

# The **BRAVE NEW WORLD** *of Work*



ULRICH BECK

# 1

## **The Brazilianization of the West**

### **Two Scenarios, One Introduction**

The unintended consequence of the neoliberal free-market utopia is a Brazilianization of the West. For trends already visible in world society – high unemployment in the countries of Europe, the so-called jobs miracle in the United States, the transition from a work society to a knowledge society – do not involve a change only in the content of work. Equally remarkable is the new similarity in how paid work itself is shaping up in the so-called first world and the so-called third world; the spread of temporary and insecure employment, discontinuity and loose informality into Western societies that have hitherto been the bastions of full employment. The social structure in the heartlands of the West is thus coming to resemble the patchwork quilt of the South, characterized by diversity, unclarity and insecurity in people's work and life.

#### **The political economy of insecurity**

In a semi-industrialized country such as Brazil, those who depend upon a wage or salary in full-time work represent only a minority of the economically active population; the majority earn their living in more precarious conditions. People are travelling vendors, small retailers or craftworkers, offer all kinds of personal service, or shuttle back and forth between different fields of activity, forms



## The Brazilianization of the West

of employment and training. As new developments show in the so-called highly developed economies, this nomadic 'multi-activity' – until now mainly a feature of female labour in the West – is not a premodern relic but a rapidly spreading variant in the late work-societies, where attractive, highly skilled and well-paid full-time employment is on its way out.

Trends in Germany may stand here for those in other Western societies. In the 1960s only a tenth of employees belonged to this precarious group; by the 1970s the figure had risen to a quarter, and in the late 1990s it is a third. If change continues at this speed – and there is much to suggest that it will – in another ten years only a half of employees will hold a full-time job for a long period of their lives, and the other half will, so to speak, work *à la brésilienne*.

Here we can see the outlines of what a political economy of insecurity, or a political economy of world risk society, needs to analyse and theorize in greater detail.

1 In the political economy of insecurity, the new power game and the new power differential are acted out between territorially fixed political players (governments, parliaments, trade unions) and non-territorially fixed economic players (capital, finance and commerce).

2 This creates a well-founded impression that the room for manoeuvre of individual states is limited to the following dilemma: either pay with higher unemployment for levels of poverty that do no more than steadily increase (as in most European countries), or accept spectacular poverty in exchange for a little less unemployment (as in the United States).

3 This is bound up with the fact that the work society is coming to an end, as more and more people are ousted by smart technologies. 'To our counterparts at the end of the 21st century today's struggles over jobs will seem like a fight over deckchairs on the *Titanic*.'<sup>1</sup> The 'job for life' has disappeared. Thus, rising unemployment can no longer be explained in terms of cyclical economic crises; it is due rather to the successes of technologically advanced capitalism. The old arsenal of economic policies cannot deliver results, and all paid work is subject to the threat of replacement.

4 The political economy of insecurity therefore has to deal with a domino effect. Those factors which in good times used to complement and reinforce one another – full employment, guaran-

## The Brazilianization of the West

teed pensions, high tax revenue, leeway in public policy – are now facing knock-on dangers. Paid employment is becoming precarious; the foundations of the social-welfare state are collapsing; normal life-stories are breaking up into fragments; old age poverty is programmed in advance; and the growing demands on welfare protection cannot be met from the empty coffers of local authorities.

5 'Labour market flexibility' has become a political mantra. The orthodox defensive strategies, then, are themselves thrown onto the defensive. Calls are made everywhere for greater 'flexibility' – or, in other words, that employers should be able to fire employees with less difficulty. Flexibility also means a redistribution of risks away from the state and the economy towards the individual. The jobs on offer become short-term and easily terminable (i.e. 'renewable'). And finally, flexibility means: 'Cheer up, your skills and knowledge are obsolete, and no one can say what you must learn in order to be needed in the future.'

The upshot is that the more work relations are 'deregulated' and 'flexibilized', the faster work society changes into a risk society incalculable both in terms of individual lives and at the level of the state and politics, and the more important it becomes to grasp the political economy of risk in its contradictory consequences for economics, politics and society.<sup>2</sup> Anyway, one future trend is clear. For a majority of people, even in the apparently prosperous middle layers, their basic existence and lifeworld will be marked by endemic insecurity. More and more individuals are encouraged to perform as a 'Me & Co.', selling themselves on the marketplace.

The picture of society thus changes dramatically under the influence of a political economy of insecurity. Extremes of clarity appear in small zones at the very top as well as the very bottom, so low down that it is no longer really a bottom but an outside. But in between, ambivalence is the rule in a welter of jumbled forms. More and more people today live, so to speak, between the categories of poor and rich.

It is quite possible, however, to define or reconstruct these inter-categorical existences within a 'social structure of ambivalence'. To this extent, we may therefore speak of a clear-cut ambivalence. In contrast to class society, divided between proletariat and bourgeoisie, the political economy of ambivalence produces not a



## The Brazilianization of the West

Neither-Nor but a Both-And culture. This means, first of all, that top and bottom are no longer clearly defined poles, but overlap and fuse in new ways into a kind of wealth-aspect/poverty-aspect or into fixed-term wealth with its corresponding forms of existence. Consequently, insecurity prevails in nearly all positions within society. In accordance with relative weight in knowledge and capital, this leads to splits in societies and perhaps even to the collective decline of whole groups of countries. At first this may be symbolically covered over – discursively ‘sweetened’, as it were – by the rhetoric of ‘independent entrepreneurial individualism’. But it cannot be concealed for long that the bases of the much-praised welfare state and a lively everyday democracy, together with the whole self-image of a worker-citizen society based on ‘institutionalized class compromise’, are falling apart.<sup>3</sup>

The euro currency experiment is thus beginning at a time when, with the irrevocable loss of full employment in the classical sense, Europe’s postwar project and its understanding of itself are in a state of suspense. As global capitalism, in the countries of the West, dissolves the core values of the work society, a historical bond is broken between capitalism, welfare state and democracy. Let there be no mistake. A property-owning capitalism that aims at nothing other than profit, excluding from consideration employees, welfare state and democracy, is a capitalism that surrenders its own legitimacy. The neoliberal utopia is a kind of democratic illiteracy. For the market is not its own justification; it is an economic form viable only in interplay with material security, social rights and democracy, and hence with the democratic state. To gamble everything on the free market is to destroy, along with democracy, that whole economic mode. The turmoil on the international finance markets of Asia, Russia and South America in the autumn of 1998 gives only a foretaste of what lies down that road.

No one today questions capitalism. Who indeed would risk doing so? The only powerful opponent of capitalism is profit-only capitalism itself. Bad news on the labour market counts as a victory report on Wall Street, the simple calculation being that profits rise when labour costs fall.

What robs technologically advanced capitalism of its legitimacy is not that it tears down national barriers and produces ever more with ever less labour, but rather that it blocks political initiatives towards a new European social model and social contract. Anyone

## The Brazilianization of the West

today who thinks about unemployment should not remain trapped in old disputes about the 'second labour market', 'falling wage costs' or 'affirmative action'. The question that needs to be asked is how democracy will be possible after the full-employment society. What appears as a final collapse must instead be converted into a founding period for new ideas and models, a period that will open the way to the state, economy and society of the twenty-first century.

### **The right to breaks in lifetime economic activity**

The 'pessimistic optimist' André Gorz argues that if no recipes are useful any more, the only option is to recognize the 'crisis' and to make it the basis of a new normality. 'We are leaving behind the work society, without seeking the outlines of a new society,' writes Gorz. And in the poverty of the present, he detects the outlines of an alternative way forward for society, which matches up anew security and liberty for all. 'We know, feel and grasp that we are all potentially unemployed or underemployed, part-time or makeshift workers without any real job security. But what each of us knows individually has not yet become an awareness of our new common reality.' Only after the oath of manifestation – which reads: 'The free market utopia is not the solution but a major cause of the problem, and even new turbo-growth will not revive the good old full-employment society' – is it possible to delineate a new social model and the paths towards it. André Gorz sketches out a change of perspective whereby lack of work becomes an abundance of time, and low growth an impetus to become self-active.<sup>4</sup>

I propose to go one crucial step further. The antithesis to the work society is a strengthening of the political society of individuals, of active civil society here and now, of a civil democracy in Europe that is at once local and transnational. This society of active citizens, which is no longer fixed within the container of the national state and whose activities are organized both locally and across frontiers, can find and develop answers to the challenges of the second modernity – namely, individualization, globalization, falling employment and ecological crisis. For in this way communal democracy



## The Brazilianization of the West

and identity are given new life in projects such as ecological initiatives, Agenda 21, work with homeless people, local theatres, cultural centres and meeting-places for discussion.

In place of a society fixated on paid work, this vision offers the prospect of gradually gaining sovereignty over time and experiencing political freedom within self-organized activity networks. Nevertheless, it raises a number of thorny questions, which will be addressed later, in Chapters 8 and 9. To name but two: How can spontaneity be organized? Is all this not just an ideology which frees the state, especially the welfare state, from the responsibilities of public provision?

Civil society and direct democracy presuppose that citizens are able to find the energy for active involvement. But does this not exclude those who cannot participate in social and political life because they are under intense economic pressure or actually on the brink of ruin? Does the idea of a citizens' democracy not derive from a middle-class idyll? And will it not be actually counter-productive, by creating a cheap-wage sector that thins down regular paid labour?

Furthermore this vision of the future, which is opposed to false hopes in a return of full employment, must not lead either to a new class division between paid workers and civil workers or to the eviction of women from paid labour or the worsening of their dual burden of paid work and domestic labour. The animation of local democracy is thus bound up with the following assumptions about the division of labour in 'multi-active' society.

- 1 Working hours should be reduced for everyone in full-time work.
- 2 Every woman and every man should have one foot in paid employment if they so wish.
- 3 Parental labour and work with children should have the same social recognition as *civil labour* (a concept explained in detail in Chapters 8 and 9) in the arts, culture and politics – for example, through equality of entitlement to pensions and sickness benefits.
- 4 Simultaneous involvement in paid labour and civil labour presupposes a redistribution of family tasks between men and women. But it must be ensured that the prospect of choice is not once again illusory. In modern work society, the idea of taking years out and only later returning to work is fraught

## The Brazilianization of the West

with risks. Many women would like to take a break, but do not do so because they fear ending up in the 'part-time ghetto of the moving track' (Suzanne Franks).

Basically, this raises the question of how a postnational yet political civil society is possible in Europe. My answer is as follows. Only if the insecure new forms of paid employment are converted into a right to multiple work, a right to discontinuity, a right to choose working hours, a right to sovereignty over working time enshrined in collective-bargaining agreements – only then can new free spaces be secured in the coordination of work, life and political activity. Every person would thus be enabled to plan his or her own life over a period of one or more years, in its transitions between family, paid employment, leisure and political involvement, and to harmonize this with the claims and demands of others. Only then can the three principles of freedom, security and responsibility be adjusted and reaffirmed. To find a creative balance between paid work and 'the rest' (!) of life is already today the main cultural and political project – in the United States, in Europe, in Japan and elsewhere.

Nostalgia for the age of full employment is the last bastion that is being defended tooth and nail, in an effort to prevent the truly major issues of the second modernity from bursting into the open. How can the limits of growth be converted into tolerable forms of life and work? How are we to achieve a political Europe, with its own constitution and civil society, which makes it possible to flesh out the European idea of democracy for the global age? What answers beyond protectionism and indifference will countries find to migratory movements of the poor into the wealthier regions of the world? How will living and loving be possible after the gender revolution? What is the meaning of global justice? Or, more modestly: how will this become a vital issue of transnational political debate? These challenges appear too great, too intimidating. Yet in so far as the loss of work as the centre holding things together places society and democracy in danger, these questions may precisely come to form the new centre for a cosmopolitan society at once local and transnational.

Let us put this in a different way. The antithesis to the work society is not free time or a leisure society, which remain negatively imprisoned in the value imperialism of work. It is the new self-active,



## The Brazilianization of the West

self-aware, political civil society – the ‘do it yourself culture’ – which is developing, testing and implementing a dense new concept of the political.

### A method with risks

Marcel Proust was right: the true voyage of discovery is not to visit new countries but to see reality with new eyes. For social scientists, of course, there is the methodological problem of which data and arguments could ever inform a future-oriented study that breaks with the basic assumptions of the work society. This question may be answered with another. How can the present state of the fragmented and globalized work societies be properly analysed and understood *without* scenarios of possible futures?

Conventional analyses of the work society, which never raise the question of alternative futures, nevertheless imply that the biographical, social and political norms of the work society will continue indefinitely into the future. In general, there is a tacit assumption that the past and present model will also be the future model – namely, the full-employment society, with its guiding ideas, institutions, economic and political organizations, and cultural identities. When it comes to specifics, then, investigations of late work societies here rest, strictly speaking, upon an unexpressed More-of-the-Same dogma that fails to confront alternative scenarios either empirically, theoretically or politically.

This approach has long ceased to correspond to the fact that all the social sciences, including economics, are faced with the same questions and difficulties. For it is as problematic to infer the future from current trends and data as it is to read it from the tea leaves. One special source of difficulties is the fact that, given the fundamental changes in the work society, we need conceptual frameworks to identify new realities in their specificity, rather than as anomalies to be swept under the carpet of normality. This book represents one attempt to do this – which is why it belongs to the category of ‘visionary non-fiction’.<sup>5</sup> The argument is *non-fiction* because, in describing both the present and the future state of things, it has recourse to all imaginable and available arguments, data, concepts and models. It is *visionary* because,

## The Brazilianization of the West

in opposition to the unexpressed self-perpetuation of the work society, it presents the embryonic vision of a post-work society whose basic features and traces can already be glimpsed today, in a new translocal and transnational sense of political civil society. The reader will be able to decide at the end whether this vision is plausible, eccentric, fantastic or realistic – or perhaps even all together.<sup>6</sup>