

## From Social Rights to Social Networks: Flexibility and Stability in Contemporary Labor Markets

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Plenarveranstaltung: Uncertain Exchanges. Innovation, Stability and the Societal Repercussions of Contemporary Capitalism

### Abstract:

In the 1980s workers faced growing pressures for a reduction of employment protection, in the name of higher "flexibility" of firms and labor markets. In countries like Germany, unions responded by distinguishing between "external" flexibility of employment, which they rejected, and "internal" flexibility of job assignments and working time, which they were willing to accept if necessary. Attacks on employment protection, however, continued even while internal flexibility was being driven to its limits. Today the dominant theme of labor market reform in Europe is "flexicurity", which offers high unemployment benefits - combined with an effectively enforced obligation to accept available jobs - in exchange for external flexibility. Although "flexicurity" would appear to be significantly more disruptive for the social life of workers than internal flexibility, the erosion of what was once considered a social right to stable employment is meeting with surprisingly little resistance. One reason could be that social structures may have changed in ways that make them more tolerant of economic uncertainty than was believed possible in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, family obligations seem to have become less binding and more flexible, in parallel with the disorganization of postwar capitalism. Moreover, increasing workforce participation of women and declining numbers of children may have enhanced the capacities of workers and their families to live with economic uncertainty. Also, informal social relations seem increasingly to be relied upon as a social safety network substituting for stability of employment and supplementing the more conditional benefits of a changed social welfare state. Polanyian assumptions on social limits to the commodification of labor, and related predictions of a societal "counter-movement" against market expansion, may have to be revised in light of the possibility that social structures and cultural dispositions may adapt to the requirements of continued capital accumulation, becoming more flexible to meet the demands of an expanding market society.