Across the contemporary world forms of work and employment are being transformed at the same time as they are being made the subject of political negotiations, cultural and moral critiques, and profound rethinking. How can we ethnographically trace – and think with and about – the ambiguities of contemporary labour regimes? For example: How do we conceptualize and understand the (re)making of entrepreneurial subjects and the outsourcing of risk, the construction of special economic zones, the tensions and ambiguities of affective labour, or the role of corporations, unions, or indigenous federations as substitutes for the state in the enactment of public regulation and/or welfare? In the early 21st century we witness changing state forms, changing configurations of capital and corporate power and increased preoccupation with management of health and safety. What are the specific implications for work and labour?

The examination of labour was decisive for key figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ social sciences – such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. In the 1970s and partly in the 1980s, anthropology saw a strong (often Marxist- and feminist-inspired) interest in the comparative investigation of labour regimes and labour processes – and in the same period some of economic anthropology’s key perspectives and most influential concepts (such as “the informal economy”) were developed and given shape. To what extent, or on what terms, should or could classical divisions (between the rational and the irrational, paid and unpaid, work and leisure, center and periphery, formalisation and informalisation) be put to use in order to ethnographically map and explore contemporary labour regimes?

Today’s western debates about global restructurizations in contemporary capitalism, or about the neoliberal, tend to raise the question of whether permanent, waged work generally, perhaps lastingly, is becoming something more uncertain, rarer, than it seemed to be in a few decades up to the 1970s in parts of North America and Europe. Yet today’s preoccupation
with the precarious and insecure nature of most work and employment needs to be situated in a far wider and deeper history that includes western colonialism and its aftermath. Put differently, let us ask: What generates concern in the first place? How is precariousness experienced? Do we see the appearance of new or altered, contemporary forms of (economic, social and cultural) precarity? How are informalised economies and short-term contracts coped with and experienced? How do changing and uncertain environmental circumstances impinge on the possibilities and/or difficulties of producing, working, and securing a living?

In this workshop we invite a broad anthropological engagement with our world’s manifold and shifting labour realities. We are particularly interested in grounded ethnographies from different parts of world-society that examine labour regimes and labour processes both as expressions of specific histories and as forms of practices, knowledges and experiences. Finally we are interested in anthropology’s shifting relationship to examinations of labour. How have particular anthropological schools and/or authors looked at, or treated, work and labour? What might one learn from it? Examples of issues that could be raised include but are not limited to:

- Why, and how, should anthropologists seek to explore the diverse ways in which contemporary labour forms are being reconfigured?
- What is the relationship between particular labour regimes and particular forms of state-making (including production or dismantling of welfare)? How do changing law and/or regulation impinge on work realities and work forms?
- In what ways is work constitutive of subjectivities, of health, and/or well-being?
- What is the part played by organized labour or unions? What kinds of political collectives emerge in the face of an increasing sense of inconstancy, heterogeneity and informality – and what kinds of changes, or stabilizations, do they address?
- In which ways can an ethnographic focus on labour practices further our understanding of how economic and social forces are registered in working bodies? Or, how do the bodies of working people register new uncertainties and/or social tensions produced by the conditions of work?

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