



*Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought*

# **WORK: MARXIST AND SYSTEMS-THEORETICAL APPROACHES**

Stefan Kühl



# Work: Marxist and Systems-Theoretical Approaches

Using Marxist and systems theory as guides, this book offers an entry point to the current debate on the role of economy in modern society, the change in work organizations and the effect of the economy on the individual. It explores the concepts of 'work society', 'industrial society' and 'capitalist society' to explain the conditions of society as a whole, and not just the conditions of businesses, making particular use of the category of 'work'. The first systematic theoretical comparison of Marxism and systems theory, it provides a brief overview of the central debates concerning work society and the controversies surrounding organizations in capitalism. As such, it will appeal to social scientists and social theorists with interests in the sociology of work, industry and organizations.

**Stefan Kühl** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld, Germany, and a senior consultant for Metaplan—a consulting firm based in Princeton, Versailles, Hamburg, Shanghai and Singapore. He is the author of *Organizations: A Systems Approach*; *When the Monkeys Run the Zoo: The Pitfalls of Flat Hierarchies*; *The Sudoku Effect: Universities in the Vicious Circle of Bureaucracy*; *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism*; *For the Betterment of the Race: The Rise and Fall of the International Movement for Eugenics and Racial Hygiene*; and *Ordinary Organizations: Why Normal Men Carried Out the Holocaust*.

## **Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought**

**137 Common Sense as a Paradigm of Thought**

An Analysis of Social Interaction

*Tim Delaney*

**138 The Intellectual Origins of Modernity**

*David Ohana*

**139 Political Fraternity**

Democracy beyond Freedom and Equality

*Angel Puyol*

**140 Nationalism, Inequality and England's Political Predicament**

*Charles Leddy-Owen*

**141 Politics through the Iliad and the Odyssey**

Hobbes writes Homer

*Andrea Catanzaro*

**142 Social Change in a Material World**

*Theodore R. Schatzki*

**143 Hubris and Progress**

A Future Born of Presumption

*Carlo Bordonni*

**144 Work: Marxist and Systems-Theoretical Approaches**

*Stefan Kühl*

For a full list of titles in this series, please visit [www.routledge.com/series/RSSPT](http://www.routledge.com/series/RSSPT)

# **Work: Marxist and Systems-Theoretical Approaches**

**Stefan Kühl**

First published in English 2019 by Routledge  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2019 Stefan Kühl

The right of Stefan Kühl to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Translated by Andrés Crump

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Published in German by Springer VS 2017

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Kühl, Stefan, author.

Title: Work : Marxist and systems-theoretical approaches / Stefan Kühl.

Other titles: Arbeit-Marxistische und systemtheoretische Zugänge. English

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. |

Series: Routledge studies in social and political thought ; 144 |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019005583 (print) | LCCN 2019006985 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780429032097 (ebk) | ISBN 9780429629143 (web pdf) |

ISBN 9780429627507 (epub) | ISBN 9780429625862 (mobi/kindle) |

ISBN 9780367144494 (hbk)

Subjects: LCSH: Labor—Philosophy. | Social sciences—Philosophy. |

Economics—Sociological aspects. | Industrial sociology. | System

theory. | Marxian school of sociology.

Classification: LCC HD4904 (ebook) |

LCC HD4904 .K75713 2019 (print) | DDC 331.01—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019005583>

ISBN: 978-0-367-14449-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-03209-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by codeMantra

**Translation from the German language edition: Work by Stefan  
Kühl Copyright © Springer VS 2017. Springer VS is part of  
Springer Science + Business Media. All Rights Reserved.**



# Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Work—theoretical perspectives</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Primacy of economy vs. functional differentiation: the debate on the form of modern society</b>	<b>9</b>
	2.1 <i>The basic Marxian idea: from capitalist economy to capitalist society</i>	10
	2.2 <i>The societal theory debate: from Pre-Fordism to Fordism to Post-Fordism</i>	17
	2.3 <i>The systems-theoretical approach of functional differentiation: capitalist economy instead of capitalist society</i>	26
<b>3</b>	<b>Business vs. organization: subsuming the company to the logic of profit maximization or stressing the self-logic of the organization</b>	<b>35</b>
	3.1 <i>Marx's basic notion: the increase of absolute and relative surplus value</i>	36
	3.2 <i>The debate: Taylorist vs. Holistic forms of work</i>	41
	3.3 <i>The approach of systems theory: the inherent rationale of the organization</i>	53
<b>4</b>	<b>Worker consciousness vs. worker essence as a role: class as a binding link between society and the individual</b>	<b>70</b>
	4.1 <i>The Marxian rationale: the imprint of work and the class concept</i>	71
	4.2 <i>The debate: formation and differentiation of class consciousness</i>	77
	4.3 <i>The approach of a theory of functional differentiation: roles</i>	87
<b>5</b>	<b>In favor of a renaissance of grand theories</b>	<b>96</b>
	<i>References</i>	101
	<i>Index</i>	115





# Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# 1 Work—theoretical perspectives

Work is an enigmatic term. Intuitively, one supposes what it means. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent just how difficult it is to determine what can and can't be defined as work (see already, e.g., Cummings/Srivastva 1977; Ransome 1996). It might be uncontroversial to say that a person 'works' when they are remunerated for their activities at a factory, a retirement home or an association. But what if their activities are not remunerated at all? Of course, one wouldn't say that an entrepreneur managing their own company is not 'working'; but what if they have someone else manage the company, and the entrepreneur retreats to the position of chairman of the supervisory board? When a paid tutor at a university teaches the intricacies of variance analysis to their fellow students, one would presume that they are 'working'; but what if they're performing this service as an act of friendship?

One could simplify things and refer to all human activities as work (regarding the difficulty thereof, see, e.g., Applebaum 1992; Karlsson 2004; Budd 2011). For instance, adults who wrap their kids in diapers, take them to kindergarten or read to them at bedtime would be performing 'child-rearing work'; cleaning up, grocery shopping and cooking would obviously also count as 'housework'. The same would go for someone who is politically or artistically active, or someone who is committed to volunteer work; according to this broad definition, they would also be 'working'. Someone in conversation with their partner would be performing 'relationship work', and if feelings are involved, one could speak of additional 'emotional work' taking place. Furthermore, one who tries to come to terms with a breakup after failed 'relationship work' would be performing 'mourning work', just as one who is processing this long after the separation would be performing 'remembrance work'. Whatever we do, we would be performing work—as long as we are able to make these activities appear as work to ourselves and others (see Liessmann 2000: 86f).

Or one could exclusively attempt to define as work the activities which are understood as a burden. The 'burdensome character' of work (Marcuse 1973) would be understood as a feature—if not a central feature—of work. For example, digging in the beds of your allotment garden in your spare

## 2 *Work—theoretical perspectives*

time would be considered to be a leisurely activity, but if you're doing this to ensure your survival as a subsistence farmer, then it would be considered as work. Likewise, if you play with your children, or with those of friends or family, just for fun, this would be seen as a leisurely activity; do this as a kindergarten teacher's or day-care worker's burdensome task, it would be seen as work. Ultimately, our relationship to an activity would determine whether it was work or not.

However, the question is still: How exactly can we clarify to ourselves and others that we are working and not simply pursuing pleasure? All attempts to recognize household activities—such as raising children, taking care of family members or preparing meals—as paid work have been unsuccessful. Financial remuneration continues to be the decisive criterion to define something as work (see Waring 1999). Payment signalizes that an activity is of value to someone; in this way, it is possible to negotiate labor power in the same way as commodities and capital.

The possibility and—even more importantly—the necessity to offer and sell one's own labor power in the labor markets formed itself comprehensively with the emergence of the capitalist economic system (see Polanyi 1977: p. 94). In the transitional period from a feudal society to a capitalist society, there were still various groups for which the provision of remunerated activities in the labor market did not play a central role. Small farmers, homeworkers and artisans who lived on the countryside had various sources that contributed to their livelihood. Indeed, they sold their products and services, but to a considerable extent, they lived from the products that they themselves farmed and manufactured. Similarly, the artisans and wagedworkers that lived in the cities would lease a small piece of land and grow food for their own needs in order to maintain partial independence. The small garden allotments that can still be found in many cities today are remnants of these economic survival strategies (see Crouch/Ward 1997; Willes 2014). House personnel, servants and unmarried artisan journeymen generally had no access to such a piece of land. However, as they were integrated in the household of their employers, remunerated work was not of central significance to them either. The most important foundations for their existence were 'room and board', which they obtained 'for free' from their employers. Remuneration in form of money played a tangential role (see Kocka 1983: p. 40, 1990: p. 109). Vestiges of this originally once widely spread form of work can be found in the case of *au pairs*, who work for a limited time and are integrated in the household of a family for low remuneration (see Búriková/Miller 2010).

It wasn't until the establishment of wage labor that work became a commodity quantifiable by money. It became possible to compare under monetary considerations the activities of a soldier with that of a weaver or an agricultural worker. In businesses, it became possible to calculate the cost of labor powers similarly to that of raw material and capitals, and these various cost factors could be correlated as a result. It was possible to calculate

whether it was more affordable to execute a task by introducing new automatized production methods or with the extensive application of labor powers. And, quite central—from the moment that work services became quantifiable with dollars, marks or francs—they became negotiable in the markets, similarly to products or capital (for the observational function of markets, see Luhmann 1988a: p. 95).

The last century is characterized by the efforts to have more and more activities recognized as paid labor. The women's movement in particular stood for the valuing of household, child-rearing and caretaking work through monetary remuneration (seminally, see Oakley 1985, 1990). Conservative circles embraced this idea within a certain scope by demanding that women be paid a so-called 'stove premium' if, instead of handing over their children to a day care center, they raised them at home. There were also further considerations to value volunteer, citizen and individual work by remunerating it in some way (see Bungum/Kvande 2013). And the kinds of payment that were considered were not only monetary, but in the form of tax benefits, access to college placement or state services as well (see Beck 1999; Georgeou 2012).

Ultimately, this struggle for recognition by being monetarily valued has resulted in increasingly more activities being subjected to commodification. Commodification, according to the definition of the social sciences, is when more things are valued monetarily and therefore become tradable in the market. Just as works of art (Velthuis 2005), the adoption of children (Zelizer 1985), human sperm and egg cells (Almeling 2007), organs (Healy 2006), educational services (Kühl 2014) or environmental damage (Fourcade 2011) are labeled with price tags, the value of more and more human activities would also be increasingly calculated in dollars, euros or yens (Budd 2011: 43ff.).

It is uncontroversial that the rise of paid work and the correlated emergence of labor markets represent a central feature of modern economy (see Castel 1995). However, one of the core questions of social sciences is how decisive this process of offering and selling of labor power on the market is—not only for the economy but also for modern society as a whole.

### **The explanation of society over the key category of work**

Underneath contemporary sociological analyses—such as those of work society, industrial society, service society or capitalist society—hides the thought that work is the central category needed to explain modern society. With the acknowledgment of such time diagnoses, the idea of using the key category of work to describe not only the relations in companies, administrations or hospitals, but also those in society as a whole became dominant (cf. Offe 1985: 129ff.). This is correlated with the fact that the emergence of sociology as a scientific school of thought coincided with the height of industrialization and the formation of capitalism (cf. Dahrendorf 1962: 7ff.).

#### 4 *Work—theoretical perspectives*

In this way, the sociologist Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon—active in the late 18th and early 19th centuries—compared the French society with a large factory in “Du système industriel” (1964), one of the very first sociological monographs. His concept of *enterprise industriel* does not only describe a business; it describes society as well. Herbert Spencer, the evolutionary theorist who lived in the 19th century (1969), described the development from a military to an industrial society in which the businesslike exchange of services would become a commonplace dominant social relationship.

Sociologists had a clear theoretical preference for Marxism for a long time—after all, there is scarcely another theory that bestows work with such significance in the explanation of society. Work, as Friedrich Engels put it (1962: p. 444), is “the primary basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labour created man himself”. At the latest after the upheavals in the universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the majority of sociologists interested in work looked to Marx’s theory of history and society. All paths seemed to lead to Marx, who’d offered a “comprehensive theoretical interpretation at the highest intellectual level of all, which one wanted to research” (Bahrdt 1982: p. 14; see also Strangleman 2016: p. 22). Regarding the key category of ‘work’, the sociologists that looked to Marx had convincing connections to the sociological theory of society, to the theory of business and to theories on the individual. Specifically, as class relation with Marx reflected the relation between capital and work, it was possible to more or less tie with the same theory the entire spectrum of societal relations, the tensions in businesses and the behavior of individuals using the concept of ‘classes’.

However, since the 1990s at least, Marxism seemed to lose ground as a central point of reference for large sections of social science. Whether this quiet retreat from Marx was owed to the general “theory-fatigue” of old sociology warriors, a dissatisfaction with aspects of Marx’s theory or political sobriety in the face of the failure of state socialism, the increasing abstinence of societal theory in large sections of work and industrial sociology, of work science and of economic science, was undeniable. Fundamental papers on the development of capitalist economy seldom serve as exceptions at the moment. New rationalization strategies in companies are described without categorizing profit maximization strategies within the frame of a basic Marxist interpretation. Research on work ethic is hardly ever linked to the once popular research into class consciousness anymore.

The Marxist roots of social scientists who were interested in work reached so deep that most of them dared approach other fundamentally differently structured concepts of societal theory only to a limited extent. Predominantly, the trend seems to be to either use as basis medium-range theories such as micropolitics, principal-agent theory or new institutionalism, or to completely refrain from any theoretical approach. Most sociological analyses are characterized by a conspicuous theoretical modesty. If at all, the theories that are used have an aspiration for explanations which are limited