

Traveling Back In Time? Job Quality in Europe

REPORT BY JÁNOS MÁTYÁS KOVÁCS

No, the IWM has not turned into an institute of labor economics or a human resources consultancy. We simply continue to show interest in comparative economic cultures. During the past decade, the Institute has accomplished a number of research projects on recent institutional/cultural developments in Eastern Europe. Our ACCESS project asked whether the new member states would serve as cultural assets or rather liabilities in the economy of the European Union. DIOSCURI examined the cohabitation of foreign and indigenous economic cultures¹ while CAPITO focused on the varieties of emerging capitalist regimes in the region.

Two years ago, the IWM joined the NEUJOBS program² to study the cultural undercurrents of labor markets in two old and two new member states of the Union. In examining “good jobs” in Hungary, Slovakia, Spain and the UK³, our research group examined how stakeholders and scholars think and speak about “goodness”, but we were equally interested in popular attitudes to job quality. After having completed a broad literature review⁴, we prepared eight case studies in various industries, ranging from telecommunications to food processing, to grasp the employees’ preferences “on the ground”. The company case studies were complemented by issue studies of labor legislation.

In the first decade of the new millennium, one couldn’t help discovering a large gap between the mounting popularity of the terms “good job” and “decent work” (which have become catchphrases like “flexicurity” and “employability”) in politics and academia, and a growing number of people who seem to be satisfied with “bad jobs”. However, scholarly research tends to circumvent that disparity, instead of bridging it, by measuring job quality rather than trying to comprehend the changing cultural priorities of employees.

We entered fieldwork with the following hypotheses in mind: (a) in thinking of “decent work”, the main actors of the labor market organize their discourses along the security/flexibility axis; (b) elite discourses combine both the security and flexibility narratives but, in the end, lean toward the latter; (c) employees prefer security and when it comes to choosing between “materialist” and “post-materialist” features (Ronald Inglehart) of job quality, materialist features appear to be preferred; (d) hence, popular attitudes point to a process of retraditionalization, i.e. a partial return to the concept of a good job that prevailed back in the 1960s and entailed a fixed contract



“The academic discourse is out of touch from what is going on. [...] We spend our lives ‘having theories about whether the contract of employment is green, yellow or pink, instead of asking if everybody has an employment’”.

A labor law expert from the UK.

Photo: IWD

with full-time work, fair pay and appropriate physical working conditions (simply put, a “good job” is an acceptable job that will continue to exist tomorrow); (e) as regards the four countries under scrutiny, instead of the East-West divide that is widely held to exist (the West is flexibility-prone and post-materialist, the East is security-prone and materialist), a North-South divide emerges, in which Hungary and Slovakia join Spain on the Southern side, whereas the UK still represents the post-materialist values of the North.

In other words, we expected to witness a journey back in time to a world in which quality attributes such as self-fulfillment, creativity, recognition, autonomy, participation, equal opportunity, “greenness” and the like were much less valued in Europe than in the early 2000s. Given the limited means our research group had in order to test the working hypotheses, a large survey was not feasible. At any rate, our quasi-anthropological case studies, based on in-depth interviews and participant observation, were able to reveal cultural preferences more precisely than a large, impersonal survey. The same applies to the issue studies, in which legal experts and politicians informed us about their own cultural choices in drafting labor laws after a change in government in all four countries over the past few years.

Our research project is now finished.⁵ The fieldwork encouraged us to reinterpret the initial hypotheses but we did not have to give up any of them. The empirical findings nuanced much of what our research group believed we knew about materialist versus post-materialist cultures in the context of the flexibility and security discourses. It became clear that a simplistic model of materialism versus post-materialism cannot be identified with one of security versus flexibility (or of East versus West or South versus North). Aspiring to security may go beyond materialist values (e.g. if stable jobs result in mental/spiritual well-being,

whereas flexibility may combine with materialist values (e.g. if flexible work contracts increase job security through inclusion). Symbolic geography is also a slippery slope: we saw Eastern European employees subscribe to post-materialist values (e.g. demanding more recognition and dignity) while Westerners proved to be deeply materialist (regarding professional education as a means of becoming employable rather than of self-fulfillment).

Our interviews suggested—and I consider this the most thought-provoking finding—that retraditionalization appears not so much as the return to a preference for materialist values but as an inclination towards egoistic values, be they materialist or post-materialist. The low priority of any altruistic definition of job quality among the overwhelming majority of our respondents in almost all companies (and *Hexenküchen* of labor legislation) in the four countries counts as a near-representative result of our project. The ignorance and/or neglect of green values was perhaps the strongest evidence, followed by weak interest in social responsibility, participation and equal opportunity. “It is very difficult to value sustainability if you don’t have a job”, a Spanish respondent noted sadly.

Even more striking was the fact that with those components of “good jobs” that could have been interpreted both ways, the non-altruistic option prevailed. The best example is participation (social dialogue), which was not regarded by the interviewees as a (collectivist) end in itself but as a means of attaining predominantly egoistic goals such as the prevention of layoffs and wage cuts. Flexibility working time presents a more complicated issue. When it was popular at all, employees defended it as an opportunity to achieve a work-life balance. Nevertheless, altruism rarely surpassed the boundaries of the family; when it did, the free time gained through flexibilization was seen to increase personal autonomy, in particular, the freedom to engage in leisure activities.

they did not provide a solid basis for generalization.

Our inquiry need not end with these conclusions. One might, for instance, give further thought to how detraditionalization turned into retraditionalization, and ask what role the recent global economic crisis played in that shift of emphasis. All uncertainty notwithstanding, I think we may continue to raise our eyebrows if someone tells us that job quality in country A is three times higher than in country B, flexibility killed security, and the era of post-materialism is over for good. <

¹ See J. M. Kovács and Violetta Zentai (eds): *Capitalism from Outside? Economic Cultures in Eastern Europe after 1989*, CEU Press, 2012.

² See “Neujobs. Creating and adapting jobs in Europe in the context of a socio-ecological transition” (www.neujobs.eu). The program is coordinated by Miroslav Beblavý at the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels, and supported by the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission.

³ The research activities were divided between *The Conference Board, Europe*, the *Slovak Governance Institute* and the *IWM*. Researchers included Christoph Hilbert, János Mátyás Kovács (project director), Marcella Veselková and Tünde Virág. The project was coordinated by Manuel Tröster and Christina Pössel.

⁴ See J. M. Kovács: *Jobs First? In Search of Quality*, CEPS Brussels, 2012 (www.neujobs.eu).

⁵ I would like to thank, besides the members of the research group, the participants of the final conference of the project in June for their valuable contributions (see *Infobox*).

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