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Editorial – Review Articles

Introduction to Review Articles on ‘Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices’

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In this issue of *New Technology, Work and Employment* (NTWE) we are launching a new initiative entitled ‘review articles’. In addition to book reviews, the aim of this new section is to invite scholars to critically reflect on major policy documents, key academic publications and debates. This will involve established scholars, mid and early career academics, as well as contributors from wider communities outside of academia. These feature commentaries will extend the book reviews section of the journal and consist of shorter articles on contemporary work and employment debates. As an international journal, *NTWE* has always been a broad church (Baldry, 2011) with a primary focus on critical and non-managerial approaches. The journal has consistently published articles by influential scholars from across the social sciences, incorporating sociology, industrial relations, political economy, psychology, economics and organisational behaviour. More recently, with the development of theoretical, conceptual and empirical research on the transformations of work and employment, the journal has featured articles on globalisation, global value chains and global production networks (Howcroft and Taylor, 2014). *NTWE* has always provided a platform for critical debate on a broad range of issues around new technology, work and employment. In the review article section of the journal, we aim to extend this discussion and dialogue. The first of these feature commentaries is centred on critical reflections, some 18 months on, from the high-profile launch of ‘Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices’.

In October 2016, Matthew Taylor was commissioned by the Conservative government to undertake an independent review of modern employment practices in contemporary Britain. Whilst there have been major global changes in employment, the UK has been at the vanguard with a highly de-regulated and liberalised system of employment relations. Given the significant transformations of work and employment over the last 20 years, the review is both timely and important. The approach of the review is to contribute to ensuring that “...all work in the UK economy should be fair and decent” (Taylor Review 2017: 6). The report praises, what it terms, ‘the British way’ of a “vibrant, flexible labour market” (p. 47), with the “distinctive strengths of our existing labour market and framework of regulation” (p. 7). The review emphasises that this ‘British way’ is very good at creating jobs, but does recognise some challenges and complexities. Central contemporary issues around the gig economy, zero hours work, flexibility and work-life balance, agency employment and job quality are considered – amongst other topics. The Taylor Review offers 53 recommendations and 7 key steps to attaining decent work, which can help shape the government’s industrial strategy. Central to these recommendations are good work and responsible corporate governance. The Taylor Review generated considerable media coverage on television, radio and in the newspapers, along with presentations by the lead author at a number of national

conferences. In terms of some of the key stakeholders, the business community largely welcomed the report's recommendations. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) are supportive of how effective corporate governance, good management and strong employment relations can both enhance job quality and productivity. However, the CIPD are wary of further employment regulation and proposals to increase the National Minimum Wage for those with non-guaranteed hours (CIPD, 2017). In contrast, many trade unions and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in particular argue that the Taylor Review lacks ambition and fails to address job security and mistreatment (TUC, 2018a). Furthermore, there is an urgent need for new employment legislation to reflect changes in the labour market and to ensure that all workers have access to statutory rights (TUC, 2018b). The UK has seen a fundamental erosion of worker rights – especially in the collective sense – since the 1980s and a problem of ongoing weakening of the labour movement.

Whilst the Taylor Review advocates 'fair and decent work', there are issues with the terminology adopted. The report is replete with phrases, such as, 'flexibility', 'choice', 'voice', 'good work', but there is a lack of clear definitions. Similarly, there are methodological issues with no clarity over the research methods utilised, the research objectives and questions, sampling techniques or data analysis. Another issue with the Taylor Review is that there is no acknowledgement of the wage-effort bargain, power asymmetries or structural antagonisms that are inherent in the employment relationship. Moreover, there is little engagement with wider academic literature that has critically addressed debates around the changing world of work and employment. Indeed, *New Technology, Work and Employment* has published articles that critically address the deleterious implications of zero hours work (Moore and Hayes, 2017); the gig economy, collectivism and control (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2014; Wood et al., 2018; Lehdonvirta, 2018); and outsourcing work (Chan et al., 2013; Howcroft and Richardson, 2008; Taylor et al., 2014). There is a long tradition of research that critically examines the challenges and complexities of work-life 'balance' (see Crompton, 2006); and Fleetwood (2007) argues that notions of 'flexibility' are primarily based on 'business friendly' notions and agendas. More contemporary literature critically addresses the 'new norm' of non-standard employment and low-pay (Rubery et al., 2018), and the lived reality of in-work poverty (McBride et al., 2018). Indeed, Heyes et al. (2017) assess the emerging phenomenon of underemployment and question the current government's obsession with job quantity, to the detriment of job quality. There is also a plethora of academic studies that consistently point to rising work intensification (Green, 2006; Gallie and Zhou, 2013); along with both job tenure and job status insecurity (Gallie et al., 2017).

Along with mainstream media interest, the Taylor Review has generated growing academic coverage. Much of this literature has been critical of the claims, findings and recommendations of the review. Birken and Taylor (2018) critique 'the British way' and notions of 'choice', arguing that low-paid temporary workers at an Amazon 'fulfilment centre' in South Wales are compelled to accept low-paid and degraded jobs. McGaughey (2018) questions the 'independence' of the review; as do both Taylor and Thompson in this issue, who then go on to critically consider the political motivations of the Conservative government in commissioning the review. McGaughey refers to 'Taylorism' as the new theory of the gig economy and argues that the Taylor Review proposes the deepest cuts to employment rights for

30 years. Similarly, Bales et al. (2018) argue that the reviews recommendations are not only problematic, but dangerous with serious deregulatory consequences. They state that there is very little coverage of trade unions and that the terms adopted have neo-liberal interpretations; topics which are referred to by all of the contributors to this issue.

The first of the review articles of NTWE brings together key scholars to critically assess the Taylor Review and the implications for contemporary work and employment. The opening article by Sian Moore and Kirsty Newsome draws on detailed empirical research to question the claims of the Taylor Review regarding 'choice' and 'flexibility' of working non-standard contracts. Moore and Newsome critically assess the adoption of Workforce Management Software systems for self-employed delivery drivers and the surveillance of both goods *and* labour, arguing that these drivers deserve worker status. They also investigate the electronic monitoring of homecare workers, with the episodic nature of fragmented and variable hours. As opposed to claims of 'choice' and 'flexibility', such technology systems embolden the management prerogative and further curtail worker autonomy; as these workers want permanent and predictable working hours.

In an article entitled 'a Band-Aid on a gaping wound', Phil Taylor critiques both the omissions and commission of the Taylor Review. He argues that the review serves up a sanitised view of the UK labour market – the so-called 'British way' - and ignores changes in the realms of work (re)organisation, labour process and employment relations. There are omissions of a number of important dimensions of contemporary work and employment. Chief among these are very high levels of work intensification due to re-engineering, lean, efficiency gains, rationalisations and managerial demands to deliver 'more with less', which result in an ever-tightening of the porosity of labour. The deleterious consequences of punitive performance management techniques for worker health and well-being are also critically examined. Phil Taylor states that the weaknesses of the commission of the review are that it adopts neo-liberal approaches with weak recommendations that will ultimately offer very little for workers.

Paul Thompson also covers work intensification and contemporary transformations of work and employment in his article. He raises issues of focus in the Taylor Review and argues that there is too much attention paid to the gig economy and platform working, when we need to ensure due consideration to other forms of precarious work, such as, low-pay, zero hours work, and non-standard employment. In terms of the big picture, Thompson argues that the driving forces that are reshaping employment strategies must be critically examined, namely financialisation. Whilst he claims that the proposals of the Taylor Review are modest, with some scope for trade unionists and campaigners to advance pertinent issues, he does state that the report misses an opportunity regarding employment status in the gig economy. Such issues are the focus of Alex Wood's article, where he critically assesses the Taylor Review and the requirement for a new approach to determining employment classification in the gig economy. The review considers issues of 'control' and work in terms of employment classifications. However, Wood argues that the term 'control' is not clearly defined in the review, and he draws on sociological conceptualisations to examine detailed and general control in the employment relationship. He articulates that the review conflates 'control' with

'dependency', and it is the latter that should be the focus of determining labour rights.

The intention of these feature commentaries is that they will stimulate debate not only in the realms of academia, but will allow academics to engage with wider audiences about some of the key dilemmas and challenges around work, employment and new technologies. The editorial team at *NTWE* did invite Matthew Taylor to comment and respond to these contributions, but unfortunately he had to decline due to work pressures and time limitations.

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