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## **Ruth Dukes and Wolfgang Streeck, *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status and Post-Industrial Justice* (Polity Press, 2023).**

Ruth Dukes and Wolfgang Streeck's *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status and Post-Industrial Justice* revisits the historical development of labor law, affirming its place as a key institution of political economy while pushing the boundaries of how it can be understood in the contemporary, fragmented world of work.

*Democracy at Work* builds on a longstanding tradition in labor law and industrial relations scholarship: namely, it thinks of (labor) law in the context of a broader political economy of work. For example, the work of Hugo Sinzheimer, upon which this book draws, has made it evident that labor law is historically rooted in class struggle and needs to be studied as a phenomenon linked to political economy and through materialist analysis.

Dukes and Streeck further build on Sinzheimer and argue that labor law intervenes in market logic by highlighting that at the core of the labor transaction as market transaction is the human being itself. This intervention is important because it challenges the notion of labor as a mere commodity. It echoes Marxist thought and Karl Polanyi's concept of the "fictitious commodity," which critique the idea of labor as something that can be bought and sold like any other commodity without further consideration. The book offers a well-developed critique of liberal contractual ideas of autonomy and free will, showing how these concepts mask the underlying material coercion, domination, and subordination that define the employment relationship and other forms of contracting for work.

Drawing on the work of the American sociologist and legal scholar Philip Selznick, the book's own historical reconstruction of labor law is grounded in a dialectical relationship between the concepts of contract and status. This framework offers the reader a lens through which to understand how labor law has evolved as part of a broader class struggle over time. The authors show how labor law has vacillated between the principles of contract (emphasizing individual autonomy and bargaining) and status (acknowledging the structural inequalities inherent in the employment relationship). They highlight how labor law has historically served as a vehicle for protecting workers and facilitating collective action, reflected in its two main functions. First, it emancipates the employment contract from tenets of private law, such as formal autonomy and free will, which are foundational to liberal contract theory. Second, it enables organized labor to establish itself as a political actor, shaping not only workplace relations but also regulating and defending broader social objectives.

Thus, the book argues that by providing a legal framework for industrial citizenship, labor law helps workers to challenge market dynamics and push for (industrial) justice within the workplace and beyond in society at large. The authors use the historical trajectory of labor law (mainly in the global North), particularly from the postwar period to neoliberalism, to explore the changing role of labor law and its relevance in today's fragmented world of work. The book exposes the promise of liberalization of the employment relationship through other forms of contracting as a false emancipation.

Given the rise of the gig economy and other forms of precarious work, one of the book's central questions is whether and how labor law can still fulfill its emancipatory function. The authors suggest that occupational communities—groups of workers within specific sectors or workplaces—might offer a way forward. These communities could engage in collective lawmaking, influencing the legal

norms that govern their work. By empowering workers to shape the laws that affect their lives, occupational communities could reinvigorate the collective spirit of labor law, moving beyond a purely functional approach that seeks to balance the interests of employers and workers.

Building upon Selznick's work, this would mean revamping the workplace itself as a polity and site of democratic government. This shifts the focus from seeing labor law as a tool of worker protection to seeing it as a more complex institution that should strive for industrial justice and emancipation, which could hopefully repoliticize labor law, restoring industrial justice from below and providing a more democratic framework for workplace governance.

The book opens up new avenues for further research. One of the key questions *Democracy at Work* raises is whether the categories of contract and status are transferable across different local and sectoral contexts, particularly in light of global challenges such as austerity, value chains, gig work, and technological disruption. Can these concepts still capture the diversity of contemporary work arrangements, which are increasingly characterized by precariousness and instability? The book leaves these questions open, suggesting the need for further research into how labor law can adapt to these new realities.

Additionally, the book highlights the difficulty labor law faces in accommodating the diverse interests of various groups of workers in the global economy. Dukes and Streeck suggest that decentralized forms of collective bargaining and action could address these challenges, but the effectiveness and limitations of such approaches remain uncertain. By emphasizing occupational communities, the book invites future research on potential pathways to revitalize labor law in a fragmented, globalized economy. It would be crucial for such research to critically engage with the book by exploring how processes such as racialization, colonialism, and empire shape the global division of labor, influencing workers' experiences and needs.

Overall, *Democracy at Work* offers a rich theoretical framework for rethinking the role of labor law in today's political economy, with important implications for both scholarship and policy. Through its critical exploration of labor law's historical evolution and normative foundations, the book lays the groundwork for ongoing debates about labor law's future in an increasingly complex and interconnected global workforce.

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