

What relevance has division of labour in a world of precarious work?

Deborah James, London School of Economics

Abstract:

Post-Marx, social scientists have tended to define ‘labour’ by reference to working for others in return for a wage, rather than to a harmonious Durkheimian-style co-dependency. This mini-review of recent anthropological literature considers whether, in a world where the ‘standard employment contract’ is dwindling and many are out of work, ‘division of labour’ has any continuing relevance.

When asked for a contribution towards a special issue on this topic in which biologists and natural scientists predominate, the social scientist may feel herself ill at ease. The social sciences have long moved past a Durkheimian ‘division of labour’ standpoint (1893), to encompass a more conflict-oriented, Marxist or post-Marxist one, in which the allocation of tasks is seen as organised not because of harmonious consensus or overall population fitness, but rather because of unequal ownership of, and access to, what Marx called ‘means of production’ (Marx 1990). In this perspective, low-paid workers are seen as essential to industry and the service sector, but largely ‘exploited’ in that their remuneration must be kept low enough to enable large profits for company owners. Low pay for workers who have ‘nothing to sell but their labour power’ (Marx 1990), is seen as part of the overall capitalist schema. This, in vastly simplified form, was the ‘classic’ Marxist view of the division of labour; with ‘labour’ defined by reference to working for others in return for a wage.

However, workers, especially after the end of WWII, were not completely at the mercy of capitalist employers. This period saw the rise of a society based on the ‘standard employment relationship/contract’, characterised by stable, full-time jobs. Maximum working hours were regulated; workers were paid not only for a day's work but also for periods of recuperation, and were somewhat shielded from arbitrary dismissal. That in turn enabled them to organise in support of their demands (Parry 2018).

This situation has since changed because of significant developments since the late 1970s when the period known as *la trente glorieuse* came to an end.¹ Globalisation and liberalisation saw firms closing or upping sticks and moving abroad in search of cheaper labour. To oversimplify the case, one might point out that there has been a global trend towards outsourcing and casualisation of work and hence a rise in what is now widely known as ‘precarity’.² More casualisation meant fewer strikes/union activity; workers become more dependent on family and on patrons than on rights freely won; and they become less powerful as unionists since they this dependence made them unwilling to challenge the status quo.

Anthropologists studying industrial life in the global South show how labour had ‘always-already’ been precarious in these settings (Sanchez & Lazar 2019; Parry 2018) with life being either ‘wageless’ from the start as people relied on their own informal income-generating

¹ Scholars have noted how, even during this period, the standard employment relationship and stable full-time jobs were largely only the privilege of white male workers/employees: the ‘normative male breadwinner’ (eg Denning 2016: 279).

² Precariousness was inherent in wage labour too: Denning cites Marx who observes that ‘the “higher the productivity of labour, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence, namely the sale of their own labour-power” (Denning 2010:290).

activities (Denning 2010), or becoming wageless as a result of the developments noted above. All this has led anthropologists such as Jim Ferguson and Tania Murray Li to claim that we are now in a 'post-work world'. They maintain that expectations of ever-expanding wage employment are misleading and have lost plausibility as a 'universal' solution. Situations exist worldwide that do not follow productivist narratives predicated on the 'proper job'. Rather than being seen as a negative or as a fundamental lack, these non-productivist scenarios should, these authors claim, be thought of as 'emergent realities' with their own characteristics: they may be 'social and affective' rather than material, and based as much on social relations and informal loyalties as on contracts. They use the term 'distributive labour' to describe the cultivation and maintenance of 'various strategies for tapping into streams of income controlled by others', such as 'dependence on patrons or kin', or reverting to more informal income-generating activities (2018:12). Among the elements they highlight as forming the basis of these emergent social realities that replace wages as sources of livelihood are 'gender and generation'. (Both, however, remain important as the basis for the differentiation of tasks in global South settings: the former – gender – is highlighted in the case studies discussed below).

Recent anthropologists' writings have pointed, then, *not* to the gradual disappearance of work but instead to a world where other features become the basis of labour division. One of these distinctions is that between permanent employees (often known as the 'labour aristocracy') and casual/precarious ones whose work, although definitely essential, is easily replaced. Jonathan Parry, in a comprehensive introduction to the topic, illustrates this point. Referring to India alongside other cases, he shows how there *is* still work, and how the permanence of the small proportion of employees who have job security depends on the much larger population of temporary ones. In India, no more than about 8% of the total workforce, mostly state employees, enjoyed the kinds of protections noted earlier. The remainder of the workforce are unorganised, and hence unprotected (Parry 2018: 4). In India, too, the children of former employees have been given preferential treatment (with jobs being regarded as almost equivalent to heritable property), creating 'labour dynasties' (ibid:5). In these public sector factories, the protection of some is accompanied by the increasing precarity of others, as the most unpleasant and dangerous tasks are outsourced to insecure, poorly-paid contract labourers who have no claims on company welfare. Here, we can remind ourselves of the Marxist idea of the 'industrial reserve army': the existence of a more protected and rights-bearing workforce *relies* on that of its opposite, an unprotected workforce with no rights. Or, where these rights do exist, they are provided by the state, which has assumed (but only in minimal ways) the responsibility of giving some form of 'social protection', replacing the more comprehensive provision by the post-war, redistributive, 'welfare state'.

Parry asks why these expensive permanent employees continue to be employed. Another anthropologist, Andrew Sanchez, suggests that this allows management to count on the compliance of the rest, who hope (somewhat forlornly) eventually to be 'regularized'. The security of some is dependent on the precarity of others, reiterates Parry; 'two poles of the hierarchy are inseparably linked: the lifetime employment of the salaryman could only be sustained while there were flexible workers to meet employers' fluctuating demand for labour' (2018:7). This is indeed a kind of 'division of labour', but one involving a far less benign-sounding interdependence than the kind Durkheim originally outlined.

An important element mentioned by others working in India is that those forms of social differentiation that pre-determine where people may fit in a labour division may *not* be those of ‘labour’ per se but rather of position in an ethnic hierarchy which pre-determines class. This is the case with Indian tailors discussed by anthropologists Grace Carswell and Geert de Neve (2018), in a chapter in the volume edited by Hann and Parry. This ‘division’ of *labour* overlaps, here, with one that allocates low-paid work on the basis of caste/ethnicity (thus, their *class* position is almost pre-ordained by their *caste* one). Thus ‘division’ may happen along many different axes, but these do not cancel each other out, rather, they exacerbate and intensify each other.

In reaction to this kind of ‘adverse’ inclusion as workers, research in other southern contexts, like South Africa, point to the existence of a ‘wageless’ life (Denning 2010), in which young men (given the prejudicial nature of their inclusion), actually opt to operate outside the formal economy altogether: choosing instead to make a living out of ‘hustling’ (Dawson 2022).

Interdependence? Two case studies

These are the ‘objective facts’ as documented by those seeking to understand the increasing precarity of work, especially in global South settings.³ But how should we understand these ‘facts’ in light of older claims that draw on Durkheimian ideas about organic solidarity, of the kind that animated the call for papers that resulted in the workshop on which this volume is based (Durkheim 1893; Heinrich & Boyd 2008; Taborsky et al 2021)? That call for papers perhaps oversold the case for models that posit the existence of harmonious units comprising neatly interdependent components, whether in biology or the social sciences. Discussions at the workshop, indeed, problematised the idea that this kind of coherent inter-reliance can be easily found in either disciplinary domain. But it is still useful to explore whether such frameworks can prove useful in a world where ‘labour’ – whether or not subject to ‘division’ – has so fragile an institutional base.

Adivasi coal workers in India

Firstly, what are the *constituent parts* of which the ‘division’ consists? Are these ‘classes’ (Marx 1990), or ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2010, cited in Noy 2022)? What about sub-divisions: ‘the more nuanced, relative distinctions between different kinds of precarious work as perceived by labourers themselves’ (Noy 2022), which may play significant roles in their livelihood decisions? Noy shows how the concept of ‘precarity’, itself, is too homogenising. He argues that the features of different types of informal work and workers within the overall terrain of labour precarity need to be distinguished from each other. Otherwise there is the danger of putting up an ‘ideal type’ or standard of *non-precarious* work against which modes

³ Ernest Gellner (1982) distinguished between the division of labour in agrarian societies and industrial societies. In the former, a static division prevailed amid strong cultural diversity and social and geographical immobility. In the latter, in contrast, there was a dynamic division of labour, influenced by technological innovation and shifts in demand for various products, so that these societies were marked by cultural homogenization and increased social and geographical mobility. The state played a role in achieving this and in providing a safety net against the continuous destruction of established jobs. However, globalization and the diminished influence of the state has reshaped the situation for workers on the peripheries of capitalism such as those discussed in this paper.

of precarity are assessed, ignoring how much labour, especially in the global South, has ‘always already’ been precarious, as outlined above. Noy describes two of these that were evident in his field study. One is coal peddling, in which villagers illicitly gather coal from the mine, coke it, and sell it as cooking fuel on the nearby highway. The second is casual wage labour in the mine’s depot yard, which involves manually loading coal onto trucks for dispatch. This is one of numerous villages in rural India — and indeed other parts of the global South — where people now *combine* and *shift between* different kinds of precarious work, one a form of self-employment, the other casual wage labour. Noy shows how people have ‘complex livelihoods’ comprising informal forms of wage labour, self-employment, and other subsistence activities (ibid: 172). Seen from one perspective, those who might once have been viewed as ‘labourers’ (whose reproduction was assured by the state via formal redistributive mechanisms) are now part-wage-labourer, part-self-employed, part-distributive-worker (ibid:173). Whatever division of labour we will look for here can be sought *within* a single community, even within the life trajectory of a single individual, rather than *between* clearly-defined segments of society (or ‘classes’).

Coal peddling can be cannily used to generate new ‘opportunities, even to save money beyond mere subsistence. It also provides a ‘greater degree of freedom and flexibility in terms of *when, how frequently, and how much* to work’ (2022: 178, emphasis added), enabling a kind of independence and autonomy traditionally viewed as important by adivasis. They see themselves as somewhat outside mainstream society, since they also have freedom from any specific labour hierarchy. In this way coal peddling has replaced the foraging they formerly relied on for a livelihood. The success of this ‘labour’ is enabled, in turn, by the fact that the police turn a blind eye – they too play their part in creating the necessary framework. Can the relationship between these workers with their patchwork livelihoods and the police who ignore them be seen, perhaps, as another kind of ‘division of labour’?

What about the casual, but wage-paid, labour of truck loading? This is more intermittent, it is seen as better, and is done whenever available, and mainly by women. This raises an important dimension of labour division: that which occurs along gendered lines.⁴ This too enables autonomy, ‘but of a different kind’ it ‘offers women access to independent wages. This allows them increased financial control, and consequently status, in the household, and serves as a motivation to participate in this otherwise undesirable form of work’ (Noy 2020: 181). Interestingly, it is offered by the company as a ‘mechanism to forestall potential local agitation over the adverse impact of mining operations and lack of jobs’ (Ibid). There are several reasons why women undertake this labour: one is that, compared to coal peddling, it is so low-status that men are not bothered to do it and have not put their own family-based ‘labour division’ – that is, gender-based hierarchy – in place. Women do this job and are in a position to retain what money they earn from it. As adivasis they are actually often better placed than higher-status women to go outside the home and earn money independently.

Here we have a situation where, within the ‘precariat’ or the world of unprotected casual work, there is a kind of ‘division of labour’, with certain niches being available to some and foreclosed to others, and in which some kind of interdependence – largely based on gender – exists between those occupying these niches. The case also demonstrates, however, how some autonomy from such interdependence may be achieved by those for whom it is oppressive.

⁴ In the specific case in question, I make the point in relation to a gendered division of labour, but generational divisions of labour are equally salient in forming a framework for such internal divisions (see Lancy 2015).

Precarious work and welfare in the UK

The question Noy poses about nuanced distinctions as ‘perceived by labourers themselves’ (ibid: 187) demands that we pay attention to how workers (whether more or less permanent) account for their situation? Do they view it as involving an interdependence such that, in combination with others, they experience themselves as contributing to some larger whole? If so, is this just a case of their being successfully indoctrinated – as suggested by the term ‘manufacturing consent’ (Burawoy 1982)? While Marxist analysis of the more deterministic kind suggests that workers must eventually recognize the exploitative basis of their conditions of employment, and thus become part of a ‘class for itself’, subsequent scholars have argued that we must take seriously the ways people see (or interpret) their situation, which might yield a very different perspective.

Here, the example comes from my own fieldwork, conducted in an advice office in the UK (James & Kirwan 2019). It concerns a migrant from central America who is an Uber driver. The lesson is broadly similar, in that such work in the so-called ‘platform economy’ can be viewed as quintessentially ‘precarious’ and ‘casual’ and is performed by migrants from the global South who occupy a low place in the social hierarchy. Here, too, there is a form of gendered division of labour: the husband is the only earner in the family while his wife is doing ‘emotional’ or ‘affective labour’ (Hochschild 1983; Ahmed 2004) and is in receipt of state welfare payments. However, in this case the situation is more complex. The man, too, is doing care work. And the household overall is dependent, in part, on welfare payments. Getting hold of these involves a lot of effort, as is shown by the fact that the wife found it necessary to spend much time in the advice office making her claim. This might be seen as ‘distributive labour’ (Ferguson & Li 2018).

The Uber driver, Trevor, hails from the Caribbean. He works about 40 hours per week and his take-home pay averages £1,000 per month but increases at peak times like Christmas – ‘it could be less or more. It’s a nightmare when you’re self-employed.’ (James and Kirwan 2019). The fact that his income dips and dives creates problems when calculating benefits since welfare recipients must keep the authorities informed about their earnings. The unevenness of zero-hours contracts, in contrast to more stable and regular forms of wage labour, make the kind of accurate reporting that is required very difficult. The fact that Trevor does have employment mitigates Ferguson & Li’s claim that we now in a world ‘beyond the proper job’ (2018), and also shows that reliance on grants and welfare payments is not irreconcilable with the world of work.

The other adult in the family, Susan, is undertaking care that, until recently, was partly subsidised by the state. As official guardian for her grandson, she has been relying on the Special Guardianship Allowance, which has since been suspended. Susan has misgivings about dependency, but the adviser, Jennifer persuades her, on behalf of the household, to apply for various forms of income support: Council Tax reduction and Universal Credit. The fact is, as Susan tells Jennifer, that her partner Trevor is away abroad, spending a month in his home country where he and his siblings take it in turn to look after his aged mother. During this time, of course, he is not earning (James & Kirwan 2019: 676-7). Here, we find an example of an apparently precarious ‘platform worker’ and his wife who view themselves as having some autonomy. This family’s combination of wages and benefits, and of paid labour

with care work, has gained them a measure of flexibility that enables them to perform important tasks of ‘social reproduction’, thus making up for the lack of broader welfare provision in their Caribbean homeland.

Conclusion

Let me return to my initial question: does ‘division of labour’ have relevance in a world where opportunities for ‘proper work’ are limited? Does it have purchase for the social sciences as well as the biological sciences?

The title of my piece refers to a world where the ‘proper job’ has disappeared (Ferguson & Li 2018), or at least where the ‘standard employment contract’ is on the wane (Parry 2018). To talk of division of labour in such a world would seem to make no sense. What the two case studies demonstrate, however, is that wage work does continue to play its part: it does so for those at the margins of society, such as adivasis in India, and for those who have migrated abroad in search of a livelihood not available at home, such as those from abroad who take up ‘zero hours’ jobs in the UK. These cases show that different conceptualisations of the division of labour might need to be brought into play. For the adivasis of Noy’s account (2022), men and women from the same group of low-status people play differing roles, but to view these as dovetailing in order to form a solidary whole, à la Durkheim, would be misleading. Indeed, for the women who are truly at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, their best option lies in detaching from any gendered labour division and, instead, in seeking relative autonomy from any such interdependence. For the zero-hours wage workers of my own UK fieldwork (James & Kirwan 2019), the intricate demands imposed by childcare and by the care needs of ageing family members abroad means that interdependence is certainly necessary – but of a rather different kind. It yokes together husband and wife in a delicate set of negotiations. It also yokes together families and the state, forcing them to search for a balance between precarious wages and welfare payments, but in a way that contrasts fundamentally with conventional images of labour division.

At the workshop, papers delivered by both biological and social scientists, and discussions prompted by those papers, did not align neatly with images of coherent interdependence of the kind outlined in the call for papers. We heard that division of labour is not necessarily adaptive. It cannot be assumed to have evolved for a specific purpose or to enable the good functioning of the whole. It may not necessarily be advantageous for the fitness of any given species. Rather, it can be complex, contingent, and flexible. If that is the case, then the cases I have presented above may, I tentatively suggest, illustrate that a social science viewpoint shows more correspondence with a biological science perspective than initially supposed.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. 2004 ‘Affective Economies’ *Social Text* 22(2)

Burawoy, Michael. 1982. *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Carswell, Grace and Geert de Neve. 2018. “Towards a Political Economy of Skill and Garment Work: The Case of the Tiruppur Industrial Cluster in South India” in Chris

- Hann and Jonathan Parry (eds) *Industrial Labor on the Margins of Capitalism*. New York: Berghahn, pp309-335.
- Dawson, Hannah J. 2022. "Living, not just surviving: The politics of refusing low-wage jobs in urban South Africa", *Economy and Society* 51(3): 375-397.
- Denning, M. 2010. Wageless life. *New Left Review* 66: 79–96.
- Durkheim E. 1893. *De la division du travail social*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Ferguson, James and Tania Murray Li. 2018. "Beyond the 'Proper Job': Political-economic Analysis after the Century of Labouring Man". Working Paper 51. PLAAS, UWC: Cape Town.
- Gellner, Ernest. 1982. The Industrial Division of Labour and National Cultures. *Government and Opposition* 17(3) 268-278.
- Henrich J. and Boyd R. 2008. Division of labor, economic specialization, and the evolution of social stratification. *Current Anthropology* 49: 715-724.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- James, Deborah, and Samuel Kirwan. 2019. "'Sorting out income': transnational householding and austerity Britain" *Social Anthropology* doi:10.1111/1469-8676.12619
- Lancy D.F. 2015. Children as a Reserve Labor Force. *Current Anthropology* 56: 545-568.
- Noy, Itay. 2022. Unpicking Precarity: Informal Work in Eastern India's Coal Mining Tracts. *Development and Change* 54(1): 168–191.
- Parry, Jonathan. 2018. "Introduction: precarity, class and the neoliberal subject" in Chris Hann and Jonathan Parry (eds) *Industrial Labor on the Margins of Capitalism*. New York: Berghahn, pp1-38.
- Sanchez, Andrew & Sian Lazar. 2019. "Understanding labour politics in an age of precarity" *Dialectical Anthropology* 43: 3-14.
- Taborsky M., Cant M.A., and Komdeur J. 2021. *The Evolution of Social Behaviour*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.