

Warhurst, Chris; Darr, Asaf

Article

Interview: Chris Warhurst interviewed by Asaf Darr

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Interview

Chris Warhurst interviewed by Asaf Darr

Chris Warhurst is Professor and Director of the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick. He is also a Trustee and Board Member of the Tavistock Institute in London and an Associate Research Fellow of SKOPE at the University of Oxford. He was formerly a director of the Scottish Low Pay Unit and an advisor to the Scottish Living Wage campaign. Before Warwick he was Professor of Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney and Founding Director of the Scottish Centre for Employment Research in Glasgow. He has published 15 books, 50 journal articles, 50 book chapters and 40 reports, and secured 60 research grants. He is the UK lead for an EU-funded project on job quality, innovation, and employment outcomes and is IER's co-ordinator of the UK Observatory for Employment and Labour Markets for the EU agency, Eurofound. He has provided expert advice to various national governments as well as the OECD. He is motivated by wanting to see better scientific and policy-maker understanding of work and employment. C.Warhurst@warwick.ac.uk

Twenty-five years ago you published your book *Between Market State and Kibbutz*,¹ based on your PhD thesis. What attracted you to conduct an ethnographic study of kibbutz industry?

I first developed an interest in the kibbutz in the 1980s. It was a time in the United Kingdom when there was massive economic restructuring, lots of job losses and people were worried about the future of jobs, the economy and society generally. The social and economic fabric of the country was stretching to breaking point. Identifying alternatives was a key issue for many. London had its alternative economic strategy and various regional governments in the United Kingdom were interested in developing co-operatives. My intention when I started studying the kibbutz was to explore it as a possible alternative. The study was three-way comparison between capitalist industrial work organization, state socialist industrial work organization, epitomized by the Soviet Union and Soviet Bloc countries, and the communal socialist industrial work organization of the kibbutz. By its end, however, over the end of the 1980s, start of the 1990s it became a study of the transformation of the kibbutz, as it increasingly marketized its social relations.

Kibbutz industry was the economic backbone of the kibbutz movement. At that time there'd been a lot of quantitative research of kibbutz industry and there'd been some qualitative research of other aspects of the kibbutz lifestyle, particularly around gender issues but there was very little qualitative research of kibbutz industry, particularly done by a non-kibbutznik. I undertook qualitative research of kibbutz industry as an outsider. It was a mixture of participant observation and interviews over a period of almost two years living and working in the kibbutz. I had a kibbutz family for support and was assigned to a work team in the host kibbutz' factory. The study genuinely added something new to scientific understanding. One thing which really struck me as I started living in the kibbutz was the disjuncture between the 'official' account of work and living on the kibbutz – the stuff picked up in surveys – and the unstated, unofficial world of work and living – the reality that wasn't picked up in surveys and which was only possible to discern through ethnography. The reasons behind and the processes underpinning the transformation of kibbutz industry were only really revealed through doing that kind of ethnography.

That's a great explanation of your methodological development. What were the theoretical underpinnings of your research?

At the time I was very lucky, I had a doctoral supervisor who was – and still is – one of the leading lights in labour process theory. I came to labour process theory – or really labour process analysis, as the two are disentangleable – in its second wave. The first wave had been centered on skill and the claim of inevitable deskilling within capitalist labour processes. Of course the empirical evidence was – and is – more mixed. Deskilling was too simplistic a story and there were other potential outcomes. In its second wave, labour process analysis shifted onto a new terrain which was about control and how the need to overcome the indeterminacy of labour – or the conversion of potential into actual labour – explained why employers employed various means, including scientific management and Taylorism in workplaces. I realized that the indeterminacy of labour existed in all modes of production, whether capitalist or socialist. The key issue in all modes of production is how to get people to do work. In the kibbutz, which lacked the oppression of the Communist Party and the

gulag, and also lacked managerialism and paid labour, the indeterminacy of labour is resolved through a mixture of individual consent and social control. There was no monitoring and evaluation of worker performance. The problem with labour process “theory,” as it had by now become relabeled in the United Kingdom, was that it was very good at looking at how you get workers to work at a kind of micro, workplace level. It was also pretty good at understanding macro influences; how that workplace level was a feature of political economy; in other words, how it emerged out of the modes of production of capitalism or state socialism. However, it was weaker at incorporating the meso-level, in this case the influence and role of the state in supporting or delivering methods of labour control. Filling this gap required me to draw on neo-institutional theory and to appreciate that different countries have different business systems with different institutional configurations that support or provide the framework through which management and labour operated. So theoretically it was a welding together of labour process theory and neo-institutionalism theory; a synthesis of the two theories to cover the three levels of analysis needed to understand not just industrial work organization in the kibbutz but other forms of socialism, as well as capitalism.² It’s a template that I still carry in my head.

Did you see kibbutz industry as a form of workplace democracy, or as a model for class ownership of the means of production?

Given the UK context, my initial interest in the kibbutz was as a form of cooperative. Certainly, as I said, in the 1980s there was a lot of renewed interest in cooperative organization in the United Kingdom, so I came at it through that lens because in mainstream organizational literature the kibbutz was, at that time, often positioned as a kind of co-op. However it’s not a co-op. It’s more a society than an organization. Historically, at the start of the twentieth century, it was an attempt to establish a new state with a different, alternative political economy – a workers’ state based on communal socialism. Even when Israel was founded as a “normal” country in the 1940s, there were initial concerns on the part of the government that the kibbutz movement might operate as a state within a state. So really, in that sense, pre-transformation kibbutz industry operated a form of workplace democracy but that workplace democracy was part of a wider *modus operandi* of a classless society (though there were other social divisions, for example based on gender) in which everyone owned

and controlled the means of production through community democracy.

What was your main conclusion regarding the transformation of kibbutz?

As the title of the book suggests – *Between Market, State and Kibbutz* – the conclusions were that senior managers within the case study kibbutz factory faced competing and *tensive* pressures from the three levels. To deal with these pressures these managers sought to resolve the ambiguity of having responsibility without authority – being tasked with the competitiveness of their factories but with no way of delivering that competitiveness because they lacked control of the indeterminacy of labour. They sought, and attained, managerial control over it through the bureaucracy imposed on the factory by customers. These customers, foreign and market-based, were entering a now deregulated Israeli economy, and couldn’t comprehend how a system that lacked labour control could produce the quality of product they desired. They wanted that control imposed, and without it the factory couldn’t win orders. Once that bureaucracy was introduced a domino effect occurred. The monitoring and evaluation of individual workers’ performance was made possible. Comparing the output and costs of kibbutz labour resulted in much more hired labour being employed. This hired labour, as with other waged labour, required further control. Kibbutz labour, now also assessed for its surplus value-producing capacity, became commodified and waged. With it, the red line was crossed and, in my opinion, the kibbutz ceased to exist as a kibbutz as formerly conceived. Not all kibbutzim went this way but those that did are now little more than dormitory villages.

Moving on from the kibbutz, your scholarly interests over the years reflect much broader trends. Could you say something about what triggered your interest in service work and in particular in the notion of “aesthetic labour,” a term you coined and then worked on a lot together with Dennis Nickson?

In the late 1980s I was living and working in Preston, Lancashire, which was one of those UK regions that had been decimated by economic restructuring and had very high unemployment. A former mining and manufacturing heartland, jobs in these industries had collapsed and hadn’t yet been replaced by service jobs. However, I noticed a newspaper job advertisement asking for “good

looking staff” for a local nightclub. It puzzled and intrigued me. The advert didn’t stipulate qualifications or even experience; the only criterion was that applicants had to be good looking. I assumed that looks-based recruitment must be illegal and was surprised to find out that it wasn’t – and still isn’t in many jurisdictions in the world. I then moved to Glasgow in Scotland. In the early 1990s, like Preston, Glasgow had lost its traditional jobs base but unlike Preston it had deliberately sought to re-establish itself as a regional service hub. Retail, hospitality and financial services were strong. Its shipyards had been replaced by shops, its mills by malls. I noticed that hiring on the basis of looks also appeared to be strong in Glasgow. It was a handsome city with handsome staff. A pilot study we conducted of retail and hospitality confirmed that looks-based employment was writ large in Glasgow. Aesthetic labour was born as a concept to understand this development.³ Loosely speaking, aesthetic labour is the employment of workers based on their looks. Whether good looking or having the right looks, these looks are important for workers’ getting and doing their jobs. It envelops employees’ comportment, dress and speech. It is intended by employers to positively affect the senses of customers and generate new or repeat custom. It’s become a competitive strategy for some companies and has resulted in discrimination and social exclusion for some workers.

For many years you’ve been writing under the theoretical umbrella of labour process theory. In what ways is this theory relevant to the field of economic sociology? Can it contribute to the study of an economy and society today?

I’ve worked almost since the start of my academic career with the concepts and tools of labour process theory. I’m a member of the International Labour Process Conference Steering Committee and have published a number of books in the conference’s book series on a wide range of issues such as skills and work/life balance.⁴ Analysis of the labour process is undertaken worldwide, though I accept that what is now labour process theory is used most by UK researchers. It still offers, I think, an important intellectual and analytical tool for understanding the world of work, or certainly the world of paid work, especially if it’s centered round the issue of the indeterminacy of labour. Moreover, although labour process theory and my own doctoral research started off essentially focused on what might be called the “3Ms” agenda of male, manufacturing and manual workers, labour process theory has evolved to

cover a range of industries from manufacturing to services, from car workers to call center workers. I’m pleased to see that aesthetic labour is now one of the tools in its toolbox for understanding the employment relationship in services. Understanding paid work is important. Jobs are still at the core of our identities and material being, despite what some academics claim about consumption. Jobs enable and disable us socially, economically and psychologically. I think those who heralded the death of work a number of years’ ago got it badly wrong. How we work might be changing but we still work – and need to work. Voluntary downshifting is more topical than typical. Governments are still trying to push people into work and, in fact, the European Union has an overt policy to increase the employment participation rate by getting more older, younger, female and ethnic minority and migrant workers into work.

For me, economic sociology is focused on the circuit of capital (or its equivalent in other modes of production) and the structures, actors, relationships and processes within that circuit that both define and drive it. Within this circuit, production and consumption are important in the generating, appropriating and realizing of surplus value. Labour process theory is focused on production, whether that’s the production of goods or services. Centered on this part, it offers one tool for understanding that part of economic sociology. So labour process theory is a useful tool within economic sociology for analyzing and understanding production, though as I said before it needs supplementing with other theoretical tools, and also needs to be complemented by other theories if the full circuit of capital is to be analyzed and understood.

For the past few years, you’ve been writing about job quality. Can you explain what exactly job quality is and how this term relates to the broader interests that have guided your research over the years?

For the past few years my research focus has been on job quality, but it’s part of a clear trajectory that can be traced back to my first study of the kibbutz. I recognize an intellectual and moral thread throughout all of my research over the past twenty-five years: a desire to understand good work and, with it, a concern to improve bad work.

Implicitly and explicitly, most of what is now called the sociology of work and employment has been concerned with job quality – not just wages but also the terms and conditions of work, ranging from despotic management to

health and safety at work to job satisfaction and opportunities for work/life balance and career development, and now workplace well-being. Using different language these issues have informed the study of paid work since the time of sociology's so-called founding fathers: Marx, Weber and Durkheim. I came to it overtly through participation in international, comparative research on low-wage work in the US and Europe funded by the Russell Sage Foundation. I then became involved as an adviser to the Scottish living wage campaigns, driven by a desire to help reduce working poverty in Scotland. I realized that something needed to be done about job quality and that interventions to improve it had to be evidence-based. With colleagues I then launched a project aimed at "making bad jobs better" and I'm pleased to say that it's an issue that's on the Scottish government's new policy agenda. And in one sense it's all gone full circle because I was recently asked to write a chapter with a colleague from Oxfam on job quality and its contribution to creating a good society for a book reflecting on the current state of communalism.⁵ Our point in that chapter was that good jobs benefit not just individuals and their families but employers and governments.

This focus on job quality, however, has made me realize that whether within or outside sociology departments much of sociological research frustrates me. This research falls along the continuum of prescription, suggesting what should happen, or description, presenting what does happen, or prediction, suggesting what will happen, all overlaid, at best with some kind of evaluation – some robust, some not. When I'm asked to define being critical I reply that it means understanding what happens, why it happens and what the alternatives are. Unfortunately there isn't a lot of research offering alternatives. In the 1990s Anthony Giddens was derided for his overtures to government and, while I disagreed with much of his policy suggestions, I acknowledged that he was at least trying. My own omission in this respect was hammered home to me when I was engaged in advisory work in the early 2000s on economic development in Scotland. One of the government's civil servants said to me, "You're very good at knocking down our ideas," which I attributed to my grounding in labour process theory, "but," he continued, "you haven't told us what we could do instead." He was right and I've spent the past decade trying to right that wrong. The book that I recently published with American colleagues entitled *Are Bad Jobs Inevitable?*⁶ is part of that effort. It describes job quality and what's happening to job quality; it evaluates job quality developments and outcomes; and it offers strategies for how job quality might be

improved. Its publication is timely, the EU and OECD now recognize that what's required to get the global economy moving again is not just more jobs but better jobs.

It sounds as if you've come full circle in terms of how you look at your research.

Yes, but it's not just our approach to research that needs to be broadened, so does our teaching. We should be enthusing students with sociologically-based alternative possibilities. Returning to the issue of job quality, the individual, organizational and societal benefits of good jobs have to be put back into higher education pedagogy, as they once were in Scandinavia as part of the Quality of Working Life movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We need to educate future generations of managers while they're still students by presenting them with the evidence and making them think critically about job quality and helping them to appreciate that they have choices and can exercise these choices even within constraints in their workplaces, whether they working for large or small companies. It's an argument for an engaged sociology in which we make ourselves available and avail ourselves as public servants. Understanding how we do that practically is one of my current tasks.

Endnotes

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