A plea for sustainable and desirable work

In May 2017, Emmanuel Macron was elected as the 25th President of the French Republic. As soon as he took office, he began to actively promote the idea of the “liberation of labour”, a somewhat vague concept that had figured in his election campaign, and caused some controversy and concern. In his latest book, Thomas Coutrot admits from the outset, somewhat sardonically, that the expression “freedom of labour” has been bandied about in recent years to embellish certain neoliberal reforms aimed solely at future deregulation of the labour market.

The title of Coutrot’s book, "Freedom of Labour" ("Libérer le travail"), plainly attributes a more emancipatory – and anti-capitalist – meaning to the expression, as if to clarify and settle its definition once and for all. In the first of the book’s four sections, he provides an overview of the current state of the labour market based on statistical surveys of working conditions. These show that work represents a source of anxiety for more than half of those surveyed. The neoliberal organisation of the labour market, its digitisation, the standardisation of tasks, job insecurity, intensification, etc. lead to a climate of unsustainability that can cause significant problems (often referred to as “psychosocial risks”) for those affected by it; problems that are increasing at an alarming and distressing rate.

The second section echoes the book’s subtitle, which rings out like a challenge to the country’s leftist parties and the trade unions: “(Freedom of Labour:) Why the Left does not care and why this must change”. On this point, Coutrot identifies two currents of thought: the productivist and statist approach favoured by the proponents of Taylorism (described as “the anti-labour left”) and the concept of cooperative self-management (described as “the left without labour”). He sets out the reasons why each of these approaches has failed to achieve a democratic organisation of the labour market, an alternative system leading to autonomy, creativity and emancipation; in other words, genuine freedom of labour. Coutrot maintains that, while this disregard for a restructuring of employment was tolerable “as long as capitalism offered adequate trade-offs for subordination, […] the damage currently being caused by the neoliberal organisation of the labour market makes it untenable”.

In the third part of the book, the author discusses managerial initiatives, suggesting that the majority of proposals to liberalise the labour market have emerged from business owners and managers. He sets out ideas put forward by “humanist” managers to challenge the concepts of Taylorism and unbridled rationalisation or to consider the potential productive benefits of employee autonomy and stakeholding. These include participative management, autonomous teamwork and the adoption of a sociotechnical approach leading to a “liberalised enterprise” culture, sociaocracy, holacracy, self-governing companies, etc. In some cases such approaches have failed, while others prove that greater autonomy can go hand-in-hand with improved productivity. Nevertheless, they all constitute a positive breeding ground for the idea that non-hierarchical organisational models can bring genuine freedom to the working environment.

The fourth and final part of the book addresses the link between work and democracy. Coutrot effectively highlights the reasons why freedom at work is an issue that goes beyond the sphere of employment and why it is vital that the organisation of the labour market be seen as a political issue. He cites a number of studies that show that political participation decreases. In France, a commune-by-commune cross-comparison of data on working conditions and voting outcomes in the 2017 presidential election shows a strong statistical link between a lack of autonomy at work and abstentions or votes for the far right. At a time when Europe is grappling with the rise of populism, such findings must prompt us to look for ways to increase democracy in the workplace in order to make work a tool of democracy. To this end, Thomas Coutrot recommends focusing on two promising routes: collaborative work and the ethics of care, both anti-capitalist alternatives that are outlined with reference to existing practical initiatives (the “flipped classroom” teaching method used by some teachers in France and the Buurtzorg autonomous home care teams in the Netherlands).

This thought-provoking book is a must-read for anyone questioning the sustainability of the contemporary labour environment.

— Fabienne Scandella

Libérer le travail.
Pourquoi la gauche s’en moque et pourquoi ça doit changer
Thomas Coutrot, Editions du Seuil, 2018