

## Beyond the current political economy of competence development

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### Abstract

*Competence is a concept imported into the adult and continuing education arena from the psychological terminology of human resource development in work organizations. It has been elevated to a societal and political level as part of a new discursive regime. This article points out the significance of the particular circumstances in which the competence discourse has emerged, and argues for its critical investigation within a Marxist framework. A new discourse of learning and competence reflects a new material dependency of capital(ism) on the concrete quality of work and workers, requiring a total program of learning for work. This opens a new arena of political struggle over the direction of learning processes and the participation of workers in work and society. The socio-economic realities and a new understanding of the interrelationship between knowledge, skills, learning and practice central to the competence concept, raises a potential issue about the role of work and the living worker in a capitalist economy. This requires a re-development of the notion of economy based in the value and interest of working people, and enabled by the full development of the competences of the workers themselves. A notion of the “political economy of working people” is proposed as a framework for investigating the potentials of competence development for enhanced democracy.*

**Keywords:** competence; qualification; subjectivity; profession; political economy of working people

### Introduction

The notion of competence has flooded political, educational as well as academic discourses on adult education and adult learning since the middle of 1990s. It is a psychological term, imported from discourses of human resource development in work organizations, and elevated to a societal and political level. It is part of a cluster of new policy concepts of learning and educational practice. In this sense there is a competence regime emerging. The reception of this competence discourse and regime in the

educational professions and institutions has been uncomfortable, and mainly led to a critique of the power of this discourse, questioning its consistency and pointing out its building through power relations. But a discourse shift is often also a symptom of emerging problems and new issues.

In its historical context the introduction of the notion of competence can be seen as a reaction to the increasing separation of knowledge and school based learning from the subjective horizons of work and social life. Seen in this context this discourse may reflect a desire for a new and comprehensive control of subjectivity, by extending prevailing societal rationales of work and employment to all spheres of life. But the material background and implications of this notion of competence may simultaneously be productive for investigating and reflecting on the potentials of a competent workforce.

Competence development may be instrumental in increased exploitation, but also a vehicle for autonomy and democracy. This article points out the significance of the particular circumstances in which the competence discourse has emerged, and argues for a critical investigation of it within a Marxist framework. Contemporary developments in the labour process remind us about the dual nature of work, as an exchange of commodities and the living activity of people, in changing “naturalized” societal relations. The new discourse of learning and competence reflects a new material dependency of capital(ism) on the concrete quality of work and workers. On the one hand this circumstance implies a total program of learning for work, which is inferred not only for education and learning but also everyday life- a new level of (capitalist) economy, subordinating people to conditions of paid work. On the other hand, this request for competence development in which the subjectivity of working people occupies an important role, constitutes a new arena of political struggle over the directions of learning processes and the range of subjectivities required for the participation of workers in work and in society. Looking for empowerment potential, rather than the risks of a more and more penetrating control, requires re-developing a notion of economy, based in the value and interest of working people and enabled by the full development of the competences of the workers themselves. A notion of the ‘political economy of working people’ is proposed as a framework for investigating the potentials of competence development for enhanced democracy.

The use of a concept of competence from human resource development to refer to the practical implementation of knowledge and skills was connected with the operational development of tools meeting political and economic desires to measure and compare educational performance internationally. Through its application within a discourse of governance and international competition, the concept of competence was translated from the organizational psychological terminology of a relatively limited sphere of business leaders and developers, to that of socio-economics. In a short time this discourse came to determine how in political-bureaucratic systems and later in public debate it was legitimate to talk about what people are capable of and how they achieve this capability. In education and the teaching professions, this discourse has broadly been seen as a “hostile takeover” of rationality in the educational system. More generally it has been seen as an attempt to colonize ever-greater areas of our lives within an economic framework and requirement for one’s entire personality to be available for work. This show of force by economic political systems corresponds only too well with our more general everyday experience of demands for competence development, from morning to evening, our whole life through—with ubiquitous work, individual competition and the constant efforts of companies and organizations to create corporate identity.

In this article I will try to go beneath the surface of this new discursive regime to consider the socioeconomic realities attempted for capture through the concept of competence, as well as the management practices of which the concept has become part. A new understanding of the interrelationship between knowledge, skills, learning and practice central to the competence concept raises a potential issue about the roles of work and the living worker in a capitalist economy. This leads to the question of how we can possibly imagine “something beyond” a capitalist society.

## The concepts of competence and competencies

Originally the concept of competence had a legal meaning related to legitimacy. But the meaning that gained ground from the 1990s combines functionalism and psychology, where the emphasis varies a little between the two and which has been applied in different ways (Rychen & Salganik, 2001; OECD, 2003; Gnahn, 2007; Illeris, 2009). The applicability of the concept in political communication as a characteristic of the needs of society in its entirety undoubtedly depends on its logical and semantic ambiguity. Nevertheless, there is in practice today a core meaning: competence refers to the abilities of an acting subject to translate knowledge into appropriate action for everyday practical situations, above all in work processes. The concept of competence generally covers the combination of the following attributes:

- The ability to act successfully
- In a complex context
- Through the mobilization of psycho-social prerequisites (cognitive and non cognitive)
- With results related to the requirements of a professional role or personal project (OECD, 2003; Rychen & Salganik, 2001).

In this understanding, representative of the political-economic use of the term, competence is in one respect *functional*, *performance-oriented* and *pragmatic*, and defined in terms of external social demands that need to be mastered. But this also involves a questioning of previous conceptions of the application of knowledge, where knowledge is something one can *have* and where rational practice can be based on general abstract knowledge. Practice is concrete, and knowledge must be mobilized and transformed in order to be applied successfully. Therefore competence is linked to a potentially acting subject who is able to mobilize various prerequisites in a manner relevant to the situation at hand.

It should be pointed out that the social requirements are not well defined, and known in advance—it is a question of being able to take the appropriate action, in unpredictable, and relatively complex situations. “Competence” is thus not a (new) canon of knowledge and skills, but a potentiality whose realization is conveyed through the subject’s knowledge and will. In this way, it is correct to say that a person can *be* competent and can *realize* competencies in specific situations. There are also two good reasons to develop new ways of thinking about people’s learning and abilities, and reflect on the relationship between education and everyday practice. One reason is the new challenges in work processes, especially the increase in types of work that require people to adapt rapidly and flexibly to changing tasks and conditions. The other is a radically altered conception of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and

reality. The faith in universal, abstract, and immutable knowledge has been replaced by awareness that knowledge is always interwoven with practice and historically situated—and therefore also subjectively mediated. For this reason, the relationship between societal requirements, and the individual knowledge, necessary cannot be stated in terms of a general formula. Rather, it is concretely mediated in a rather nebulous way through the development of specific competencies by concrete subjects; as when certain cohorts of women in welfare state societies become competent care professionals in public service, or when geeky men become computer experts on the basis of a job history and an education entirely different from IT. These conceptual challenges provide justification, both separately and especially in combination, for our interest in a new concept of competence that is more *dynamic* and sensitive to *specific* factors.

These qualities have however only to a limited extent been expressed in discourses emerging from political processes; quite the opposite has taken place. The interest of political management in being able to measure and compare across countries requires a common and general descriptive system. Efforts have therefore been directed towards defining key competencies. The concept of competence contains a contradiction between that defined above and a notion of invariance.

### Competence and formal education

The political processes that produced the competence discourse are aimed primarily to measure educational performance and its (socio-) economic relevance. In recognition of the problems of the validity of previous measurements, this was the start of a general change of perspective. This was a change from considering educational input, still the logical focus of pedagogical thinking, to considering educational output. The concept of competence involves two critical questions for formal education. First, how important and relevant is its academic content in relation to societal reproduction and diffusion of knowledge and skills? Second, how effective are student-learning outcomes? Can people actually use in practice the knowledge and skills they have learned? The intention in (key)competence measurement is not only to measure knowledge and skills, but the development of a *practical subjective capacity* which consists of being able to mobilize knowledge and skill in a relevant way in complex situations, thus to achieve results.

In historical terms, the tendency has been for a competence discourse advanced through a neo-liberal competition-oriented strategy with its cultural roots in the business world. In schools this has paradoxically resulted in a utilitarian perspective and conservative notion of the school's fundamental tasks (back to basics), which does not rhyme particularly well with the new demands on the labour force. But the focus of the competence concept on a flexible and practical subjective capacity ought to lead to ambitions of a higher level of mastery and reflection on the academic content and higher degree of commitment to school work. An energetic attempt to outline a pedagogy promoting competence development for the formal educational system has been made in Denmark, for example, by Illeris, (2009). This is, however, no simple task. A vital aspect of the concept of competence is that it embraces "the whole person" and thus the person's subjective (individual and collective) capacity in all facets of life. For economists, this is not for humanitarian reasons of principle, but because they realize that subjective capacity is not produced in formal education alone. Consequently, the

competence discourse is oriented towards a broader field of learning than formalised education—towards seeing educational institutions as what they *also* are, i.e. lived life or social practice, where much more is taking place than the objectives of the institution. Therefore, the competence discourse has become a catchphrase of lifelong learning and also life-wide learning. For this reason, competence development cannot be thought of solely in relation to formal education.

The implications of the concept of competence can be seen in attempts to operationalise it through assessments at the individual level. These have been introduced in European countries under slightly different headings - competency assessment, recognition of prior learning, the Danish “realkompetencevurdering” (an assessment of competencies from all previous experience), the French “bilan de compétence”, etc. In many cases, the assessment criteria are completely different. Here we see a clash between two regimes of recognition, business and industry, and the formal education system. Recognition by business and industry relies on an instrumental perspective and is thus subject to the structures and economic considerations of the labour market. It is also to a very great extent based on the perceived ability of the subject to function in the work situation, which staff selection procedures attempt to assess. Recognition by the educational system is based on documented completion of formal courses and description of course content. The basis here is thus partly a hierarchical ranking, and partly an educational structure, which directly or indirectly implicates an academic worldview that is one or two hundred years old. Of course there are examples of intermediate variants, but basically these two regimes of recognition are disjointed. Of interest here are not considerations of equality or legal-administrative factors that typify the question of access to education and various professions, but the operational aspect: how is people’s competence assessed?

In the context of the issue of recognition, “competence” is supposed to serve as a “general equivalent” of human capability. Competence is primarily a counterpart to or replacement for the dominant system of diplomas and certificates linked to formal education. It is also a broader and more general alternative to the narrow and one-dimensional job-oriented view of work qualifications, such as is used in, for example, labour market statistics. Such a system is quite necessary to the realising of lifelong learning, using the learning resources available both in formal education and in other areas of everyday life. But “competence” faces two quite fundamental challenges. First, a language must be found that is not trapped in one of the two regimes of recognition that dominate understanding of competencies in society. Second, the acknowledgement of the subjective nature of competencies means that their assessment must in principle be very individual—which is both impracticable, and in opposition to the current place of prior learning assessment as a legal basis for access to education and work. These two factors are obviously interwoven, in so far as a language whose content is not limited to familiar societal practices, and which must also be sensitive to subjective diversity could only be established through an imaginary organisation of relevant modi and levels of experience—a proxy categorisation of careers and experiential backgrounds. It is quite clear that such a categorisation involves a contextualisation of knowledge in relation to societal practice, which involves something more than abstract cognitive knowledge. However, it is more difficult to specify theoretically the “non-cognitive” psychosocial prerequisites, and perhaps it is also politically tricky because it is in part a question of active involvement in and acceptance of given practice contexts. Procedurally, competence assessments are performed in quite different ways (Salling Olesen, 2004; Alberici & Serreri 2003; Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg, 2013).

The French system, also transferred to other countries such as Italy, involves competence accounts established by business organisations and based on functional categories. In most other countries the structure consists of descriptions of levels and content categories taken from the formal education system, partly because the most tangible use of competence assessments is to facilitate access to education. In key areas of educational policy, there have in some cases been established ad hoc steering mechanisms, explicitly for the recognition of professional experience in formal education (such as the “Dritte Bildungsweg” in Germany and the professional master’s degree in Denmark).

The practical application of the concept of competence as a link between formal education, and everyday life learning, raises a number of theoretically interesting questions. In EU administrative and policy implementation, the analytical interest has faded into the background in favour of a regulatory bureaucratic construction of a system of competence *levels*, and the concept of competence itself has just become part of the political jargon about lifelong learning.

### The reduction of key competence in economic thinking

However, here I wish to pursue a tension built into the notion of competence. This is evidenced by the past efforts to identify key competencies, i.e. the qualities of the workforce that were vital for the economy and competitiveness, and could provide a basis for the development of indicators of competence development over time and for comparing the competence situation in different countries, as in the OECD DeSeCo project (Definition and Selection of Competencies). This analytical task was approached somewhat ambitiously. The scientific ambition to create clarity and consistency in the definition of key competencies was obviously guided by the pragmatic need to achieve workable indicators. One of the main actors, the psychologist Franz Weinert, referring to the connection between competencies linked to specific practices and key competencies with broad or universal applicability, states as follows:

Such scientific plans have often failed in psychology, however. The underlying multilevel models can be logically reconstructed, but not validated psychologically. The different degrees of abstraction mean, therefore, a fundamental asymmetry in competence research - high abstraction— intellectually brilliant, pragmatically hopeless; low abstraction— pragmatically useful, intellectually unsatisfactory. (Weinert, 2001, p. 52).

To put it simply: The scientific ambition to understand the dynamics of subjectivity must be sacrificed in the pursuit of political objectives. The practical-political definition of key competencies is primarily one of its applicability in many and varied situations. This definition is relatively independent of cultural settings or requirements for any content of practices or function in a situated context. One can now describe the character and common features of these situations in a societal context and attempt to rank them so that some competencies appear to be generic. There are two difficulties involved in such use, both related to the political context in which the concept was conceived and propagated.

One is *reification* or *commodification*, i.e. it is assumed that competencies are immutable properties that can be acquired and possessed. This reification is directly triggered by objectives of measurement and comparison, but also in the thinking of economists regarding the logic of the market (commodification), and capital

(accumulation). It seems reasonable to view the definition and description of key competencies as an attempt to dream of a universally flexible workforce in an era where the industrial (Taylorist) division of labour and reduction of the complexity of the employee's operations is now out-dated. More generally, there is an attempt—now supported by psychology—to (re)discover a general equivalent in the labour market to replace the basic watchwords of industry: time and hard work. This attempt perpetuates the capitalist political economic thinking of human labour as unchangeable and quantifiable. This way of thinking, as I shall attempt to show, is in contrast to, and neglect of, developmental trends that involve the concept of competence. However, the unavoidable realisation of the subjective nature of competencies meant that psychology was given the instrumental task of finding the qualities that individuals can acquire, and regardless of circumstances, bring into play in an unfamiliar field of changing practices. The mobilizing of “cognitive and non-cognitive” prerequisites has deliberately been included in the above summary definition of competence. Psychological attempts at conceptual delineation revolve around the relationship between cognitive factors, and a great many other things that are generally called motivational factors. Within the cognitivist figure of thought, which has been the starting point, it is the relationship between: universality and abstraction, and specificity and concreteness that cannot be resolved satisfactorily. This is hardly surprising, since practical problem solving involves something other than abstract knowledge. Weinert himself also refers to empirical data showing that the solution of difficult problems always requires the involvement of content-specific knowledge and skills (Weinert, 1998). This finding points to a link between psychosocial dynamics (as in problem solving) and situatedness (since content-specific knowledge is linked to specific situations). In psychological contribution to the DeSeCo project's initial conceptual process, Weinert emphasizes that competence implies and presupposes, in the fulfilment of a task, a combination of ‘cognitive, *and* (in many cases) motivational, ethical, volitional, and/or social components’ (Weinert, 2001, p. 62). One can get no closer.

This leads us to the second problem of the prevailing competence discourse, namely that it does not take *the subjective nature of competencies* seriously, or rather, sees it as a subordinate factor that contributes to the complexity of specific tasks. Although the requirements or success-criteria for competent practice are externally determined (and only from an affirmative point of view), competent actions are basically subjective processes, based in feelings and interpretations— problem comprehension, mobilization of knowledge, learning, and practising skills in new contexts. Therefore, the concept must relate to the subjective prerequisites and dynamics in competent practice. It must involve a view of competence as a personal, local (culturally anchored), and experience-based ability, located in the competent person's way of interpreting situations, and engaging in them, and also as a learning tool. It must enable analyses of slackness and constraints, as complexes of rationality and defence mechanisms, and seek to understand the subjective “productive forces” that lead to learning and practice development, including the kind of expertise that supports the emotional and cognitive re-contextualization of experience that always takes place.

### **Work processes and the subjective factor**

The discussion of the notion of competence drew from research into qualifications from a (industrial) sociological approach, amongst other sources. Without expressing an

explicit policy (in most cases), qualification and skills analysis had implicit aspiration to justify better, more long-term, and progressive forms of education through empirical exploration of the development of work processes (Kern & Schumann, 1970)—the hope of a dynamic to civilize the contemporary transformation of work by capitalism. This did not involve questioning the understanding of the relationship between work and learning/education. Empirical research has predominantly produced analyses of societal requirements for the development of the educational system and workforce retraining, thus a logic of necessity. The striking fact that researchers, and educational practitioners, despite a generally critical attitude (towards society), direct their political aspirations for more versatile, and autonomous ways of working within the dynamics of capitalism, is of course a form of realism—the subjectivity is already subject to this reality. To a large extent, qualification analysis has, however, refrained from formulating theoretical concepts for the cultural background experience learning, and competencies of the workforce as a source of changing that reality. Sociological qualification analysis has mostly left such aspects to more voluntaristic political discourses, in the practical interpretation of findings. The research interest has been to demonstrate the practical significance of educational/learning paths in relation to social and political battlegrounds, in order to demonstrate a space for policy making.

There have for example been empirical studies, demonstrating that political latitude for different educational strategies, could be related to the structure of work processes. The German sociologist, Burkart Lutz (1989), argued for focusing research into qualifications (more) on the working subject. A comparative study of vocational education, and workplace structure in German and French industry, showed that companies competing on the same international market could operate with greatly different combinations of qualifications and work organisation. Germany had skilled workers and a relatively flat business organization. France had unskilled workers and technicians linked together in a relatively hierarchical organisation. The comparison between the German and French qualification structures, shows that production factors must be combined in different ways, depending on the qualifications of the workforce, but also that this is possible through the adaptation of the organisational, and institutional frameworks, which can balance productivity, living standards, and welfare system. The current crisis in Euro-cooperation shows conversely that the coexistence of very diverse production systems within the same (global) market is impossible if the balancing of relatively autonomous, disparate socio-economic structures is blocked (by the shared currency, the Euro).

A Danish study (Sommer & Sørensen, 2000), compared employee qualifications, continued training policies, and work organisation in three large and mutually competing agricultural firms, showed that they adopted entirely different strategies, even though they were competing in the same market. These strategies were based on different work organisation, different workforce training, and not least the recruitment of different kinds of employees with completely different lifestyles. This study indicates the importance of workers' subcultural life experiences, work identity, and current way of life, for business strategies to be realised within a single market.

These examples support the argument that the overall competence (ability and willingness to perform) of the workforce sets boundaries for the manifestation of work processes—and not economic dynamics. It is patently obvious that the differentiation of employee groups is connected to society, and imparted through the labour market with its competitive environment, preferences, and mobility structures. But this situation also reveals that the mechanisms of this market encounter constraints in the viscosity of labour supply, linked to individual and collective subjective factors. Some people prefer

to have more demanding tasks and an orderly employment situation through education. Others' life history makes them used to following agricultural rhythms, living in family constellations and local communities where unsocial hours are acceptable and can be effective in differently organised work situations. On the other hand, they are quite happy to avoid being trained as logistics workers. These examples illustrate that context, workers' experiential background, and social identity, play a key role in technological and organisational strategies at the level of both an individual company, and national industry. This is the key point in the cited works: They argue that workers and their qualifications form an independent parameter in production systems. A further important trend, primarily in empirical research, sometimes combined with practical experiments (demonstration projects), has sought to identify developments in work processes, and technology that could justify an increased focus on key qualifications. HR-inspired analysts and consultants, together with Marxist-inspired researchers and trade unions, could unite in this organisational and educational perspective, as long as there were common interests between capitalist modernisation, and the concrete humanisation of work—thus avoiding any explicit conflict of interest.

The critical potential of the concept of qualifications was, and is, to (re)establish a materialist understanding of education and learning by relating it to the societal determination of the work process. In a more explicitly Marxist-based analysis, qualifications are analysed in relation to capitalism's societal transformation of work processes. This type of analysis has a salient critical potential in relation to political optimism in education, and generally idealistic self-understanding of professionals in the education sector. But they could also become more or less structural-deterministic. A response was provided to the tendentious methodological determinism involved in making the analysis of work processes and the demand for labour the basis for educational policies and learning strategies, partly in continuation of a discussion of Schlüsselqualifikationen (key qualifications) in Germany. This was through interest in a relationship between vocational qualifications, everyday life, and general social skills. A Danish project on general qualifications led to the formulation of the concepts of "capacity" (kapacitet), to refer to an individual's ability (Andersen, et al., 1996; Salling Olesen, 1996), and "capacity building" as the goal of progressive vocational training. The concept of competence was already on the market in Denmark, but we (those involved in the Danish project) saw it as a predominantly individualistic concept that did not analyse the societal conditions for competencies. In retrospect, one might consider that the concept of 'capacity', developed through this project, was an attempt to formulate an alternative—societally situated competence concept.

### **A societal concept of subjectivity**

The concept of qualification was taken up by industrial and labour sociology, more or less influenced by Marxist theory, and brought an outside perspective to education and learning, relating learning outcomes to the specific requirements for, and societal organisation of work. The Danish general qualifications project represents a conceptual break in this tradition by introducing the learner's subjective perspective. The decisive, but not developed conceptual point here, is the perception of general qualifications as a subjective capacity, produced through life experience, and unfolding across various spheres of life. Notable examples are the work of women in (industrial) cleaning, and institutional care, based on life-historical experiences (Bering, 2002; Dybbroe, 2012).

The logical next step was to consider the totality of the life historical experiential process, and the learning processes involved in these, including those promoted through formal education and training. The life history project found inspiration in biographical and life history approaches to the understanding of the subjective handling of learning in relation to work by specific populations. Such learning often took place in situations of complex social upheaval, involving both work and gender identity, and these empirical studies resulted in a theoretical and methodological approach to learning and identity processes (Salling Olesen & Weber, 2002; Salling Olesen, 2007b, 2011, 2012). By seeing learning processes as integrated in (both determined by and contributing to) a life-long identity process, a framework emerges for an understanding of the subjective side of transfer processes, integrating cognitive, emotional, and interactional aspects. It is important that this focus does not include any kind of individualistic understanding of either learning or skill. The thinking is based on cultural analysis, in a tradition partly inspired by psychoanalysis, according to which life historical experiences are understood as individual symbolic mediations of common societal conditions of life (such as wage labour, gender division of labour) (Salling Olesen et al., 2012). The analytical question is how this mediation takes place in specific individual, but characteristic situations, and how to provide an exemplary interpretation of these experiences. I position this methodological development, based on a social, interactionist theory of the individual subjectivity, in the context of a development in Marxist theory. This provides theoretical room for the societal role of subjectivity—no trivial matter.

The predominant reception afforded to the analysis of capital and capitalism by Marx, always contained an intellectual irritation about the relation of this theoretical insight to political practice and ideas about socialism: Marxism had to encompass an endogenous understanding of potentials and conditions for political agency and societal change. Such reception also created a political void—given that “realised socialism” in the Soviet Union was obviously based on elitism, and that the social democrats had sacked Marxism, believing in more equal distribution of an ever-growing capitalist cake. For this reason, I have always been fascinated by the concept of ‘Political Economy of Labour’ or ‘Political Economy of Working People’<sup>1</sup>, which was not introduced but convincingly elaborated by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their book *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (1981). The title may be approximately translated as “History and Autonomy/Self-reliance” (in the context of work). I see this concept as a potential framework for the re-interpretation of the ideas of subjectivity, and learning within a Marxian theory. This with implications for political, as well as social science thinking, because it is a history of the development of the human subject as a working species—first the evolutionary origin of work capability, and then through civilization the capacity for socially organised work. This re-interpretation would potentially link the utopian idea of a society beyond capitalist organisation with the interpretation of subjectivity in everyday life in capitalism. This provided a logical complement to Marx’ theory, as developed in *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*, and a new version of historical materialism as a history of civilization, which promises a way out of the determinism of capital analysis, and avoids the mechanical quality of historical materialism, which was mainly developed by Friedrich Engels and communist political theory. The notion of a political economy of working people faced the basic question which still remains today: How can we amidst the flexible, and comprehensive ability of capital, to subordinate all materiality and all subjectivity see any *material dynamics* which points to substantial change *beyond* capitalism?

Utopian perspectives must be developed from the social realities within capitalism itself in order to be realistic, considering the fact that capitalism is constitutive of the organisation of our society. In the 1960s, Oskar Negt provided his important critique of political education in the labour movement, and presented his alternative vision of ‘exemplary learning’ (Negt, 1963). His point was that instead of stuffing people with theories of capitalism and socialist principles (which obviously failed) labour education should rather be based on the experiences of everyday life. He wrote this at a time of a rebellion among industrial workers against the price paid for economic prosperity in terms of work intensity, and environmental hazards, and against the lack of practical democracy in the labour movement itself. His points might appear less hopeful in other periods without rebellion. Subsequent years saw a general disappearance of the societal preconditions for the mobilisation of class-consciousness in the sense of the traditional labour movement. Today it has become obvious that a theory of class-consciousness, which extrapolates from industrial labour, is obsolete. But it does not negate Negt’s argument that political education must depart from concrete everyday experiences. In *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (1981), the scope was much broader—a civilizational history of subjectivity, manifested in work—not in the narrow capitalist sense of paid work or in the historically limited form of industrial work, but the living engagement with the environment in all its forms (Negt, 2001). Within this notion, capitalism is an organising factor, and the life mode of wage labour, an important but not universal historical form of subjectivity. The reader can find a brief introduction in English to this enormous work in Salling Olesen (1999), or listen to the online copy of my introduction to Negt’s thinking at RWL 6 (Salling Olesen, 2009).

In the Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt school, the aim of criticism is to reveal the historical and changeable nature of social reality—and discover the invisible potentials. By insisting on a principle of endogeneity, this critical tradition maintains a strictly materialist ontology while paying respect to the intellectual work and the dialectic of knowing and learning. The decisive contribution of Negt & Kluge’s book is that it provides the framework for a historical and material interpretation of subjectivity as a product of capitalist civilization and potential source of a new social order. Further, this is where we see how it links with the theorising of learning and competence. Negt’s critique of labour education points to the connection between everyday life experiences and the development of societal insights, such as an analytical understanding of societal structure as well as what he, following Wright Mills, named sociological imagination, i.e. the ability to imagine an alternative reality. So the challenge is to theorise the ways in which this material production of subjectivity takes place, and how it can be empirically researched, since it is both social and invisible.

### **Competencies: subjectivity on a societal Level**

In the present context, I wish to establish a conceptual connection between learning as competence development, and societal transformation. The establishing of a notion of competence, which has a perspective beyond capitalist economy, beyond commodification, enables an empirical examination of the societal power dimensions of competence development on the micro-level of everyday life. It also opens the analysis to an understanding of the significance of the subjective aspect of competence and competence development. In the psycho-societal life history approach (Salling Olesen, 2012), we are developing a strategy for an empirical analysis of mundane everyday life.

This analysis may on the one hand, contribute to developing a social psychology theory, which is adequate for the complex mediation process. On the other hand, the analysis will explore specific social phenomena—in the present context how people individually, or together, can influence societal forces at the work process level (technology shifts, labour market trends) by means of their competencies, and their ways of relating to competence development.

Life historical experiences are a result of societal learning processes, and at the same time become individual prerequisites for new learning processes. Understanding the dynamics of life historical experiences may be a key to understand the development of the subjective capability, which is the core of competencies. The societal learning process that forms individual subjectivity is in a fundamental way mediated through gender and class relations (and in some societies race/ethnicity). Further, it is mediated through various forms of collective experience—based on individual belonging to subcultures, regions, or groups. In relation to competencies, the most important collective experiences are naturally linked to the work itself, including class affiliation, and gender, as characteristics of wage labour. They may be stabilised in collective forms, as knowledge disciplines, and in skills linked to fields of work. As such, they become meeting points, or rather tension fields, between individual and collective developments in identity and competence, and changing historical conditions, in the form of occupations and employment provided by the societal division of labour.

Classical big industry represents an apex in the subjection of the work process to economic considerations—in Marx's concepts: the real subsumption of living work to the capital's political economy, primarily in the form of mass industry. Knowledge is built into machinery, and Taylorist organisations result in minimal demands on the individual worker's skills. Post-industrial developments impose new qualitative demands. These include the capacity to subjectively mobilise knowledge and skills, as intended to be captured by the concept of competence. But they also, in comparison with big industry, include emergence of differentiated occupations and the requirement for specific work skills in each occupation.

The concept of competence is related here, to an eminent degree, to the relationship between work identity (responsibility, identification, etc.), and professional capability. Occupations and professions can be seen through this analysis as societal organisations of competence, and as a framework in which competencies can have a broader impact (Evet, 2011; Salling Olesen, 2007a). Although the concept of profession is ambiguous, and used differently in different linguistic communities, it is clear enough that a classical profession, such as medicine, for example, has an acknowledged monopoly on certain areas of work by virtue of certain knowledge and skills, and a collectively controlled responsibility for the quality of work. The *raison d'être* of the profession is that the rest of society acknowledges that the practitioners are *competent*. One could therefore say that competence is an attempt to codify these knowledge and skills for professional education and learning.

The existence and legitimacy of the traditional professions depends on the understanding that professionals have the right knowledge and practical skills, and their existence and legitimacy are therefore unambiguous. That, however, is not my perspective. On the contrary, the knowledge and practices of professions are problematic. They are a result of rather than the justification for professions. Categories involving societal rights and privileges, and the regulation of working conditions in important labour markets, are of course woven into power relations and societal dynamics. Therefore, an exemplary study of the relationship between learning, competence, and work processes in specific professional areas can shed light on the

very core of the competence concept: The situational capacity, being subjectively capable of mobilising knowledge and skills in practice in certain situations at work or in everyday life.

There are a number of areas of professional work that merit particular attention, particularly within the human service professions. They represent a growing proportion of the labour market, and have not been subject to Taylorist work organisation to the same degree as the manufacturing sector - although one can see features of industrialisation in the hospital system. They are distinguished by being fundamentally defined in terms of professional competencies, in the sense being developed here. In most cases, they also clearly require a subjective engagement in the work process on the part of the employee/professional, not only because human service directly involves inter-subjective interactions with clients/users, but also because such work can only be done through this subjective engagement. Some of these jobs are professions in the classical sense, while others are striving to become recognised as such.

An empirical and temporal study of whether professionalisation supports increased subjective autonomy for competent employees is interesting. What is peculiar to professionals in this context is the relationship between the specific subjects—with their professional identity determined by history, class, and gender—and the societal knowledge and abilities that these subjects command. By conducting their professional competencies they each participate in their own individual way in a collective cultural development of societal practice, basic self-understanding, and power relations (Salling Olesen, 2007a).

## **Competence, economy and democracy**

My focus on professions is because, in concrete form, they represent the contradictions in the concept of competence, and are therefore an appropriate subject of an empirical social analysis of the dynamics of capitalism. Knowledge and skills are subject to the social division of labour, but are also sometimes in themselves resources and instruments of power. Usually they are limited in their forms of expression, and controlled by employers and global capitalism as a system. In orthodox Marxist terminology: production forces under the control of the relations of production. The historical development in the distribution of (paid) labour in occupations and those concrete work processes that require the capacity to act in unknown and complex situations, provide the main reasons why the concept of competence has been able to gain a foothold in the economic-political establishment. The concept emphasises the active, subjective, and context-sensitive use by workers of all the resources of knowledge and skills possessed by the individual, irrespective of how they were acquired, and without the need for them to be specifically aimed at the task in question. It follows that competence is also a resource for democratic power based on working life. Notably this is a different kind of power than that of trade unions or strikes, implying a possible struggle within the framework of the capitalist economy, and possibly also blocking it on the basis of particularistic interests.

During the modernisation process, professionals have had special competence-based power, sometimes directly supported by legislation. Therefore their specific competence is also a factor in historical change and power struggles. In some phases, professional groups have been a driving force in the development of society, or have risen up against the undermining of the quality of their professionalism by neo-liberal

policies. In other cases, they have defended their privileges, and opposed democratic and egalitarian developments. But in all cases, the societal mandate of professional groups is limited to a specific area, the specific quality of their profession and its practice. Neoliberal policies with populist support have now weakened this competence-based position of power in a decisive way. If the historical power position is to be defended, it seems clear that it must be redefined in order to be legitimised democratically.

In the social democratic, or socialist tradition, there is a division between the struggle of interest conducted by trade unions based in work, and the political struggle over state politics based in citizenship, as battlegrounds of social security and political power. In the one arena, we have employees with particularist perspectives, while in the other we have citizens with Universalist perspectives. But asking about competence and democracy raises the question of the relationship to economics and society's material structure in a new way, in which there is a link for the individual between the employee (such as the competent salaried professional), and the citizen, who is at the same time receiving or buying services of professional work.

In the Nordic countries, in particular, the relatively strong position of the trade union movement has meant that collective bargaining framework models of participation and cooperation have been established in industry that go far beyond the traditional struggle of interest of trade unions. The most familiar examples are the Norwegian socio-technical experiments with direct employee involvement (Nielsen, 1997). These are merely institutional attempts to activate dormant resources. The premise is that employees have always had a major influence by virtue of their knowledge, skills, and in some contexts their will. But employees also have considerable resources of untapped experience, and un-manifested autonomy, particularly in relation to technological changes and workflow design. It is possible to influence the work process in a way that exploits these experiences. There is the classic case of Lucas Aerospace where the employees set out to show how military production could be converted for social purposes, using the competencies of the staff. Another example is that of front-end technology design, in which technology changes are designed on the basis of the experiences of workers directly involved in the work process in question (Sawchuk, 2006, 2007). The more dependent the workflow is on the employees' subjective investment, the greater the possibility that they can achieve real control over the work process.

In the socialist tradition, the cooperative model has had hard times— at least in modernised Western countries. But there are some cooperative structures in other spheres of life and forms of social economy involving non-capitalist, not-for-profit economic activity. Cooperatives may gain more importance in step with global capitalism's all-pervading impact on societies of the world at all levels of social life. However, until now, notions of an alternative economic order are typically just as marginal as the activities that realise it. Linking competence development as a subjective process with forms of social economy may open new perspectives for cooperative forms of work-based democracy.

It should not be forgotten that there are many examples where employees are also (co)owners—in forms of cooperative ownership, direct employee buyout, Employee Stock Ownership Programs, employee-owned shares, etc. In these cases, the subjective horizon is considerably more far-reaching than the immediate work process, but is still within the capitalist economic sphere of dominance. Those involved typically operate in an open market, and often have difficulty in obtaining investment and working capital. Relevant in this context is that they have to be successful in business

management and organisational development at a professional level, despite the fact that employees usually lack extensive management experience (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009; Spear, 2010).

The rationale for including the concept of the ‘political economy of working people’ is that it illustrates the fundamental dimension of democracy in the changing relationship between capital and labour as clarified through the concept of competence: the competent worker can not only handle unforeseen and complex professional challenges, but also assume greater responsibility and ambition for participation in the running of society.

In a continuation of this framework of thinking, Oskar Negt, with a background in political workers’ education and the trade unions, coined an alternative competence canon: What are the competencies needed for a worker’s orientation in future society? His competencies offer an alternative to the hegemonic discourse of competence—defining competence development as a tool for democracy and codetermination rather than a more intense exploitation. But this canon can also be read as an invitation for empirical research to investigate which learning processes take place within the regime of competence discourse and actually point beyond it—research driven by subjective experiences of socio-economic contradiction in the present phase of capitalism. Research questions would be: What is the subjective experience of the relationship between people and societal work? What could it be? Where and how is this relationship developed?

It is a dynamic material form of utopia that is linked to the analysis of capitalism of critical theory. Capitalism is a social relationship where the ”dead work” is accumulated in the form of capital and rules over the living work. Marx’ critique of capitalism’s political economy was a theoretical critique of the way the then also liberal economic theory politicised the understanding of the economy. Marx however developed a much more dialectical analysis which considers the ambiguity of the material forces of motion—which of course depends on political learning processes. The point here is that these political learning processes involve insight and capacity for action in all areas of life in society, and also insight into the possibility of changing them.

In his later work, Negt develops the concept of “Ökonomie des ganzen Hauses”, which could be translated as “comprehensive household economy”, i.e. a holistic economy in which everybody is dependent on and responsible for each other. This may theoretically be a more correct term than the ‘Political Economy of Working People’. First, it includes every person in the community of society and does allow work be the condition for democratic participation, and second, because it more clearly covers all types of work, not just the work performed in a societally organized form, but also the many other kinds of necessary work which present-day working society often makes invisible, and which only becomes visible when organised in society as paid work (child care, housework, relationship work). However, for now I will keep to the ‘political economy of working people’, since it cannot so easily be trivialised or misunderstood.

## Conclusion

The concept of competence is a productive way of understanding the changed relationship between knowledge and work increasingly typical of post-industrial society. It handles notions of eternally valid abstract knowledge and its translation into forms of controlling practices, and raises productive questions for understanding the

subjective process by which experience is processed and become potentials in new concrete practices. It provides for a more dynamic and situational understanding of human potential in work and life. The concept of competence can therefore also serve as a productive concept for understanding the functioning of educational systems and their interaction with other learning environments.

However, on the basis of the concept of competence, a political-economic discourse regime has been established, which subordinates people's learning needs and career opportunities under a "capitalist political economy", through the logic of competition and markets. Bureaucratic control and comparison techniques have attempted to describe competencies as static items that can be possessed and accumulated. The dynamic, situated, and subjective nature of competence development has been rendered invisible.

Other forms of description not politically subordinated to socio-economic competition at enterprise, sector or regional level, have focused on the concrete procedural aspects. This reveals clearly the altered relationship between work and knowledge. Industrial sociology has identified the need for new types and concepts of qualifications, but has been unable to fully re-conceptualise the relationship between knowledge, work, and worker. In the practical implementation of the competence discourse as a common framework for understanding learning and skills between business and education, the following operational question very soon arises: how should human potentials be assessed in a dynamic way, which is realistic for employment as well as formal education? This question has not been answered in the development of the competence discourse.

There is a need for an alternative socio-psychological theorising of competence development as a subjective process. The premise is that competence is a learning tool and potential based on the processing of past experiences. It will therefore to a great extent be intertwined with learning theory that deals with learning at work and in relation to work. Learning and knowledge are practically situated and experienced, but an understanding of them must also involve psychodynamic aspects of motivation, defence mechanisms, identity development, and the "knowledge-sociological" issues of the societal embedding of knowledge in occupations and professions.

Politically, competence must be understood as the potential instrument of power of working people to achieve self-determination at work, and so enhance democracy at the societal level. Empirical research in competence development, and theoretical (historical-societal) interpretation of existing research in this area, is the alternative to subjugating oneself to an economic, reified, competence discourse. A conception of 'the political economy of working people' as an economic order based on ecological and democratic sustainability can hardly be imagined, let alone realised within contemporary discourses of competence development and experimental reform. It is therefore vital that criticism of the discursive regime uncovers the material contradictions and potentials obscured by that regime.

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