



## Work on Demand: Contracting for Work in a Changing Economy

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### **Contract and Status at Work: Markets, Servants and Fiefdoms**

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This paper revisits the notions of contract and status found in classical sociology and, to a lesser extent, industrial sociology and the sociology of work. It explores the usefulness of the distinction in analysing current trends in the regulation of working relations, including the emergence and spread of ‘gig’ or platform-mediated work. Taking guidance from Karl Polanyi’s characterisation of the self-regulating market as a utopian ideal, the paper argues that regulation of a working relation by means of a contract of sale, work being exchanged for money, may similarly be understood as a utopian ideal: elements of status must always be present if the work is to be performed and paid for as the parties require it. Claims to the contrary – for example, that the gig economy creates a labour market without search frictions and only minimal transaction costs: contracts without status – assume an undersocialized model of (monadic) social action that has no basis in the reality of social life (Durkheim).

Like Polanyi's notion of the countermovement, status may come in a variety of forms that are more or less desirable from the perspective of workers, businesses, society at large: servitude, industrial citizenship, membership of a particular profession or occupation. At the end of the twentieth century, sociologists observed the beginnings of trends towards the bifurcation of workers into two groups – core (with relatively well-paid and secure employment) and peripheral (low-paid and insecure) – identifying therein a significant challenge to the status of industrial citizenship (Gorz; Streeck). Twenty years later, gross inequalities of wealth and conceptions of the neo-liberal self as ever-improving, ever-perfectible, are combining to create novel forms of status not anticipated by the literature. For example, well-paid (core) workers now employ (peripheral) others directly, not only to provide ‘domestic’ services, widely understood, but as a kind of private staff at work, helping to complete duties and tasks, which ostensibly comprise a single job for a single employee. With reference to the contract/status distinction, the paper develops a conceptual framework to assist with understanding such developments and their consequences, including the challenges posed to existing systems of labour law.