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Weaving Lives and Livelihoods

Generative Perspectives on Work and Labour

In the years since the *Gens* Manifesto (2015) was published, I have returned to it several times and found that it suggested, on each occasion, slightly different questions, insights and possibilities. As my research developed around people's experiences of work, belonging and place-making in a Scottish textile industry, the Manifesto provided helpful reminders and provocations, resonating with my own interest in examining the 'generative powers' of capitalism. Over time, as I reflected on the enmeshment of production and social reproduction in local lives and livelihoods, *Gens* echoed some of my own concerns with researching 'the means and mechanisms – the very processes of generation – through which systems and socialities are made' (Bear et al 2015).

Part of the Manifesto's generativity lies in its ability to problematise a diverse range of categories and narratives that characterise more established analyses of capitalism. It highlights, for instance, the vital role of substantivist feminist scholarship in challenging prevalent representations of 'the economy' as a separate domain of social life. Some of those critiques have also questioned established binaries in the study of capitalism (e.g. 'market' vs. 'non-market'; 'affective labour' vs. 'industrial labour') in ways that were also helpful to make sense of the tensions that emerged in my own ethnographic research and analysis.

And yet, as I finished reading *Gens*, I often wondered whether it could have invited readers to engage further with debates about work and labour. The Manifesto critiques the 'false binary' created by the category of 'immaterial (affective) labour', highlighting how it 'attributes inherently different creative energies and communicative powers to forms of labour ordered in a hierarchy of value' (Bear et al 2015) – an important argument that could inform more nuanced analyses of work

and life in global capitalism. At the same time, however, while the Manifesto acknowledges the role of feminist scholarship in 'indicating the narrowness of Marxist conceptions of labour', it left me wondering about the potential of expanding these limited 'conceptions of labour' beyond a mere focus on criticising and overcoming prevalent binaries.

Informed by *Gens*'s call to 'articulate a more comprehensive approach to capitalism' by drawing, 'redeploying and expanding' on familiar tools of analysis, in this comment I draw on my ethnographic research on work and life in the Harris Tweed industry (Nascimento 2023) to suggest how an expanded concept of work/labour can contribute to rethinking these issues.

***Fig. 1**. Weaver setting up the loom to start weaving a new length of Harris Tweed in a black and grey herringbone pattern, 2017. © Joana Nascimento*

Researching an 'industry of paradoxes'

In August 2016, I moved to the Outer Hebrides of Scotland to conduct thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, aiming to learn more about the Harris Tweed industry and its place within broader social, cultural and political-economic processes in the region. The production of this world-renowned woollen textile – which has been trademark-protected since 1910 and covered by its own Act of Parliament since 1993 – is bound exclusively to these islands. According to this legislation, a cloth can only be called Harris Tweed and stamped with the Orb trademark if it has been

> *... handwoven by the islanders at their homes in the Outer Hebrides, finished in the Outer Hebrides, and made from pure virgin wool dyed and spun in the Outer Hebrides ...* (*Harris Tweed Act* 1993)

Despite this extremely localised production, the famous cloth is exported to over 50 countries around the world, exposing islanders to the challenges and possibilities of fluctuating global markets. Since the early twentieth century, the industry has contributed to population retention, providing employment in a region threatened by depopulation and economic fragility. In the 1960s, when global demand for Harris Tweed was at its peak, the historian Francis Thompson described it as 'an industry of paradoxes', with an international 'stature' that was 'out of all proportion to its actual size and method of manufacture' (1969: 27). In his analysis, Thompson also highlighted how this was 'an industry whose organizers have an aim beyond that profit motive which is the raison d'être of commercial enterprise: they have a remarkable understanding and recognition of its social and economic value to the people of the Western Isles' (1969: 27).

Yet the industry's reliance on international demand has also led to periodical 'peaks and slumps' that have long reminded local populations of the islands' vulnerability to the vagaries of global capitalism. Spending time with industry workers, I noticed how they mobilised their knowledge of these histories (and sometimes first-hand experience of their consequences) to explain certain outlooks on the possibility of labour uncertainty, often framing it as integral part of 'island life'. The 'local' strategies they described and used to navigate some of the socio-economic challenges of life in this region were also informed by longer histories. Common examples of 'island resourcefulness' ranged from pursuing occupational pluralism or making claims based on kinship ties, to being open to the possibility of temporary, seasonal or permanent migration.

Unexpectedly, these were insights that emerged not only in conversations with 'locals' and 'returners', but also with 'incomers' – people who were born elsewhere and later moved to the islands. Despite their diverse origins and backgrounds, some of my interlocutors articulated a sense of shared vulnerability and interdependence as islanders in a depopulating region, and many described how they drew on shared repertoires to grapple with the uncertainties of 'island life' – including the local implications of shifting global markets. As I discuss below, drawing on an expanded concept of work/labour to examine the complexities of socio-economic life in this region rendered visible the different kinds of 'work' involved not only in making a living, but also in cultivating particular kinds of lives and forms of belonging. In some ways, this approach resonates with *Gens*'s call to focus on the 'diverse and wide-ranging practices of life and production that cross-cut social domains' (Bear et al 2015). At the same time, it suggests the generative potential of taking the Manifesto's proposals further by thinking with 'work' as a more capacious analytical category. I suggest that this could foreground relevant practices, experiences and moral understandings that may otherwise be overlooked in our analyses of socio-economic life under capitalism.

An expanded concept of work/labour

Recent discussions in anthropology have highlighted the importance of interrogating the concept of work/labour, considering whether – and if so how – it may be a relevant tool of analysis (e.g. Harvey and Krohn-Hansen 2018; Narotzky 2018). Some of these discussions have problematised established conceptual divisions, in ways that echo *Gens*'s critique of binary categorisations that have long been taken for granted. Susana Narotzky's points out that:

> *English-speaking scholars have often been using a distinction between 'work' and 'labour', where labour is defined as human effort [that] pertains to capitalist relations of production, and work describes the rest of human energy expenditure in relation to non-capitalist realms, whether these be reproductive tasks (which eventually became subsumed by the 'care' concept) or socially relevant, non-market-orientated tasks (generally but not solely reproductive) in the margins and interstices of the capitalist market system or non-capitalist historical or present-day societies.* (2018: 31–32)

Narotzky argues that not only does this conceptual distinction not hold across languages, but it also makes 'two presuppositions':

> *First, that there is something inherently different between one form of effort expenditure and the other, namely the kind of value that is created; and second, that they cannot be simultaneously present in the human experience of energy expenditure.* (2018: 32)

Recognising such conceptual limitations forces us to consider alternative analytical

possibilities to grasp the diverse practices and entanglements involved in navigating the tensions and promises of global capitalism. Some scholars offer helpful reflections that suggest how the concept of 'work/labour' could be used to think more holistically about human activity and economic life. For instance, William Roseberry discusses how Marx's early ideas, before he concentrated on labour in its relationship to capital, emphasised the more encompassing and generative potential of the term. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels (1970) 'began not with nature or with material "conditions", but with a collectivity of humans acting in and on nature, reproducing and transforming both nature and material conditions through their actions' (Roseberry 1997: 27). This had, in turn, a transformative effective on humans and their social relationships, as 'the process of provisioning, of interacting with nature and individuals through labor, was seen to transform both nature and the collectivity of individuals' (Roseberry 1997: 27).

Similarly, Karl Polanyi highlighted the importance of thinking about land and labour beyond capitalist relations of production, stating that:

> *Labour is only another name for a human activity [that] goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale, but for entirely different reasons; nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized. Land is just another name for nature, which is not produced by man.* (Polanyi [1944] 2001: 75)

More recently, Fiona Mackenzie (2013) has explored the potential of the verb 'to work' in her analysis of growing community landownership in Scotland, expanding it to consider how relationships between people, place and land are being re-imagined and 're-worked' in those processes. Foregrounding the 'work' involved in changing property regimes and exploring alternative notions of ownership, entitlement and belonging, Mackenzie suggests their capacity to reconfigure social and political

possibilities beyond established capitalist forms.

Reflecting on my own research, these perspectives provided helpful reference points and encouraged me to broaden the terms of my analysis. At the same time, the richness of insights that emerged through ethnographic engagement suggested the need for frameworks that allow diverse strategies and outlooks to be examined and understood as integral to making a living in contemporary capitalism.

Fig. 2. *Bags of weft yarn delivered by the local mill's tweed van and left outside a Harris Tweed weaver's domestic loom shed, 2017. © Joana Nascimento*

Weaving lives and livelihoods

As I spent time with workers within and beyond workplaces, I realised that the Harris Tweed industry was not only more inclusive and demographically diverse than might be expected (especially given the emphasis placed on terms like 'provenance' and 'heritage' in promotional materials), but that it was also a productive site for thinking about the relationship between people, place, and the work involved in the making of various kinds of 'things' – from lengths of tweed, to social relationships, identities, subjectivities, ideas of belonging and visions of 'good lives'. Considering the generative potential of these processes and their multiple entanglements, I realised that an expanded concept of work and labour might be required to make sense of the various kinds of 'work' described by my interlocutors as integral to building particular kinds of lives in this region – for themselves and for others around them.

Considering workers' experiences and strategies through a more encompassing lens revealed how they made sense of their circumstances by referring to particular regional, industrial and personal histories. For instance, many industry workers emphasised that their decision to live on these islands had required coming to terms with the 'predictable unpredictability' of local economic life. Doing so entailed not only devising resourceful strategies to make a living, but also cultivating particular outlooks that made it possible to envision 'good lives' amidst this uncertainty. Calum, a self-employed Harris Tweed weaver, explained that his diverse career history and recent occupational pluralism were shaped partly by his father's advice, partly by his own decision to remain with his family in the islands, and partly by his love of weaving. As a teenager, Calum discovered how much he enjoyed weaving work, but his father – who, as a weaver, was familiar with the industry's 'peaks and slumps' – encouraged him to pursue a different trade, something that he could more safely 'fall

back on'. Following this advice, Calum trained as a car mechanic, but ultimately his career would be marked by the same uncertainty that has long characterised employment prospects in this region – not just within the Harris Tweed industry. Over the years, as he sought to keep his home and family life in the islands, Calum moved between trades, jobs and training opportunities. When we met, he had only recently given up on his offshore job and decided to give weaving another try. As he was still getting started and 'receiving only a few tweed orders to weave', Calum took on other part-time or seasonal jobs as they became available, complementing his income and keeping his options open in case there was a sudden 'slump' in the industry.

Now in his early fifties, Calum described with excitement the prospect of being able to remain in the islands and to be able to make a living primarily by weaving Harris Tweed. Yet, like many other islanders, Calum also acknowledged that his life choices had required embracing the possibility of labour uncertainty, gradually shaping his perspective: 'my view on it is – it lasts the length of time it lasts. And let's just work at it while it's there.' Similar perspectives emerged not only in conversations with other 'locals' and 'returners', but also with 'incomers'. For instance, Vickie, a German woman who worked as a self-employed Harris Tweed weaver, described how she came to understand the realities of labour uncertainty in this region by learning from other islanders about their experiences, by researching local histories, and eventually by experiencing it herself as an industry worker. As she learned Scottish Gaelic, she also found that local expressions and the syntax of the language provided helpful ways of thinking about the constant possibility of 'change' in this region – from shifting employment prospects and personal circumstances, to dramatic changes in weather. This awareness had helped her work through uncertain times and settle into local rhythms, relationships and expectations.

At the same time, despite their diverse origins and backgrounds, several workers expressed their gratitude and sense of responsibility towards the industry,

recognising its vital contribution to population retention – today and in the past. Some people recalled being 'raised on Harris Tweed', as the industry had employed both of their parents when they were growing up. Others described how working as self-employed weavers had enabled them to remain in the place they cherished most and allowed them to pursue particular visions of 'good lives' – despite potential uncertainty. These individual considerations were often framed in relation to broader social concerns. Some workers hinted at a sense of shared precariousness as 'islanders', and many stressed the importance of 'respecting' and 'protecting the industry' in order to safeguard local livelihoods. And while workers recognised the powerful role played by the industry's long-standing legal protection, many also expressed their views on the important 'work' performed by islanders to ensure the continuity of the industry over time. Some of my interlocutors highlighted not only the collective efforts that had led to the trademark protection in 1910 and that were periodically required to preserve its integrity since then; but also what they saw as the vital role that each individual worker should play, through their everyday conduct, to ensure that the quality and reputation of Harris Tweed continued to be upheld.

These are just some of the insights that emerged while thinking more openly about work/labour to consider how lives and livelihoods are variously 'made' and 'worked at' as people navigate uncertain socio-economic conditions. In my monograph – titled *Working the Fabric* (2023) – I explore some of these ideas in greater detail. Proposing an expanded concept of work and labour, the book draws on ethnographic research and theoretical debates to examine how people understood, mobilised, articulated and departed from 'shared repertoires' as they grappled with the uncertainties and possibilities of capitalism and 'island life'– and the inclusive forms of belonging and place-making that emerged in these processes. Examining workers' everyday experiences, moral understandings, resourceful approaches and shifting life projects through this expanded lens rendered visible the different kinds of 'work' involved in making the material *and* social fabric of these islands – within and

beyond workplaces.

These insights suggest the importance of examining the intertwinement of 'work' and 'life' in contemporary capitalism in ways that may prove helpful for researchers working well beyond these islands. Some of these ideas resonate with the *Gens* Manifesto's focus on 'the diverse and wide-ranging practices of life and production that cross-cut social domains', and its attention to 'the very processes of generation through which systems and socialities are made' (Bear et al 2015). Locating workers' experiences and livelihood strategies within broader social, cultural and political-economic processes, I suggest not only the latent potential of 'work/labour' as an analytical category, but also its contribution to develop more holistic and generative approaches to the study of socio-economic life.

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production, inclusive belonging and place-making in global capitalism. Joana's work is informed by her background in design and in social anthropology.