



Does work still shape social identities and action?

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This project seeks to understand the ways in which people identify with their work and the extent that this has changed over time. It examines the experience of employees in three different industries -teaching, railways and banking. It explores how people are socialised into workplace identity, how they in turn reproduce these identities and how these change over time. It further seeks to understand how these occupational identities inform and underpin individual and collective engagement with community, other aspects of civic life and political involvement. Much of contemporary academic and more popular writing in this area makes fairly crude caricatures of both current and historical work identification. In such accounts work in the past is characterised by stability of long term employment, epitomised by the 'job for life' and a strong work ethic. Work, it is further suggested, provided the major source of meaning for people. With the change in the nature of the economy and work many commentators now suggest that such identities are no longer possible in an era marked by labour market and industrial uncertainty. Further there are questions raised as to how younger employees engage with work and civil society. This project explores these developments by placing contemporary change within historical context. It seeks a more detailed and complex understanding of the way people think, and have thought, about work.

The project will interview three sets of workers from the three industries - those currently in their 20s who started work in the 1990s/2000s; a second group in their 40's who would have started their working life in the 1970s; finally we will interview those who started their working life in the 1950s. The aim is to compare and contrast across age groups, genders and between and within industry. Lastly we aim to explore a further group of workers from the three industries whose working life began around the turn of the 19th/20th century. This will be done by the use of auto/biographical material accounts from the sectors as well as a variety of historical record from employers, occupational groups and trade unions.

The project will make use of a variety of research methods and techniques including semi-structured interviews, analysis of auto/biography, use of visual techniques as well as documentary analysis.

Continued overleaf



For more information please contact

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This project runs from February 2005 to January 2008

More details of the project
can be found at
www.workinglives.org

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