

Editorial

Work, recognition and the market

Jonathan Seglow and Ruth Yeoman

Ongoing debates about the (im)proper remuneration of those working in the financial services sector, in the light of the recession, reveal not simply deep-rooted intuitions about the comparative fairness of monetary rewards for different kinds of labour.

They also invoke more amorphous but no less real ideals – about the social contribution of various kinds of work ('bankers are only in it for themselves') and the respect they receive from the wider society; the way work enables or disables us from meeting our obligations to fellow citizens ('bankers got us into this mess in the first place'); the comparative merits of regarding work as a competitive domain (which financial markets perhaps exemplify) as opposed to a co-operative one, generating social solidarity; and beyond that an older notion, rather eclipsed by neo-liberalism, that work might be seen as a fundamentally expressive, dignified activity.

Beyond money and consumables, then, work produces, or fails to produce, a range of *social* goods. And workers – highly unpaid, low paid and unpaid (such as parents) – can be recognised for the way in which they produce social goods and realise core values. Conversely, of course, our world of values structures the way different forms of work are perceived and regarded. Since human beings seem almost limitlessly hungry for honour (Brennan and Pettit, 2004) such recognition is as important as monetary reward: it is a crucial source of self-respect and self-esteem.

Our aim in this special issue of *Renewal* is to reflect upon the ways in which different forms of work are recognised, misrecognised or under-recognised for the wider set goods they produce in the contemporary market, and to connect this to debates about the comparative fairness of remuneration.

Work and its meanings

Work did not always mean what it means for us in the economic market today. Notions of work which still retain a hold upon our imaginations, but which have been weakened by neo-liberalism, include usefulness, craftsmanship, re-productive and caring labour, and solidarity.

In some cases, neo-liberalism has attempted to appropriate the content of these meanings and render them susceptible to economic exploitation; for example, re-productive work requires emotional labour, which underpins much service work and carework. Such attempts can generate further distortions: usefulness becomes superfluousness in the form of unemployment; craftsmanship becomes alienation as autonomy and self-formation are frustrated in the technical division of labour; affective labour becomes

RENEWAL Vol 18 No. 1/2 2010

commodified by the requirements to extract maximum value from the carer; and solidarity becomes the conscious attempt to use socialisation and the bonds between persons to promote management ideology for the purpose of increasing organisational profit.

The ideal of the 'good worker' becomes the measure of persons, demanding that individuals conform themselves to the requirements of market work, and the crowding out of mechanisms to value human action in the spheres of family, civil society or political engagement. To work, or to become a worker, generates a new necessity – that we work upon ourselves to develop the competences, characteristics, virtues and emotions that enable us to be maximally productive in market work. This may seem to have things the wrong way around.

At any rate, recognition in modern liberal democracies is tied to the production paradigm and to the employment relation; wages and patterns of compensation are determined according to a complex, structured system for the allocation of esteem which signals the place individuals occupy in the global economy. But recent struggles for recognition – by careworkers, domestic workers, mothers, the economically marginalised and others under-recognised – have brought to political expression values and ideals of wide appeal but which are obscured, nevertheless, by the economic market. Such struggles have the potential to bring to light less visible forms of activity which can then be re-valued to enable their practitioners to gain respect and esteem.

However, struggles for recognition may issue in unexpected outcomes. First, economic revaluation of socially valuable but denigrated work does not automatically entail its cultural revaluation (Fraser, 2000). For example, carework thrust into the public sphere may attract a wage, but the level of wages replicates the low social value attributed to reproductive labour in the private sphere, and the marketisation of carework makes complex dimensions of the activity such as emotional labour vulnerable to commodification.

Second, in the context of rapid change and economic insecurity, workers find it increasingly difficult to hold onto the stable sense of esteem-recognition required for secure personal identity, leading to an exhausting race for recognition complicated by a competitive structure where esteem is often available only to those judged to be the most successful practitioners of an activity (Petersen and Willig, 2004, 344).

Third, institutions as forms of structured relations – of which the organisation of labour is one – can generate negative forms of social recognition (Deranty and Renault, 2007, 100). For example: depreciative recognition when hierarchical relations in economic institutions are replicated in everyday life; misrecognition which over-identifies an individual with their social role, leading to invisibility if the individual is excluded from institutional membership; and unsatisfactory recognition when institutional rules and roles shape a personal identity at odds with an individual's self-conception. The institutional framework of labour and the market is the key condition for the interactions between individuals which produce and distribute recognition; it is institutions which 'enable individuals to maintain relations of recognition' (Deranty and Renault, 2007, 99). Therefore, if we are to pluralise the achievement principle for the purpose of extending recognition to all, we must give attention to the reframing of institutional rules and roles.

The prospects for the emergence of a pluralistic value framework in a world which is defined and structured by globalisation appear dim. The hollowing out of the achievement principle tracks the weakening of various historical meanings of work which nevertheless cast long shadows across both the constraints and hopes inherent within our ideas about

Editorial work, recognition, and the market

work; shadows which still shape our everyday attempts to find meaning in the work that we do. And the misrecognition involved in having one's own valued meanings of work ignored, misunderstood or rendered invisible is as severe a threat to one's sense of self as having one's productive or affective contributions and achievements de-valued or ignored.

Still, what appears to have staying power in the daily aspirations of many people is the urge to do good work which is expressive of what it means to live well and to contribute to the common good. At a minimum, this urge is enacted in forms of subversion, of play and of humour in the workplace: the factory worker who deliberately damages a uniform product in order to mark it as his or her own; the mother who resists the model of full-time employment; the artisan who adapts organisational rules in order to nurture a machine to produce well, or to coax a bureaucratic system to deliver good customer service; the care workers who protest at a job description process which renders their emotional labour invisible – all of these are human beings motivated by the search for esteem-recognition, but against different values from those ossified in our present economy of merit.

Such activities evoke work of yet another kind which has hardly received sufficient attention, despite the dramatic loss of trust in our democratic institutions: work which might be summed up in Hannah Arendt's phrase of 'care for the world' (Arendt, 1958), or for the fabricated world of structured institutions and practices which are essential to mediating intersubjective relations and which enable us to live a fully human life. It is fashionable to castigate our institutions for their failures and distortions, but well-functioning institutions are vital in important moral ways because they engender 'infrastructures of responsibility' (Williams, 2006, 214).

Good institutions provide the background to the value horizons which constitute intersubjective relations, and, as major sites of co-operative activity and belonging, are some of the most important ways that adults develop moral agency and form attachments which add to the purpose and meaning of their lives. To be deprived of institutional membership – even if one retains legal recognition and intimate relations – is to be in danger of an impoverished life, and this is one of the reasons why unemployment is so destructive. When we seek to have our productive and contributive activities recognised we are seeking to do so through our membership – or claims to membership – of institutions as structured relations. If our aim is social reform which redistributes the recognition which different forms of work receive, attending to this institutional nexus might be one good place to start.

Recognition and mis-recognition

The contributions which follow – some are polemical, others more reflective; some theoretical, others more driven by the data – all seek to evaluate and critique existing arrangements whereby work, of various kinds, is recognised or misrecognised, in various ways.

John O'Neill's article which opens the collection demonstrates, through a critical analysis of the history of liberal and socialist thought, that recognition has always been central to debates about defensibility of economic market. It is not just our problem today. Adam Smith, for example, held that one great advantage of commercial society was that it encouraged individuals to assert themselves as independent agents, and not to appeal to others' benevolence, thereby rendering themselves dependent. Similarly, Hegel saw the market as a sphere of mutual recognition where abstract individuals develop their personalities as property- and rights-holders.

RENEWAL Vol 18 No. 1/2 2010

But these writers were aware too that the market also bred pathologies of recognition, such as when those with few goods were practically socially invisible, when goods were desired for appearance rather than their real worth, and when they were desired insatiably and far more than necessary to live a good life (a cogent argument for which can be found in Aristotle). In our own world consumer goods are signals of social standing, which is both self-defeating and environmentally unsustainable. O'Neill quotes the English socialist R. H. Tawney, who held that equality in economic and social standing is a condition for respect and recognition of worth, a thought that echoes Hegel's notion of an associational life organised around economic corporations (an institution which Hegel put to rather different purposes than it holds for us today).

Catherine Hakim's article is both more current and more rigorously empirical. Drawing on the statistical data provided by recent time budget studies, Hakim challenges the assumption that has undergirded many recent struggles for recognition – that working women, especially mothers, experience the double burden of paid and unpaid labour, with an especially disproportionate share of childcare, eldercare and household work. Once all kinds of work are aggregated – paid employment, care work, voluntary work and household work (and bearing in mind that pre-school and school age children occupy only a proportion of a working woman's career) – men in fact engage in slightly more work.

It's worth pointing out, perhaps, that Hakim adopts a fairly economic approach to work, and the aggregate figures arguably need supplementing by more qualitative measures of the status of work, the extent to which it is fulfilling, and the opportunities it provides to experience autonomy and other human goods, as well as remuneration. Though sizeable minorities of women choose career-centred or child-centred lives, Hakim says, most women in developed countries seek to balance paid work with home and family life. This, she contends, demands greater recognition, financially (and through that symbolically). Her essay ends with a brief survey of the policy options available.

From a contrasting position, Diane Perrons considers the unjust recognition and valuation of paid care as against financial work, considering the intangible but no less potent ways that wages tend to be determined by social norms. Childcare, eldercare and to some degree nursing and teaching are labour intensive and, while they have limited potential for productivity increases measured in purely financial terms, they also have a significant affective dimension and help realise (what we might call) relationship goods that are a fundamental part of any decent human life. Carework also has significant positive externalities, for example, through helping socialise children into good citizens, and relieving family burdens.

The reasons carework is not recognised as more skilled, important and deserving of monetary reward are social, not fixed, and therefore, in principle at least, amenable to revision. Perrons ends her piece by discussing the subtle cultural boundaries, practices, norms and constraints that lead women disproportionately to 'choose' care work. Institutions including the family, schools, the segmented labour market and others arguably bear some collective responsibility for this dualism.

Examining the privileged group in Perrons' contrast, Jonathan Aldred considers the monetary 'over-recognition' of those employed in the financial services industry, especially in the light of the recent economic crisis. The contribution to economic welfare that finance workers may make does not justify the disproportionately high rewards they enjoy; because the skills, talents, and indeed social background they rely upon are more a happy accident and therefore not something for which they are responsible in any morally relevant

Editorial work, recognition, and the market

sense. Market contingencies of supply and demand (which may in any case not reflect people's real interests) plainly also have an enormous affect on wages, but these too are unrelated to any notion of contribution, at least if it is understood in relatively objective terms. The high salaries enjoyed by the holders of prestigious jobs, Aldred points out, may *seem* to be deserved because of the effort and burden involved in attaining them, but the low paid may well have greater burdens visited upon them, or possibly try harder. As Aldred says, 'inequality is bad enough, but giving market-generated inequalities [remunerative] *recognition* is worse'.

Rosie Cox's article takes a comparative perspective, drawing on studies she conducted in the UK and New Zealand which, along similar lines to Perrons, contrast the low status of housework – regarded as boring, repetitive, unimportant and endless – with another kind of domestic labour, home repairs and improvements, this time a largely male preserve. The male employees of a New Zealand franchise which offered these services regarded themselves as moderately skilled; they had learnt, by doing and observing something which was worth learning. Job satisfaction was quite high, work conditions good, and in contrast to female domestics, their skills were appreciated by clients. 'Women's work', by contrast, was more invisible, less recognised if not overlooked and presumed to take little time. In contrast to the world of DIY, women were expected inherently to know how to do it, and hence those bought in could be despised. Cox's article, like Hakim's, is an antidote to the generalisations adored by polemicists; its conclusions rest on careful, thorough investigation.

Danny Dorling's contribution starts from the fact that about 20 per cent of the population find it difficult to get by on their income in UK and survive to a large degree through borrowing and credit, the latter also being true of those who manage more comfortably. In a startling way he compares the position of the poor, who have few work choices and little rest or leisure, to the position of indentured labourers, those who have no choice over toil. These inequalities have in fact increased since 1973. Prejudice – or negative recognition – towards the 'indentured', helps to justify, in their own eyes, the position of the more fortunate who come to regard themselves as a class apart. And given that so many 'indentured' labourers work in the service industries meeting the wants of the better-off, this is in many ways true. Both men and women can find themselves in a vicious cycle where indigence, or the real fear of it, and a failure of recognition, serve to mutually reinforce each other.

Dimensions of social critique

This is undoubtedly one message of the collection as a whole. Though financial service workers and others can at times enjoy remuneration without much positive recognition, the two tend to go together. Those who are best rewarded also often enjoy recognition in other ways besides, and the reverse holds true too.

Having said that it is important, for both analytical and practical purposes, to keep apart the material aspects of work, including its remuneration, and the no less important symbolic plane of recognition. High status, highly paid work may still leave employees whose plans are redirected by ever more fluid, flexible, mobile labour markets with a distinct feeling that they are not recognised as human beings with distinct needs and interests. The institutions structuring work would be just in one way, but not in another. Justice in the distribution in income, especially if defined in meritocratic terms, could still subvert the social bonds necessary for society to generate due recognition for all.

RENEWAL Vol 18 No. 1/2 2010

Recognition, then, provides another dimension to social critique. Attempting to ensure that all citizen workers are accorded their due measure of recognition could bring us into conflict with justice in wealth and income, but it might not if those over- (or under-) recognised are systematically also those over- or under-remunerated. Perhaps there is only a contextual answer, not a general solution to that question. Whatever the case, we hope that this collection helps contribute to the debate about how work can and should be recognised in the twenty-first century market economy.

Jonathan Seglow is Senior Lecturer in Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research interests are in contemporary political theory, especially as applied to current social problems. He has co-edited three collections of articles on ethical aspects of altruism and his book, *Altruism*, co-authored with Niall Scott, was published by Open University Press in 2007. He is also Principal Investigator on an AHRC/ESRC funded project on 'Religion, Justice, and Well-Being: the normative foundations of public policy in a multi-faith society' (October 2007 to June 2009). **Ruth Yeoman** is writing a PhD, exploring how theories of justice and democracy apply to the concept of meaningful work.

Bibliography

- Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
- Brennan, G. and Pettit, P. (2004) *The Economy of Esteem*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Deranty, J-P. and Renault, E. (2007) 'Politicizing Honneth's Ethics of Recognition', *Thesis Eleven* 88: 92-111.
- Honneth, A. (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.
- Honneth, A. (1995) 'Work and Instrumental Action', in *The Fragmented World of the Social*, Albany, State University of New York Press.
- Lazzeri, C. and Caille, A. (2006) 'Recognition Today: The Theoretical, Ethical and Political Stakes of the Concept', *Critical Horizons* 7 (1).
- Petersen, A. and Willig, R. (2004) 'Work and Recognition: Reviewing New Forms of Pathological Developments', *Acta Sociologica* 47 (4).
- Williams, G. (2006) 'Infrastructures of Responsibility: the Moral Tasks of Institutions', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23 (2).