Non-Normal Normality? Claims on Work and Life in a Contingent World of Work

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Abstract

Workers are not determined by their social conditions, and they are no simple object of dominant (neoliberal) discourses. The article shows that, contrarily to widespread beliefs about working people as individualistic "entrepreneurial selves", workers strongly hold on to ideas about the social character of their life and their world of work, the need for humanity in both work and life, and the basic idea that work, even when it is waged labour, should be meaningful and have a sense for others in society. This is the result of our empirical investigation about expectations on work articulated by "normal" employees (mid-career, medium-level qualification, in relative stable employment). We explored how expectations on work are affected by precarisation, but also by a general rising social insecurity due to permanent corporate restructuring, changes in the social system etc.

The findings show, overall, that normative expectations on work have not been given up. However, not all expectations have the potential to serve as basis for self-empowerment and (collective) action. Here, our distinction between "claims" and "desires" is very important. *Claims* are expectations which are normatively justified. We identified three modes to legitimise claims of work: the concept of performance as meaningful, societal work; the concept of human rights, seeing oneself as a bodily and mental human being; and the conception of a balanced life, seeing oneself as a social being within diverse needs and social embeddings. *Desires*, by contrast, are expectations with no legitimisation in normative terms. Here, expectations are fulfilled by chance or even by individualistic recklessness. Both "claims" and "desires" go along with different perception of society as a whole: firstly as (still) normatively structured and thus shapeable by the workers: or, secondly, as a terrain of fortune and mere struggle. So, whereas expectations on work in general are not given up, we see a shift from claims to desires. Workers are not sure anymore whether their claims: seen as normal and legitimate, can still rely on the normative normality in today's society.

Biographically, claims and desires are embedded in life orientations, i.e. implicit perspectives on the world, their options and modes to act and influence their life. In all, the article insists on the need to analyse workers as subjects with highly complex and self-confident resources of action and resistance: to avoid worker's objectivation as a pure appendix to (neoliberal) discourses.

Key words: claims on work, life orientations, meaningful work, normality, social actor

¿Normalidad no normal? Reinvindicaciones sobre el trabajo y la vida en el mundo contingente del trabajo

Resumen

Los trabajadores no están determinados por sus condiciones sociales, y no son un simple objeto de discursos (neoliberales) dominantes. Este artículo muestra que, contrariamente a las creencias generalizadas sobre los trabajadores como "emprendedores" individuales, los trabajadores se aferran fuertemente a ideas sobre el carácter social de su vida y su mundo del trabajo; a la necesidad de la humanidad tanto en el trabajo como en la vida; y a la idea básica de que el trabajo, incluso cuando es una labor asalariada, debe ser significativo y tener un sentido para los demás en la sociedad. Este es el resultado de nuestra investigación empírica sobre las expectativas en el trabajo articuladas por los empleados "normales" (carrera media, calificación de nivel medio, en un empleo relativamente estable). Exploramos cómo las expectativas sobre el trabajo se ven afectadas por la precarización, pero también por el aumento general de la inseguridad social debido a la reestructuración corporativa permanente, cambios en el sistema social, etc.

Los resultados muestran, en general, que las expectativas normativas sobre el trabajo no han sido abandonadas. Sin embargo, no todas las expectativas tienen el potencial de servir como base para el auto-empoderamiento y la acción (colectiva). Aquí, nuestra distinción entre "reivindicaciones" y "deseos" es muy importante. Las reivindicaciones son expectativas que están justificadas normativamente. Identificamos tres modos para legitimar las reivindicaciones de trabajo: el concepto de desempeño como trabajo social significativo; el concepto de derechos humanos, viéndose a sí mismo como un ser humano corporal y mental; y la concepción de una vida equilibrada, viéndose a sí mismo como un ser social dentro de diversas necesidades e inserciones sociales. Por el contrario, los deseos son expectativas sin legitimidad en términos normativos. Aquí, las expectativas se cumplen por casualidad o incluso por imprudencia individualista. Tanto las «reivindicaciones» como los «deseos» acompañan la percepción diferente de la sociedad en su conjunto: en primer lugar como (todavía) normativamente estructurada y, por tanto, moldeable por los trabajadores: o, en segundo lugar, como terreno de fortuna y mera lucha. Así, mientras las expectativas sobre el trabajo en general no son abandonadas, vemos un cambio de las reivindicaciones para los deseos. Los trabajadores ya no están seguros si sus reivindicaciones: vistas como normales y legítimas, todavía pueden depender de la normalidad normativa en la sociedad actual.

Biográficamente, las reivindicaciones y los deseos estan incorporados en las orientaciones de vida, es decir, las perspectivas implícitas en el mundo, sus opciones y modos de actuar e influir en su vida. En suma, el artículo insiste en la necesidad de analizar a los trabajadores como sujetos con recursos de acción y resistencia altamente complejos y seguros de sí mismos: para evitar la objetivación del trabajador como un apéndice puro de los discursos (neoliberales).

Palabras clave: Reinvindicaciones de trabajo, orientaciones de vida, trabajo significativo, normalidad, actor social.

1.   Employees as Social Actors and the Relationship between Work and Life

Research on work consciousness has always aimed to capture the wage-earner's horizons of meaning, and to understand these horizons in sociological terms in the context of everyday practices and social relations. It is still wage-earners, or currently mainly employees, who

generate a major part of social wealth through their work in capitalist societies marked by a division of labour. Our basic assumption, therefore, is that learning more about their everyday practices, patterns of interpretation, and horizons of meaning will enable us to achieve analytical insights into a central and relevant part of social reality, and thus into how contemporary societies operate overall

It seems necessary to make this observation at the outset, because a form of critical social research has recently become influential that in our view draws inferences too quickly, from the prevailing *discourses* about the world of work, to how this world and its subjects *in fact* function. Even though its intention is genuinely critical, this research takes up neoliberal "invocations" of maximum marketability, and condenses them into concepts such as the "entrepreneurial self" (Bröckling), which then seem to describe a real practice in the world of work. In the process, the difference between the prevailing and dominant discourses and the practical orientations of the subjects that these discourses purport to describe is in danger of disappearing.

By contrast, the present article seeks to show that workers should in no way be construed as mere "complements" of dominant ideas. Material support for this claim is provided by an extensive qualitative study we conducted, on the claims and standards in terms of which so-called normal employees evaluate their work. The study addressed the question of whether and how economic crisis developments, precarisation, and systematic insecurity due to corporate restructuring are reflected in the expectations of those employed persons who have permanent contracts, who see themselves as still being in relatively secure employment, and whose company environment is not at present directly affected by downsizing.[1]

Our empirical findings and the theoretical categories developed in connection with them, which we present in excerpts in this article, once again provide impressive confirmation of the need to understand employees as *social actors*. Employees are not merely a reflex of problematic "conditions" or objects of ruling discourses, and, contrary to what is often assumed, they by no means internalise neoliberal notions of flexible, market-driven individualism. On the contrary, our findings show that employees are upholding the criteria of a "good" working environment: that is, one which is in a positive sense "normal", in spite of their pervasive experience that these standards of normality are being placed in question by downsizing, low wages, the erosion of the boundaries between work and free time, and so forth. Employees do *not* understand themselves in this context as "monads": our study provides impressive confirmation of this, but as part of a social world that they contributed to producing by drawing upon their resources, and upon their situation and that of their firm and of society. In other words, the employees we studied *act*: they develop recalcitrant orientations: specifically, notions of a good world of work and, connected with

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1   The project was funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation. Our sample consisted of employees in mid-career (30-45 years old) with medium-level qualifications (from skilled and qualified semi-skilled workers, through lower-level employees, to employees with university degrees but without managerial positions) who were working in a variety of sectors (ranging from the automotive industry through mechanical engineering and IT services to the civil service) in different regions in Germany. In a total of 42 highly detailed, so-called prospective biographical interviews, we focused primarily on the interviewees' life history, their work situation, and their expectations for the future (for a detailed account of our findings and observations that go beyond the scope of the present article, see Hürtgen & Voswinkel 2014).

this, of a good life in a good society, through engagement with their lives and in their social contexts. Our findings indicate that employees do not simply give up these orientations even when confronted with evidence that they are in fact being questioned on all sides: and even when faced with discourses that celebrate this questioning as the new modern world of work to which workers have to adapt.

The current, often crisis-prone developments in the world of work, therefore, are specifically not reflected in the retraction of notions of what constitutes good, meaningful, and fulfilling work which makes a good life possible. A particular concern of the present article, however, is to demonstrate that employees are faced with the question of whether such notions of good work and a good life are still generalisable today, that is, to what extent these notions remain the socially valid norms to which one can appeal, beyond personal ambitions, to demand their enforcement or to engage in (collective) struggles for their realisation. As we explain in detail in the article, this doubt finds expression in two fundamentally different subjective orientations that we call, on the one hand, harboring "desires" and, on the other, harboring "claims" (sect. 3). The first orientation does in fact represents an individualistic, as it were "privatised" perspective, because, along the lines of disillusioned realism, it denies that social norms of good work and a good life actually exist. The second orientation continues to appeal to precisely these norms, in spite the feelings of insecurity that are likewise present.

A second preliminary remark concerns the "classical" research on workers' consciousness. In the first place, we cannot take for granted that this research is based on an understanding of employees as acting, self-willed subjects who fill their lives with meaning. In this respect, we certainly see our remarks as continuing a critique of notions of "objective interests" that seem to be necessary consequences of the situation of employees (for an overview, see Langfeldt 2009; for critical conceptual analysis, see Becker-Schmidt 1983). In addition, there is a second way in which we go beyond "older" research on workers' consciousness, namely, by considering "work and life" as being related. Employees should not be conceived from the outset only as workers. On the contrary, production and reproduction, or "work force and life force" (Jürgens 2006), structure each other mutually, and refer to each other: in their factual biographical life context, as well as in the formation of action-guiding norms and actors' conceptions of value (see Alheit & Dausien 2000; Giegel 1989).

In fact, our results show clearly that employees articulate their expectations concerning work against the background of their social *life context*, from which these expectations derive their meaning and weight. As we will show, work is far from being considered merely as a means for earning a living. Such "instrumental attitudes to work," which were at one time attributed: rightly or wrongly, to the "Fordist worker," are scarcely discernible; the emphasis is instead on the criterion of meaningful work. At the same time, employees by no means see themselves, even directly "on the job," only as service providers or labor forces. Rather, they evaluate their world of work in terms of criteria that aim at sociality within and outside the workplace and at the human dimension: that is, the dimensions of physical and psychological integrity, and of respect for workers as subjects. In short, they situate "wage labour" in the context of an inclusive social and biographical existence.

The article is structured as follows: in sect. 2, we briefly outline employees' ideas of the normal: that is, in their view good, work and how they are related to notions of a good

life. In sect. 3, we introduce the distinction between *claims* and *desires,* and explain the associated legitimation process, hence the justification of work-related concerns. Then we go on to explain in greater detail in terms of which values claims on work appear justified, and what this has to do with employees' self-constitution as social actors within and outside work (sect. 4). Whether concerns are conceived as claims or desires should be understood in connection with, on the one hand, employees' biographical life orientations (sect. 5) and, on the other, prevailing conceptions of normality (sect. 6). Specifically in this regard, employees exhibit a profound uncertainty over whether the claims they make on work that they regard as normal are indeed still normal today – or already express a situation of privilege, so that they cannot be justified any longer by appeal to generally valid social norms and rules, and hence can no longer function as claims. In conclusion (sect. 7), we summarise our findings and take this as an opportunity to emphasise the importance of empirical research in providing us with critical protection against overestimating the power of (neoliberal) discourses.

2.   Empirical Highlights and Initial Thematic Approach

Our study clearly demonstrated the importance for employees of those standards of work that in fact still count as "normal": work should be "good," hence it should be appropriately organised both as concerns the result and the employees' expenditure of energy; supervisors should behave fairly and treat employees with dignity (not overload them with work, for example, and also not yell at them); of course, the money must " be right," i.e. sufficient for a "normal life": not a life of luxury, including retirement and "normal" vacations, and working hours should allow sufficient time for recovery and recreation. Thus, the *contents* of these expectations present, in outline, more or less what other studies and trade union surveys regularly confirm about attitudes toward "good work." In addition, our findings show that employees articulate their expectations concerning work against the background of their *life context*, which lends the expectations in question their meaning and weight. Just as employees do not see themselves merely as a labour force, they always also situate work within their social and biographical existence as a whole.[2] Instrumental attitudes toward work can scarcely be discerned in this context. Employees are far from regarding work with indifference, or only as a means of earning a livelihood that is supposed to enable consumption and fulfillment in one's free time. *First*, life for employees also includes other social domains besides work. Thus, women are not the only ones who emphasise the importance of reconciling working life and family life. Men also see themselves as fathers who want to enjoy a family life, and women also stress the importance of friendships and of social commitments and involvements. Accordingly, our interviewees evaluate work also in terms of whether it facilitates this desired diversity of life, and they often complained and criti-

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2   In order to subject the relationship between work and life to scientific study, one must, of course, first assume that such a relationship even exists and focus on it. In the aforementioned project, we made a conscious decision, in contrast to most studies in the sociology of labour and industry, not to take working conditions *per se* as our privileged conceptual starting point, but instead to concentrate on the interviewees' subjective perspective on their work.

cised that forms of work that encroach on free time make their basic conduct of life difficult or even impossible.

But, *secondly*, work and life, in the opinion of our interviewees, are also inseparably related in the workplace itself. Here, too, the employees do not see themselves exclusively as a labour force, even in the immediate execution of their work. They are not "robots," as some of them put it, but human and social beings who, as already mentioned, do not want to be yelled at, and are in different physical shape. For example, sometimes they can "have a bad day," they are deeply affected by family problems that impinge on their work, or they see communication between colleagues at work,[3] a drink to celebrate their birthday, or a houseplant also as part of working life. One's mode of access to work is also shaped by the course of one's (social) life as a whole: shift work becomes increasingly strenuous with increasing age, being in one's "middle years" often means having to take care of family members, and so forth. Work, according to this credo, must not negate these human and social dimensions of life, and only then is it even possible to work well.

3.   The Distinction between Claims and Desires

To summarise, therefore, we can say that our interlocutors have "normal" expectations of work and that they articulate these in the context of their lives as a whole. Moreover, in doing so, firstly, they thematise the relationship between work and other spheres of life and, secondly, they do not want to be reduced to the role of worker, even directly "on the job" and in the workplace. However, our study shows that it is not self-evident whether these expectations are something the employees *claim,* or something they *desire,* and that there is an essential difference between these attitudes.

Why is this distinction between claims and desires of such central importance? As a categorical separation, it points, as we will explain in this section, directly to the dimension of employees as social actors mentioned at the beginning. More precisely, the distinction between claims and desires marks a fundamental difference in how employees, as thinking and acting subjects, constitute themselves and actively approach the (working) world. The transitions are in fact fluid, of course, but the distinction is of central importance at the conceptual level and at the level of (trade union) politics.

In the case of *claims*, employees regard their work-related concerns as legitimate. For our interviewees, they are *justified* concerns. Making claims: that is, having a justified expectation to receive (and, if necessary, to fight for) something from concrete or general social others (one's supervisors, wage negotiation partners, politics, etc.), involves, analytically speaking, two steps: first, workplace and social relations are conceived as normatively structured social orders that function, or at least should function, in accordance with certain rules. The claim that work should be organised in a meaningful way, for example, is based on the putatively general rule that work should produce useful and practical results (cf. Hürtgen and Voswinkel 2014, 163ff.; Nies 2015; Hürtgen 2015; Hürtgen 2017; Voswinkel 2016) and that it should not require excessive or harmful expenditure of one's labour power.

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3   On collegiality, see Hürtgen 2013.

These and other basic social and work-related norms and rules provide patterns on which employees can draw to justify their concerns. Therefore, claims are embedded in the idea of a normative order of society: here, above all, the world of work. The second step consists in seeing oneself as a *component* of this social structure which functions in accordance with certain norms and rules. If the (working) subject is to be able to make claims and justifiably defend them, she must understand herself as someone who contributes to producing the assumed normative connections: for example, by working "sensibly" or "precisely", and not simply working "to rule." Thus, claims also entail "claims on oneself," for example, to be a productive worker. Making claims is a *relational process* that is both self-reflexive as well as being directed to concrete and general addresses of claims: both are inherent components of social relationships and interactions conceived as rule-governed phenomena. To understand oneself as a subject of claims is to conceive of oneself as an actor and as part of social relationships structured by norms. However, this mode of self-constitution, of seeing oneself as a bearer of legitimate expectations, is by no means self-evident: as is made clear by considering the contrasting concept, namely, desires.

Desires are social concerns that are not pursued by appeal to a rule-governed social order or to one whose realisation is regarded as desirable; thus, desires are not legitimised in normative terms. At a first glance, one can desire all sorts of things: good weather, a new love, winning the lottery, or a better boss. The key point is that a desire is not contingent on one being able to believe, by recourse to a norm, that one has a claim to this. Here the self-empowerment involved in being able to legitimately expect and receive something in social interactions and contexts does not play any role. For those who conceive of concerns as desires, notions of (for example) justice of performance or of respect for persons are certainly still present, but they do not function (any longer) as a legitimising resource for raising claims. An "appropriate" salary is something one can desire but not something to which one has a claim. Here the social norms governing (working) life are either questionable: at least in the eyes of the employees concerned, or they have ceased to exist altogether, so that they can no longer serve as a resource for legitimation. Or employees cannot view themselves as part of a normatively structured (working) world any more: for example, if their productivity is so severely constrained by chronic illness that insisting on the observance of the performance principle seems impossible (even though it is still assumed to be valid). Claims can turn into desires, therefore, if the norms that legitimise them are no longer regarded as valid in general or for particular individuals. We will return to both variants later in this text.

This fundamental distinction between claims and desires, developed on the basis of the interview material, should not be taken to imply that the employees are "active" in the first case, but "passive" in the second. Subject constitution and active social conduct are centrally involved in both cases, though in very different directions: the category of claims aims at the general level, at the *generalisation* of norms and concerns, in that it inscribes itself in the normative order or tries to modify it (Honneth 1996). This means that the claims that individual employees make on work and life are indeed raised *also*, but *not only*, for themselves. Rather, the normative legitimation of their own concerns anchors claims in general social orders that also include others besides the subject, and hence necessarily always also legitimises these concerns for others. Claims thematise what should hold in general for those who are (conceived as being) involved in social relationships and in society. As a re-

sult, the category of claims also refers to the (potential) configurability and contestability of society. The very assumption that the (working) world should be configured in a certain way already presupposes that it is possible in principle to reflect on these norms, and thus to bring them within the horizon of reflection and contestability (cf. Ahrens et al. 2011; Scheele 2008).[4] To harbour claims involves empowering oneself to see oneself as an active component of the generally valid normative framework.

Desires, by contrast, are private in character; they refer to an individual or social self beyond normative structures. Desiring something for oneself: without normative anchoring, remains detached from possibilities of generalisation.[5] The interviewees who correspond to this ideal type are sometimes unusually active, determined, and in part "shrewd" when it comes to achieving their goals. However, the advantages in question are only particular ones; they exclude, in part explicitly, any notion that social orders might be configurable or changeable. Here it is instead a matter of realising one's objectives "for oneself" (or one's family).

4.   Modes of Self-Constitution in Relation to the World of Work

How do employees as subjects of claims construe the (working) world and their place within it in normative terms? What, in other words, are central normative dimensions in which they justify their claims?

As already emphasised, the normative dimensions under consideration *go beyond* the world of work. How claims are made on the world of work, and individuals conceive of themselves as part of normative structures, follow from the standpoint of a holistic subject who unites work and life. In our study, we identified three central conceptions of a world of work that is normal in a positive sense and, accordingly, three ways in which subjects constitute themselves as part of this world, though we can present them only in brief outline here.[6]

The first, largely classical normative conception is that performance should be rewarded in the workplace. Here performance is conceived in terms of a "genuine," meaningful contribution, as opposed to how performance is officially represented. Notions of just reward for performance are addressed to both superiors and colleagues; they refer to one's own merit, the amount of work, the aforementioned meaningful organisation of work for accomplishing the task, etc. Norms of just reward for performance are highly ambivalent,

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4   In this context, "configurability" should not be conceived per se in positive terms. As our empirical evidence shows, appealing to the norm of good and responsible performance involves the inclusion of others. However, it also involves the exclusion of, for example, precarious workers, at least some of whom are suspected of not satisfying the criteria of good work, and hence of not belonging to the putative normative relationship of the reciprocal performance principle that would qualify them as colleagues. In principle, however, a "claim" goes beyond what is proper to each individual, so that, from the perspective of the theory of action, it refers to society, and hence to the question of which norms are (or should be) valid here for whom.

5   Claims can be articulated even when they may count as unattainable for a certain time under certain circumstances. The important thing is the certainty that they are normatively legitimate "in principle." Claims are not "private desires" but rest on socially valid norms and values.

6   There are both overlaps and differences in this regard between our results and similar findings; see, e.g., Dubet 2008.; Kratzer et al. 2015.

because they generally also involve factual or rhetorical determinations of who is not contributing enough, for example, a particular colleague, workers from the outside firm, or the boss in the office. The important point here is that, in order to be in a position to make claims with reference to the norm of just reward for performance, one must view oneself as a productive worker and behave accordingly. Employees often speak of doing "good work." Depending on the activity and the work hierarchy, this can include very different things; but in general it is a matter of working conscientiously and reliably without "malingering" and "cheating." This self-constitution as a productive worker then allows employees to expect or also to demand "good money" or corresponding working conditions.

A second normative dimension in which claims are made on the world of work is very different in character. Here employees thematise themselves as *human beings.* Even though our topic was confined to the working world, the "human" played a major role in the interviews. Being a "human being" includes both the necessity that everyone be treated equally regardless of age, gender, ethnic origin, external characteristics, and so forth, as well as a kind of basic right to consideration as an embodied and psychological subject of needs and vulnerabilities.[7] Conceiving of oneself as a psychosomatic human being refers both to limitations and disruptions (exhaustion, illness, aging, physical disabilities, having good and bad days at work, etc.) and to basic bodily and communicative features of the human constitution in general. Relevant features are, for example, gender, one's bodily constitution (size, height, etc.), age, haptic skills and idiosyncrasies, but also language skills (e.g., as a foreigner, not having good command of German) or specific needs, for example, for more quiet in the office. To be a human being at work (see Hürtgen 2013) means being recognised in one's basic psychosomatic integrity. Its violation "makes one sick," as many employees put it, and it is unacceptable because it disrespects or even violates one's dignity. Whether it is a matter of having to work in an unnecessarily dark environment, of not being allowed to go to the toilet, or of being exposed to permanent stress or to the boss's yelling: on this view, one has a claim to different conditions *as a human being.*[8] In justification, employees cite the normative pattern of *human rights.*[9] According to this argument, every individual is entitled to these rights, independently of his or her performance. But human rights also refer to the conception of oneself as a socially respected being who is able to lead a life fit for human beings, and thus enjoys "normal" opportunities for financial and cultural participation. This marks a transition to a second form of legitimacy, which we called the "right to self-care." The right to self-care refers to the permission, as a psychosomatic entity, to be able, and to have a duty, to look after one's bodily and mental health and integrity; one must be able to maintain one's vitality and one is entitled to strive to live an authentic life.

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7   Here we must distinguish between the body as something that is always experienced and lived by the subject [*Leib*] and the body as it is perceived by others [*Körper*]. What for another person is a *Körper* for the subject herself is *Leib.* We use the concept of corporeality [*Leiblichkeit*], because our interviewees speak about themselves, their feelings, illnesses, and sensations, and hence thematize themselves as "embodied subjects" (Schroeder 2009: 193).

8   Thus the statements made by our interviewees cohere with reflections about the need to strengthen the principles of care and sensitivity to human (bodily and mental) needs in the world of work (see Senghaas-Knobloch 2008; Plonz 2011; see also Tronto 1993).

9   Of course, by this we do not mean that they actually use the legal concepts of human rights when they formulate their concerns, but that the normative figure of human rights can be deduced from the interview texts.

The third normative dimension in which social interactions and oneself as part of them are conceived is connected with this: namely, the idea that one is a *social being* in the world, and hence also in the world of work. From the perspective of employees, people have a fundamental right to a balanced life and, above all, to a life that is varied and involves forms of development that are responsive to individual needs. According to this view, social existence must be respected. It must be possible: in financial terms, in terms of time, but also as regards the degree of exhaustion from work, to care for one's family, cultivate friendships and hobbies, be active in associations, take an interest in certain topics or issues, and, more generally, follow the rhythms of life, be it in caring for one's elderly parents or in dealing with one's own problems. Human beings, on this view, are not only workers, and not only human beings in the abstract, but always also social beings who are integrated into society. These conceptions of oneself as a social being, and of a right to care for oneself and to a social existence, culminate, for example, in claims to limits on work and working hours, in claims to a "normal" income, and in notions of collegiality and of how superiors should behave: for instance, that there should be time and opportunities for social communication in the workplace.

Summarising what has been said, it turns out that employees associate three central normative orders with the world of work, and conceive of themselves as part of this world and hence as bearers of claims: the working environment should be structured according to the dimensions of (1) performance, while taking into account that this performance is delivered by (2) individual, psychosomatic human beings and by (3) social beings who find themselves in different life situations. Here we encounter claim dimensions that transcend the world of work, and come into view only if work is conceived as part of individual and social life.

Up to now we have worked out the logics governing the way claims are made in the working world; the "opposite side," that of desire, by contrast, was left somewhat to one side. "Desire" versus "claim" is a theoretical opposition, but in reality desires and claims are the poles of a continuum. The vast majority of our interviewees harboured both claims and desires, only a few of them almost exclusively or predominantly desires. Although the latter also argued in the light of what they conceive as the normality structure of the working world, the supposed "insight" that this structure is not valid (any longer) is central here, so that one cannot appeal to corresponding norms to legitimise one's own claims. Thus these interviewees construed such a normal working world that conforms to certain principles as illusory, and hence at best as desirable, but not as relevant for action.

In order to grasp the variations of "combinations" of demands and desires, and, in particular, to show that claims also turn into desires that cannot appear legitimate (any more), in what follows we would like to address employees' life orientations.

5. Life Orientations: Modes of Self-Constitution in Work and in Life

Life orientations can be understood in very general terms as (also implicit) perspectives on the world that are relevant for action. *The ways in which* claims or desires: or, in most cas-

es, both, are harboured, enabled us to make a distinction between different types of life orientation. Here we will present a couple of them by way of example, in order to clarify how the articulation of claims versus desires can be understood in the context of life orientations.

Mr. Bürtük, a 35-year-old machine operator in a large automotive company, sees himself as part of a family migration project. As immigrants, his parents accepted many privations in order to make a life in Germany. As he sees it, Mr. Bürtük, as the eldest son, now has the task of successfully continuing this migration project by achieving social advancement into the mainstream of society, as part of the family that he also supports financially. Central to his life orientation, which we called the "advancement and prestige" type, is the pursuit of social advancement in this sense and the symbols associated with it (money, a house, etc.). Mr. Bürtük subordinates many things in life to this goal. He has one or two jobs on the side, works shifts, and is building a house for himself and his brother. He sees himself as an extremely productive worker who works hard and responsibly. He stresses repeatedly in conversation that he feels justified in claiming a good income and the fringe benefits provided by the company specifically because he is very productive. In no way does he see himself in individualistic terms as someone who is driven by success; rather, he conducts disputes with the master craftsman along with his colleagues, and is a member of and a representative in the union IG Metall. The temporal vanishing point of his claims to recovery and recreation as a human being, which he repeatedly articulates but repeatedly postpones for the sake of social advancement, is retirement on a pension, which, as recognition of lifelong achievement, is deeply anchored in his normative view of the world. Mr. Bürtük can be understood as an example of an employee who confidently articulates his claims regarding work, status, and life by appealing to a normative world that is profoundly shaped by the performance principle.

Ms. Salzbaum is a 36-year-old surveyor who started out working on overseas projects in Sudan. Although she found the work very rewarding and enjoyed undisputed standing among her project colleagues, she ultimately resigned from this firm. As she relates it, one of the reasons for this, apart from engaging with her identity as a lesbian woman who had to deal with outsider experiences throughout her life, was her need for a closer relationship to nature. Now she satisfies this need by working part time as a therapeutic riding instructor for disabled children. In order to do this she has reduced her working hours, something made possible by a job at a firm for measurement software. She formulates this balance between qualified work and an additional area of life involving commitment as a legitimate claim because she is a human and a social being who has a variety of commitments and interests in life. We called this type of life orientation "self-development and life balance."

The case of Mr. Torwig, a clerk at the bank and a full-time member of the works council, exhibits a contrasting attitude toward work as an attempt to take advantage of favourable opportunities to realize desires for a certain level of income and job security for oneself. Mr. Torwig has observed how, in his organisational department of the bank, the work is being progressively centralised, a process in which he himself is actively involved. In the course of this development he had a "very narrow escape" and he decided to work full time as a representative on the works council, a secure position from which he can now sit out the "downsizing measures." At no point in the conversation does he give the slightest hint

of normative outrage over the many redundancies or suggest that the process, as a collective one, should have been organised differently. They appear to him instead as a matter of fate which he, Mr. Torwig, cleverly managed to avoid. Mr. Torwig also sees the fringe benefits provided by the bank as a benefaction, and his "above market rate" salary not as a reward to which he as an individual or the workforce collectively has a normative claim, but as a matter of good luck for which one must be grateful. In his life orientation, this good luck is what enabled him to escape (until now) the social decline that continually threatens him. This view of the world as permanently risky and threatening, in which one can only survive through skill and struggle, is characteristic of this life orientation: we called it "getting by in life", and its "conversion" of claims into desires.

The light cast on employees' life orientations, therefore, shows that making claims is part of a view of the world that is formed and transformed in the confrontation with the individuals' own personal experiences and with the conditions under which they live and work. As the biographical perspective shows, life orientations are not based on a deterministic relation. They are not simply a result of social "structural features" such as social origin, working position, gender, or ethnicity.[10] It is not as though the interlocutors whom we assigned to the "getting by in life" orientation have more precarious jobs, or are less qualified or earn less than the others in the sample.[11] Something similar holds for the different meaning of the orientation to social advancement, which is by no means pursued by all those on the "lower rungs" of the social ladder. This is not to say that living conditions, social origin or even gender, are unimportant. Rather, what is crucial is the meaning these "structural features" acquire in the employees' active interpretation, and hence in how they approach the world. Life orientations as inclusive, action-guiding perspectives on the world point to the active *confrontation* with social circumstances that is always also situated with the subjects themselves, in our case, in the form of their own biographical experiences. Goals and perspectives are always necessarily subjective, and hence so, too, is the question of how one's relation to a normative order can take the form of self-constitution as a bearer of legitimate normative claims, or not (any longer), as the case may be.

6.   Non-Normal Normality?

Our study examined employees who belong among the "core" of employees, that is, those who are in relatively secure employment and who are not in a precarious social situation. The majority of these employees articulate claims on work, in particular claims they understand as "normal."

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10 Our interviewees were often, though without any prior intention on our part, children of immigrants, not only from Turkey, but also from Romania, Greece or Kazakhstan. This "different" origin plays a major role in the interviews, as does the interviewees' gender or social position in the hierarchical distribution of employment and income; but no specific way of dealing with claims and desires could be deduced from these factors.

11 According to this view, people who are in precarious employment, for example, are by no means less capable in principle of understanding themselves as bearers of claims, as is confirmed by a glance at the relevant literature (Hürtgen & Voswinkel 2014: 349ff.).

Here we must make an analytical distinction between "normativity" and "normality." Although normativity and normality occur together they are not the same thing. Talk of "normality" can refer to what is merely usual or customary, to what is factually given or what is statistically speaking most frequent. But "normality" can also have a very pronounced normative connotation: what counts as "normal" is then what is normatively legitimate, and therefore at the same time worth striving for. This conception can be found, for example, in the formulation: "Normal is when you can live from your work." (For a more detailed account, see Hürtgen & Voswinkel 2014: 29ff.) For the normal employees we surveyed, however, these normative legitimacy patterns ("that is how it should be") are very closely associated with notions of *normality* ("and that is how it (actually) is too").[12]

Our empirical study shows a very complex result with regard to this tension between normativity and normality. The interviewees are no longer sure whether the normative order in which they anchor and situate their claims, and themselves as the bearers of these claims, can (still) count as "normal." We can present our findings in "layers": on a first level, one can say that most employees stand by their claims and regard them as "normal." They repeatedly emphasise that they do not want anything special, that the notions of work and life they cherish are perfectly normal. On a second level, however, insofar as they are employed in permanent jobs, moreover mostly in large companies or in the civil service, they view their situation as exceptional. All around them they see that working conditions are deteriorating: in their companies, staff are now hired almost exclusively on short-term contracts or through subcontractors, hardly any of their friends or acquaintances still have "normal" contracts, or they are unemployed or their income situation is in some other way more precarious, and labour market entry for their own children is often difficult. They assume that they are not able to change their jobs even if they are dissatisfied with them, because they would make their situation worse as a result. Conversely, it is often their hard-won position in the company, their "niche," which they have carved out for themselves by acquiring company-specific skills over many years, and the like, that protects them from the further downsizing that they often consider likely.

In short, even though they conceive of their working conditions as "normal," in fact they see them as being exceptional. The normal employment relationship increasingly turns out not to be normal and general any more, but is instead a *privilege* that is becoming rarer, and is often viewed with envy by others. The interviews indicate that employees are in fact extremely uncertain about whether their claims and the norms that underlie them are still even generally valid. They are unsure how far the normative normality inscribed in the logics governing their claims remains the usual normality.

However, a normative order that is no longer regarded as "normal" leads to uncertainty over whether people can understand their concerns as claims to which they are normatively entitled, or whether they think that they will be able to realise their concerns only by seizing favorable opportunities or by using power, an attitude already expressed by a minority among the interviewees in our sample. If the norm of "being human" in the workplace is no longer generally valid, for example, then invasive working conditions can no longer be rejected by appealing to it. Humanity would cease to be a standard that one could legitimately

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12   This close connection between normativity and normality does not necessarily pertain: we can conceive of movements that struggle for a different normality, hence for the implementation of different norms.

expect to be fulfilled in general and by specific colleagues or supervisors. On the contrary, *not* expecting it to be fulfilled would become a useful tool for the world of work in which the imperative would henceforth be to "get by," even if humane conditions were something that one desired. In such a situation, it would no longer be possible to anchor one's concerns and norms in a general social consensus. Neither the individuals (supervisors, etc.) nor the general conditions (the materialised work situation, the type of contract) that one encountered in the working world could be assumed to satisfy the basic norms of humanity that one upholds oneself. But in that case claims are in danger of becoming desires.

Therefore, the variations in the ways individuals deal with claims and desires, as reflected in their *biographical self-constitution* in the context of their life orientations, are bound up with their capacities to conceive of themselves, *in the process of constituting themselves in relation to work*, as (legitimate) bearers of claims. Both the variations and the capacities in question refer in turn to the social fabric, and the normative structures of society as a whole.

7.   Outlook and Conclusion

This brings us to our concluding remark. Our findings convey a twofold message: "normal employees" uphold their claims, and see them for the most part as being normatively justified. However, they are unsure how far their claims can still count as normal in contemporary society. In this situation, critical social research must take a responsible approach to the discourses and models that are prevalent in society, and must make a clear distinction between the analysis of discourses and the analysis of people's consciousness.

With the concept of a "double hermeneutic," Anthony Giddens (1984: 284) pointed out that sociological concepts and theories take up ideas that are widespread in society and process them in its scientific context, but that these ideas, now in the guise of sociological concepts, then reflect back on social discourses, and as a result develop power potentials and effects of their own. This "double hermeneutic" becomes problematic when it is not subjected to careful empirical controls: that is, when social discourses are accepted as sociological findings without analysing the effects they actually exert, especially on people's consciousness and on their meaningful practices. Doubling discourses in this way has the effect of stabilising them, even when the sociological research in question sees itself as critical.

Thus for many years sociology has been describing developments in the world of work and in subjectivity using concepts such as "employee entrepreneurs" (Voß & Pongratz 1998), the "entrepreneurial self" (Bröckling 2007), flexible man (Sennett 1998), and the like. These and similar concepts take their lead from neoliberal discourses according to which modern workers are forced to be, and want to be, flexible and self-organised and at the same time adjusted to the market. The theories in which these developments are condensed are certainly intended to be critical: they are presented as diagnoses of new form of submission. This is not altogether wrong, insofar as they take up and interpret influential social models, "dispositives" and "invocations" (and hence also central features of empirical reality). However, these theories become problematic when direct inferences are made from them about real subjects and when the latter are subsumed under the corresponding

social discourses by means of theoretical generalisations. This has the effect of doubling the existing "invocations" in a critical language and thereby solidifying further an image of "normality" while nevertheless criticizing it.

Our research has shown that employees are far from being "entrepreneurial selves"; on the contrary, they uphold claims for the most part and understand them as legitimate. But at the same time they are uncertain about these claims. One could say that they reject the "modern" invocations, yet at the same time they are afraid that the basis on which they make this rejection is being pulled out from under them: that, in effect, they are no longer in the zone of normative "normality." In this empirical situation, is it illuminating when sociology describes "entrepreneurial selves" as the supposed norm in the working world? Or does this not instead (also) contribute to imposing this very "normality" that is nevertheless being criticised? This danger exists, at any rate, as long as the analyses of the discursive invocations are not counterbalanced by studies of the empirical subjects, with their claims and their self-understandings.

As we indicated at the beginning, the "old" research on workers' consciousness was long guilty of neglecting workers as acting subjects who bring forth social reality, and instead often deduced their consciousness from "objective" facts and classified it in ready-made schemas. In our view, we are currently facing a very similar problem, only now with discourses and invocations that are presented as objective facts. The problem is the same in both cases: without empirical and conceptual research that grasps everyday acting subjects and their consciousness in all of their complexity and contradictions, and tries to understand them as an interpretation that brings forth reality in accordance with its own logic, sociological debates, however critical their intention, are in danger of reproducing and confirming the dominant discourses. Understanding action of employees, thus, has to analyse day-to-day workers practices as practices of subjects and social actors, i.e. as always conflicting and contradictory effort to overcome objectivisation and to insist on lively capacities while handling and shaping social life.

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