

## **'Decent work' – historical and cultural varieties**

### *Call for contributions*

Past ideas and present experiences concerning acceptable forms of work are wide and varied. Opposition to slavery, child labour, and long work days vividly illustrate how formerly acceptable notions of labour change over time and across cultures, even if none of these forms have been totally abolished. In 1999, in response to the persistence of coercive working conditions around the world, the International Labour Organization (ILO) linked its main institutional goals to a specific definition of 'decent work':

The primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. This is the main purpose of the Organization today. Decent work is the converging focus of all its four strategic objectives: the promotion of rights at work; employment; social protection; and social dialogue. It must guide its policies and define its international role in the near future.

Though the ILO definition is heavily employed in many political and media debates, the ways that people define 'decent' work varies across societies and history. Decent work also appears to be intimately bound up with ideas of a 'good life', yet another category that varies widely across places and times. While specific relations of coerced and precarious labour may appear as aberrations from the so-called 'regular employment', they are hardly exceptional when viewed through historically-informed perspectives from the Global South.

Beyond conditions of work itself, what is considered 'decent' work often relates to work's perceived contributions to society. In his recent book, [Bullshit Jobs: A Theory](#), David Graeber examines how some people consider the content of their jobs to be useless, while addressing what services (or not) they provide to society at large. But who decides what is a meaningless job and what is not? How and why does this change over time? Financiers involved in speculation, for example, may consider themselves as performing an essential social function, but there is a long history of others who judge their practices as socially undesirable and even pathological.

For this issue of [Voices from Around the World](#) we thus invite contributors to explore and critically reflect on notions of decent versus indecent work from a global and comparative perspective, with the aim of achieving a more detailed understanding of labour relations worldwide. By bringing different discourses of (in-)decent work into the discussion, we aim to stimulate debate on the values and ethics of work in comparative perspective. Potential questions may include:

- What is decent work?
- Does the ILO's definition resonate with other concepts of decent work from around the world?
- Is it feasible, or even desirable, to advance a universal normative definition of decent work, such as the one advanced by the ILO (1999)?
- How have concepts of decent work changed over time?
- In what contexts, and from which actors, do notions of decent work emerge? Who 'invents' such notions?

- What role do expressions of identity, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, play in reflections upon notions of decent work?
- How do definitions of (in-)decent work relate to changing notions of social value and function?
- How is decent work related to a globalisation?
- Is decent work a pillar of democratic societies?
- How does decent work relate to different ideas of a 'good life'?

We welcome text-based submissions, including poems and philosophical reflections, of between 800 and 2000 words. We also encourage photo-essays, videos, sounds, or other multimedia submissions. Please contact the editorial group with any questions.

**- Deadline: 15 November 2018.**

**- Please consult the style sheet included below.**

**- Contact for submissions and inquiries: [gssc-voices@uni-koeln.de](mailto:gssc-voices@uni-koeln.de)**

### ***Voices from Around the World* – an alternative online journal**

*Voices from Around the World* is an alternative online journal published by the Global South Studies Center Cologne (GSSC). Its aim is to publish short contributions in various formats (texts, videos, interviews, pictures, music, poems etc.). The contributions should be comprehensible to people beyond the sphere of academia, and written contributions should have a maximum length of about 1,500 words. The open-access journal is published on the GSSC website. The goal is to publish contributions that reflect various opinions on a common theme or concept from around the world and to publish them in an easily accessible way.

**Find the previous issues of *Voices from Around the World* here: <http://voices.uni-koeln.de>**

**Editorial board: Andrea Hollington, Sinah Kloß, Tijo Salverda, Nina Schneider and Oliver Tappe**