the world where everyone, including the lowest category of worker, is called upon to don the mantle of entrepreneurship (Bröckling, 2015). This vision is a profoundly ambiguous one (Hartmann & Honneth, 2006). In valorizing individual action and initiative, it frees and opens up spaces for self-fulfillment. In stressing individual responsibility, it obliges one – to succeed, to be equal to the task under any circumstances, to deal with contravening orders, to make due with the means at hand – and opens the door to psychic "fatigue" (Ehrenberg, 2010) or what one now calls psycho-social risks (Clot and Gollac, 2014).

**Financialization** refers to the growing domination of financial activities over an increasing number of social sectors. It infers a relationship to the world based on calculation and the maximization of profit and a government by means of numbers and indicators (Desrosières, 2008; Streeck, 2014). In the sphere of work it goes hand in glove with a change in the profile of shareholders (briefly put, from the *bonus pater familias* to the pension fund) and a transformation of their demands (Favereau, 2016 ; Faust, Kädtler and Wolf, 2017). The optimization of payments to shareholders tends to become a priority of companies to the detriment of any redistribution to employees as well as disadvantaging long-term investments. The consequences of this are manifold. A number of works have shown the widening gap between the remuneration of work and the returns on capital in capitalist economies (Piketty, 2014) but apart from the material question and the distribution of resources, financialization exerts an added pressure on work and workers and leads to their commodification. Beyond issues of organizational, legal and political regulation of work, financialization rises the broader question as to companies government and the distribution of power within them. Just as siliconization, but from a different angle, financialization rises the issue of workers' participation, inviting us to **revisit the relationship between work and democracy** from a political economy perspective.

Moreover, as a counter-movement or at least gearing towards another direction, it seems to us necessary that we integrate another logic into our reflections, even if still in embryo and still contested, namely that of ecology and sustainable development. One might call this dynamic the **greening or ecologization** of work insofar as it aims to reintegrate nature into a debate that for decades has been dominated by technology and culture. It takes as its subject the impact of work on human beings, the environment and social organization, and it revisits the question as to the final purpose of work as well as to the model of economic growth in which are embedded the dominant conceptions of this latter (Méda, 2013). To the longstanding but always relevant question – "What kind of work for a just society?" – we can add the further query: "What kind of work for a *sustainable* society?" If the impact of greening logic on today's observable large-scale transformations of work is low, it is no less important for those experiments which

proceed from it, the long-term perspective and the outline of alternative scenarios thereby introduced.

### **Work of the Social Sciences**

These three types of logic – that of siliconization, financialization and ecologization – now coexist in all capitalist economies, but their concrete expressions, their thematization and the manner in which they come to be articulated in public debates on work or become the object of social-science studies, are subject to wide variations from one country to the next, including between neighboring states such as France and Germany. The objective of this project is to elucidate these variations and if possible their foundations in order, on the hand, to move beyond superficial approaches that make national models into airtight black boxes where one blithely isolates a certain element notwithstanding its interdependence with other constituent elements of the model; and, on the other hand, to escape universalizing approaches which forget to question situated realities, categories and practices which incorporate terminologies that at first blush would seem to be equivalent – such as siliconization and financialization – if one reduces them solely to their linguistic dimension.

The work of the social sciences gives then rise to three epistemological and political questions which we should like to place at the center of the discussion:

- The first raises the issue of *a renewal of analytical categories and tools of inquiry* so as to respond to the twin challenge of grasping the ongoing transformations and making the question of the future a subject of social science investigation. Indeed the question as to *work and its futures* confronts the social sciences with futurology. Can the social sciences contribute to thinking about the future? How? And with what tools and methods?
- The second question touches on *the capacity of the social sciences to contribute to a shareable understanding* – if not shared – of contemporary transformations beyond national frontiers. Such an exercise requires *reflexivity and distance* in order to make accessible the logic at base of our respective practices of categorization. The aim is to quest for reflexivity not for its own sake but as a basis for mutual understanding and as the condition for producing a space of shared meaning among researches from different countries.
- Finally, the third question regards *the relationship to values and normativity*. The transformation of work confronts the social sciences with the question of normativity with regard to the identification or formulaation of “desirable futures.” This in turn raises the question of what is desirable and for whom. Beyond that, it is the old refrain of the relationship between scholars and the political field which enters the discussion, a relationship which it is important to clarify not only because it receives different treatments among different disciplines but also within respective national traditions.

### **A Transnational Project with a Franco-German Nucleus**

If we consider that one of the things at stake in contemporary transformations of work is that of the construction of a shared and desirable future which transcends national borders, then working for greater mutual understanding and for the elaboration of a

shared language and categories among scholars from different countries is a scholarly enterprise that can also nourish political debate. It is in this spirit that we propose to articulate this project at three levels – at the Franco-German level, which constitutes its central core, at the European level, and finally at the global level.

The problems sketched above are intended to frame the discussion at each of these levels but using different foci and methods. Let us briefly recapitulate the two sets of questions:

- (1) What are the questions, problems and challenges relative to the transformation of work in France, Germany, in Europe and on the global scale? How are these questions formulated by actors in the economic, political and social spheres? How is work conceptualized and categorized? How does one speak of it? What does one act upon it?
- (2) How do the social sciences address and make sense of these questions? How are these latter established as subjects of research in each of the different countries? Which in turn raises the question as to the way in which relations between the social sciences and public action in each of the countries under consideration are constructed and conceived.

Concretely speaking, the project unfolds around three types of initiative:

1. ***Constitute an interdisciplinary and international network of experts around a Franco-German core*** and meet twice a year with, among other objectives, the organization of scientific events and joint publications.
2. ***Organize a summer university every two years.*** The objective is to have young scholars join their mental resources.
3. ***In association with Berlin's re:work institute*** extending the network to a global scale by integrating specialists on work and its transformation in non-wage societies or those more recently converted to wage societies.

## References

- Boltanski L., Chiapello E., 2007 (1999) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London, Verso.
- Bröckling U., 2015 (2007) *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject*. Cambridge, Sage.
- Castel R., 2003 (1995) *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*. New Brunswick NJ, Transaction.
- Clot Y., Gollac M., 2014, *Le travail peut-il devenir supportable?* Paris, Armand Colin.
- Desrosières A., 2008, *Gouverner par les nombres*. Paris, Presses de l'Ecole des Mines.
- Ehrenberg A., 2010 (1999) *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*. McGill-Queens University Press.
- Faust M., Kädtler J., Wolf H. (eds.) 2017, *Finanzmarktkapitalismus? Der Einfluss der Finanzialisierung auf Arbeit, Wachstum und Innovation*. Frankfurt and New York, Campus.
- Favereau O., 2016, *L'impact de la financiarisation de l'économie sur les entreprises et sur les relations de travail*. Rapport pour le BIT, Geneva.
- Hartmann M., Honneth A., 2006, "Paradoxes of Capitalism," *Constellations* 13 (1) 42-58.

Méda D., 2013, *La mystique de la croissance. Comment s'en libérer?* Paris, Flammarion.

Piketty TH., 2014 (2013) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Belknap Press.

Sadin E., 2016, *La siliconisation du monde. L'irrésistible expansion du libéralisme numérique*. Paris, Editions L'Echappée.

Sennett, R., 2006, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Streeck W., 2014 (2012) *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. London, Verso.