

Deconstructing Work

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Is work in itself a bad thing? Not at all, according to Michel Lallement, who uses a fine brush to paint an ideology-free portrait of the various forms taken by work today in response to economic changes and management strategies.

Reviewed: Michel Lallement, <i>Le Travail sous tensions</i> , Éditions Sciences Humaines, 2010, 125 pp., 10 €.
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In this little book of 125 pages, with its straightforward title *Work Under Strain* (*Le Travail sous tensions*), we have an outstanding survey of the realities of work in our time. Being under strain means being in an unstable condition, vulnerable to the actions of the various and sometimes contradictory forces that give to work its contemporary form. The author has taken on himself the task of reviewing, analysing and measuring these tensions and their impact on the practical world of work. The key word in the book, its guiding theme, is clearly “diversity”: Michel Lallement opposes the oversimplifications of ideologies, of unreflective visions of the world, and of preconceived ideas. In opposition to unifying, all-embracing explanations and one-way thinking, Lallement makes use of an extensive colour chart, which lets him give plenty of scope to the plurality of different ways of working, to the diversity of the worlds of work, to the widely-differentiated ranges of working conditions and of the meanings given to work, to compositional effects, and to the fading away of rigid boundaries. After reminding us of the diversity of the role of work, these differences are analysed using four points of departure, which are so many “major strains” running through work, in each case allowing clarification of how economic and technological changes and management strategies to which the actors and the institutions have had to adapt have gone into the making of new workplace realities.

The first strain is the one that opposes the work of the rich to the work of the poor – which not only divides members of rich versus poor societies, but also operates at the core of our rich societies. After all, globalization, far from having produced univocal results – the spread of commodification, or the convergence of conditions – has produced difference. This difference takes the form of increasing polarization and inequalities, of a reinforced division of labour and country specialization, of the exponential development of new information and communication technologies which in some cases enrich work and in others considerably impoverish it, and of an exacerbation of differences between developed and developing countries in work and employment conditions. Within rich countries, there is also polarization between those for whom work is a rich activity and those – casual labourers, part-time or temporary workers, salaried employees in businesses at the end of the subcontracting chain, and workers without papers – for whom work is poor in every sense of the word. As Lallement suggests, there is no doubt at all that the release of this tension, the reduction of this polarization, would result from the universal adoption of the social norms drawn up by the International Labour Organization, as the base of decent work standards. Perhaps those norms would also make it possible to reestablish some homogeneity in the worlds of work that are currently being restructured: those segments of the private sector that are subjected to the greater need for flexibility, and those public services coming up against the imperatives of modernization.

The second strain is experienced by salaried employees and the professional classes since the retreat of Taylorism, who are now torn “between autonomy and constraint”. Especially in his discussions of the INSEE Work Conditions survey series (“*Conditions de travail*”), Lallement notes that salaried employees say at one and the same time that they enjoy greater autonomy in their work, and that they are subject to more powerful constraints. He sees in this situation one of the explanations for the increase in the “psychosocial risks of work” and in workplace maladies: “in a dysfunctional organization with no means of protecting itself from such evils, the risks of pathologies grow exponentially.” The way in which the different actors essential to getting work done (salaried employees, employers, unions, customers, shareholders, subcontractors, suppliers, etc.) do or do not manage to work together is an integral part of this tension. Lallement notes that one of the major transformations in contemporary work is the intrusion of the customer into every step of the activity of production and the fact that nearly two thirds of employees are in contact with the public. Although these changes have made successful interaction more difficult, they have not been accompanied by greater attentiveness to the needs of these employees: financialization, development of short-

term strategies, and the prominence given to shareholder value have on the contrary facilitated restructurings in which they have been the first victims. New forms of negotiation and of registering discontent have for the moment not been any more successful than traditional forms of action in countering this situation in which work is “dominated” (“*sous domination*”).

The third strain opposes work as a practical matter to employment as a matter of statute. The very badly named “labour market” (for labour is not a commodity like others and the labour market is not a market in the ordinary sense of the term) is structured by a number of segmentations that have been reinforced in recent years. But “more than these labour market segmentations, it is ultimately the destabilization of the position of the salaried employee that characterizes these recent years,” fuelled by the uninterrupted growth in the number of poor workers. As for the employment policies that have now been implemented for more than thirty years, while they have certainly made it possible to save some jobs, they have also quite certainly added to the degradation of the quality of work.

The fourth tension is of a cognitive nature: the categories that we use to describe work today are obsolete and unsuitable to analyse the new realities of work and *a fortiori* to envisage the contours of the work of tomorrow. The classic distinctions (goods/services, work/unemployment, salaried/self-employed) have worn thin, boundaries have moved, ways of working have changed. Professor Lallement suggests by way of conclusion that we should take advantage of these upheavals to reinvent work, to restructure the category of work. According to him, there are three main ways to go about doing that: to make the rights needed for decent work effective; to implement policies of recognition; and (last but not least) to adopt the distinction suggested by André Gorz between autonomous and heteronomous work.

As can be seen, none of the big questions currently relevant to work and to the world of work are absent from this book. It very successfully blends a dependably rigorous theoretical framework (the approaches of the masters – Durkheim, Marx, Elias – remain central, and the questions pursued are never simply “current affairs”) with exploitation of the best analyses produced by the sociological community (many of them by Michel Lallement himself, who has been an indefatigable student of the worlds of work for more than twenty years) or of the results of national or international surveys mounted by statistical or research institutes. Another great quality of this book is that reading it is extremely easy, thanks to a very helpful pedagogical structure that gives us the historical situations, detailed reasons for changes, and several levels of analysis, and that completes the experiences as they were lived, by bringing

into the picture macroeconomic and macrosocial considerations; thanks also to a number of sidebars that go more deeply into a topic, an expression or a study; and thanks finally to a very welcome glossary.

This book thus includes a summary of the brilliant analyses that Professor Lallement has previously published on the issues discussed in it: the meaning of work, magnificently explored in *Travail: Une sociologie contemporaine* (2007); the relationship between work and ways of life, explained in *Temps, Travail et modes de vie* (2003); and professional relationships, on which the author is one of the leading French experts (*Sociologie des relations professionnelles*, 2008).

After reading this essential book, three questions remain. First, what exactly is the author's diagnosis concerning the contemporary worlds of work? Does the subtlety of the overall argument of the book not make it too indecisive, or even sometimes too optimistic? I have not even counted the number of times that the author, after having described a situation that some analysts consider hardly favourable to employees, questions their judgement – finding it too general, too simplistic or caricatured, or too unappreciative of the diversity of situations – and draws distinctions showing, for example, that yes, of course, globalization has brought increasing inequalities, but after all it has not been so very disadvantageous to employees, and all in all it has led to relatively little outsourcing; or that, granted, “few professional circles are immune to workplace maladies,” but nevertheless “the majority of salaried employees have not been affected by the most serious of these threats”; or that, admittedly, work is “dominated” and in the increasingly firm grip of financialization, and “France does not have a very brilliant level of union membership,” but still, “in spite of their apparent weakness, French unions continue ... to participate actively in handling the tensions between divisions and cooperation...” Even if we are grateful to Professor Lallement for always preferring rigorous analysis to quick and easy criticism, we can still find that the grounds for his optimism are questionable and in any case they do not appear to supply the leverage with which to implement the proposals elaborated at the end of the book. Why should we expect learning organizations to gain ground in France? What exactly are the forces on which we could depend to get into place those rules that would allow us “to make the rights needed for decent work effective”? What are the signs that financialization – which causes work to be “dominated” – is receding? Do “the new forms of negotiating and of registering discontent” that have arisen during the past few decades, or perhaps the “movement towards the individualization of conflicts” that the author sees, constitute fulcrums for putting new rules

into place? Of course, the sociologist is not there to furnish recipes or to help develop public policies, and in any case the scope of this book would have made that impossible; nevertheless, one would have liked to see Michel Lallement departing a bit more from his scholarly neutrality in order to show us, if not the precise paths to take to launch the restructuring of work that he pins his hopes on, at least a few useful signposts.

The second question is to do with the meaning that the individual gives to work. As in *Travail: Une sociologie contemporaine*, Lallement considers that it is established and amply demonstrated that “most French people associate work with living happily,” and he does not explore any farther the disagreement observed between the extensive studies that “portray a picture of a rather happy life at work” and the microsociological investigations that “tend rather to bring out the professional afflictions and difficulties that arise day-to-day.” Perhaps it would be hasty to interpret as evidence of an identification between work and happiness the fact that 27% of the respondents in Christian Baudelot's and Michel Gollac's survey “Travail et modes de vie”, when asked “What is most important to your happiness?” replied “work”; or the fact that 70% said that work is “very important” to their happiness. For one thing, the fact that not having work can constitute an extreme hardship does not make having it feel like a part of happiness; for another, it is important to consider with great caution the results of subjective surveys (Lallement is of course well aware of this); and finally, there is a lingering mystery about the French relationship with work (Davoine and Méda, 2008): although the French are the Europeans most likely to say work is “very important” to their happiness, in fact they are also the ones most likely (65%) to say they wish that work occupied less space in their lives. It is this paradox, which is explained in part by the disappointment that actual working conditions inflict on the immense expectations placed on work, that it would have been good to see Michel Lallement dissect, to help us measure the distance between what work is really like (as Lallement reminds us, for many, it is not synonymous with happiness, it is rather an affliction) and what work *per se* is or should be. Like the recent Commission on Workplace Afflictions (*Commission de réflexion sur la souffrance au travail*), which refused to equate work with affliction and preferred to use the expression “unwell work” (*travail malade*),¹ one senses (and one knows) that Lallement is opposed to the idea that work *per se* could be an affliction. It can only be so “by accident”, whence comes the idea that workplace maladies (stress, suicide, and so on) occur only in certain very particular conditions, when production-oriented organizations

¹ “Work is not affliction. A country that puts these two ideas on an equal footing has no future.... Indeed, because it makes use of the body, of intelligence, and of subjectivity, it remains, whether salaried or not, an irreplaceable source of liberation and accomplishment.... [R]ecent suicides in large firms have brought an end to a taboo: in a large number of cases, the work itself is unwell” (p. 4).

do not allow employees to work in the normal way, thus producing “pathologies”. Should we deduce from this that in normal conditions (but have they ever existed? when? will they exist some day? what conditions are normal?) work is a source of happiness? Should we deduce that situations that lead to the production of pathologies are only accidental and temporary? And more generally, should we deduce that if the relevant organizations were better adapted, work would be for itself, in action, in actuality, what it is in itself, in potential: an individual and collective activity, a means of self expression, and a source of happiness, even in a capitalist regime, and even though salaried work is by definition subordination, and even though, as the author clearly demonstrates, the division of labour never stops going deeper?

From this arises a third and last question, or rather – knowing Michel Lallement's wariness about utopia (at least about bad utopias, for he has recently devoted a voluminous and enthralling work to the *Famillistère de Guise*, an actual utopia²) and his disinclination to call into question the essential role of work in our societies – the astonishment that took hold of me in reading the last ten lines of his conclusion, where he calls for a return to Gorz and to Gorz's fertile distinction between autonomous and heteronomous work, which has inspired several authors (me among them). To accept – with necessary distinctions, of course; Lallement, right after opening this door, reins in his audacity by pointing out that certain ideas of Gorz were “contestable” – still, all the same, to accept the idea of heteronomous work is to open the door to a radical critique of work. This would be a critique not only of present-day work, crippled by ills provoked by the combination of obnoxious work organizations, by weakening and deregulation of workplace standards, as well as by an unlimited financialization; but also of salaried work, characterized by heteronomy; of alienated labour that Friedmann had already denounced in the 1950s; of labour in a capitalist regime; of labour as merchandise as conceptualized by Smith in the eighteenth century; in short, of work since its very invention. Thus, to accept this idea and its backers is perhaps, after a lot of nuances and caution, to open a very large Pandora's box and to have what it really takes to restructure work.

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² Michel Lallement, *Le travail de l'utopie. Godin et le famillistère de Guise*, Les Belles Lettres, 2009.