SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE WORKPLACE AND THE FUTURE OF WORK
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The Institute of Sociology of the University of Neuchâtel hosted the Congress of the Swiss Sociological Association (SSA) on “The Future of Work” from 10-12 September 2019. The Congress provided a debate on the future transformations in the world of work by gathering more than 400 social science researchers around the world. The workshop on Social innovation in the workplace and the future of work: Outcomes for a social policy agenda in Europe and beyond reunited five presenters from different universities and centers of research in Europe, and integrated several discussions on how social innovations in the workplace can be a source for the creation of social policies. The workshop discussed how the world of work has been transformed through the appropriation of new practices enforced by the implementation of digital platforms, automation, and robotization.

Workplace Innovation (WPI) can be defined as “a strategic renewal in organizing and organizational behaviour” (Oeij, Dhondt, & Korver, 2012, p. 36), that involves elements from business innovation, technological innovation, and particularly, social innovation in the workplace. Although WPI has the intention to conduct business activities into profit-making outcomes, its functioning is not only limited to productivity and performance but to foster social integration, job creation, well-being, and better working conditions. In this sense, WPI has been mostly referred as a policy concept (Pot, Totterdill, & Dhondt, 2016). It includes practices of collective participation and continuous learning in the improvement of the organization and relates the integration of employees in the activities of the firm and the use of new technologies. The workshop of the SSA discussed on different topics of WPI, and the presenters provided a variety of research results aiming to contribute to the debate of the integration of WPI in the social policy agenda in Europe.

The integration of WPI insights into the European social policy agenda is very recent; Egoitz Pomares from the Sinnergiak Social Innovation Centre of the University of the Basque Country (Spain) discussed the presentation entitled Reviewing regional initiatives in WPI: a study of development programs in the Basque Country. As exposed by Pomares, WPI emerged from the European Union as a policy concept since the 70s through the integration of public initiatives and programs in different regions. After the 90s, a new social policy intended the alignment of the action-research tradition and new analytical frameworks were created for encouraging learning from programs across the EU. According to Pomares’ research, innovation policies should be created in order to respond to specific problems in order to fulfill the deficiencies of the present innovative system. When they meet specific needs, those policies are most effective.

Ralf Kopp from the Technical University Dortmund (Germany) presented his speech on Workplace Innovation (WPI) as Social Innovation (SI): Slow farewell or continuation of the techno-centric age? in which he analyzed the current international trend of countries pushing to a new era of digitalization as a way to provide solutions to the existing challenges raising in society. By focusing on the digital transformation adopted in Germany, Kopp identified that although this country goes along with the development of institutions supporting the dissemination of WPI practices, this effort has not been enough to surpass the techno-centric age and appears disconnected from the needs of social policies promoted by the welfare state. That is why the social element of WPI is so important.

Peter Oeij from the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research, TNO (Netherlands), presented on Social innovation, workplace innovation, and employment: sustainability and the future of work. Oeij explained that although some of the consequences of
Digitalization in the world of work are the disappearance of some professions on the one hand, also new jobs have been created, and working benefits such as freedom, flexibility, and comfort have raised as well on the other hand. Oeij addressed the question of how social innovation could provide a solution to the changing environment of the world of work, and suggested that WPI is a means to improve employment by facilitating the entrance to the labor market, through the development of talent and mobility inside the organizations, and by fostering sustainable employability.

Gábor Mélypataki from the University of Miskolc (Hungary) presented on the Effects of new employment forms and social innovation on social security in Hungary. His research showed two trends in the labor market characterized by digitalization and robotization, a phenomenon that revealed that traditional labor tools are obsolete in order to give an answer to modern working condition needs. Nevertheless, both trends are oppositely different. While digitalization alludes to work on virtual surfaces, robotization implies that human parts can be substituted by technology, essentially robots. This phenomenon is in a debuting stage, and it will determine more and more challenges on the future of the labor market through specific changes on finances, social care systems, and other concerns regarding national legislations.

Finally, Lisa Hummel and Sarike Verbiest from TNO, Netherlands, presented the results of the research entitled Job quality within the platform economy. The study aimed to understand that although the work platform presents characteristics that workers dislike, job satisfaction is moderated by the motives of workers using those platforms as a job opportunity. The main motivations to perform gig work are related to the access to new and/or temporary incomes and to earn extra money, however, workers considered important to determine how often they could work, when and how to obtain a fair reward per task. Hummel remarked that gig workers relate job satisfaction with freedom and independence and that the benefits of the platforms contest workers' low economic and social benefits.

Digitalization, automation, and information and communications technology in the world of work present unexpected challenges for social policy in fields where the welfare state is not well prepared to give solutions to society (e.g., wages, workers minimum rights, or social security). The phenomenon is still in its initial phase. On the other hand, even the European Commission has been attempting for the creation of social policies including work organization since 1995, most of the efforts have been focused on health, well-being and occupational safety, and it has never resulted in regulations at the European Union level (Pot et al., 2016). A new direction of European policymaking from economic and technological innovation towards social innovation offers the opportunity of providing better working conditions, social integration and well-being, as well as to transform the world of work, regarding that technology propose new and fast challenges to the modern society. Policymaking reclaims a collective construction of evidence in order to build a more just and egalitarian society, a potential that gives a particular accent through social innovation in the workplace.

References
