BOOK REVIEWS

THE CONTRADICTIONS AND AMBIGUITIES OF WORK FLEXIBILITY

O ARDIL DA FLEXIBILIDADE: Os trabalhadores e a teoria do valor

O ardir da flexibilidade is the third publication in a trilogy that include the titles: A jornada de trabalho na sociedade: O castigo de Prometeu (Ed. LTR, 1996) and Mais trabalho!: A intensificação do labor na sociedade contemporânea (Ed. Boitempo, 2008). In this book, the sociologist Sadi Dal Rosso evolves from analyzing the working day and the intensification of work to investigating flexibility, which is consistent with the complex process of giving a word positive connotations, and the widespread belief that flexibility is the future of labor.

The book has three parts. Part I encourages a theoretical discussion of the main elements related to workplace flexibility, including the genesis of flexible practices and the labor theory of value. The analysis in part II is based on the flexible practices in core countries, that is, developed countries with late industrialization. Part III discusses labor flexibility in Brazil, analyzing the influence of social factors such as age, gender, and race on several economic sectors.

The first part of the book examines the movement for streamlining procedures, the central economic role of flexibility, strategy applied to business, and the Brazilian context. It also reveals one of the primary points of debate in the book: the search for a common direction to what has become flexible work. Its use as a corporate strategy appears to be a motive for the disputes between employees and employers. The author creates a typology for flexibility, differentiating it in quantitative and qualitative terms. The variation in the workforce due to downsizing can be understood as external quantitative flexibility, while polyvalence can be understood as internal qualitative flexibility.

To understand working hours and non-working hours in their rigid and flexible variants, Dal Rosso organizes his work according to three principles: (1) duration of the working day, (2) intensity, and (3) distribution of working hours. In distinct contexts, the work denounces the hidden social contradictions within flexible practices. The author delineates the boundaries between the different times based on the principle that working hours are not the time for living life and denounces the evils of flexible distribution of labor hours, for example, the merging of working hours with non-working hours to other forms of alienation.

For the sociologist, the attempt to give a positive meaning to the movement for workplace flexibility comes at the cost of a loss of rights. These rights, such as an 8-hour working day, full-time pay, overtime pay, and job security, are replaced by...
flexible hours, part-time jobs, intermittent work, job cuts, lack of social security, and lower wages and benefits.

The book moves on to question whether flexibility could completely replace the full-time job. Using the theory of value, the author criticizes working on weekends, holidays, and hours that were previously considered as non-working hours. The author also recognizes that flexible work incorporates unproductive time frames, rationalizing it as producing value for the continuous accumulation of capital.

In part II, after exposing some tendencies, Dal Rosso recognizes that the flexible standard does not apply the same way in countries with recent capitalism, which he calls periphery countries, as it does with primitive industrialization, that is, the central countries. The author demonstrates that flexibilization with pre-regulated mechanisms such as temporary work, daily payment, and different types of contracts, has already affected countries with late industrialization, although they have not yet transitioned to a regulated working system with rights. Brazil, a peripheral country with late industrialization, still needs to transition to a regulated full-time work day and has a trend of precarious employment, characterized by the excessive use of overtime among wage earners, forms of self-employment (pejotização – when the employees of a company have their own micro-businesses), part-time jobs, and a proliferation of the informal sector jobs.

The author examines trends in the central countries to understand how flexible practices manifest themselves in these contexts. Analyzing the United States, Canada, and the European Union, Dal Rosso reveals that the “new” work arrangements are reinforced within environments in crisis with low economic growth and recession, but not all modalities of flexibility show a tendency toward growth. On the contrary, functionality problems, worker resistance, and contradictory policies on the accumulation of capital cannot ensure business gains, which assign uncertainty to flexible practices.

In part III, Dal Rosso reinforces the need to analyze census data consolidated by activity, organizing them by age, color/race, and gender/sex. According to the author, flexible practices for farming, industry, construction, commerce, finance, transport, education, health, public administration, and domestic service are distributed into three groups according to the distribution of working hours. His thesis culminates in the creation of a “Convergence Theory,” that is, the inclination of practically all sectors and branches of economic activity towards a full-time working day (between 40 and 44 hours a week), including the working day of the employers.

This book’s contribution to this area becomes evident when considering that Brazilian companies are already implementing different forms of flexible work, for example, hourly payment for professors from private universities, payment by delivery for drivers, or for domestic servants known as day laborers. Excessive work hours are also an expression of flexibility, particularly among agricultural, fishing, and extraction workers. Owing to the practice of unpaid overtime and disregard of labor rights, the primary economic sector is continuously monitored for reports of work analogous to slavery. In the health sector, professionals are subjected to a form of flexibilization only found in Brazil: the shift system comprising of 12 hours of work and 36 hours of rest.

Among the possible advances, it can be assumed that flexibility is used as a strategy of confirmation, reinforcement, and creation of inequalities, further reducing access to worker rights, expanding the accumulation of capital, incorporating non-working hours into the production of value, and rupturing the separation between work and leisure time. Similarly, there is much more room to discuss this subject, as it carries a huge ideological load and is often the motive for disputes between employees and companies, generally for opposing reasons.

However, readers of the book may question whether the theories that explain the flexible practices observed in Brazil and countries with primitive capitalism can be applied to nations with unique profiles, such as China, India, Russia, South Korea, or Australia. The concept of flexibility applied to business was also not sufficiently developed given the complexity of the relationships between organizations and their subjects. Therefore, sometimes the author neglects the willingness of workers, which can weaken his arguments about the generated inequalities.

This book offers readers a good opportunity to expand their knowledge on flexibility, work hour distribution, and the new labor morphologies. It contributes significantly to society in these dark times of precarious employment in Brazil.