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Theme 4 Labour

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Labour can typically be said to represent realities, which are de facto very important and, to a large extent, central, within the field of economic activities, but which are somehow the worst treated by current mainstream economics, on the basis of which the most extreme market ideology and prescriptions are being put forward.

Neo-classical economics typically reduces labour to a generic production factor, exchanged in the market place. Even skills are reduced to units of generic human capital. Perfect market are suppose to produce equilibrium full employment prices, corresponding to marginal productivities.

Of course, other disciplines are producing, separately, knowledge on many different aspects and issues of labour and on workers as human beings, both within and outside the workplace : health, psychology, injuries, social and industrial relations, ergonomics... But these aspects are considered not to affect the economics of it, but for some rather marginal elements of costs.

But, as is well known, mainstream economics is unable to take into consideration or to perceive many of the major aspects of labour realities : for example, (strong and lasting) structural unemployment, the strong reduction of the wage share, training-employment interfaces, inequalities (for example, gender inequalities), working poors, competence building, know how, layoffs by profitable firms....

Moreover, the emphasis has to be put on the fact that the neo-classical representation of economic activity - one could say, the representation of the world - has been build with reference to the industrial paradigm (energetic transformation of raw materials into standardised products), within which upstream knowledge activities are strongly separated from direct production activities or labour. The integration of, more or less important, information or knowledge components in nearly all jobs changes the picture and makes this representation to be totally obsolete. The new paradigm makes that the type of labour economics which is based on the old representation is still less satisfactory than before.

As the diagnosis is sufficiently clear, it doesn't seem useful to go, once again, through a kind of systematic critical analysis of mainstream labour economics.

A new type of transdisciplinary "labour science" is thus more necessary than ever. What is needed is to design new types of holistic transdisciplinary approaches and to build a new type of political economy of labour issues.

The question is of course how to build this new "labour science".

The idea would be that we have both to organise existing knowledge and to design a new framework for integrating and producing new knowledge. And this has likely to be done repeatedly (de manière "itérative" - trials and errors methodology).

We need first to try to take stock of existing knowledge, belonging formally to a series of different disciplines, and for that reason to find the ways and means for organising such existing knowledge. Many different aspects are analysed, from different angles, with reference to different disciplines. These pieces of

knowledge have somehow to be brought together and, to the extent possible, integrated.

At a first stage thus, it is proposed to assemble the various existing (publications, grey literature) pieces of knowledge belonging to the many disciplines involved.

Authors would be asked, not only to make their piece of knowledge known (to give references), but to make additionally some kind of analytical exercise aiming at making clear the type of knowledge which they have produced. They would be asked to contribute several elements (to be discussed of course) :

the object of their contribution (possibly with 4 or 5 catchwords)

a short schematic presentation of the aspects of labour which are highlighted

the scope (circumstances, degree of possible generalisation...) of the piece of knowledge which has been produced

an attempt to formalise how this affects "labour economics"

the values to which the paper refers.

Of course such information would be open to discussions and, to the extent possible, to some type of selection or validation procedures. This would thus allow for some rather rude form of organisation of existing knowledge.

On that basis, an exercise will be proposed aiming at trying to put the various pieces together and to characterise both the degrees of compatibility or consistency between those different pieces of knowledge and the possible gaps.

Some special emphasis would have to be put on characterising the "values" or "value systems" involved.

The product of this first stage would thus consist in some kind of critical and selective inventory of existing knowledge in the various disciplines.

At a second stage, it is proposed to try to build some kind of representation of what one could call the "labour system", i.e. the comprehensive system of the multiple dimensions (aspects, issues, actors, variables...) of labour and the set of (known and possible) interrelations between them. It may appear to be needed to build two or even three different, but closely interrelated systems (at the micro-, the meso- and the macro-level).

The basic idea here is that labour realities are fundamentally multidimensional, both in terms of elements or aspects which are involved and in terms of values to which it is possible to refer. These elements are more or less interrelated, while values may converge or be contradictory.

We thus need to enter into some kind of system design modelling.

Because of several characteristics of labour, we know the "labour system" to be a living, concrete, open, with high entropy, with conflicting ends..., in any case a complex system. For example, defining the boundaries of the system, which cannot be made a priori and is part of the exercise - do we, for example, consider that the State budget (budgetary constraints) is, because of the various labour and employment policies which are implemented, part of the "labour system" ? - may be difficult, or even to a certain degree impossible. We have of course to recognise that labour is part of the (larger) system of economic activity overall without it being necessary to decide about precise, definitive boundaries. It will be enough, at any point of time, to adopt some work hypothesis as concerns what we consider the actual boundaries of the system to be.

An exercise will then be proposed aiming, in a more dynamic perspective, at identifying and formalising the key sets of interrelations and retroactions within the "labour system".

Let us take an example, as concerns the complex set of interrelationships between health and labour.

People have to be in good health : much is spent, at both individual and global levels, in order to make sure that people are in good health. This is somehow the consumption aspect of it. We also know that the amounts spent are steadily increasing. This is the health system aspect : health systems are complex and costly. But there are also close links between health and labour issues.

But how are we to define the complex set of interrelationship between health and labour :

health per se : one among basic needs

+ social security systems : access, inequality...

+ life-span.

+ epidemiology

employment and labour in health systems

+ organisation

+ skills and competencies

+ costs

health as a formal condition for labour :

+ sanitary situation

+ efficiency (or productivity)

+ absenteeism

labour as a condition for health

+ morale and well-being

+ integration in social security system

health consequences of non-labour (unemployment, retirement)

+ depressive states

+ sickness ratio

health consequences of labour :

+ stress

+ labour injuries.

+ interpersonal relations, conflicts

What kind of interrelationship ?

For example, from allocated resources (on what basis ?) and organisation (which one ?) to labour in health systems, to costs, to sanitary situation, to job efficiency, to incomes

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