

## Transforming “Work”: From Capability Approaches to Ulrich Beck’s Civil Labor

*Roberta Rehner Iversen, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*

### 1 The Situation and The Problem(s)

The central idea in the paper I presented at the *Ambivalences of the Rising Welfare Service State* conference (May 28-20, 2018) is the following: the overemphasis on labor market jobs in the United States (U.S.) and other countries hurts workers, hurts communities, and hurts the broader democratic society. Accordingly, ideas about what “work” is need to be transformed beyond jobs in the labor market.

Specifically, my argument about the harms from sole emphasis on labor market jobs draws from Amartya Sen’s (1992; 1999) and Martha Nussbaum’s (2003) capability approaches and from Kathi Weeks’ (2011) thoughts about “postwork society.” As such, I argue that one possible way to reduce this overemphasis is to put into practice an expanded version of Ulrich Beck’s (2000) notion of “civil labor.” My “expansion” addresses the need for compensation, primarily monetary but also through various forms of exchange. Compensated civil labor would enable men and women to enact their “work” interests and capabilities more effectively and humanely than is possible now in the context of hegemonic and often-alienating labor market structures and paternalistic welfare service state regimes.

### Overemphasis on labor market jobs hurts workers

To illustrate how the overemphasis on labor market jobs hurts workers, I use two brief narrative excerpts from my five-year ethnographic research project among workers across America (Iversen and Armstrong 2006). These narratives, and hundreds of others like them from my 30 years of qualitative and ethnographic research, set the stage for my developing views about transforming “work.”

First: Teresa (a pseudonym) is a 43-year-old African American mother from Seattle, Washington who works full time as a utility person at a rental car company. Twelve weeks of workforce training prepared Teresa for her auto sector job and she is highly appreciated at her company. She earns a minimally-adequate wage, but her passion is food catering, which she does as a volunteer for organizations in her community – when she has the time. Catering is what she calls her “heart-string,” meaning activity that she loves to do and that also makes her feel useful to others. Teresa would love to be able to do more catering and many people and organizations in her community would like that too. But catering such as Teresa’s is now primarily viewed as voluntary contribution to a civic organization with, at most, minimal monetary reimbursement. Thus, without her catering being compensated as civil labor, which would enable her to conduct labor market “work” half time *and* catering “work” half time, Teresa’s civic contribution remains constrained.

Second: Wendy (a pseudonym) is a 33-year-old Latina-American mother who had held a ten-year career as a pharmacy assistant for an independent pharmacy business until the pharmacy

closed. She was grateful for the closure, as the business owner was verbally abusive to his employees. Thinking that another career direction might be more fruitful, Wendy then enrolled in a six-week customer service training program, after which she worked as a customer representative for two medical insurance and billing companies. Wendy’s first customer service job required a 90-minute commute each way, with irregular transportation, which left her too far from her middle-school-aged child with special needs, whose teachers frequently summoned her to the son’s school during the day. Wendy next took a closer customer representative job, which eased her commute but was extremely stressful because of its Taylorist management practices, such as supervisors listening in to her calls and irrational expectations about number of calls per day. Wendy’s wage in both customer service positions was above poverty, but it was not sufficient. After an earlier stress-related health problem recurred, Wendy concluded that customer service was not a good career direction for her after all. Wendy’s “heart-string” was to be a counselor for adolescent girls, which she enacted informally at a local community center. She loved that work and the adolescents reported benefiting greatly from Wendy’s experiences and her natural counseling ability. However, because she had two children at home and a husband whose construction work was irregular, returning to school for a social work degree to be an “official” counselor was out of the question. In contrast, if Wendy’s counseling were rewarded as civil labor, Wendy and the community’s girls would both benefit.

During decades of interviewing working men and women across America, I heard story after story like Teresa’s and Wendy’s from men and women alike. These stories became even more frequent during the 2000s, especially during and after the Great Recession. Many men and women had skills and energies to work at their “heart-strings,” but could not do so because the only way for them to earn sufficient income was through a full-time job in the labor market. Even with that, many full-time jobs did not yield a family-sufficient wage; nor were many of the labor market jobs experienced as personally valuable or meaningful, which is the opposite of “work” enacted according to capability principles.

Teresa’s and Wendy’s employment and wage situations in their respective labor market jobs are replicated daily by millions of workers in the U.S., Germany, and other countries. In response, as conference presentations eloquently noted, welfare regimes in Europe, the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere are increasing their practices of retrenchment, philosophies of individualization, budgetary downsizing, and devolution of responsibility from the state to local governments, in addition to devolution of considerable responsibility to the people in need. As a result, poverty has increased in many locations, unemployment is much higher than official metrics indicate, and millions of people are suffering rather than flourishing.

At the same time, labor markets in Europe and the U.S. have also faced decades of wage stagnation and shifts from manufacturing industries to service industries. Too many in the working population believe that immigrants and people of color are ‘taking our jobs,’ which has resulted in populist and exclusionary solutions. For example, the goal of returning to the post-World War II reality of full employment is a solution posed by some in Germany. Moving from universal support during hard economic or personal times to the selective provision of “people-changing” services is another current solution in Germany – a solution that has resulted in harm for many former and would-be workers in the U.S. Similarly, the growing expectation that all social safety net supports should require recipients to work is a solution posed by some in the U.S. Many researchers, including myself, find that people-

changing and work-requirement goals are not realistic, achievable, or even desirable from either economic or human perspectives.

Further hurting workers, the employment reality in the U.S. is substantially different from populist rhetoric. In the first place, there are not enough jobs for millions of people who want to work, but are not even counted in the official definition of “unemployment.” One reason for vast numbers of unemployed persons is that even now, ten years after the Great Recession “officially” ended, fewer businesses are hiring new workers. Productivity in some fields has increased, but the increase has come on the backs of the firms’ existing workers. For example, many firms now expect or demand that employees work overtime instead of investing in new hires. This practice is described by employers as “flexibility,” but it is most often experienced by workers as “insecurity.”

In addition to there not being enough jobs, too many jobs in the U.S. today are short-term rather than long-term. These jobs are also lower-paying, tenuous positions in retail service, customer service, food service, and health services, rather than “jobs for life” in manufacturing, construction, or even in many professional positions that were prevalent in post-war U.S. The lack of job security became glaringly evident in labor market jobs during the long-lasting Great Recession, and will continue into the future given the frequency of recessions in the U.S. and today’s labor market employer practices. Precarity, to use Arne Kalleberg’s (2011) term, now eclipses security.

### **Overemphasis on labor market jobs hurts communities and democratic societies**

The above-noted harms to workers also extend to communities and beyond. Reduction in construction jobs, for example, has negatively impacted the national infrastructure in the U.S. The country recently received a grade of “D” because of too many dangerous road conditions, crumbling bridges, derailed trains, inadequate airport runways, and disintegrating water and sewer pipes. The insufficient labor market also means that civic and political organizations do not have enough people to help them, which weakens vital aspects of a democracy such as voting and political representation, enabling older persons to remain in their homes, and ensuring quality education for children. Finally, the country’s sole reliance on labor market work is also reflected in the continuing shift from entitlement-based financial supports to work-oriented welfare regimes. Infrastructure suffering, then, compounds personal suffering when the labor market is the sole source of compensated work. What can be done about these intersecting constraints to flourishing among persons and communities? I argue that we need to consider a widespread transformation of what we think of as “work” and of how such “work” is compensated.

## **2 Transforming “work”**

Today is a new age in work and welfare. It is an age with new needs that cannot be fulfilled by past solutions, as described earlier. In other words, both welfare and work need transformation. While others in the *Ambivalences of the Rising Welfare Service State* conference identified the need for new types of welfare thinking and support and new forms for welfare regimes, I pose ideas about the need to transform what we think of as work. My ideas about transformation, and those suggested by conference participants, will ultimately be refined to form the final chapter(s) of a book I am currently writing.

Two theoretical frames form a platform for the notion of transforming work. First, I draw on the spirit of Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approaches to human and societal well-being. Several authors in Otto and Ziegler’s (2014) book describe capability

ideas as “what counts as wellbeing is the freedom of persons to lead the kind of lives they value...and have reason to value” (Lehwess-Litzmann 2014, p. 30): in other words, the capability to engage in flourishing and contributory lives. A capability perspective also means that both the person and the society as a whole have voice in what is considered to be personally valuable and socially valued. In the U.S. today, only labor market work is socially valued, and then only if it provides a truly sufficient income, which is the case for only a very small portion of workers. Second, capability ideas lead very naturally to Ulrich Beck’s (2000) thoughts about civil labor and civic money, and then further to my thoughts about transforming work.

I want to be clear from the beginning, however, that what I say about transforming work is absolutely NOT the same thing as active welfare policies and practices, workfare, work first policies, or most workforce development ideas. These so-called “solutions” to employment and income challenges tend to be authoritarian, insufficient, and often exclusionary. For Beck, civil labor is expected to generally exist alongside labor market work. Transforming work does not mean forming a “leisure” society or overthrowing capitalism. There’s plenty of “work” to go around if compensated civil labor augments labor market work.

From the perspective of maximizing capabilities, people can form their “working” lives in various ways. They can enact labor market work and civil labor simultaneously (as one full-time activity), feeling secure in the knowledge that they will be compensated for both. Alternatively, they can do labor market work full time for a while, and then switch to full-time civil labor. In all choices they can feel they have contributed to themselves, their families, their communities, and often their world in the process. Income security movements, such as adequate minimum wages, and universal, or at least mobile, health insurance are optimal in order to fully foster civil labor, but even without these enlightened policies, examples of civil labor have already been reported.

### **3 Civil Labor Funding Ideas and Examples: A Beginning**

So how could civil labor be funded? A partial way to fund civil labor is to adjust fiscal policy, such as federal, state and local tax credits and tax practices, so that women and men who engage in market labor and/or civil labor can be compensated adequately. Because civil labor would be rewarded with civic money, it would also be socially recognized and valued. Moving toward civil labor and vastly-broadened ideas about what “work” is would probably be located primarily at the community or regional level where coalitions could herald and learn from the successes that actually exist now. Unions and other civic organizations could easily attach to these successes. A major transformation in what counts as “work” will be appreciated by increasing numbers of people in the younger generations who have many types of “work” they would like to do and that would contribute. This is reportedly already happening on a small scale in parts of Germany (Beck 2000, p. 81).

At the same time, it is essential to critically analyze the potential for unintended negative consequences of reforms such as the Berlin Mayor’s proposal for a “solidarity-based basic income” (The Local 2018), which the Mayor maintains “is not the same as universal basic income, as people would have to work to benefit from it” (p.1). For example, although the Mayor’s proposal emphasizes “volition,” its governmental top-down approach contrasts with civil labor’s local community-generated approach. Related, one strand of the Universal Basic Income (UBI) movement in Germany is considering cryptocurrency, called “Circles,” as a possible mechanism to implement universal basic income (McFarland 2017), although implementation remains experimental. Similar cautions hold for the Universal Basic Income

(UBI) movement in the U.S., even though the ideals of such movements are related to capability concepts such as emancipation and self-determination (Tönshoff, Brandherm, and Philipps 2017).

Aside from the basic income debate, one example of a fiscal exchange idea that has already been implemented in Philadelphia (USA) involves space for artists. Because artists often cannot afford the space they need to conduct their work, a local foundation offered free space in a large facility in an under-resourced part of the City. In exchange for each hour the artist spends in the facility, he or she is required to contribute an hour to the local community. The contribution need not be artistic – it could as easily involve helping to establish community gardens, showing youth how to draw or paint, or anything that the community itself needs and wants. Thus, the artists’ work is not only valuable to the artists and community members for itself, it is valuable through its tangible exchange contribution to the community.

A different type of example illustrates the blending of infrastructure improvement with skill development. Many years ago I saw hundreds of persons working on road improvement in Mexico. My first thought was, ‘if they used machines, the roadwork could be done sooner.’ A bit later I reflected that using hundreds of workers was a brilliant way to employ local residents and teach them transferrable construction skills at the same time. Several generations of “job creation” programs in the U.S. have used a similar strategy, but only directed to labor market work. Expanding upon this, I would argue that most of the dire infrastructure needs in the U.S. could be effectively and efficiently addressed by using a relatively small number of very experienced experts to oversee the work of generally unskilled men and women. While this suggestion risks being viewed as anti-union, it is not. Infrastructure work clearly needs to be designed and overseen by “experts,” who are often union members, but much of the day-to-day work does not need high-level “expertise;” it simply needs an interested and eager civil worker who receives good supervision and wants to work outdoors and further develop his or her construction skills.

In conclusion, with appreciation for the thoughtful and erudite suggestions from other participants in the conference, some of which have already been incorporated into this report, I will continue to refine my thoughts and details about the value and the potential negative unintended consequences of implementing civil labor. I will also refine my ideas about existing and potential sources of funding and compensation practices for my book manuscript. It is also possible that ideas about transforming work could potentially better enable welfare states to focus their limited resources on those unable to “work” at all. Details are important, to be sure, but widespread passion for the ideas and commitment to work out civil labor solutions may be most important for reducing human need and pain and increasing human, community, and societal flourishing through transforming “work.”

#### **4 Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Professor Drs. Otto, Ziegler, Bonvin, fellow conference participants, the VW Foundation, Arne, and the many others in Hannover and Bielefeld who made the stimulating conference possible!

#### **References**

**Beck, U.** (2000). *The Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

- Iversen, R. R., & Armstrong, A. L.** (2006). *Jobs Aren’t Enough: Toward a New Economic Mobility for Low-Income Families*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kalleberg, A. L.** (2011). *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lehweß-Litzmann, R.** (2014). Rationality and Freedom? Sen’s CA and Critical Policy Evaluation. In H.-U. Otto & H. Ziegler (Eds.), *Critical Social Policy and the Capability Approach* (pp. 29-44). Opladen, Germany: Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- McFarland, K.** (2017, August 20). *GERMANY: ‘Basic Income Café’ Provides Center for UBI-Related Activities in Berlin*. Retrieved June 6, 2018, from Basic Income Earth Network: <https://basicincome.org/news/2017/08/19124>.
- Nussbaum, M. C.** (2003). Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice. *Feminist Economics*, 9(2-3), 33-59.
- Otto, H.-U., & Ziegler, H.** (Eds.) (2014). *Critical Social Policy and the Capability Approach*. Opladen, Germany: Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Sen, A.** (1992). *Inequality Reexamined*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sen, A.** (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books.
- The Local** (2018, March 20). *Berlin Mayor Backs ‘Basic Income’ to Tackle Capital’s Unemployment*. Retrieved June 8, 2018, from The Local: <https://www.thelocal.de/20180320/berlin-mayor-backs-basic-income-to-tackle-capitals-unemployment>.
- Tönshoff, C., Brandherm, R., & Philipps, R.** (2017). *(No) Universal Basic Income, Please! Lessons from the Debate on the Welfare State of the Future*. Bonn, Germany: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Weeks, K.** (2011). *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

**Author’s Address:**

Roberta Rehner Iversen, Prof. PhD.  
University of Pennsylvania, USA  
School of Social Policy and Practice  
[iversenroberta@gmail.com](mailto:iversenroberta@gmail.com)