



Understanding Social Change

Work - who does what?

Sarah Neal

Both of you have raised the centrality of work and employment and perhaps we could now go on to look at that in a bit more detail. Now I'd like to ask you, Rob, what do you think have been the key changes or shifts that have taken place since the 1940's in employment and labour markets?

Rob Sykes

Well before I answer that question I think it's important just to stress again the centrality of work, indeed the centrality of full employment to the post-war welfare state, particularly in Beveridge's plan. The assumption was that the man would be in employment and it was the man who would be paying into the social insurance scheme, and families would benefit. So full employment and just use the term the sort of Keynesian approach towards managing the economy so as to have full employment, was absolutely central. Of course if we don't have full employment, although we may be in a rather better position than some of our European competitors at the moment, nevertheless unemployment has been a problem, and this has been associated with a number of structural changes, and a number of other changes in the British economy. Perhaps the best known one is what's often referred to as deindustrialisation, which has been defined in a number of different ways, but basically we can think about it as being a collapse of manufacturing, at least in terms of employment, fewer and fewer people being employed by manufacturing industry, and at the same time, although not enough to absorb the people who were made unemployed from manufacturing a growth of the service sector. A service sector is always important to remember as always being significant in the British economy but we're talking about a growing range of services these days, not least those associated with shops and financial services, and so forth. So this deindustrialisation process is an associated shift in terms of work and employment, and unemployment. It's also been interesting to note from a welfare point of view that the rate of women of a working age who are actually engaged in employment has significantly increased so that in the UK now we have similar levels of employment of women as they have in the traditionally high female employment countries such as Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. So you've seen a shift both in structural terms but you've also see a shift in terms of the people who are working, and where they are working in the labour market, in which the work that is now available is often referred to as "flexible employment". I use that term with inverted commas around it because what it actually means is that people are now in more insecure employment, and guess who it is that those people who are more often than not – women. Women working in some of these new service industries, working in shops, working in the restaurants and catering trades, and so on, wouldn't it be worthwhile just to exemplify what we're talking about here just by referring to where I live, in Sheffield. Sheffield's a classic example of this deindustrialisation. Very quickly, as most people will know, Sheffield is famous for what they call locally "metal-bashing" - steel production, making of cutlery in the past; thousands upon thousands of people used to work in the steel industry and metal-bashing industries. That's collapsed. Literally tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs in the period from when I first moved to Sheffield in 1975, and almost to add insult to injury it's worth noting that the new service centre in Sheffield, this means in particular associated with commerce, associated with a very famous shopping called Meadowhall is actually based upon where two major steelworks used to be, so from having the temple of manufacturing we've now got the temple of consumerism, as it were, where typically more women than men are employed, very often on what are called zero hours contracts where they can be called in virtually at will, and/or have very insecure forms of employment. So in a way Sheffield is a classic example of what's happened to the labour market. Not everything is

shared by that across the country but it I think gives a real feeling to what's been going in the labour market in the economy more generally.

Sarah Neal

And could we place your story of what's happened in Sheffield, Rob, within a global context, would you see that as important?

Rob Sykes

For sure. Actually steel, in terms of the amount which is produced is around more than it ever was, just this really strange notion, but it doesn't employ people, it employs machines, and this has been as partially a response by the steel manufactures and others to compete. One of the key features would mean cut away some of the arguments about what really is globalisation is that whatever else it is, that it's about world markets for goods and services, world markets which are increasingly competitive in terms of cost and so that now steelworkers in Sheffield, such as the few that remain, are competing not just with other steelworkers in the UK, or for that matter in the rest of Europe, but competing with steelworkers in other parts of the world some of which, for example in Taiwan, are working for lower wages and consequently are more likely to get their products sold than those which come from a British base, so globalisation is fundamentally important and if you harp back to what Mrs Thatcher said earlier - opening up the market to the full force of international competition has meant just that – opening it up to the effects of globalisation.

Sarah Neal

Heidi, Rob's painted a picture there in which insecurity and uncertainties dominate what's happening in the labour markets and employment. What other patterns can we see that may be of interest and concern to us?

Heidi Safia Mirza

In Rob's narrative about Sheffield we can see that there are regional differences so it's not a uniform phenomena. However, it's a growing pattern and we find increasingly bigger gaps between the rich and the poor. We find a real move towards, as Rob was saying, flexible employment patterns, insecure labour, short-term contracts; every which way in a sense, so that people really have less rights in work, and I think that that's a really worrying trend, and we find that mirroring that a real pull on the use of migrant labour to fill the gaps, so we find increasingly migrant labour, labour from Eastern European places where there's been upheaval coming to Britain, and what's very interesting is that with the aging population in Britain, by 2020 there will be a need to have across Europe over four million migrant workers. Now these will be people who would come, not stay, and traditionally most migrant workers do not stay. They contribute to the economy and often send quite a lot of money back home, therefore kind of fuelling the whole kind of global process of capital accumulation, so they are a very necessary part of the economy. So we find that there's a racialisation of labour going on where people have no rights at all and yet they contribute significantly to the economy. Ideologically, a lot of hate is focused on these groups, they're seen as, as I was saying earlier, as scrounging, as taking, as having no right to be here. In terms of political citizenship they have no status and, in fact, our politicians very much play on that kind of notion in order to increase their popularity, so we find that there's this whole way in which there's a deepening of racialisation both ideologically and economically in the labour market. Mirroring that though, we have very high rates of unemployment amongst ethnic minority groups, twice the rate as the British population, and black and minority ethnic young people are nearly two-thirds more likely to be unemployed as their equivalent peers, so that's another worrying trend. So on one side we have migrant labour, but the settled migrant communities here are less likely to be employed, and that's largely to do again with regionalisation and patterns of social exclusion, people living in areas that have been deindustrialised for two generations, generations that have never known what it is to work because the mills were closed down, or the pits were closed. So they might have political citizenship but their access to a kind of equality, of opportunity is very limited.