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Workers without Companies

Workers without Companies: Towards a New Way of Working

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To Pierre Rolle

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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to analyse work, a task that is vital for an understanding of the large-scale challenges facing society today. The topic is all the more relevant given the changes that have occurred in the different forms of work over recent decades, compounded by rising unemployment rates and the increased precariousness of employment statutes. Work, which at one time fostered the integration of different populations, standardising their living conditions and providing a certain degree of stability, is today developing in such a way as to render the entire system more fragile, often in complete disregard of the rules intended to regulate it. Tales of thousands of jobs being lost through bankruptcy and offshoring have become commonplace, as have discussions of the acceleration of production cycles, which is transforming recently-emerged professions (and generating new ones), renewing the techniques and technologies used, breaking up existing labour groups and changing, time and time again, our consumption habits. These shifts, which used to take an entire generation to become evident, today affect all age groups, spawning unease at the speed of change. Nevertheless, a thorough analysis of work requires us to go beyond such considerations to attempt to identify the processes of transformation that lie behind so much concern and disruption. Indeed, one of the aims of this book is to discuss a specific interpretation of these deep-rooted transformations, which we must understand if we are to rise to the challenges of our modern world.

Others have sought to explain the current transformations in work from different perspectives, interpreting them basically as being the result of the deliberate dismantlement of the wage labour statute in response to pressure from triumphant neoliberal forces. While the power of these processes and the weakening of many of the guarantees inherent to the wage labour statute cannot be denied, this perspective seems to overlook certain dimensions of work that, to our mind at least, are fundamental. One example is the collective framework in which both the wage labour statute itself and the (outwardly private) contract on which it rests are located. It is from this collective framework that the obligations that limit the employer's authority stem (an authority that is absolute when it comes to assigning and organising the tasks workers are expected to complete). It is also this collective framework that provides the guarantees and protections that workers enjoy in exchange for their subordination to their employer. And it is in this collective framework that we find the many different mechanisms which, outside the reach of the company and the individual labour contract, determine salary conditions, define employment categories and guide the development of professional careers.

In sum, the conditions under which the workforce is mobilised today in the production system are governed by a particularly dense web of mechanisms and institutions that also constitute an effective means of maintaining and renovating that same workforce. Like all other employment statutes, the wage labour statute not only establishes the rights and obligations of its signatories, but also incorporates workers into a vast system of collective insurance designed to cover all their needs linked to healthcare, temporary disability, housing, family and ageing, among others. In most European countries, these collective insurance systems are closely linked to employment, even if only as a result of the obligatory wage retentions used to finance them. Work is, therefore, much more than a simple professional statute or labour contract. It is a set of mechanisms and institutions that enable individuals to act as producers, assigning them a specific space for action

within a productive organisation and guaranteeing their reproduction. Seen from this perspective, work is a key element of our social system and the source from which it draws the strength it needs to exist, reproduce and adapt.

The disruption of professional statutes and the redefinition of the terms of the labour contract inevitably reflect shifts and transformations within this complex, multifaceted structure we call the *wage system*, in reference to which we seek to identify the deep-rooted transformations that appear to have led to the current state of disorder. We chose the term *wage system* after much debate, exacerbated by the fact that our book was drafted in three different languages; indubitably, the French term *salariat* would have been more faithful to some of the analyses of the wage system that served as a powerful inspiration for us during the writing of this book.² Pioneered in France by Pierre Naville, and developed further by Pierre Rolle, such analyses remained a minority approach within the (mainly empirical) branch of French sociology devoted to the subject of work. Time, however, has demonstrated the veracity of many of their initial results, such as, for example, Pierre Naville's analyses of automation at the beginning of the 1960s, which anticipated many of the transformations in work and social organisation with which we are struggling to come to terms today (Naville, 1963). Similarly, Pierre Rolle's more recent work (Rolle, 2022) offers a powerful reflection on the nation-state, a key stakeholder in the world of work, the actions of which have often been overlooked or reduced (over-simplistically in our opinion) to a clear-cut expression of a specific political project (this is the case, for example, with diagnoses postulating a dismantling of the wage system by dominant neoliberal forces).

We are particularly indebted to these French pioneers of *salariat* studies in all matters related to the identification of the deep-rooted dynamics of the wage system and we draw heavily on their view of work as the fundamental social relationship within that organisation. It is a relationship in which individuals' time and activity are harnessed for production and assigned to different jobs, in which they are consumed according to the demands of capitalist valorisation. Unlike in the past, individuals today are not predestined to take up a specific trade, profession or activity merely because they are born into a particular family or community. In the modern world, the children of farmers are not themselves preordained to become farmers, just as the children of butchers are not required to carry on the family business. The fact that privilege is slow to change or spread and that subordinate social positions tend to be passed down from generation to generation is no longer due to direct imposition, but rather to social mechanisms designed to reproduce and preserve social hierarchies. From this perspective, individuals are indeed 'free', if only, as Marx argues, to bring their own hide to market (and has nothing to expect but a hiding in return). In a society in which workers and work do not automatically overlap, the two must be coupled socially; this is precisely what the set of mechanisms and institutions alluded to above strives to do. This coupling continues to be necessary so long as production requires human work to valorise the capital that has been invested in it, and workers have no other means to earn a living.

The coupling of worker and work is a basic yet always delicate task in our society, due to the contradictions that both drive it and are caused by it. It is a union of two spheres that are fundamentally different in their composition, nature and the logic they obey. On the

² At the end of this Introduction the reader will find a (non-exhaustive) list of works by authors (both pioneers and followers) who have contributed to the development of the analysis of work from the perspective of the *salariat*.

one hand we have individuals, who seek to earn a living, acquire training and ensure they are ready for production; and on the other, we have production operations, which are geared towards valorising capital and whose organisation is constantly changing. Each of these spheres is linked to a specific cycle, which is different from, yet intrinsically entwined with that of the other. We have therefore analysed work (a social relationship oriented towards harnessing human activity) within the framework of this necessary coupling, interpreting its transformations as an expression of the changes taking place in the way this coupling is achieved. For example, we have observed the effects of a widening gulf between the two spheres (individuals and production operations), rendering their coupling more circumstantial and unstable than in the past. If individuals are no longer predestined from birth to engage in a specific trade, profession, statute or type of work, they are even less fated to do a specific job or join a specific company. The diversification of the wage labour contract, along with the emergence of new professional statutes, reveals the presence of a more temporary and less predictable relationship between individuals and their job. It is a relationship that, to a certain extent, is becoming more looser—hence the title of the book.

The effects of this distancing are multifarious, resulting in new reforms and actions that in many cases affect (and disrupt) states, which are key stakeholders in this increasingly unstable social architecture. These effects are never unequivocal; they can be contradictory and, at times, even paradoxical. For example, they are the source of the aforementioned disruption, yet *at the same time*, they bring with them the seed of a potentially emancipating future for workers. We say potentially emancipating because the very distancing we have alluded to also serves to remove workers somewhat from the more direct determinants of technology, the arbitrariness of their employers and the mechanisms that constantly seek to compare and rank them. Difficult though it may be to maintain an overarching analysis of these opposing yet closely correlated aspects, it is vital that we do so if we wish to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under observation. In our book, we have tried to achieve this by examining different means of mobilising the workforce, since it is through this mobilisation that the basic social relationship we call work is manifested. The so-called ‘standard’ model, which links the wage labour contract to a private company and integrates the workforce into that organisation, is not the only possible means of mobilising the workforce. There are many other formulas in our market societies that contribute effectively to the valorisation of capital and we see no reason to exclude them from our analyses, particularly since conventional models no longer do much to protect workers against abusive practices. Good examples of these alternative formulas include zero-hours contracts and on-demand work, which require workers to be available without guaranteeing them any fixed income. At the same time, in the production system, which now operates throughout the world (albeit with significant variations in format), the conditions applied across different sectors of activity are gradually being standardised, and the borders (more conceptual than empirical) between those sectors are becoming increasingly blurred. For all of these reasons, it is vital to gain an overall understanding of the way in which this new productive system functions.

Alongside standard formulas for mobilising work, we also analyse three alternatives, since we are convinced that farmers, the new self-employed workers and academic researchers have much to teach us in this regard. Our aim is not, however, to present them as the quintessential figures of the future of work, as some analyses of delivery riders working for digital platforms have done. We simply discuss their presence as alternative

means of mobilising the workforce, describing as best we can the system of stakeholders, institutions, mechanisms and social relations that make sense of each and enable their reproduction. In other words, we explore these alternative *work formulas* by trying to find in them evidence of the distancing to which we have alluded. The effects of this distancing reflect the general disruption we are currently experiencing, alongside the sometimes spectacular increase in income and wealth disparities both within and (particularly) between states. The unequal distribution of socially-produced value between capital and labour clearly reflects this process, which, along with overt or covert wars between states, is the main driver behind the dangerous migratory processes some populations have been forced to undertake. States are also under pressure in this sense, as a result of both resource depletion and increasing levels of mistrust among their citizens. Throughout the world, this growing political unrest has given rise to some ominous calls for a return to the past and the reestablishment of authority, demands that only serve to cast an even darker shadow over an already uncertain future.

And to all must be added the existential challenge posed to the human race by climate change. We are all aware of the part played in global warming by the modern-day production system and its intensive use of the workforce, machinery and natural resources. Production continues to be a fundamental issue in this respect, even though it is often ignored, minimised or bypassed in many of the alternatives proposed under the so-called *degrowth* approach. This is the case with most of the *penseurs du vivant* (thinkers of the living world)³ who, paradoxically, advocate a strengthening of our connection with the reality of the world, even though this ‘reality’ seems to lack the key component through which humans produce and reproduce.⁴ The solution, we believe, does not lie in stopping production, but rather in determining the conditions under which it can continue while respecting the future of both the planet itself and its inhabitants. The problem is a tricky one that will keep us busy for the foreseeable future, but in order to find an effective solution, we must first understand how our society functions today, and face up to the contradictions and paradoxes that determine, with ever-increasing intensity, our social experience.

The book is divided into two parts, followed by a detailed conclusions in which we propose possible ideas for a future programme of research into the topic of work. **Part One** explores the standard formulas of work that constitute the core of the wage system. Our analysis focuses mainly on Europe, a region that seeks to offer a protectionist model of workers’ rights. The principles implemented in Europe are, however, much more universal in nature, and their distinctiveness lies in the constant and central action taken by the states, particularly in managing and orienting the mutualised system of workforce maintenance and reproduction (**Chapter 1**). The representatives of capital and labour, often referred to as ‘social partners’, also participate actively in this system, thereby ensuring an ‘administered management’ of work and its exchanges. These mechanisms

³ This group encompasses a range of different authors, all united by a common approach. On the international stage, the best-known are without doubt the sociologist Bruno Latour, the anthropologist Philippe Descola, and the philosopher Vinciane Despret. Although possibly less well-known outside France, the philosopher Baptiste Morizot and the anthropologist Nastassja Martin are also key members of this group.

⁴ For further information on this fundamental issue, we recommend the book recently published by Alexandra Bidet and Vincent Rigoulet (Bidet & Rigoulet, 2023), which contains a detailed and well-documented critical analysis of the work of the best-known *penseurs du vivant* regarding production.

of protection and negotiation are often viewed as ‘triumphs of the workers’ movement’. Their establishment, however, is actually the result of a complex confluence of stakeholders and interests, including those of big business and the administrative apparatus of the states. They are ambivalent devices that recognise the rights of (subordinate) salaried workers, while at the same time establishing pacifying mechanisms designed to facilitate capitalist valorisation.

In developed countries, this system evolved hand in hand with (and to a large extent enabled) the unprecedented expansion of postwar capitalism during what has become known as the *Golden Age* (**Chapter 2**). The spread of the wage labour statute and the labour contract on which it is based prompted a mass migration of the workforce towards industry and the services sector, both of which were hungry for labour. It also had a standardising effect on many societies, which became societies of salaried workers, although differences soon started to creep back in. From very early on, workforce mobilisation strategies began to diversify, with new models arising, many of which were highly disruptive. One example is the model promoted by digital platforms, which mobilise workers remotely without actually incorporating them into their organisations. Companies, which for many years constituted the main source of workforce mobilisation, have gradually begun to move away from this function. Some, like the digital platforms, have resorted to the use of bogus self-employed workers to avoid having to pay to maintain a standing workforce. Others have simply disappeared, due either to bankruptcy or a decision to off-shore their business to regions that offer more favourable conditions. These transformations are analysed from two perspectives (**Chapter 3**): first, the increase in inequality in terms of income and wealth registered within (and between) different countries, as evidenced in the unequal distribution of the value generated; and second, the growing distance between work and workers, with the latter being mobilised in an increasingly circumstantial and provisional manner. Experiences of work and worker’s living conditions are becoming more and more fragmented, often making it hard to gain a clear picture of what they have in common. This places enormous strain on the system, while at the same time enabling it to survive and even expand. More than the collapse of the wage system, what we are witnessing is its mutation.

The **second part of the book** draws on the findings of our previous studies to explore the functioning of three different forms of work. First, we focus on new self-employment statutes, in which salaried workers are transformed into entrepreneurs who enjoy certain rights traditionally reserved for wage-earners subordinate to their employers (**Chapter 4**). Next, we analyse the situation of farmers, workers with an uncertain professional statute who engage in agricultural production within a complex system that guides and sets the pace of their activities (**Chapter 5**). Finally, we turn to public sector researchers (**Chapter 6**), who are exposed to collaboration and managed by multiple authorities that define and orient (ever more restrictively) the aims of their research and the means of achieving them. These formulas for mobilising the workforce demonstrate the extreme plasticity that characterises the wage system, which has no compunction about side-lining companies and promoting more incongruent professional statutes if its development so requires. As we can see, however, these constant readjustments generate tension, which states, somewhat hesitantly, seek to resolve, creating new problems in the process that herald more reforms, crises and disruption in the future.

The last and longest chapter in this book (**Conclusions**) draws together all the lessons of the previous ones to propose five avenues of research for a possible future programme on

work. Three of these avenues concern what we believe to be key elements for consideration in any research on the issue of work. First, in keeping with our interpretation of the phenomenon of work, we seek to explore the fundamental split between work and workers that structures (and to a certain extent beleaguers) our social organisation. Second, we have the issue of the recourse to work, an increasingly temporary and ‘disconnected’ option promoted by a profoundly different means of valorising capital. And finally, there is the question of the global, decentralised nature of the current production system, as well as the (apparent) transformation of the *company structure* that is so closely associated with it. It is vital that we start thinking about work within this global framework, in which capital circulates and is transformed at an unprecedented pace. Every area of production that we observe empirically forms part of a chain of activities that, today more than ever, goes far beyond individual jobs, the companies that organise them and the countries that host them. Empirically speaking, we are only ever able to observe fragments of work, which are often more sensitive to global transformations than to mutations in their immediate environment.

These shifts and changes also impact the other two stakeholders in the system: states and workers (and their representatives). And these are the last two avenues of research identified. In relation to states, the aim is to chart the different sources of tension to which they are subject, as well as the ambivalence of their actions, two issues that pose a plethora of questions about their future. The conditions under which states operate today lead to opposing trends, the results of which are difficult to predict. On the one hand, these conditions clearly weaken the capacity to act of states and the traditional political parties that aspire to power; yet at the same time, they offer them the opportunity to establish authoritarian and arbitrary procedures and make unilateral decisions—in other words, to resort to discretionary forms of governance. As for the workers, the fragmentation of their professional careers undermines the very foundations of the system of workforce reproduction and protection, which is based primarily on employment. In this regard, it is important to look beyond temporary links to production when exploring professional trajectories. Several proposals have already been made in this area, and we analyse them from a critical standpoint in the last of the avenues identified, whilst also examining the questions that labour law poses in regard to the worker statute.

Our aim in establishing this programme of research on the issue of work is to ask questions and set goals that are more in keeping with the real situation of today’s world—a prerequisite, as we have said, for imagining a better one. It is clearly the responsibility of the workers themselves to come up with the forms and structure of this new world, but as a small contribution to this undertaking, we end the book with five proposals for future research on the matter.

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PART I: Shaping the wage system in Europe

What does it mean to work? Working is an experience that most of us necessarily have to cope with on an everyday basis. Apart from a small minority who enjoy a private income, the norm in our societies is that we all need to work to pay for ourselves and our families. This individual experience varies depending on the specific industry, company, collective, technology or moment, thus leading to varying levels of satisfaction. This might all seem obvious today, but it has not always been the case. Although work is a necessary function in any society, there are considerable variations in the way human activity is structured around it. Indeed, it depends on an entire social organisation, rather than on specific actors within that society. In the first part of this book, we will try to define the social organisation within which individual experiences of work are lived out today and which constitutes their shared foundation. This is no small task; work is remarkably dynamic, and the result is a constant change in institutions, production activities and the type of knowledge that is considered useful at any time. Nonetheless, over the last forty years, the social sciences have built up a large enough body of solid information to achieve this aim.

We shall begin by discussing whether there exists a specifically European model of work that is intrinsically more protective and democratic than others. In this regard, we should make a number of qualifications. First, the widely varying domestic situations of different European countries make it difficult to offer a single overview of shared characteristics. Second, although the predominance of the labour contract, with its arsenal of guarantees and rights, is often held out as a European differential, it can also be found in other regions, albeit with fewer protections, especially against dismissal. Nor is Europe the only region in which work is closely tied to a variety of social insurance mechanisms, enabling a system of *mutualised* protection against the various risks of life (illness, disability, old age, unemployment, etc.) to be organised for the entire community. This work-based socialisation also applies to other important social functions such as youth education, housing, transport, healthcare institutions, etc.

If there is one thing that distinguishes this geographically nebulous collection of countries that comprises Europe, it is the fact that the vast majority of workers are required to pay into these mutualised systems, either through taxes or social contributions. By social contributions, we mean the compulsory advance withholding of a portion of earned income to finance collective risk protection schemes. More often than not, therefore, working in Europe means participating in a vast system binding different generations and shaping institutions, regulations, legislation and other schemes that progressively structure all of our lives. To that extent, work is not only our inescapable fate; it is also an overarching system that conditions and enables the reproduction of different groups of workers—in other words, societies.

Another characteristically European feature is that this vast global system lies in the hands of the state. As its principal administrators, it is the individual states that control the extraordinary financial flows it generates and determine the thresholds and eligibility criteria for accessing the different social benefits. Naturally, this 'redistributive' function, from which states draw much of their legitimacy, is of fundamental importance to them and it is easy to understand why the member states of the European Union have jealously sought to hold on to their prerogatives in social matters, transferring only the least portion

of their responsibilities to the community sphere. Nonetheless, although they play a decisive role, states are not the only players with responsibility for this management function. Through negotiation, the 'social partners'—representatives of employers and workers—are involved in defining the parameters of the labour exchange: price, duration, the nature of the ties between the different participants, etc. This is known as an 'administered' system, to distinguish it from purely market regulation, and it is found to varying degrees in other parts of the world. However, Europe stands out for the sheer scale of this type of regulation and thus the number of workers targeted. It is important to note that this involvement of the 'social partners' is the only mechanism that Europe has actually extended to a community-wide level, even though negotiations at this level are currently suffering from a certain lack of momentum.

So, from where, in the midst of all the irreducible diversity of national arrangements, did this common European space arise? The industrial and political history of Western Europe is undoubtedly a font of shared experience. For a long period, today's most developed countries functioned as the workshop of the world and employed the largest workforce. From an early juncture, this labour force, concentrated in large production centres, was politically articulate, spawning particularly active workers' movements. Against this especially tense social backdrop, stretching from the end of the nineteenth century through to World War II, the Russian Revolution and its transnational ambitions catalysed workers' hopes for emancipation and fuelled the fears of capitalists and states. The response from European governments was not only to unleash intense police repression, but also to introduce mechanisms to make employment more secure, in an attempt to defuse the most radical of the workers' demands.

Thus, the social organisation of labour which became the norm in Europe was, above all, a 'pragmatic' response to extreme political tensions. It was promoted by the states with active support from the economic powers and the participation of a section of the workers' movement. The first chapter in this book outlines the history of the period up to and including the interwar years. It shows that the origins of the wage system were more ambiguous and interlinked than many analysts have previously tended to assume. Some have seen it as a manifestation of a particular sensitivity of European states towards social issues. This is demonstrated by the now conventional use of terms such as 'social state' or 'welfare state', which presuppose the existence of an intrinsically social political project among European states. Others view it as an achievement in the battle by workers to force capitalists to grant social benefits. Viewed from this perspective, the workers' movement successfully managed to introduce an anomaly into the workings of capitalism.

As discussed in the second chapter, this social organisation of labour was relaunched after World War II, building on its previous position and expanding globally through the creation of a series of more or less consolidated institutions. The labour contract, which endured throughout this period, was an essential feature. With the help of the law, it served to structure the duration and stability of labour exchanges. Developed countries became 'nations of wage earners'. In other words, income from labour became their main source of consumption, savings, investment and, ultimately, national growth. In overall terms, this was an auspicious period for workers, who could now afford to consume the manufactures they themselves had contributed to making, while at the same time helping to ensure an outlet for these same products. Workers also benefited from an increase and diversification in social spending. This period is often referred to as the *golden age* of

capitalism. Nonetheless, large sections of the population were left behind, exposed to increasing inequality and a whole series of difficult and precarious working conditions.

In any event, this *golden age* did not last long. From the 1980s on, the system became a context that was exposed to profound changes. A succession of economic 'crises' soon followed. Socio-technical innovations revolutionised the way people lived and worked, while industry and the very nature of the corporation were utterly reshaped by globalisation. The situation was further compounded by unemployment and new, more precarious and short-term forms of labour force mobilisation, for some wage earners at least. Starting with these two major stages that have played out since the postwar period, Chapter 2 explores the largely unaddressed mutation undergone by the traditional players of the *wage-based society*: companies, trade unions and states.

While these players have been transformed, what has happened to the forms of labour exchange that once linked them? Chapter 3 examines two important elements in this regard that seem destined to endure. The first is the constant pressure being exerted on labour incomes in order to extract continued profits despite lower increases in productivity. This is reflected in an unprecedented shift in the relative distribution of value between capital and labour, as well as an incessant rise in inequality. It is impossible to tell what social disturbances this trend may ultimately engender. However, what is clear is that such upheavals are taking place across the globe, on occasion bringing electoral victory and legitimacy to the most unpredictable political groupings. The second feature is the fact that diversification in the way the workforce is mobilised has led to the introduction of more short-term, intermittent and irregular forms of employment, profoundly marked by a sense of provisionality. The relationships between the different protagonists on the employment stage are also becoming more distant. Through a variety of channels and employment statutes, workers are finding themselves operating increasingly on the fringes of the firms with which they collaborate.

These two phenomena, which appear to be more dynamic than ever, have far-reaching effects. This first part of the book seeks to explain the principles and history of wage-based societies, which have slowly regulated their labour exchanges according to the duration of the tasks assigned and the proximity between employers and employees. Today, these societies are seeing more remote and unstable models, marked by inequality and profound reverses for labour. Under these conditions, how will they be able to guarantee the minimum degree of stability they need to reproduce?

1. Ambiguities in the European model

Europe claims to be both a world economic power and a model of advanced democracy, capable of ensuring not only that its citizens' fundamental human rights are safeguarded, but that they are provided with extensive social protection, especially in the sphere of work. Despite its weakened position, Europe is still a major economic player on the world stage. The twenty-seven member states of the European Union account for 18% of the world's gross domestic product. The EU has nearly 700 million consumers with medium and high purchasing power and forms a key trading bloc for international operators.

However, matters are not as clear when it comes to the more generous social protection Europeans are presumed to enjoy. Average social expenditure in the EU as a whole is indeed greater than the average elsewhere in the OECD (30% of GDP as compared to 20.6%). However, the United States—often cited as being the antithesis to Europe when it comes to social protection—has a similar level of social spending (29.6%). The difference is minuscule, especially taking into account the major internal disparities within the EU. Indeed, in many countries, social expenditure rates are well below not only the European, but also the OECD average. This is true, for example, of Luxembourg (17.4%) and Ireland (14.7%).

Although there are other European particularities in the area of labour, two features—which are found to some extent or another in all developed economies—are particularly striking. The first is the way that social expenditure is financed by compulsory employment-related contributions. Most workers in Europe are subject to this system. By contrast, in the US, where healthcare and pension schemes depend to a greater extent on different private operators, it extends to only 38% of the workforce. The second characteristic feature is the fundamental role played by European states in managing and orienting social spending. Yet what exactly does this organisation of the social sphere involve? To what extent is it the result of Europe's highly heterogeneous general history?

Compulsory insurance under state control

In most European member states (20 out of 27), public spending is financed through a variety of mechanisms. Of these, one is particularly important: a contribution (compulsory and paid in advance) applied to a portion of labour earnings (salaries, benefits, fees, pensions, etc.). This is known as the social contribution and constitutes the basis of the 'pay-as-you-go' scheme. In this system, a generation of active workers and their employers finance community protection against a variety of risks. In former Soviet-bloc countries, for example, most of the revenue used for social spending is obtained using this mechanism. By contrast, in Ireland it accounts for only 38.4% of revenue and in Denmark just 18.6%. Direct and indirect taxes are another source of financing; in almost all countries, they are largely collected in advance and their importance has also tended to increase.⁵ Thus, social contributions and taxes constitute social funds, which are essentially managed and governed by the states and their administrations. It is state

⁵ In 2018, collective insurance schemes in Europe were 40% financed by social contributions and 38% by direct and indirect taxes (Eurostat, EESPROS database, 2018).

governments who determine the conditions of access to different rights, the amount of the social contributions and the general distribution of public spending.

Does this mean that Europe has built a uniform social model with common resources? Decidedly not. In most EU countries, the welfare system is based primarily on national schemes. Community strategies—such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in agriculture—are the exception. Amongst all the EU's aspirations to become a (more or less) harmonious coalition of states, the social sphere has never been a priority. Since the foundations were first laid for the European project in 1957, it has focused primarily on creating a space for the free movement of goods, services, capital and people; this was seen as a necessary condition for the economic growth from which social progress was supposed to emanate. The 'European social model', if that term can be used to describe the mechanisms put in place by the different countries, is limited to certain guarantees—such as equal rights between European nationals and citizens—aimed mainly at harmonising the conditions under which those states compete (Didry & Mias, 2003; Pochet, 2019).⁶

As a result, the different member states have jealously guarded their prerogatives over social affairs, refusing to pool all or indeed any of their social protection funds at a European level and resisting any attempt at common organisation of their national schemes. In retaining control over this social component, the states have two aims: to sustain an oft-challenged political legitimacy and to have an effective regulatory lever by way of the so-called 'social' policies. We therefore need to view the 'European social model' from the diversity of its different national manifestations, with regard to the resources mobilised, the risks covered and the conditions of access imposed (Greve, 2019; Kuhlmann, 2019). This diversity has further increased as lower-income countries—especially those from former Eastern bloc countries—have joined the Union. Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1989) famously encapsulated this diversity in his description of three models: corporative-conservative, liberal and social democratic. His classification has since been hybridised and broken down into a variety of sub-models (Rhodes, 1997; Huber & Stephens, 2001; Katrougalos & Lazaridis, 2002; Hicks & Kenworthy, 2003).

Although it is difficult to place empirically, the 'European social model' nevertheless arouses considerable controversy in Europe. In the social sciences, for example, debates between researchers comparing different 'social' or 'welfare' states have spawned a diversity of possible denominations and thus meanings.⁷ The same is true of political actors, particularly from the more liberal schools of thought, for whom social spending constitutes an excess of 'generosity' and an incentive to unemployment. In 2012, for example, former head of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, said the following when calling for budgetary restraint: 'You know there was a time when (economist) Rudi Dornbusch used to say that the Europeans are so rich they can afford to pay everybody

⁶ It is in this context, for example, that one should view the simplification of the occupational health and safety decision-making procedures contained in Chapter 2 of the Single European Act, and, in particular, the issue of employment, which has become an area of community competence (Treaty of Amsterdam, 1997). Also in regard to employment, one might mention the European Employment Strategy (Luxembourg, 1997), which extended the mechanisms of coordination between the different national policies on pensions, social protection, education, training, etc.

⁷ Thus, while the Germans, for example, speak of a *Sozialstaat*, in France, equivalent but not identical arrangements become the *État-providence* (in the sense of foresight) and, in the Netherlands, a *Verzorgingsstaat* (from *verzorgings* meaning care).

for not working. That's gone.' (Blackstone et al., 2012). In essence, Draghi was sounding the death knell of the 'European social model'.

To return to the issue of social spending and its coverage, it is important to note that social spending is a response to what are known in the field of social welfare as risks, that is to say, the threats that have long plagued human communities. These include illness, disability, old age and the inability to find a place to live or raise a family. Meeting these needs means providing food and shelter, but it also involves responding—as far as possible—to any unforeseen events that may arise during our lifetime. The direct wage that employees receive in exchange for placing their labour capacity at the disposal of an employer is insufficient for this purpose and always has been. We see multiple examples of this from the nineteenth century process of industrialisation, ranging from the destitution and short lifespan of the proletariat to, conversely, the paternalistic initiatives from some employers to provide their employees with housing, healthcare and education for their children (future company workers), thus in the long run ensuring a stable and submissive workforce. Workers themselves organised cooperatives to provide mutual protection against the risks they faced in life. In our societies, a supplement to the direct wage, or 'social wage', is provided in the form of benefits, i.e. services associated with specific situations and given under equally specific conditions, which are essentially defined by the states. On average, social spending each year provides a wage supplement of 8,350 PPS (Purchasing Power Standard)⁸ per European (figures for 2018, before the COVID pandemic), i.e. 40% of the average annual income (20,000 PPS or €20,130).⁹

Social spending partially reduces the need for wage earners to save money, by removing uncertainty about how they might cope with unforeseen events in life. It also provides the necessary social stability for business, by avoiding the tensions that might arise from any minor fluctuation in the value of savings or prices if employees needed to protect themselves against risks. Otherwise, any wage claim would run the risk of turning into a riot. The €820 billion raised in 2019 in the various European countries to finance social protection gives some idea of the scale of the funds handled. By way of comparison, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) budget for the same year was €54 billion. One can therefore readily understand why states have introduced a variety of compulsory collective procedures to regulate these accumulated incomes, orienting the maintenance and reproduction of a wage-earning class that grew continuously throughout the twentieth century.

Unlike the nineteenth century and the early paternalistic schemes of business owners, the chief protagonists in this vast collective system are no longer companies, nor indeed mutual or corporatist workers' organisations. All of their previous attainments have been progressively merged into a single, centralised, state-run system. The 'social partners'—representatives of employers and workers—take part in the system by joining in a number of carefully codified negotiations, with varying degrees of autonomy. At these talks, they establish the price of labour, professional advancement, conditions for labour use, the amount and duration of unemployment benefits, pensions, etc. Employers' organisations are still very active in these areas of negotiation. They have acquired the right to take part

⁸ The Purchasing Power Standard (PPS) is an artificial monetary unit intended to remove differences in price levels between countries. PPS ensures that the same volume of goods and services can be procured in all countries and facilitates international comparison of economic indicators.

⁹ Scope: 28-country European Union. Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC system.

in exchange for their input to the social funds. However, their contribution (one third),¹⁰ might be considered fairly modest, especially in view of the numerous subsidies they enjoy throughout Europe (for example, when they employ unskilled labour or persons with difficulties in accessing employment, such as young people with no work experience). The state and its representatives tend to play a decisive, and often prevailing, role in these negotiations.

Indeed, tripartite negotiation was one of the few mechanisms to spread throughout the EU, during the Delors presidency (1985–1994) at least. Throughout that period, several European-wide representative bodies were set up and negotiations were held on a variety of labour issues, including talks on regulating part-time work, fixed-term employment contracts and the introduction of parental leave. Achieving these aims not only required active support from the European Commission; it also needed the national trade unions—many of which were critical of the fundamentally economic goals of the single market—to join the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). Another prerequisite was a shift in the balance of power within the Confederation of European Business Owners,¹¹ with the southern European countries coming out in favour of the German representatives to the detriment of the hard-line liberal wing of the British employers. What finally tipped the balance was the election of Social Democrat or Christian Democrat-led governments in several European countries (Moschonas, 1994; Ducange, Keucheyan & Roza, 2021). Their backing was vital for the European project to be accepted by a hitherto unenthusiastic public. In this regard, one should not forget the intense referendum campaigns on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.

This 'social moment' in Europe came to an end from the 1990s on, when liberal voices regained control of European employers' organisations, in the generally uninspiring context of the Barroso Commission (2004–2014). Social dialogue in Europe ceased to push for legally binding agreements. This is evidenced by Article 155 of the 2019 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which reads 'Should management and labour so desire, the dialogue between them at Union level may lead to contractual relations, including agreements'. Everything, then, depends on the national dynamism of the social dialogue. As with many other aspects in Europe, this varies greatly from one country to another and depending on the social partners that have (or have not!) historically formed part of it. The 2004 European Framework Agreement on work-related stress, for example, has only been implemented in 30% of the countries affected (Michéa, 2019). European employers have even gone so far as to make it a precondition for talks that any agreement should not be mandatory. One example was the negotiation on inclusive labour markets, which contained little that might be considered offensive. Here, extensive talks ended with a simple list of good practices.

European states also intervene to a significant extent in labour issues by promoting and orienting a variety of legal arrangements that provide an employment framework and structure. One excellent example is the labour contract, the cornerstone of labour regulation. This contract binds two parties, the employer and the employee, for a given period of time, based on certain stated categories, while formalising the asymmetry of their respective positions. Specifically, the worker's position is subordinate to that of the employer, enabling the latter to direct the former's productive activity and coordinate it

¹⁰ Eurostat, EESPROS database, 2018.

¹¹ Known at the time as the Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe (UNICE). From 2007, the European employers' association was renamed Business Europe.

with that of others, with no obligation to specify at all times what tasks are thus allocated, nor how they are to develop. These apparently private contracts are in actual fact heavily regulated by the public authorities via a set of provisions contained in national labour laws, which determine and delimit the employer's authority. Such legislation may be more or less restrictive, but essentially it imposes obligations on the employer that constitute guarantees and protections attached to the employment statute: social rights, protection against dismissal, obligation to prevent occupational hazards, etc. In short, the labour contract acts as a counterweight to the subordinate position that salaried workers are presumed to have freely consented to occupy.

Another area of state involvement in the labour sphere in the EU is the training and education of younger generations. In most cases, states are responsible for certifying the skills acquired, although they may sometimes cede their diploma-issuing privileges to selected social agents. As a result, the school institution is now largely run outside the company environment, meaning that firms no longer have to shoulder the cost of the apprentice schools of yesteryear. Once again, employers' representatives are very active in this area, participating in the different bodies responsible for orienting training, especially vocational training. Indeed, the sharp increase in different types of apprenticeship has provided companies with a cheap, well-trained young source of labour. They can also hire them directly, offering short-term, part-time employment while they are still in education.

The productivity of labour is subjected to constant scrutiny. In Europe, as elsewhere, work is regulated by a complex series of mechanisms and institutions which set its price, define its terms of use and mutualise the costs of social protection, education (to a varying extent), housing, healthcare, etc., for all workers. This type of work impacts not only the individual, but the entirety of the social organisation through which the collectivity is reproduced. If there is anything unusual about Europe, it is the central role that states play within this social organisation. And that social organisation in turn provides them with substantial financial flows and allows them to establish their legitimacy, for example by redistributing the resources they hold. However, the fact that this shared feature can be found in countries across the European Union owes very little to community initiatives, which continue to focus primarily on ensuring the free flow of trade. It should instead be examined in the context of the profound disparity within the EU, in which individual countries have jealously guarded the institutions and bodies that regulate work. So how has such a disparate and dissonant collection of states managed to converge on labour-related issues?

The legacy of an industrial and political history

Some explanation for this paradoxical convergence of the principles used to organise labour within such a heterogeneous grouping may be found in the history of European industry. Although agricultural employment had long been a feature of Europe, the footprint of industry in European countries—in the northwest of the continent, at least—has been greater than in any other comparable region (Kaelble, 1998). First, the process of industrialisation was a particularly long one, extending over almost two centuries, from the start of the industrial revolution in England right through to the 1950s and 1960s. Second, industrial employment in Europe has always been important, accounting at its peak for a higher proportion of employment than elsewhere. This was particularly true of

Great Britain and Germany, but it was also the case in Belgium and Sweden. All of these countries played a major role in Europe. Throughout the nineteenth century and until the early 1970s, Europe could lay claim to being the workshop of the world and European manufactures were exported to the rest of the globe, to countries where employment in trade and transport, for example, developed more.

With only a few exceptions (amongst them France), emigration from Europe was particularly intense throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century (up until the 1950s, or indeed the 1970s in the case of many southern European countries) and this probably limited the development of the service sector. Had they not emigrated, the millions of Europeans who left for North or South America would most likely have found work in trade, transport or a variety of personal services in the large urban centres. Finally, one other feature that distinguished Europe from the US (although not necessarily from Japan, pre-revolutionary Russia or the USSR) was that, for a long time, the processes of industrial production were more labour-intensive. Indeed, this is still the case in some sectors today. For example, the luxury industry and the artisan manufacturing sector, which were both deeply rooted in Europe, were difficult to mechanise, and European entrepreneurs were disinclined to invest in machinery.

As a result, despite major differences between countries, a large working-class population was formed in Western Europe from a relatively early period, while at the same time, the region retained an extensive agricultural sector. In 1970, one third of the European working population was employed in industry, whereas in the United States, Australia, Canada and Japan, the sector accounted for just one quarter of the labour force.¹² Unions and worker-based political parties gradually coordinated and structured the working-class population, which was highly concentrated in large urban industrial areas. The nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century saw the development of large numbers of social movements championing workers' rights. The intensity of these movements varied from country to country, but they were capable of making their demands heard in parliament and even of destabilising governments by initiating revolutionary processes, some of which led to major social reforms.

France's Popular Front, which emerged between 1936 and 1938 out of a series of major popular mobilisations, is an illustrative example of a key moment in European social history. The strikes of June 1936 were brought to an end by the Matignon Accords, which established several fundamental elements of today's regulatory framework for labour relations in Europe. The agreements prioritised 'collective labour contracts' (i.e. collective bargaining), consolidated trade union rights and increased the lowest wages by 15% (Alaluf, 2021). The celebrated laws on the 40-hour work week and paid vacations were complemented by the reform of the Banque de France and nationalisation of the war industries. This period of social reform under a capitalist regime came under severe budgetary pressure as a consequence of the Great Crash of 1929—whose effects came late to France—aggravated by opposition from financial circles. Measures such as the creation of a national unemployment fund and the establishment of a pension for older workers were abandoned in favour of rearmament against Germany.

¹² These figures do not include the former German Democratic Republic or the countries of the former Soviet Union. Source: ILO, Yearbook of Labour Statistics. Retrospective Edition of Population Censuses 1945–1989, Geneva, 1990.

Another common feature of the European experience was the mark left by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. In the early twentieth century, revolution had been expected in industrial Germany. When it finally did come, however, it was in a feudal country with a prevailingly peasant populace. Across the continent, the Russian Revolution sparked a wave of social movements in the form of general strikes (France 1920), peasant and worker mobilisations (Italy 1919–1920) and even popular uprisings (Germany 1919 and 1921, Hungary 1919 and Poland 1923). All of these were violently suppressed, even by social democratic governments such as the SPD in the Weimar Republic. The same 'fear of communism' that lay behind these violent repressions, also fostered a 'reformism of capital', in an attempt to meet some of the workers' demands, while at the same time defusing some of the most subversive ones. This reformism is often painted simply as one of the achievements of the workers' movement, but it enabled an expanding European capitalism to adapt—slowly and chaotically—to the social upheavals of the time. Reformism of capital often sparked bitter controversy, partly, of course, because of the ideological divergences between liberals and social democrats, but also, and perhaps more decisively, due to the extreme technical difficulty involved in creating such collectivised organisations for the social protection of workers (Hennock, 1987; Ashford, 1988; Hatzfeld, 2005).

The prominent part played by Bismarck's Germany in launching these collectivised institutions within capitalist societies in Europe is a good demonstration of the ambivalence of the defining influences. The principal laws that Bismarck pushed through the Reichstag from 1883 onwards enjoyed the backing of the large landowners, the nobility and the Lutheran Church. Their stated aim was to pilot workers away from the socialist party created in 1875, against which the chancellor and his allies brought to bear all the means of repression at their disposal. Bismarck's Germany thus launched the first major compulsory insurance system, erected on the basis of compulsory deductions from earnings—in other words, an early form of social contribution (Durand, 2005). This first mandatory insurance system provided workers with protection in the event of illness, maternity, old age and disability. Germany's lead was soon followed by the Netherlands, Romania, Austria and the Scandinavian countries. In the United Kingdom too, a bill on industrial accidents (the Workmen's Compensation Act) was passed in 1897. Two other major acts followed in 1908 and 1911, the Old Age Pensions Act and the National Insurance Act, which provided cover for sickness, disability and unemployment. France became embroiled in endless parliamentary debates on a mandatory Bismarckian system, the need for which was by then apparent. However, for a long time it clung to the 1898 law on workplace accidents (Ewald, 1986; Cottin–Euziol, 2016). The 1910 laws on workers' and peasants' pensions failed because of the modest sums provided, the small number of workers covered and the absence of protection in the event of sickness, which was left in the hands of unaffordable or non-existent voluntary insurance schemes.

Countries in Southern Europe also followed suit, although for a long time the early insurance systems suffered from fragmentation and underfunding. In Spain, for example, a Social Reforms Commission was set up in 1883 to improve the living conditions and welfare of the working class. In 1900, the first national social insurance against accidents at work was created and in 1908, a national welfare institute was set up (the Instituto Nacional de Previsión, an autonomous public body with representation from the workers, employers and the state) to promote 'welfare culture' among the working classes. These early insurance schemes were not compulsory and offered limited protection (Montero García et al., 1988; Castillo, 2008). In Italy, where the liberal monarchy of the late

nineteenth century was primarily concerned with the country's unification, social insurance initiatives arrived somewhat later. Nevertheless, between 1917 and 1921, the country rapidly fell into step with other European powers, and some three hundred social protection measures were enacted to help the large numbers of invalids, war widows, orphans, elderly persons and those injured in agricultural and industrial work. In 1919, the country even instituted the first form of unemployment protection in Europe (Pavan, 2019; Valat & Rainhorn, 2019).

The formation of the chief players in the labour exchange

The period from 1920 to 1930 saw the first significant steps in collective organisation of the world of work. France, for example, was concerned about movements for self-government in Alsace and Lorraine after World War I. It therefore gradually positioned itself in favour of a compulsory German-style collective welfare system, such as the one that operated in those regions. It is worth noting, however, that the system was promoted not by the 1924–1926 Cartel des Gauches [Cartel of the Left] government, but by a later moderate administration, keen to claim political parenthood of a system that was already in widespread use throughout Europe, and whose principles had long been inconclusively discussed in France. The 1928 laws implemented a 'German-style' system of social protection throughout the country. Attempts to silence opposition to the scheme, however, failed. Small business owners largely objected because of the new economic burdens imposed on them, which would soon drive them to become part of the wage system themselves. By contrast, larger employers already had major social welfare schemes in place and, to a varying extent, accepted the principle that such schemes should be mandatory. They were therefore more willing to transform the existing systems, provided that they could play a part in administering the new funds. As we have seen, they continue to defend this goal doggedly to this day.

For their part, the workers did not necessarily favour the change, especially those in small and medium-sized enterprises whose earnings were being reduced by the social contribution. Doctors were worried about the possible 'debasement' of their profession; farmers refused to pay in for others and demanded their own specific provident fund and communists rejected the notion of workers' contributions and any employer representation on the boards of provident funds. A variety of compromises were therefore required to get the law across the line, all of them at the state's expense from a financial and management point of view. They included extensive tax relief for industry, tripartite management of provident fund boards, the creation of a specific provident fund for farmers with smaller social contributions, recognition of professional autonomy for doctors, etc. After years of tension, the budgetary situation appeared favourable for implementing the reforms. However, political leaders utterly failed to notice the looming 1929 stock market crash that was soon to engulf the country.

The French example shows the complexity and ambivalence of the mechanisms that led to the first institutions regulating the wage system. During the 1930s, the wage system was far from being hegemonic in France—nor indeed elsewhere in Europe, including industrialised Germany. Large numbers of people continued to work in agriculture, small commerce, crafts and small pre-industrial enterprises. It was from these sectors, which had experienced a profound revolution due to the wage-based organisation of labour, that the deepest and most prolonged opposition came. By contrast, large employers and their

leaders supported these initiatives, to which they were already accustomed due to their contribution to mutual benefit societies and their social work. Big business stood to benefit from the increased stability and durability of the employment relationship, which aided production and the acquisition of useful knowledge by workers. Finally, governments of different hues, from liberal to socialist, also contributed significantly to the socialisation of labour, thus keeping the project alive in a particularly unstable political context. This support was not unrelated to the long shadow cast by the Russian Revolution. As had happened in Germany, the governments' aim was to pull the rug out from under the 'extremist' movements. These actions left a long mark on the French socialist movement, leading to a deep rift between the pro-government left, which was willing to bend to the constraints and compromises of parliamentary practice, and its more radical counterparts.

The French wage system institutions, or at least their first expression, were therefore born out of an unholy alliance between large employers, labour unions in big companies and right- and left-wing governments. This type of coalition could be found to differing degrees throughout Europe, with variations in composition and timing. Wage system institutions expanded the capacity for action of public authorities, already embedded by World War I and by the exploitation of colonial resources. They also favoured the growth of the administration, sometimes creating a specific statute for civil servants. The emergence of this group of public administrators also contributed to the maintenance and spread of the wage-setting regime. In France, senior civil servants—often dubbed 'progressive republicans' (Hatzfeld, 2005), regardless of their political differences—saw this regime as a new social contract adapted to the new industrial situation and structured around the notion of solidarity. Indeed, it was they who doggedly maintained the social insurance project throughout all the political fluctuations and conflicts of the interwar period.

However, this reformist project, which was partially embodied in the French wage system, was entirely absent in other countries. A good example is Spain; despite attempts to bring about social reform in the first third of the twentieth century, it was the Franco dictatorship that finally piloted the process into harbour, in a spirit that was very far removed from the French humanist ideal. The Spanish case also serves to illustrate the close link between collective labour regulation mechanisms and national industrial development strategies. During its first decades in power (1939–1963), the Franco regime recommenced—albeit with significant reductions in coverage—the use of compulsory social insurance schemes created before the Spanish Civil War.¹³ Initially sanctioned and excluded from the package of reconstruction aid provided elsewhere under the Marshall Plan, Franco's government began to receive US economic support and technical assistance in exchange for agreeing to the installation of military bases on Spanish soil. The advent of the Cold War thus served to reduce the regime's political isolation and to finance the launch of an expedited process of state-directed industrialisation. Rather than a project of solidarity, Franco's Spain sought pragmatic answers to the political, economic

¹³ The failure of voluntary social insurance schemes in the early decades of the twentieth century (unviable at the time because of the low wage rates) led to the extension of compulsory social security, with the creation of the first mandatory old-age insurance in 1919, followed by maternity insurance in 1923 and unemployment insurance in 1931. These compulsory schemes extended the risks covered and gave rise to the Instituto Nacional de Previsión's first attempts to unify social insurance mechanisms (Montero García, Cuesta Bustillo & Samaniego Boneu, 1988; Castillo, 2008).

and social needs of an authoritarian regime that used every means at its disposal—including repression—to retain power until the dictator's death in 1975.

Mass industrialisation required the availability of a working population that was in short supply in such a rural country as Spain. Ousted from the countryside, the poorer peasantry gradually moved to the large cities, which suffered from a marked shortage of housing, healthcare, transport, etc. These structural deficiencies endured for many years, causing profound and recurrent social tensions. In this socially tense context, and despite intense political repression, opponents of the Franco regime managed to create a large underground trade-union movement (the 'Comisiones Obreras' [Workers' Commissions]) and to organise a strong neighbourhood movement. The response from the Franco government was to intensify its authoritarian control of discipline in the factories and to repress any independent union movement. It also developed a paternalistic policy of regulating the conditions of use of the workforce (placing limits on dismissal, working hours, etc.). Furthermore, beginning in the 1960s, it tried to centralise and rationalise the highly fragmented and inefficient system of social protection (Martínez Quinteiro, 2008).

By establishing a unified system of protection from 1963 on and recognising certain workers' rights, it sought to ensure continuity of production and steer workers away from the opposition movements, spearheaded by the Spanish Communist Party. The same aim was pursued through the establishment of a 'social dialogue' in a context of authoritarian corporatism, similar to that of the Vichy regime during the German occupation of France. This 'social dialogue' brought together representatives of workers and business owners, both of which were affiliated to Franco's single trade union. Gradually, these measures created an attractive and relatively well-protected statute for the peasantry who, for several decades, continued to constitute a large section of the population and progressively made their way to the factory gates. The alternative was emigration. Between 1960 and 1973, over three million Spaniards (10% of the total population) left for northern Europe (Nicolau Nos, 2005, p. 94). This mass exodus, encouraged by Franco's government, can be viewed as another of the regime's attempts to structure labour at a domestic level. No longer a burden on the national budget, emigrants helped relieve domestic employment shortages, whilst supplying the country with foreign currency and supporting their families back in Spain.

Work in Europe: convergences and national differences.

From the end of the nineteenth century until the interwar period, European states laid the foundations of a collective and controlled work-based social organisation. Work was no longer just the regulated activity (the productivity of which was the object of constant measurement) that the capitalist regime had progressively established through profoundly unequal relations. Work now formed the very foundation of the social sphere and its means of reproduction, structuring the lives of workers and their families from cradle to grave. Labour exchanges were therefore fundamental, and the private contracts upon which they were structured were heavily regulated. The price of work was defined by collective bargaining between institutional 'agents' and the use of the workforce was codified at distinct levels by different areas of law. Similarly, work, through a variety of contribution mechanisms, served to help finance social welfare funds and public spending.

This labour-based social organisation is not unique to Europe. It can be found in all developed countries and serves as a model for many, if not all, others. What is specific to Europe, though, is the extent of the compulsory contributions applied to labour income and the central role played by states in the institutions that manage and structure this social organisation. These distinctive features have been forged over the long and unique industrial history of this ill-defined geographical space, which was, for a long time, the great workshop of the world. Within this space, a working class developed from a very early stage and structured itself into unions and political parties that led to social struggles. Their hopes for emancipation were further fuelled by the Russian Revolution. In this unique context, the institutionalisation of the wage system was nourished by a variety of ambiguous and ambivalent sources. It also had contradictory effects. In the interwar period, it brought undeniable improvements in the living conditions of workers, especially in the north-western region of Europe, thanks to social laws and other devices that placed restrictions on the omnipotence of employers, regulated working time, made schools more readily accessible for children and improved healthcare. These developments were, of course, being demanded by the workers' movement, but also by humanist movements among business owners and high-ranking government officials. Nonetheless, such arrangements were also born out of a fear aroused among national governments by the revolutionary movements of the time—a prospect they resisted with the full force of their police and even their armies. For companies, especially larger ones, these arrangements brought with them a stable workforce with basic reading and writing skills—i.e. better trained workers. Finally, the enormous financial flows generated by the compulsory social contributions from labour incomes boosted available public resources, giving states an unprecedented capacity for action and orientation which the producers lacked.

We should not, then, view the wage system in Europe simply as the expression of a peculiar, intrinsic kind of generosity directed by EU member states towards their populations; nor should we view it as a victory wrested from the jaws of capitalism by the force of the workers' struggles. Heterogeneous in nature, it has always been a pragmatic response to specific national needs. What can we say, then, about this European model of work which features so strongly in the EU's community rhetoric? The answer is necessarily ambivalent. While this model is visible in the scope of mandatory social contributions and in the omnipresence of the states, given the irreducibility of current national situations, it is difficult to pin down.

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2. Transformations in the wage system

The extreme violence of the World War II brought down the curtain in dramatic fashion on a period of strong economic and social instability fuelled by a market system that was poorly regulated, especially at a global scale. The countries that suffered the full effects of the war on their own territory saw the annihilation of most of their production infrastructures and sometimes even their institutions. During the subsequent 'reconstruction', the institutions in charge of regulating and articulating labour were quickly re-established and even reinforced, expanded and visibly transformed. The development of the labour contract during the postwar years can be seen as part of this movement to reassert the wage system principles of the interwar period. Gradually, more formalised rights and guarantees were attached to the labour contract. At the same time, states earmarked more resources for social objectives (education, health, social protection, etc.). The appeal of the labour contract lay in the benefits and the stability it provided and it became the predominant form of labour exchange. An unquestionable improvement in the living conditions of the new wage earners and their families was accompanied by an increase in their consumption capacity. Industries, to which these workers were now more closely tied by contract, mass-produced goods that readily found buyers within domestic borders. Consequently, the labour contract and consumption were perfectly woven together into the economic order of the period immediately following the war. The upshot was a phase of extraordinary economic expansion, commonly referred to as the 'golden age' of capitalism.

This phase of apparent happiness—though not for everyone—in the history of capitalism was short-lived. It ended in the mid-1970s, when expanding production and expectations of capital profitability began to require larger markets. Thus began an enduring transformation of the forms of labour exchange in developed economies, characterised by the emergence of 'new forms of employment', destined to bring greater diversity to the duration of contracts, introduce new players into the labour exchanges and formulate new links between them. It was also marked by rising levels of unemployment, especially in Europe. This second period seems, in general terms, to have been more unfavourable for workers, most of whom were already operating as wage earners. However, protected forms of labour still persisted, and even expanded in certain sectors and in certain types of jobs. This suggests that there was a greater diversification in the use of labour, rather than a generalised precariousness among workers.

The wage system, which had taken its first steps in the interwar period and then spread its wings after World War II, underwent a rapid transformation from the 1980s onwards. The historical players—companies, unions and the state—may still be found today, but their role and capacity for action have changed radically. They are all still recognisable, but they have nonetheless been profoundly altered. By outlining the two major stages in the way labour has been managed since World War II, this second chapter aims to explain the transformations currently being experienced by the main players within the wage system.

The Golden Age of capitalism?

The years immediately following World War II witnessed the expansion and consolidation of the wage system in industrialised countries, many of whose characteristics converged. This formed part of a period of exceptional economic growth in these countries between 1950 and 1973. To take just one indicator, during this period, average GDP per capita increased by 3% worldwide and by 4% in the more developed capitalist economies (Maddison, 2006, p. 129). In consequence, these years are often known as the 'trente glorieuses' (Fourastié, 1979) or the 'golden age' of capitalism (Glyn et al., 1992, p. 41; Maddison, 2006, pp. 24 and 125; Frieden, 2020, pp. 279–283; Dockès, 2021, p. 29).

This remarkable economic growth stimulated the demand for labour, thereby increasing the employed population. Between 1950 and 1973, that population grew by 17% in Europe, 41% in the United States and 47% in Japan (Maddison, 2006, p. 345). New employees were mainly hired through wage labour contracts, which as a result became more widespread. Some countries, especially in the English-speaking world, already had large numbers of wage earners at the beginning of the period, but this was not the case in most of the rest of Europe or in Japan, which now gradually caught up with their more developed counterparts.¹ Moreover, unemployment remained generally low throughout the period: 3% on average in Western Europe, 5% in the United States and 2% in Japan (Ibid., p. 134).

This phase of economic expansion and the spread of the labour contract brought about a profound change in industrialised countries, and its effects can still be felt today. For example, the expanded socialisation of the wage led to a transformation in its nature and function. Likewise, the labour contract that became more commonplace in the immediate postwar period was increasingly difficult to equate to a simple private contract between employer and employee. Rather, it constituted a fundamental (though not the only) element in an overarching social organisation on which both the life of workers and the very dynamism of societies depended.

Nations of wage earners and their key historical actors

With ever larger numbers of workers being hired by companies on labour contracts, industrialised countries were transformed into 'nations of wage earners', or in other words, into 'administered' spaces in which consumption and savings depended primarily on wages and, in general, work-related income (Rolle, 1988, pp. 101–102). The labour contract bound workers, if not permanently then on a lasting basis, to a job and an employer, usually a large integrated industrial structure.² It allowed these companies to bring stability to an increasingly necessary workforce. In return for their subordination, workers were granted a series of rights and guarantees attached to their employment statute (see Chapter 1). Large companies comprised the main stage on which workers'

¹ In 1956, wage earners accounted for 83% of the workforce in the US (90% in 1973), 85% in Australia (87% in 1973), 79% in Canada (89% in 1973) and 76% in the UK (74% in 1973) (OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 2023 and Bank of England, A Millennium of Macroeconomic Data, 2023). These rates were lower in 1956 in Japan and continental Europe: Japan 46% (69% in 1973), Spain 53% (68% in 1973), Italy 55% (69% in 1973), West Germany 61% (67% in 1973), France 66% (81% in 1973) (OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 2023 and Maluquer & Llonch, 2005, pp. 1216–1217 for Spain).

² The average duration of employees' contracts in OECD countries was 9.1 years in 1995 (8.4 years in 2019). In 1995, 19% of the labour force had been employed for less than one year (18.9% in 2019), 51.5% five or more years (44.9% in 2019) and 33.2% ten or more years (33.9% in 2019) (OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 2023).

demands played out, articulated by trade union organisations that thus found an opportunity for consolidation and reproduction.

The third key actor, the state, also played an active role in this move towards transformation. The first consequence of the expansion of the wage labour statute was a significant increase in state resources, due to revenue from social contributions and a variety of taxes (see Chapter 1). Indeed, the social security contributions paid by employers and workers increased significantly during the postwar period. In OECD countries, for example, the ratio of contributions to GDP rose by almost 2.5 percentage points between 1965 and 1980 (from 4.5% to 6.9%), although with significant variations between countries (OECD, Social Security Contributions and Social Expenditure Database, 2023).³ States used these resources to implement various Keynesian-inspired public policies—very popular at the time—that sought to facilitate job creation and foster domestic demand for goods and services. Social contributions also served to finance social spending, which grew rapidly between 1960 and 1970 (Ibid.), including broader, guaranteed compensation for unemployment, illness or disability, and old age. Many OECD countries actually encouraged the creation of new social programmes and the expansion of existing ones (OECD, 2020, p. 1) and public social expenditure doubled (from 7.8% of GDP in 1960 to 14.5% in 1980).⁴

Thus, rather than relying on individual savings, with all their attendant uncertainties, the vast majority of workers—especially in Europe—increasingly came to depend on pooled resources to cope with the unforeseen events of life. Social stability was also bolstered, minimising the tensions that would inevitably arise from any fluctuations in the value of savings and prices were wage earners to be self-dependent for protection against risks. Wages also acquired a strategic importance due to the monetary flows they generated and the role they played in maintaining and reproducing the workers' collective. It is hardly surprising, then, that the spread of the labour contract has been accompanied over the years by a redefinition of wage-setting mechanisms. For example, supposedly 'negotiated' collective mechanisms have been introduced among the main players in the wage system, who have now become 'social agents'. Business associations, labour unions and state representatives—all 'agents' with divergent interests—agree on the prices at which workers' productive capacities and skills are exchanged on 'labour markets'. What we see, therefore, is the deployment of a 'logic of administration', rather than a market logic, which has spread to the management of pensions, unemployment benefits, health spending and, in short, to social spending as a whole. This administered logic has also led to the creation of different mechanisms, such as the minimum wage (found in practically all developed countries), index-linking and automatic wage appreciation, and the redefinition of professional classifications and career paths.

³ With only a few specific exceptions (the UK, Ireland, Denmark and Switzerland), the OECD data show a significantly higher proportion of social security contributions in Europe (since the 1980s, more than 10% of GDP in almost all cases). Japan, however, has seen a similar trend (OECD, Social Security Contributions and Social Expenditure Database, 2023).

⁴ These data do not, in any case, reflect trends in private social spending. In the OECD as a whole, according to 2017 data, private social spending (3.2% of GDP) is notably lower than public spending (20.2% of GDP). In some countries, however, private social spending plays a much more significant role. In 2017, it accounted for 13.5% of total social spending in the Netherlands, 12.4% in the United States, 11.5% in Switzerland, 6.5% in Australia and 6.5% in the United Kingdom (OECD, Social Security Contributions and Social Expenditure Database, 2023).

Data from the ICTWSS database⁵ corroborates this shift towards collective wage-setting mechanisms. Between 1960 and 1973, for example, most capitalist economies in continental Europe had some form of collective bargaining system for the majority of their workers (70% in continental Europe). Negotiations were usually conducted on a centralised basis at a sectoral or national level; only a few countries, such as Japan and the English-speaking world, prioritised company-level negotiation (Ruyseveldt & Visser, 1996; Ferner & Hyman, 1998; Baccaro & Howell, 2017). 'Opening clauses', which allowed companies to deviate from the terms of the sectoral agreements, tended to be the exception. States and their representatives almost always participated actively in wage-setting during the negotiation processes, as well as in defining the regulatory and legal framework. For example, they would establish minimum wage thresholds, bringing pressure to bear on the social partners to reach agreements. States also mediated in collective disputes, extending the agreements reached in the negotiations to other groups or industries that had initially not been included or legislating to modify the very workings of collective bargaining.

Capitalism for all?

The extension of wage regulation during the postwar period coincided with a phase of massive capital accumulation. This accumulation was particularly significant in Europe and Japan, but occurred in all industrialised countries (Duménil & Lévy, 2005, p. 11.; Maddison, 2006, p. 24; Dockès, 2021, p. 35). Between 1950 and 1973, the stock of non-residential fixed capital per worker increased by 3% per year on average in the US, 4% in the United Kingdom, 5% in France and Italy, 6% in Germany and 8% in Japan (Glyn et al., 1992, p. 47). This accumulation was based on the spread of the American technological and organisational innovations of the early twentieth century, which boosted productivity and growth in all developed countries. Thanks to these innovations, Europe and Japan managed to narrow the gap in terms of mechanisation of the means of production and labour productivity. Between 1950 and 1973, for example, productivity rose by almost 5% per year on average in Western Europe, as compared to just 3% in the United States (Maddison, 2006, p. 132).

The increase in production capacity during this accumulation phase led to the appearance on domestic and international markets of thousands of manufactured products, where they could be absorbed because of a tripling in the purchasing power of wage earners between 1950 and 1975 (Glyn et al., 1992, pp. 49–50; Husson, 2013, p. 479; Dockès, 2021, pp. 30 and 52). The new wage earners also become the new consumers, and the fusion of 'worker' and 'consumer' became a characteristic feature of modern market societies. Nonetheless, an interconnection between production and consumption can be seen in all labour regimes (Rolle, 1988: 134) and was therefore not really a novelty. During the post-World War II phase of wage system consolidation, however, this interconnection became more intense than ever before, binding ever more tightly the regime of intensive accumulation on the

⁵ The ICTWSS (Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts) is a database originally developed by Jelle Visser, researcher at the University of Amsterdam-AIAS (<https://www.ictwss.org/downloads>). It contains information on about a hundred variables (collective bargaining, social dialogue, business and union organisation, minimum wages, etc.) from over 50 countries. Since 2021, the database has been run by the OECD (<https://www.oecd.org/employment/ictwss-database.htm>). For our analysis we have focused on a selection of developed economies: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and West Germany.

one hand, and mass consumption on the other (Boyer, 2002, p. 129). This new 'social consumption norm' (Aglietta, 1979) led to the exceptional economic growth recorded during the period.

Under programmes developed by social democratic governments and those of other hues, workers saw a clear improvement in their living conditions in the decades following World War II (Alaluf, 2021). Consequently, many have come to view this period in a positive light, as a time when an inter-class compact held sway whereby wage earners, renouncing socialism, accepted the market economy in exchange for a greater share in the surplus value generated. This 'Keynesian pact' meant, in theory, a project of economic growth based on the private appropriation of wealth in exchange for the extension of social welfare to broader sectors of the population. At the same time, that population was recognised as having inalienable individual rights and freedoms.

This optimistic and widely shared interpretation of postwar capitalism can be challenged from several perspectives. First, inequality was still a very real feature of these societies. Indeed (as we shall see in the next chapter) it has continued to increase steadily. Secondly, it is worth questioning the democratic value of wage system institutions that remained largely outside the direct control of workers. Finally, and more generally, it is questionable whether the blind dynamic of capitalism was 'embedded', to use Polanyi's term (Polanyi, 2001), in the social sphere thanks to the intervention of the state—which supposedly went from gendarme state to welfare state, to become the repository and the agent responsible for welfare and social cohesion. In reality, the profound transformations of the postwar wage system acted more as a necessary condition for the process of capital accumulation than as a constraint imposed on the logic of the market by political configurations sensitive to social issues, or by a correlation of forces that was exceptionally favourable to workers.

Moreover, the labour contract has not always applied the norm of stable, full-time employment that was supposed to accompany it. Throughout this period, other more unstable forms of labour use persisted, to which certain segments of the population—women, young people and immigrants, for instance—had to turn much more often. These forms were in frequent use in specific sectors (such as agriculture, small commerce, the hospitality industry, construction, etc.), as well as among small and medium-sized enterprises, which offered their employees less protection. Forms of self-employment also remained, together with contributing family workers (once again, often women), casual employment and the informal economy. In 1970, self-employment still accounted for a significant share of the working population in many countries, including West Germany (36% of the labour force), Spain and Japan (35%), Italy (33%) and France (22%) (OECD, *Employment and Labour Market Statistics*, 2023). In the same year, traditional sectors, such as agriculture, reluctant to adopt the standard employment format, still accounted for 14% of all employment in the EU-15 (OECD, 2002, p. 40). In short, at the beginning of the 1970s, large segments of the population (most notably, women) were excluded from the protective framework of the wage labour statute. In 1970, women accounted for only one third of the available labour force in the EU-15 and the figures were similar elsewhere: Australia 32%, Canada 33%, Japan 39% and the United States 37% (Ibid: 37).

Any positive appraisal of the 'golden age' of postwar capitalism and its supposed Keynesian pact therefore needs to be qualified in the light of all these considerations. As

with everything related to the way work is organised, the reality here is both more complex and more ambivalent.

A new mutation of capitalism

In the mid-1970s, the period of economic expansion appeared to come to an end. In the OECD, annual growth in GDP per capita fell from an average of 3% between 1950 and 1973 to 1% between 1973 and 1998. The slowdown was also pronounced in Europe, where it fell from 4% to 2% (Maddison, 2006). For some time, these changes were considered to be related to the 'first oil crisis'.⁶ However, analysts now agree that they actually reflected a structural shift in capitalism arising out of a combination of several different, and more or less simultaneous, movements. A return to relatively high growth and profit rates came fairly quickly, but the effects of this mutation in capitalism can be felt to this day (Glyn et al., 1992; Husson, 2002; Duménil & Lévy, 2005). The wage-based organisation of labour, whose consolidation and extension—as we have seen—played a part in this mutation, suffered its effects in a variety of ways. Firstly, continued pursuit of the accumulation of capital, in a context in which productivity growth was not guaranteed, profoundly transformed the conditions under which work was exercised (Aglietta, 1998; Husson, 2002; Duménil & Lévy, 2011).⁷ Secondly, the industrial organisation itself was transformed; its processes were split up and distributed among different hierarchically-coordinated international operators. Finally, employment also underwent profound changes with the proliferation of what were dubbed atypical forms of work (removed from the standard employment relationship) and an increase—especially in Europe—in mass unemployment. In this context, companies, trade unions and states, the three main actors in the wage model instituted during the postwar period, were gradually transformed.

Continued accumulation of capital

The first movement we will examine is the spread of technological innovations capable of perpetuating capital accumulation during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Rather than innovations, we should really speak of the development of a series of inventions first launched in the 1960s and generally grouped together under the umbrella term 'information and communication technology' (ICT). These innovations encompass a wide variety of usually networked devices, used to display, transmit and process large amounts of information. Needless to say, we are talking about the spread of the Internet, mobile telephony and multiple sensors enabling production processes to be monitored and analysed remotely and in real time. We are also referring to satellite communication, the modernisation of civil aviation, the reorganisation of maritime transport systems⁸ and the transformation of military armament. More recently, the increased power and

⁶ In 1973, the industrialised countries—all major consumers of fossil fuels—experienced an initial shortage, accentuated by a rapid hike in oil prices from 2.59 to 11.65 US dollars per barrel between October 1973 and March 1974.

⁷ In the US, productivity fell from 3% (1950–1973) to 2% (1973–2003); in Japan from 8% (1950–1973) to 3% (1973–2003) and in Western Europe from 5% (1950–1973) to 2% (1973–1998) (Maddison, 2006, p. 132; 2007, p. 306).

⁸ The shipping container, invented by Malcolm McLean in 1953, is a paradigmatic example of the way in which innovations that emerged in the 1960s spread and are now commonplace throughout the world—in this case in the strategic sector of shipping.

miniaturisation of microprocessors has led to a major increase in computing capability, opening up the possibility of automated exploitation of big data in the cloud using algorithms, in what is now known as artificial intelligence (AI) (Castells, 1996; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2016; Eurofound, 2018, 2019; Mitchell, 2019). These innovations now extend to the so-called Internet of Things, which encompasses fourteen billion devices, virtual currencies, augmented reality devices and miniaturised 3D printers. In short, this is a continuous, multiform mass movement that affects all societies, whether they are developed or not, and the businesses that operate in them.

For companies, these technologies spread particularly quickly. That has continued to be the case ever since, although the 2008 recession triggered a major slowdown. To concentrate on just one field, between 1995 and 2007,⁹ the number of ICT-based services doubled in most developed industrial countries. Indeed, some—including Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, the US and the UK—saw growth rates of 300% or more (OECD, 2012a). Whereas during the postwar period, process automation mainly impacted large corporations, now all sizes of companies were affected. As French sociologist Pierre Naville predicted as early as the 1960s, speaking of automation, the nature of the machines used by these companies has changed profoundly. Machines, said Naville, would not only consist of mechanical procedures for processing and assembling solid and flexible materials; they would also include different 'treatment' and 'functioning' processes for the most diverse purposes. Such systems—with differing degrees of integration and differentiation—would be responsible for treating different elements (liquids, gases, atoms, etc.); for transport, transmission and communication; for the proper functioning of living organisms; and for timekeeping and predicting the future. In short, the machine would be any technical system designed and used to bring about an implicitly or explicitly measurable effect of any kind (Naville, 1963: 34).

Naville's qualification is important, since the technological mutation seen in companies has not comprised a radical replacement of the old techniques employed by a new technology, as often appears to be implied in discussions on robotisation. Rather, it has focused on the development of a hitherto unknown ability to connect vastly heterogeneous technical systems, operations and information. Equipment of different generations and types has been gradually interconnected, as we saw, for example, in a large French car factory (Célérier, 2013). The plant combined sophisticated algorithms with exhausting rudimentary maintenance operations, combining the most primitive pair of pliers with spectacular welding robots, all displayed like the crown jewels as the centrepiece of an official visit by Mikhail Gorbachev to the plant in 1986. The end result was a bewildering alloy of iron and flesh, of the dead and the living. In this mix, the most traditional industrial operations are embedded in a series of new and expanded operations that contribute to the multiple calculations performed in a factory to monitor and regulate production.

These movements have been painstakingly documented by the social sciences, mostly to challenge the optimistic predictions of an imminent end to hard labour, or even work itself. Researchers have denounced the new mental burden that accompanies work, the nervous tension and the sense of meaninglessness workers experience in these technically denser production environments. More generally, some have questioned the degree of professional autonomy workers enjoy in a scenario in which it is increasingly easy to

⁹ According to information contained in the EU KLEMS database (2009, 2013 and 2016). See in this regard (Koszerek et al., 2007). Data cited and aggregated by the OECD (2012b).

monitor their activity. These debates tend to revisit many of the issues explored in previous controversies arising from technology or different types of work organisation. Consequently, the impact of new technologies has been viewed in the same light as Taylor's time-and-motion stopwatch and Henry Ford's assembly line, that is to say, as devices for subjugating human beings and capturing their professional skills. Another recurring feature of the debate on technology is its impact on employment and the possible destruction of employment. In the United States, the most pessimistic studies speak of a loss of around 50% of jobs (Frey & Osborne, 2013, p. 41). To date, however, this alarming diagnosis has not been empirically corroborated. Rather, all available data suggest that the effects on employment have been slower and less intense than expected. Indeed, in some cases, automation and robotisation are even helping to create jobs.¹⁰ In other words, new technologies do not automatically reduce employment, except in a localised fashion in certain occupations, sectors, regions or segments of the labour force. It is therefore difficult to draw any definitive conclusions in this regard or indeed about any loss of skills.

One might therefore argue that new technologies have not led to mass unemployment, but have instead contributed to a profound transformation of the employment structure within companies and between sectors, with a spectacular increase, for example, in service activities. Today we can more clearly see that this development indicates a symmetrical mutation of industry, rather than the emergence of a post-industrial society based on information management and the distribution of 'intangible' services' (Bell, 1976; Touraine, 1971).¹¹ The hyperconnectivity of technical systems has expanded the industrial perimeter far beyond its traditional manufacturing function. Activities related to the security of complex and 'sensitive' equipment—initially performed in-house or by service providers—have been consolidated, starting with maintenance and IT services, whose procedures have been progressively standardised. Industry itself produces an enormous range of services. In France, for example, 83% of companies in the industrial sector provide services, and for one third, it is their primary occupation (Crozet & Milet, 2017). Products are transformed into materialised services, offering mobility instead of a car, and kilometres travelled instead of a set of tyres. This is what Pierre Veltz calls a 'shift towards services' (Veltz, 2017; Célérier & Veltz, 2020). Finally, we can see the extent to which industrial norms and standards have now been extended to all activities considered non-industrial, including social activities. The connectivity of technical systems therefore involves accelerated mobility between activities and sectors, which progressively affects all societies, posing formidable problems of adaptation.

Global capitalism and fragmented industry

¹⁰ Some authors (Gregory et al., 2022) argue that, despite the destruction of nine million jobs as a result of the automation of routine tasks, technological change also created over fourteen million jobs in Europe between 1993 and 2010. Others—again focusing on Europe—have noted the positive net impact of robotisation on employment over the period 1995–2015 (Klenert et al., 2023).

¹¹ We are referring here to the Fisher-Clark model for the English-speaking world and the Fourastié model for France. In both models, the development of services ushered in a new stage of economic development, after a preliminary, chiefly agricultural phase and a second predominantly industrial phase, characteristic of the nineteenth century. The notions established in these models have long been criticised for their fragility (Naville, 1972; Kaelble, 1988; Veltz, 2017, 2018), yet they continue to be ingrained, especially among statistical mechanisms.

The economic slowdown of the 1970s underscored the difficulties that major capitalist powers faced in disposing of a growing build-up of products resulting from the productivity boosts of previous decades. Previously, their domestic markets had primarily been sustained by consumption from their wage-earning population. Now, for a variety of reasons, they were beginning to show signs of running dry. Firstly, a devaluation in labour—resulting from unemployment, 'wage moderation' and a reduction in the social wage—had a negative impact on the purchasing power of the wage-earning population. Secondly, households were now fully fitted out with manufactured products, shifting social demand towards service activities that were less profitable for capital (Husson, 2002). And finally, Keynesian policies—which tend to boost public spending—were beginning to lose ground as 'austerity' became the new watchword, particularly in Europe.

Seeing limitations to the capacity of domestic markets in developed countries to absorb their output, companies opted to expand their presence on international markets. This led to the creation of a range of transnational spaces, where capital, goods and labour were exchanged at even greater degrees of intensity. This process was not necessarily a new one. Business historians note that the period spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was also one of increasing globalisation and government-backed development of multinational corporations. At that time, the aim was to penetrate foreign markets from within, and this was one of the primary means by which technologies were disseminated. However, the globalisation of the 1990s was different and profoundly altered the relative status and positions of its protagonists. First, it was unprecedented in its scale. All countries—developed or developing, capitalist or Soviet-dominated (pre-1989)—witnessed the same economic dynamic, thus intensifying the interdependence between them. The global health crisis of 2020 and the war in Ukraine have recently underscored the dark side of these interdependencies for Western countries, which now face multiple difficulties in sourcing basic goods.

The dramatic reduction in transport and communication costs aided the process of globalisation, from which Southeast Asia (especially China) benefited particularly, leading to a rebalancing in the global positions of different countries. However, countries in the global South were adversely affected by the constant drain of financial, energy and labour resources towards the economies of the North. We have already discussed the extraordinary development of information and communications technology during this period, which obviously played a fundamental role in this process. However, it did not act alone, like some exogenous factor; rather it was enmeshed with a new world order which, in turn, shaped and oriented its development. At the heart of all these different movements were the great mass producers, which Robert Reich calls 'global corporations'. In 1992, Reich described them as fragmented organisations, oriented towards a more or less fictitious customer, which tend to subcontract their business across the world to optimise production and take advantage of any opportunities that exist (such as tax breaks, cheap labour or available capital). These complex conglomerates of producers are no longer organised on a strictly hierarchical basis. Instead, they are networked, although decision-making powers still lie with the parent companies. The nodes of these production networks are energised by 'strategic brokers' that continuously capture, manage and reinject information, which serves to (re)orient the processes and structures to which they are attached (Reich, 1992). Globalised production has thus become a disparate and particularly tangled assemblage of by-products, production structures and services of diverse origins, resulting in the elimination of any national

affiliation. One well-known example is the life and death of a T-shirt, as told by Pietra Rivoli (2014).

However, this image of a globalised economy blurring borders between nation-states has recently been called into question (Hirst et al., 2009). Very few of these global corporations, in Reich's definition, locate their strategic activities around the world. At the same time, industry is being reorganised worldwide. Everywhere, at a national or, more often, regional scale, large integrated companies are being replaced by production networks that resemble a tangle of activities embedded in a vast continuum (Veltz, 2017). Through these networks, client companies ensure remote control and oversight of their suppliers' processes, lower labour management costs and greater flexibility in the event of a downturn in activity. It is easy to see why workflow-based industrial approaches have become so popular. They provide a common framework for the diverse in-house and outsourced systems that contribute to the production of a good or service. The same is true at an academic level with concepts such as the global value chain, which also serve to re-structure dispersed processes, regardless of where they are disseminated.

The effects of this more or less globalised segmentation of production are double-edged. On the one hand, it has made 'wage moderation' possible in developed countries, due to the low cost of everyday consumer goods. On the other hand, however, it has heightened international competition between countries and between workers—especially workers in traditional industries that have suffered more directly from intense offshoring. Segmentation has also increased the density of financial activities and sped up the flow of capital, especially financial capital, leading to erratic movements with a short-term appreciation. Industry, which is traditionally rooted in territories whose history and business practices it has helped to shape, is now tending to disengage from them, becoming more labile.

New ways of mobilising the workforce

The 1970s also saw a substantial change in the ways in which labour was mobilised for employment. That is not to say that the spread of the labour contract came to a halt; on the contrary, it continued to expand, although at a much slower pace than in the postwar years. Indeed, between 1970 and 2021, the number of wage earners in G7 countries increased by more than 50% (from 235 million to 362 million) (OECD, Annual Labour Force Statistics, 2023). Rather, the change affected the conditions under which these employees were recruited, with significant growth in so-called 'non-standard' forms of employment¹² and a marked impact on unemployment, especially in Europe.

Non-standard jobs have taken different forms that are well documented in the literature. The oldest is temporary and part-time employment, which has become more common in all industrialised countries since 1980.¹³ Today, a significant proportion of the workforce is employed for very short periods of time, in some cases—as in 'on-call' contracts—with no assurance from the company as to the number of hours to be worked or the continuity

¹² The ILO defines non-standard forms of employment as a range of arrangements that deviate from standard employment, i.e., continuous, full-time work that is part of a subordinate relationship for a single, clearly identified employer (ILO, 2016, p. 7).

¹³ Temporary work among wage earners has increased from 9% (1980) to 12% (2019) and part-time work from 13% (1976) to 17% (2019) (OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 2023).

of the service provision.¹⁴ Another non-standard employment arrangement entails temporary agency work. As with subcontractors, such arrangements tend to promote three-way, or even directly multilateral, labour relations. Some companies have also exploited traditional forms of self-employment to avoid, for example, stable hiring of workers. Such arrangements are known as 'false self-employment', 'dependent self-employment' or, more generally, 'disguised employment' (ILO, 2016).¹⁵

The emergence of the gig economy has helped extend these arrangements, which are precarious for workers and ambiguous from the point of view of employment status.¹⁶ Platforms mobilise large numbers of workers—either domestically or, in the case of 'cloudwork', internationally—as self-employed or workers with no recognised employment status. They are paid 'piecework' for performing highly fragmented tasks (Woodcock & Graham, 2020; ILO, 2021). Their work is closely monitored by the platforms, using algorithms, messaging and geolocation apps. In developed countries, these ways of mobilising working populations outside the constraints of protected employment have sparked a major controversy, with legal action being taken to reclassify self-employed contracts—what the unions call 'false self-employment'—into employment contracts with rights and obligations for the employer. Legislation in this regard has advanced, particularly with the passage of the 2019 'Uber Act' (Assembly Bill 5) in California, which required platforms to reclassify their Californian workers as paid employees. The recognition of employee status for platform workers is also being discussed in Europe. In 2021, for example, the Spanish parliament passed what is popularly known as the 'Rider Act', recognising the salaried status of platform-based delivery workers. More recently, the new European Directive for Platform Workers¹⁷ adopted in 2024 established a legal presumption of employment for digital platform workers. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how each state will transpose it into its own legislation.

Nonetheless, platforms now enjoy a level of economic clout that they have no hesitation in wielding, for example, by threatening to destroy jobs, a highly sensitive issue for governments. To avoid the costs of work-related social obligations, the platforms present themselves as mere technological interfaces, matching labour supply and demand. In this way, they negate their true status as employers. The gig economy thus contributes to the casualisation of the workforce, first ushered in with the new forms of employment that emerged during the 1980s. The result has undoubtedly been to heighten the precarious nature of employment for workers mobilised at low cost and with little or no protection (Woodcock & Graham, 2020; ILO, 2021).¹⁸

¹⁴ In the OECD, 7.4% of employed people in 2019 worked less than 20 hours per week (OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 2021), while 10% of the employed population in the US and 2.5% in the EU are estimated to be in on-call work (ILO, 2016, p. 85).

¹⁵ Depending on the country, between 1% and 6% of employed persons are estimated to be in multilateral employment relationships (ILO, 2016, p. 105). Dependent self-employment affects approximately 1% of the employed population in Europe (Eurofound, 2017, p. 24).

¹⁶ Some estimates place the impact of the gig economy at between 0.5% and 3% of the employed population (OECD, 2019, p. 56). For a detailed discussion of the issue, see ILO, 2021.

¹⁷ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240419IPR20584/parliament-adopts-platform-work-directive>

¹⁸ On working conditions in the gig economy (including cloudwork) in different countries and regions, see also the reports by the Fairwork network (<https://fair.work/en/fw/homepage/>).

Depending on their political leanings, state governments have viewed the roll-out of these new forms of labour mobilisation either as a solution to unemployment or as a tool to assist the healthy liberalisation of labour markets. The development of new precarious employment statuses and the hybridisation of traditional employment statuses have blurred the boundaries between different working arrangements and the regulatory frameworks that govern them. The result has been to create an intermediate space somewhere between the labour contract and self-employment, described in the European literature as a 'grey zone' (Drahokoupil, 2015; Pulignano & Morgan, 2023) yet to be legally defined (ILO, 2016; OECD, 2019). States have granted employers greater flexibility in the way they use the workforce. Some, as we have seen in the case of platforms, have managed to escape any obligation to pay social contributions. Having this flexibility within national borders should make firms less inclined to relocate to areas with lower wage costs, although relocation has continued to be commonplace since the end of the twentieth century.

As we can see, there have been profound changes in labour mobilisation arrangements since the 1980s, but they have not led to the disappearance of 'conventional' labour systems. In 2021, 88% of wage earners in the OECD had a permanent contract (OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 2023), while 47% of employed Europeans were still engaged in a 'standard employment relationship'.¹⁹ In other words, existing arrangements are not actually disappearing; instead, they are being diversified and recombined. There are two possible reasons for this persistence. The first is the political cost that any plan for reforming employment or the social wage entails, particularly in Europe, where governments have had to face recurrent social conflict over wages, job protection and pensions. The second, and more important, is that standard forms of employment favour the sort of regular and stable labour income that every state requires to maintain domestic consumption and sustain collective insurance systems (that is to say, the social wage). From the states' perspective, their (unquestionable) support for greater flexibility in employment must not go so far as to compromise their other obligations as the managers of these social welfare systems. They therefore need to ensure regular and stable incomes for a large majority of workers, even if this requirement is becoming increasingly difficult to meet.

The other major development in labour mobilisation arrangements that occurred over the final decades of the twentieth century was a general rise in unemployment. This change, too, favoured an increase in non-standard employment and more intense fragmentation of career paths. The rate to which different countries were impacted varied in accordance with demographic factors, the more or less industrial structure of employment, job creation capacity in the service sector, etc. (Rowthorn & Glyn, 1992, pp. 236–237; Blanchard, 2005).²⁰ Nonetheless, unemployment has been a constant concern for governments around the world and has served as an excuse for a series of labour market reforms. Faced with strong pressure on public spending, governments have implemented actions to speed up a return to work and reduce the benefits received by unemployed people. This has led to a tightening of the requirements for access to benefits, and

¹⁹ Estimate based on data taken from Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey (ECWS) 2015.

²⁰ For example, the US and Japan have been relatively unscathed by unemployment, whereas in Europe, in which a larger proportion of the workforce is employed in industry, the impact has been greater. Between 1994 and 1998, unemployment stood at 3% in Japan, 5% in the US and 11% in Western Europe. (Maddison, 2006, p. 134). These differences still persist: between 2005 and 2019, average unemployment in Japan and the US stood at under 5%, as compared to 9% in the EU27 (OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 2023).

demands for greater conditionality for receiving them (Kluve et al., 2007; Eichhorst et al., 2008; ILO, 2015; Eichhorst et al., 2017; Theodoropoulou, 2018; Grégoire & Vivés, 2021). It was in this context that the notion of activation—one of the cornerstones of 'active employment' policies—emerged, establishing a new relationship between social rights and moral obligations. This notion was also used to justify the introduction of experimental forms of employment that were supposed to encourage certain target populations back to work (young people, over-50s, long-term unemployed, etc.) through a combination of remuneration and compensation. These are legally uncertain forms of employment that are assumed to be temporary; in practice, however, they tend to become embedded, further blurring the boundaries between different employment statuses.

Mass unemployment has also impacted union strategies. Generally speaking, confederations have accepted significant concessions in working time and pace (including pay) in exchange for a guarantee of 'job maintenance' for those in work. The collective bargaining framework has thus been infused with the precepts of market-type 'win-win' negotiations, which are based on the assumption that the negotiating parties are on an equal footing. History shows that such negotiations often come shortly before the company goes out of business, condemning the employees to joblessness.

As a major cause for general concern, unemployment has also become a recurrent theme in academia, with European sociology of work scholars turning to topics related to employment and the (dys)function of labour markets. In this area of research, it is generally accepted that employment is contracting in developed economies, despite the fact that the figures on job creation suggest otherwise.²¹ In the individual experience of wage earners, however, employment is perceived as a 'scarce commodity' to be fought for within and across national borders. This sense of fragility has been exacerbated by a wider context of growing international competition for labour and large-scale relocation of economic activities. In this fierce competition for jobs and wages, characteristics such as gender, age, education, state of health and national origin all become possible sources of discrimination, threatening to relegate entire sectors of the population to permanent unemployment. We are seeing a kind of dog-eat-dog situation, which is driving the emergence of forces of reaction, xenophobia, protectionism, ultra-nationalism, anti-feminism and the like. Such movements, which are gaining increasing electoral ground (sometimes even emerging victorious), dump on society their simple answers to the complex problems of our time.

A profound remodelling of the wage system

In barely seventy years we have witnessed first the consolidation and then the transformation of this unique form of workforce mobilisation that is the wage system. The foundations of the wage system were first laid at the beginning of the twentieth century and, with them, the preparation, capture and exchange of the production capacities of individuals were to a large extent socialised and institutionalised. Labour exchanges are now governed by a whole panoply of regulations, laws, institutions and collective agreements, calling into question the supposedly individual nature of the labour contract. Although the contract itself is established between employer and employee, the exchange is rigorously and collectively regulated. This collective dimension has in no

²¹ Between 1970 and 2019, a total of 127.5 million jobs were created in G7 countries (OECD, Labour Force Statistics, 2023).

way been affected by the changes that have occurred in the wage system since the 1980s, with the fundamentals of that system being essentially preserved. Wages remain more necessary than ever for access to social goods and to guarantee individuals a life that holds out certain basic possibilities. Those who do not have access to a wage have a painful experience of it, also clearly structured by different types of actors, institutions, laws and nomenclatures. In other words, we are not seeing a return to the exhausting and unstable forms of work of early industrialisation, as some who denounce the ineluctable collapse of the wage system—which they view as the pinnacle of social guarantees and rights—might suggest. The wage system is not being jettisoned; rather, it is experiencing a profound reform, whose essential lines and challenges we need to analyse.

The last seventy years have also seen a transformation of the traditional agents of the wage system: large corporations (mainly linked to manufacturing or extractive industries), trade unions and states. The integrated corporation has gradually given way to a panoply of intertwined and often international networks whose precise boundaries are difficult to define. Amongst countries which were the first to industrialise, the figure of the large corporation has often disappeared from certain sectors such as mining and certain branches of metallurgy. Today, companies are polycentric, labile and ready to relocate rapidly to territories where their interests are better served. Some forms of company—such as digital platforms—can recruit labour without being subject to the constraints of a labour contract or the obligation to contribute to social protection systems. The same is sometimes true of taxes, with the cost of social security and the sophisticated infrastructures these companies require being passed on to the community.

For their part, the unions have unquestionably been weakened by a decline in industrial employment and the changes in the corporation discussed above. These mutations have tended to destabilise workers' collectives, sometimes annihilating them altogether. Social dialogue, a traditional forum for national legitimisation and union influence, has also lost some of its relevance, leaving companies free to unilaterally define the conditions for the use of labour. States have done little to counter this trend, despite their habitual recourse to the trade unions to legitimise their persistent 'modernisation' projects.

Although states continue to play a key role in the system, their capacity to act has also been weakened or at least rendered more complex. States now have to operate in a much more open space, and one which is partially beyond their control. They need to take into account a whole range of actors, including multinationals, investment funds, risk assessment agencies, central banks and global or European economic governance institutions. Many countries are responding to these new constraints by rebooting protectionist policies and/or strengthening their capacity to attract international investment. Becoming an attractive investment location almost always means implementing tax breaks and cutting labour costs, with the price of such measures automatically being borne by the collective. It also entails maintaining and expanding the various types of infrastructure necessary for capital appreciation. At the same time, states also have to bear the cost of transferring labour from one activity to another, with more or less prolonged periods of unemployment, which means paying out benefits and basic guaranteed incomes.

The historical players in the wage system have evolved; today they comprise elusive but still powerful companies, significantly weakened unions and disarmed states, nevertheless still capable of action. The metamorphosis undergone by all of these actors

suggests that there have been other, less visible, transformations in the system, and more generally, a change in the way it reproduces. In short, we are seeing a persistent, expanded and yet largely unexplored wage system.

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3. Silent mutations in labour exchanges

Despite a whole succession of economic crises, Western societies have evolved in a relatively stable fashion since the 1970s. Some even went so far as to suggest that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the USSR constituted the last death throes in the history of Western societies (Fukuyama, 1992). From the perspective of work, the fact that the fundamental principles of the post-World War II wage system have been maintained has also led some to consider this to be a period of relative stability. Regardless of the changes wrought by new technologies in the way we work and act in society, working for others is still most people's inevitable lot. This stability is relative; as we have seen in the previous chapter, it contains movements of different kinds—varying in their degree of coordination but always significant—that transcend national borders and cause constant unrest among host communities. These movements include diversification in forms of employment; legal reformulations that bring together theoretically opposed employment statuses;¹ the implementation of a unique work model driven by new operators such as the so-called service platforms and global reticularisation of production.

These movements are often grouped together and viewed as a project intended to dismantle the postwar wage system; in this reading, the wage system is seen as a model of labour protection and the high-water mark in the gains of the workers' movement. However, as far as its achievements are concerned, the first chapter of this book has highlighted the ambiguity of this arrangement, which has historically drawn from diverse and possibly contradictory sources and continues to do so. Whatever the truth may be, social scientists have meticulously recorded and denounced ongoing transformations in the wage system as constituting a backward step for workers and as forming part of a neoliberal project, backed by reactionary governments that are now back in power. At the centre of these narratives stand socially-excluded groups (young people, women, migrants, the working classes, even the middle classes), as victims who are assigned the hardest, lowest paid and least stable jobs with the fewest social guarantees.

No one could dispute that the period since the 1970s has not been a favourable one for workers, in terms of either income, job stability or, more broadly, families' hopes for the futures of their children. Nor could one argue that there has not been an impoverishment of socially-excluded populations. However, any interpretation of this period as an unequivocal shift towards greater precariousness raises some awkward questions. The first and most pressing is the disconcerting role that this reading attributes to work. Work is essentially viewed as being the product of a variety of external dynamics for which it is nothing more than an instrument, with no real substance or dynamics of its own. It is at the service of the neo-liberal trends that seek to bend the social sphere to the needs of the economy, smoothing the transition between companies, between employment statuses and between employment and unemployment, at no cost to capital. In the context of globalisation and the fierce competition between countries it engenders, it is also seen as an instrument to attract international capital through tax cuts and greater flexibility in the use of the labour force. In short, it is viewed as an instrument in international labour competition, in which countries with lower labour costs triumph, displacing entire

¹ For example, the statuses of employee and self-employed or even shareholder, as is the case with the Employee Shareholder Contract introduced in the UK in 2013.

segments of activity in societies that industrialised earlier. Whether it is a question of neoliberalism, globalisation or competition between nations, in this type of analysis, labour is always presented as an adjustment variable, of central importance no doubt, but lacking any movement of its own.

However, if we instead view labour as forming the framework of every society and thus as constituting a fundamental social relationship that continuously transforms that society, then we give it back its substance and dynamism. From this perspective, the postwar wage system was neither an idyllic period nor the expression of a singular political project. Rather, it reflected a particular moment—at a specific historical juncture—in the need to valorise capital; this need constantly redefines the institutions and means by which work is regulated, making them subject to constant contradiction. Thus, although the founding principles of the postwar wage system still persist, they do not signify the same as in the 1970s. The system in which these principles operate has changed radically, particularly with regard to the determinants of capital valorisation. Today, for example, those determinants must be viewed on a global, borderless, scale. Add to this the symmetrical change between the historical actors in the wage system (cf. Chapter 2) and we must conclude that today's society is, at least in part, unfamiliar to us.

Can we infer some of the characteristics of this unprecedented dimension of work from the data on transformations in work amassed by social scientists over the last forty years? The figures undoubtedly show a profound transformation in the forms of labour exchange, that is, the way in which human activity is currently captured and oriented towards work. However, here we will analyse just two of the most well-established dimensions: wages, i.e., the price attributed to labour activities; and the ways in which workers are linked to their jobs, i.e., employment.

Value sharing and widening inequalities

The price of labour—what we call the wage—allows workers to amass social goods, live their lives and support their families. Although this issue is of central importance for workers, their unions and, more generally, the groups in which they participate, it has attracted little attention amongst sociologists. Economics, however, has made it a seminal theme in its—still fledgling—project to elaborate a general theory of wages. This project has recently been set in disarray by challenges to one of the most established laws of macroeconomics, Kaldor's theory of the distribution of value added between labour and capital. According to this theory, two thirds of the wealth produced goes to remunerate labour and the remaining third to remunerate capital (Kaldor, 1957). This ratio had been considered stable in the long term, but has changed since the early 1980s. In all developed countries, there has been a significant decline in the share corresponding to labour (in the form of wages, salaries and other social contributions) relative to that going to capital. Official reports from the OECD and the IMF confirm a trend about which there is little debate today (IMF, 2017).² In Europe, labour's share of value added fell by 8 percentage points between 1950 and 2015 (from 68% to 60%). In the United States, during the same period, there was a 7-point fall, from 65% to 58% (its lowest level) (Elsby et al., 2013; Piton & Vatan, 2018; Stockhammer, 2013). The same trend can also be seen in developing countries (Karabarbounis & Neiman, 2014).

² Despite this, much macroeconomic modelling continues to employ Kaldor's stability hypothesis.

Attempts to explain the phenomenon in econometric terms have thus far failed. The conclusion reached by Blanchard in 2006 can therefore still be considered valid: 'the labour share puzzle (can be seen) as largely unsolved' (Blanchard, 2006). The main attempts to explain the phenomenon seek to factor in technological progress (automation, robotisation, artificial intelligence, etc.), on the grounds that in replacing human operators (especially the least skilled ones), this phenomenon leads, de facto, to a decrease in the share of wealth earmarked for labour income. However, the decline has been observed across all sectors, including those that are less capital-intensive, which calls into question the role of automation in the process. Another, intermediate (i.e., semi-technological) variant has not been much more successful; this explanation examines the deleterious effects of excessively high wages, on the grounds that they encourage firms to change their production mix to the detriment of labour (Piketty, 2015). Attempts to model other factors—such as the income effects that benefit hyper-concentrated companies such as the so-called 'Big Five'³ (Autor et al., 2020), globalisation and relocation, or falling unionisation—have also failed to provide a complete and convincing explanation.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to understand this phenomenon, since it serves to guide the action of all governments, as well as the other social forces present. For example, given the advantages of technology in terms of growth, to assume that it is the main cause means accepting that the decline of labour's share in the distribution of wealth is inevitable and trying (or not) to compensate for its unequal impact among workers. On the contrary, considering the power and income of supercompanies to be excessive should be seen as an invitation to try to limit their prescriptive power on the markets and the ease with which they avoid national regulations. Indeed, this is one of the avenues being pursued by the European institutions, which want to make access by these multinationals to European consumers conditional on their compliance with a series of rules and standards (GDPR,⁴ unification of electricity supply systems, health standards, etc.). In other words, any proposed intervention in this field is based on an implicit understanding of the phenomenon we are analysing, even if it has yet to be explained by the theory.

Whatever the truth of the matter, with few exceptions, analysts consider this decline in labour's share of value added to be detrimental and even dangerous, since it jeopardises not only countries' economic performance, but also their social stability. They link this decline to the increase in income and wealth inequality observed over the period and to the revolts and demonstrations that have taken place in many countries, which have shown the limits of acceptability of an enormously unequal system. Examples include Occupy Wall Street in the United States, with its explicit slogan 'We are the 99%'; the gilets jaunes in France; the indignados in Spain; and, around broader issues, the so-called 'Arab Spring' movements. A few striking and now widely-accepted figures will suffice to give some idea of the magnitude of today's inequality:⁵ in 2020, the wealthiest 10% of the world's population made 55% of its income (and the top 1% made 19%), with an average income thirty-eight times higher than the average income of the bottom 50% of

³ Alphabet (Google), Apple, Meta, Amazon and Microsoft (known as GAFAM until Facebook changed its name to Meta in 2021).

⁴ The General Data Protection Regulation, adopted by the European Council in 2016 to protect the personal data of individuals and the free movement of that data.

⁵ This research is based on a variety of international databases, including the World Inequality Database (<https://wid.world>). One might also mention the Luxembourg Income Study, used in OECD reports (OECD, 2008; OECD, 2011; OECD, 2015a). See <https://data.oecd.org/fr>.

the population (Chancel et al., 2022). Part of this distortion can be explained by the concentration (and spiralling) of higher incomes since 1980. This is especially well-documented in the United States and the United Kingdom (Piketty & Saez, 2003, 2006; Atkinson et al., 2009; World Bank, 2022).

These observations challenge the supposed benefits of the trickle-down economy, so often used to justify inequality.⁶ Throughout the period, the incomes of the poorest stagnated in overall terms, experiencing no real benefits of the few phases of growth. In 2020, the poorest half of the population shared just 7% of global income, as compared to 5% in 1980 (Chancel et al., 2022). The inequality is even greater when it comes to wealth. The top ten percent owns 76% of the world's total wealth, while the poorest fifty percent own only 2% (Ibid.). Beyond these global averages, considerable differences remain between regions. Europe emerges from the comparison as relatively egalitarian, with the top 10% holding a 36% share of total income. This compares to a figure of 46% in the United States, 55% in Latin America and 58% in the Middle East and North Africa, the most unequal region. Differences in wealth are again more pronounced than in income. The top 10% in the US own 70% of the wealth, while the poorest have barely 2%; in Latin America, the figures are 77% and 1% respectively. Again, Europe performs better, but the differences between rich and poor are still significant: 59% of wealth is owned by the richest, and 4% by the poorest.

The social instability feared by analysts and the concomitant erosion of confidence in institutions that is evidenced in the success of populism and right-wing extremism (Stiglitz, 2012) are prompting researchers and politicians to seek remedial solutions. More traditional economic analyses have also joined in the debate, pointing to a reduction in consumption capacity resulting from these high levels of inequality, leading to growing difficulties in selling the products of industry, although this deficit has been partially offset in recent years by the increased purchasing power of consumers in so-called emerging countries. These analysts also highlight the threat posed to workers' performance by the lack of resources, which prevents them from investing in training for themselves and their children. According to some estimates, this constraint was responsible for a fall of 4.7 points in cumulative growth between 1990 and 2010 (OECD, 2015b). Among the proposed reforms, the most widely-discussed entail the use of three articulated levers (Stiglitz, 2012; Piketty, 2014; Atkinson, 2015; Piketty, 2020): expanding the financial resources available through tax reforms (Piketty, 2020, p. 1131);⁷ securing the minimum wage, which exists in most developed countries but is always threatened by tax increases or a reduction in social benefits (OECD, 2015b); and, finally, improving redistribution.

These proposals are reminiscent of some earlier ideas, such as those from the 1970s that championed equity (or fairness) over equality (Rawls, 1971); i.e., accepting the existence of inequality provided it was neither excessive nor permanent. Other proposals include a

⁶ This type of programme has been widely implemented in Europe. In France, for example, Emmanuel Macron abolished wealth tax (*impôt sur la fortune*, ISF), introducing a French-style flat tax, i.e., a one-off advance tax of 30% on capital income (interest, dividends, etc.). In 2021, a report by the agency responsible for advising the government on the issue confirmed that the programme had failed, having only benefited a small number of households.

⁷ Tax reforms to make income and wealth taxes more progressive by updating property taxes. One of Piketty's flagship proposals, for example, is to reduce the wealth tax paid annually by 90% of the population and raise it for the wealthiest. This would involve a scale of the following type: 0% up to €1 million of net worth; 1% from €1 million to €5 million; 2% above €5 million (Piketty, 2014).

universal allowance, in order to decouple income from work (Fitzpatrick & Campling, 1999; Parijs & Vanderborght, 2005; Parijs, 2017). However, the current proposals are notable for attributing a fundamental role to the states in implementing remedial solutions, without actually questioning their capacity for real action. Critics of this reform project have concentrated mainly on its budgetary viability. Very few have denounced its overemphasis on distribution and its neglect of the area of production, as well as the mechanisms by which individuals are prepared and assigned to jobs. Yet this is where the inequalities that have been denounced have their origin, as can be seen in the reduction in the share of value allocated to labour since the 1980s.

To demonstrate their assertion, the fiercest critics start from the apparent contradiction between the exhaustion of productivity gains and the sustained growth of profits. The depletion of productivity is due to the scarcity of investments offering at least short-term profitability, as the automobile, aeronautics and chemical industries might have in the past. It is also due to a shift in social demand in developed countries towards service activities and personal services, which are much less profitable than manufacturing (Bergeaud et al., 2016; Bihr & Husson, 2020; Lapavitsas, 2014; Tombazos, 2015, 2019). The increase in profits in such a context of 'narrowing profitability' has only been made possible through a constant reduction in the price of labour; or, in other words, through an intensification of the exploitation of labour (Ibid., p 110). This profound movement of capitalism clearly affects future profits and also weighs on job creation. It likewise contributes to the inflationary phase that we are currently experiencing and whose origins are more speculative than monetarist. The pressure on wages is therefore part of this unprecedented and as yet unexplored new society. It heralds an economic and social instability of which the financialisation of the economy is itself a symptom, rather than a cause (Bihr & Husson, 2020, pp. 107–108).

Working remotely and intermittently

The second mutation that has occurred in labour exchange involves the ways in which workers and work are linked—in other words, it relates to employment. The clearest proof of this lies in the myriad of transformations witnessed by developed countries in existing employment models since the 1980s.⁸ Legal experts have demonstrated a certain degree of creativity when seeking to adapt the labour contract to purported market constraints that require greater flexibility in the use of labour. Some of these legal innovations have served to drive a wedge between workers and the security supposedly offered by labour contracts. The Director General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) summed it up as follows in 2013: 'the classic stereotype of a full-time permanent job, with fixed hours, and a defined-benefit pension on the completion of a largely predictable and secure career path with a single employer, however desirable it might appear, is an increasingly infrequent reality' (ILO, 2013, p. 13). As anticipated in chapter 2, while the labour contract mutated, new arrangements began to emerge that were even more threatening

⁸ Although the definition and scope of these 'non-standard' forms of employment are still under debate, the statistical systems used to track their development commonly cite features such as: part-time work, temporary work, work mediated by recruitment agencies and other forms of multi-party contract, self-employment, 'platform-based' work and ambiguous labour relations. This last—residual—category encompasses a wide range of different situations in which labour relations are not clearly defined by law, either because the respective rights and obligations of the different signatories to the contract are not specified, or because the law simply overlooks them. Informal work, very common in low-income countries, is a perfect example.

than traditional non-standard forms of employment. The most significant example of this is what is often referred to as platform work (Perren & Kozinets, 2018; Schor, 2016, 2021), in which employers mobilise workers as self-employed individuals only as and when the platform needs them, thereby saving themselves the cost of the social wage.

Available data, however, suggest a scenario that is more complex than one of widespread (or increasingly widespread) precariousness. The labour contract continues to be the norm among workers in industrialised countries (85% in Europe and 94% in the US in 2018), providing, in most cases, a high level of protection. New employment arrangements, while still in the minority, have nevertheless contributed to rendering the range of working situations both more diverse and more complex. Access to employment is nowadays the result of a set of clearly differentiated and interconnected processes, some of which are lengthier than others or, in fact, never reach fruition. Even so, two common traits can be identified amidst all the diversity arising from the mutations in the arrangements by which workers are connected to their jobs. First, there is increased fragmentation and intermittency in the way workers are mobilised, as is evident in the transformation of working hours and rhythms fostered by certain contemporary forms of employment. Second, the relationships established between the key players in labour exchange are becoming increasingly complex and diffuse.

Precariousness is one possible—although not inevitable—outcome of these two trends. Intermittent employment or distance from one’s employer or customer can result in situations that are under the workers’ control and are beneficial for them. However, when they are mobilised through new employment statutes, these workers—whether they be in a precarious or stable position—forge a different kind of bond with their jobs. It is a bond based on briefer assignments or missions and less stable labour expectations. One might argue that the transformations in employment over the past forty years have sown a seed of precariousness at the very heart of societies that were structurally built upon the idea of stability. However, that contention can only be sustained if we avoid associating the term ‘precariousness’ with simple deprivation or hardship, as more conventional analyses tend to do. We use the term ‘precarious work’ to refer to a means of mobilising human activity in which duration, reliability and stability are no longer guaranteed and may vanish into thin air at any moment.

Diversification of working time patterns

The development of a wage labour statute gradually regulated the duration of work on the basis of clearly-established periods of time—weeks, months, years or, in the case of retirement, the worker’s entire working life. Historically, this is an area that has sparked considerable conflict. Shorter working hours constitute one of the oldest demands by workers and their representatives in all developed countries. These struggles bore fruit in a reduction in hours across the world from the nineteenth century on; another result was an employment timeframe that remained relatively stable and widespread up until the 1980s. The contracts between workers and their employers had no predefined end point and were based on regular daily and weekly working hours, with one or two rest days per week and several weeks of holidays throughout the year. This regime is often associated with Fordism, in reference to the Regulation Theory analyses used by statistical institutes (particularly European ones) as a benchmark for measuring current transformations (Berg et al., 2014; Bouffartigue & Bouteiller, 2012).

The reduction in working hours in developed countries is clear to see, although the scale of the reduction varies from nation to nation, as evidenced by the two extremes found in Europe: Germany (1349 hours per year) and Greece (1872 hours). These individual measures, however, ignore the parallel evolution of the working population, which has grown significantly since 1980 in all industrialised countries (+25% in Europe). If we multiply these individual working hours by the number of people actually working, to give the volume of hours worked, we can see that the overall duration of work has increased in all countries except Japan, where it has fallen by 2% due to slower growth of the working population.⁹ It is also important to note that this downward trend in mean individual work time is no longer the result of workers' struggles; instead, it is the outcome of diverse mechanisms of work deprivation, particularly part-time and temporary contracts.

Working hours, which are so vital for accessing social benefits, are distributed very unevenly between different groups of workers. Women, young people and less qualified workers have incomplete and increasingly sporadic access to work. This restricted access can take a myriad of different forms, most of which are justified by two (often combined) arguments: the quest for a better 'work-life balance', particularly in the case of women, and the fight against unemployment, which is mainly oriented towards young people and less-skilled workers. Part-time work is the oldest of these forms. Practically non-existent in the 1980s, by 2021 it accounted for approximately 19% of workers' contracts in high-income countries, with a mean weekly employment time of 17 hours. If we compare this with the 39.5 hours worked by those on full-time contracts (OECD, 2021), we see that this—often involuntary—restriction in working hours constitutes a significant drop.¹⁰

The widespread use of part-time contracts in some countries goes a long way to explaining the decrease in working hours seen over recent years. In Germany, for example, which has the lowest recorded number of hours worked per year in Europe, part-time employment explains almost 90% of the reduction in hours since 1992, whereas in France, it is only responsible for 14%.¹¹ In 2021, 30% of workers in Germany worked on a part-time basis. The figure was even higher in the Netherlands, where almost half of the labour force worked part-time (Wierink, 2015). Although the increase in part-time work is the result of different factors and circumstances in these two countries—improvement in work-life balance in the Netherlands and fight against unemployment in Germany—¹²

⁹ Since 1998, the first year for which data is available for all countries in the OECD database, this volume has increased by 15% in Europe.

¹⁰ According to the OECD, only 80% of those working part-time do so out of choice (OECD, LFS – Incidence of Involuntary Part Time Work). One must be careful, however, when talking about the 'voluntary' or 'involuntary' nature of part-time work. The way in which the workers concerned are registered differs from country to country, although in most cases, it is usually based on personal preference, except when structural or health-related constraints come into play. Several studies have suggested that this system vastly underestimates the prevalence of involuntary part-time work (Gash, 2008). It should also be remembered that the 80% who claim to have chosen to work part time may not necessarily be satisfied with their working hours and may wish to work for longer without wanting (or being able) to work on a full-time basis (Eurofound, 2009).

¹¹ Source: Groningen Growth and Development Centre (annual durations), Eurostat (part-time), with estimates by Insee France (Bouvier & Diallo, 2010).

¹² Part-time contracts have been common in Germany since the 1990s, although the formalisation of 'mini jobs' in 2003 and 'work on demand' (Arbeit auf Abruf) in 2019 resulted in a major increase in their prevalence. These new types of contract offer particularly short working days: no more than 43 hours per month in the case of mini jobs and even fewer in the case of work on demand. Something similar occurred

in both cases, women, young people (aged between 16 and 24) and/or people with few or no qualifications are those most affected by this reduction in working time. Similarly, more and more companies are having recourse to part-time contracts. In 2009, Eurofound estimated that in over 40% of enterprises, at least part of the workforce were working fewer than 15 hours per week (Eurofound, 2009).

Fixed-term contracts constitute another means by which the working hours available to certain groups are cut back. The specific conditions of these contracts, as well as possible constraints on how many can be signed directly one after the other, vary considerably from one country to another, although in all of them the regulatory framework has been rendered more flexible, giving rise to an increase in the prevalence of this type of contract. In 2021, the number of temporary workers throughout the OECD was 80% greater than in 1983. This rise was particularly pronounced in Europe, where the number of temporary workers doubled during the period, rising by 7 percentage points between 1983 and 2018 (from 9% of the total workforce to 16%).¹³ The passing of Council Directive 1999/70/EC in 1999, which established fixed-term work as an important—and desirable—instrument for rendering the labour market more flexible, formed part of this general movement, which has reached spectacular heights in some countries. In Poland, for example, temporary work has increased fourfold since 1998; since 1993, it has more than doubled in Portugal (accounting for 19.5% of all jobs in 2018) and the Netherlands (17.8% in 2018), and it has risen by 60% in France since that same year (cf. OECD).

In regard to temporary work, Spain occupies a unique position, both in and outside Europe. First, because, for some time now, it has had the highest rate of temporary contracts (27% of all jobs in 2018), with a significant, ongoing increase (between 1987 and 2018, the number of workers with temporary contracts more than doubled) (OECD). And second, because this increase in temporary contracts coincided with an unprecedented rise in the working population (+75%) between 1982—the end of what is known as the ‘transition to democracy’—and 2012, after which it levelled off. This notable increase was mainly due to the mobilisation of new categories of workers, such as, for example, immigrants (a new phenomenon in the country), women and young people, all of whom were often hired under different types of temporary contracts, particularly in the case of those with few or no qualifications. In terms of employment flows, hiring in Spain during this period mainly comprised short-term contracts (90%);¹⁴ this was the case also in the four countries mentioned above, albeit to a lesser extent.

Researchers have shown intense interest in this new employment situation, focusing particularly on workers’ chances of finding a long-term job (Blanchard & Landier, 2002;

in the UK where, according to the Office for National Statistics, in 2015, 1.8 million workers (5.5% of the working population) had ‘zero-hours’ contracts. Such contracts were initially created for students in the 1980s and offer no guarantee of either working hours or pay.

¹³ This was the last significant year, since the health crisis triggered by the Covid pandemic drastically reduced the use of this type of contract.

¹⁴ The Spanish labour reform passed on 28 December 2021 aims to make permanent contracts ‘the norm rather than the exception’, limiting the use of their short-term counterparts. Almost one year after its entry into force, the number of people working on temporary contracts had fallen from 28% (November 2021) to 16% (November 2022) and the temporary employment rate had dropped from 25% of the working population (last quarter of 2021) to 18% (last quarter of 2022) (Le Monde, 2022). Despite these achievements, however, the sharp increase registered (almost half a million in just one year) in a specific type of ‘permanent seasonal contract’ that combines periods of activity with periods of inactivity has triggered a heated debate between supporters and opponents of the reform.

Booth et al., 2002; García et al., 2017). Although the wide variety of methods and data used in these studies renders comparisons difficult and precludes any generalisation of their findings, all describe heterogeneous employment trajectories that are more or less continuous, albeit interspersed (to differing extents) with periods of unemployment. They also confirm a greater level of diversification in the forms of workforce mobilisation when compared to the postwar generations.

Uncertainty regarding working hours and the duration and continuity of effective periods of activity is therefore a feature of all industrialised countries. At the same time, workers are expected to provide the most continuous and intensive career path in terms of hours worked; a contradiction that is particularly marked for those with the lowest level of qualifications. As we have seen, this change cannot be equated to a mere increase in precariousness, nor to an unequivocal acceleration of time (Rosa, 2013). Not everything moves faster nowadays; rather, our societies are becoming more fractured, breaking down into multiple universes, each with their own specific regimes of time, at times greatly isolated from one another. Some of these universes foster a particularly unstable, restrictive and disruptive type of worker mobilisation, whereas others oscillate back and forth across the porous watershed between unemployment, inactivity and voluntary work, and others offer stability at the price of an excessive workload.

The data published in the sixth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS 2015, Eurofound)¹⁵ offer an international perspective that is vital to understanding and gauging the scope of some of these temporary universes. The survey data confirm, firstly, the continued prevalence of the wage labour statute, under which 81% of all European workers operate. They also confirm, however, alterations—through diverse mechanisms—in the Fordist employment norm whereby a permanent contract used to be linked to a stable, full-time job. Only 64% of workers with permanent contracts are currently in such a situation. The remainder report a—voluntary or involuntary—reduction in working hours due to part-time employment contracts (18%), with a significant decrease (16 hours) in weekly hours worked compared to the mean for permanent employees (40 hours). Moreover, 7% of workers with a permanent contract say they are worried they will lose their job within six months. This finding might also be interpreted as a deviation from the employment norm. Evidently, a permanent contract does not guarantee absolute long-term stability and dismissal—particularly large-scale redundancy, the conditions of which have become more flexible throughout Europe—¹⁶ is now a very real risk for everyone, at any point in their career.

Finally, in terms of working hours, it is difficult to categorise the situation of the remaining 11% of employees working under permanent contracts. Although we cannot

¹⁵ For the purposes of this book, we used the 2015 edition rather than the—exceptional—2021 edition, since the latter was forced to adapt to the specific context of the health crisis triggered by the Covid pandemic. Indeed, the 2021 edition does not fully guarantee continuity from the 2015 edition. We also limited the sample to the EU 15 countries, or in other words, the countries that were already Member States in 1995 (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). In doing so, our aim was to reduce the oft-cited heterogeneity of European countries and avoid excessive structural dispersion. For more details on the methodology used in the different editions of the survey, see: www.eurofound.europa.eu/fr/surveys/european-working-conditions-surveys/sixth-european-working-conditions-survey-2015.

¹⁶ A European Directive issued in July 1998 harmonised the conditions for making collective dismissals to adapt them to changes in the different industrial structures of Member States.

be certain, the data appear to suggest that the working hours of this group are neither regular nor stable. Note, too, that a quarter of all employees working under more stable contracts, who should fit the classic employment norm, tend to deviate from it due to an excessive workload, claiming to regularly work more hours than stipulated in their contracts. While they do not necessarily have irregular timetables, they are nevertheless forced to work during their leisure time and find it hard to strike a satisfactory work-life balance. Outside the group of workers with permanent contracts, temporary employment arrangements are even more diverse and further removed from the employment norm. Part-time work is particularly common here (affecting 45% of workers on temporary contracts, as opposed to 23% of those employed on a permanent basis). Part-time workers reported working 19 hours per week, as opposed to the 39 hours worked by their full-time counterparts. Those with this type of contract are also significantly more likely to have irregular working hours, although they did not report difficulties achieving a good work-life balance.

This quick overview of the results of the EWCS 2015 enables us to identify—among all salaried workers—seven different temporary employment regimes that differ from the full-time norm characterised by stable and regular working hours.¹⁷ This arrangement still applies to half of all salaried workers, although over one third of them (35%) are now mobilised under alternative, more fragmented and/or intermittent formulas.

The distancing of labour relations

The second trend identified in the diversity of new forms of employment that have emerged since 1980 is linked to the transformation of existing relations between the different players on the labour market. As outlined earlier, the labour contract establishes a close bond between employee and employer, with the latter often being a large industrial company that acts as a single employment agent. Labour Law has formalised this proximity, situating the signatories—employee and employer—within the framework of a lasting relationship. This mechanism rests on legal subordination, which gives rise to a certain right to the continuation of a contract that is executed in a consecutive manner (Gaudu, 2008). By virtue of this right, employers do not need constantly to outline the tasks they require their wage-earning employees to perform, as they would if they opted instead for a commercial contract. In the latter type of contract, the employer becomes a client and each new exchange with the service provider must be governed by a specific contract establishing the purpose of the transaction, its price and the delivery deadlines. For the exchange to be durable, it requires an articulated succession of contracts, each of which must specify, every time, the tasks to be performed. When it comes to employees, a labour contract assumes that the signatories freely commit to performing any task the employer sees fit to assign them throughout the duration of the agreement. They also undertake to respect the way their employer decides to organise the work to be carried

¹⁷ By way of a reminder: 1/ a stable, full-time regime with regular hours and no significant fear of dismissal (51%); 2/ a stable, regular regime but with constraints on working hours as a result of a part-time contract (15%); 3/ a stable regime that is nevertheless provisional due to fear of dismissal in the near future (5%); 4/ a stable regime of limited duration (5%); 5/ a stable regime that is rendered doubly flexible due to contract duration and volume of hours worked (4%); 6/ an unstable regime in terms of both timetable and contract duration (3%); 7/ an unstable regime in terms of timetable, contract duration and working time constraints due to a part-time contract (3%). There is also one last category that is more difficult to qualify from the perspective of working hours and was not taken into account during the analysis of new working regimes.

out, as well as their hierarchical authority. Commercial contracts also assume that all exchanges are made freely, although in this case, it is not the customer who determines how the tasks in question are to be performed. The service provider is the only party with the authority to decide this.

In reality, neither type of labour exchange—both of which have existed in all developed countries since the beginning of industrial development—involves only two signatory parties who enter freely into the contract. In the case of the labour contract, the public authorities also play a key role, rendering labour contracts private agreements in appearance only. Government bodies specify and constrain the employer's effective authority, imposing obligations on them, including that of making social security contributions. In turn, these obligations constitute, for workers, the rights and protections associated with the wage labour statute, even though they are not enshrined in law, but exist rather as a trade-off for their subordination. States also intervene in regulating commercial contracts, although in this case they do so through formulas that do not seek to avoid or correct an imbalance in the relative positions of the signatories. In addition to tax laws, commercial exchanges are also regulated by case law, which may identify as an employer someone seeking to operate solely as a client, thereby turning any succession of commercial contracts into a labour contract.

The extraordinary expansion of this subordinate space in industrialised countries throughout the twentieth century reveals the extent to which its development was linked to the stability and duration of labour exchanges. All wage system institutions (cf. Chapters 1 and 2) contributed to this expansion, fostering the forging of closer ties between workers and their companies, under the watchful eye of the state authorities. And it is precisely this close link between the protagonists of labour exchange arrangements that has been altered and loosened in a number of different ways by the legal redefinition of employment statutes over the past forty years. Unquestionably, the most striking of these is the emergence of the digital platforms, which mobilise supposedly self-employed workers and assign them repetitive tasks along with, on occasions, instructions regarding how to perform them, without assuming any responsibility for social wage costs. Thus, the former 'employer' becomes, one might say, the 'sole client', imposing on the self-employed worker the obligation to valorise their capital, no matter how modest it may be (a car, a computer, a bicycle, etc.). The repetition of these one-off contracts, in which the same actions are performed time and time again, the same project carried out, the same type of investment made, generates a *de facto* kind of 'subordination' that the law is incapable of recognising—or at least not fully.

This economically dependent independence, which attracts so much attention among analysts, nonetheless continues to be a minority phenomenon in Europe. The results of the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS, 2015) indicate that self-employed workers who obtain 75% or more of their income from a single client account for only 2.6% of the working population. Moreover, this figure has decreased from 4.2% in 2010 (Célérier et al., 2019). Over two-thirds of the self-employed population work for several different clients, with no one client having significantly more weight than the others. The percentage of this type of worker has increased notably since 2010 (from 7% to 12% of the working population). To put it another way, in order to make an active contribution to their production activities, companies today more frequently mobilise segments of the working population that are located on their periphery, outside the stable, well-regulated framework of the labour contract. The same logic can be observed, however, within the

labour contract itself; for example, when the wage earner is hired by a group of employers, a temping agency, as an apprentice or even under certain forms of government-subsidised contract. If we bundle together self-employed workers and this type of wage earner as a single group, then it becomes clear that approximately 17% of jobs in Europe are located on the fringes of the company. To this, we could also add the 7% of ambiguous cases, in which most of those surveyed claimed to be wage earners but did not have a contract (5.6%), a situation which is increasingly arising in countries with the lowest percentages of wage earners, such as Cyprus, Malta, Greece, Poland, Ireland, Italy and Portugal.

All these forms of labour exchange—both wage earning and self-employed—point to a loosening in the relationships between the parties, which the wage system of the postwar years had bound together so tightly. This is even more evident in relation to unemployment—a status that encompasses the myriad different situations of joblessness, providing this situation is involuntary and the individuals are considered employable in the (more or less) long term. There has been much debate about the criteria used to define this status since the first official statistics were published in developed countries at the end of the nineteenth century. These criteria serve not only to calculate the unemployment rate—a politically sensitive indicator often used to gauge the effectiveness of the government in power—but also to define whether or not the jobless individual in question has the right to receive a surrogate income. In Europe, this income generally takes the form of unemployment benefits. This is the case in France, for example. In other countries, it also involves significant tax exemptions (Germany), social transfers in kind, depending on the family situation (UK) or placement services and help in finding a job. In all cases, the aim is to maintain the consumption power of the recognised unemployed population and encourage them, in a number of different ways, to re-enter the labour market—not always an easy task. In all these mechanisms, states continue to be key players, fulfilling a central role in terms of administering, controlling and establishing the scope of the benefits provided. The sum of the benefits varies from country to country, although the trend everywhere is downward (Marc et al., 2021).

Despite this shift towards employment on the fringes of established production systems, the wage system understood in the most restrictive sense of the term, i.e., those with a labour contract that places them under the control of an employer for an extended period of time in exchange for certain rights and guarantees—are in no danger of disappearing any time soon. The regime persists and is still the predominant one in both Europe and all other industrialised countries. Three quarters of the European workers surveyed for the EWCS–2015 were engaged in this type of bilateral relationship, although this figure has dropped slightly since 2010 (when it stood at 81%). The spread of new kinds of employment regimes, however, reveals certain cracks in the system, or at least points to the presence of a wider variety of methods for managing the workforce, with formulas that are both more complex and more widely socialised than before. They are more complex—for the affected workers at least—since the stability of the jobs in question is no longer guaranteed and the time commitment required is more uncertain, either due to insufficient working hours or an excessive workload. They are also more socialised because the number of employers involved in the implementation of the labour contract tends to increase, either at once or over the course of the worker's career. The same is true of the groups of workers they temporarily join, and their periods of unemployment, during which they are linked to a myriad of different professional groups charged with monitoring them, training them and aiding them in re-entering the labour market. This is the case, for example, with unemployed individuals who are no longer entitled to any

benefits and who are ousted from the compensation system and handed over to solidarity-based mechanisms managed by other types of social workers. Complexity and socialisation are also present in companies, which can now combine heterogeneous activities or fractions of activities—independent or otherwise—without having to stabilise their workforce. Workforce management tends to extend beyond the frontiers of companies themselves, which are often hard to discern anyway among the multitude of production networks in which they participate.

A more complex and interconnected labour mobilisation

So, what can we learn from the data on changes in work gathered over the past forty years by social scientists? In general terms, they reveal that the wage system, as established after the end of World War II, has undergone a deep-rooted and long-lasting transformation. This alteration was prompted by movements that have disrupted the labour relation itself (fundamental in our societies) and, more specifically, the modes of labour exchange. The wage system of today and the future will face a likely fall in productivity that will only serve to accentuate the trend—visible for over thirty years now—to increase the share of profits by squeezing labour incomes ever tighter. It is in this light that we should interpret and analyse the unprecedented decline in the portion of value added assigned to labour, a phenomenon that has been facilitated by a range of different mechanisms such as wage control, restrictions on public spending and, currently, inflation. It is difficult to foretell what civil unrest may be engendered by these changes. However, revolts are flaring up everywhere, over-spilling the boundaries of the traditional institutions that once channelled such conflicts and showing that there is a limit to people's willingness to accept social inequality—and we are skirting worryingly close to that limit. It is in this context that several profoundly reactionary and dangerous movements have arisen and been championed and (re)legitimated by the votes of an ever-growing swathe of the population.

The data published by social scientists also clearly indicate that for nearly thirty years, industrialised countries have been experimenting with new forms of labour exchange based on a principle that is totally different from that which governed the consolidation of the postwar wage system. During that period, the principal aim was to ensure stability and a certain degree of continuity in the tasks assigned. This was made possible by the legal subordination of workers to companies that were themselves stable and enduring. In contrast, new exchange formulas tend to disassociate workers from production units, loosening the employment bonds established between those participating in these exchanges. Despite being very much present in the current employment system, these new modes of labour exchange are still a minority and foster, among workers, a more precarious, circumstantial and, on some occasions, particularly disruptive link with their jobs. Moreover, they contribute to diversifying the experiences that make up work activities and, more generally, exacerbate the fragmentation of the wage-based society. Are these new labour exchange formulas likely to become more widespread in the future? All we can say for certain is that their impetus does not look set to diminish any time soon and their effect on workers and the different groups that make up this population are considerable, to say the least.

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PART II: Variations in the wage system

Without doubt, the best-known form of work is wage labour. For the employee, it is also often the most attractive, affording as it does access to employment in an institution—be it a company, an association or some other body—and guaranteeing a certain degree of security during the term of the labour contract. Another appeal lies in the guarantees and entitlements conferred by law on employees in such an arrangement in return for submitting to the employer's authority. However, it is far from being the only formula within which people work. There are others in which the work is carried out outside any traditional labour institution, with or without an employer. Work takes a wide variety of forms, some of which are easier to identify than others, and some of which lie on the very fringes of the law. Although different from conventional wage labour, these formulas are no less proactive and effective in mobilising labour, without resorting to coercion. Workers in this area experience a wide range of constraints and freedoms.

Despite this, however, arrangements of this kind, lying outside the labour contract, are rarely (if ever) considered worthy of consideration when discussing work and the dynamics of labour. They are seen as being overly abnormal, marginal or archaic. On the rare occasions that they do capture our attention—for example in the case of the gig economy, in which the work is provided by workers dubiously referred to as being 'self-employed'—they are studied only in terms of the potential threat they pose to the wage contract or the possibility of emancipation they confer. Most studies on labour implicitly use the labour contract as their benchmark, removing any interest in analysing the way any other labour formulas operate. However, this widely-held position effectively ignores half of the world's workers, who do not work under a labour contract.¹ Most of them, it is true, are in poor countries and generally work in very precarious conditions. However, such arrangements also exist in rich countries, where the labour contract is still the norm. They range from relatively formalised situations of self-employment, to much more scattered situations such as that of the *matsutake* mushroom pickers working in the devastated forests of Oregon (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015) and gold prospectors in Guyana (Tourneau, 2020).²

There can be no numerical justification, therefore, for excluding such a large group of workers from any analysis of the concept of work. At the very least, their existence serves to highlight how many different forms of labour force mobilisation exist. It also shows that the labour contract and the corporate form under which it is structured are not inevitable: a system that today might seem ideal for capital reproduction might take on new forms tomorrow. That is not to say that we see these formulas as containing the germ of alternatives to the hegemony of the market, like some foretaste of the post-capitalist world that some authors predict (Gibson–Graham, 2006; Hardt & Negri, 2001, 2011). We

¹ There are, of course, enormous variations from country to country. In the world's poorer countries, 80% of the working population work outside a labour contract; in some sub-Saharan countries, such as Niger, Chad and the Central African Republic, the figure is as high as 90% (World Bank data, ILO databases).

² In wealthier countries, 20% of jobs are linked to the more formal situations we have discussed, such as legally-regulated self-employment. There is also an informal or underground economy, whose size is difficult to estimate. Based on 2012 data, some studies estimated that the informal economy accounted for an unweighted average of 15.7% of jobs in high-income countries and 19.5% in Europe (Schneider & Schneider, 2013). More recent studies calculate that the underground economy in Europe might account for between 15% and 20% of GDP (Kelmanson et al., 2019).

simply note their existence and their diversity, considering them to be just as legitimate a subject of study as the 'standard' arrangement in any account of the transformations currently taking place in the field of labour.

Consequently, the second part of the book sets out to explore three of these other formulas, contextualising them within the system that enables and reproduces them. All three differ to some extent from the standard employment contract, whilst still operating within the codified spaces of labour. The first arrangement discussed is the most recent and has arisen out of amendments made to the self-employment statute in most developed countries. In some cases, this has entailed incorporating elements of the labour contract into the field of self-employment, in a way that would, until recently, have been legally impossible. In formal terms at least, these new employment statutes preserve the organisational autonomy of the self-employed worker, whilst at the same time recognising their entitlement to guarantees that were previously the exclusive prerogative of salaried workers—the only subordinate position recognised by law. These legal contrivances, grafted onto the conventional system of work, continue to be a source of tension and contradiction and have necessitated constant revision. The ambiguity of existing conventions, particularly with regard to the standard employment contract, are gradually being revealed.

The second formula also comes from the sphere of self-employment, but in this case within the 'traditional' variant of farming in France. As in all former agricultural nations, most of the country's output comes from a scattered group of small independent farmers. They are considered to enjoy sovereignty over the management of their farms and to be owners of their means of production. However, a more in-depth exploration of the specific aspects of their productive relations reveals the active presence of a vast set of technical and bureaucratic networks and a wide variety of different institutions. Self-employed producers are required to participate in these networks to acquire and maintain their status as farmers. Agricultural production is thus the result of this wider whole and not just the actions of farmers, who constitute necessary—but not unique—nodes within it. The conditional membership of farmers in this expanded system has acted as a powerful engine driving the transformation of their work and their enterprises, which are today fully aligned with expectations of capital valorisation. What we see in these arrangements, therefore, is not so much tradition but a modern approach that is worth exploring.

The final formula analysed shares some important aspects with the standard labour system, since it largely comprises salaried workers on contract. In this case, however, they come under the authority of a public, rather than a private, employer. The science workers we examine here enjoy a large degree of autonomy over the manner in which they organise their labour and even participate in a form of co-management of the institutions in which they work. We have chosen to focus on researchers working in Spain, a country which although far from being at the forefront of today's competitive international sector, nonetheless constitutes an interesting case study, given the decisive role the state plays in the field of science. Spain thus exemplifies a feature that is common to all developed economies; the public authorities have always (and never more so than today) been involved in the workings of science, which is considered to be a strategic area for industry and plays a key role in inter-state trade wars. During both the Franco dictatorship and subsequently under a democratic government, the state has created different systems for mobilising scientific work, which are now being updated to meet current international criteria. This intense reorientation requires major reorganisation of professional careers

and the introduction of a variety of devices that limit scientists' remaining autonomy and delegation of powers.

Each of the three formulas, therefore, operates outside the classical industrial model and yet each is effectively reproduced and is integrated with equally efficiency into the processes of capital valorisation. In all three cases, it appears, workers are encouraged to become more involved in organising their work and in the exchanges—commercial or otherwise—involved in that activity. As self-employed workers, they are transformed by their statute into managers of an economic unit (real or otherwise), with greater or lesser capital. In the case of public sector researchers, their subordination to their employer is more diffuse and less immediate than in the bureaucratic order of private enterprise. As might be expected, each of the three formulas promotes a different version of autonomy; in all cases, however, this aspect is important for the workers involved, who hold it up as a guiding principle, a fundamental psychological trait or a means of emancipation. Scientists, farmers and bicycle delivery workers all make their autonomy a cardinal value in their lives, turning it into a principle of their freedom.

Nonetheless, the other stakeholders in these spheres are entirely unconcerned about this common passion. Their structures are based on a powerful mercantile logic that is either applied to all production processes or emerges at some key stage. The different formulas analysed here therefore form part of a more widespread situation that obliges workers to play a part in the ceaseless spread of capital. The obligation may not take the same form as it does in the traditional context of a wage contract, but it is exercised nonetheless, regardless of the spaces for autonomy provided to the workers involved. Such spaces in no way contravene the logic of the market, which has no difficulty in accommodating them. Market logic and worker autonomy constitute two separate tiers of reality and are indifferent to one another. In order to understand these situations, then, we must again examine the networks of economic exchange whereby the products of labour are valorised. We also need to consider the mechanisms by which workers are prepared for work—mechanisms that attract and orient their labour by distinguishing certain workers from others, hierarchising them and distributing them amongst different production networks, thereby enabling (or attempting to enable) their reproduction. Regardless of the formula adopted, workers are always required to be employed; they are prepared for this purpose through a complex set of mechanisms, backed by a whole host of institutions for social welfare, training, reallocation or accumulation of labour forces, etc. The formula of the labour contract is the *result* of this broad set of mechanisms and institutions, not its substance. It is just one of the several possible forms this complex set of mechanisms can take, as are the three systems described in this second part of the book. These arrangements also play their part in the wage system, even if (to some extent or other) they represent a departure from the traditional formula of the employment contract.

In the three *wage arrangements* analysed here, the worker's autonomy, however substantial it may be, is constantly being oriented, controlled, standardised and externally regulated through a variety of devices. These may take the form of technological mechanisms, in the case of the 'new self-employed' (especially those who are mobilised remotely via digital service platforms); dense networks of professional bodies, in the case of farmers; or complicated webs of regulations, in the case of public-sector researchers. Outside the world of the private company, production therefore takes place in a variety of organised systems of bodies, which validate—always on a conditional basis—employment statuses and professional careers. These organised systems, to which

workers are bound, carry with them a wide variety of rules, obligations, objectives and technical modalities, drawn up by the participating institutions. Each one leaves its mark—depending on its *raison d'être*, the project it represents, the characteristics of its structure, its prescriptive power, etc.—resulting in often inconsistent requirements. It is up to the workers to structure these requirements and, as far as possible, to try to mitigate any contradictions they may contain. This is one of the traits shared by workers in all three of the arrangements analysed.

Another is the constant and vigilant presence of the state. States always have an interest in matters related to labour, regardless of whether or not the work is performed within a company. This can clearly be seen in the case of scientists mobilised by the Spanish state; the state has assumed the role of employer, along with responsibility for 'producing' scientific personnel, as a way of offsetting the lack of investment from the private sector. We can also see state involvement in the case of the 'newly self-employed', whose employment statute is a direct result of public action. This is borne out by our comparison between the new employment mechanisms created in France and Spain. From very similar initial positions, these mechanisms have come up with two different solutions, showing that state intervention is never entirely consistent or entirely disinterested. In the case of agriculture, the state could be said to intervene at all times and in all places to control and guide the way this strategic sector functions. However, this mass intervention in the operations of independent producers is not performed directly. Rather, it is exercised through professional technical and administrative networks, partly controlled by the state, which act as its intermediaries. This, therefore, can be seen as a paradoxical form of management in which the state has a major interest and a large degree of involvement, but one in which it also has to overcome multiple obstacles.

Another common feature of all three formulas involves the maintenance and reproduction of workers. The way this is organised varies from one case to another, but it is always the object of strong tension. In the case of a wage contract, these essential functions are based on employment and compulsory contributions deducted from the income generated by employees and their employers. These deductions generate extensive public funds, whose management and use lies in the hands of the state—which thus implements a policy of redistribution. As salaried employees, Spanish researchers are fully dependent on this type of system, albeit with certain adaptations for government employees (who are not, for example, exposed to the risk of unemployment). This type of device can also be seen in the other two formulas analysed. Self-employed workers, despite being separated from their direct employers, do not escape the obligations, rules, conditions and evaluations imposed by this extraordinary public body, which structures, organises and schedules our everyday lives. However, they do not obtain the same benefits as salaried employees. In particular, they tend to pay lower social contributions because their income tends to be low. This may be aggravated by the impact of other costs borne by self-employed professionals who benefit from certain tax measures. For example, the expensive machinery used by farmers can be written off for tax purposes, thus reducing the earnings declared and by extension, the size of social security contributions. The only relationship these employer-less sole traders have is with their customers, who—by definition—do not provide employment and are therefore not obliged to participate in the reproduction of a labour force on which they nonetheless depend. The result is a predatory mechanism—promoted (deliberately or not) by the states—that profoundly unbalances work systems, if only in financial terms. The cost of loss-making self-employment

schemes is, for the time being, transferred non-transparently to the workers' collective, but one must wonder how sustainable this type of solution is.

In the case of Spanish researchers, although they are covered by the standard system, their situation is not without tension. The deep-rooted change that has occurred in the way scientific personnel are managed has spawned significant pockets of precariousness, excluding many researchers from the protection provided by wage labour and/or prolonging the instability of the early stages of their professional careers. The continued existence of this precariousness has led some in the scientific community to abandon their research careers or emigrate to countries that offer more appealing salaries and career opportunities. This is a patently bad outcome for the state, which has borne the cost of training these researchers. It also affects the country's science system, jeopardising its goal of meeting the demands of international competition, and impacts the state's ability to reproduce a scientific community with sufficient critical mass in the medium term.

The tensions and contradictions that are causing unrest in all three spheres are evidence of a deeper and more chaotic movement towards the dissociation of states from the productive instances of capitalism. Their solidarity has been one of the bedrocks of the development of market societies since industry first emerged, but in the formulas studied here, this solidarity has waned. More specifically, the trend is for the respective fields of action to diverge: national spaces for states, globalised space for capital. Capital is valorised in a decidedly international space. The consequences can be seen in each of the three wage forms analysed in this second part of the book: in the stakeholders involved; in the constant reforms that are rocking agriculture; in the internationalisation of scientific research networks (at least in areas that are strategic for capital valorisation schemes). Trapped within the narrow confines of their purpose, states adapt and compete fiercely with one another to snatch a morsel of the valorisation processes that come their way. The specific forms of employment they promote or discourage all form part of this fierce competition.

The three forms of work presented here all demonstrate—possibly better than the traditional wage contract—this underlying tension, contradiction and rupture, in which labour remains a central element. It is clearly important to have as accurate a picture as possible of this situation if we are to have any hope of envisaging a path into the future.

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4. The incomplete wage system of self-employed workers

Self-employment, once thought to have been confined to the fringes of the ever-expanding wage system, is once again hitting the headlines. This is not because the number of self-employed people is growing exponentially, although some authorities are predicting a significant increase,¹ but rather because, for many years now, this particular regime has been fed by new dynamics that are generating new types of workers. The most prominent of these new employment models are reminiscent of the unstable and challenging forms developed during the early years of industrialisation. At the opposite extreme from the figure of the triumphant entrepreneur, these new workers are forced to accept unreasonable working hours and an intense work pace in exchange for an income that is, at best, uncertain. Their level of social protection is low in comparison with salaried workers and their bond with those who purchase their services is fairly precarious. They are also forced to guarantee the reproduction of their own capital, no matter how modest that may be. We are referring, among others, to domestic workers, the couriers and drivers who traverse our city centres and the ‘clickworkers’ who perform fragmented digital tasks over the Internet. An entire universe of ‘small jobs’ managed remotely by economic operators who mobilise these individuals as self-employed workers, assigning them tasks and then monitoring their completion using different mechanisms, while at the same time making a profit from them. In short, we are referring to freelance workers who are, in reality, anything but free.

Self-employment is currently being transformed by a plethora of legally-ambivalent situations halfway between self-employed work and salaried employment; two regimes between which the law used to draw a clear distinction. Self-employed workers are characterised, in principle at least, by having the freedom to organise their work as they see fit, providing they do not violate the terms of the contract linking them to their client. Salaried workers, on the other hand, have to accept the rules imposed by their employer, at least for the duration of their work contract, which recognises and formalises this subordination. Nevertheless, some self-employed workers find themselves in a position that is as subordinate as that of their salaried counterparts, yet devoid of the protection and rights that employees enjoy in exchange for this subservience. It is easy to imagine the advantages of this system for those operators who mobilise this kind of self-employed worker: not only do they save themselves the expense of having to pay the social salary (i.e., the cost of the benefits received by salaried employees), they also avoid having to honour the obligations imposed on employers. In addition to the precarious situation in which this type of mobilisation places self-employed workers, the practice also raises a number of other questions. Since they contribute nothing to funding the growing social needs of society, these operators shift the burden to the collective. Who will cover the cost of healthcare, pensions and training if, in addition to the social security payments made by self-employed workers themselves, the companies that mobilise them fail to do their part? What will happen to these workers when they retire or if they fall ill?

¹ See, for example, the report published in 2023 by the Council of the European Union on platform workers, who account for only one part of the self-employed population (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/infographics/digital-platform-workers/>). This report estimates that, in Europe, 28 million people work over digital platforms (most as self-employed workers), almost as many as in the manufacturing industry. The report forecasts that, by 2025, this figure will have risen to 43 million (almost 20% of Europe's working population). However, initial assessments by the EU's statistical office, Eurostat, suggest that these forecasts should be treated with caution.

These concerns are particularly pressing in high-income countries, where the wage system continues to be the dominant model. Here, self-employed workers represent 12% of the workforce (just over 14% in Europe, 6% in the United States and 10% in Japan) (ILO, 2021). Globally, however, although this regime is often confused with informal work, self-employed workers account for 46% of the working population, and figure is as high as 80% in some low-income countries.² Similar levels of informal work, combined with the absence of any real protection for formal jobs, change the order of priority in which different problems need to be addressed. High-income countries are immersed in a debate regarding the emergence of new types of self-employed worker, particularly those linked to digital service platforms. But however disruptive these new models may be in many respects, they represent only a small fraction of all the different possible permutations of self-employment that are currently emerging. Under a diverse range of statutes and tax regimes, many self-employed workers today offer their services (some more qualified, some less so) to the market without the need for any platform.³ Own account workers who enjoy a more stable position are often referred to as ‘traditional’ self-employed workers, although this adjective fails to reflect the deep-rooted changes that their professions have undergone over recent years. Many of these changes are linked to work procedures themselves, although others have more to do with the many different professional networks self-employed people must now join, the employment statutes under which they provide their services and even the social and professional characteristics of their calling. Architects and notaries, for example, do not work in the same way as they did ten years ago, and this type of transformation is as novel for the world of self-employment as the emergence of platform work.

A full analysis of the situation of self-employment today would require us to examine all its different varieties, something that lies beyond the remit of this book. In this chapter, therefore, we will focus on just one aspect, namely the legal adjustments that have been made in many places in response to the proliferation of these hybrid situations that combine elements from both salaried employment and self-employed work. Regardless of who (or what) the client is, these hybrid situations tend always to exist outside their organisation; in other words, they are peripheral to the client’s organisational infrastructure, with workers hired under a model that differs significantly from subcontracting. This is not, therefore, a relationship between two companies, but rather between a client—who may be a company, an institution or an association—and a worker defined as a self-employed person who is not, therefore, a member of any group. These new legal mechanisms have adopted different forms and names in each individual country: auto-entrepreneur in France, trabajador autónomo económicamente dependiente in Spain, collaborazione coordinata e continuativa (co.co.co) in Italy, worker in the United Kingdom, Arbeitnehmerähnliche Person (quasi-salaried person) in Germany, recibos verdes in Portugal, and JOBS in Bulgaria, to give just a few examples. All models,

² As defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), informal employment refers to people who, in their main or secondary jobs, are (a) own-account workers, employers and members of producers’ cooperatives employed in their own informal sector enterprises; (b) own-account workers engaged in the production of goods exclusively for final use by their own household (e.g., subsistence farming); (c) contributing family workers, regardless of whether they work in formal or informal sector enterprises; or (d) employees holding informal jobs, whether employed by formal sector enterprises, informal sector enterprises, or as paid domestic workers by households (ILO, 2021).

³ In France, for example, in 2023, half of those referred to as *auto-entrepreneurs*—a common employment model among ‘new’ self-employed workers—had never used a digital platform in their economic activity (Juliachs, 2023).

however, tend to bestow on these workers some of the rights and protections reserved, in principle, for those subject by contract to the authority of their employer. It is on this extension of rights and protection—and the difficulties it entails—that we will focus in this chapter.

These new legal mechanisms are the result of intense institutional and legal activities in all countries. There has been a burst of new case law as a result of the sheer number of lawsuits filed. These suits aim to unmask employers operating under the guise of simple clients, forcing them to acknowledge these ‘false self-employed workers’ as salaried workers and treat them as such. Several court rulings, some unequivocal, have helped consolidate national case law through important judgements.⁴ A number of countries have also enacted specific laws in this respect. One that has attracted a great deal of attention since it was passed in 2018 is the California Assembly Bill known as AB–5, which establishes the presumption of employment and shifts the burden of proof onto the employer. In other words, it is up to the company to demonstrate the existence of a true relationship of self-employment.⁵ In 2019, Portugal enacted a similar law, known as the Uber Act, for passenger drivers mobilised by platforms; and Spain passed a piece of legislation in 2021, known as the Riders’ Act, aimed at the delivery sector. For its part, within its strategy to digitalise the economy, Germany has announced an ambitious plan to substantially improve the situation of digital platform workers, although this does not yet seem to have resulted in specific solutions, nor in the much-anticipated consolidation of the professional statute covering these workers. Finally, Europe has embarked on a similar path, approving in 2024 (after endless discussions and stiff resistance) a proposal for a European Directive on Platform Work that recognises, de facto, the presumption of employment for all workers. Application of this directive will, however, depend on the criteria established in each country.⁶

Like court rulings, however, new legislation is not always enforced easily or even successfully. In addition to certain countries’ reluctance to approve the new European Platform Work Directive, the clients—usually service platforms—who purchase these workers’ services are relentlessly deploying their entire legal and lobbying arsenal to limit or delay enforcement, and their powerful and well-financed legal departments are bringing all kinds of suits against the laws or legal resolutions that affect them. AB–5, for example, has been only partially enforced in California, and much the same is happening currently in Spain with the Riders’ Law (Lahera–Sánchez et al., 2024). Moreover, service platforms often band together to form lobbies, some of which—such as Move EU in

⁴ See for example, the 2020 judgement of the California Supreme Court (San Francisco) requiring Uber and Lyft to treat their drivers as employees under the state’s Assembly Bill 5 (AB–5). In Germany, the Federal Court recognised the act of performing small tasks for a services platform as an employment relationship, thereby paving the way for German crowdworkers (who were not able to freely design their activities and whose collaboration with the client was monitored over online platforms) to be accepted as salaried employees. In France, the *Cour de cassation* [Court of Cassation] ruled for the first time in 2018 that the labour relationship between a platform (Take it easy) and one of its freelance couriers was in fact that of a salaried employee. It has since handed down similar rulings against Uber (2020) and Deliveroo (2022). The same conclusion was reached by the *Tribunal Superior de Justicia* [Higher Court of Justice] in Spain in 2020, in relation to the delivery platform Glovo, and by the UK Supreme Court in 2021, in the case ‘Uber v Aslam’.

⁵ The client is required to demonstrate that the self-employed worker whose services it has hired: a) is free from control and direction in their activities; b) provides a service that is outside the scope of the client’s usual activities; c) is formally registered as a self-employed worker with the pertinent administration and provides services similar to those provided to the client.

⁶ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698923/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)698923_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698923/EPRS_BRI(2022)698923_EN.pdf)

Europe, for example—are very influential. By virtue of the jobs they claim to create, it is likely that these operators will continue to exert pressure on national governments, threatening to take their business elsewhere and evading their responsibilities as employers (for instance, by failing to recognise the presumption of employment for couriers or outsourcing the hiring of courier staff to intermediary companies).

Despite this resistance, however, different laws have been enacted at a national and European level, various cases have been won in court and new employment statutes have been approved. All this activity clearly shows states' deep involvement and concern. But why are states so worried? Self-employment is not usually the object of any kind of priority public action. Labour exchanges in this field are normally left to the mercy of the market and any conflicts are resolved with reference to commercial law, with the state rarely intervening except to levy taxes. The parties to the contract, whom commercial law considers to be free and equal, are joined temporarily by contracts that specify, in each case, the nature of the service to be provided and the conditions of delivery and remuneration. The self-employed individual is solely responsible for organising how and when the task is completed and is obligated to exercise this responsibility actively. If these conditions are not met, then—as we have seen—the courts may redefine the arrangement as an employment relationship, penalising the 'undercover' employer. This situation is very different from that of the salaried labour contract, whose slow and costly institutionalisation we analysed in the first part of this book. Despite being private in nature, salaried labour contracts have clearly been the object of public intervention, with states moving to limit the authority of the employer over their employees by imposing different obligations that offer certain rights and guarantees to contracted workers. Whether they be formalised in unified legal codes or in a succession of independent regulations,⁷ these rights are only recognised from a legal perspective as a counterpoint to (and constraint on) the subordination to which salaried workers are exposed. The subordination remains, however, and it is assumed that workers consent to it when they sign the contract—a contract that obliges them, in relation to their job and for the duration of the agreement, to accept all the tasks assigned to them by their employer, and to perform them in the manner and within the timeframe established by that figure.

The current interest being shown by states in work situations located on the fringes of companies and the labour contract—situations in which, legally speaking at least, there is no subordination—is unprecedented and prompts us to wonder what challenges are posed by these situations to warrant such a legal and institutional frenzy. It seems clear that states wish to establish for themselves an active role, seeking to impose a modicum of order on the problems and contradictions raised by the deployment of an emerging outsourced and remote model of workforce management. The solutions proposed to date basically consist of extending the existing mechanisms of the wage system to cover those workers trapped in hybrid situations—a process which is both complex and as yet incomplete. The rights and guarantees extended to these new self-employed workers continue to be weak, yet these individuals must still bow to the dictates of collective institutions that structure the different stages of their life and determine their social needs and how best to satisfy them, just as they do for salaried workers in a company setting. The analysis presented here in no way contradicts the predominant thesis in the field of social science, which views hybrid employment situations as a new attack on protected

⁷ It is important to remember that not all countries have a Labour Code that formalises the labour contract. German labour law, for example, is set out in a series of independent texts that nevertheless clearly define the statute of salaried workers, along with the rights and obligations of their employer.

salaried employment. There are many elements that support this widely-held point of view, and it is not our aim here to contest it by demonstrating the benefits and advantages of the reforms currently underway. On the contrary, our objective is to call attention to certain aspects that this dominant thesis tends to overlook, but which we believe to be vital to understanding how the transformations currently taking place in the world of work may possibly play out.

The dismantling of the wage system

The spread of hybrid employment situations has not passed unnoticed among social science researchers, who are both intrigued and concerned by this new phenomenon. The dominant thesis views these situations and new legal mechanisms as indications of a new era in the dismantlement of protected employment—a process that has been rendered easier by a prolonged period of high unemployment that is extremely disadvantageous for workers.⁸ Many researchers argue that this dismantlement of the protected wage system began during the 1980s, when what are now referred to as atypical forms of employment first began to emerge and spread.⁹ These new models disrupted and diversified what was then known as the ‘standard employment relationship’ (SER)¹⁰ in terms of both duration and working hours, with new operators, such as temping agencies, joining the market. Since that time, although standard employment continues to be the norm (indeed, most statistical studies continue to use it as a benchmark for measuring all other employment situations), its scope has shrunk considerably. In Europe, where this employment norm remained robust up until around twenty years ago, we estimate that, in 2015, around one third of all European jobs failed to meet the criteria to be considered standard employment relationships (Célérier et al., 2019).¹¹

These ‘atypical’ employment models are often perceived as a direct attack against ‘standard’ salaried employment, which is considered the most secure in terms of income and protection and offers workers greater scope for organising their lives. Legal experts have certainly demonstrated a remarkable degree of creativity in inventing employment models that prove unsettling and uncomfortable for workers. The zero-hours contract, very common in the United Kingdom, is one example that has spread to several English-speaking countries. On-demand work is another model in which work hours fluctuate according to the employer’s requirements, with workers given little or no advance notice. In the United States (although also in Europe, particularly Germany), large department stores and other companies working in the hotel and catering industry regularly abuse this type of contract (Lambert et al., 2014). The precariousness to which part-time workers with temporary contracts or temporary agency workers are exposed is more difficult to assess. Some studies have found, for example, that younger generations tend to reject the standard employment relationship, viewing it as inimical to the development of their talents (SPReW & Vandramin, 2008; Bureau & Corsani, 2014; Longo, 2018). The

⁸ We discuss this approach, as well as the limited notion of the wage system on which it is based, in Chapter 3 of this book.

⁹ The 2016 ILO report (ILO, 2016) proposes a definition of these atypical forms that covers a number of different situations, including fixed-term work, temporary agency work, casual work, part-time work, subcontracting, disguised work and dependent self-employment. See also Chapter 2 of this book for more details.

¹⁰ According to the most common definition, the SER is a direct (bilateral), ongoing, full-time relationship between an employer and an employee (Stone & Arthurs, 2013; ILO, 2016).

¹¹ For more details, see Chapter 3 of this book.

successive waves of resignations observed in the United States (20 million workers at the beginning of 2022) and many other developed countries seem to confirm this latent attitude, which was most notably catalysed by the Covid-19 crisis. The observation of these trends, however, has not prompted analysts to begin radically criticising the wage system, which they continue to view as a reasonable system in terms of the protection it provides, and which is currently at risk of collapse.

Indeed, the slow but inexorable decline of protected employment has (logically) led to the interpretation of new forms of self-employment as expressions of a new kind of precariousness, rooted mainly in the presence of digital work platforms and their novel workforce management model. The activity of these platforms has attracted the attention of many analysts, whose work has been fuelled by the establishment of different public and private research programmes aimed at shedding light on the practices of these new operators and their consequences for the self-employed workers they mobilise.¹² The results so far suggest, in general terms, that these self-employed individuals exist in increasingly fragile situations and are forced to bear all the risks of the corresponding economic transactions, as well as the cost of maintaining their activity. This increased fragility is particularly evident in the most widely-studied service platforms (namely those that provide delivery and passenger transport services). Most of the workers mobilised by these platforms are young, working-class men who are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the increased liberalisation of the labour market. Many of these diagnoses suggest that a new scenario has emerged in which the old salaried workforce—integrated into and protected by the company—is being irreversibly transformed into a plethora of isolated, remotely-controlled individuals subject to fierce competition and devoid of anything but the most basic social protection and rights.

Many authors have sought to analyse these new self-employment models, often coming to different conclusions, particularly in terms of the exact nature of the role played by the state in these transformations. Nonetheless, all agree that the state continues to be an important presence and no credence is given to the notion that it is destined to disappear. Despite the withdrawal of many public services or the degradation of the conditions under which they are provided, the state remains a central player in the labour market. Where analysts disagree is in their interpretation of the nature of state intervention.¹³ Some see

¹² Of the many programmes we could mention in this field, the Fairwork project established by the Oxford Internet Institute (University of Oxford) and the Berlin Social Science Centre (WZB) is particularly worth noting. Fairwork is a network operating in almost 40 countries worldwide that aims to analyse and impact the working conditions of the platform economy, improving the recognised rights of workers (minimum wage, labour contract, worker representation, health and safety, protection and transmission of personal data, the position of women, the use of AI, etc.). For more details on the project and its outcomes, see <https://fair.work/en/fw/homepage/>.

¹³ These differences of opinion mainly focus around the two principal approaches to the analysis of what is often referred to as neoliberalism. This term, however, should be used cautiously, since overuse has given rise to a wide range of different meanings (Haber, 2012). Both approaches concur in rejecting Hayek's theory, which predicted the total liberalisation of the market (Hayek, 1978) and has been roundly disproven by all available data. Differing interpretations of neoliberalism stem from the references on which each author bases their arguments. For those who subscribe to the theory developed by Bourdieu and Boltanski, for example, neoliberalism may be seen as a doctrine or ideology adapted and adopted by states in their effort to direct the progress of society (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Boltanski, 2008). In contrast, for those inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, it is a set of governance techniques that guide individuals' behaviour and values (Dardot & Laval, 2010). Finally, for those more aligned with Marxist tenets, it is a phase of capitalism (Harvey, 2007; Klein, 2014) that some (Gerbaudo, 2021) believe may lead to a neo-statist transformation as a result of the Covid-19 health crisis. Needless to say, these approaches often merge in a variety of different combinations.

the state as an accomplice in the decline of the wage system and view the new self-employment models as an instrument designed to normalise the transition towards ‘entrepreneurship’, which forces workers to ‘commodify’ themselves in a process that is as costly as it is uncertain (Levratto & Serverin, 2009 ; Dardot & Laval, 2010). In addition to formalising these new employment statutes, states also develop and disseminate a prescriptive discourse, along with a series of ad hoc legal and regulatory mechanisms designed to encourage workers to become auto-entrepreneurs and, moreover, to feel fulfilled by doing so. These mechanisms help render a labour market that has already been reconfigured by atypical forms of employment even more flexible. The state strives to meet the demands of employers—namely platforms—through rational and well-reasoned actions that are not necessarily governed by ideology (no matter how liberal it may be). Judges, who are valued very highly in this kind of analysis, refuse to toe the line, and emerge as one of the few groups prepared to defend workers’ hard-won rights against this attack.

Other analyses view the state not as an accomplice in the decline of the wage system, but rather as the protector of salaried workers. Like other welfare state approaches (which assume that the state acts in the general interest of its population),¹⁴ this perspective holds that states do their best to oppose the powerful non-state forces, which seek to impose their own rules on the labour market and deregulate the exchanges that take place within it. These forces considerably limit the state’s capacity for public intervention and are the element responsible for the transformations currently occurring in the field of self-employment. The emergence of legally ambiguous grey areas in the labour market is evidence of their influence (Arthurs, 1996; Anteby, 2008; Bisom-Rapp & Coiquaud, 2017; Ahlberg & Romberg, 2019). It is in these grey areas that we find economically-dependent self-employed workers, although we also find—albeit in a very different situation—certain salaried employees who are contractually subordinate yet enjoy a certain degree of autonomy in terms of being able to organise and define their tasks and goals. Staff reporters and researchers with tenured positions in R&D organisations (see Chapter 6) constitute two classic examples. According to this type of analysis, the new employment statutes aim, as far as possible, to protect the weakest self-employed workers, providing them with certain guarantees within the framework of available resources and the state’s limited capacity to impose obligations on digital platforms. Public intervention adopts the form of legal action taken in conjunction with other measures and mechanisms.

The expansion of the wage system.

Regardless of the role attributed to the state, the dominant approaches predict a fairly bleak future for the world of work. Nevertheless, they do recognise a certain degree of resistance with a very clear goal: to defend, as far as possible, the rights currently enjoyed by subordinate workers, whose employment statute is implicitly held up as the ideal towards which all should strive. Some of the assumptions made by this approach are, however, problematic. For example, defending a series of rights whose existence depends on workers accepting their own subservience poses a number of questions, as does the automatic equation of atypical employment with precariousness. Issues of this kind often beleaguer analyses and statistical assessments, with no satisfactory answers being

¹⁴ Throughout the first part of this book, we discuss this generalised view of the state, revealing its ambivalence and, to our mind, limitations.

provided. The distinction, for example, between ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ part-time work fails to reflect the multitude of forces at play in relation to workers’ behaviour, which is characterised by both existing constraints and the desire for independence. Although more exhaustive analyses of this behaviour offer a more comprehensive range of explanations for workers’ actions and decisions, they do so in such generic terms that they fail to resolve the problem of their indecision.

Over and above these conceptual uncertainties, the main problem with interpreting any kind of transformation in work as a sign of the collapse of the wage system is that it makes it very hard to analyse said transformations with any degree of clarity. What is clear, however, is that these new self-employment models reflect a degree of transformation in the way that labour exchanges are carried out that has not been seen since the end of World War II. New self-employed workers have, in essence, been relegated to the fringes of the company, whose labour force is now almost entirely outsourced. Take Uber’s subsidiary in France, for example. According to its 2022 social report, the company employs only eighty salaried workers, gleaning its profits from the 30,000 or so independent drivers that it mobilises externally. In other words, those that actually do the work and those that commission it no longer belong to the same organisation. It is important to highlight this distancing, since once again it contrasts with the standard wage system model, which is based on belonging to a specific company. There can be no doubt that the new atypical forms of employment rendered the labour relationship between employer and employees more casual, limiting its duration and defining it as part-time or arranged through a third party.¹⁵ Nevertheless, these relationships did at least remain within the sphere of the company, integrating workers (albeit under different conditions) into a single collective whole.

New self-employed workers, however, are located outside these company-integrated worker groups. This type of figure was common during the early stages of industrialisation, when many workers operated outside the sphere of the recently established manufacturing firms. However, both the social context and the way in which labour exchanges were organised were very different back then. The state did not intervene in the field of work to the same extent as it does now, and any action it did take tended to be more localised. The intense legal and institutional activity triggered by the emergence of new self-employment models proves that the outsourcing of the workforce is by no means a problem-free process. Outsourced workers, defined as self-employed workers, are in a situation of subordination and should therefore be compensated accordingly in order to limit in some way the power that those purchasing their services hold over them. The law, however, prohibits this and, to date, has failed to provide any such system for market exchanges involving self-employed workers. In this sense, the presumption of employment enshrined in some recently-enacted laws or the redefinition of ‘false self-employed workers’ as salaried workers dictated by the courts, offer two possible solutions to this problem. Both equate workers and their clients with the well-established positions of salaried employee and employer. Experience shows, however,

¹⁵ It is worth noting that, in some countries in which atypical employment models are less common, the precariousness of this relationship is written into the letter of the law. In the United States, for example, normal ‘Employment Contracts’ or verbal ‘at will’ contracts can be terminated at any moment by either party without notice and without cause. It is not the purpose of this chapter to analyse the situation of low-income countries, in which labour contracts—where they even exist—fail to guarantee either the duration of the relationship or the worker’s access to real social rights or, on occasions, even a salary.

that neither solution is able to resolve all the problems posed by the new situation, mainly due to the fierce resistance they excite.

The hybrid employment statutes invented by states must therefore be relocated within this uncertain context, in which pre-existing agreements are no longer able to untangle the confused web of situations that have arisen, or indeed offer a definitive solution to the problems that they generate. This is the main reason for extending the scope of the rights and protections hitherto reserved for those accepting the authority of their employer within the boundaries of their company. Through these new employment statutes, states seek to establish mechanisms that guarantee the maintenance and renewal of the workers at whom they are targeted, since these are fundamental dimensions in the collective workforce management of a wage-based society, something for which states are primarily responsible. Indeed, a worker's employment statute determines whether or not they are eligible to receive unemployment benefits when they are between jobs, the size of the pension they are able to draw upon retirement, the financial aid granted to their families, how their health problems are dealt with and the education opportunities open to their children, among others. In sum, their statute locates workers within the collective workforce management system, which dictates the way in which they organise their work and family life.

In modern wage-based societies, this broad-ranging collective system is funded by social security payments, or in other words, by the obligatory withholding of part of the income earned by those participating in labour exchanges. This money is placed in a common fund and redistributed in accordance with criteria established mainly by states, which are also responsible (directly or indirectly) for managing the system. Employment statutes also determine the type and magnitude of the social security payments due from all parties involved. The payment conditions applied to new self-employed workers are still a far cry from the norm: self-employed workers pay very little in social security while their clients are entirely exempt from any such obligations. The cost of maintaining these workers therefore falls on the collective, a situation whose sustainability depends entirely on the number of workers affected.

The extension of rights currently under way is also complex from a legal perspective, since self-employed workers are not really under the permanent control of their clients. Consequently, unlike conventional employers, such clients do not benefit from the advantages of the wage contract. The wage contract bestows on employers a certain 'right to continuity in the contract, which is executed in a consecutive fashion' (Gaudu, 1986). This means that employers are not obliged to specify in advance all the individual tasks that they want their salaried workers to perform, or to outline exactly how they want them to do so. Their employees agree to accept all the tasks that the employer decides to assign them within the scope of their work. Clients, on the other hand, hire self-employed workers to provide a service, but do not benefit from the prolongation of this relationship. If they want the relationship to last for a long period of time, they must renew the contract, defining once again the product or service they require while making sure that the tasks to be performed, the project or the type of investment made are different from those formalised in the previous contract. If they fail to do this, the courts may be tempted to view their relationship with the self-employed individual as a salaried employment relationship and sanction them accordingly.

The new self-employment statutes established aim to respond to this problem, combining (for the first time) labour law and commercial law, but without binding self-employed workers permanently to their clients. Even so, the situation is confusing and poses other dilemmas that are reflected in the contradictory categories and descriptions used to refer to these workers. Spanish law, for example, provides for the figure of the *trabajador autónomo económicamente dependiente* [economically-dependent self-employed worker]—begging the question as to how a self-employed worker can be in a situation of subordination. The same can be said of the term workers, which seeks to define a casual form of labour relationship using a general category that can be applied to many other (if not all) employment situations. Underlying these difficulties are new self-employment situations that reflect the transformation of figures that, until recently, represented own-account workers and salaried employees, as well as client and employer. These new employment statutes push existing conventions to their limit, particularly those that aim to confine the subordination of workers to within company boundaries. New self-employed workers reveal the arbitrary nature of such delimitations, which have hitherto marked the division between salaried employees and own-account workers.

States' reactions to the emergence of hybrid work situations can hardly, therefore, be viewed as an attempt to dismantle the wage system. Indeed, from a logical perspective, what we are faced with is more akin to an extension of that regime. State actions aim to place these new entrepreneurs under the authority of the wage-based institutions that govern the mechanisms of the social salary and ensure the renewal of the workforce. New entrepreneurs are therefore equated with wage earners and are remunerated in much the same way, with one part of their income being financial in nature and the other social. This form of remuneration structures their entire life: training, parenthood, cessation of activities, retirement, illness, etc. In light of this, the reasons for public action seem to be inspired more by pragmatism than by any broader political goal, such as protecting workers or liberalising the market. The decisions made by states are still somewhat half-hearted, posing new problems and requiring new actions; and their actions are hesitant, chaotic and often contradictory.

The extension of the wage system to new self-employed workers does not necessarily translate into a significant improvement in their situation. The social rights established are, in all cases, less comprehensive than those enjoyed by salaried workers. Unemployment benefits constitute just one of many examples; others include daily benefits, protection against occupational hazards and the right to education and training. Unemployment benefits for self-employed workers have gradually been introduced across a number of countries,¹⁶ highlighting the need for states to correct some of the decisions they took early on. A recent study (URSAFF, 2023) comparing unemployment benefits for self-employed workers across eleven different countries found that access to this kind of social protection was fairly limited, with conferment often depending on a set of very restrictive criteria. Moreover, the amounts received are generally low, mainly for two reasons: firstly because their previous earnings (used as the basis for calculating the amount to which they are entitled) are often fairly modest; and secondly because the benefits are not designed to fully replace all discontinued income.¹⁷ The fixed benefits

¹⁶ For example: Germany (optional), Belgium (compulsory), Spain (compulsory), France (compulsory), Italy (compulsory), Ireland (compulsory), Luxembourg (optional), Finland and Sweden (dual system, compulsory and optional).

¹⁷ Rates vary between 90% of one's previous income in Denmark and 45% in Finland. That said, no reliable assessment has yet been carried out of the real sums received.

that exist in countries like France and Ireland are also very low (€800 and €952 respectively in 2023).¹⁸ There is still much ground to be covered before unemployment benefits for self-employed workers reach the level enjoyed by their salaried counterparts (even taking into account the cutbacks suffered by the latter).

The extension of the wage system inflicts on these new ‘entrepreneurs’—who have barely managed to escape the authority of an employer company—the norms and assessment of the collective body that is responsible, in our societies at least, for maintaining and renewing the workforce. Just like salaried workers, these new ‘entrepreneurs’ are forced to abide by discretionary and ever-changing decisions, the logic of which sometimes fails to take into account the conditions of their job or their work situation, such as the need to reduce costs, the necessity of resolving conflicts between competing professionals (such as traditional taxi drivers and those working for digital platforms) and third parties’ attempts to restrict (or increase) access to these new employment statutes. Access to rights and the means to exercise them depends in each case on the expectations of the authorities, whose actions are not always easy to understand. Is this blanket system really an ideal worth defending and preserving?

A new type of self-employed worker

The new employment statutes established recently by France and Spain are concrete examples of our earlier discussion of the changes occurring in self-employment. More or less simultaneously, the two countries introduced two new self-employment models, thereby creating two new categories of worker. In 2007, Spain’s Ley del Estatuto del Trabajo Autónomo [Self-Employment Statute Act] (LETA) created the figure of the trabajador autónomo económicamente dependiente [economically-dependent self-employed worker], often referred to by its acronym TRADE. For its part, France established the auto-entrepreneur (AE) statute in 2009, within the framework of the Loi de Modernisation de l’Economie [Law on the Modernisation of the Economy] (LME). These two pieces of legislation are interesting because they embody the two most common pathways for reforming self-employment—pathways that are usually viewed as being divergent, if not downright conflicting. The first establishes an employment statute that is halfway between salaried employment and self-employment, whereas the second invents an entirely new model of entrepreneur. Spain opted for the first option, locating the new TRADE in immediate proximity to the salaried worker. Dependent self-employed workers are workers who are economically dependent on a single client, who accounts for at least 75% of their income. This is similar to the solution proposed by Italy, which established the Contratto di collaborazione coordinata e continuativa (co-co-co) [Coordinated and continuous collaboration contract], and the Worker statute proposed by the UK. In contrast, France opted to pursue the second pathway to reform, creating a new type of *intuitu personae* entrepreneur; in other words, a self-employed worker who is responsible as a natural person for the assets and losses generated by his or her activity. This model is similar to that of Sole proprietorship in the United States, *kojin jigyo* in Japan and *Einzelunternehmen* in Austria.

¹⁸ Belgium, which has a more generous system (€1,929 in 2023), would be the exception here.

Ambiguities in the new self-employment statutes

Regardless of the specific nature of the reform strategy adopted, the aim is always to bestow on self-employed workers some of the key conditions and benefits of the wage labour contract (see summary table at the end of the chapter). TRADE self-employed workers, for example, have to sign and register a special contract (known as the TRADE contract) with the Ministry of Labour. The text defines the object of the contract, weekly working hours, rest periods (minimum of eighteen vacation days per year), the conditions under which the contract may be terminated and any possible compensation to be paid as a result. TRADE self-employed workers are also entitled to health and maternity/paternity insurance and occupational hazard insurance, and can claim a retirement pension and unemployment benefits. The TRADE statute also establishes a kind of ‘collective bargaining’ system for determining working conditions, the results of which may be applied through what are known as ‘Professional Interest Agreements’ to a wider group of TRADE self-employed workers all working for a single client. For their part, French auto-entrepreneurs enjoy more or less the same social rights as their salaried counterparts and must sign a traditional commercial contract with their client. The statute does not, however, include any kind of collective bargaining system. In both cases (Spanish and French), the activity of these ‘entrepreneurs’ is governed by a specific social and tax regime that simplifies the bureaucratic procedures required and is based on pre-established social security payments. Tax incentives or subsidies are also established from time to time to render these statutes more attractive and easier to access.

In the two cases analysed above, the state has extended the social rights initially associated only with situations of subordination to an employer, to workers who are not subject to this same level of subservience. The justification for this move varies. Spain claims to have been prompted by the legal recognition of a form of subordination that exists outside the company, the characteristics of which are clearly defined in the requisites that workers must meet in order to be recognised as TRADE self-employed workers (see summary table at the end of the chapter). The statute also enables tasks to be delegated to displaced workers who are defined as self-employed workers and whose activities are organised by the clients to whom they provide their services. Consequently, although their subordination is not as direct as that of a salaried employee, it is nevertheless present in economic form.

For its part, the French model identifies auto-entrepreneurs on the basis of the economic activity they generate. It is a type of activity that the law recognises as pertaining to an ‘enterprise’, which is why the worker is considered an entrepreneur. They are, however, a rather special kind of entrepreneur. They may combine, for example, their statute as an auto-entrepreneur with that of a salaried worker, retiree or student, without losing any of the advantages to which their main employment statute entitles them. Approximately one third of all French auto-entrepreneurs earn a complementary wage in addition to their principal one, with the former being subject to the same rules as the latter (Omalek & Rioux, 2015, p. 93). For those who do not combine different employment statutes, there is a simplified regime that provides access to specific social rights (rights that were previously denied to self-employed workers). In addition to the monetary income they receive in exchange for their activity, the earnings of auto-entrepreneurs also include certain compulsory social elements that are greater now than ever before. These compulsory deductions are used to cover the social services that these entrepreneurs are deemed likely to use at some point in their lives, thereby bringing them into the collective

system designed to provide protection against the risks inherent to life, regardless of who actually manages that system. In our wage-based societies, this system plays a key role in ensuring the maintenance and renewal of the workforce.

The French model therefore denies all subordination located outside the company sphere, but still extends the rights traditionally linked to that sphere to those working beyond it. The reason for adopting this apparently contradictory position is explained in the explanatory notes of the LME (Law on the Modernisation of the Economy)—the piece of legislation that establishes the new statute. The notes reveal a firm desire to establish a provisional employment statute with three basic objectives: to encourage and make it easier for people to become self-employed (here, the complementary nature of the different available statutes plays a key role); to reduce the financial, property and social risks linked to such activities; and to facilitate, as far as possible, movement between different statutes throughout a worker's professional life (enabling brief forays into the world of self-employment). The auto-entrepreneur (AE) model in France is designed as a transitional statute between self-employment and salaried employment that aims to minimise the cost of moving between these two regimes. The objective is to encourage salaried workers and the unemployed to take the leap towards entrepreneurship, and to provide them with a certain degree of protection as they do so. The establishment of a turnover cap for being considered eligible for the AE statute follows the same logic, aiming to encourage entrepreneurial projects that complement other employment situations and may, one day, be further developed under other self-employment statutes. The fact that no unemployment benefits were initially included in this statute was also consistent with this overriding philosophy—although, as mentioned earlier, this was amended ten years after the creation of the statute. The inclusion of unemployment benefits—which are still insufficient and hard to access—reveals the limits of the initial intentions underpinning the establishment of this new statute. AE, which was originally conceived as a provisional statute, is today applied to long-term situations that further exacerbate the ambiguity of its position, midway between own-account and salaried employment.

It is important to remember that the social rights that are so characteristic of the wage system and have been extended to these new self-employed workers in both France and Spain, continue to be more limited and subject to stricter conditions than in the case of their salaried counterparts. However, despite being less generous than those granted to wage earners, the benefits for which new self-employed workers are eligible are still better than those that other self-employed workers can hope to access. The situation is particularly disadvantageous in relation to daily benefits and unemployment protection. This has prompted many self-employed workers to take out private insurance to cover these risks. However, voluntary insurance policies are expensive and the income they provide is uncertain. Moreover, some of their clauses are difficult to apply, such as, for example, the need to identify the party or parties responsible for covering the costs generated by a cessation of activity. In the case of salaried workers, it is the last registered employer, which in principle is fairly easy to determine. The same cannot be said, however, of the clients who purchase the services offered by self-employed workers, who are exempt from having to contribute to covering these costs. Consequently, new 'entrepreneurs' rarely take out complementary insurance policies, preferring to depend primarily on basic benefits. In Spain, these benefits became available the moment the new TRADE statute was established, although, as we have seen, in France they are a more recent addition. Only self-employed workers pay into this scheme, although their

contribution base is fairly low. In order to be deemed eligible to receive these benefits, workers must have been active for a minimum period (one year in Spain, two in France) (URSAFF, 2023). The sum received is calculated in Spain on the basis of the worker's previous income (generally fairly modest) and covers up to 70% of their declared income, with a cap of €1,575 per month. The situation in France is even more disadvantageous, with workers receiving a fixed sum of €800 per month and only then when certain conditions are met. Such benefits are therefore unable to provide any meaningful protection during the transition between different types of contract.

The same limitations apply to the collective bargaining system established by the LETA in Spain. As in the wage labour contract, the LETA offers TRADE self-employed workers the possibility of adhering to a collectively-negotiated set of conditions in their individual contracts. This collective dimension takes the form of the signing of 'Professional Interest Agreements' between clients and trade union representatives or TRADE professional associations. However, only a few such agreements have actually been signed to date, and the system offers fewer guarantees and rights than the traditional collective bargaining regime from which salaried workers benefit (Cairós Barreto, 2008; Castro, 2011). The attractiveness of these statutes for workers therefore mainly lies in the opportunity they offer for being legally self-employed without having to overcome all the obstacles and meet all the obligations inherent to setting up a business. Since most of these self-employed people are young workers, social rights are not always their top priority. However, the high accident rate associated with certain services (such as bicycle deliveries), and the inevitable aging of this population, will no doubt intensify the need to find more ambitious solutions in the future, particularly if these employment statutes become more popular.

In this respect, it is important to note that the results achieved by the AE and TRADE statutes differ considerably. The French model enjoyed immediate success and resulted in the creation of 360,000 micro-enterprises (12% of all self-employed workers) within its first year. Indeed, it was the model chosen by half of all the new businesses set up that year. Since that time, the model has gone from strength to strength, with 2.5 million self-entrepreneurs registered as administratively active in 2022 (60% of all self-employed workers), most with up-and-running businesses.¹⁹ The AE model has therefore made a significant contribution to France's acclaimed business dynamism. The TRADE model, in contrast, has performed more poorly than expected. At the time the statute was established, the number of self-employed people who met the requirements for recognition as TRADE self-employed workers was estimated at 300,000 (14% of all self-employed workers) (Riesco-Sanz, 2014). Currently, however, there are fewer than 10,000 individuals registered with the Ministry of Labour under this statute. Self-employment has increased in Spain; however, it has not done so not by way of the new TRADE statute, but rather through its conventional counterpart.²⁰

The success of the TRADE statute, which has often been hailed as the most innovative example of self-employment reform and the one that provides most protection, has clearly

¹⁹ 2023 data published by the URSSAF (*Union de Recouvrement des cotisations de Sécurité Sociale et d'Allocations Familiales*), the body responsible for collecting Social Security payments from self-employed workers.

²⁰ The 2007 LETA defines self-employed workers as those who engage in some kind of economic activity (i.e., an activity designed to make a profit) that is both regular and autonomous as regards its management and organisation.

been hampered by the strategies employed by client companies, who much prefer the less restrictive and limiting general self-employment model. Moreover, the Spanish reform proposal (which is based on the creation of an intermediate employment statute, midway between self-employment and salaried employment) has come up against a number of constraints. First, competition between statutes seems to have worked against the TRADE model, curbing its spread and popularity. Second, the fact that it is located midway between another two statutes is likely to have blurred its boundaries, leading to increased conflicts. The number of lawsuits threatens to skyrocket, making it more difficult for judges to hand down consistent rulings. Finally, the TRADE model has been used on occasions as a means of restricting the recognised rights of salaried workers. This is evident in several sectors, such as the meat industry (Riesco–Sanz, 2021), for example, as well as in relation to digital delivery platforms (Lahera–Sánchez et al., 2024), where the Spanish Labour Inspectorate has recently had to intervene to halt the increase in ‘false self-employed workers’.²¹ In both cases, sectorial employers’ associations have tried their best to evade the sanctions imposed and avoid incorporating these individuals onto their payroll as salaried employees (with all the incumbent obligations), urging the Ministry of Labour to adopt an adapted version of the TRADE model. In this variant, workers hitherto hired as (false) self-employed workers would have certain rights, but the companies would not be under any obligation to provide the guarantees enjoyed by salaried workers or to cover the costs of the social salary. Despite these limitations, however, the Spanish solution is still favoured by many analysts and continues to be raised often in debates on hybrid employment situations.

A transformation permeated by state action

In both France and Spain, these new legal mechanisms are the result of state-led initiatives. As is so often the case in the employment field, state action initially focused on categorising new situations that existing legislation was unable to define. These new situations (which are too commonplace today to be considered a marginal phenomenon) combine characteristics of both self-employment and salaried employment. Although the workers concerned are defined as self-employed, it is clearly the clients who purchase their services who organise and set the pace for their activities. In theory, this is a privilege that is reserved for employers who, in return, are subject to certain obligations and limitations that ensure respect for salaried workers’ rights. Clients, however, are not subject to these obligations and limitations and take advantage of the two work exchange models permitted by the legislation (that envisaged by labour law and that envisaged by commercial law) to evade their responsibilities. The process implemented by the state therefore seeks to define a new work exchange model that traditional categories are unable to reflect. The emergence of new hybrid employment statutes must therefore be framed within a broader set of public actions in the labour field, designed (among other things) to bolster the market, reduce the burden of employers’ social security payments, retrain and recruit workers in accordance with different criteria (women, older adults,

²¹ Between 2018 and 2023, the Spanish Labour Inspectorate changed the statute of almost 133,000 false self-employed workers to that of salaried employees. Approximately half of these individuals were working for digital delivery platforms and around 20,000 were working in the meat industry. For more information, see: <https://www.publico.es/economia/mercado-laboral-bolsa-245000-falsos-autonomos-pese-aflorar-100000-cinco-anos.html> and <https://elpais.com/economia/2023-10-19/inspeccion-de-trabajo-ha-regularizado-a-30000-falsos-autonomos-en-2023.html>.

young people, those with few qualifications, etc.) and encourage people to enter (or leave) the labour market.

In neither of the two countries analysed here is self-employment the focus of novel action within public employment policies, although it has for some time been included in initiatives designed to fight unemployment, as part of an attempt to turn unemployed people into entrepreneurs who create their own jobs. In France, public interest in self-employment dates back to 1979, when the first business start-up programme was established. This mechanism enabled the capitalisation of unemployment benefits and was accompanied by a series of rebates on social security payments. A modified and adjusted version of the programme still exists today, facilitating (or hampering) access to this kind of employment statute depending on the economic climate of the moment or its own success.²² The programme has been complemented by many other measures with similar goals. For its part, although it began later than in France, Spain started with an initiative very similar to that of its northern neighbour. The programme was targeted at specific groups who had more trouble finding employment (women, young people, etc.) and also enabled unemployed individuals to capitalise their unemployment benefits in order to set up their own business.²³ Many other initiatives followed, almost always aimed at helping disadvantaged groups (young people, women, immigrants, older adults) to access the labour market.²⁴ Things came to a head during the 2008 financial crisis, when self-employment promotion policies became one of the principal measures taken to fight rising unemployment rates (Riesco Sanz, 2016). Throughout this time, states have always shown a tolerance for legally uncertain employment models. This is the case, for example, of the salaried-entrepreneur statute, which in France at least was associated with what are known as *coopératives d'activité et d'emploi* [activity and employment cooperatives]. Despite being a short-lived experiment, many of its elements still survive today under different guises (Mouriaux, 2005; Darbus, 2013).

In this long struggle against unemployment, the AE and TRADE statutes represent an important turning point. These new statutes do not merely establish support measures for

²² Assistance for unemployed people seeking to set up or take over a business (often shortened to ACCRE in French) was initially targeted at business managers, although in 1985 it was extended to all unemployed individuals eligible for benefits. In 1987, access to the programme was once again restricted and applicants were obliged to present a feasibility study of their business project. Since that time, the programme has undergone several periodic reforms, giving rise to changes in its name (ACRE, ARE, NACRE, ARCE, etc.). The inclusion in 1993 of unemployed individuals not receiving any kind of benefit increased the impact of the programme, which recorded 90,000 beneficiaries in 1995. For further information, see the POEM data published by the *Direction de l'animation et de la recherche du Ministère du Travail*: <https://poem.travail-emploi.gouv.fr/donnee/aide-a-la-creation-ou-a-la-reprise-dune-entreprise-acre-micro-entrepreneurs-stocks>.

²³ For more information, see: Ministry of Labour and Social Security, Royal Decree 1044/1985 of 19 June, Official Gazette of 2 July 1985.

²⁴ In Spain, a country with structurally high unemployment rates, many initiatives designed to combat this situation by fostering self-employment have been developed since the 1980s. Of the many examples we could cite, of particular interest are the *Plan de Promoción del Empleo Autónomo* [Plan for Promoting Self-Employment] (1986), the *Emprender en Femenino* [Female Entrepreneurship] programme (1996), the *Medidas urgentes para fomentar el empleo autónomo y la contratación* [Urgent measures for fostering self-employment and hiring] (2008-2011), the *Estrategia Española por el Empleo 2012-2014* [2012-2014 Spanish Employment Strategy], the *Ley de Fomento del Trabajo Autónomo* [Self-Employment Promotion Act] (2015), the *Plan Garantía Juvenil Plus 2021-2027 de trabajo digno para las personas jóvenes* [2021-2027 Youth Plus Guarantee Plan to ensure decent jobs for young people] (2021), and the *Programa de orientación profesional para el empleo y el autoempleo* [Professional guidance programme for employment and self-employment] (2021).

the unemployed that may result in more or less marginal transitory situations; they represent a government initiative with a much broader scope, designed to completely redefine the conditions of self-employment. Both mechanisms are targeted at the entire working population (salaried workers, self-employed workers and those operating under a combination of both statutes) rather than just specific segments. As such, they establish an unprecedentedly intense link between the fight against unemployment and the traditional economic regulation carried out by state governments. This regulation involves, for example, the formalisation of different company or employment statutes that are accompanied by fiscal and social rules designed to render them more (or less) attractive and accessible. In general terms, these new statutes appear to encourage workers to participate more actively in the market system. However, it is a specific brand of participation that formally turns them into the individuals responsible for an economic unit, often poorly capitalised, but an economic unit nonetheless.

Why do states adopt this kind of initiative and why do we assume that they are the brainchild of the conservative parties in power? As we know, the figure of an entrepreneur embodies opposing left and right-wing ideological positions that are often viewed as irreconcilable. For those of a right-wing persuasion, entrepreneurs represent creative power freed from the weight of social burdens and therefore able to innovate in response to risk, in line with the Schumpeterian approach (Schumpeter, 1983). For their part, left-wing stakeholders tend to mistrust this ambiguous figure, whose apparent freedom actually disguises the fragility and limitations to which workers are subject. It is therefore easy to understand why conservative governments promote entrepreneurship; however, it is harder to discern the reasons why progressive parties should do so too. Nonetheless, in Spain, the idea of a new Self-Employment Statute Act (LETA) was proposed by the socialist government led by President Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–2011), who immediately after taking office convened a group of experts (four specialists in labour law and an economist) to draft the bill. In France, although the initiative itself emerged from a right-wing government, when the left was voted back into power in 2012, they failed to challenge either the AE statute or the general provisions of the Law on the Modernisation of the Economy (LME), against both of which they had fought fiercely when in opposition.

The Spanish and French governments have both gradually tailored their new employment statutes to match their ideologies. The Spanish left, for example, considers ‘new’ self-employed individuals as workers to be protected, whereas the right, when in power, has tended to view them as ‘entrepreneurs’ to be liberated. In France, as discussed earlier, the Socialist party accepted the content of the LME almost wholesale, although it did focus on establishing a more flexible, innovative and job-generating production fabric. Under this new system, auto-entrepreneurs no longer occupy the key position they did in the previous policies and national economic strategy. The focus now is on stimulating the growth of those economic units that have the greatest job-generating potential. There is also strong interest in the new ‘intermediate-sized enterprise’ category (known as ETI), which is viewed as crucial for generating wealth, over and above the large international groups that were previously favoured by economic councils.

Differences in the way governments of different persuasions interpret and view self-employment also affect how measures are implemented. Particularly striking, however, is the firm continuity of the regimes implemented, which remain in place despite changes in government and the adjustments introduced by different ideologies. In other words,

they are regimes whose establishment and survival seem relatively unaffected by the political convictions of those in power. In both countries, all political ideologies share a firm belief in the need to adapt employment, modernise the economy and make a concerted effort to fight unemployment, the evolution of which has a major impact on election results. In this general framework, new employment statutes are designed to stimulate value creation and employment, along with innovation and, in general, economic prosperity. The European authorities are fully on board with this proposal, making self-employment one of the main focuses of the European Commission's Europe 2020 Strategy.

The absence of any meaningful impact of different governments' political ideologies on policies designed to promote and foster self-employment is not the only conclusion we can draw from a comparison between France and Spain. In both countries too, these new legal statutes were rolled out more during phases of economic expansion than during periods of recession. The LETA was drafted immediately prior to the 2008 financial crisis and the EA regime was introduced just before the ensuing recession began to seriously affect the French economy from 2009 onwards. Both statutes were therefore designed and established during a period which, despite some ups and downs (particularly between 2003 and 2005), was largely characterised by sustained economic growth, at least since the economic downturn of the early nineteen-nineties. In Spain, this economic expansion was quite remarkable, with GDP growth rates outstripping the Eurozone average (3.8%, peaking at 5%, as compared to 2.3% in the Eurozone) (Eurostat). Unemployment rates also remained low throughout the period: 8% in 2007 in Spain (down from 21% in 1997 and 11% in 2002) and 7% in France in 2008 (as opposed to 12% in 1998 and 8.5% in 2003). In both countries, the active population also increased; the rise was particularly spectacular in Spain, where it almost doubled from 1976 to 2007.

Over this decade of economic growth, the number of self-employed people remained stable and even increased, putting an end to large-scale migration of self-employed workers into salaried employment (a historic trend that had been evident since the end of World War II). By the time the AE and TRADE statutes were established, self-employment had already undergone a deep-rooted transformation and the steps taken by governments merely complemented a movement that was already underway. In sum, while their actions no doubt helped to nourish and consolidate it, they were not the trigger. To some extent, the new self-employment models already existed when the laws that sought to bring some kind of order to legally confusing employment situations were passed. This confusion is evident also in the actions of national bodies, who regularly found themselves obliged to review and modify their own initiatives. The situation is similar today, for example, with the so-called platform work model, whose scope in Europe has yet to be determined.²⁵ What we have, therefore, are a set of processes that serve only to drive a larger wedge between workers who are already divided by the duration of their contracts, the number of hours worked, etc. The already complex maze

²⁵ The 2022 Labour Force Survey included an exploratory module designed to analyse the situation of those individuals working through digital platforms. The aim was to prepare an official module on this issue for the 2026 survey. Although the data obtained in 2022 are exploratory and will not be published by Eurostat, several countries have published their own estimates based on the information gathered. In France, for example, it is estimated that approximately 1% of workers use digital platforms to generate income. In Belgium this figure is 2% and in Italy 13%. These estimates, however, must be treated with extreme caution, since many believe they reflect a high number of both false positives and false negatives (Rémila, 2022). For more information, see <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/48491c8f-59bb-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1>.

of employment models is rendered even denser, thereby highlighting the inequality of workers in market societies.

By granting social rights to some self-employed workers, states have expanded the prevailing social contribution model for salaried employment, but without applying the fundamental element of that model: the twofold contributions made by both employer and employee. Clients who purchase the services provided by those operating under the EA and TRADE regimes avoid having to make these contributions, and the workers' contributions, regardless of their statute, remain low. The rest of the bill must therefore be met by general society. This situation is only sustainable if the number of workers in this model remains low. Hybrid employment statutes thereby put immense strain on collective social protection systems, without offering any comprehensive solutions. The legal reclassification of these workers as salaried employees may be useful but cannot hope to address the problem in its entirety.

If, as indeed looks to be the case, the volume of hybrid employment situations continues to increase as a result of these new self-employment statutes, states will have to find a way of forcing the clients and users of self-employed individuals to contribute to the collective effort to ensure the reproduction of this workforce. They will have no choice but to modify and consolidate the timid measures adopted to date and exert more pressure on those who mobilise these self-employed workers. In France, for example, there is an ongoing debate about how digital platforms should help fund the social security system. The measures adopted to protect their workers are viewed as somewhat disappointing,²⁶ since they only apply to certain types of service provision (delivery and passenger transport) and are not binding. The platforms continue to enjoy total freedom to decide what social commitments to make and what improvements to enact. Current worldwide protests by self-employed workers may help exert more effective pressure, but they are notoriously difficult to organise (Dirringer, 2022; Dirringer & Nizzoli, 2022).

Conclusions

Like most developed countries, since the beginning of the 21st century, France and Spain have witnessed an increase in the number of employment situations that, from a legal standpoint at least, can only be described as ambiguous. Workers officially deemed to be self-employed—and therefore free in principle from all subordination—are in fact as dependent on the clients that purchase their services as wage-earning employees are on their employers. These workers, who are assumed to participate freely in the exchanges that take place, are not afforded the rights and guarantees enjoyed by salaried workers in return for their subordination. These new situations are not necessary illegal. In both

²⁶ These measures include the 2016 *Loi Travail* [Labour Law], which requires self-employed workers to cover part of the contributions earmarked for occupational accidents when they have taken out a private insurance policy and have an income of over €10,000. For its part, the 2019 *Loi d'orientation des mobilités* [Mobility Orientation Law] (LOM) obliges self-employed workers to share their personal data. A 2021 amendment to the law identified the organisations responsible for representing digital delivery and passenger transport platform workers, and recognised their right to remuneration for time spent on representation and training activities. The 2022 *Loi d'orientation des mobilités* (LOM) opens up a channel for platforms to take out a collective complementary insurance policy and grants the *Autorité des Relations sociales des Plateformes d'Emploi* [Authority for regulating social relations on employment platforms] (ARPE) the authority under certain conditions to approve sectorial agreements that are binding on all platforms.

countries, turning to entrepreneurship as a means of combatting unemployment has given rise to a wide variety of experiments, some of which are exceptional enough to make these ambiguous models not only possible, but tolerated also. For example, unemployed individuals have often been encouraged to create jobs for themselves, thereby establishing a workforce willing to put up with somewhat ‘chancy’ circumstances. New economic operators, such as service platforms, have taken advantage of this, as have traditional employment institutions—even public ones. All these players save themselves the trouble of covering the social costs and honouring the social obligations derived from integrating workers into their organisational structure.

The spread of these confusing situations has prompted a firm response from states, particularly as regards the prerogatives and protection owed to these supposed ‘free-market stakeholders’. Both Spain and France have expressed concern about these unstable employment situations, although these common misgivings have given rise to different solutions. France designed a statute that combined both salaried employment and self-employment, whereas Spain created an intermediate model midway between the two. Two different responses to a similar problem that demonstrate that the mechanisms implemented were not inevitable and that public action is not always consistent, nor indeed entirely disinterested. In both cases, however, the aim was to bestow certain social rights on these new self-employed workers, while leaving their economic activity to the whims of the ‘free market’. What both Spain and France have attempted to do, therefore, is extend the salaried labour contract model (and the institutions upon which it rests) beyond the scope of the ‘company’. In both cases, the actions taken sought to recognise forms of subordination that had hitherto been ignored.

It is therefore difficult to view these new mechanisms as an attempt to dismantle the wage system, as most employment analysts seem to suggest. On the contrary, from a logical perspective, they are in fact an attempt to extend it, or more precisely, to mitigate the ambiguities present in previous legal categorisations that denied the existence of subordination outside the scope of the salaried labour contract. This expansion of the wage system is not, of course, impervious to political (and even party) interests. States are, above all, pragmatic, because they need these workers to participate in one way or another in the—now collective—management of the mechanisms designed to ensure the renewal of the workforce. Workers must ensure their own future income, satisfy their healthcare needs, educate their children, plan their retirement, etc.; and for its part, the collective must find the resources necessary to meet ever-increasing social needs. The comparison of the French and Spanish cases shows us that this need is common to all governments, regardless of their political leanings.

It also highlights the fact that the expansion of the wage labour contract does not necessarily imply full equality in terms of rights. The rights extended to new self-employed workers are by no means as broad-ranging as those enjoyed by wage earners. Rather, they always come with strings attached, fostering circumstantial social positions defined by thresholds and criteria that severely limit the activities of these workers and their access to social rights. These thresholds and criteria are subject to review and vary in accordance with the current situation and the decisions made by governments—decisions that are often based on considerations that have little to do with real working conditions and the constrictions they impose. There can be no doubt that reducing public spending is the most consistent and recurrent of these considerations. The authorities relax the access criteria when they wish to encourage potential self-employed workers, and

make them more stringent when they wish to discourage them. These workers have scarcely had time to draw breath after escaping the authority of the companies, before being made subject to the rules and assessments of the collective body responsible in our societies for organising and ensuring the maintenance and renewal of the workforce.

The solutions implemented by Spain and France appear to have had only a limited impact, mainly due to the contradictions they generate. The intermediate employment statute established by Spain, for example, has been generally ignored by client companies, who prefer to resort to the somewhat reformulated but still less restrictive classic self-employment statute. In both countries, clients take advantage of the fact that they do not need to pay social security contributions and other collective costs, but this does not do away with the problem of how the social services supported by these contributions are to be funded. New self-employed workers continue to pay very little in the way of social security, leaving the rest of the active population to pick up the slack. One might ask whether this burden will remain manageable if, as all indicators suggest, ever increasing numbers of workers begin to sign up to these new employment statutes. Finally, it is worth noting that these new workers operate—without too many limits or prerequisites—on the fringes of regulated professions, which are consequently feeling threatened. An example can be seen in the tension between officially-licensed taxi drivers and the drivers mobilised by Uber across the planet.

In both Spain and France, the state has played an active role in organising these grey employment areas that have sprung up recently. In both cases, however, the actions taken have been somewhat hesitant, varying in accordance with the different problems that arise and the opportunities perceived. Despite the apparent clarity of their motivations, their actions continue to be rather haphazard and, on occasions, even contradictory—the fruit of a gut reaction rather than a well-thought-out plan. There is no doubt that the new legal mechanisms invented by these countries have helped enlarge these uncertain zones situated on the fringes of the company. However, the emergence of new problems is forcing them to seek new solutions and new formulas for existing employment statutes. If our interpretation is correct, then states will need to go much further than the somewhat confusing procedures they have implemented to date, turning instead to more radical legal alternatives.

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Appendix: Table summing up the AE (France) and TRADE (Spain) employment statutes

**France and the auto-entrepreneur (AE) regime
(Established 01/01/2009)**

Legal Framework:

Created by the Loi de Modernisation de l'Economie [Law on the Modernisation of the Economy] (LME) of 4 August 2008, which seeks to extend the micro-social regime that enables individuals to calculate and pay obligatory social protection contributions and (optionally) a flat-rate tax (impôt libérateur). Social security payments cover sick leave and maternity/paternity leave; daily benefits (except in the case of the liberal professions), the Generalised Social Contribution (CSG) and the Contribution to the Reduction of Social Debt (CRDS), family benefits, obligatory and complementary retirement, disability and death benefits, and contributions linked to vocational training. Since 2019, they also cover unemployment benefits. Self-employed workers operating under the general Social Security system (artists and creatives, for example, linked to the Maison des Artistes) or the Mutualité Social Agricole (MSA) cannot benefit from the new regime.

Eligibility criteria:

- Any natural person (not companies or legal entities) who engages individually in their economic activity, whether it be the main source of their income or a complementary source (civil servants, salaried workers, retirees, students).
- Maximum turnover permitted per year: €188,700 (in the case of sales activities or accommodation services) and €77,700 (in the case of the liberal professions, service provision or property leasing).
- Qualifications required in the case of certain craft activities (beauticians, hairdressers, construction workers, car mechanics, etc.).

Exit routes:

- Automatic exit if turnover exceeds the threshold during the first year. In subsequent years, exit if turnover exceeds the threshold during the following two years (and over a certain quantity).
- In the absence of any invoices being issued for 24 months.

Advantages:

- Exemption from Value Added Tax (no need to either invoice or return).
- No need to register in the Business Register or Directory of Professionals (except in the case of craft activities, although monitoring of obligatory training is not required).
- Simplified declaration of social security contributions based on a fixed charge applied to turnover (12.3% in commerce, 21.1% in the liberal professions, 21.2% in services).
- Exclusive option to pay income tax in full; in other words, workers can choose to pay income tax at the same time as social security contributions, depending on the income threshold for their tax household (an additional 1 to 2.2 points over and above contributions). Reduced social security contributions are applied to those on ACCRE (unemployment benefits).

Coverage (if the activity is complementary, the main regime is taken as a reference):

- Sick leave and maternity/paternity leave identical to that enjoyed by salaried workers (in terms of both benefits and reimbursement rates for payments made).
- Maternity/paternity benefits.
- Right to a daily benefit (except the liberal professions) calculated on the basis of turnover, with a calculated reduction: 71% for sales activities, 50% for BIC (Bénéfices Industriels et Commerciaux) benefits and 34% for BNC (Bénéfice Non Commercial) benefits.
- Basic and complementary retirement pension based on turnover. Quarters are only deemed valid if turnover exceeds a certain threshold defined for the activity in question (on average, about 30% of the maximum threshold).
- Family benefits identical to those enjoyed by salaried workers.
- Unemployment benefits for professionals listed in one of the articles of the 'Labour Code', calculated on the basis of a replacement benefit (Allocation chômage des travailleurs indépendants-ATI) of €800. Eligibility for the ATI is subject to several conditions: uninterrupted activity during at least the past two years; definitive or involuntary cessation of the activity; annual professional income of at least €10,000 during the last two years of activity; personal resources amounting to less than the sum of the Revenu de solidarité active (€564.35 in 2024); individuals must be actively seeking a job.

Spain and the economically-dependent self-employed worker (TRADE) regime (Established 12/10/2007)**Legal Framework:**

The economically-dependent self-employed worker (TRADE) regime was created by the Ley del Estatuto del Trabajo Autónomo [Self-Employment Statute Act]—LETA (Act 20/2007 of 11 July, in effect since 12 October). The Self-Employment Statute defines the professional regime under which self-employed workers operate, along with the associated rights, obligations and occupational risk prevention rules. It creates the figure of the economically-dependent self-employed worker and the

concept of Professional Interest Agreements and acknowledges collective rights, the representative nature of its associations and the social protection afforded, and seeks to foster self-employment. Over recent years, diverse regulations have been approved that have modified both the statute itself and the General Social Security Law in order to render the rights enjoyed by self-employed workers similar to those enjoyed by salaried employees.

Eligibility criteria:

The statute is applied automatically to everyone engaging—habitually, personally, directly, on their own account and without managing or organising anyone else—in a for-profit economic or professional activity, regardless of whether or not they hire third parties. The loss of or failure to comply with these criteria results in the individual’s exclusion from the statute.

For their part, TRADE workers ‘engage habitually, personally and directly in a for-profit economic or professional activity, predominantly for a natural or legal person, called a client, on whom they depend economically, since they rely on them for at least 75% of their earned income or income from economic or professional activities’. TRADE workers:

- Must draw up a written contract (entered in the Spanish Public State Employment Service register) between the TRADE self-employed worker and their client, in which they identify the parties, define the aim of the contract, the working hours (maximum duration of the working day and weekly distribution) and weekly and annual rest periods (minimum of 18 working days of vacation), or the ‘Professional Interest Agreement’ that may be applied (in the event that it exists and the worker gives their consent). The contract must expressly state the TRADE nature of the self-employed worker, who can only be recognised in this way in relation to a single client. In the event of there being an applicable Professional Interest Agreement, the content of the individual contract may not contradict that stipulated in that document.
- Must not employ salaried workers or outsource the activities purchased by their client.
- Must perform their job differently from the other workers (salaried or self-employed) hired by the client.
- Must have their own production infrastructure and enough materials (separate from those provided by the client) to perform the task in question.
- Must perform their activities in accordance with their own organisational criteria, regardless of the technical indications they may be given by the client.
- Must receive monetary compensation for the outcome of their activities and in accordance with the terms negotiated previously with the client, although in all cases, they assume the economic risks associated with their activity.

Titleholders to commercial or industrial establishments or premises, offices and office spaces open to the public are excluded from the TRADE statute, as are professionals who operate in conjunction with others under a corporate regime (or other legal structure).

Exit routes:

The contractual relationship between a TRADE self-employed worker and their client may be terminated for the following reasons: by mutual agreement between the parties; the causes outlined in the contract; death, retirement or disability; cessation of activity by the worker (advance notice must be given to the client); serious breach of contract by the client; at the client’s request for a justified cause (advance notice must be given to the worker); if the worker is a victim of gender-based violence.

If the contract is terminated due to a breach of contract by one of the parties, the other party has the right to claim damages. If the contract is terminated at the behest of the client without due cause, the worker has the right to claim damages (defined in the individual contract or applicable Professional Interest Agreement). If the contract is terminated at the behest of the worker and generates serious harm to the client, the client has the right to claim compensation. In the event of conflict, all matters must be settled by the Labour Courts (also known as the ‘social’ courts—the same courts that deal with issues concerning salaried workers).

Labour rights:

As with other self-employed workers, the Self-Employment Statute bestows certain (individual and collective) rights on TRADE self-employed workers:

- Individual rights to equality and non-discrimination; the right to a good work-life balance; the right to health and safety at work; prevention of occupational hazards; the right to economic guarantees (contract duration, right to receive remuneration in exchange for their activity, and the protection of the self-employed worker's principal place of residence in the event of financial losses derived from their professional activities), etc.
- Collective rights of association and collective defence of professional interests; right to participate in the definition and management of public policies that affect their group (recognition of the principal self-employed workers' associations as intermediaries); creation of a Self-Employment Council (encompassing the principal self-employed worker organisations, trade unions, employers' associations and the Public Administration) as an advisory body responsible for promoting dialogue.
- Self-employed worker associations and/or trade unions may establish Professional Interest Agreements with clients. Professional Interest Agreements may outline the conditions under which TRADE self-employed workers perform their activities, the time and place of those activities and other general conditions. These agreements must be drawn up in writing and are governed by the principles outlined in the Civil Code. The agreements are only binding on signatory parties and, where appropriate, the members of any self-employed worker associations or trade unions that have expressly consented to them.

Social cover-protection:

- Sick leave and maternity/paternity leave, greater coverage for occupational risks affecting TRADE self-employed workers.
- Right to retirement and early retirement in the event of the activity being classed as hazardous (greater cover for TRADE workers).
- Involuntary termination (unemployment) benefits: between 4 and 24 months depending on the contributions made during the 48 months prior to termination (contributions must have been made without interruption for at least 12 months immediately prior to termination). In general terms, benefits amount to 70% of the mean social security payments made during the last 12 months (with a maximum threshold that may vary in accordance with the worker's family situation).

5. The agricultural wage system

Is agricultural work really work in the sense in which this term is usually applied to the activity carried out by wage earners? And if so, can it be used to develop some ideas about the wage system? The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that this is indeed the case. The issue, however, is unclear, since agriculture differs from other sectors in many different ways. First, labour contracts are far from being the norm, as most farmers are self-employed.¹ Just like other self-employed workers, farmers are the legal proprietors of their means of production (land, buildings, machinery), which can constitute capital of considerable worth. Nonetheless, it is not always easy to distinguish farmers from wage earners, since they often flit from one status to another (or are signed up to more than one system at the same time). Agricultural enterprises also differ from other companies in that they are often family businesses. Farmers and their families (extended or otherwise) mobilise little or no wage labour; they therefore constantly need to renew their economic unit in order to obtain the profits that form the basis of their income. Consequently, the line separating employer from employee is often blurred. Such a situation rarely occurs in ordinary companies, in which the two figures are clearly distinguishable and coincide only under the terms established in the contract and for a specific (and limited) period of time.

Although the family enterprise is the prevailing model in most countries, it is not the only possible alternative. For example, in Brazil—a quintessentially agricultural country—most farms are indeed family concerns,² but most land belongs to landowners who farm it in the form of large-scale operations of up to 200,000 hectares, employing agricultural workers under unclear employment statutes. The situation in Europe is very different, with family farms representing the vast majority of the sector (93%) and accounting for three-quarters of the labour force (78%) and most of the land (61%) and livestock (55%), in holdings that are generally no larger than 150 hectares.³ France differs from other European countries in that it has more agricultural enterprises that operate under ‘specific’ conditions, although in reality, they are often nothing more than extensions of the individual agricultural statute that aim to attract young people to the sector or formalise the involvement of an extended family group. As in the rest of the world, most farms in France are family concerns and this has a major impact on the structure of the sector, since most agricultural production is carried out by a group of independent producers whose status is unclear. Are they capitalist business entrepreneurs, as their ownership of their means of production suggests? Or are they individual business owners forced to exploit themselves? Do they represent the last fragile survivors of an old peasant system

¹ Although we are aware of the political implications of the term, we use the word farmer here to refer, in general, to self-employed agricultural workers. In countries such as France, the choice of term used to refer to such workers can reflect very different outlooks and demands: minority agricultural trade unions, for example, talk about *paysans*, whereas majority trade unions and the modernising elite tend to prefer *exploitant agricole*.

² We follow here the definition provided by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), according to which, family farms are those managed by a single household, which also provides most of the labour required. The assumption is that farmers have control over their own means of production and are free to choose which operational strategy to employ.

³ Data from the latest agricultural census (Eurostat, Agricultural Census 2020), which recorded nine million farms in 2020, with an average size of 17.4 hectares. Two thirds of all farms had an area of less than five hectares and only 3.6% were over 100 hectares in size.

destined for extinction? Or are they simply workers, no different from wage earners, who operate under a very specific set of conditions?

These differing interpretations are underpinned by two opposing views of agriculture.

The first of these posits that the sector moves to its own beat, swayed principally by unique institutions (mainly the family and science) that are not directly subject to the dictates of the market and are somehow also located outside the bounds of the wage system. Although no one would go so far as to argue that the market has no impact whatsoever on agriculture, those that subscribe to this view hold that it does so only insofar as it is the hegemonic force that governs and guides practices, rather than the hub around which societies are organised. One of the proponents of this interpretation is Bob Jessop, whose analysis of the dynamics of capitalism (Jessop, 1997) traces its origins to the—always open—interactions between the system and its environment. In other words, certain social spaces remain relatively independent of the market; although they are regulated and coordinated by it, they are not completely dominated by its dictates. Agriculture is one of those spaces that are not entirely subject to the market but are nonetheless subject to its logic.

The second interpretation, in contrast, acknowledges the universal nature of a market logic that has colonised all social spaces, erasing any trace of autonomy. This regime detects and utilises workers' availability in myriad different ways, including (predominantly but not exclusively) labour contracts. Although social totality is far from homogeneous, embracing a wide variety of different situations, the resulting heterogeneity nevertheless lies within a greater whole, whose founding principle is capital.

It is this second view that informs the arguments put forward in this chapter. It is a perspective that downplays the supposed specificities of agriculture and views its workers—wage earners and others—as being similar to those of any other industry. The approach we adopt here also asks a set of questions that are very different from those posed by authors such as Jessop, for example, who focuses on the way in which the wage system has penetrated spaces previously considered to be autonomous and refers to aspects such as the spread of market exchanges and the tendency to assess activities in an economic way, as well as the hegemonic weight of the labour contract (Allaire & Boyer, 1995). Recent studies on the emergence of highly-capitalised corporate farms⁴ follow a similar logic. While still clearly in the minority, these eminently capitalist units are considered manifestations of a movement that seeks to adapt agriculture to the structure and rules of the dominant industrial model (complete with its capital-based logic), against which agriculture has remained relatively protected to date.

We, in contrast, hold that for a long time, agriculture has been thoroughly structured by the constraints of capital accumulation; that agricultural work—whatever the employment status of the workers involved—is as dissociated from the capital as the rest of society. The fact that this universal constraint is not primarily founded on labour contracts and large-scale capitalist companies in no way diminishes its structuring force.

⁴ 'Corporate farm' and 'agribusiness' are terms borrowed from research in the field of humanities and social science, exploring different company profiles in order to describe new ways of working within and organising agricultural production that are far removed from the family model and tend to adopt the characteristics of companies operating in other sectors of the economy (see Purseigle et al., 2017).

Agriculture therefore demonstrates the extreme plasticity of the wage system, which is capable of adapting to a wide variety of historical forms, transforming them without necessarily revolutionising them. Agriculture shows us that labour contracts and capitalist companies are neither the essential forms of the wage system nor the only ones possible. Both are the result of specific, historical circumstances that have enabled them to emerge and be renewed, and although they are in the majority, they cannot, by themselves, account for the entire wage system. The aim of this chapter is therefore to analyse this plasticity and explore the contingent nature of the different types of work it encompasses.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, we will show how the traditional players in the wage system can also be found in the agricultural sector. To this end, we will focus on the activities of trade unions, as well as on the attentive presence of the state, whose interest in agricultural production continues to be important at several different levels. We also see large agrifood and chemical groups which, while not directly organising agricultural production, nevertheless play a fundamental role in it. In the second section, we will explore how production within the sector is profoundly impacted by diverse professional organisations that are constantly guiding, monitoring and assessing it. As we shall see, state intervention in the sector, while not direct, is nevertheless very—and increasingly—significant. Finally, in the third section, we will analyse the efficacy of the agricultural system and its internal tensions in order to highlight some seminal aspects of how it functions, as well as certain limitations.

The same players as in the wage system

Agriculture is, without doubt, a singular sector, but not so much so that it has a radically different set of players from those who operate in the wage system. Agricultural cooperatives, for example—who are key players in harvesting raw materials—today apply a similar price policy and adhere to much the same accumulation logic as industrial companies. The ideals of solidarity and defence of farmers' rights that prompted their creation in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century have gradually been diluted by policies better adapted to the competitive context in which they operate, particularly in the case of the larger cooperatives. Management tends to operate without necessarily consulting members, establishing relationships similar to those found in private industry. The price pressure exerted by these cooperatives—which is particularly visible in the dairy industry, for instance—is a frequent bone of contention amongst agricultural protesters. Although these cooperatives do differ in some ways from their corporate counterparts—again this is most evident in smaller organisations—the traits that set them apart are mostly of secondary importance; at a fundamental level, they operate as capitalist structures. Instead of protecting farmers from the economic domination of suppliers and processing companies further up and down the value chain, cooperatives instead appear merely to pass that domination on, occasionally adapting or modifying some of its effects.

Large (conventional) capitalist enterprises are also found among the suppliers and processing companies operating in the primary sector. Livestock feed, fertiliser, 'phytosanitary' products and seed suppliers, among others, account for over half of the final value produced by the agricultural industry. In France, in the most integrated

sectors,⁵ such as the swine and poultry segments, for example, these figures are as high as 72% and 66% respectively.⁶ In other words, the French agricultural sector boosts the value of supplier inputs by as much as, or even more than, the value it produces itself, and the more integrated the sector, the more this value increases. The situation is the same in all countries, albeit with certain variations.⁷ The capitalist nature of the supplier companies operating in the agricultural sector is beyond question. Some of the most active include, for example, the Bayer Group and its 385 subsidiaries, operating in seventy-nine different countries; the BASF Group, the largest chemical business in the world; and the French group Roulier, a leader in the field of fertilisers with operations in 125 countries.

These observations are even truer in the case of the agrifood industry, which directly processes raw agricultural output and also acts as an intermediary in marketing it. As in other areas of French industry, micro-businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) clearly predominate in numerical terms (99%). However, larger companies provide most of the jobs (60%) and account for the majority of turnover (80%) and exports (93%) (Insee, base ESANE 2021). Business groups (Danone, Lactalis, Pernord-Ricard, Avril, Agrial, Terrena, etc., to list just a few of the leading ones in France) are even larger and absorb almost all the raw production generated in the sector. In the case of cattle farming, for example, 95% of output is processed by these corporations (75% in France and 20% abroad) (Agreste, 2023). Alongside input suppliers and processing companies, special mention should also be made of agricultural machinery manufacturers, which have an estimated value of around 31 billion euros in Europe and 85 billion dollars worldwide. Here again, we find a handful of large business groups dominating a highly-concentrated sector. For example, production and sales of new tractors—still the most widely-used machinery in the sector—are to a large extent dominated by the US group John Deere, which had a market capitalisation of 112.3 billion dollars in 2021 and sales totalling 33.35 billion. The next largest companies are New Holland Agriculture, a subsidiary of European group Fiat, which is very active on the Asian market, and Fendt, from Germany, which operates in twenty countries.

Regardless of the exact moment at which they intervene in agricultural production, all of these capitalist operators have a major impact on family farms working in the sector. Such is their influence in setting the boundaries of agricultural production that one might well

⁵ The notion of integration, which we will discuss in more detail a little later on, refers to situations in which suppliers and producers are linked by contract. The suppliers provide the inputs (usually feed), the equipment necessary for fattening the animals or biologically developing the plants and, in an increasing number of cases, the financial resources required to build or maintain facilities. Farmers are remunerated in accordance with the animal weight, feed consumed or kilos produced. Despite the constraints it imposes, this model appeals to farmers because of the relative income stability it affords them. They often view the resulting income as a wage, often speaking of the dairy wage, for example, albeit the term is not strictly correct from a legal perspective.

⁶ Assessing agricultural income is a complex task and is still the focus of much debate due to the plethora of measurements that can be used depending on the dimension or dimensions selected (Piet & Hérault, 2021). Here, we refer to the often-used indicator of productive efficacy known as the R2 ratio, which links the amount of intermediate consumption with the value of the final product. In other words, it assesses the degree of net wealth created in relation to the prior inputs required. In 2017, this ratio oscillated between 43% and 61%, with a median of 52% for all farms studied (Piet, 2020).

⁷ In this regard, it is worth mentioning the apparently counterintuitive findings of a recent study on the profitability of European farms. The authors show that, regardless of what farms produce, profitability is always greater in newer EU member states (Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary). In other words, to obtain the same yields, older member states (United Kingdom, Italy, Denmark and France) have to invest more (Volkov et al., 2020). This apparent contradiction is caused by the lower cost of production factors in newer member states, which compensates for their lower level of technical efficiency.

aspect of the agricultural sector that states cannot afford to overlook is its contribution to the balance of payments. This is particularly true in France, where agricultural produce is one of the few items to generate a surplus (+8 billion euros in 2022) in a context of chronic trade balance deficit. Agricultural produce also generates a surplus at a European level (+58 billion euros in 2022), with the global trade situation looking set to be even more favourable in 2023, with a surplus of 11 billion.¹¹ It is important to remember that agriculture is the largest item in the European budget,¹² absorbing over one third of all the money spent by the European Union (169 billion euros). The redistribution of these resources among member states is an issue of great importance. It is a fierce battle in which France, to date, has emerged victorious. However, these advantages are not long-term guarantees and France, like everywhere else, needs to mobilise at a European scale to defend its interests.

The international trade in agricultural products leads to enormous pressure on prices, which are, to a large extent, regulated at a global scale. This is the case, for example, with wheat, the cereal with the highest market volume. The war in Ukraine—one of the world’s leading wheat-producing countries—has drawn attention to the small number of nations that actually produce this key crop and highlighted its geopolitical importance.¹³ The war has also shone a spotlight on the situation of (sometimes total) dependency in which many consumer countries, particularly those in Africa, find themselves. More discreet but still immensely powerful are the four principal grain distributors—known collectively as the ABCDs¹⁴—which control between 70% and 90% of the global grain trade and have made huge profits from the tension generated by the Russia-Ukraine war (Denieulle, 2023). Wheat is not an isolated case and all products exported from Europe—poultry and pork, dairy products, wine and spirits, potatoes, etc.—are subject to similar pressure. And this price pressure often translates into pressure on the productivity levels of agricultural labour.

However, price control over agricultural products is also a major internal challenge for countries themselves, since food continues to be one of the top expenses in most

¹¹ France has the largest trade deficit in Europe, peaking in 2022 at 164 billion euros. Nonetheless, it remains notably smaller than that of the United States, which recorded a 945 billion dollar deficit in 2022, mainly due to the exchange of manufactured goods with Europe and, above all, China. During the same period, China recorded a global surplus of 877.6 billion dollars. The trade imbalance registered in the United States partly explains its aggressive policy of reviewing international agreements and the protectionist measures it is currently implementing.

¹² Expenditure linked to Europe’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) totals 57 billion euros (as opposed to the 1.2 billion euros it is estimated that the EU currently spends on security and defence). Historically, the CAP has been divided into two ‘pillars’: 1) direct support for markets and agricultural income (77% of the credits); and 2) resources earmarked for rural development policies (23% of the credits). Following reform of the CAP in 2023, various ‘eco-schemes’ now account for 25% of all direct aid provided in the first pillar. This aid was previously known as ‘green payments’ and was targeted at fostering environmentally-friendly practices. The new ‘eco-schemes’ also emphasise this goal and aim to expand the number of beneficiaries, without significantly increasing the amount received by affected farmers.

¹³ The wheat trade is structurally imbalanced: wheat occupies only 17% of all land under cultivation, but is a staple food source for 35% of the world’s population. A volume-based classification of producer nations reveals the existence of a key group comprising three countries: China (134 million tonnes), India (107 million tonnes) and the Russian Federation (86 million tonnes). These are followed by the United States (50 million tonnes), Canada (35 million tonnes), France (30 million tonnes), Pakistan (25 million tonnes), Ukraine (24 million tonnes), Germany (22 million tonnes) and Argentina (20 million tonnes) (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2022).

¹⁴ Acronym standing for: Archer Daniels Midland–ADM, Bunge, Cargill and Louis–Dreyfus, all from Europe.

households, particularly lower-income ones (INSEE, 2009). Although habits have changed (with people eating less meat, eating out more, etc.), the fact that almost no one these days grows or produces their own food renders households particularly sensitive to changes in food prices. At the same time, pressure to keep agricultural prices low also enables the curtailment of demands for wage increases. The conditions under which agricultural production takes place impact the wage dynamics of developed countries in much the same way as the offshoring of manufacturing activities to Asia.

Finally, trade unions, another player in the wage system that also operates in agriculture, play a fundamental, albeit somewhat unique, role here too. Among the many possible differences that spring to mind are the spectacular protest strategies employed in the agricultural field, which sometimes verge on the illegal—and occasionally cross the line altogether (Lynch Édouard, 2019). Attacks on public buildings, the dumping of diverse products on public thoroughfares and the blocking of roads and city centres—all actions that would be severely dealt with in any other context or if instigated by anyone other than the principal agricultural trade unions—do not seem to be perceived as violence. At the time of writing, the agricultural protests sweeping across several European countries¹⁵ offer numerous examples of this particular brand of ‘peasant violence’, which is either directly instigated by leading trade unions or quickly taken over by them when instigated by others.

Another unique characteristic of agricultural trade unions is that their members tend to be farm owners rather than paid workers, despite the fact that there are around ten million such workers in Europe’s agricultural sector. Although there are some trade unions that represent agricultural workers, even at a European scale (e.g., the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions—EFFAT), some of which have been around for many years,¹⁶ they tend to keep a low profile and are often ignored by analysts and mainstream media outlets. Agricultural trade unionism therefore promotes the figure of the farm owner as the main representative of the sector and, on many occasions, of the rural milieu as a whole, a single figure in a field that we have already seen to be profoundly segmented and extremely hierarchical. Differences between countries, sectors and farm sizes are well documented (European Commission, 2023). In France, for example, there is a 4.7-point gap between the standard of living of rich and poor agricultural households (as compared to 3.3 points between the richest and poorest households in general). The rhetoric that has unified a traditionally segmented rural world owes much to fascism and dictatorships, which have always promoted agricultural discourse (Fernández–Prieto et al., 2014).

These authoritarian regimes have also fostered the institutionalisation of trade unions under the ever-watchful eye of the state (Hervieu, 2000). Agricultural trade unionism is notable for its greater involvement in the development and implementation of agricultural policy. Although France and the Netherlands are often presented as the archetypes of this involvement, the process can actually be seen in all countries, albeit in differing forms.

¹⁵ Since the beginning of 2024, for the first time ever, most EU member states have been affected by simultaneous protests by farmers. The most-affected countries were Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain, as well as, outside the EU, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Although demands vary across countries, the magnitude of the movement remains striking.

¹⁶ In France, these organisations were particularly active in 1968, when they managed to raise the agricultural minimum wage to the same level as that enjoyed by wage earners in other sectors (Bourquelot, 1972).

Indeed, within a single country it may take different forms from one region to another, as is the case with Flanders and Wallonia in Belgium. Specifically, the agricultural policies and strategic areas of action that are defended at a European level have previously been negotiated with the leading trade unions, which undertake to implement them in their respective regions. However, those farmers' unions do not necessarily have any control over the outcome of the negotiations, leading to recurring protests in the public space. Although many of their demands go unmet, these mobilisations do sometimes bear fruit. The current protests, for example, have led to the amendment (and in some cases the downright elimination) of the environmental measures only recently implemented as part of the new CAP following painstaking negotiation.¹⁷

Constantly accompanied production

The agricultural sector is similar to the wage system in many different aspects of the social wage. As is the case with wage earners in the wage system, agricultural incomes are effectively structured by different mutualisation mechanisms that fund education, healthcare and other systems designed to protect them against the risks they face in their daily lives. In both systems, such mechanisms ensure fresh supplies of workers, generation after generation. In the agricultural field, however, they are somewhat different. In some cases, the similarities are minimal, such as, for example, with workforce management, which given the absence of any system designed to protect against unemployment, is based on mechanisms that are specifically adapted to the sector and to the different employment statuses present in agriculture. In others, they are similar yet adapted. This is the case with agricultural training, where programmes and diplomas are run and issued by specialist professional bodies. And in others, these mechanisms only partially apply the guarantees and obligations enshrined in the labour contract. This is true of social rights, which we will examine below in greater detail.

Across the world, the recognition of social rights in the agricultural field leaves much to be desired. In lower-income countries where informal employment is the norm, public aid or local initiative mechanisms are either few and far between¹⁸ or entirely non-existent (Sato, 2021). Consequently, it is only in higher-income nations that part of the agricultural income is managed in accordance with the general framework of social rights. This framework, which was developed in tandem with the spread of industrial work, reached the agricultural sector fairly late. In the United States, for example, the Social Security Act, which established the first social measures in 1935, specifically excluded agricultural

¹⁷ Since March 2024, the regulation on pesticides has been withdrawn, the law on nature recovery has been blocked by eight member states and the scope of other environmental measures contemplated in the CAP has been substantially reduced. Several measures have also been adopted to simplify procedures. These decisions have been hailed by the leading European trade union, COPA–COGECA (Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations–General Confederation of Agricultural Cooperatives) as ‘a step towards more flexible and sustainable farming’. In France, the chairman of the leading agricultural trade union, the Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles (FNSEA), welcomed the government's decision to abandon its strategy of establishing ever more stringent environmental targets and obligations. At the same time, some fifteen green NGOs denounced these same decisions as a major reversal of efforts to protect the environment.

¹⁸ According to the 2020–2022 report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), over four billion people around the world have no form of protection (ILO, 2021).

workers and their families.¹⁹ In France, agricultural workers did not enjoy the same rights as their counterparts in the general social security system until 1988 (Fer, 2021; Magnan & Trouvé, 2023), and self-employed farmers continue to be worse off in terms of social rights even today, particularly in relation to pensions (Mocquin, 2023). Alongside the issue of income, this imbalance in rights fuels many of the agricultural conflicts we see today, particularly in Western Europe.

This delay in extending the social protection model to the agricultural field is often attributed to the resistance put up by agricultural representatives, concerned about losing their authority to organise production as they saw fit. Indeed, the myriad different decentralised bodies that had been created many years earlier in countries with a long-standing agricultural tradition were dominated by large landowners. These bodies fulfilled a range of different functions: they defended farmers' interests, helped organise loans, structured harvesting activities, guided agronomy studies, fostered the mutualisation of production equipment, etc.²⁰ In sum, they organised and guided agricultural production and its various markets. For this agricultural elite, the spread of the principles underpinning the notion of social rights within the wage system posed a series of risks. First, it meant the interference of the state in areas they wished to continue to govern as they saw fit. Second, they were concerned that being forced to pay into a compulsory social security scheme would effectively result in the creation of a new 'tax on agricultural employers'. Finally, they were also worried that this same obligation might exacerbate the class struggle between employers and employees, in a sector in which all the professional rhetoric was geared towards blurring the line between the two groups under the pretext of a supposed shared attachment to the land.

Above all, however, they saw the spread of the new system as threatening a fundamental pillar of the agricultural equilibrium, the means by which individuals could protect themselves against life risks, namely savings, private property and capitalisation (Hatzfeld, 2005). This was an age-old strategy which, argued the agricultural elite, guaranteed an ongoing commitment to farming, despite its many hardships, while at the same time enabling the constant expansion of capital. Thanks to their effective political connections, for many years these elite French farmers benefitted from an exceptional regime in all social laws passed before the end of World War II, thereby avoiding the obligation to pay into the general social security system.²¹ In exchange, governments were assured stability and the support of a peasant class that was still firmly in the majority at the time. They also gained effective intermediaries to help them implement projects designed to guide the country's agriculture in what they deemed to be the right direction.

The general spread of social rights to agriculture began after World War II, although professional organisations continued to have a major say in the management of the sector, at least in countries with more deeply-rooted agricultural traditions. In France, for example, the theoretically universal general social security system introduced in 1945 did

¹⁹ Farmers, their families and domestic employees, who represented almost half the workforce at that time (DeWitt, 2010), were effectively excluded from this first law. They were not integrated into the general protection system until 20 years later, with the amendments approved in 1950 and 1954.

²⁰ See, for example, Jamet (1907), cited in Mocquin (2023).

²¹ In relation to France, we are thinking here of the law on *Retraites Ouvrières et Paysannes* (ROP), which was passed on 5 April 1910 and sought to organise worker and peasant pensions on the German model. The aim was for the state to manage the social contributions made by business owners, employees, farmers, sharecroppers and domestic workers, supplementing them when necessary.

not extent to the agricultural sector. Instead, the mutual aid funds that had been legally recognised since 1900 remained in effect, albeit reorganised under a different system.²² The system survives to this day under a very specific and exceptional format; the modern-day *Mutuelle Sociale Agricole* (MSA), which is responsible for its management, continues to protect the rights of farmers, workers and their families. In other countries, however, agricultural wage earners are now included in the general social security system and, in some cases (such as Austria), farmers are covered by a specific system for self-employed workers. This normalisation, which can be seen throughout Europe, has not triggered the same level of opposition as it did in the pre-war years, mainly due to the emergence of new agricultural representatives who played an active role in the modernisation of agriculture. This process, known as the ‘green revolution’, was reproduced in all developed countries following the end of World War II and entailed a deep-rooted restructuring of the conditions of agricultural production.

Part of this far-reaching plan was to extend social rights to agricultural workers. Among other aspects, it contributed to a renovation of the productive framework by doing away with farm units that were considered unproductive and less likely to adopt the anticipated modern practices. In France, for example, the measures had a direct impact on smaller farms managed by older farmers. Since the pensions of these farmers, (re)established in 1955, were too low to encourage them to stop working, a complementary lifetime annuity was offered to anyone aged 60 or over who agreed to retire. In the thirty or so years for which it has been in effect, this annuity has enabled half a million farmers to retire, resulting in the transfer of over 11 million hectares to larger agricultural holdings.²³

The same economic logic also underpinned the move to ensure that agricultural workers enjoyed the same rights as their wage-earning counterparts in the general protection system. As already mentioned, this development took place in 1988, although it was something agricultural worker trade unions had been demanding since the 1960s, in a context of rural depopulation and increased tension around salaried employment. The measure was accompanied by several reductions in employers’ social contributions, including a total exemption from paying any contributions at all in the case of young farmers (Fer, 2021; Magnan & Trouvé, 2023). Just when the rural environment needed it most, this move encouraged many younger workers to return to agriculture after leaving the sector for industrial jobs during the 1960s, attracted by the security associated with the labour contract and the higher quality of life on offer in larger cities. In addition to improving the situation of the affected parties, social measures in general also constitute a powerful mechanism for managing the labour force, offering individuals a (greater or lesser) range of options and, consequently, steering their behaviour. Agriculture, a sector that has experienced extraordinary variations in its available workforce, is an excellent example.

²² Besides France, only three countries in Europe still have a separate system for protecting farmers’ rights: Germany, Finland and Poland.

²³ Here we are referring specifically to the *Indemnisation Viagère de Départ* (IVD). Between 1962 and 1990, the IVD provided a mean supplementary annual income of 1,450 French francs (with a maximum of 2,400 francs), which was paid in addition to the individual’s pension. Consequently, farmers who retired in 1962 enjoyed a mean annual income of 4,000 francs, equivalent to 6,500 euros (value in euros in 2018). This was a significant figure when compared to the minimum retirement pension of 2,100 francs per year that most pensioners received up until the middle of the 1970s. During that period, a kilo of beef cost €1.70, a dozen eggs 44 eurocents, a kilo of bread 9 eurocents, a newspaper 4 eurocents and a packet of the most popular brand of cigarettes 19 eurocents.

The spread of social rights throughout Europe's agricultural sector reveals both the power of the professional organisations operating in this field and the consistency of their reactions to state intervention. France is unquestionably the most advanced example of this professional model for co-managing the future of the sector with the state, although similar models can also be found elsewhere, often with a diverse range of characteristics (Fernández-Prieto et al., 2014). In France, the Organisations Professionnelles Agricoles (Professional Agricultural Organisations or OPAs as they are known) are the descendants of the historical professional entities referred to earlier, and continue to perform much the same function. OPAs are often described as constituting a conglomerate of institutions with fairly blurred dividing lines, which perform a wide range of development and orientation tasks within the agricultural sector (Coulomb et al., 1990). In general, they are usually described as a group of intermediaries that liaise between the state and farmers, guiding different dimensions of their production activities: trade union and corporative representation, cooperation, loans, agricultural and economic development, outcome monitoring, consultancy, participation in advisory bodies, management centres, etc. In short, they engage in a broad range of general and specific activities depending on the nature of the sector or beneficiary with whom they are working.

Although they take a diverse range of legal forms (private or public entities, associations, cooperatives), these professional agricultural institutions share several defining characteristics, beyond being self-defined representatives of the agricultural community in any matter concerning the profession as a whole. For instance, all are based on the principle of voluntary membership—even though being a member is sometimes difficult to avoid—and are administered by elected professionals. They also operate at different geographical levels, sometimes even at an international scale, and are, in theory at least, independent of each other. In reality, however, they are often interconnected, even if only because candidates for managerial posts are drawn from lists of trade union members (Laurent et al., 2006). The popular image of farmers as solitary producers is therefore somewhat misleading. Agriculture is a fundamentally collective undertaking, enmeshed in a complex web of professional networks in which family firms are merely one link, undeniably essential but by no means isolated. To fully understand how agriculture works, we must therefore analyse the activities of direct producers themselves in the context of their myriad links with the councils and other administrative bodies of the professional organisations (OPAs) that guide and structure their production.

The collective nature of agriculture is nothing new. One need only think of the farmers' markets and agricultural fairs that have always, everywhere, provided a venue for exchanges between cities and their rural surroundings, and amongst country folk themselves, as well as constituting a hub for the spread of knowledge and rules (Allix, 1923; Mintz, 1959). Nonetheless, this collective dimension was bolstered in the nineteenth century and again in the period between the two world wars, as the sector became increasingly international and states sought to organise their food markets. New guidance and aid structures were created to help implement national reforms, and inter-professional offices were set up to regulate markets such as the wheat trade, which suffered early on from the pressure of international competition. The European authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century took these structures to new heights, intensifying institutional bureaucratic control and strengthening the role of technology and technical experts (Fernández-Prieto et al., 2014). Although their leaders fell from grace following the end of the war, the general structures remained in place (Fernández-Prieto et al., 2014).

Consequently, there are now many different ‘non-directly-productive’ consultants involved in agricultural production, although their exact number is difficult to calculate due to the fact that the boundaries of the OPAs on which they depend are somewhat uncertain. In France, the MSA, which is responsible for managing the social rights of all farmers, estimates that around 40% of its members are agricultural consultants, a proportion that is increasing year on year (in 2003 it was just 27%) as the number of actual farmers decreases. However, agricultural consultants affiliated to the MSA account for only part of this group. Consultants and other technical experts employed by private companies also intervene both before and after the process of agricultural production, as do members of a wide range of other associations charged with injecting new life into rural areas (Arnon, 1989). What we have, therefore, is a group of professionals with close ties to the public authorities who act as intermediaries between the government and farmers, helping the former implement its agricultural policies. This intermediation can take different forms, depending on the type of governance structure in place in the specific country. In France, the most centralised country in Europe, it serves to bolster the already fairly solid partnership that exists between the state and the OPAs. It is a partnership based on a pyramidal organisational structure dominated by the majority agricultural trade union (FNSEA) and the leading organisations of rural professionals (Hervieu, 2008). This co-management results in close ties and ongoing negotiations that tend to focus mainly on future policies and how they are to be implemented. The government enacts laws and publishes guidelines that must first be discussed (more than negotiated) with the OPAs and the majority trade union, who are then responsible for implementing and enforcing them (Colson, 2008).

This group of technical intermediaries has played a crucial role in the ‘modernisation’ of the rural environment, irreversibly changing agricultural production and rendering it utterly dependent on fossil fuels, fertilisers and ‘phytosanitary’ products.²⁴ They also made it dependent on grain, a common source of livestock feed today, combined with (mostly imported) soy flour. The industrialisation of poultry farming, practically inexistent prior to 1960, also resulted in the deployment of a vast and highly mechanical infrastructure designed to turn grain into chicken.²⁵ These actions combined harmoniously with the different actions carried out by the state to redefine land ownership and land valuation and implement tax regulations designed to encourage young people to set up farms or increase the size of their existing holdings.

In just a few years, the joint efforts of the OPAs and various states totally restructured agricultural production in high-yield areas that were mainly oriented towards exports and were completely at the service of different agrifood sectors and their capitalised groups

²⁴ The literature on the ‘modernisation’ of agriculture has expanded since the first decade of the new millennium, and a critical revision of this so-called ‘green revolution’ has emerged, centring on its environmental impact. A few pioneering studies even identified the challenges and risks of the various agricultural transformations while they were actually taking place (Klatzmann, 1953; Lenin, 1956; Houée, 1972; Evrard et al., 1977b; Darré et al., 2004). For some recent works and a European perspective, see Moser and Varley (2013a) and Olsson (2011); for the United States see Fitzgerald (2003); for France, see Lauwe (1979), Bonneuil and Frioux (2013), Pestre (2014), Bonneuil et al. (2015), Pessis et al. (2016), Bivar (2018), and Lyautey Margot et al. (2021). In relation to France, two recent publications on the role of the advisory councils in agriculture may also be of interest: Brunier (2012) and (Rémy et al. 2006).

²⁵ This industrial-scale deployment has enabled the sector to stimulate (and then satisfy) society’s growing desire for meat. Between 1956 and 1974, meat consumption increased by 20 kg per person per year, resulting in the consumption of 7 million more tonnes of grain (Viau et al., 1977a).

(Colson, 2008; Cornu et al., 2018). This transformation proved particularly disruptive in France, a country which, in the space of just 25 years (quickly and more radically even than in the United States), became the world's second largest exporter (Bivar, 2018). These coordinated forces also brought about the widespread substitution of capital for labour. Having been the exception rather than the rule up until the 1930s, from the 1950s onwards, machines (starting with tractors) became increasingly common. The spread of agricultural machinery was further encouraged by the concentration of land in many countries, combined with a range of reforms in the banking system which facilitated access to short and medium-term loans. The articles of association of *Crédit Agricole*, founded in France in 1894, were amended in 1966 to stimulate savings mobilisation and enable the financing of land acquisition. From the 1970s onwards, this mutual society became the holder of state-subsidised loans granted to enable farmers to purchase machinery, a move that resulted in a twenty-fold increase in short-term loans and an eighty-fold increase in long-term ones (Gueslin, 1988; Gervais et al., 1992; Muley, 2016).

Loans and indebtedness, which had not previously been a feature of farmers' savings strategies,²⁶ gradually became part of the normal *modus operandi* of any farm. Today, this 'normal' practice accounts for a large percentage of farms' yearly budget (roughly 40% according to estimates made in France).²⁷ This process of mandatory indebtedness also enables those who hold the purse strings to regularly select which farmers are to be permitted to prosper; these days, a rejected loan application almost inevitably results in cessation of the applicant's business, sooner or later. Farms that can demonstrate their borrowing capacity can stay afloat, at least until they next need to apply for a loan. The criteria for assessing farmers' borrowing capacity are complex, constantly changing and—in France at least—largely determined by the state.

As we have seen, the state and its administrative apparatus never let agriculture stray too far from their control. State dominion over the OPAs, for instance, has actually increased in recent decades thanks to an increasingly centralised administration. The situation is similar in other European countries (Moser & Varley, 2013a). In France, public funding is one of the main mechanisms used to manage professional agricultural institutions from afar. For example, since 1997, the MSA, which, as stated earlier, is responsible for managing agricultural workers' social rights, has had to adapt to the priorities established in the state-defined four-year plans (*Convention d'objectifs et de gestion*), with hardly any scope for negotiation. These priorities, which must be complied with by anyone wishing to access public funding, have recently focused on reducing the staff employed by the MSA itself, as well as on digitalising services and reducing management costs, among other things. The funding mechanism is particularly powerful here since the social

²⁶ Savings strategies were particularly intense up until World War II. Farmers rarely incurred debts, since they made most land purchases after depositing their savings before a notary public. Said savings provided France's monetary reserves with a considerable boost, particularly through the purchase of Treasury Bonds and recourse to Russian loans prior to 1917, both strategies that were very popular among farmers. These monetary reserves were used to meet the financing requirements of other sectors, including industry, which was developing at a brisk rate, and (of course) banks. Backed by the state, during the early twentieth century, banks achieved hegemony over international markets and France in particular became known as the bank of the world (Gervais et al., 1992).

²⁷ Calculation by Piet and Hérault (2021). The *Coopératives d'Utilisation de Matériels Agricoles (CUMA)*, constituted in France in 1945 and drastically reformed in 1962, contributed to the spread of heavy machinery by offering cooperative members the possibility of reducing associated operating costs. Although they have been losing ground for some years now, these cooperatives continue to invest over 600 million euros a year in the acquisition of new machines.

contributions made by members cover only a very small part of the institution's expenses. Every year, the state provides over half of the MSA's total income. The number of contributing members is small and differences between social contributions and debt payments are often settled to the detriment of the former.²⁸

The recent emergence of private operators in the agricultural consultancy market has led to slight changes in this situation, resulting in additional expenses for farmers. The influence exerted by the state has hardly changed and given the importance of the sector for the domestic economy, it is unlikely to. In Spain, Europe's fourth largest agricultural producer, there are many such private operators, although the regional authorities have managed to retain their right to coordinate and guide actions in this field. Regional administrations continue to be unavoidable partners for anyone wishing to obtain complementary funding (even though most farmers turn to Europe to satisfy their financing needs). Furthermore, any private advisory council wishing to operate in the region needs to gain their approval (Laurent et al., 2006). The trend among OPAs (both public and private) to apply for European funds is widespread, although we currently lack studies that would enable us to assess their impact on the course taken by agriculture in the different European countries.

Regulations and tension among the agricultural wage system

How should we analyse the production activities of this constellation of farms and institutions that presides over the production of primary sector goods in developed countries? First, by examining the fundamental change that has taken place in its structure as a result of the constant reduction in the number of people directly involved in food production. For example, at the end of World War II in France—a country with a long agricultural tradition—one out of every three workers was employed in the primary sector. Today, that proportion has dropped to a mere one in fifty. The fact that 3% (on average) of Europe's working population continues to be employed in agriculture is mainly due to the presence of its newest members from the eastern part of the continent, principally Romania (12%, Eurostat 2023). The older members of the EU report lower figures than the mean; this is particularly true of Germany (1%, Eurostat 2023). Nevertheless, the convergence process has already begun and Eastern European countries are now also seeing a drop in the number of small farms (less than 4 hectares). This trend will play a significant role in fulfilling estimates predicting that there will be six million fewer farmers in the EU by 2040 (European Parliament, 2022), which comes on top of the five million agricultural jobs already lost between 2003 and 2016. Were this trend to be confirmed, it would mean the widespread disappearance of the smallest agricultural concerns in Europe, to be replaced by larger farms and more intensive production.

The efficiency of this way of organising agriculture is reflected in the most commonly-used economic indicators. For example, the continuous drop in the number of individual farmers and farms has been accompanied by an ongoing increase in the volume of agricultural production. In France, output doubled between 1960 and 2004, a period

²⁸ Farmers' social security contributions are calculated on the basis of their pre-tax earnings, which, by definition, are often reduced as a result of debt. Agricultural consultants commonly recommend that farmers borrow money to purchase agricultural machinery, for example. Whilst such recommendations do encourage wider mechanisation, they also considerably reduce farmers' entitlements, particularly on retirement.

which also saw the disappearance of 70% of existing farms. Contrary to forecasts by certain economists, including Colin Clark, agriculture has not proven impervious to technological progress. Indeed, the sector has adopted increasingly labour-saving crop growing practices that, combined with the intensive use of inputs, have significantly enhanced productivity (Rolle, 1993; Insee, 2007; Chatellier & Dupraz, 2019). This spectacular increase in the productivity of agricultural labour has taken place throughout Europe, particularly in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands.

This new system of organising agricultural labour has also proved to be extremely flexible in many different ways. First of all, it is flexible in terms of labour. The agricultural labour force has been reduced through a series of fairly inexpensive measures, including (more or less) voluntary withdrawal from the market in the case of older workers, forced resignation in the case of those farms considered to be less efficient, and transfer to industry in the case of younger workers. Rural flight, which was particularly intense during the ‘modernisation’ phase, triggered concern among many sociologists about the future of peasantry. However, one of its principal consequences has been a formidable, largely silent and fairly smooth transfer of labour, whose positive effects for the target industries have been amply demonstrated (Lewis, 1954). Indeed, the transfer of labour has made a significant contribution to the development of modern capitalism.

Second, it is also flexible in terms of production, as a means of responding to the incentives of the ‘modernisation’ plan.²⁹ This is evident, for example, in the emergence from the 1960s onwards of a crop that had never before been considered as such: grass—grown under the slogan: *l’herbe, ça se cultive!* [grass, it’s grown!] (Béranger & Liénard, 2006; Brunier, 2022). This movement occurred throughout Europe, led principally by the United Kingdom and Scandinavia. This forage crop, most often corn for silage,³⁰ completely transformed animal fodder, with traditional methods based on permanent pasture lands being considered insufficient in light of the progress of the postwar period. Even today, this crop, which requires repeated applications of chemical fertilizers,³¹ continues to be one of the world’s principal agricultural products, in terms of both volume (accounting for 47% of agricultural land area in France) and yield (around 14.2 tonnes per hectare in France, as opposed to approximately 7 tonnes in the case of cereal crops). Over the past twenty years, fodder plants have disrupted the existing balance between animal and crop production, tipping the scales in favour of the latter.

Alongside the search for profitable crops, the CAP and its various amendments also gave rise to variations in animal production.³² The milk quotas imposed between 1984 and 2015, for example, had a major impact on the restructuring of Europe’s dairy industry (Chatellier & Dupraz, 2019). France, for instance, lost 85% of its dairy farms between 1984 and 2018, a period which also saw a significant increase in the size and yield of the remaining herds (Depeyrot, 2017). Livestock farming was also affected by transformations in Europe’s agricultural financing models, initially as a result of the 1992 reform and later by that of 2003. These reforms abolished the concept of minimum

²⁹ We do not wish to imply that agricultural production did not vary before that time. However, since World War II, the changes have been much more numerous, intense and frequent.

³⁰ Unlike grain corn, which is mainly used for human consumption, silage corn is one of the principal components of animal fodder.

³¹ World Bank data from 2021 and agricultural statistics from 2022 (AGRESTE).

³² We refer here to the reforms carried out in 1992, 2000, 2003, 2009 and 2013, as well as to the latest proposal (under discussion since 2021), all of which were incorporated into the corresponding commercial agreements within the framework of the World Trade Organisation.

guaranteed prices in favour of subsidies paid directly to farmers, regardless of the nature and volume of their production. This process is commonly known as decoupling and enables prices to be freely determined by market forces.³³ This liberal strategy has generally been justified on the basis of the demands made during negotiations with the World Trade Organisation. However, the establishment of quotas was also prompted by Europe's aspirations to increase its exports and improve its competitive position on the international market, in a context of ever-increasing demand for food products. In the case of food products covered by the CAP, this strategy basically shifted the financial burden of subsidies from the shoulders of consumers to those of European taxpayers, thereby increasing farmers' dependence on subsidies.

Farmers' incomes in Europe no longer depended on the sale of their products, but rather on EC subsidies. In France, for example, the agricultural price index, measured in terms of real value, decreased by 16% between 1960 and 2004, falling again from 2022 onwards after a near twenty-year uptrend, due to tensions in the international supply of food products. All this points to farms' structural inability to recover their production costs merely by selling their produce, with the ensuing losses being made good (partly at least) through subsidies.³⁴ We say 'partly' because this 'administrated' portion of farmers' earnings does not necessarily guarantee sufficient income. This situation varies greatly depending on the products produced by the farms and, particularly, on their size, which is a key factor in the allocation of subsidies. Over a 15-year period (2003–2017), the mean income of French beef producers was 2.5 times lower than that of their counterparts who grew grapes, a much more profitable undertaking (Piet et al., 2021).³⁵ Agriculture continues to be a deeply segmented sector governed by a strict hierarchy.

The agricultural production system has thus proved itself to be both extraordinarily efficient from an economic perspective and remarkably flexible. It represents a means of accumulating capital that is different to the industrial pathway yet perfectly adapted to the value-based imperatives of the large agrifood or chemical companies involved in the resources it produces. The current link between agriculture and industry has not been forged on an extension of the model of the industrial firm, as many had predicted (and indeed continue to argue) (Rolle, 1993). Rather, it owes its existence to the generalisation of a unique form of production in which the production unit (regardless of its size or legal status) emerges as a transactional hub in the midst of a vast web of technical networks that supply it, feed it, inform it, control it, guide it, finance it, select it, and reject it. These networks regulate the circulation, use and development of capital by establishing rules, obligations, targets, procedures, etc., and it is up to the production unit to articulate these rules and obligations and mitigate, as far as possible, their contradictions. Within this

³³ Prior to these measures, the establishment of a minimum sales price by the European Community (as the EU was formerly known) guaranteed a steady income to farmers, who sold the entire volume of their production on the market, with any surplus being purchased by the Commission. The quotas were introduced in response to an ongoing increase in the volume of surplus production, which generated excessive costs.

³⁴ Subsidies represented 250% of the revenue (current earnings before tax) of French cattle farms in 2019 and 47% of the revenue generated by all agricultural concerns in general. The figures vary widely across products, with subsidies for flowers and horticulture, for example, accounting for less than 4% that same year (Piet et al., 2021).

³⁵ The mean income of beef producers was 21,300 euros a year, as opposed to the 53,000 euros a year earned by vine-growers. Even today, calculating agricultural income is a particularly delicate statistical operation. It is always important to specify which data are being used. In this case, calculations are based on current earnings before tax, or in other words, the profit made by the farm minus all expenses, just before determining how much tax needs to be paid.

grid-type structure, family farms are neither anomalies nor archaic vestiges of a bygone era. Rather, they are modern economic organisations forced to adapt to a general productive fabric that constantly overwhelms them and submits them to the constraints of capital valorisation. In this sense, despite its apparent idiosyncrasies, the way in which the agricultural sector is organised can be understood as a form of wage system.

This agricultural wage system is, however, different from the labour contract-based system. First, the labour contract is not very common and, moreover, it operates with a population of geographically scattered farmers who hold title to their own means of production. Neither of these characteristics constitutes an impediment to the development of the wage system, and indeed may even foster it. This should not evince surprise or be viewed as an anomaly unless one is wedded to the somewhat spurious assumption that legal ownership of the means of production in itself guarantees these producers autonomy and protects them from being assimilated (to a greater or lesser extent) by capitalist enterprises. In the case of agriculture, the income farmers earn is generally insufficient to yield profits that can then be reinvested. Moreover, this income does not even stem from the sale of their products, which have a very low market price. Rather—as we have already seen in the case of large-scale livestock farms—they mainly stem from subsidies. The amount of those subsidies (which is both variable and conditioned by external factors) is set by different government bodies (at least in the case of products deemed to be strategic for subsequent industrial processing, for those involved prior to the production process itself and/or for consumption by other workers). The resulting income is just enough to allow those owners of capital to go on farming their land and breeding their livestock. Nothing more.

In the wage system, then, ownership of one's means of production is simply another element (and not the most decisive) in the exchange of labour and goods in which farmers must participate in order to survive. Long gone are the days in which the sources of their livelihood and the resources for their work (draught animals, seeds, manure, etc.) were produced and reproduced on the farm itself. Today, everything is bought and everything is sold! And this capital, which successive generations of farmers have tried so hard to maintain and expand, continues to be profoundly unstable and exposed to drastic devaluations as a result of recurring overproduction crises that constantly restructure the way in which the entire sector is organised. The changes wrought by this constant restructuring in both the nature of products themselves and the way in which they are exchanged serve to further reduce the economic importance of directly owning one's production resources. The constant imbalance between production and sales price, between the amount of labour mobilised and the income earned, is one of the key components of the system. These imbalances are institutionalised—regulated by states and their regional coalitions—and have a major impact on farmers.

Firstly because, during each successive crisis, those who are considered to be unproductive are identified and—given the absence of any mechanisms to protect them against unemployment—are left with no alternative but to remove themselves from the sector. This versatility of employment statutes, combined with the great flexibility of which many professionals boast and their willingness to retrain, has led to the development of a particularly mobile type of workforce. Rarely does keeping a job require as much effort from workers as in the case of agriculture. And rarely has the link between labour and the means of work been so precarious.

Secondly, these imbalances impact farmers because restructuring processes serve as opportunities to drastically modify the terms under which different producers trade their goods and products. The European dairy industry (still a strategic sector³⁶) is a good example. The way it is organised is perfectly adapted to the current industrial model, in which gross output provides continuous input for the agrifood structures that later transform raw products and add value to them. In 2019, Europe's dairy farmers retained only 0.08% of their total output (Eurostat, 2022). The reason for this was twofold: first, a strong push towards concentration in the stages subsequent to milk production itself, resulting in the elimination of many small-scale family-run dairies;³⁷ and second, increasingly intense management of herds (which, we should remember, had grown steadily larger over previous years). This situation is particularly evident in Germany and the Netherlands.

Consequently, although farmers have managed to retain ownership of their produce, they have lost all control over how it is traded (Viau et al., 1977b). Payment for services rendered to processing companies involved in the later stages of the production chain is not received until at least one month after the daily milk collection and no explicit reference is made to the sales price.³⁸ The income received by farmers, which they refer to as the 'dairy wage', may fluctuate but it is at least regular, and it is this circumstance that induces those beset by debt to continue accepting and participating in the system. The amount they receive is no longer really paid in exchange for their goods, but rather for their labour capacity or the productive capacity of their farm, which they have placed at the disposal of the processing industry. In other words, what we see is a salary-type relationship that is not really so different from piecework (Viau et al., 1977b).

Another example is that of poultry and swine farms, which have also suffered the effects of multiple crises and are even more integrated than their counterparts in the dairy business. Here it is usually (although not always) the companies intervening further up the production chain that impose their dynamics on the sector. These companies supply livestock feed, a product consumed in vast quantities by pigs and poultry, thereby guaranteeing a stable demand. The role played by farmers consists solely of maturing batches of livestock supplied to them as inputs, all within a specific timeframe and in accordance with contractual agreements. This biological development is carried out in production 'workshops', or in other words, in buildings equipped with all manner of monitoring devices that farmers acquire by taking out long-term loans. In this case, although farmers are the owners of the facilities and are legally responsible for the part of the production process entrusted to them, all operations are strictly controlled by technical experts from the supplier companies responsible for the integration of the value chain. Unlike dairy farmers, then, poultry and swine farmers do not really retain any control over their production, and have no choice but to bow to the dictates of the sector's main contractors. Their income depends on (and is particularly sensitive to) the risks inherent in the raw material transformation process that they supervise, although it is

³⁶ In 2023, the dairy industry accounted for 12% of the 552 billion euros generated by the whole of Europe's agricultural sector (Eurostat).

³⁷ In 2022, the world's leading dairy groups were (in descending order of sales volume): Lactalis (France), Dairy Farmers of America (USA), Nestlé (Switzerland), Danone (France), and Yili (China) (Statista Research Department, 2024).

³⁸ In France, prices are usually set in accordance with exchange rates and therefore tend to vary widely. In contrast, the amount of product to be delivered is stipulated in the contract, which also establishes penalties for failing to deliver the specified amount or failing to pass the health and hygiene controls carried out during each collection (fat and protein content, bacterial density, traces of antibiotics, etc.).

regular and relatively secure since it is in the interests of the companies that benefit from the integration of the value chain to ensure stability among the farmers with whom they work.

The examples of the dairy and poultry sectors demonstrate the extent to which ownership of the means of production is often a mere formality. Although the capital exists, its legal owners are not fully in control of it. On the contrary, it is the legal owners who appear to be subservient to capital, because of constant pressure to expand and renew it. This constraint imposed by capital is part of the non-juridical subordination embodied by agriculture in a variety of different ways. Under such conditions, the status of farmers and their family businesses is somewhat ambiguous (Grignon, 1975) and equates neither to that of capitalist business owners nor to that of wage earners, since their working conditions differ, as do the nature of their obligations and the control to which they are subject. Their lifestyle may seem enviable to some—particularly older farmers—once trapped precariously in the agrifood chain with no apparent means of escape. Such experiences remain relevant and farmers often refer to them, while complaining about long working hours and the burden of costs they are forced to bear, something from which (in their view) wage earners are free. However, the self-employed worker status enjoyed by farmers and the legal autonomy enjoyed by their family businesses fail to reflect the true scope of the network of commercial exchanges in which they are trapped.

We therefore need to resituate the family farm within the production system outlined above, which is the dominant system in countries with a long agricultural tradition. Family farms need to (re)constitute their own labour resources, adjusting them flexibly and in accordance with technical, social and economic constraints to the available workforce—a workforce that is increasingly finding employment in other sectors, thereby reducing the available labour and prompting its gradual replacement with fixed capital. More than a subcontractor of input supplier industries or a consumer of their products, family farms seem rather to constitute a kind of company-less work station that contributes (remotely and in a controlled manner) to a range of production processes carried out further up and down the value chain (Rolle, 1993). It is, however, a unique type of workplace in which the means of production employed become capital, even though they only really constitute part of the total means of agricultural production mobilised by the scattered community of producers. In other words, it is a kind of collective capital spread out among members of a specific worker community. The functioning of this form of wage system—which, as we have seen, is highly effective—requires constant guidance by institutions and other professional groups, which convey (again at a distance and in a more or less harmonious fashion) the guidelines issued from different government spheres.

Although the system is effective, flexible and perfectly adapted to meeting the value-generation expectations of large companies from the agrifood and other industries, it is by no means free of violent tension. Recent protests in Europe are evidence of this, prompted as they were by issues such as low income, lack of social protection and the pernicious effects of opening the sector up to international markets. These protests (and those that preceded them) highlight the fact that the mutations undergone by agriculture have never been accepted without criticism, confrontation and/or resistance. The same can be said of the integrated organisational models imposed on so many farms. Following the spring of 1968, new trade union figures emerged from the protests denouncing the

commitments made by the majority agricultural trade unions.³⁹ In France, the so-called milk strikes of 1964, 1972 and 2009 (in which women played a key role) served to turn the protests into a national issue. Another feature of these protests was the use of the strike, a mechanism more common to industrial disputes, with livestock farmers refusing to supply milk to dairies. Another stratagem used on several occasions was the symbolic dumping of milk in front of the media, an action that has since become a central element in the choreography of agricultural protest (Lynch, 2013).

These conflicts reveal the limited sustainability of the system. Yet the sector also faces a number of other challenges. The stiffest and most urgent of these is linked to the environment. The effects of global warming directly affect farmers, mainly through ever more extreme climate variations against which they find it almost impossible to completely protect themselves. Moreover, intensive agricultural practices have depleted the best swathes of land, gradually reducing yields and sometimes even threatening the viability of certain crops, such as the Bintje potato, for example, perfect for pommes frites but increasingly difficult to grow to an optimal size for subsequent processing. Farmers are also large consumers of fossil fuels, which constitute a fundamental feature of the current model of technological development. In 2022, tractors, buildings, workshops, barns and pens, greenhouses, utilitarian vehicles, etc. accounted for 2.2% of the 1,309 million tonnes of oil equivalent (Mtoe⁴⁰) consumed in Europe. This level of dependency renders farmers extremely sensitive to fluctuations in fuel prices. Indeed, a hike in petrol and fuel oil was the spark that lit the flame of the protests that spread throughout Germany at the end of 2023.

Another challenge, less spoken-about yet equally important, is the ageing of the current farming community, a sizable proportion of which is set to retire en masse in the not-too-distant future. At the same time, for the first time ever in the history of agricultural work, there is not enough replacement labour to cover existing needs. Everywhere, farms are being forced to source the labour they require from other industries, a development which looks set to usher in major changes to the sector. Expertise, for example, will no longer be acquired by means of a long and repetitive process of learning technical skills before starting work. Just like in industry, strategic knowledge will have to be formalised in order to shorten the learning period required. Evidence of this change can already be found in agricultural schools and lifelong learning centres (Rolle, 1993; Nye & Loble, 2023). In terms of registering knowledge, greater dissemination of scientific and management training is required, alongside computer systems that will provide support for more complex decision-making processes. All that will be left to do then will be to attract potential candidates and somehow convince them of the advantages of submitting to a model that will challenge their true autonomy, offer little protection against the risks inherent to life, afford an unsatisfactory income and impose outrageously long working hours. Who knows whether or not this major transformation in the renewal of the agricultural workforce will bring about significant improvements to farmers' status? After all, no matter how few their numbers, farmers continue to be a vital element for the valorisation of considerable capital.

³⁹ These movements were also organised at a European scale. For example, the European coordinator La Via Campesina was established in 1986 following years of debate among different alternative trade unions.

⁴⁰ The tonne of oil equivalent is the unit of measurement used to assess the amount of energy produced or consumed. Like all units of measurement, it enables comparisons to be drawn between different energy sources. For example, 1.5 tonnes of carbon is required to produce the same amount of energy as one tonne of crude oil.

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6. Mobilisation and organisation of scientific work under state protection

*What can the structure of Spain's science system teach us about the dynamics of the wage system?*¹

Today, science is one of the playing fields on which competition between nations is played out. For decades, economic globalisation spread apace as the hegemony of the US and its allies expanded across the globe. However, the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, clashes with Russia and China, have underscored the inherent risks of depending on external sources for technologies and raw materials that are strategic for national security (semiconductors, rare minerals, energy sources, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, etc.). Great emphasis is now placed on concepts such as 'strategic autonomy' in research and development and 'technological sovereignty', as the links between state scientific, industrial and security policies are strengthened (OECD, 2023, pp. 43–86). Just as the Cold War saw an arms and space race between the US and the Soviet Union, science and technology have now become a competitive battleground between states and regional blocs seeking global hegemony.

It comes as no surprise, then, to see state intervention in science; indeed, it has been a constant feature of all developed capitalist economies. As well as its direct participation in the financing and performance of research and development,² the state has also played a decisive role in orienting scientific activity by identifying and regulating priority areas for research. It has been fundamental in creating scientific infrastructures, training research personnel, transferring and reproducing strategic knowledge and implementing the mechanisms of intellectual property. It has also been crucial for the development of science in the private sector, providing subsidies, credits and tax breaks and implementing commercial and industrial policies. Moreover, by supporting the research autonomy required in basic science and promoting a whole network of start-ups and spin-offs linked to public research centres, the state is taking on the most uncertain and risky part of research, mutualising the costs of that activity and enabling private operators to make applied developments and invest with greater assurance.³ The development of the Apple

¹Although closely inter-related, science, technology and innovation occupy separate spheres. The interactions between them are more complex and less linear than is often thought. Technological innovation, for example, is not simply the applied transfer of the findings of basic research (Veltz, 2017). However, to save space and unless otherwise stated, in this chapter we use the term 'science' in its broadest sense, applying it to both basic scientific research and the technological developments connected with scientific practice. Most of the statistics used in this chapter come from the OECD (*Main Science and Technology Indicators, 2023*) and the Spanish *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* [National Institute of Statistics] or INE (*Estadísticas sobre actividades I+D, 1964–2021*).

² In 2021, governments in the OECD spent over \$497 billion (current PPP dollars) on R&D, performed either by themselves or by partners in the private sector. This represents 27% of total R&D spending in the bloc. In the EU, the figure was almost \$161 billion (34% of total R&D spending) and in the US, almost \$162 billion (20% of the total).

³ In the United States, for example, the proportion of funding for 'basic science' coming from the federal government increased from 57% in the 1950s to 70% in the 1960s and 1970s. Overall, between 1953 and 2021, private corporations funded only 22% of all basic research carried out in the United States, with 60% coming from the federal government. The real extent of government funding may be even greater since, during this period, another 18% came from other (non-federal) areas of the US administration, universities

product range (Mazzucato, 2017) and more recently, COVID–19 vaccines (Cassier, 2023) are excellent examples of the way the private sector has exploited the research carried out over decades with public-sector funds to develop highly innovative technological products.

Any analysis of the dynamics of science in contemporary capitalist societies therefore needs to take into account the prominent role played by the state; and this includes the means used to mobilise science’s ultimate strategic resource: human labour.⁴ In state-driven systems for mobilising scientific labour, we find many of the elements traditionally used by private enterprise to mobilise salaried labour: codification of the relationships of subordination defining the bonds between employer and employee, in the form of *labour contracts*; the use of social contributions and the social wage as instruments for reproducing the collective of salaried employees; definition of use-of-work conditions by way of collective bargaining processes (with varying degrees of institutional input) with workers’ organisations, etc. Nonetheless, the arrangements for mobilising scientific labour also contain certain unique features that it may be helpful to explore for a wider understanding of the way the wage system works.

Firstly, we are dealing with a sector consisting mainly of highly-qualified salaried workers who enjoy a large degree of autonomy in the way they organise and implement their work. Unlike other forms of salaried work (such as industrial labour), scientific work is usually considered to be intellectual. As such, it might *a priori* seem difficult to formalise, measure and standardise. The scientific profession is commonly associated with features such as autonomy, freedom and creativity, and its activity might appear to transcend traditional systems for measuring productivity and scheduling. Scientific work is strongly vocational; it might therefore be equated with ‘virtuous work’ (Virno, 2003) or that of the artist (Menger, 2014). From this perspective, the scientist is seen as being akin to the intellectual, the genius, the creative artist, the inventor or the entrepreneur; rarely, though, are scientists equated with salaried workers (with their characteristic subordination to their employer). Secondly, those employed in state-supported science do not work (directly or primarily) for business structures, but for public institutions, organised around a bureaucratic system. The state plays a unique and intermediated role as an employer, delegating some of its authority to a host of administrative bodies that the researchers themselves are actively involved in running. Moreover, the state’s actions as an employer are presumed to be guided by a desire for the *common good* and the provision of a public service, rather than by a wish to intensify scientific labour, increase its productivity or reduce the associated staffing costs.

Yet despite the public service vocation of scientific work and the quasi-self-management that prevails in the sector, the state must accept the need to participate—often with limited

(whose research is 50–60% dependent on federal funds) and non-profit organisations (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2023; National Science Foundation, 2024).

⁴ In the OECD as a whole (2020), 35% of R&D workers (researchers, technicians, etc.) work outside the corporate environment, most in universities (73%) or government agencies and bodies (20%). Specifically in the EU (2021), non-corporate R&D workers account for 41% of the total, again mostly employed in universities (68%) and government agencies (30%) (OECD, Main Science and Technology Indicators, 2023). With regard to education, almost all PhDs in Europe were obtained in public institutions (or government-dependent ones in the case of the UK). In Japan, PhDs in public institutions accounted for 75% of the total, in the United States 59% and in Korea 36% (OECD, Education at a Glance, 2024, available data for 2021).

resources—in an increasingly costly and competitive globalised science system. The fact that researchers have autonomy over the way they organise their work does not mean that they are not subject to the bureaucratic dynamics that underpin the science system as a whole (for example, their professional careers are conditional on their successfully navigating a recurring series of merit review processes). Science stands well apart from the algorithmic models used since the emergence of AI to control and monitor work. Scientific labour is mobilised via the state in a (viable) form of wage system in which workers are granted extensive autonomy, but this does not prevent their activity from being oriented, brokered and measured in the medium term. In short, they are subject to the needs and objectives of the ostensibly ‘watered-down’ employer that is the state.

Thus, the state-driven scientific labour system—with its continuities and singularities—may help us better understand the functioning and transformation of the wage system. Nonetheless, one might reasonably ask why we choose to explore the Spanish case in particular. Despite rapid growth since the final decades of the twentieth century, Spain holds only a modest position on the global science stage and is not at the heart of the major contemporary science systems.⁵ Why then does it deserve our attention? The answer is that the Spanish case contains certain features that make it especially interesting for our analysis. First, state intervention in creating and building up the science system has been particularly intense, partly as a consequence of traditionally weak participation in R&D by the country’s business sector (see below). Second, this intense state involvement in R&D—necessary to restore the position of the Spanish economy within the global economy after the isolation of the early decades of Franco’s dictatorship—has been implemented with more limited resources than in other capitalist economies. This is reflected in the systems introduced to mobilise and organise scientific work and in the imbalances that may jeopardise its future viability. Lastly, the Spanish case allows us to explore state control of access to scientific careers (during both Franco’s dictatorship and the later democratic period), and the subordination of science to the interests of the state and the valorisation processes of private capital (not always the same).

In this chapter then, we will use the Spanish case to examine the specific labour system that operates in state-supported science. We shall start by briefly exploring the make-up and main features of the Spanish science system today. Next, we will analyse the singular role played by the state as an employer of scientific labour, the transformation in the systems by which scientific activity is mobilised and the growing hybridisation of academic careers. We will conclude with a brief reflection on the challenges faced by this state-supported R&D system when it comes to labour mobilisation.

The creation of a science and innovation system in Spain

The emergence of a consolidated science and innovation system in Spain coincided with the restoration of democracy in 1977 and the country’s subsequent entry into the European project in 1986. This period saw the creation of the institutional framework responsible

⁵ In 2021, for example, Spain spent 1.4% of its GDP on R&D, well below the overall figures for the OECD (2.7%), and the EU–27 (2.2%) (OECD, Main Science and Technology Indicators, 2023). In 2022, Spain ranked eleventh worldwide in terms of volume of scientific publications (indexed in the Scopus and/or WOS databases), accounting for 3.1% of the world’s science output. The impact of this scientific production (measured as a percentage of publications in Q1 journals) was lower, with Spain coming fifteenth worldwide (FECYT, <https://indicadores.fecyt.es/#/produccion>).

for implementing science policies, the establishment of the main players in the system and the setting up of the regulatory framework governing its financing and operation. At the same time, fundamental instruments for the development of science were either created or consolidated (national R&D plans, more ambitious funding programmes for PhD studies and overseas stays, etc.) and sufficient resources were made available (many from Europe) to finance the creation of the human and material infrastructure that underpins Spanish science today (Sanz Menéndez, 1997; Fernández–Esquinas & Ramos–Vielba, 2011).

Nonetheless, some of the key hallmarks, institutions and instruments of the current Spanish R&D system can be traced back much further—to Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975) or even the ‘Silver Age’ of Spanish science and culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. An example is the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas* (CSIC), which is now the largest research centre in Spain, employing almost 14,000 people. It was created in 1941 by Franco’s government using the resources and infrastructure previously allocated to the *Junta de Ampliación de Estudios e Investigaciones Científicas* (1907–1939). Indeed, the Franco regime was not unsympathetic to the importance of science, albeit always subordinated to its own strategic (political, military and economic) needs. For instance, it used science to reinforce its cultural hegemony after the civil war. In its crusade to erase all traces of the ‘republican nation’ (Villacañas, 2022), Franco sought to replace the former scientific and cultural elites—who had mostly supported the republic in the war—with others who were more loyal to the new regime.⁶ Control of the country’s universities and main research centres allowed Franco to create technical and political cadres, and to promote a form of science that did not contravene the national-Catholic principles that formed the ideological pillars of his dictatorship.

This was not the only use that the regime made of science. Franco also employed it to create a ‘national technology’ capable of solving the problems faced by a country devastated by war and (in the early years of the regime) internationally isolated. Using research institutions such as the *Patronato Juan de la Cierva* (PJC), one of the components *patronatos* (or trusts) of the CSIC, Franco’s government mobilised the human and financial resources necessary to meet the technological needs of the industrialisation process the state was promoting through the *Instituto Nacional de Industria* (INI). The PJC was the largest centre of applied research during Franco’s dictatorship, but it was not the only one: the INI also had its own centres and laboratories, as did some ministries and the army (López García, 1994). In this way, the government created a research structure that was no longer beholden to any single company or industry, but instead served the country’s industries and strategic interests as a whole. As a collective research infrastructure, it was subject to government control, but it was financed not only by the state, but also by the industries that potentially stood to benefit from its work. In the case of the PJC, for example, approximately two thirds of the funding came from state subsidies and from resources obtained by the PJC’s own research institutes. The remainder came from mandatory contributions (between 0.5% and 1% of

⁶ Of the 316 researchers employed by the *Junta de Ampliación de Estudios* (JAE) in 1934 (shortly before the outbreak of the war), only 15 were still employed by the CSIC in 1941. In all, some 60% of the JAE’s scientists were either purged by Franco or went into exile. It has also been estimated that political purges led to the removal of approximately 11% of all university professors working in the faculties of natural and exact sciences (López García, 1994, pp. 99 & 105).

output or sales) paid by companies producing cement, coal and iron and steel. This was in addition to the ‘voluntary’ donations made by some companies favoured by the authorities (López García, 1994, pp. 203 & ss.).

However, the resources mobilised by the state were clearly insufficient to meet the technological requirements of an economy which, by the latter decades of the dictatorship, was booming. Spain’s reincorporation into international institutions and markets, together with the consequent availability of external sources of financing, allowed Spanish companies to source the (generally not overly complex) technologies they needed abroad, importing machinery and acquiring patents.⁷ From the mid-1950s until the fall of the dictatorship, the Spanish economy—with its links to international economic dynamics restored—enjoyed strong growth, leading to some modernisation of the country’s productive structure (García Delgado & Jiménez, 2001; Prados de la Escosura & Sánchez Alonso, 2020).⁸ Notwithstanding, the science and innovation system remained underdeveloped throughout the Franco years, thus helping to perpetuate one of the chronic problems faced by Spanish capitalism: the significant degree to which it was technologically dependent (Molero, 2015).⁹

Other characteristic features of the Spanish science system also emerged during the Franco years: low levels of R&D involvement by a highly fragmented business sector, concentrated primarily in low-tech manufacturing sectors; the central role played by the state in promoting science; and the fact that investment in R&D remained doggedly beneath the average for the developed world. These features still persist today. At 1.4% in 2021, Spain’s R&D expenditure is still well below the average for the OECD (2.7%) and EU27 (2.2%), despite improvements since the years of the dictatorship (0.3% between 1967 and 1975) and the early years of democracy (0.4% in 1981). The Spanish business sector has also significantly increased its share in research activity. In 1964, it accounted for just 26% of R&D expenditure; by 2021, this had risen to 56%. The private sector now employs 47% of all R&D personnel in the country. Despite these improvements, however, Spanish companies still lag behind their counterparts in the most competitive capitalist economies. In the EU, 66% of R&D is performed by business, which employs 60% of the total R&D workforce. In the OECD in general, these figures stand at 73% and 65% respectively.

Despite Spain’s push to ‘modernise’ from the 1980s on (industrial restructuring, privatisation of public companies and liberalisation of the economy, flexibilisation of the

⁷ At the height of the Cold War, anti-communist Spain became a strategic American ally. Under the Madrid Agreements, signed in 1953, Spain received economic and military aid from the US in exchange for allowing five military bases to be installed on Spanish territory. In 1958, a year before President Eisenhower’s official visit to Spain, Franco’s government successfully applied to join the IMF and the OECD. These policy changes were reflected in total foreign investment, which rose from \$67 million in 1959–60 to \$2.3 billion in 1973–1974, (i.e., from the equivalent of 1.7% to 6.4% of Spain’s gross fixed capital formation) (Donges, 1976, p.109).

⁸ Between 1960 and 1975, the proportion of the population living in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants rose from 28% to 50% (García Delgado, 1987, p. 183). By contrast, agricultural employment fell from 48% of the total in 1944–1952 to just 28% in 1964–1974. During the same period, employment in industry rose from 19% to 24% and in the service sector from 26% to 39% (Prados de la Escosura, 2003, p. 209).

⁹ According to the OECD’s figures for 2020, Spain had only 0.5% of all IP5 patents (i.e., patents registered in at least two of the world’s primary intellectual property offices: Japan, Europe, the US, Korea and China). To put this figure into perspective, in the same year, Japan held 23% of the total, the US 19%, China 16%, Korea 10% and Germany 8%.

labour market, EU membership, opening up of the economy, etc.), business R&D continues to be heavily burdened by the weight of a small business fabric (Fernández-Esquinas & Ramos-Vielba, 2011; Molero, 2015) and by a manufacturing structure that is largely dominated by low-tech sectors (Molero & Sarai, 2021), where keeping labour costs in check—rather than making improvements in innovation or technology—is usually the decisive factor in companies’ competitive strategies.¹⁰ In this context, the state’s role in promoting and sustaining innovation and scientific activity is decisive. In Spain, 44% of all R&D is carried out by universities and public research organisations (as compared to 25% in the OECD and 34% in the EU27).¹¹ Between them, they are responsible for 93% of all basic science carried out in Spain (with business accounting for just 7%), although this is not the only area of science in which they are involved.¹² At the same time, the state directly finances 38% of all science carried out in Spain—42% if one includes the universities, as compared to an average of 33% in the EU and 28% in the OECD. As we shall see, it also employs a large proportion of R&D workers. Despite the growth in business-based R&D in recent decades, the Spanish science system continues to see a greater proportion of state-financed activity than elsewhere. This state presence is also reflected in the systems for mobilising scientific labour.

Mobilisation and organisation of scientific work under state protection

The Spanish National Institute of Statistics (2022) estimates that around 420,000 people are currently employed in R&D, as either researchers or research technicians and assistants. This is not an especially large group, accounting for just 2% of the employed population, but it has grown significantly in comparison to the early years of the current Spanish R&D system. In 1981, for example—shortly after the restoration of democracy—barely 55,000 people were working in science (0.5% of the total workforce) (INE). R&D workers therefore constitute a growing group, performing all manner of research work of varying complexity in widely different organisations and work systems.

As in any other field of production, there is also a division of labour in science and tasks are assigned to workers with different educational backgrounds, mobilised under different employment statuses. Work systems vary depending on the fields of knowledge involved, the goals pursued and the type of science being carried out (applied, basic, prototype development, etc.). They also vary depending on which organisations are providing the resources and participating in the research activity: multinational companies with their

¹⁰ Ninety percent of companies operating in Spain have fewer than ten employees and 99% have fewer than fifty. Only 0.2% of companies employ more than 250 people (INE, Directorio Central de Empresas, 2023). At the same time, according to the INE’s Business Innovation Survey, between 2020 and 2022, only 24% of companies introduced innovations (in either their products or business processes).

¹¹ In Spain, university research mostly consists of state-supported or state-dependent science. There are now eighty-nine universities in the country, of which fifty are public. The proportion of private universities in the higher education system has increased significantly in recent decades, rising from sixteen in 2000 to thirty-nine in 2024. This is reflected especially in a rise in the number of students enrolled in private universities (from 8% in 2000–2001 to 21% in 2022–2023), but not so much in their research. At university level, 84% of R&D personnel and 94% of those enrolled in PhD programmes are still in public universities (Ministry of Universities, 2022–2023 academic year).

¹² Indeed, basic science accounts for just half of the research activity of Spanish public centres and universities. Also represented are applied science (35%) and experimental development (18%), a reflection of the direct or indirect links between these areas and the concerns and needs of the manufacturing sector and civil society.

own laboratories and resources; small and medium-sized enterprises relying on *technology parks* to meet their R&D needs; start-ups and spin-offs making use of the infrastructure of incubators and *science and technology parks* to build up their business; public research centres, hospitals and universities, etc.

In Spain, as in many other international science systems (Lanciano–Morandat & Nohara, 2002), there are two major systems mobilising scientific work. In simple terms, these might be classed as science performed by industry and science performed by academia. Each system establishes its own separate professional careers, mechanisms for recognising the skills acquired, remuneration systems and scales, methods of acquiring and circulating knowledge, etc. This differentiation between the two ways of doing science—together with a growing interconnection and hybridisation between them—can be found in all developed economies, including Spain. What makes the Spanish case somewhat unusual, however, is the prominent position of the state as both a mobiliser and direct employer of scientific labour. While the state plays this role to some extent in all countries, it is particularly intense in Spain due to the traditionally low rate of business involvement in R&D activities (Molero, 2015).

The state as a singular employer of scientific work

The system of state-organised work is not the only way in which scientific work is mobilised in Spain, but it is the most important: 59% of researchers and 51% of R&D personnel are directly employed by bodies that are dependent on (central or regional) government authorities. The state is responsible for making the rules governing employment relations in science and is also the primary employer of scientific labour—even though it exercises its ‘managerial’ functions in a mediated form, with the involvement of many different government bodies and the researchers themselves. Researchers assume certain specific responsibilities in the management and organisation of scientific practice: use of the economic resources allocated, planning and distribution of the workloads and human resources required to implement them, participation in staff selection processes, creation of work teams, design of research projects, etc.

All of these factors—the assumption by researchers of a large number of organisational responsibilities, their participation (directly or through elected representatives) in the governing bodies of the institutions in which they work, and the recognition of certain guarantees against arbitrary decisions by their hierarchical superiors—go some way to diluting, although not removing, the figure of the employer. Many of the functions performed by the employer in the private sector are here distributed and manifested across different bodies, with regulations, strategies and instructions that can, on occasions, be ambiguous and inconsistent. In this tangle of intermediary bodies and regulations, individual researchers, especially those who are employed on a permanent basis, enjoy broad autonomy over the way they organise their work, with no strict control over the working hours they keep or even whether they are actually physically present in the workplace. Researchers interpret the codes, the rudiments and the timing of the system for which they work. They define their own strategies and associates, seek information, partners and funding for their projects and join groups, organisations and networks that protect their interests and facilitate their work. In short, they are salaried employees enjoying all the security of public service but acting as ‘academic entrepreneurs’.

However, the autonomy they enjoy in their day-to-day work is intrinsically contingent on their subordination to the entire bureaucratic framework that regulates science work. They themselves form an active part of the process, as both subordinates and agents who promote subordination. In the university, for example, researchers do not set their annual workload on their own; it is also conditional on their status and rank in the academic hierarchy, as well as on legal regulations and the decisions made (and attendant power struggles) within their peer community. Their ability to influence the amount and content of their workload is always limited (although the higher their place in the hierarchy, the greater their influence in this regard). Once the workload has been approved, they must guarantee they will meet their targets, although they do enjoy a large degree of autonomy over the way in which they organise their work.

In the annual planning process, there is sometimes a mismatch between the time estimated by the academic institution for certain activities and the actual workload involved (which is usually greater). In the absence of any time control mechanism, researchers will often work beyond the stipulated hours to accomplish the targets they have been set. Likewise, when they either do not yet have a permanent employment contract (and renewal is contingent on a performance evaluation), want to improve their employment conditions and ascend the academic hierarchy (also requiring performance evaluation) or are simply driven by their scientific vocation, passion for knowledge or the pressure of publish-or-perish academic competition, they will sometimes accept an extension to their workload, taking on new projects or academic commitments. However, researchers' autonomy is offset by a number of other factors. These include the existing regulatory apparatus (which, for example, may render certain activities incompatible with their employment status); external monitoring from quality and evaluation agencies; quality surveys among users (in teaching, for example); peer review (publications, research projects, etc.); the regular use of bibliographic metrics and academic rankings to measure productivity and academic prestige; the need to justify all their actions to the bureaucracy (acquisition of material, attendance at conferences, participation in projects, etc.); and the accreditation criteria required to extend their temporary research posts or simply continue their academic career. In sum, the autonomy that researchers enjoy does not prevent their activity from being measured, compared, standardised and oriented.

The professional career and the civil service as structuring devices for the mobilisation of scientific work

In order to guarantee the mobilisation and organisation of scientific work, the state establishes and defines a professional career, with specific positions, functions and employment statuses differentiated by virtue of the stage reached by the researcher, together with his or her academic qualifications and level of experience. As some researchers have noted (Saglio, 2004; 2005), the notion of a professional career is enormously significant in the public sector, especially among civil servants. Unlike salaried employees¹³ in the private sector, the salaries and working conditions of state civil servants are not primarily defined by collective bargaining agreements negotiated between employers and workers' representatives. Rather, they depend on the level they

¹³ Translator's Note: Throughout the original Spanish text, a distinction is drawn between '*funcionarios*' (civil servants) and '*laborales*' or '*asalariados*' (non civil-service employees working in the public service). While both the exact nature of this sector and the term used to describe its members varies from country to country, for the sake of brevity I have opted to use 'salaried employees' (and the adjective 'salaried').

have attained within the civil service hierarchy and the amount of time they have been working in it. It is the state, with its laws and regulations, that establishes—possibly but not necessarily in consultation with civil servant organisations—the bulk of the attributes, salaries and working conditions enjoyed by different tiers and categories of civil servants. For a civil servant, therefore, any improvement in pay and working conditions will essentially depend on his or her possibilities of mobility (horizontal and, above all, vertical) within the public administration. This explains the importance trade unions attach to defining the different stages of the professional career and the mechanisms provided for accessing them. These promotion mechanisms are ostensibly based on objective merit, equal opportunities and transparency in the selection processes (with properly-advertised public merit-based competitions, monitored by trade union organisations with the active involvement of civil servants of the same rank as the position on offer).

In the field of science, the state government has also established a hierarchical career structure. There have been numerous adjustments to the different stages and requirements involved in this pathway. Nonetheless, for several decades now, a single work system has combined both statutory positions (i.e., career civil servants), which are regulated by administrative law, and salaried positions (permanent or temporary), which fall under the remit of labour law. Thus, career pathways in R&D are pre-defined by the state, in accordance with the specific needs of scientific practice and the area in which it is carried out. These pathways have been ordered and adapted to European standards, thus facilitating (national and international) benchmarking of researchers' experience and skills and enabling them to be mobile within a highly globalised work system. The 2011 Science, Technology and Innovation Act (Law 14/2011), for example, aligns the Spanish science system with the European Framework for Research Careers, recognising four profiles that apply to any scientific sector and institution: R1 (first stage researcher), R2 (recognised researcher), R3 (established researcher) and R4 (leading researcher). This means that the different scientific posts and categories in Spain (which vary greatly from region to region and institution to institution) can be 'translated' into a kind of 'lingua franca'. Thus, there is a 'standardised' career path that allows the amount of accumulated research experience to be 'measured', facilitating researchers' mobility between different organisations, regions and countries.¹⁴

The state also sets the conditions of access to one or other of the research categories (salaried or civil service), the length of each stage, the bridges enabling individuals to 'jump' from one to another and the requirements for promotion to higher categories. These pathways are 'monitored' by public assessment agencies, which compare and measure the researchers' activity, qualifying them for specific positions in their research career, depending on their accumulated merits. The state also sets mandatory staffing levels (number of PhD-holders, minimum proportion of civil servants, percentage of temporary personnel, etc.), overall authorised expenditure on salaries in universities, replacement rates for retiring public servants and the creation of new R&D posts through the annual public service postings (specifying destination, area of knowledge, category, etc.). Thus, through a range of instruments—financing, regulations and merit review agencies—the state provides itself with a system for training and recruiting research personnel, while at the same time maintaining a certain degree of control over personnel

¹⁴ A brief description of how scientific careers are organised in Spain can be found at: <https://www.fecyt.es/es/publicacion/researcher-career-path-spain-glance-7th-edition>

flows into each category, and the size and make-up of the workforces. In short, it controls the financial resources involved and their impact on the public accounts.

Progressive move towards salaried employment in Spanish scientific work?

Traditionally, the centre of gravity of the research career—and this entire work system—has lain in the different categories of the civil service, which still enjoy greater kudos than research posts based on labour contracts, even though the latter often benefit from the same entitlements and pay.¹⁵ As is the case in many other services considered to be strategic for the functioning of the state (the postal and rail services, security forces, the military, etc.), in the field of science, the civil service has also been a reference point around which much of the scientific work in Spain has been mobilised and organised. However, this central position has not always reflected a statistical hegemony. At the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas* (CSIC), for example, 80% of researchers are civil servants, but they only represent 48% of R&D personnel in general.¹⁶ At the beginning of the 21st century, civil servants made up 58% of all teaching and research staff in public universities. Today they account for only 39%.¹⁷ There therefore appears to be an ongoing shift towards salaried employment in the research activity of Spanish scientific institutions, particularly in the universities, even though this transformation has not eradicated the importance of the civil service—or the impact of the state—in the R&D system.

In the case of universities, for example, where this transformation process has advanced further, the move towards salaried employment in scientific work was boosted significantly following the enactment of the *Ley Orgánica de Universidades* [Universities Act] in 2001. With the stated aim of ‘modernising’ the Spanish university system, the law introduced a dual system (civil service and salaried) for mobilising teaching and research staff. This has been further consolidated by subsequent changes in the legislation (University System Act – Ley 2/2023). Emulating the university system in the English-speaking world, this reform created a ‘salaried’ academic career path paralleling that of the civil service. The traditional civil service system—with its employment guarantees, counterweights to the employer’s authority and special mechanisms for determining pay and working conditions—was seen as being excessively ‘rigid’ for Spain’s science system (and Spanish capitalism), which sought fuller participation in a much more ‘fluid’ and uncertain globalised world. Science could not stand aloof from the process of *acceleration* being experienced by Spanish society more generally.

¹⁵In most Spanish R&D systems and institutions, the most prestigious research posts (university professorships, for example) and/or permanent positions (in the case of the *Organismos Públicos de Investigación* [Public Research Bodies]) are still reserved for civil servants. Consequently, for permanent salaried researchers, becoming a civil servant is still a desirable prospect.

¹⁶ These figures include over 1,300 trainee researchers (predocs) in the CSIC. Not including them, the proportion of civil servants among R&D personnel rises to approximately 54%. Estimate based on the overall personnel figures included in the annual report for 2022 and the 2023 ‘Relación de Puestos de Funcionarios’ [List of Civil Service Positions]. Both documents are available on the CSIC website (<https://www.csic.es/es/el-csic/informacion-corporativa/memorias-anales> and <https://www.csic.es/sites/default/files/2023-09/230301-rpt-xex06-47811-pf.pdf>).

¹⁷ Figures from the Ministry for Universities for the 2004–2005 and 2022–2023 academic years. The data are for staff employed at the Spanish public universities.

However, the primary aim of the successive reforms of the Spanish science system was not to do away with the civil servant researcher altogether, but rather to provide the system as a whole with greater flexibility and dynamism in the mobilisation and brokerage of scientific labour (a transformation which, it was felt, was not being sufficiently promoted by the civil service-based system).¹⁸ To this end, institutions were encouraged to hire more salaried research personnel, with backing from a combination of different interests. On the one hand, there were the regional governments and administrations, which had control over the professional careers of salaried researchers but not their civil service counterparts (who were dependent on the central administration of the state). And on the other, there were the universities and public research centres, which saw this option as a way of continuing to participate in the existing ‘project-based’ model of science without having to commit their increasingly limited economic resources in the long term. This model requires variable mobilisation of research personnel depending on institutions’ capacity to attract (annual or multiannual) research funds through collaboration contracts or highly competitive calls for proposals with uncertain results. For these research centres, the salaried system of hiring researchers also meant significant savings in workforce costs (especially when it came to temporary contracts in the early stages of the research career). It also afforded them greater flexibility in hiring personnel when the 2008 credit crunch led to the imposition of severe restrictions on new public (civil service) employment.

In the case of public universities, for example, growth in the proportion of contract researchers among research staff (from 42% in 2004–2005 to 60% in 2022–2023) made it possible to continue mobilising a large group of science workers without committing an excessive volume of state financial resources. In most Spanish public universities, the most common type of civil-servant researchers (*Profesor Titular de Universidad*) are, on paper, paid quite similar amounts to their salaried counterparts (*Profesor Permanente Laboral*), and both groups are eligible for the same type of salary supplements. However, civil servants (who do not pay unemployment insurance) usually pay less in social contributions than salaried researchers (at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, for example, they pay 8 percentage points less).¹⁹ Moreover, until 2011, civil servant researchers, like other state civil servants, had different retirement systems from salaried employees (which were also cheaper for the employer). In other words, with the same individual merits and the same length of time in their positions, civil servants would not necessarily cost the university more than salaried researchers in permanent positions.

Indeed, in the area of science too, the civil service has historically been an effective mechanism for mobilising essential workers for the state at a relatively low cost, making up for ‘modest’ salaries by offering job stability and other perks of civil service status (more advantageous access to goods and services provided by the state or the private sector, possibilities of accessing loans at lower interest rates, social benefits, etc.). Until the costs of financing the social wage of civil servants began to converge with that of

¹⁸ In academia, both the 2001 Universities Act and the recently approved University System Act (2023) require that at least 51% of university staff (full-time equivalent personnel) must be civil servants. In public research centres dependent on the state government (*Organismos Públicos de Investigación*), the 2011 Science Act (Ley 14/2011) and its amended 2022 version (Ley 17/2022), also recognise the civil service as the predominant pathway for a research career, restricting the hiring of salaried employees to the training phases and support positions. The situation is different, however, among research centres that are dependent on the regional governments (i.e., the autonomous communities), which have burgeoned significantly in the wealthier regions; here, the norm is to hire salaried employees.

¹⁹ <https://www.uab.cat/web/personal-uab/personal-uab/personal-academico-e-investigador/retribuciones-del-personal-academico-e-investigador-1345699364196.html>

most salaried employees, for many universities, turning permanent salaried researchers into civil servants might even enable certain savings in personnel costs. For the universities, the principal advantage of promoting the salaried academic career did not come, therefore, from permanent salaried researchers, but rather from the intensive use of researchers on temporary labour contracts, who went from accounting for 41% of all research staff in 2004–2005 to 49% in 2022–2023. It is these research positions—many of which are regularised as compulsory stages in the research career, with much lower salaries—that have economically benefited the Spanish science system.²⁰

Promotion of a salaried research career was not the only new feature introduced by the reforms in the systems for mobilising scientific work. They also introduced national systems (or regional systems for certain research positions) of accreditation and merit review, in an attempt to break the stranglehold enjoyed by local academic networks over staff selection processes. The aim was to increase the mobility of researchers and the competitive nature of the recruitment system. Introduction of accreditation systems also meant a significant ‘activation’ of the work carried out by researchers (civil servants and salaried employees alike), by tying the stabilisation and development of their academic careers, and a growing part of their salaries, to their scores in these regular merit reviews. Thus, the intensification and acceleration of scientific work in Spain over recent decades (Noll 2019) has led to a significant improvement in Spain’s global standing in terms of science output. While still a long way from the top of the table, the improvement is proof of the way the country has managed to consolidate a modern research and development system, comparable in quality and impact to those of other similarly-sized economies. The weakness of the Spanish science system appears to lie not so much in the quality of the science it produces, but in the scarcity of the (public and private) resources available to it and in the difficulty of valorising scientific knowledge in the productive sector.

Academic entrepreneurship and hybridisation of scientific pathways

As is the case in many other countries (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997; Clark, 1998; Vallas & Kleinman, 2008; Lanciano–Morandat, 2019), successive ‘modernising’ reforms of the Spanish science system have sought to boost processes of knowledge transfer and collaboration between industry and academia. A range of instruments have been used for this purpose that have already been tried out in other science systems. These include agreed joint financing of R&D projects by private companies and public research organisations; mechanisms intended to link the findings of academic research with the business world; company-financed university chairs and PhD programmes jointly developed by academia and industry; mixed research centres with combined funding sources, agents and research staff; inclusion of transfer or research results to the private sector as an evaluable merit in research careers; removal of legal obstacles preventing public employees from collaborating with the private sector; promotion of so-called ‘academic entrepreneurship,’ etc. (Rubiralta, 2007; Fernández–Esquinas & Ramos–

²⁰ For example, in 2024, civil servant teaching and research staff constituted 34% of all research staff at Spain’s largest university, the Complutense University of Madrid, but accounted for 64% of its spending on research salaries. By contrast, their salaried counterparts, who made up the remaining 66% of the workforce, accounted for only 36% of the wage bill. Calculated from information provided in the Complutense University of Madrid’s 2024 budget report (<https://www.ucm.es/portaldetransparencia/informacionpresupuestaria>). The estimate does not include expenditure on social security contributions, which are not listed separately for civil service and salaried teaching and research staff.

Vielba, 2011; Giachi, 2018; OECD, 2021). As yet, these measures have had a more limited impact in Spain than in other countries, but they have established the current orientation of Spanish science policies and are transforming the ways in which the state mobilises scientific work.

Recent reforms to the Spanish science system (Laws 6/2001, 2/2023, 14/2011 and 17/2022, for example) have promoted the development of hybrid research statutes, a move that has fostered the (temporary) transfer of public research personnel and resources to the private sector. For example, public sector researchers can apply for leaves of absence of up to five years to join tech-based firms that have been set up to exploit patents or research results obtained with public funds, after which time they can return to their former posts, maintain their seniority, participate in merit review processes, etc. Those responsible for the scientific results may also provide part-time services to these spin-offs, on a temporary basis and provided they have prior authorisation. In doing so, they can maintain the dual institutional link and can take a share in any profits generated (at least a third in the case of commercial companies created or part-owned by the public research organisations to which they belong). As a result, public sector researchers may find themselves in an ambiguous part-subordinate, part-independent position; on the one hand, they are civil servants (or public-sector employees), and on the other, they are the owners of companies that are subject to the capital-valorisation logics of the private sector.²¹

Such business initiatives—many of which are doomed to be short-lived, despite all the ‘mentoring’ and ‘accompaniment’ programmes in place—actually function as structures for experimentation rather than companies per se (Veltz, 2010), enabling private capital to ‘test out’ new technologies, processes and products without shouldering the costs of the innovation process. Once the incubation, mentoring and public financing programmes have run their course, many of these initiatives fall by the wayside. Alternatively, if they are lucky, either the entire firm or the most valuable portion of its know-how may be bought out by a larger, more established company. The spread of concepts such as the entrepreneurial university (Etzkowitz, 2013; Foss & Gibson, 2015), open innovation (Chesbrough, Vanhaverbeke & West, 2006) and the triple helix of innovation (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2017) is evidence of the emergence of new and more complex processes of capital valorisation. Such processes involve different types of capital, actors and institutions (companies, research centres, public authorities, venture capital funds, etc.), mobilising a more or less scattered group of workers (with very different employment statutes) in networked processes of wealth production operating on a global scale. The example of *Science and Technology Parks* (STPs) may serve to illustrate how this process of transformation operates in Spain.

The first STPs were created in the 1990s, and there are now fifty fully operational parks across the country (Asociación de Parques Científicos y Tecnológicos, 2023). Of these, twenty-three are chiefly backed by universities and, in all, forty-six universities have stakes in STPs. Despite the important role played by universities and research centres (mostly public, but also some private ones), they are not the only significant agents involved in developing and running these technology parks. Agencies of the state and regional governments, town and city councils, chambers of commerce and business

²¹ Senior researchers sometimes take on this hybrid mantle of ‘entrepreneur-scientists’ as a means of creating scientific jobs for younger members of their laboratories and research groups.

organisations, private capital banking institutions and, of course, companies, micro-enterprises, consortia and entrepreneurial initiatives, all participate in what is viewed as a space for promoting entrepreneurship and creating and consolidating highly-innovative tech-based companies.

Although they have different degrees of specialisation and offer a wide variety of services, STPs are all physical spaces that have formal and operational relationships with universities, research centres and other higher education institutions. Their purpose is to encourage the creation and development of knowledge-based companies, while at the same time, through their resources (facilities, laboratories, scientific personnel, legal advice, patent management, etc.), enabling technology transfer and the development of R&D in production processes.²² By the end of 2022, Spanish science and technology parks played host to 5,780 organisations (companies, start-ups, spin-offs, micro-enterprises, consortia, etc.), as compared to 500 in 1997. Of these, 808 were classed as ‘incubating companies’ (less than 3 years old) and another 789 were start-ups (Asociación de Parques Científicos y Tecnológicos 2023). In 2022, companies operating out of *science and technology parks* in Spain had a combined turnover of €25.15 billion, and employed 150,624 people, 34,190 of them in R&D work (Asociación de Parques Científicos y Tecnológicos, 2023).

Science and technology parks therefore act as an instrument for valorising research results and mobilise a large number of different stakeholders (companies, universities, research centres, banks, chambers of commerce, municipal authorities, etc.). They constitute ‘productive networks’ located outside the ‘company’ structure as it has hitherto been understood. They also mobilise a wide range of resources (public and private; local, national, European, etc.), including human labour, which is essential for this type of activity and is covered by a wide range of employment statutes: permanent researchers (with either salaried employee or civil servant statutes) linked to the research centres and/or companies operating in the park; administrative personnel working under different systems of employment; subcontracted personnel providing a range of services to the STP’s users; researchers with grants, training contracts or salaried employee contracts; entrepreneurs and self-employed workers; ‘conventional’ salaried employees, etc. Thus, science policies are promoting entrepreneurship and closer collaboration with industry, transforming traditional systems and making the task of utilising Spain’s scientific labour force more complex. Could the accumulated effect of all these transformations be to endanger the medium-term sustainability of the system whereby scientific labour is mobilised?

Challenges facing the current system of scientific labour mobilisation in Spain

²² For example, the Madrid STP—set up in 2001 by the Complutense University of Madrid and the Autonomous University of Madrid—offers technology start-ups a wide range of business services (advice and mentoring, search for financing and clients, fully fitted-out workspaces and laboratories, etc.). It also offers services to existing companies that need to perform research and development for their business but lack the necessary infrastructure. For example, the STP has a genome unit offering qualified staff and scientific services (ranging from experimental design to statistical analysis and interpretation of results) in the fields of genomics, proteomics and microanalysis of materials. Each year, the unit provides more than 60,000 services to over 100 research groups in more than 350 projects, as well as SMEs, large companies and hospitals (<https://fpcm.es/genomica/>).

As discussed earlier, Spain's science system was developed and consolidated with less (public and private) investment than in other developed countries, in a context still dominated by low-to-medium tech production sectors and a high degree of business fragmentation. As a result, the level of employment availability in R&D has remained low. As we have seen, government action has gone some way to compensating for the still small presence of R&D in business. However, it has done so with significant budgetary restrictions and against the backdrop of strong tension in the labour market (very high unemployment and temporary employment rates, low wages, etc.). Consequently, although R&D employment has grown in absolute terms, it has not kept up with changes in the Spanish working population; since the restoration of democracy, education levels have risen apace with interest in these types of job (skilled and intellectual positions, often in the public sector, in socially valued activities, etc.), which are generally viewed as being of higher quality.

The Spanish science system has thus been dealt the triple blow of budgetary restraints, a deterioration in employment and an increasingly educated population looking for qualified posts (a scarce resource in Spain). All these factors have meant that the expansion of Spain's science system has mobilised far more workers than it could ever provide with stable employment (and indeed, more than it could ever wish to). As a result, and to meet the structural needs of Spanish science, it has generated a large pool of researchers in temporary positions. This 'contingent academy' (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009) absorbs the uncertainty of scientific work (regarding the renewal of funding or the continuity of certain avenues of research) and is often excluded from some of the principal entitlements and guarantees inherent to salaried work: severance pay, the right to a professional career, access to the social wage, etc. Standing at the periphery of the science system, these workers are mobilised by an appeal to their scientific vocation and the promise of some uncertain stability in the future (for which the civil service continues to be the reference point).

This is the case, for example, of researchers (postdocs or otherwise) hired to perform research support tasks in limited-duration R&D projects. These projects are led by researchers with permanent positions, who create teams comprising several permanent researchers, but above all (predoc) trainees and (postdoc) researchers, hired from the project's budget. When the research project ends, any employment relationship between such researchers and the R&D institution (or, on occasions, the private foundations created to manage private sector collaboration more 'flexibly') is wound up. The researchers enjoy no form of compensation and cannot add the time to the years they have worked for the institution. However, if the laboratory or research group obtains new funding (and wishes to continue working with the researcher), the situation may be repeated and a new employment relationship established.

This is also the case of the large group of researchers with (pre- or postdoc) research grants. Until 2011, their research work was not registered as salaried employment, but rather as 'training grants'. Consequently, for many years, they were excluded from all the mechanisms of the social wage (benefits for unemployment, cessation of business, retirement, etc.). Finally, the same applies to *profesores asociados*, who are a sort of part-time collaborating lecturers. The position was initially created to encourage professionals from the private sector or government to bring their knowledge and experience to the university. In practice, however, it has been used by many researchers as a (more precarious) means of entering the academic career and by universities as a flexible way

of covering their teaching requirements at a lower cost (part-time hiring and contribution for a reduced number of hours).

The continued precarious situation in which these groups find themselves has led to a series of protests of varied length, featuring many of the same sorts of collective action as those taken by other wage-earning collectives: go-slows, sit-ins, demonstrations, petitions, press conferences, etc. This kind of mobilisation is uncommon among permanent scientists, who are generally under-unionised and more inclined to adopt individual strategies for improving their working conditions (competition and a focus on their academic career) or to lobby the political powers that be via scientific societies and professional associations.

Such actions have sometimes resulted in changes to the law intended to relieve their situation, such as limits on the proportion of temporary personnel employed among university staff; more precise definition of the requirements and duration of the initial stages of the scientific career; creation of stable positions for salaried employees (with an indefinite, although not permanent, labour contract) for researchers employed in short-term research projects; stabilisation programmes for *profesores asociados* and more restrictive use of this type of contract; transformation of ‘grants’ into ‘labour contracts’; creation of special agreements with the social security authorities so that former ‘research fellows’ can meet the cost of unpaid social security contributions (including employer’s contributions) out of their own pockets in order to extend their rights of access to the social wage, etc. Some of these measures have only recently been introduced and it is still difficult to assess their impact. Nonetheless, the problem of this ‘floating’ population of researchers does not appear easy to resolve. Its origin is structural and strongly interwoven with an acceleration in innovation cycles and the speed with which strategic productive knowledge is rendered obsolete, together with Spain’s need to compete (with fairly limited resources) on a project-based international scientific stage.

Unless there is a significant increase in (public and private) investment in R&D—which appears unlikely, in the short term at least—the country’s science system seems fated to repeat the practice of ‘remote’ mobilisation of a significant portion of science workers, and for years to come, their work will be managed and mobilised by the public science system, with no requirement for them to join its institutions on a permanent basis. The risk is that a deferment in the age at which scientific careers become stable, together with the ‘strangling’ of research careers when budgets are particularly tight (as occurred in the wake of the 2008 crisis), will push many of these researchers out of the science system; either they will quit science altogether, or they will join other more attractive science systems where they have greater opportunities (a relatively simple step in a field as internationalised and competitive as science, where there is fierce competition between countries to attract the best talent).

In Spain, all of these trends already exist. Unless there are changes in the financial resources allocated to science, they may seriously jeopardise the medium-term possibilities of reproducing the scientific work mobilisation system analysed here. Within this system, as we have seen, autonomy over the organisation of work is entirely compatible with measurement, comparison and medium-term orientation of the researcher’s activity. In other words, this wage system does not necessarily involve any authoritarian (personal or algorithmic) control of the activity by the employer; rather, workers are subordinate only in so far as they form part of an extensive bureaucratic

apparatus, diluted through different authorities, which workers themselves actively participate in managing. The state plays a fundamental role in this system (as employer, coordinator, promoter and financier of scientific practice) and it would be difficult to view its action as ‘decommodifying’ or as seeking to sever the scientific field’s ties with the processes of private capital valorisation.

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In conclusion: some proposals for future research on work¹

*Pour qu'un monde nouveau surgisse, il faut d'abord que meure l'ancien monde. Et nous savons que l'intervalle qui les sépare peut être infiniment court ou au contraire si long que les hommes doivent apprendre pendant des dizaines d'années à vivre dans la désolation.*²

Jérôme Ferrari, *Le serment sur la chute de Rome*

In this book we have essayed a reflection on work and the transformations it is currently undergoing. And we will freely admit that the complexity of this undertaking has necessitated some meandering digressions. We have traced the slow and chaotic legal formalisation of the labour contract (which continues to play a fundamental role in employment) (1) and its subsequent reformulation in a profoundly altered context of production (2). We have also explored the consequences of these mutations for workers (3). These aspects are addressed in the three chapters that make up Part One of the book. Part Two examines three specific situations in which the private company is not the principal operator of employment, nor is the work built on the labour contract. Instead, it takes alternative forms which we feel need to be analysed for a more precise understanding of the underlying dynamics. The first of the three chapters in this second part looks at the 'new' self-employed who now stand at the heart of the debate because of their remote mobilisation by the large digital service platforms operating in the gig economy (4). The second examines 'traditional' self-employment in agriculture—a sector that is far more modern than often thought (5). And the third turns the spotlight on academic researchers, whose situation is closer to the traditional wage system than the other two cases, but who operate under the singular authority of a public employer and whose work apparently lies beyond the demands of economic profitability (6).

Rather than summarising the previous chapters, our aim here is to systematise certain aspects of the current situation that we consider to be decisive and essential for any understanding of the way in which work has evolved. Each of the five dimensions selected explores a different aspect, including the structural characteristics of work in market societies, the profound transformation of the production organisation underpinning the logic of work today and the intense changes among key actors, such as companies and states. The impacts of these movements on workers are often ambivalent and contradictory and as such, they are difficult to unpack. These five dimensions might therefore form the basis for further research into work and its transformations and to that end, we submit them here for discussion. Before we do, however, we should first briefly revisit a number of closely associated methodological aspects.

To start with, we have examined work as a social relationship that sustains the overall workings of our market societies. In such societies, an individual's sole source of income

¹ In these conclusions we use numbers in parentheses in a smaller font to refer readers to the specific chapter or chapters of the book that deal most directly with the issues discussed. So, for example, (2-3) refers to chapters 2 and 3 of the book.

² 'For a new world to arise, an old world must first die. And we know that the interval between them can be infinitely brief or so long that men must spend dozens of years learning to live amid the desolation'. Jérôme Ferrari, 'Sermon sur la chute de Rome', p. 20, 2012, Actes Sud.

is what he or she can obtain from participation in the production system. We have to work for a living; few escape this fate. As a social relationship, the notion of work encompasses all mechanisms whereby the individual's time and capacities are harnessed, oriented towards production and collectively consumed, all for the specific purpose of generating the surplus value needed to increase capital. As researchers, we need to explore the nature of these mechanisms, the reasons for their dynamism and the agents who promote them. Inevitably, this may mean paying less attention to some other issues and possible considerations arising out of them, such as the individual experience of work. Work is an occupation that takes up a considerable proportion of our lives. It is the object of our hopes, expectations and, sometimes, a burning desire for emancipation. All of these motivations unquestionably impact and orient individuals' careers, whilst fashioning the density of their experience of work. However, these motivations do not enable us fully to understand the social mechanisms by which specific individuals are assigned to a task, the qualities their employer recognises (or fails to recognise) at any given time, the rank they hold *vis-à-vis* their fellow workers, the benefits they can gain from that position, and so on.

We are interested in the mechanisms by which capital harnesses and exploits human activities. We view such activities within a collective programme in which they are combined with one another and consumed in accordance with rules and objectives that are far removed from the principles by which they are regularly governed. Thus, human activity is constantly being measured and assessed in accordance with the prevailing logic of capital valorisation, the fundamental principle of our capitalist societies. This general framework creates the dense network of opportunities and limitations against which the inevitable passions in the relationship between humans and their work play out. Seeking to understand the mechanisms that make up this global framework—as we do here—does not mean prioritising one field of work over all others. Rather, it means focusing on (and thus giving precedence to) those that are most decisive, whatever their intrinsic interest. However, this approach does not make our research any easier. The means by which capital exploits labour today are more complex than ever. The guises it takes are unstable, sometimes disruptive and, as already noted, deeply ambivalent. Although we can see traces of these different forms of exploitation in any work situation, their actual presence is often blurred, making it difficult to view them head on. They cannot be apprehended or fully described just through empirical observation, however meticulous. At the same time, to interpret such forms of exploitation in a single line (such as the characteristic acceleration of modernity, the absolute triumph of neo-liberal ideology, the clash between employers and wage earners or the organised deconstruction of the wage labour statute) would be to oversimplify the complexity of the phenomena involved.

To overcome the difficulties of this project (not always with complete success), we invoke the invaluable help of the theories formulated by French scholars of the *salariat* and the vistas they afford for any deliberation on the wage system.³ These ideas are relevant to all the different dimensions we discuss, but particularly the first two, the primordial alienation of workers from their work in the wage system and the way in which that alienation has intensified. As we said in the general introduction, one of our motivations in writing this book was to introduce a wider audience to the scholarship of these *salariat* researchers. Few translations of their work have been published, and for many years they were viewed as a minority amongst French labour sociologists, who tend to focus more

³ At the end of the general introduction, the reader will find a short reading list of works by these authors and by some of the researchers who are now following in their footsteps.

on empirical studies of the world of work. It goes without saying that these authors bear no responsibility for our interpretation of their work, for which we are solely answerable.

Finally, in keeping with our approach to work, the various situations we explore in the second part of the book, documented through our own research, have been analysed as different forms of workforce mobilisation. One possible variant is the wage labour contract, which is associated with the private company, the chief operator of this mobilisation. Because it is in such widespread use, it has come to be viewed as the 'standard' form of labour mobilisation. However, it is by no means the only one, as demonstrated by the three other situations analysed. All forms of mobilisation exist and endure because they form part of a system that links the primary actors and configures the relations of production between them. We use the expression *work formula* to reflect the close link between each means of mobilisation and the system in which it operates and makes sense. Compared to the 'standard' formula, the three other forms of labour mobilisation analysed here are in a clear minority. However, the very fact that they have developed and endured is proof that they too make an effective contribution to capital valorisation and there is no reason not to include them in any analysis of work.

The other formulas analysed stand at a considerable distance from the conventional wage system but nonetheless retain several of its essential features. For example, they are all codified and governed by professional statutes regulated by law. The reason is that they all channel workers into the collective mechanisms of the social wage. Such mechanisms are based on the principle of the social contribution, whereby a collective insurance scheme is created to cover certain life risks. The social wage is a central dimension of work. As such, it is one of the main themes of our discussions and appears throughout both the book and these conclusions. Analysing the social wage, we clearly see the crucial role played by the state in work, an area in which it has exclusive authority. As alternative formulas expand, with a more obscure legal status, the impact of these regulatory aspects will undoubtedly be reduced. It remains to be seen to what extent the state will be prepared to ignore the development of such structures. This, however, is a discussion for another day. Indeed, it could be the subject of future research within the framework of this research programme, based on the five dimensions discussed below.

The primordial alienation of workers from their work

Analyses of work tend to focus exclusively on the labour contract. In seeking to extend the scope of our analysis beyond this type of arrangement, we are by no means ignoring it. Private companies still play an important part in mobilising the workforce and the labour contract that is usually associated with them continues to be the predominant formula for work in the developed world. Following the World War II, this arrangement spread to become a key factor in the creation of societies of wage earners. The result was the large-scale migration of workers, especially agricultural labourers, to industry and services, where demand for labour was constantly growing. The central role played historically by this formula is undeniable and it is for this reason that we have devoted so much of the first part of this book to analysing the legal structure of the labour contract (1). The process, which began in the nineteenth century, was a long and faltering one, marked by vacillation and conflict. The emergence of this relationship is often attributed to the confrontation between workers and employers. In this interpretation, the rights and guarantees attached to the wage labour statute are seen as being amongst the triumphs of

the workers' movement. However, closer examination reveals a more complex and ambiguous origin story. Trade unions did not always look favourably on the labour contract; indeed, they were often openly hostile to it. And a number of employers—including some of the most liberal amongst them—have promoted and played an active part in its development, with the aid of senior state officials.

The supporters of *salariat* theory on whom we base our analysis propose an alternative assessment, which goes back to the foundations of work in the wage system. They see the turbulent path to legal recognition of the labour contract as reflecting the unprecedented and problematic nature of wage-based societies. In such societies, the demarcation between work and worker is no longer blurred, as it was in previous systems, in which the individual's lot was determined by his or her birth and personal, communal or patriarchal allegiances. Today, the offspring of peasants are not bound to be peasants themselves, nor must they become butchers just because their father was. They are not predestined to any specific occupation, trade or type of work. If children follow in their parents' footsteps, either preserving their privileges or stagnating in the same subordinate social positions, it is not a consequence of birthright or direct coercion, but of social mechanisms that reproduce and conserve social hierarchies. In this regard the workers are 'free', even if, to quote Marx, it is only to bring their own hide to market (and have nothing to expect but a hiding in return). These 'liberated' workers have thus been deprived of their means of subsistence and, at the same time, forced to participate in work; they must therefore accept the conditions that are imposed on them.

Free, yet obliged to participate in production, workers have become alienated from their work. And so, one of the characteristic features of wage-based societies is that they contain two separate subsets, which differ both in their nature and in their underpinning logic. On the one hand, we have the production operations, all oriented towards (and by) the valorisation of capital and the pursuit of the greatest possible labour savings, as that logic dictates. Since Adam Smith first penned *The Wealth of Nations*, we have known that it is this dominant logic of capital that essentially promotes technological development and determines which operations are useful and which are obsolescent. Production operations are constantly being redefined due to the impact of technological development, changes in their social value and the emergence of new activities. The other subset comprises the workers, who need to be fed, housed and protected from a variety of factors, such as health-related problems and old age. This second group spawns social needs to which every community must respond in order to guarantee their reproduction. The separation between work and worker thus gives rise to two distinct cycles, each with their own specific timescales and constraints. On the one hand, there is the dominant cycle of capital, seeking expansion, one of whose metamorphoses is merchandise; and on the other, the cycle of the workers, whose aim is to ensure that the collective is reproduced from one generation to the next.

These two distinct sets are closely linked by the very conditions of their reproduction. Workers, as we have said, can only obtain an income by participating in work, the only means of payment available to them. Likewise, production operations require human activity to be performed and to achieve the expected level of capital valorisation. The increased use of technology has hardly impacted this dependence at all; it has only changed the form it takes. Strictly speaking, machines do not work, only humans do. This explains why despite its hegemonic nature, the capital circuit continues to depend on labour. Thus, one can see that the coordination—or indeed synchronisation—of these two

sets and their respective cycles is a crucial (and always delicate) challenge for any community. *Inter alia*, it means that 'free' individuals have to be allocated to the tasks where they are required under the best possible conditions from the perspective of capital. Today, hosts of interconnected mechanisms are mobilised towards this goal. Their mission is to prepare individuals—at the least possible cost—for their destiny as producers—disciplining them, providing them with the skills that capital expects, making them as adaptable as possible to future transformations, keeping them healthy or withdrawing them from production. Work, then, is far more than just the activity in which we are all engaged on a daily basis.

Among other aspects, these complex mechanisms include what is generally called employment—a term that reflects the breach between work and workers and the intrinsically precarious nature of the relationship between them. This precariousness derives from the fact that there is no longer any factor that predetermines the place assigned to the individual within the production process; moreover, this allocation may change frequently. One of the components of this social machinery is the legal employment statute and each statute plays a unique role. The function of the labour contract is to provide a certain continuity of employment. The attraction for employees is obvious, but there are also benefits for employers; they do not have to specify in advance what tasks employees are to perform or in what way. By entering into a labour contract, salaried workers undertake to accept any tasks assigned to them by their employer for the duration of that agreement. Indeed, the law recognises the employers' full authority to define these tasks and their power to oversee the fulfilment of their instructions. The labour contract brings stability to the relationship between the workforce and the machines and other equipment mobilised by the company, thus enabling the employer to make sustained use of the labour force. As a result, the company can experiment with production processes, reorganising them to rectify any failings detected or to incorporate third-party innovations. In short, the labour contract enables them to optimise processes as well as technical and economic performance. It therefore contributes directly to capital valorisation, which would be weakened in a context of uncertain or erratic labour relations. The open-ended labour contract, which came into widespread use following World War II, contributed significantly to the extraordinary growth of capitalism during that period.

As well as delivering employment stability, the labour contract also bestows certain rights and guarantees on its accompanying professional statute (1-2), as recompense for the subordinate position the employee is deemed to accept upon entering into the contract. It is the only position of subordination recognised by law. Any other work exchanged outside this arrangement is considered to be non-subordinate; in other words, the contracting parties are assumed to be on an equal footing. The rights and guarantees attached to the wage labour statute give workers access to a variety of benefits during transition between jobs, retraining or unemployment and when facing certain life risks such as illness, disability, old age, etc. These 'social' rights are financed by compulsory withholdings levied on their income, which in turn generate extraordinary financial flows. This vast system of collective insurance is largely responsible for ensuring maintenance and renovation of the workers' collective (for example through training, which is now largely provided outside the ambit of the company). To some extent, these collective arrangements release wage earners from the need to make savings, thus preventing tensions from arising in the event of price hikes or fluctuations in the value of savings, as would be the case if workers had to protect themselves individually against risk. In such

a situation, it would be far more difficult to rein in wage demands, and any breakdown in negotiations would run the risk of escalating rapidly into a riot. In this way the social wage—whose generosity is often noted—contributes to social stability, which is essential for businesses to function.

Thus, we can see that the labour contract—that apparently individual agreement between employer and employee—is in fact deeply embedded within a vast and multi-branched system with the social wage at its heart (1). With certain variations, one can see this same system in the other formulas we have analysed. For example, the civil-servant statute achieved by many academic researchers offers an especially high degree of employment continuity (the longest of all the formulas we have examined) (6). Critics may argue that this durability is an unmerited privilege, but that is to ignore its other functions. As an employer, the state needs to create stable long-term professional groups who are prepared to accept a modest salary in exchange for that stability. These professional groups are sufficiently loyal that they can be delegated (always under supervision) to manage public institutions that are never directly state-run. This consolidation of the civil service statute and the growth in the number of people operating under it has coincided with an expansion in the power of the state.

The statutes of self-employed workers, old (5) and new alike (4), offer no guarantee of continuity beyond the stipulations of their contracts—contracts whose terms must be renewed with every fresh interaction. Nonetheless, despite the temporary nature of the contract, we can see a striking level of stability in the exchange of work in all the self-employment formulas explored here. This stability is not concomitant on the contract itself; rather it is the result of a system of production relationships in which the large contracting companies clearly dominate and can give priority to their valorisation needs. The income these self-employed workers obtain from their production commitment could hardly be termed 'profit', since the primary goal of these exceptional 'entrepreneurs' is not to valorise capital. They earn barely enough to fulfil their side of the production undertaking—an undertaking which will be renewed only until such time as they are no longer able to meet the demands required for their professional survival. Although they are deemed in law to be free from any constraint, they operate under situations of obvious subordination. And when that subordinate status is recognised by the courts, their statute of self-employment is revoked, and they are transferred from the auspices of a relationship of supposed independence to the principles of the labour contract. The labour contract is the only agreement in which a relationship of inequality between employer and employee is accepted by law. And so, we see situations in which employers are charged with concealing their real status behind the guise of 'clients' and are ordered by the judge to fulfil their legal obligations, especially with regard to contributing to the upkeep of their workforce.

By contrast, however, when the law does not recognise that relationship of subordination, there is no provision obliging the contracting companies to fund the maintenance of the self-employed workers they (directly or indirectly) mobilise. For example, large digital service platforms have made the savings in social contributions they can achieve one of the pillars of their particular economic model. Self-employed workers have long been encouraged to provide themselves with individual protection against risk; now they are being incorporated into systems similar to those of wage earners. In return for their subordination, they can enjoy access to many of the privileges granted to wage earners, albeit in a more limited way and with certain restrictions. Indeed, the many tweaks made

to the statute of self-employed workers during the twenty-first century have largely been geared towards introducing more of the rights that were previously restricted to wage earners (4). However, because of the lack of financing by contractors, it has constantly been necessary to transfer funds between the two systems, in subtle accounting procedures that ultimately shift part of the cost of maintaining the self-employed workforce onto the community. In any case, it is clear that all workers, wage earners and self-employed alike, fall under the authority of the same collective structure, which governs their upkeep, ensures their reproduction and engages in multiple aspects of their lives, from the cradle to the grave. Clearly, this applies to all workers, in their condition as producers.

This system, which enables the maintenance and reproduction of the workforce, is organised directly by the state. If one had to name any one specific characteristic of the European social model, it would undoubtedly be the state's central and direct role in managing the workforce (1). The state (especially in Europe) makes a decisive contribution to the development of today's market economies, whilst at the same time gaining an invaluable source of power. All social measures, then—especially those that regulate employment—are profoundly ambivalent. These measures are social because they underwrite the certainties that are needed to renew and pacify the labour force. But they are also unequivocally economic, because they are informed by the expectations of production, from which the state derives much of its power. Indeed, it may perhaps be unreasonable to try to draw such a clear distinction between 'social' measures (i.e. those related to the allocation of funds collected within the framework of the social wage) and the many measures that states adopt to sustain their economies (tax or social insurance exemptions, research loans, large-scale supply-side support, regulatory standards, etc.).

States contribute to the development of market economies through many different channels. On the one hand, measures to standardise work are the prerogative of the state; it has a monopoly over such actions and is ultimately responsible for implementing them. These state-initiated standards also help foster the necessary coordination at both a local and an international scale. The European Union is a good example, managing as it does an expanded market and the internal flow of goods. Customs duties and agreements with other economic blocs are classic mechanisms through which EU states protect their companies and help them expand into foreign markets. In the past, states pursued these same aims through violent warfare and no less aggressive colonisation. Public research is another of the important contributions made by the state. It enables it to give the market access (at a lower cost) to innovations that will subsequently be developed by a network of private start-ups and spin offs of varying sustainability. For example, the rapid development of a vaccine against COVID-19 actually benefited from forty years of mainly American academic research work, largely backed by public funds. Other state contributions include the construction of energy, rail and road infrastructure, which is so important for industry; currency, kept stable by national or supranational central banks; and the banking system, which is so important to the economy that at the time of the credit crunch, a number of states went so far as to cover the shortfalls caused by dubious banking practices. In all of these areas, states are essential and decisive agents in the social relationship we call work, a relationship through which individual's time and activity are harnessed and oriented towards production.

A transformed system of valorisation

In the post-war period, the processes by which capital was valorised relied on the stabilisation of the labour force. Now, they are achieved by assailing the gains previously made by workers and ignoring the regulations meant to govern them (2). We are all aware of the many thousands of jobs that have been lost in developed countries through factory closures or relocations to regions where labour is cheaper. The industrial landscape has been profoundly transformed. Here, once thriving cities have been devastated, while elsewhere oversized and under-regulated conglomerations have sprung up. Accelerated production cycles are transforming newly-created professions, speeding technological renewal, breaking up or rearranging collectives and constantly altering consumption practices. No profession, it would appear, is safe from these changes, not even the most prestigious. Such shifts formerly occurred over the space of a generation; now they impact numerous generations simultaneously. In doing so, they generate a feeling of disquiet at the dizzying pace of change. Some analysts, such as Hartmut Rosa, view this acceleration as an integral feature of our modern times.

In all the formulas for work analysed here, some trace can be seen of these mutations and the destruction they sometimes wreak. For example, the number of farmers has dwindled progressively (5), to such an extent that the very continuity of the group is now threatened. At the same time, family businesses, still predominant in the most traditional agricultural societies, have been utterly transformed to adapt to new production conditions. In the space of just twenty years, new equipment (with its associated costs), harvesting methods, seeds, regulations, etc. have radically changed the way farms are managed. The family farm business is now one of many production hubs—necessary, but not unique—operating in a host of different networks of supply, information, control and financing. Its very existence and capacity to endure depend on its membership of these networks and its ability to meet a range of requirements imposed by external bodies. To present this as a traditional organisational structure, contrasting it with the ever-expanding capitalised agricultural enterprises that are depicted as representing the inevitable future of agriculture, is to overlook the extraordinary transformation that has taken place on the family farm.

Another good example of the current transformations can be seen in the 'new self-employed' (4)—or, more specifically, in the hybrid employment statutes that different states have progressively established to codify and regulate the use of such workers. These statutes turn workers—often unemployed people—into entrepreneurs who create their own jobs and reproduce capital, on however small a scale. In exchange for the uncertain promise of pay, many are prepared to work long hours in extreme conditions. These workers also have a precarious relationship with their clients. As we have seen, the client has no obligations towards the worker beyond the stipulations of a contract it itself imposes unilaterally. This way of using the workforce, making it contribute to the company's production processes from a peripheral position—without the company having to assume the costs of integrating the mobilised workers into its organisation—is unprecedented. It is also, on several levels, profoundly disturbing. In terms of protection, these new self-employed workers enjoy only limited social rights, while the platforms that use them so intensively are thriving, largely unfettered by any form of regulation. However, it is not only the service platforms that utilise this system; it can also be found in the public administration and is commonplace in some countries. Given their primary target group (unskilled or underskilled young people), these new employment statutes

might initially appear to pose little threat to the traditional labour contract. However, the conditions already exist that would enable this form of statute to be rolled out to other sectors. The problem of legally unrecognised subordination is liable to intensify, as is the issue of how the upkeep of this workforce is to be financed by the client companies that mobilise it. Until more ambitious measures are put in place, we can therefore expect further reforms to these employment statutes in the future.

We are generally more familiar with the transformations in the labour contract (2-3) that first began at the end of the 1970s. They have introduced greater complexity to labour relations, partly due to the involvement of new intermediaries (e.g. temporary employment agencies) and partly to the increasing fragmentation of labour contracts in accordance with duration, hours and target groups (younger and older segments of society, the unemployed, etc.). Thus, the labour contract formula—which in its day helped to homogenise post-war workers and substantially improve their living conditions—is now fostering their fragmentation into a host of different situations, giving rise to disparate and increasingly compartmentalised ways of living (2). We estimate that in 2015, more than one-third of European wage earners were no longer working in either full-time or open-ended contracts. And the remaining two-thirds were not fully protected against dismissal either. In some segments of this fragmented space, work no longer guarantees the minimum income needed to live on, although it still remains an imperative necessity for those populations (3). Given this fragmentation, workers find it very difficult to see what they have in common as producers.

Finally, civil servants (6), although not exposed to the threat of dismissal, are also seeing their position weakened. Amongst the Spanish public sector researchers analysed here, access to the civil service is the result of an increasingly long and demanding selection process. The result has been a decline in the number of researchers working under a civil servant statute, whereas the ranks of public sector researchers working as wage earners, with private and often precarious labour contracts, are increasing. In Spain, therefore, the state is encouraging and organising the mobilisation of its researchers without incorporating them into its institutions on a permanent basis. There has also been a transformation in the activities of these researchers. Although they continue to enjoy broad autonomy in the way they organise their work, in an increasingly competitive context, they must accept ever stricter assessment and oversight of their work if they want to get ahead in their careers and achieve funding for their research. Moreover, the content of their projects and their prestige (so decisive to their position in the academic hierarchy) are informed and conditioned by the priorities established in national or international funding programmes. Nonetheless, these transformations have not been directly imposed by the state as a public employer. Rather, they have been introduced through a vast bureaucratic apparatus—diluted across many different bodies and subject to a host of rules and regulations—which researchers themselves are actively involved in managing.

One of the direct consequences of this weakening in professional positions has been a consistent decline in the proportion of wealth that goes to labour (3). The post-war trade-off (improved purchasing power in exchange for productivity gains) is now a thing of the past, if indeed it ever really existed. Today, capital is appreciating all the time, bringing ever greater yields to shareholders. Inequalities in wealth and assets, both within and between countries, are becoming ever more striking. The countries of the global South are those most affected; they are also those which are suffering the most direct effects of climate change, to which they have barely contributed. Meanwhile, pockets of poverty

are growing up everywhere, impacting categories of the population that once appeared to be protected. All these movements cause profound unrest and instability. They feed the fears of the populace, lead to serious disturbance and force unemployed workers to undertake highly dangerous migrations.

We have attempted to analyse all these disorders by linking them to the complex relations that connect capital and work, elements which, as we have seen, are at the same time differentiated and interconnected in wage-based societies. What lies behind these disorders is an accentuation in the distance between the cycles of capital and work, transforming the (irrevocable) bonds between the two. The ways in which capital and work are now linked are not conducive to stability; the relationship is becoming more contingent, temporary and fragmented. Workers risk being pushed towards zones of precariousness, and the situation can become extreme for those who fail to find a place in the production systems. This heightened distance does not, however, challenge the foundations underpinning wage-based societies. Nonetheless, it is clear that this organisation is mutating. Its metamorphosis is gradually creating a hitherto unknown world that we must learn to decipher if we wish to question and understand work. This is the approach that we uphold here, in contrast to analyses that concentrate exclusively on the undermining of the wage system, with their constant denunciations of these transformations. By focusing primarily on the conflict between capital and work—in which the former is currently emerging as the clear victor—they lose sight of transformational movements that we believe to be deeper, more decisive and more complex.

One movement that is having contradictory effects is the widening of the primordial rift between workers and production operations. On the one hand, this shift has thrown the lives of many workers into disarray, with clearly tragic consequences. Yet at the same time, it is severing the link between those workers and their products, their jobs and their companies. As a result, their fate is potentially less subject to the constraints of technology and the rules governing production. Despite this change, imbalances continue to multiply, affecting especially the most vulnerable members of society, who pay the highest price. The breach between work and worker, and its accentuation, is thus having both positive and negative effects. The two effects are not independent, as Proudhon argued; rather, they are contradictory. They are closely linked and thus are both complementary and ambivalent. And therein lies the primary obstacle to analysis: how can one simultaneously reflect both the constraints imposed by the new valorisation regime and its potential for emancipation?

One of the principal features of the new regime of capital valorisation is the global roll-out of production (2). It has been demonstrated empirically so often that we may now consider the process to be irreversible. Local initiatives adopted in different places to try to respond to the excesses of globalisation appear incapable of challenging it. Indeed, given the current global distribution of production circuits, any strictly local measures are unlikely to prove effective. The packaging for our locally-produced food or the bicycle used to distribute it may come from China. An Indian or Senegalese computer programmer may be behind the digital platform we use to pay for it. Today's production processes are oblivious to geographical limits or the restrictions imposed by distance. On the contrary, they are inventing a whole new geography, powered by the continuous and unimpeded circulation of extraordinary flows of goods, services, data, capital, etc. In this new landscape, the division between producers and consumers is wider than ever before.

This has been made particularly evident by recent wars and the COVID pandemic—to a dramatic degree in the case of countries that are dependent on commodities manufactured a long distance away.

Not only has the scale of production changed, the processes involved have been broken up into many different sequences: production itself, research and development, warehousing, data mining, etc. Each sequence is now assessed against similar operations elsewhere in the world and its contribution to the final value of the product. The aim of the value chain concept is to integrate the different contributions made by each of these segments. Activities that add the most value, such as research and development or oversight of global processes, tend to be retained within companies from the most powerful nations. Conversely, activities that add least value are delegated to a myriad of constantly competing subcontractors. For example, assembly operations tend to be outsourced to Asian workshops. The different segments of production are located in the places that offer the most advantages in terms of infrastructure efficiency, labour costs, the availability of specific skills, tax breaks, the promise of subsidies, etc. Should local regulations change, workforce costs rise or subsidies run out, then these activities may be relocated, and the sequences redefined. As a result, the global distribution of production operations has become extremely plastic.

Capital is reproduced in an expanded space, adapting and transforming in previously unseen ways. Increasingly, production operations have ceased to form any complete or consistent whole. Instead, they are often no more than fragments, fed by flows of materials and information that they themselves feed in return. The power of this new arrangement affects all labour experiences, including the most artisan ones. And needless to say, it affects the specific types of work we have examined here. The impact is evident, for example, in the case of private-sector wage earners who have been forced into unemployment by the closure or relocation of their factories (2). Their companies may have found it impossible to find a place in the fabric of global production or they may simply have found a more advantageous location for their activities. Those workers who do manage to keep their jobs are seeing changes in both the duration of the labour relationship and the number of hours worked (3). Some are even being forced to become employers, operating under the tutelage of a subcontractor in profoundly altered working conditions (4). As we have seen, the growth in the numbers of new self-employed workers is closely—though not exclusively—linked to the worldwide emergence of new types of business. Digital service platforms, for example, employ thousands of producers across the world in more formal or informal capacities, often as sole traders or in other contractual arrangements that grant them scarcely any rights (4).

Self-employed workers in the agricultural sector are affected too, despite their firm roots in the territory and the essential role they play in any society (5). The impact of globalisation on agriculture is nothing new; in the nineteenth century, for example, the burgeoning US economy flooded European markets with low-priced wheat. Farming has long been compared to the business of other remote producers operating with different production rules and combinations. Perhaps the real difference today lies in the range of products that are being affected by globalisation. All agricultural products are now traded on a large scale, and in the case of staples or products that are essential for some particular industry, they become the subject of speculation. Cereals are a good example. At the same time, the jobs available to the agricultural self-employed are no more secure than those available to wage earners. Agricultural crises and progressive reforms to the EU's

Common Agricultural Policy have forced many out of business, leading to a progressive reduction in the size of this collective. Those that do survive only retain the right to continue operating if they give in to the demands of international competition, as required by their respective states. Finally, the financial networks, by granting or denying them loans, play a decisive role in determining the survival of their business. They can use the credit to purchase more efficient equipment, which will enable them to cut the farm production workforce to a single person. This frees up other family members to become wage earners, providing a supplementary income.

Academic researchers (6) now clearly produce and compete on an international stage, a trend that is being accentuated as investigation becomes strategic for industry. Every country wants its researchers—often partnered with key private-sector operators—to be involved in these international networks. The EU shares the same aspiration and to this end set up the European Research Council 2007, which, for the 2021–2027 period, has a budget of around 16 billion euros. The ERC systematically selects international projects,⁴ guaranteeing the research groups not only generous funding, but also prestige for the staff (a means of ascending the academic ladder) and their institutions. As one might imagine, there is intense competition in the field of science for these international programmes. And the greater the financial, logistical and administrative support national institutions give their researchers, the greater their chance of success. The result is that in research, as in the other areas analysed here, the mechanisms currently in place for capital valorisation are widening existing gaps between countries, to the detriment of the weakest structures. More generally, it should be noted that the criteria and rules governing these international programmes ultimately impact all research activities, including expectations as to the volume and pace of publications. Consequently, researchers' careers are evaluated—in standardised terms—within a highly competitive globalised scientific labour market.

States under pressure

As discussed, the unique landscape invented by capital is free from any of the constraints inflicted by distance or natural obstacles such as oceans and mountains. Nor is it confined by physical borders or regulations imposed by states (or groups of states, such as the European Union) (2). This does not, however, prevent it from utilising states' infrastructures, exploiting their raw materials and workforce and channelling the outcomes of production towards its consumers, both rich and poor. Countries have become the playing field for globalised circuits that their governments are barely able to control. New and powerful determinants are emerging that influence states' political agendas, regardless of the strategies they employ, and in the case of the most fragile, undermine their economic policies. The long period of unemployment that affected swaths of workers in many Western countries (and against which no government programme managed to provide any meaningful protection) is one of the most patent examples of this weakening of states' ability to counteract economic forces (2). Meanwhile, these forces continue to grow stronger, pushing states into a cycle of permanent reform.

⁴ See regularly updated data from the [ERC Dashboard](#)

Work, a field in which only public powers can intervene, has been the object of many different reforms that have modified employment statutes, restructured salary negotiations and reconfigured the way in which the social salary and its redistribution is organised (1-2). Work's main social function is therefore governed by an extensive bureaucratic apparatus that defines the conditions under which the workforce is placed at the disposal of production, together with the mechanisms ensuring its maintenance and renovation. The slow and somewhat haphazard consolidation of the wage labour contract (described in earlier chapters) reveals the extent of government control over all matters related to work (the wars waged by states have also played a key role in this process, although space constraints prevent us from devoting much attention to this issue here). However, the transformation of the way capital is valorised has given rise to a partial and more temporary mobilisation of the workforce (2-3). Some companies, such as digital service platforms, only hire a small group of salaried workers who are responsible for optimising transactions between companies, remotely-mobilised self-employed workers and consumers (4). This weakening of the bond between workers and production operations affects workers' income, thus reducing the importance of work in the distribution of generated wealth (3). It also affects revenue streams from social contributions used to fund the benefits associated with the social salary. The stability that was so characteristic of previous periods (1-2) enabled the comprehensive organisation of people's working lives, thereby ensuring the long-term solvency of wage-based institutions and providing the state (their main manager) with greater resources. In this respect, the transformations that have taken place have reduced states' capacity for action (2-3).

The relationship between the state and the capitalist market system has changed dramatically, shifting towards an unknown and, at the same time, deeply paradoxical situation. Unknown because the rules established by the states (and even their authority over their own territory) are increasingly being challenged or simply ignored by economic agents with the power to transform their capital rapidly and move it to locations where it can be more easily valorised. And paradoxical because states have no choice but to integrate their populations into the capital circuit and keep them there in order to guarantee them an essential income and also to ensure the public funds necessary for their maintenance and reproduction (on whose solvency states' capacity for action depends). Thus states seek to provide workers with as much access as possible to the cycle of capital, while at the same time striving to retain those who are already participating in it. In the new production landscape, this means capturing segments of globalised production circuits, preferably those that are most stable and profitable. More powerful states achieve this goal more easily than their weaker counterparts, entering into favourable trade agreements, imposing their products and rules on a greater number of agents, guaranteeing more effective protection for their industries and firms, accessing raw materials at lower prices and ensuring a constant, reliable stream of workers whose training has been paid for by others. They also have at their disposal a young, malleable workforce that has been forced to migrate from less powerful countries. Since they are generally less qualified or their skills have been rendered less valuable by the migration process, these workers usually end up in subordinate, unattractive jobs under precarious conditions. More than ever before, therefore, the new production landscape is a territory beset by conflicts of all kinds, where the weakest are penalised the most.

This race to capture the most favourable segments of global production processes is nevertheless very costly for states, which have to pick up the tab for the competitive

advantages required to get ahead in this international free-for-all. Their infrastructures must be attractive and ensure an optimal flow of material and information; and amongst their workforce, there must be people with the scarcest and most highly-valued skills; and an even greater number with more commonplace skills must be made available to companies through measures aimed at reducing hiring costs. The state also needs a police force capable of imposing order and protecting private property, and must guarantee the reliability of the banking system, among other tasks. The profitability of production operations depends on these favourable environments, without the corporate beneficiaries necessarily having to contribute in any way to meeting the costs. This is what happens, for example, in cases of tax avoidance, a common corporate strategy (and one that keeps many tax consultants in business). In addition to the impact of population ageing, increased public spending is also directly linked to the increasing precariousness of labour relations, which limits the proportion of salaries in overall income and increases that of social benefits designed to help those who are excluded from the labour market for prolonged periods.

In short, states are left with no alternative but to try and ease at least some of the tension generated by the transformations currently underway by changing their employment strategies in accordance with the political sensibilities of those in power. Regardless of these sensibilities, however, we are witnessing an ongoing, persistent weakening of the rights and guarantees associated with employment (2-3). Unemployment rights and benefits, for example, are constantly being reduced and requirements for accessing them are becoming stricter. At the same time, budgets for healthcare, youth training, universities, social housing and culture are being slashed. The liberal approach that informs the policies adopted by many governments in developed countries obstinately seeks to promote supply, a strategy which basically consists of reducing the contributions made by companies as a means of encouraging them to hire less-employable individuals. This type of policy can considerably diminish social funds; in France, for example, the total cost of corporate exemptions from social contributions is estimated at around 60 billion euros—half of the country's public deficit (Delatte, 2023).

States therefore tend to cut back on social spending and provide greater support to companies who employ their citizens (2). They also intervene in the field of employment statutes (over whose definition they still have a monopoly), either by amending those already in place or creating new ones. Hybrid self-employment statutes (resulting from mechanisms designed to combat unemployment by encouraging unemployed individuals to set up their own companies) are a good example (4). These statutes formalise work situations of unprecedented nature and scope, while at the same time, as we have discussed, integrating these new types of worker into the mechanisms of the social salary and bestowing certain social rights on them. They also make it legal to use workers who do not form part of the economic units that mobilise them. Strictly speaking, these new employment statutes do not herald the end of the wage system, but rather its extension to a new kind of worker, albeit in a modified and as yet somewhat imprecise form. The wage labour contract has also been the object of numerous adjustments, with distinctions being drawn according to the estimated duration, the intensity and the number of hours worked (3). Here, as in other areas, law has demonstrated extraordinary ductility, along with an impressive ability to adapt to companies' demands for a more flexible workforce. Although legal steps have undeniably been taken to provide workers with certain rights, they fail to counteract the ever more flexible use made of the workforce as a result of current processes of capital valorisation.

Although all these reforms to employment statutes are being made under the authority of state governments, it is hard to find much consistency in their interventions, which often appear to be prompted more by pragmatism than by reason. Previously-adopted decisions are regularly revised in response to pressure from lobbies representing sectors whose professional practice or profits are threatened by the new statutes. Employment statutes are rendered stricter or more flexible depending on whether the number of workers they have managed to attract is too high or too low (4). States also experiment with innovative statutes that combine the position of salaried worker with that of shareholder, company director or self-employed worker. These combinations often persist long beyond the initial trial period and are absorbed into the (increasingly inconsistent) legal framework. States therefore intervene significantly and repeatedly in the field of work, albeit in a rather hesitant and inconsistent fashion. For example, our comparative analysis (4) shows that France and Spain responded very differently to similar situations of 'atypicality' within the field of self-employment, designing very different new self-employment statutes. Our findings illustrate the (somewhat) arbitrary nature of state reactions and challenge those who view current transformations in work as arising out of the implementation of a clearly-defined neoliberal programme, in which states act merely as menial enforcers. In our exploration of the new arrangements, we found no trace of the consistency such a programme would necessarily entail.

The hesitant and often confused attempts made by states to adapt to the intense transformations they face and the constant changes in direction of those transformations are not unrelated to the political instability evident in many societies today. Perhaps the most striking manifestation is the rise of pro-sovereignty movements seeking to restore their country's lost power solely through political action. At a more subtle yet perhaps more profound level, there has been a gradual erosion in the public's faith in the elite classes that govern them and claim to defend their interests. Many people have lost interest in current affairs, while riots and unrest are on the rise. This unrest often has unpredictable consequences that states struggle to contain with dubious promises and partial solutions. And in the midst of this interregnum, new leaders are emerging who present lies as truth and steer their faithful followers towards ventures with uncertain yet profoundly totalitarian outcomes. In the chiaroscuro between the death of one world and the birth of another, wrote Gramsci, lies the time of monsters. And as in the past, there are segments of the population that seem all too eager to conjure up those monsters.

A new way of organising production

Transformations in the way capital is valorised have also been accompanied by a drastic change in the nature and organisation of companies themselves (2-3), which nevertheless continue to be the main consumers of labour. Fordist firms, which contained all the resources needed to manufacture the goods they valorised, were hailed by the specialist literature as the quintessential model of production in the postwar period. Today, this corporate model has been confined to the dustbin of time and replaced by networks of open, decentralised firms that outsource sections of their production to other operators, while supplying others through their own activities. Fordist firms were self-contained, incorporating both their specific operations and their workforce within their own organisation; all they exchanged with other enterprises were goods. In contrast, today's companies form part of a dense, complex production network in which many different

economic entities (with differing degrees of hierarchy) join forces to manufacture and exchange not only products but also knowledge, competencies and projects (4-5-6). Each unit is connected to one or more networks to source resources, although some only engage in a limited number of activities (commercial, research, etc.), focusing, for example, on the exploitation of a specific patent or brand.

This process of metamorphosis or creation of networks has been the subject of detailed analysis among social scientists. For example, since the 1980s, researchers have charted the outsourcing operations of large companies in the car industry, whereby they transferred their less profitable activities to a plethora of subcontractors organised into a tier system and distributed in concentric circles around the parent company's assembly plant. The continued supremacy of the main contracting companies was assured by a series of production contracts between the different operators. This arrangement was later uprooted and scattered to the four corners of the planet, with an increase in the density of exchange flows and the number of partners involved (2). Vehicle components, once manufactured just a short distance from the final assembly line, are now being made thousands of miles away. And the assembly lines themselves, which for many years were located within the parent company due to their added value and the equipment costs and technical complexity involved, are today often outsourced as well.

Yet however striking this metamorphosis may seem, we are not convinced that there has been any meaningful change in the nature of companies. What this new networked arrangement has done, however, is to better reveal the true nature of the corporation. The assemblage of capital, equipment and labour continues to be the principal *raison d'être* of all companies, even if it is now achieved in a completely different way from in the postwar period. When assembling their resources, companies now decide which activities to keep in-house and which to outsource. In other words, they calculate how to strike a balance between production and consumption, and this calculation is heavily influenced by global social conditions of production. For example, few manufacturing companies currently consider keeping their entire production network in Europe. Asian workshops offer competitive advantages that are no longer outweighed by transport costs or economic risks. The same is true of Indian software development engineers or Latin American radiology specialists who are employed to analyse tests carried out in Spain or Portugal. The ongoing and unstoppable globalisation and densification of these types of exchange make it difficult for many Western countries to implement successful reindustrialisation initiatives.

The balance between production and consumption is therefore crucial for companies, as they could be at risk of vanishing if the forces at play are not finely tuned. The growing number of companies going bankrupt or falling foul of mergers, hostile takeovers and other restructuring mechanisms attests to the serious nature of this threat and the complexity of the calculations that need to be made. Fordist enterprises prioritised production over consumption, since this was the optimal choice in light of the circumstances under which they operated. Their decision would have been different if another kind of labour or alternative salary conditions had existed, or if they had had more reliable subcontractors, safer and more affordable transport options or a more regular energy supply. The current networking of production therefore reflects a shift in the balance between production and consumption that all companies need to strike if they are to survive. This, however, does not alter their principal function, which is still to amass and assemble resources. If the *raison d'être* of today's companies appears to be weakening

and its borders blurring, it is because Fordist thinking established a model in which the autonomous enterprise was the sole proprietor of all its resources and processes. Its physical walls served also as its economic perimeter, making its boundaries evident to all at first glance. The legal personality bestowed by the law on all companies, along with ownership of the collective capital mobilised, also contributed to this ‘substantialisation’, as did the multiple economic theories that viewed companies as a vital (and rational) agent in labour and market relations. The Fordist model, however, is in reality nothing more than one of many possible alternatives. It was an option that was perfectly suited to the production conditions of the period; modern-day companies constitute another option, one that is better suited to present conditions.

Although the metamorphosis experienced by companies has not altered their basic function, it has impacted work. For example, the worker groups that were an integral part of the Fordist company structure have been dismantled, fragmented and redistributed among the different structures responsible for specific production segments (2). Across the planet, workers are interconnected, even though their jobs provide drastically different levels of quality, stability and remuneration. Moreover, in contrast to the situation of workers in fully-integrated companies, this planet-wide interconnection is not something workers are necessarily aware of, which renders solidarity more elusive. It is chiefly manifested in professional practice, when, for example, a component is not delivered on time and leads to problems that require a rapid response. Some workers (such as designers who collaborate with their peers in similar jobs in external companies) may be more aware of this new situation of solidarity and interdependence than others. The networked arrangement has therefore prompted a complete reorganisation of (already globalised) working groups, broadening the area in which each individual job exists and makes sense. Jobs today may depend more directly on the activity of a supplier on the other side of the globe than on that of a fellow worker operating nearby.

This extension of the areas of reference and the interdependence it entails is another consequence of the distancing between workers and production operations that is so characteristic of modern wage-based societies. The inversion of the ratio of in-house to outsourced goods and services requires companies to remotely coordinate vastly different fragments of their production processes, over which they lack full control. More than to a company, workers are assigned to specific fragments of the production process, although it is their affiliation with the company that will determine the salary they receive. Curiously, this modern industrial organisation mirrors many of the features of other forms of work explored here. Farms (5) and public research institutions (6), for example, also operate within technical, administrative or political conglomerate networks, engaging in agricultural production or research as part of a larger group in which, although they are key players, they are by no means the only ones. In this sense, sector-based divisions that draw a distinction between, for example, industry and agriculture or industry and services, are no longer meaningful. Indeed, industry is increasingly incorporating different objects, materials, energy, services, coding and rules into its activities.⁵

⁵ Electric cars, widely promoted as part of the current effort to reduce carbon emissions, are an excellent example. The industry increasingly promotes leasing instead of ownership and strives to integrate different associated services (such as maintenance), as well as being highly dependent on the stability of the power grid. The same can be said of mobile telephones, which are increasingly used as support devices for a range of different services (banking, gaming, entertainment, press, maintenance, etc.) rather than as strictly functional objects.

It remains to be clarified, however, how exactly production activities are coordinated within a more decentralised organisation. Under the authority of an employer or their representatives, Fordist companies performed most basic coordination functions themselves. The operational chain, a key concept in the management model of the time, sought to organise timing, equipment, financial resources, raw materials, knowledge and working capacities within the company. As activities were gradually outsourced to external suppliers, the concept of the operational chain was replaced by that of the *flow*. Although flow also refers to the coordination of the elements mentioned above, it does so within a broader perimeter that encompasses service providers. Given the high costs of the incidents that may arise as a result of poor organisation, ensuring high-quality coordination is a priority challenge for industry.

Agriculture, and more specifically farms, provides some insight into how these key functions are performed in a highly decentralised, international and flexible production landscape (5). This unique form of company coordinates the resources it mobilises to the best of its ability, including the working capacity of the head farmer (often also the sole employee). However, this coordination does not fully determine the orientation or nature of the farm's activities, which primarily depend on the expectations of the agrifood industry (its main customer) and/or the conditions of the markets on which it sells its products. But that is not all. A complex web of mechanisms, institutions and other (often hybrid) organisations also determines the different facets of farming activities, from agricultural consultancy to financial management, productivity monitoring and union representation.

The prescriptive force behind these (more or less) coordinated groups of professional organisations emerged in Europe during the process often referred to as the 'modernisation of agriculture'. In a very short space of time, these organisations completely transformed agricultural production (the shift was particularly intense in France) from an area with a very low level of specialisation and mechanisation to a set of highly productive sectors dedicated to supplying the processing plants of the agrifood industry. This framework persists to this day and remains highly prescriptive; within the European Union, it is governed by the provisions of the Common Agricultural Policy, a range of bilateral and multilateral treaties (such as the controversial CETA)⁶ and many other international agreements established by the World Trade Organisation. The management of agricultural activities is therefore determined by a set of processes that depend, to a greater or lesser extent, on companies operating further downstream in the value chain, as well as the administrative regulations established by government organisations operating at different levels, and the professional regulations established by advisory councils on agricultural, trade, technical and management matters. It is a complex web which, as we have seen, spawns a wide variety of different rules, obligations and impositions reflecting the aims, constraints and values of the organisations involved. It is up to the agricultural enterprises to try to reconcile the contradictions generated by this system. Indeed, it has become one of the hallmarks of farmers' work, and a task to which they must devote much of their time.

⁶ The CETA (or Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement) is a bilateral free trade agreement between the European Union and Canada that partially came into effect in 2017. Its aim is to drastically reduce customs duties on numerous goods and services, including agricultural products, as a means of increasing business investment from the two regions.

Many of the characteristic traits of this management model can also be seen in the area of academic research (6). As we have discussed, states—as public employers—do not exercise direct authority over the organisations in which researchers work. On the contrary, they delegate responsibility for managing, guiding and organising research to researchers themselves, although always under the watchful eye of administrative staff, who serve the state and ensure compliance with ministerial instructions. For some time now, this delegation of functions has been combined with the promotion of partnerships (of varying durations) with other organisations (private entities, associations, banks, etc.) as a means of achieving certain basic research outcomes. It is a way for research centres to supplement their ever-shrinking public funding. This type of partnership may be anchored in a specific region, prompting different local entities and organisations to establish operational centres in a specific science or technology park. It can also provisionally turn researchers into ‘science entrepreneurs’, heading up spin-offs and start-ups that are bought out by private operators once their products have achieved market success. These collaborations, often promoted by national and international organisations, help public research centres become more international, but also expose them to the risk of their researchers (whose training has been paid for by the state) leaving to pursue more lucrative careers abroad. Researchers, like farmers—although under less exacting conditions—as administrators of research organisations and/or simple research agents, must learn to reconcile different, and at times contradictory, demands and constraints within a context of increasingly limited resources.

The state continues to exercise a clear influence over these powerful, yet unsynchronised, mechanisms of management. However, it is not direct; rather, it is mediated by the delegation of powers to a variety of organisations (public in the case of academic research, professional in the case of agriculture) which remain under state control. This influence is also exercised through the states’ well-stocked arsenals of rules and regulations, which they do not hesitate to use in relation to work. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether this influence extends beyond self-employed workers and civil servants. In other words, it is unclear whether or not states are also able to guide and coordinate today’s globalised production system, or at least some part of it. More than anywhere else, it is in this system that the maximisation of value is the principal factor guiding activities and defining models. In this regard, we have seen a weakening in states’ capacity to intervene in the flows that permeate their territories in search of opportunities and advantageous conditions, the financial weight of which they themselves are forced to bear.

Professional trajectories outside the company sphere

The changes that have occurred in the area of work form part of this new form of production, adapted to transformations in the way capital is valorised (2-3). As discussed, these changes reflect a profound shift whereby worker collectives are increasingly disconnected from the production operation systems to which they are linked (3). Salaried workers, already detached from any specific product or technology, now find themselves even further distanced from their jobs and companies (companies that employ them for increasingly variable periods, often on a part-time basis). This disassociation is all the more evident when workers do not even have a salaried job and are required to work remotely, as if they were entrepreneurs, for companies that style themselves as clients rather than employers. It is this profound shift towards disassociation that is behind the oft-described processes that are making the world of work ever more intense and

precarious. The shift is also evident in the many transformations seen in work in recent decades; how it is performed, its contractual models, increases in unemployment and the emergence of the working poor.

This dynamic is changing the experience of work and diversifying workers' employment trajectories, which are no longer confined to jobs within the bounds of the company structure (2-3). Today's workers can also become (for varying lengths of time) unemployed, entrepreneurs or inactive individuals located outside the labour market. During these metamorphoses, workers interact with different employers, as well as with a wide range of professional groups whose remit is to (re)incorporate them into the labour market, (re)train them, (re)orient them, select them and sort them into some kind of hierarchy. Their working trajectories can therefore no longer be understood solely in terms of the jobs they are offered by companies (assuming such offers even materialise). Rather, they take place today within a much broader and universal technical and economic system that is leading to a broader worker statute. Some interesting attempts are being made by different institutions, not least the European Union, to redefine this statute beyond simple employment, but they only serve to highlight the difficulties involved in this undertaking (Blatman, 2017 ; Mercadier, 2021).

In this book, we consider the extreme ambivalence of the schism between work and workers (1). As discussed, this split has both negative and potentially emancipating impacts, and the two effects are inextricably entwined. Nonetheless, the emancipating dimension often remains difficult to discern. The predominant feeling among workers is a sense of unease at the uncertainty of their employment situation and the constant assessments of their employability designed to gauge their ability to gain access to and remain in different points of the production system. From this perspective, nothing much seems to have changed: people still need to work when they lack any other source of income. It should be noted, however, that the remuneration obtained no longer always takes the form of the traditional salary, as other elements of the social salary gradually acquire more weight. This can be clearly seen amongst certain target groups of social policy, such as 'young people', 'older adults', 'women' and 'people with disabilities', who often combine both sources of income. Farmers, whose income depends almost exclusively on the criteria of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) rather than on the sales price they are able to achieve for their products, constitute the most visible example of this administrated system of remuneration (5). This shift is somewhat concerning in the current climate, in which social benefits are constantly being cut and access to them restricted. However, the resulting decoupling of workers from work merits further study.

Self-employed workers (4), who are apparently free from the authority of an employer, face an equally uncertain situation. In practice, they remain subject to relationships of subordination that the law often ignores and which powerful economic organisations seek to exploit as a means of avoiding the social costs associated with employment. Attempts to establish more egalitarian production relationships within the field of self-employment have mostly failed, as evidenced by the agricultural cooperatives that are now replicating the principles and hierarchies of large international groups. Despite their semblance of freedom, then, self-employed workers continue to be subject to the demands and rules imposed by their clients. Nor are they truly free from the constraints imposed by the state, which continues to play a key role in regulating the use made of the workforce and administering the different mechanisms of the social salary. Not even academic researchers (6), who enjoyed a greater degree of protection, are completely free from these

dynamics. In their case, the process of accessing civil servant status has become increasingly drawn-out, complicated and difficult to complete and their scientific production is subject to an ever-growing number of international rules imposed by a few (powerful) countries on the many. Their freedom to manage their own research work has also been diminished and is increasingly subject to the principles of what is known as New Public Management (Aucoin, 1990; Lane, 2000), which imposes many of the rules pertaining to private companies on the public sector.

Finally, to round off this litany of lost rights, it is worth noting that the defensive actions traditionally performed by trade unions are becoming increasingly less effective and more difficult to organise. The fragmentation and instability of worker groups have undermined their ability to act, weakening them and making it harder for them to recruit younger members (2). In their zeal to protect jobs, some trade unions have signed agreements that have resulted in significant forfeitures of working conditions and even salaries, with no ultimate assurance that no one will be made redundant. The dispersion of working spaces and the heterogeneity of employment conditions results in drastically different (often isolated) working experiences and this is hampering the emergence of a common set of minimum criteria that is so vital to any mobilisation. This is particularly evident in the case of self-employed workers (4), amongst whom mobilisation is both rare and relatively toothless when it does occur. Initiatives aimed at defending undocumented migrant workers or those in precarious jobs in small businesses, such as cafés and restaurants, reveals the willingness of trade unions to look beyond the boundaries of traditional employment and national borders. However, few unions have managed to retain their capacity to influence events and mobilise the grass roots. In France, for example, the principal agricultural unions have indeed managed to maintain their influence, although they now rank large farm owners among their members. These trade unions enjoy the unwavering support of the state, which makes them valuable intermediaries for implementing new agricultural policies (5).

Faced with this rather bleak outlook, it is hardly surprising that social scientists have focused on denouncing the most blatant injustices and railing against the increased precariousness of workers' situations. Job stability, which was achieved for a brief time during the postwar era—sometimes viewed through rather rose-tinted glasses—was nevertheless rooted in workers' subservience to their employers and an acknowledgment of the latter's indisputable authority to use the workforce as they saw fit (1-2). Today's wage system is unpicking that bond (a painful process to be sure) and revealing the arbitrary nature of previous conventions and balances (2-3). The bond is also being weakened by the constant incorporation into the wage system of new groups seeking to escape different forms of subservience (personal, community and/or patriarchal). These groups are accessing a common space in which inequalities, while still present, have become more visible and thus easier to oppose. It would be futile to seek to reverse this shift, which is being driven by the predominant logic of capital valorisation. And it would be equally pointless to cling to the oft-evoked ideal of the artisanal world, in which workers have an inextricable bond with their products, operating from small *ateliers* in close harmony with nearby communities of consumers. This is an impractical (and somewhat dubious) utopia that fails to take into account the difficulties derived from the twofold (and often contradictory) reality of work and the tensions to which it is subject.

There are currently several proposals that aim to provide an alternative response to the fragmentation of professional trajectories and the attendant increase in risk. Two are

particularly well-known. The first, reformulated by André Gorz in the 1980s against the backdrop of a profound reorganisation of the work contract, advocated a ‘guaranteed basic income’ (*revenu social garanti*) (Gorz, 1999). Gorz’s proposal has since been re-floated under a variety of names. It has even been implemented in some regions, such as Alaska, where, since 1982, the government has used some of its oil revenues to fund a basic income. Other countries have experimented with similar initiatives at different scales. Despite the variety of names used (‘universal allocation’, ‘universal income’, ‘basic or subsistence income’ etc.), the essential tenet of these schemes is the same: to disassociate people’s income from their contribution to production; to disassociate earnings from work, thereby, in a certain sense, putting an end to the notion of employment. In some variants, the whole principle of social security contributions would be abolished in favour of a tax-based system. In such systems, the money collected would enable an identical and unconditional income to be paid to all members of society, with those who so wish (and, in some cases, have the necessary foresight) being able to complement that income with a salary. Advocates of this type of alternative system—who come from both extremes of the political spectrum—view it as a means of enhancing equality and renewing people’s relationship with work, bestowing greater dignity on it by freeing it from the pressure of urgent financial necessity.

The model also has many detractors. Those on the right argue that it is immoral to give someone an income with no form of productive trade-off and point to the high costs of such a scheme. Critics from the left warn of the risks for beneficiaries, who would be deprived of agency over their income (through strike action, for example) (Ackerman et al., 2016; Alaluf, 2014). Mateo Alaluf has also noted the considerable advantage that companies would gain under such a system. Freed from the shackles of employment and social contributions, they would be at liberty to mobilise, far more cheaply and more flexibly than at present, an ever-available workforce constantly seeking to supplement its insufficient income. Not all the proposals stipulate the exact sum of the universal income to be paid. In Alaska, for example, the amount is too small to eradicate the need for a supplementary income. The use currently made by large high-tech corporations of supposedly self-employed workers does little to allay fears over such proposals. Universal income schemes are very different from unemployment benefit programmes, which guarantee a minimum level of income below which workers would not accept a job (Alaluf et al., 2017).

It is even less certain whether such schemes would have the effect of levelling social status, as has been claimed. As we have discussed, the origins of social inequality do not lie in employment (which can nonetheless exacerbate and reproduce inequality, as well as render it more visible). Inequality stems from the social order and will persist (albeit more discreetly) within a system of universal income. Minority groups (women, young people, migrants, etc.) will probably be those most adversely affected. Another source of concern regarding such proposals is their excessive trust in the state, in whose hands people would need to place their fates. Under a system of universal income, the course of people’s lives would be directly determined by the state’s decisions, in terms of the sum to be paid, its variations and its different formats. The different employment situations analysed here, all of which are, to a greater or lesser extent, influenced by state actions, illustrate the arbitrariness, opportunism and diversity of interests that often inform state decisions (4-5-6). Do we really want to make workers even more dependent on their authority? This is all the more pertinent at this moment in time, when deeply reactionary movements have gained or are on the verge of gaining power in many countries.

The second well-known proposal views the transformations in professional trajectories as being irreversible and accelerated worker mobility as being inevitable. In this case, however, the notion of employment is preserved, although it is viewed as incapable of continuing to protect workers' professional trajectories. What is being suggested is that the notion of activity be expanded to include 'non-professional' activities such as voluntary work, care work, domestic work and self-learning. The proposal was made by a group of European experts who met in 1999 under the leadership of the French legal scholar Alain Supiot to brainstorm solutions to the fragmentation of professional trajectories. Their final report calls for the creation of a new extended professional statute that would guarantee workers 'active security' in the face of uncertainty (European Commission, 1999). This professional statute was designed to replace the 'linear career' model, extending workers' rights to include so-called 'non-professional' activities and establishing a new structure for social rights. These rights would be linked not only to work (as unemployment benefits, health benefits, training time and dedicated trade union time are), but also to activities carried out by volunteers, caregivers, students and homemakers, among others. By shifting the centre of attention from employment to activity, the new extended professional statute promised more flexible management of professional careers, adapted to employers' expectations yes, but also designed to limit the harm suffered by individuals.

Despite commissioning the working party to come up with solutions to what was considered an important problem, the European institutions have yet to make any attempt to implement this proposal. With a certain degree of bitterness, Alain Supiot saw in this reaction an example of Europe's recurring tendency to sacrifice individuals to the demands of the markets, mainly the financial ones (Supiot & Padis, 2009). Despite the apparent lack of interest by the authorities, the proposal has been widely discussed in academia, and its promises are regularly raised in debates on the future of work. Discussion, however, does not mean agreement, and the proposal has been widely criticised, particularly by researchers in the field of gender studies, who note that the extended rights envisaged under the plan would apply very differently to men and women, with no assurance that the new statute would do anything to redress existing imbalances. Parental leave, for example, is taken almost exclusively by women and the proposal contains no mechanism for redressing this gender imbalance. The same can also be said of vocational training, in which a large gender gap persists in certain social-professional categories (Eydoux & Letablier, 2008).

All of the work situations analysed here indicate that we should exercise some caution when considering the effectiveness of the protections afforded to workers by law. Obviously, the legal framework within which the work is provided offers some fundamental and necessary mechanisms of defence and appeal (1-2). Workers' representatives have long known how to use these mechanisms effectively, but this has not prevented the emergence of some highly precarious situations. Far from regulating production in any detailed way, the law is constantly being adapted to fresh situations, inventing new statutes, some of which, such as those governing the 'shareholder employee' and the 'dependent self-employed worker', are clearly paradoxical. Moreover, as we have stated on several occasions, the protections afforded to wage earners are recognised as a trade-off for their subordination. This means that they have to perform all the tasks their employers assign them, and accept their decisions, however absurd. They have practically no opportunity to challenge or intervene in the decision-making process

(other than staging strikes and demonstrations, whose effectiveness has clearly been shown to be limited) (1). Habermas demonstrated that even in self-styled democratic societies, companies manage to evade even the most elementary democratic principles. Given that the arbitrariness and authoritarianism prevalent in the corporate world are legitimised by law, is it wise simply to rely on the law to defend us from increasingly unbridled capitalist forces? The question, obviously, is rhetorical.

As well as recognising the (important) issue of the centrality of law, the experts sitting on the Supiot Commission identified a fundamental issue for workers today and in the future: how to facilitate more flexible career management. In their report, they identified two key instruments: entrusting the state with the collective management of new rights related to 'activities' (not just jobs) and allowing individuals to decide freely on the direction of their own career.

The working party did not problematise the state and its actions, since its deliberations were based on the framework of the 'social state' as the guarantor of the common good. Nonetheless, the various formulas for work explored here have highlighted both the state's ubiquity in managing the workforce, and the profound ambivalence—and often inconsistency—of its actions; (some even proving fatal, as when it tries to turn millions of workers into fighters). Clearly, the management of workers' rights remains a central issue; it determines how the colossal sums held by social funds are put to use and the systems whereby workers can access them. The state's role as manager and the nature of its relations with the production system and the population merit, at the very least, a more profound reflection on our part. These relations cannot be reduced simply to a question of providing protection to individuals (with differing degrees of effectiveness), nor to absolute submission to the expectations of capitalists. This should lead us to critically re-evaluate some of the demands for greater state presence made by pro-labour groups. It also begs another question, one that is more difficult to answer: under what conditions could these state bodies guarantee workers real representation, equality and capacity for action? What non-state bodies could serve as an alternative without further reinforcing the hegemony of value?

The second instrument mentioned by the working party involved workers and their ability to shape their own careers. In their report, they argued that this capacity for intervention should be consolidated by extending workers' rights under the new professional statute. However, professional careers are not usually shaped and determined in the individual sphere. They are embedded within a social order (in this case a wage order), which assigns individuals to certain production operations, while at the same time distinguishing between them, sharing them out and sorting them into hierarchies (2-3). If we want to consolidate individual resources or, at least, mitigate the detrimental effects currently being seen in professional careers, we need to consider this wage order and identify its foundations. The theoreticians of the wage relationship we have cited here show that these foundations do not lie in technology, specific skilled or unskilled jobs or in any particular company. The fact that it is no longer possible to describe career trajectories solely in terms of assigning individuals to a job, company, industry or even a succession of such posts shows the importance of such analyses, which allude to conflictive relations between social groups—i.e., to the social sphere.

Pierre Naville used the time a worker spent on learning—including both their initial training and any undertaken throughout their career—as the principal means of measuring

what was then called *qualification* (Naville, 1956, 1972). Thus, qualification consisted of a social formalisation of those qualities possessed by workers for which they gain recognition in the course of their work. For Naville, hierarchies in work reflected differences in the duration of learning, which was in turn strongly conditioned by social dimensions and, therefore, tended to be replicated from one generation to the next. One of the key elements of Naville's thinking was that it turned knowledge into a major political issue for workers. We propose to employ the same hypothesis here. The notion of 'qualification', with all its associations with the degrees and diplomas of formal education, has been replaced by 'competence'. Competences are broader in scope and extend to aspects of the worker's behaviour. This change, however, does nothing to diminish Pierre Naville's analysis; rather it should encourage us to explore it in greater detail.

Indeed, one might argue that the notion of competence reflects the increasingly temporary and contingent way in which individuals are assigned to a given job. Workers, as we have seen, are required to adapt to increasingly varied and changing situations. The way in which industry is developing is also contributing to this principle of polyvalence, mobilising workers with ever fewer bonds to the structure of a career. This is also true when employers demand and impose greater flexibility on the workforce and their employment statutes. It thus seems likely that the duration of learning (which Naville considered to be the essential yardstick of the qualities recognised at work) will continue to play an important role. This knowledge—which needs to be transferred to workers in order to reduce the cost of incorporating them into the production system—will probably be more general than specific, and will be sufficiently malleable to allow for adjustment to diverse and unfamiliar situations. As well as the extension of rights provided for in the Suptot report, workers' capacity to control their own careers will therefore depend on what training is available and how much they are able to influence it.

In this book we have explored four forms of employment that demonstrate the weakening of the bond between individuals and their work. They also show how this change has been accompanied by the restructuring of existing employment statutes (or the creation of new ones), leading to greater diversity in the possible uses of labour, and individuals' experiences of work. We have tried to explain this shift by linking it to the complex relations between labour and capital in market wage societies. More specifically, we argue that it reflects a growing alienation between two clearly differentiated subsets in wage societies: the workers (whose maintenance and renewal must be assured) and the productive operations that form part of the cycle of capital. In this type of society, there is no longer any overlap between work and workers. Instead, they are differentiated, though still interdependent. Workers are no longer preordained to any specific activity, trade or type of work imposed by systems of personal, communal or patriarchal domination. In this sense, they are 'free' even though, to a greater extent than ever before, they are now obliged to work to survive. As this breach widens, it distances workers from their jobs and from the companies themselves, forcing us to consider whether the work of the future will lie outside the simple wage relationship, hence the title of this book.

This shift has major consequences, beginning with the disruption caused to workers. Nonetheless, the very uncertainty they are currently suffering, which reflects their growing alienation from work itself, carries with it the seeds of emancipation. One can

discern a greater independence of social relations with respect to technical relations, which would give workers more opportunity to escape the constraints of specific jobs, and the authority of the companies offering them. This would allow them, for example, to prioritise knowledge acquisition. The profound transformation of work is at once dramatic and liberating. It is a contradictory movement. Analyses that view its effects solely in tragic terms reflect only one part of the phenomenon of the transformation of work, and possibly even the most superficial one. While there are many difficulties involved in seeking to reflect its ambivalence and its emancipatory and de-structuring nature all at the same, doing so allows us to ask questions that may be better suited to the challenges of the moment.

At least five themes emerge from our deliberations. These might be used as the central pillars of a future research programme on work. Such a programme would enable us to continue our attempts to understand the way the wage system has evolved. They might also be of some use to workers, if only by identifying some of the major challenges we face. The following, in no particular order, are the main themes of this possible research programme.

Work collectives. The most commonly used notion of the work collective may now be obsolete. To a large extent, it is a hang-over from a sort of production organisation that gathered large numbers of workers together in a single space, from which it also coordinated their schedules (1-2). Technical and relational solidarity between workers played out within this space, promoting the formation and regeneration of the trade union movement and the success of some of its battles. However, this model no longer exists. Today's production organisation breaks the different collectives up into fragmented sections and scatters them across the globe, sundering the links of technical and relational solidarity. What model or models might operate today and under what conditions does any remaining solidarity operate? These are fundamental questions for identifying the existence of a common space within the diversity of existing experiences of work, a necessary condition for developing new forms of mobilisation.

Career paths and work statutes. We also need to revisit the notion of the professional trajectory or career path. Such pathways are no longer determined solely by the jobs offered by companies and occupied by workers for a given period of time (2-3). They are increasingly dependent on a broader and more universal technical and economic set, in which a new worker statute is emerging. The characteristics of that new statute need to be investigated.

Knowledge and its transmission. Individuals are now less and less bound to a single job throughout their careers (3). This means that workers will repeatedly have to adapt to a range of different production situations, whose conditions and characteristics may be difficult to predict. In other words, workers' employability—a decisive issue for those who are still obliged to work—increasingly depends on their ability to adapt to different situations. These workers must therefore apply their knowledge in a variety of circumstances and must also be capable of acquiring new knowledge. Training and transmission of this knowledge is a major political challenge, and its collective control is essential to allow each individual to be truly capable of modulating his or her career.

Coordination of production activities in a decentralised system. In a traditional industrial organisation, it was largely up to the company and its owner (or his or her

representatives) to coordinate production activities. But what happens when the company prioritises consumption over production and becomes one of the multiple production hubs operating within interdependent exchange networks? In the more decentralised formulas we have explored (4-5-6), these activities are coordinated by a complex network of mechanisms, institutions and other bodies, whose activities and orientation are controlled, directly or indirectly, by the state or states. The company also plays a part, but it is a less prominent one. This web engenders a great number of rules, obligations and instructions, depending on just how many units it contains. Its consistency is never assured, and it is up to each production hub to palliate (to the best of its ability) any potential contradictions. Is industry following a similar path? And if so, what will the consequences be for companies?

Remuneration. Contributing to production is still the principal means by which workers earn an income. However, the nature of that income is changing: the share corresponding to wages appears to be declining in favour of other benefits, i.e. incomes managed in accordance with some 'administered' logic'. Farmers (5), whose incomes are now largely decoupled from the sale price of their products, constitute an extreme example of this trend. Such transformations never occur in isolation; they always reflect other shifts currently taking place. Thus, for example, the shift to paying wages on a monthly basis (which has since become standard practise), was accompanied by an approach that viewed wages as fixed costs (to be reduced) rather than variable ones. If this increase in the 'administered' part of income gains ground, what consequences will such a transformation have?

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