

CfP: „Flexibility“ and „Agility“: Strategies, Practices, and Ambivalences of a Key Concept since the 1980s

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Location: Darmstadt

Organizers: Martina Heßler (TU Darmstadt), Martin Krzywdzinski (HSU), Christopher Neumaier (ZZF)

Conference hosted by: Technical University of Darmstadt, Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam (ZZF), Helmut-Schmidt-University/University of the Federal Armed Forces Hamburg (HSU), SPP 2267 “The Digitalization of Working Worlds. Conceptualising and Capturing a Systemic Transformation.”

Keynote: Prof. Richard Sennett

Flexibility has emerged as a key concept to explain social change since the 1970s and 1980s. Flexibilization shaped industrial and service relations as well as social relations. Examples of this process include flextime succeeding rigid workday time regulations in offices or “flexible automation” becoming the catchphrase in industrial production as the fixed automation that had shaped industrialization up to the 1970s and 1980s gradually vanished. Private life started to shift as well: new modes of life such as singles and cohabitation appeared to coexist with the traditional nuclear family. The latter represented a strict social institution while the former allowed for constant adjustments based on individual needs – a differentiation that needs to be critically analyzed from a historical perspective. Sociologist Richard Sennett pointed out in his widely received essay “The Corrosion of Character” (Sennett 1998) that flexibility had become a crucial tenet in “postmodern” societies. The title of the book’s German translation, “Der flexible Mensch,” highlighted this argument. The English title, by contrast, alluded to the negative aspects of the shift towards flexibility, which aimed to bend human beings’ actions towards the interest of management, which in turn corroded one’s character. Sociologists and historians such as Michael J. Piore, Charles F. Sabel, and Lutz Raphael further confirmed the ways in which flexibility evolved into a key concept of social change in the late 20th century have already noticed (Piore/ Sabel 1984; Raphael 2019).

Flexibility has not only been analyzed by scholars, but also experienced, practiced in some form, and criticized by management or unions since the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, academics were not the only people exploring the parameters of flexibility. In addition, it seeped from the theoretical into the practical. In both constellations, managers and union representatives identified “flexibility” as their guiding principle. These actors sparked a reorganization of temporal and spatial orders, reframing the concept for working life. Organizations and work methods— but also the life courses of workers and employees— became more flexible. Even social structures, including the traditional nuclear family were not immune to flexibility, giving way to increasing acceptance of alternative lifestyles.

This conference explores the concept of flexibility along with the strategies, processes, practices, and ambivalences of flexibilization. Even though the focus of the conference will be on work environments, we will also consider broader social contexts.

The presentations should address in particular the following intertwined rubrics:

- 1) To what extent can “flexibility” serve as a key analytical category that provides vital nuanced insight into social change?
- 2) What processes, strategies, practices, perceptions, and experiences of flexibility need to be assessed historically and empirically?
- 3) Flexibilization and digitalization have been strong allies in the last third of the 20th century: What are the ways in which digitalization facilitated flexibilization or how were they concurrently constructed?
- 4) How do we integrate the ambivalences, resistances, and criticism of the concept of flexibilization against the backdrop of its alleged success story?

1. Flexibility and Social Change

One set of proposed presentations should discuss the role of flexibility in economic, social, and cultural change since the 1970s. Studies from the social sciences, for instance, pointed out that flexibility became ubiquitous in industrial relations during the 1980s. Richard Sennett argued that a new “flexible capitalism” had emerged, which compelled individuals to constantly adjust to evolving environments (Sennett 1998).. While Sennett considered “flexibility” a key category, Scott Lash and John Urry (1994), in contrast, claimed that “flexibility theory” did not adequately explain socio-economic changes.

The conference therefore aims to discuss the extent to which “flexibility” reveals on social change as well as on the debates about “modernity,” “late modernity,” “second modernity,” or “postmodernity.” Submitted papers should critically evaluate contemporary analyses between the 1970s and 1990s within their historical contexts and further discuss the general shifts between the late-20th century and early 21st century. In particular, we are interested in papers that review how the concepts of “flexibility” and “flexibilization” as well as “agility,” which was introduced in the 1990s, offered new perspectives on the discussed watershed of the 1970s. This includes how terminology shifted towards agility during the 1990s, highlighting proactive changes by individuals where flexibility described the general ability to adapt and willingness to be open for constant change. In what ways does this shift point towards either a radicalization of flexibilization or continuous evolution linked to new qualities of adaptability? Furthermore, flexibilization needs to be juxtaposed with other social theories such as pluralization, individualization, singularization (Andreas Reckwitz 2017), decentralization, as well as discontinuity and disruption.

2. Flexibility and Flexibilization: Empirical Processes

The conference examines the processes of flexibilization and agility in the work environment within social and global contexts since the 1970s. The proposed papers should address flexibilization in industrial and service professions as well as domestic work.

We are especially interested in papers that discuss: 1) perspectives, strategies, and practices of different actors, which could include management, union representatives, workers, and employees as well as consumers; 2) the legitimization, promises, and visions of flexibilization and how their implementation or lack thereof materialized; 3) perceptions, experiences, (subversive) practices, and strategies of workers and employees in relation to flexibilization either demanded by the employer or desired by themselves.

The following topics are of particular interest to us:

- Flexibility and agility as narratives: Which narratives have been developed and why? How powerful were these discourses and what are the ways in which they legitimized both concepts? How did flexibility and agility raise expectations of how one should organize work and life? What are the ways in which both

concepts became self-fulfilling prophecies? Who initiated the debates about flexibility and agility? How did the discourses shift over time?

- Dissolution of temporal orders, such as the flexibilization of working time.
- Spatial flexibilization: The term “flexible specialization” (Michael J. Piore/Charles F. Sabel 1984) hinted at new connections between regional and local production sites as well as nationally and globally operating companies and supply chains. Re-structuring, however, also occurred at the micro level through, for instance, the redesign of workspaces, the creation of open space offices and co-working spaces, home offices, and even the global reorganization of labor division.
- Flexibilization of work organization, employment relationships, and management methods: How did flexibilization initiate the emergence of new modes of working, such as in teams or groups, or of new (and often) precarious employment conditions? In addition, papers should consider how flexibilization affected the requirements of work and employment relations and its impact on work life. In particular, we are interested in presentations discussing “semi-autonomous group work” or “team work” as well as the dissemination of temporary and contract work. Furthermore, we would like to explore the relevance of contemporary concepts from the social sciences, such as “entmployee” (“Arbeitskraftunternehmer,” Voß/Pongratz 1998; Pongratz/Voß 2003) or “entrepreneurial self” (“unternehmerisches Selbst,” Ulrich Bröckling) in our historical analysis of the shifts in work relations during the late 20th century.
- Biographic flexibilization: How can sociological as well as historical theories and methods explain the concept of lifelong learning in working environments or the changes in vocational and professional training and, further, competences and job profiles both as means and consequences of flexibilization strategies? Papers should consider de-standardization of the life course of industrial workers in their analysis (Raphael 2017).
- Industrial products: A shortened lifecycle has become a common phenomenon that tremendously affected the product itself as well as the design of product manufacturing processes. Consumer and industrial goods have been “individualized” and “pluralized.” Furthermore, consumers have taken an active role in product re-design. How did these modes of flexibilization affect the “Empire of Things” (Frank Trentmann 2016) and their production?
- Agility: How did the introduction of the concept of agility change strategies, practices, work organization, and spatial orders since the 1990s? What are the differences between “agility” and “flexibility”?
 - Gender and diversity: The processes of flexibilization have had an enormous impact on gender roles. But generally, we need to interrogate which social groups felt the effects of flexibilization. It is crucial to trace differences in practices and behavioral patterns and link them to race, class, and gender as well as age.

3. Digitalization and Flexibilization

The sociologist Richard Sennett noted that flexibilization, individualization, and high-technology— namely digitalization— have been closely intertwined. For instance, the shift towards robots and computers in factories and offices during the last third of the 20th century were accompanied by visions of flexible production as well as interlinkages and integration among the design, production, and sale of products. The shortening of innovation cycles and the introduction of flexible methods of production or work were two important consequences. Even though they have been prerequisites for flexibilization, their technological implementation is a demanding and complex process. The conference aims to review the crucial role of technology for the processes of flexibilization. Contemporary observers, for instance, discussed its impact on the role of CIM and “New Concepts of Production” (Horst Kern/Michael Schumann 1984 & 1992). Recently, the debates on “Industry 4.0” or the “Internet of Things (IoT)” promised ubiquitous networks and digital communication as well as big-data analyses. In turn, their optimization eventually would help accomplish the increasing requirements of products, most notably their time-to-market readiness, flexibility, and individualization. Digitalization also enabled a new level of gig work, home office, and a global division of labor. But at the same time, possibilities of control, precarious job options, and the devaluation of knowledge increased significantly. Submitted papers should evaluate the role of technologies for the process of flexibilization and point to their social significance. The presentations should review the co-construction of flexibility and digitalization. The linkages between agility and digitalization are another aspect that should be addressed: How did agile software development shape the concepts of work and employment?

4. Ambivalences, Resistances, and Criticism

Flexibility pointed towards a dissolution of rigid orders that have been considered a trademark of industrialized “modernity.” Flexibility thus promised new options and freedom, but simultaneously also reduced stability, solidarity and the sense of community, as well as security. Precarious living conditions are the most prominent consequence. Submitted papers should address the discourses on the ambivalences as well as the criticism of flexibility and agility.

This includes the question on the social significance as well as the implementation of flexibilization in work and private life. If the ideal of an egalitarian partnership demanded the dissolution of traditional gender roles since the 1970s, one should connect this process to flexibilization. The limits of this shift had already become obvious to contemporaries in the 1980s: Neither traditional gender roles and life forms vanished entirely nor did hierarchically organized work processes.

We are looking for papers that ask how individuals or social groups refrained from or evaded the demands of flexibilization: How did they develop subversive strategies? What are the ways they organized protest and resistance? How did contemporaries that adhered to traditional forms of work and life perceive the debates on flexibility?

Please submit your proposed papers by 30 May 2022.

Send a short CV (1 page) and abstract (max. 3,000 characters) to hiwi-technik@pg.tu-darmstadt.de

Travel costs will be reimbursed.

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