

In Search of the Global Labor Market

Edited by

Ursula Mense-Petermann

Thomas Welskopp

Anna Zaharieva



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What Is Unique about Labor Markets?

Patrik Aspers

1 Introduction

In contemporary capitalism, coordination of resources and factors of production is to a large extent done in markets. Consequently, markets are also used to find and select labor power (Polanyi, 1957), i.e., the power of human beings that can be put to work and thus used to accomplish certain ends. This power is hired out for a specific time or task, and it is extracted in an employment relation, often by means of hierarchy (organization), i.e., a superior decides what workers are supposed to be doing during the time they are hired.

Sociological research on labor markets rarely focuses on markets in general (see also Shire in this volume). Instead, issues of distributive outcomes of labor markets (Kalleberg & Sorensen, 1979) and the role of unions (Streeck, 2005) have largely dominated the literature to date. Wolfgang Streeck points to underlying ideas that might explain this situation: “Generally, sociological research and theory maintain that the labor market is not really a market, in the sense of a universalistic, impersonal, color-and gender-blind mechanism matching supply of, and demand for, labor” (p. 254). Moreover, in the social scientific literature, labor markets are viewed as being different from other markets. A corollary is that the thematically related but diverse fields of sociology of work, sociology of labor markets, and sociology of markets appear to have limited interaction. Why this gulf between these fields exists is not clear, but it has not furthered our understanding of labor markets.

To increase our understanding, I suggest zooming in on the markets and deconstructing them. The distinct objects of trade make markets different from one another. Indeed, if we look at markets from this empirical end of the theory-evidence continuum, all markets are different. Seen from the other end, however, the most formal and abstract, all markets are identical. The scientific problem of market categorization involves identifying meaningful distinctions between types of markets that can increase our understanding and improve precision in empirical work.

In the present chapter, I argue that although there are some clear differences between labor and other objects of trade in markets, there is no need

for a separate theory of labor markets. Such a theory would require a whole set of interrelated propositions that are specified and different than those in other markets. Nevertheless, there are differences that should be taken into consideration when analyzing the conditions of human beings in markets. Taking a phenomenological approach to deconstruct markets, I argue that what is specific about labor markets is that actors play two roles, as sellers and as objects of trade, switching between the two. However, this should not translate into a distinct “labor market theory.” The two ideas of the similarity between labor markets and other markets and the uniqueness of human beings as being the seller as well as the object of trade run parallel in this chapter.

2 Markets

I will begin by analyzing what markets in general mean. Any market depends on the more fundamental institutional conditions, formal and informal (North, 1991), in which it is embedded (Polanyi, 1957). There are general laws, for example property rights, that apply to most markets, thereby providing a foundation to all markets. Most laws, for example property rights, apply to most markets. Laws are based on decisions and it makes sense to speak about organized (Ahrne, Aspers, & Brunsson, 2015), or at least partially organized (Ahrne & Brunson, 2011) markets. It is, furthermore, presumed that actors are free to make choices and to enter into a contractual relation, but not into relations that remove the right to draw up future contracts.

All markets are, by definition, ordered and ordering processes are of interest to both sociologists and economists (Nelson & Winter, 2002, p. 23). The following definition of a market aims to meet the different requirements mentioned in the literature: a market is a social structure for the exchange of owners' rights, in which individuals or organizations compete with one another via offers (cf. Aspers, 2011, p. 4). The market structure is based, in particular, on two roles: that of the buyer and that of the seller, each with their own interest to “sell at a high price” or to “buy at a low price” (Geertz, 1992, p. 226). The property rights (Carruthers & Ariovich, 2004) that actors exchange must be recognized. In order to have competition in a market, at least one side has to be characterized by competition. The competition between the parties may not revolve around money but around other variables, for example product differentiation or warranty policy (Chamberlin, 1953), and it implies that the actors have a choice to trade with others and also have the capacity to make these

choices.¹ Choice, moreover, presumes that actors have the reflexive capacity to evaluate the options (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989).

There are three additional prerequisites for something to be a market. The first prerequisite refers to what is traded in markets. Markets presuppose the process of singularization of the offers traded to make them calculable (Callon & Muniesa, 2005). The second condition is about how things are done in the market. This is about the decided (formal) and grown (informal) institutions, which are part of the specific market's culture, including its "rules of engagement" (White & Eccles, 1987, p. 984) and "rules of exchange" (Fligstein & Mara-Drita, 1996, p. 15; Smith, 2007, p. 3; White, 2002, p. 2). This second prerequisite refers also to general market culture, for example a type of capitalism or a certain way of trading that is not specific of any particular market. The third prerequisite is about the value of the offer traded in the market. Given that actors know what is being traded, the economic value of the offers—the goods or services traded—can be, and must be, determined (Aspers & Beckert, 2011; Smith, 1989). Economic value is usually expressed in prices, with money being used as a means of accounting (Dodd, 2005). Below I use the three market prerequisites as the baseline of the analysis.

3 Markets and Labor

Using a substantive analysis of economic activities, Polanyi says that "Labor is another name for a human activity which goes with life itself" (Polanyi, 1957, p. 75). He does not see labor as a commodity, which is defined as "objects produced for sale on the market" (Polanyi, 1957, p. 75). Obviously, labor is possible to trade in markets, as are many other services. It is only by stipulating a definition that connects the purpose of making objects with market trade of these objects that labor becomes "fictitious," (Polanyi, 1957, p. 76). Polanyi's definition is thus more normative than scientific, and it does not account for the multitude of transactions that historically have taken place or are taking place under competition in markets. I fully agree with Polanyi that labor is central in life, but the normative semantics of his definitions make less sense.

Although some researchers, for example Arendt (1988), see differences between labor (the biological process of the human body) and work (the

1 As can be seen, my approach to markets does not see competition as a market "problem" as, for example, Shire (this volume) does. My point is that competition is essential to markets, although it might either appear to be an unintended consequence or the result of organization, depending on the type of market in question (Aspers, 2009).

making of unnatural things),² I will concur with Marcel van der Linden (this volume), who, like Marx and Polanyi, focuses on labor power, i.e., the capacity of human beings to accomplish something, a thing or a service. In labor markets, labor power is traded. Van der Linden points out that since this power cannot be packaged and traded like, for example, a bottle of wine, it is better to speak about “hiring out,” and it is this hiring out that is meant by trading labor power. The thing for which one is hired out can be very specific, such as painting 20 square meters of a concrete wall per hour, or something more abstract, such as the development of a new marketing strategy for a company selling paint. If no labor power is traded, we either speak of forced labor, as in the case of slavery, or speak of voluntary work. What is traded in a given labor market is also normally what gives the name to this market. There are, hence, different labor markets, each specialized in a certain professional service that is traded, and which constitute a market category (Kennedy, 2005; 2008), such as taxi drivers, IT engineers, sociologists, or carpenters.

My point is that not only does it frequently happen that labor power is traded, but also labor markets meet the first prerequisite of a market, since it is clear enough to the parties what is in fact being traded. Let me therefore discuss the second prerequisite, namely that there are institutions that order the market (see Bänziger in this volume). In the economy, some type of “contract,” formal or informal, is made between the seller and buyer, meaning that there are ways in which trade is done, many of which are grounded in formal laws. When there is a labor contract, we refer to hired labor force, i.e., the work done by someone who is paid for this service by someone else. The contract between the parties implies that the buyer has, for a limited domain of activities and for a specific period of time, the right to exercise hierarchical power (Ahrne, 1994;

2 The Oxford English Dictionary clarifies the distinction between labor and work. Labor refers to “the exertion of the faculties of the body or mind, especially when painful or compulsory” and work refers to “[s]omething that is or was done...an act, deed, proceeding, business” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Whereas labor focuses on the faculties of actor required and put into use to perform the act, work is what is actually done and being produced in the act. Neither of them, thus, focus on the product or the outcome per se.

Work, to be more precise, is a human activity (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, pp. 11–14), thereby excluding robots, that one is required to do, in contrast to hobbies or leisure activities that are “optional.” Work produces something, although much work, and time spent on work, or the specific work activities a person is assigned, can indeed be “empty,” meaning that there is little to do in relation to the work description and the number of hours spent at work (Paulsen, 2014). Moreover, to value labor as something positive is a recent phenomenon. Originally, in traditional societies and up until early modernity, when guilds were created, labor was avoided, and it was something to be done by slaves to the extent that this was possible (Lederer, 1932).

Luhmann, 2000; Thompson, Frances, Levacic, & Mitchell, 1991). The period of time may be very short or, in other cases, have no definite endpoint.

With hired labor under contract and paid labor for a given piece, the exchange is partial, meaning that the buyer is not, as in the case of slaves, in full control of the whole individual, or of the individual's full labor power. The human being is just renting out his or her capacity to work for a specific period of time or to do a certain thing.

Furthermore, in many labor markets, both sides have organized themselves, and there may be a whole range of established rules and institutions that regulate the work, rights to go on strike or take a vacation, the right to a pension, and many more aspects that are important in labor markets. It is not uncommon for parties in markets to be organized, however. Hence, the second prerequisite is also met.

The final prerequisite concerns the value of what is traded in a labor market. A whole range of alternatives to determine the value is available. In some cases, fixed wages have been determined in negotiations. But as long as actors have choices, there can still be competition between the individuals to get the process started, for example by credentials. Employers may also compete for the best workers. Some labor markets are characterized by centralized negotiations while in others, prices are set in direct deals between individual workers and employers; frequently, a combination of these two is used. In yet others, such as online markets, there may be bidding, or a race to the bottom (i.e., low wages) to get a job.

There is much more that can be said about pricing in labor markets, and this has to do with the type of market, and how they are ordered. Order in markets may be the result of either status or standard, although, in reality, we often observe a combination of these forms. The more work is standardized, the more easily exchangeable are the workers. Increasingly, simple service work is also standardized and can be purchased—or hired—on electronic platforms. Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) exemplifies this type of platform, which is presented as

a crowdsourcing marketplace that makes it easier for individuals and businesses to outsource their processes and jobs to a distributed workforce who can perform these tasks virtually. This could include anything from conducting simple data validation and research to more subjective tasks like survey participation, content moderation, and more. MTurk enables companies to harness the collective intelligence, skills, and insights from a global workforce to streamline business processes,

augment data collection and analysis, and accelerate machine learning development.³

In standard markets such as MTurk, work is compartmentalized, and thus made singularized (Callon & Muniesa, 2005) so that it resembles homogenous products. This is one condition for the imagined perfect market model presented by Knight (1921).⁴

The notion of status market can be used to capture another type of work, namely tasks that cannot be determined at the time the contract is signed. In status markets, order is essentially a function of buyers and sellers whose identities are ranked according to status. This means that there is a social structure, not only constituted by roles but also by identities, that the actors are able to identify and to discriminate between, as is the case with professional football clubs and players, for instance. What is traded in status markets may vary, but it is essentially a function of the trading parties coming together and “producing” whatever is the outcome of the work. In other words, what needs to be produced is not decided prior to the transaction but is an outcome of the combination of the person doing the work and the organization or other party that is paying for it. If this is the case, it is not possible to measure the output in terms of quality against a standard; it is rather a situation in which the parties are rubbing status off on one another (Podolny, 2005). Moreover, status is in the eye of the beholder; it is only possible to gain status if it is recognized by others. This means that actors gain status according to what other people think and value.⁵ A typical example is the world of academia in which people are hired to carry out research but essentially free to define what their research can and should be about. Markets for fashion photographers (Aspers, 2006)

3 Retrieved January 15, 2019, from <https://www.mturk.com/>.

4 The competition, potentially on both sides of the market interface, is increased. In this market, the work is quite similar to a thing being traded. Given the relatively much stronger position of buyers compared to sellers of labor power, sellers are normally in a weaker position. Since many of the tasks at MTurk are quite simple, and can be performed online, both the supply and demand can go global. In other words, globalization is one dimension of the increased competition, and the trend towards standardized, or rather, standard markets, is another.

5 Established institutions and people with status and affiliations to institutions come together and determine what is “good.” Thus, although it is clear that actors attempt to influence their status by, for example, actions and organization, it is still other peoples’ views that determine their status. Status, moreover, is relative so that some have more status than others. In a status market, the ranking of buyers and or sellers is more institutionalized (taken for granted) than the offers being traded.

and for authors of novels (Furst, 2017) are additional examples of this type of market.

We can conclude that on labor markets, as on any market, something is traded, there are rules for how this is done, and there are ways to set prices for what is being traded. One may argue that there is nothing unique about labor markets; they are just like other markets, seen from a formal point of view. However, if we look at the structural characteristics of markets, at the roles in particular, a different picture emerges. This is what I will outline now.

4 The Phenomenology of Labor Markets

What I argue is unique about labor markets is that the seller is both the object of trade⁶—what is traded—and the partner agreeing to the terms of the contract. Looking at this double role condition from the perspective of temporality, we see that the actor is, prior to being the object of trade, the seller of his labor power of trade. Subsequently, the actual work is performed, i.e., the specific tasks. The same actor, previously referred to as the seller, is then playing the role of worker or performer of the job or activity for which he or she is paid. In reality, this switching between “selling” and “working” may be a recurrent sequence of role switching, particularly with piece production, since there may be frequent renegotiations about the exact nature of the object traded and the working conditions.

However, role switching is not unknown in markets. It has been argued (Aspers, 2011) that one type of market is switch-role markets and another type is fixed-role markets. Switch-role markets are defined as markets in which actors constantly switch roles between being either sellers or buyers, for example, many financial markets. These are different from fixed-role markets in which the actors are identified as being either sellers or buyers. An actor may switch, for instance, between being a seller and a buyer at a flea market, but no actor switches between being a buyer and a piece of art, for example. Moreover, in many markets, you can rent things, such as a car but one can never become the car.

Consequently, what is really unique about labor markets is not the switching between roles per se, but the switching between selling one’s labor power and being this very object of trade, labor power. In other words, what we

6 This contention is based on the assumption that labor power—as the precise object of exchange—can only analytically separated from its bearer, the individual. In practice, the individual is still and always involved when it comes to make use of the object of exchange.

human beings are renting out is our labor power, i.e., our physical and mental capacities for a certain time. That there is a phenomenology of being rented out, and that we switch this role on and off makes this market different from other markets for us as human beings. But not necessarily from the perspective of market theory.

If, however, we look at this trade from an objective point of view, i.e., from a distance and not accounting for the subjective perspective of the market actors, only small differences can be detected between trading in human labor power and trading in shares of companies or in tomatoes, for instance. The fact that human beings are playing two roles is not of major importance. If, in contrast, we take the point of view of the actor, the objective account is not accurately mirroring what is happening, and above all, what people are experiencing, in labor markets. Departing from phenomenology (Heidegger, 2001b; Husserl, 1960), i.e., analyzing how things appear to the actors, represents a radically different vantage point than the objective one.

5 The Human Being as an Object of Trade

Several authors in this volume agree to the classic view that human beings' labor power is not separate from their beings. This statement is, by definition, tautologically true. What I do here is examine this statement phenomenologically in order to see what it means for people in practice. From a phenomenological point of view, the object of trade is not neutral but ultimately inseparable from a human being, with capacities, emotions, interests, and much more, who is able to reflect on his or her situation while being in the situation, and while doing other things. It is actually the individual doing things. Thus, while on the job, performing the tasks assigned, one can reflect on the conditions, for example, the content of the work, the pay, security at the workplace, and future prospects in the current position. Talking to others at the workplace and making use of one's network (cf. Granovetter, 1974) are two means of comparing one's current situation with other potential jobs. Thus, this reflection depends to a large extent on what others do or do not do in markets.

Furthermore, in their everyday routine life, human beings, or at least many of them, are evaluated by others in the markets. In labor markets, this is indeed existential, since the object of trade is inherently "the individual." What is evaluated and exposed to competition is one's self. As mentioned above, the labor contract means that an individual, as a worker, is subject to the hierarchy and the power of the employer. The point is that the other side of the market ultimately decides whether someone is selected or not, for the position

or the opportunity. An actor is consequently not in control of his or her identity. Hence, by being selected, or not, one is either in or out of the market. Nowhere is this existential dimension more pronounced than in the aesthetic sector (Menger, 2014), where job and identity are almost identical (Aspers, 2015; Furst, 2017).

6 Switching

It is true that labor can be existential—but so are most human activities. It is interesting that human beings can play two roles in a market. But the fact that we switch practices and registers structures the different experiences and is central to our reflexive capacity (Giddens, 1991; Mische & White, 1998). The argument here is not just that the potential of switching is of importance, although this is true, but that the actual switching itself is the very essence of human reflexivity. In other words, the person who is hired at the only factory in town at the age of 15 and whose father and grandfather are working at the same place is less likely to reflect on being in a particular market—since this is what “everyone does” (cf. Durkheim, 1984)—than those having several different jobs or contracts perhaps also in different markets.⁷ The difference between the two or more domains is the key to bringing about reflexivity.

The most important aspect is to look at the potential and consequence of switching between roles while at the same time being “one” person, albeit with two market identities. Harrison White spells out the role of switching for identities: “Identities trigger out of events—that is to say, out of switches in surrounding—seeking control over uncertainty and thus over fellow identities” (White, 2008, p. 2).

I do not wish to point at switching as an empirical phenomenon only. Switching is an ontological constitutional component of human beings and their capacity to reflect. Ontologically, the individual concerned is in between roles (Aspers & Kohl, 2013; Heidegger, 2001b). If we follow Martin Heidegger, we do not come as one unit but become a unit as a result of dispersion (*Zerstreuung*) of the different activities into which we are thrown (*geworfen*). These different activities make up what Heidegger calls a *Dasein* (1978). *Dasein*, the term used by Heidegger to characterize being human, is not only ontologically dispersed, it is also dispersed in its own activities: caring (*Sorge*)

⁷ This is not the same thing as evaluating the conditions of mobilization and social resistance, for example in terms of unions or other social movements.

for something, doing something, questioning, and other types of activities (Heidegger, 2001b, pp. 56–57). Work is, of course, a central activity to which Heidegger explicitly refers. Hence, man is not first what many people today would call self, and then falls apart as a result of social interaction (Heidegger, 2001a, p. 333). It is in fact the other way around: the dispersion is the condition of the self. Man, according to Heidegger is this “conglomerate” who finds himself “dispersed.” More elaborated reflection is a consequence of actors gaining several different identities, and not a given trait of humans.⁸

7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that the field of labor market research has neglected the question of what a market is. The main question posed in this chapter is whether or not there should be a specific market theory for labor. The short answer to this question is “no.” However, this is not to say that labor markets are like any other market. The question of what nevertheless sets labor markets apart from other markets leads us to our own being: being is work and work is being; this is a statement to which many would subscribe. It can be argued that being is largely constituted in labor. This condition was taken as the point of departure for a phenomenological analysis. The main point presented in this chapter is that switching in labor markets facilitates reflexivity, which in turn opens up the analysis to existential questions.

Finally, I argue that labor markets should be more central to sociological studies. Moreover, by going beyond the merely descriptive analyses of labor markets, we can gain a more in-depth understanding of labor markets. We can thus move beyond the economic view of actors who are taken for granted or the sociological focus on unions and collective bargaining.

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⁸ Reflection is a condition, but in contrast to the egological approach (Tengelyi, 2012), I see reflection as a result of the dispersion of identities (cf. Heidegger, 1975 p. 226). Mead (1934, pp. 354–79) presents similar ideas.

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