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THE TRAGEDY OF WORK
REFLECTIONS FROM AN HEGELIAN PERSPECTIVE¹

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“Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.”
(Jean-Jaques Rousseau)

Introduction

In this paper I will use a simplified Hegelian concept of tragedy in order to understand modern working relations. This means to understand them as conflicts of two opposing positions which are equally justified. Employers as well as workers have both justified needs regarding the organisation of work, but they tend to collide as they are different in their very nature. In this context, “justified” does not mean that they are morally accurate but rather that they conform to the conditions of capitalistic society and their “relations of production” (Marx’s *Produktionsverhältnisse*). What I try to show then is that modern working relations can be understood as ongoing struggles for recognition without the possibility of reconciliation or sublation (Hegel’s *Aufhebung*). This is especially true in the modern context of work, that is, in a context of increasingly flexible and atypical working relations.

Due to the limited scope of this paper I cannot do justice to Hegel’s theory as well as to the complexity of the problem posed here, but the unanswered questions I leave might stimulate further considerations.

An Hegelian concept of tragedy

Hegel’s concept of tragedy is one of the most quoted and discussed in the last 150 years. He no longer sees tragedy as a conflict between good and evil, but rather as one between two justified but one-sided positions (cf. Roche 1998, 2005).

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“The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other. Consequently, in its ethical life, and because of it, each is just as much involved in guilt.” (Hegel 1975, 1196)

“He (= Hegel) realized that at the center of the greatest tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles we find not a tragic hero but a tragic collision, and that the conflict is not between good and evil but between one-sided positions, each of which embodies some good.” (Kaufmann 1979, 201f.)

By focussing on this core structure of tragedy, Hegel not only integrates it into its own dialectic system of philosophy but is also able to use it as a model for societal and historic development and conflict in general. As history is a dialectic river in which opposing positions emerge, interfere with each other and finally become sublated, so is tragedy. The audience which follows the tragic events recognizes that for these conflicts there is no real solution possible but only sublation through the recognition of the higher good, the ethical substance which consists of both positions and holds them together. Another way to put it is to say that tragedy is a conflict of rationality, as the ratio (*Verstand*) for Hegel has its right but is one-sided and non-dialectic, whereas reason on the other hand accepts the dialectic structure of reality and is itself dialectic. The structure of tragedy now becomes especially obvious in times of radical changes, when new societal structures and convictions emerge and come into conflict with the old, traditional ones. The tragic hero often stands for this new time – and is right in doing so. But as any historic development is built on and always preserves parts of what was before, he is also wrong. The same is true for his counterpart. Or, it can be a conflict between two duties, say to obey the law (Creon) or loyalty to your family or friends (Antigone).

“It is the honour of these great characters to be culpable.” (Hegel 1975, 1215)

What makes an Hegelian approach especially interesting is that it takes into account and recognizes the various obligations and bonds humans have in their life. Hegelian tragedies cannot be solved by a moral perfectionism, as a Kantian approach might suggest. And, in my opinion, this reflects the real life situation. The various beliefs humans have and the actions they take rely on many factors: socialisation, education, knowledge, societal conditions etc. For Hegel what is wrong and what is right does not only derive from the

moral law but also from what he used to call “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*). Some important parts of the basic characterization of ethical life given by Hegel seem still to be prevailing.

“Hegel uses *Sittlichkeit* to signify two apparently quite distinct things: First, it refers to a certain kind of social order, one that is differentiated and structured in a rational way. Thus ‘ethical life’ is Hegel’s name for an entire set of institutions – the ones anatomized under the heading in the *Philosophy of Right*: the family, civil society, and the modern political state. Second, however, the term also refers to a certain attitude or ‘subjective disposition’ on the part of individuals toward their social life, an attitude of harmonious identification with its institutions.” (Wood 1990, 196)

“The ethical life of a modern social order requires the liberation of the bourgeois nuclear family from the traditional institution of the feudal extended family or clan. It needs an arena of civil society in which individuals participate in an open economic marketplace. The legal regulation of civil society must protect the personhood of each human being, and the laws should be explicitly and rationally codified.” (Wood 1990, 207)

To simplify things, I understand ethical life here as the subjective identification with certain needs and principles predefined by society. Obviously, tragic conflicts cannot come about without individuals who identify with those particular principles and act in accordance with them. Yet the logic of tragic conflicts cannot be adequately grasped, in Hegel’s view, by referring to such acting individuals alone. In this respect, his approach differs from any theory that takes the individual human being as its starting point. Tragic conflicts are in fact conflicts of different principles which constitute a given society, and the involved characters impersonate them. What we can find here is the starting point for the Marxian approach to understand modern, capitalistic society as antagonistic. For Marx, as Raymond Williams says,

“social development was seen as necessarily contradictory in character, and tragedy occurs at those points where the conflicting forces must, by their inner nature, take action, and carry the conflict through to a transformation” (Williams 2001, 35).

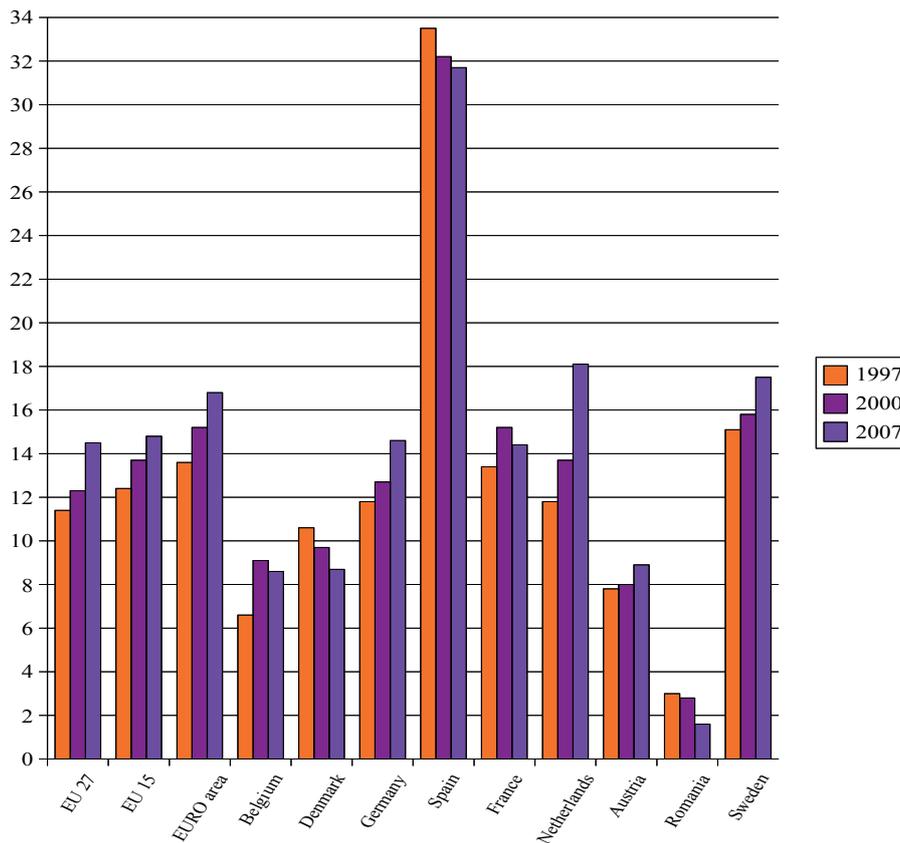
To sum up, a basic Hegelian concept of tragedy consists of three components: (1) it is a conflict of two opposing but justified positions; (2) each position is justified as it based upon and corresponds to certain needs or principles predefined by society (ethical life); (3) these conflicts itself constitute society

and are insofar inevitable. I will now try to show how modern working relations can be understood as tragic in this sense.

The modern world of work

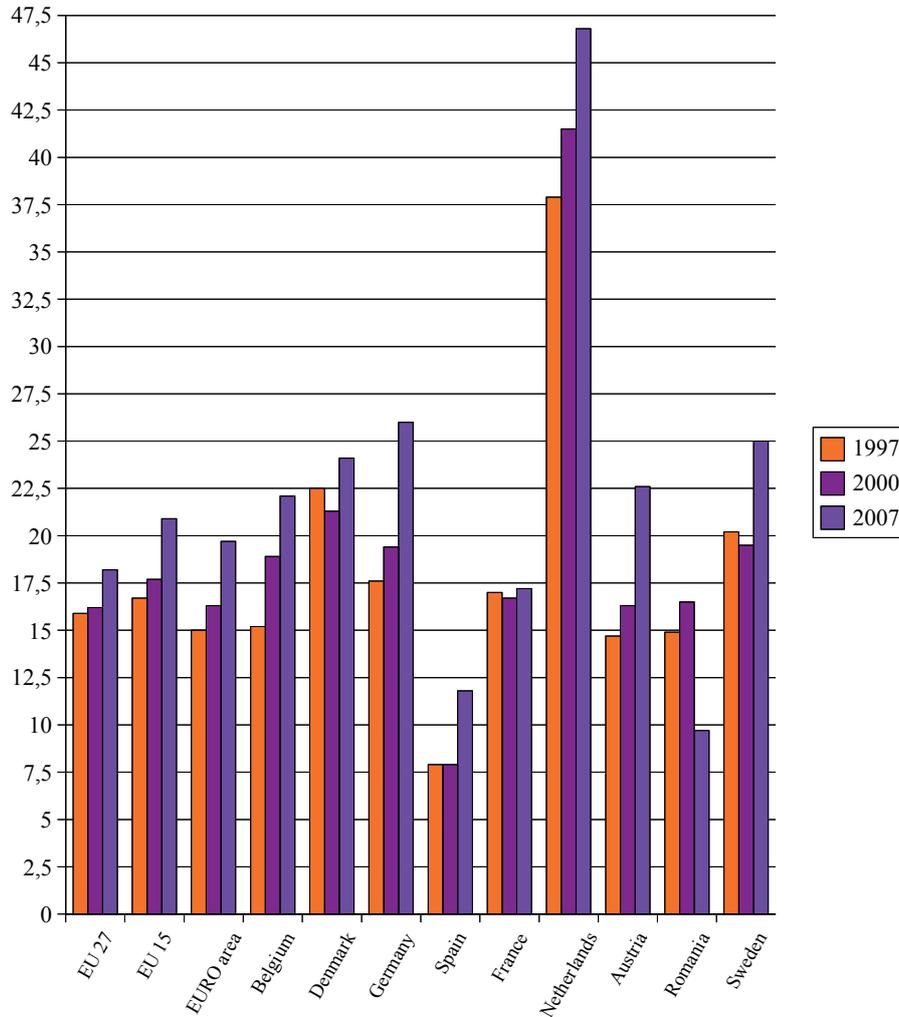
The modern world of work is shaped by increasing flexibilisation and deregulation processes. The Tayloristic model of work as well as what might be called “standard employment” (*Normalarbeitsverhältnis*) is more and more replaced by new forms of work and employment. For example this can be measured by the increase of part-time employment and employees with a contract of limited duration (graphs 1 and 2).

Employees with a contract of limited duration (annual average)



Source: Eurostat

Graph 1

Persons employed part-time

Source: Eurostat

Graph 2

“Enterprises are increasingly relying on various types of working time patterns that permit greater flexibility in working hours over a day, week, month or even an entire year. In the past, such “flexibility” in the organization of working time had been limited mainly to overtime work and shift work in its various forms. However, in recent decades there has been a marked trend away from the traditional “standard workweek” towards a more diverse array of options for arranging any given number

of working hours. Although this trend is gradual, it is nonetheless quite real: in 1995, some 65 per cent of workers in the EU had fixed work schedules, but by 2005 this figure had decreased to 61 per cent. Often, but certainly not always, flexible working arrangements have adverse consequences for family life and local communities.” (ILO 2009, 25)

Given the capitalistic way of production this seems necessary in order to fulfill the aim of generating more and more profit. Today this is still a widely unquestioned principle. For sure, due to the financial crisis of the last few months some excesses are criticized but the system of capitalistic production is not questioned in general. The whole modern society with its welfare system and other amenities seems to depend on the well-being of firms and their hunger for profit. The globalized conflicts between firms, regions and even countries ask for retrenchment, streamlining, and the development of new and more productive ways of work. One of the main reasons why governments and even workers support these efforts is that firms say it is necessary to save and create jobs and employment. And to have a job or paid work is one main condition for membership in modern society, and not just because it provides money. This can be clearly seen as one looks at the experience of unemployment. It destroys the structures of time, routine, status, self-confidence and social networks (cf. Fineman 1986).

“Work in itself may not be the means to self-realization, nor the means to achieve sufficient wealth to compensate for what may be experienced as the alienating consequences of work, but the effects of unemployment are a clear indication that work is a central social institution and an essential part of most people’s lives.” (Grint 2005, 42)

So, to introduce new forms of work and cut costs through retrenchments to generate and maximise profit seems to be justified by the very existence of capitalistic production. It is not just a bad attitude of the employers to do so and they can justify their actions by referring to the challenges of modern economy. They have to act like capitalists if they want their firms to survive and flourish.

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx/Engels 1985, Volume XXIX, 263).

The employers represent one side of the tragic conflict of modern working relations. The other one is represented by the workers whose work is transformed, flexibilised, or even abolished. They have valid expectations of their

work, above the simple fact that they want to work. These expectations can be summed up by the concept of decent work, introduced by the International Labour Organization about fifteen years ago. The main use of the concept is the application on the international and national levels through agreements and laws. Decent work is to be characterized by the existence of employment, rights at work, social security and social dialogue (figure 1). It is based on the universal human needs of freedom, equality, security and dignity.

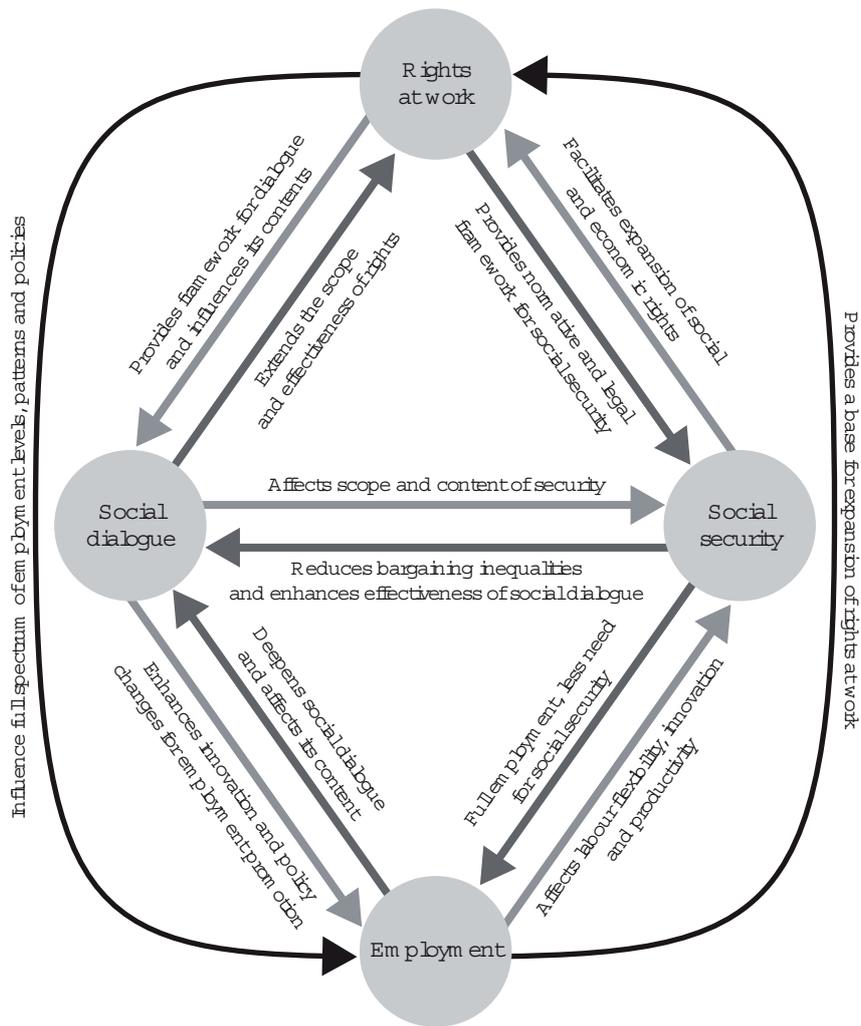


Figure 1

“The decent work paradigm is in principle applicable to all working people in all societies. The objectives of decent work are valid across the full

spectrum of institutional and developmental diversity. Working people in all societies desire freedom of association and oppose discrimination, forced labour and child employment in hazardous and harmful situations. They wish to participate through social dialogue in decision-making affecting their work and lives, both at the level of the enterprise and the nation and at regional and global levels. Likewise, all people and all societies desire work in conditions of dignity and safety and with adequate remuneration. Finally, a modicum of social and economic security in work and life is a universal aspiration.” (Ghai 2006, 4)

The concept of universal human dignity from which these claims for decent work derive is not only a constitutional part and foundation of modern bourgeois society. Given today’s stage of societal and economic development it is in principle also possible to fulfill these claims. So they are justified, too.

Both the position of the employers and the workers is predefined by society, in the Marxian sense of “relations of production” which arise from the given stage of economic development. On the one side, capitalistic production demands maximising profit on the costs of the workers, but on the other side, capitalistic production is embedded within a bourgeois society which claims to rely on the principle of human dignity but leaves the needs of the workers unsatisfied.

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of the material forces of production” (Marx/Engels 1985, Volume XXIX, 263).

In general, this conflict has been discussed widely, and different ways to solve it have been developed over the past 150 years. Maybe the most successful so far has been the implementation of working standards, specific rights of workers and a welfare system which does not abolish capitalism, but provides to some extent social protection and security. Even if most of the provided protection is closely connected to employment, efforts of decommodification reduced the citizen’s reliance on the market (and their labour) for their well-being (cf. Esping-Andersen 1990). Now, the policy efforts to establish an “active” welfare system and deregulate the labour market to improve the investment climate, strengthen the economy and create more jobs intensified the conflict between employers and workers. Firms are increasingly falling back on individualised work-organization designs which aim at achieving operational flexibility by using nonstandard solutions and delegating decision making and responsibility to the individuals. Employees are asked to make full use of the scope of

design and decision-making available to them while, however, giving absolute priority to the flexibility needs of their respective business organization. This modern process with its both enabling and forcing character changes working conditions in several central aspects (cf. Böhler/Neumaier/Schweiger/Sedmak 2009). These new challenges can be understood with the concepts of boundaryless work (“*Entgrenzung*”) (Gottschall/Voß 2003) and subjectification of work (“*Subjektivierung von Arbeit*”) (Moldaschl/Voß 2002). Whereas the first refers to the blurring of boundaries typical for the Tayloristic and Fordistic forms of production, such as fixed working hours, places, and contracts, the latter refers to the new demands coming with flexible work, such as the exploitation of personal and subjective qualities and characteristics in the working process and the increasing demands of self-control and self-organization of work. Both concepts suggest that work becomes more and more intertwined with the personal lives of the workers and that this might lead to an economization of the whole person.

“As a consequence, the employees should identify themselves increasingly with their work. Consequently, their work becomes more and more important for the individual conduct of life, the formation of identity at work, and self-consciousness of the employees.” (Nierling 2007, 57)

This development leads to a paradoxical situation which complicates the general conflict between employers and workers as it generates a similar conflict within the individual worker himself. This means that boundaryless and subjectified work demands from the workers also to take the stance of the employers. Through the identification with their work and the forced intertwining of it with their private life, they tend to exploit themselves more and more and subjugate it to economic rules. Not only their work is flexible, but so are they (cf. Sennett 1998). On the top emerges what Günter G. Voß and Jürgen Pongratz call the “labour entrepreneur” whose whole private life serves the maintenance and expansion of his employability (Wilz 2005, 197).

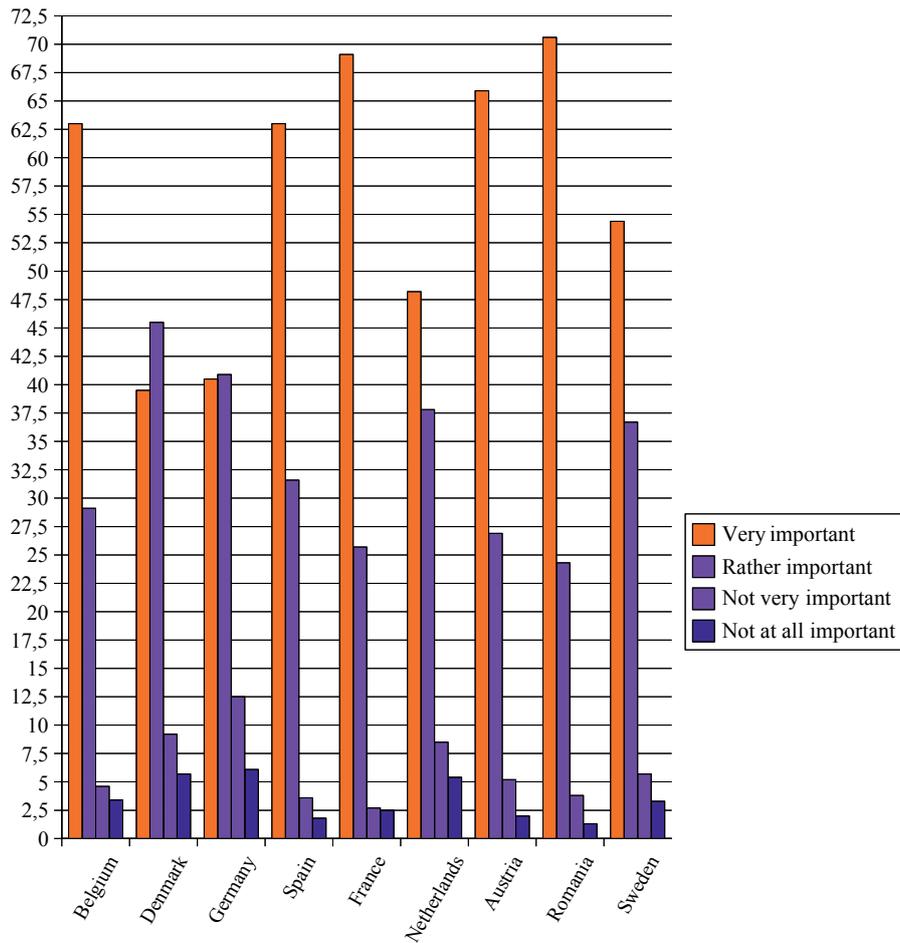
I now want to give a brief outlook on how these conflicts of modern working relations can be conceptualized as struggles for recognition.

Struggles for recognition

The Hegelian concept of recognition was recently exploited by Axel Honneth as a basic medium of social integration and of the constitution of subjectivity (cf. Honneth 1992). It places intersubjectivity at the very beginning of the development of subjectivity. In the context of work this concept was then ap-

plied by Stephan Voswinkel, Ursula Holtgrewe and Gabriele Wagner (Holtgrewe/Voswinkel/Wagner 2001). Given the high importance of employment and paid work for the individual in modern society (as shown in graph 3), it

How important is work in your life?



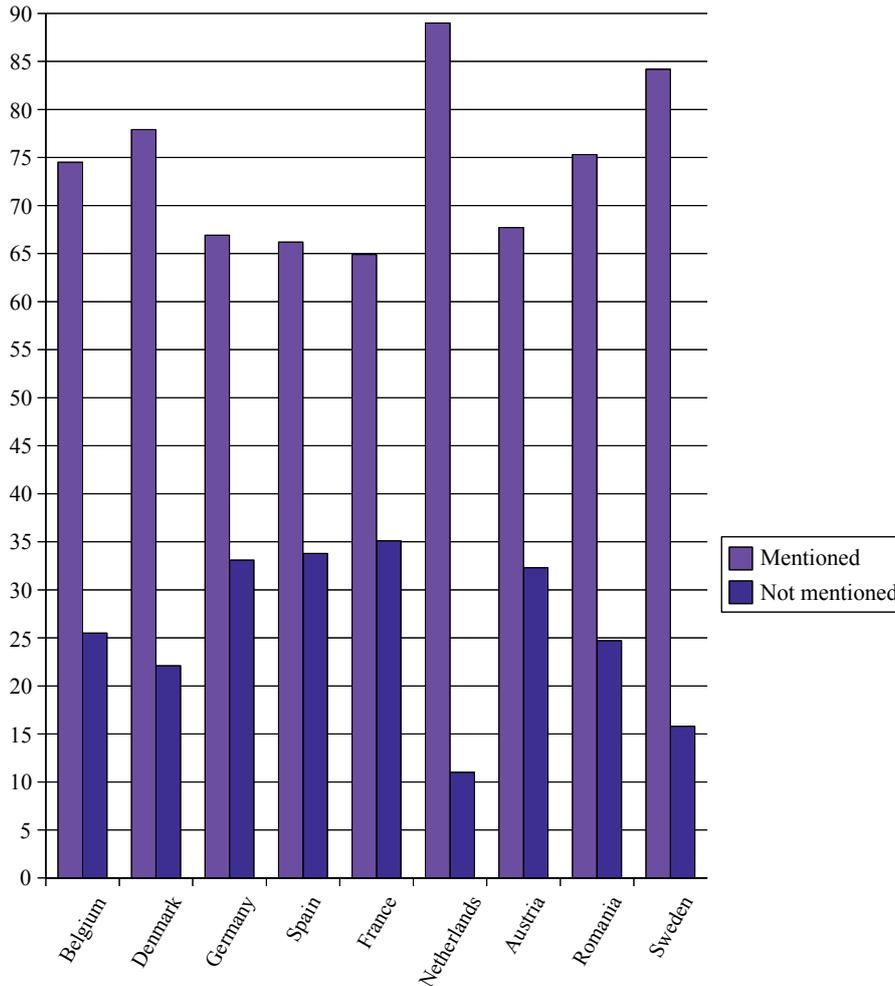
Source: World Value Survey

Graph 3

is obvious that structures of recognition of and at work are significant for the development and maintenance of self-confidence, dignity, honour, social status and reputation. As said above, the main use of the decent work concept, as designed by the ILO, is the application on the international and national levels through agreements and laws. That is the main reason why the organisational, interpersonal and individual levels are not sufficient covered by this

concept, although they are very important for the workers, (cf. the importance of working with pleasant people shown in graph 4) Some important expect-

Important in job: pleasant people to work with



Source: World Value Survey

Graph 4

ations workers have from and at their work cannot be regulated by law, but also derive from human dignity. To fill this gap I argue that the concept of recognition should be integrated into the concept of decent work.

Workers demand recognition for and at their work from their superiors, colleagues, customers and also friends and family. Although the concepts of

decent work and of recognition overlap in some areas, it can be shown that a thicker and deeper concept of decent work is needed. Using the distinction of Voswinkel between “appreciation” (*Würdigung*) and “admiration” (*Bewunderung*), one can find a variety of different forms of recognition at work (see table 1).

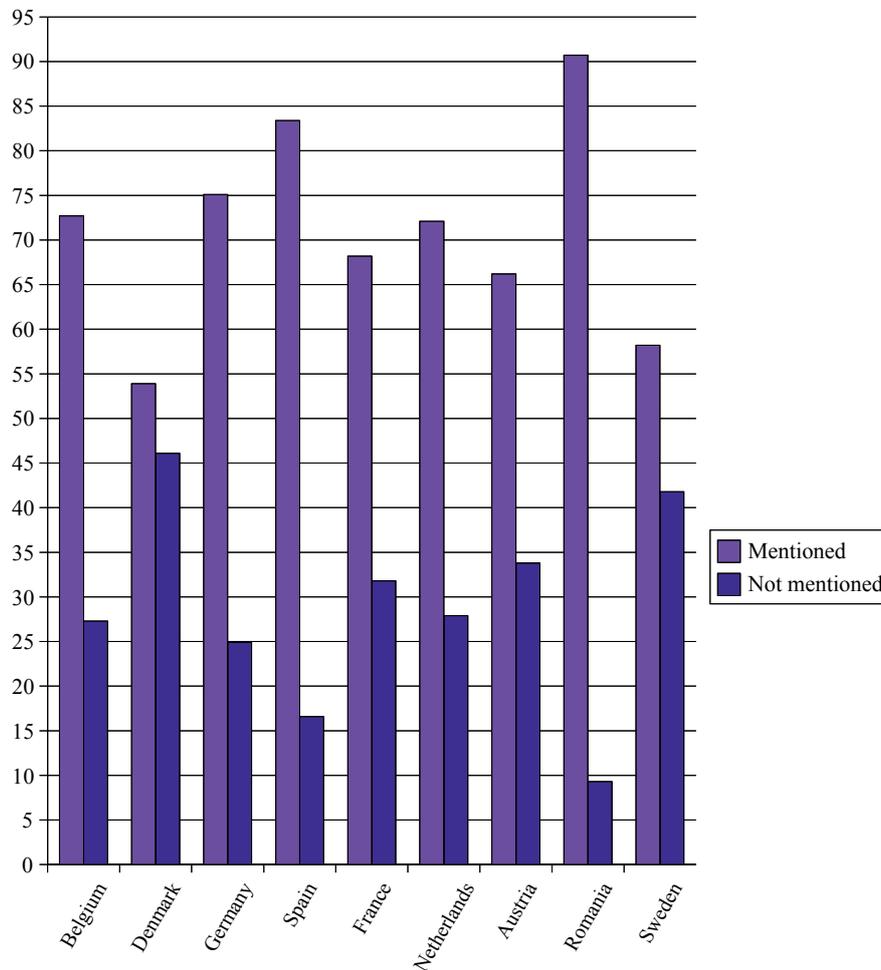
Levels and forms of recognition

	Appreciation	Admiration
Societal level	Social security (health and unemployment insurance, pension)	Prestige (wealth, position, power, education, prominence)
Organizational level	rules of seniority, payment	bonus payment, „employee of the month“, careers
Inter-personal level	politeness, respect, attention, gratitude	praise

Table 1

“Appreciation means the valuation of work in the context of social affiliation as traditional institutions like unions and work councils given by recognizing the pure membership as a worker. Admiration in contrast marks the recognition that is given for extraordinary achievements, success or originality.” (Nierling 2007, 59)

So, the tragic conflicts between the employers and the workers can be conceptualized as struggles for recognition. On the one hand, firms are not primarily concerned with the self-realisation of their workers, but with the strengthening of their performance, on the other hand workers demand recognition. Obviously good payment is one important form of recognition which most workers demand, as is shown also by the World Value Survey (graph 5, next page). And it is one major issue employers and workers tend to struggle over. Due to the implementation of collective bargaining agreements in Europe, this struggle is for most workers no longer one that they have settle themselves (table 2, page xxx). An extensive study on the concept of recognition on this level of industrial relations has been presented by Voswinkel (cf. Voswinkel 2001). It shows that labour conflicts are not only about wages or working hours but also about recognition and reputation. Both sides have to recognize each other as legitimate negotiating partners and both cannot afford to lose face. In this sense the tragic conflict is back on the stage, and both the representatives of the employers and of the workers play their roles in order to get as much out of the negotiations for their clientele as possible. And both know that they will meet again, as their struggle cannot be solved finally.

Important in job: good pay

Source: World Value Survey

Graph 5

But as the union density is declining (graph 6, page xxx) and also the collective wage-bargaining coverage, this situation might change in the future (cf. Ebbinghaus/Visser 2000). Overall, the ongoing crisis of the unions and the shifting of bargaining to the company level in many countries exacerbates the situation of workers. Traditional forms of solidarity are declining and the worker has to face his employer alone (cf. Schweiger 2009).

One other development that can be observed is that recognition is increasingly tied to admiration of success in organisations and indeed societies,

Country	Coverage rate			
	Unadjusted		Adjusted	
	2000	2001	2000	2001
Austria	78	78	98	98
Belgium	>90	>90	>90	>90
Denmark	83	83	83	83
France	90-95	90-95	90-95	90-95
Netherlands	nd	88	nd	88
Spain	75	68	91	81
Sweden	>90	>90	>90	>90

Source: EIRO; adjusted = coverage rate adjusted for employee groups excluded from the right to bargain

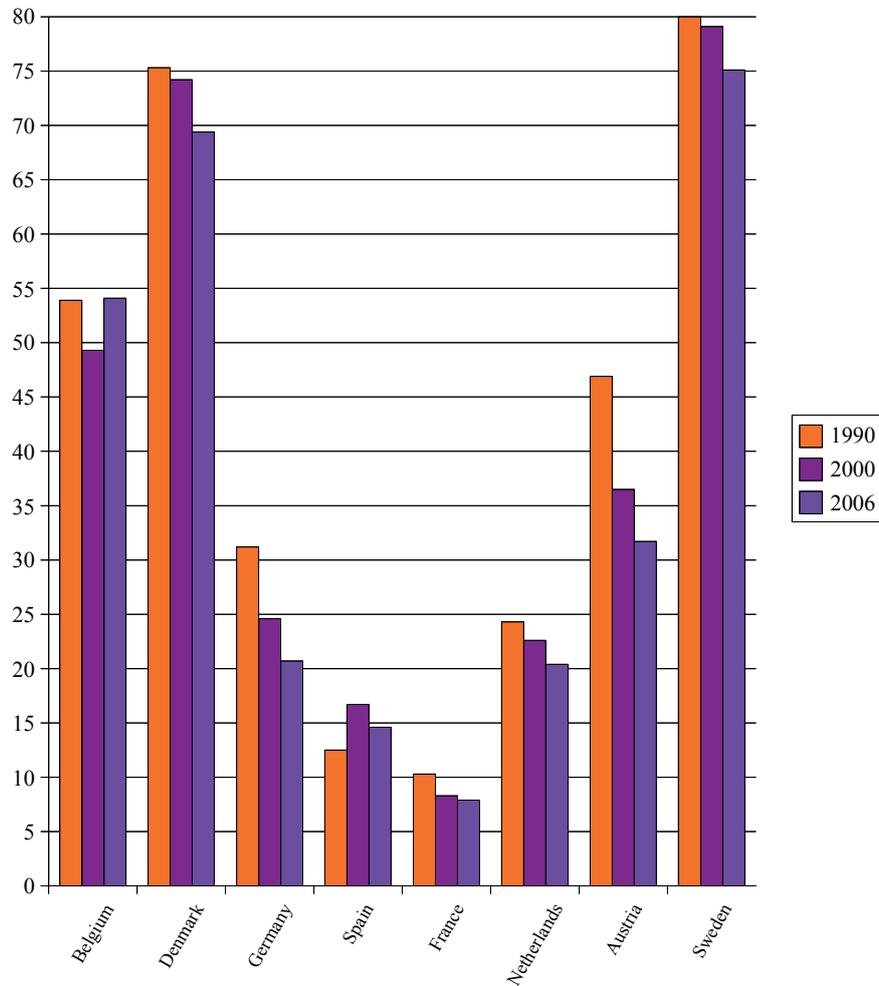
Table 2

which flexibilise themselves and orient themselves towards the market, whereas recognition in the form of appreciation declines. This shapes the struggle for recognition in the context of work as well as in the sphere of private life. The intertwining of work and life can possibly shape the forms of recognition workers demand in their private life. They begin to misinterpret personal relationships as working relations, and as work becomes life and life becomes work they seek admiration where should be friendship, love and trust.

Conclusion

In this paper I tried to show that modern working relations can be understood as tragic in an Hegelian sense. They are conflicts between the needs of the employers and the needs of the workers which are both justified given the capitalistic mode of production and bourgeois society. New developments in the world of work, propelled by the ongoing need of flexibilisation, shape this conflict and produce it also within the individual worker himself, as now his whole personality and subjectivity is demanded in the working process, which leads to a stronger intertwining of life and work. This process is dialectical in the sense that it both fulfills the workers' demands for more freedom and control over their work, but also reinforces the exploitation and leads to an economisation of life. What we have here is a new form of control, namely control through autonomy. As the capitalistic form of production is not going to be abolished anytime soon, this tragedy will last. But even if it cannot be solved, the struggle for recognition will not end.

Trade union density



Source: OECD

Graph 6

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