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Challenging Democratic Deficit at Work Through Humoristic Criticism: Perspectives from Turkey's Highly Qualified Employees

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Abstract: This article focuses on the lived experiences of highly-qualified employees facing contradictions in working life in contemporary Turkish society, engendered by the ambivalence between the managerial discourse, which promotes employees' subjectivity, and de-democratization of society manifested specifically by the limitations of freedom of expression. The empirical research discussed in this article examines humoristic narratives shared by highly-qualified employees on social media, highlighting the contradictions they experience in corporate life. The study analyzed social media accounts that humorously critique working conditions, corporate culture, indebtedness, and co-worker relationships. It employs a qualitative approach, using content analysis to interpret the narratives and explore how humor is used to express negative working life experiences due to de-democratization of the society. The main findings of the study demonstrate that highly qualified employees, working in corporate companies, use humorous narratives to critique four key areas: *psycho-social risks*, *corporate culture*, *co-worker relationships* and *indebtedness*.

Keywords: highly qualified employees; democracy; work experiences; managerial discourse; subjectivity; humor

The relationship between democracy and work has been widely discussed in political philosophy and the sociology of work, particularly in advanced capitalist societies. While extensive theoretical work has critiqued authoritarian structures of work and their implications for citizenship, less attention has been paid to how these tensions manifest in politically unstable or de-democratizing contexts. This article focuses on Turkey, a country with a complex democratic history marked by repeated military interventions, political instability, and intensifying democratic

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erosion in the last decade. Unlike the societies where most theoretical reflections on workplace democracy have emerged, Turkey presents a unique case: its democratic institutions have been historically fragile, and its transition to a wage-earning society occurred relatively late. These dynamics make it an important context to investigate how highly qualified employees experience the contradiction between the promise of participatory corporate culture and the broader democratic deficit.

Through a qualitative study of social media accounts deliberating negative working experiences and undemocratic working conditions of highly qualified employees in Turkey, the research interprets the narratives and explore how humor is used to express negative and undemocratic working life experiences. The empirical data will be discussed with a social-philosophical and a sociological perspective, particularly at the intersection of Critical Theory and Sociology of Work.

This article explores how humor becomes a critical practice through which these employees challenge managerial authority and navigate tensions between corporate pseudo-democracy and the country's political climate. By doing so, the article sheds light on how the conflict between labor and democracy – often theorized in Western contexts – takes on distinctive forms in a society facing ongoing de-democratization.

Although humor is often associated with entertainment and lightness, a growing body of literature emphasizes its critical and resistant functions, especially in contexts of political repression. Rather than acting merely as a simplifying or reconciling gesture – as it is often assumed in conventional usage – humor in protest settings can function as a creative and subversive political act. In this regard, it becomes crucial to revisit the conceptual boundaries between humor and irony, particularly when analyzing forms of expression emerging from grassroots resistance.

Dağtaş (2016) for instance, defines humorous activism as a crucial component of contemporary street politics. In her analysis of the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, she notes that humor does not merely reflect or mock, but also talks back – it constructs new political meanings and makes visible what is otherwise silenced.

Similarly, Sorensen (2008) demonstrates that the Serbian Otpor movement employed humor not simply as comic relief, but as a strategic form of non-violent resistance. According to her analysis, humor in protest operates on three critical levels: (1) it provokes and ridicules, thereby escalating tension and pressuring the oppressor; (2) it alleviates fear within the resisting group, reinforcing solidarity; and (3) it reduces the oppressor's available means of retaliation by destabilizing expected norms of confrontation. Importantly, Yanık (2015) focuses specifically on the Gezi Park protests and argues that humor in the form of graffiti served as both an outlet for frustration and a form of critical resistance. Protesters used absurdity, irony, and wit to subvert dominant narratives and reclaim public space. These

expressions were not merely humorous in tone but *politically charged*, functioning as affective and symbolic weapons in a struggle over meaning and power.

These perspectives invite us to move beyond a narrow understanding of humor as apolitical or reconciliatory. Instead, in politically charged environments such as Turkey's post-Gezi social media sphere, humor often manifests as a critical-ironic mode of engagement, disrupting dominant discourses and exposing contradictions in managerial or authoritarian language. While the term irony may more precisely capture the rhetorical structure of some of these expressions, the broader conceptual umbrella of humor remains useful insofar as it allows us to explore a diversity of critical-affective strategies, including sarcasm, absurdity, parody, and black humor.

In this study, therefore, humor is not understood as conflict-averse or passive, but as a multidimensional discursive practice that constructs political critique through laughter, often relying on irony but not reducible to it.

I will first engage in a theoretical discussion on the conflict between democracy and labor, reflecting on how existing approaches are useful for understanding advanced capitalist societies while questioning how we might analyze late-industrializing societies without well-established democratic structures (Section 1). After presenting the research methodology (Section 2), it will then emphasize the significance of discussing this issue specifically in the context of highly qualified workers in Turkey (Section 3). The study will analyze findings that focus on the democratic critiques articulated by highly qualified workers in Turkey (Section 4).

1 Theoretical Framework

The conflict between democracy and work represented a significant area of thought for political philosophy and the sociology of work in the 20th century. Debates in this field have particularly centered on the argument that work is shaped according to the interests of capital and, consequently, is not organized democratically – an issue that poses an obstacle to the establishment of a democratic society. Especially in the mid-20th century, for those reflecting on the hierarchical company/factory – organized with a bureaucratic and technical rationality specific to the Taylorist production model, where workers spent a large portion of their daily lives – the experience of work was in contradiction with citizenship rights and even posed a threat to the democratic society.

Dahl (2020) problematized the fact that while states are governed democratically, corporations are managed in an authoritarian manner. He argues that workers have democratic rights and that labor must undergo a democratic transformation. Similarly, Pateman (1970) contends that, in the context of industrial capitalism, workers' participation in decision-making processes is essential for the effective

functioning of democratic participation in society. Furthermore, as a result of the alienation produced by Taylorist corporate organization, it was argued that individuals, who were not only workers but also citizens, were deprived of critical thinking skills and unable to contribute to public debates (Riesman 1974). The fact that time spent outside of work was also encircled by mass culture, which reproduced the logic of capitalist production and instrumental reason, meant that workers could not contribute to democracy as individuals even outside of working hours.

Building on this argument, Friedmann (2012) argues that alienation led factory workers to spend their leisure time without being able to organize themselves. Similarly, in his work *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, Wright Mills (1951) warns that the quantitative rise of white-collar workers – whom he positioned as dependent salaried employees in contrast to the independent old middle class – would lead to the decline of American democracy. Furthermore, he describes them as ‘cheerful robots’ (Mills 1968), shaped by mass culture. In this context, Mills (1951) states in the introduction to his book that these employees would never be able to construct their own future. Mills’ angry tone, according to historian Hofstadter (as cited in Horowitz 1983), toward white-collar workers could actually be understood as a reaction to the risk of democracy’s collapse. This is because, in order to build their own future, they needed to create a democratic public sphere where they could critically discuss and practice engagement with the conditions they were in.

While these debates exposed the threat that authoritarian labor relations posed to democracy, the production model changed in the early 1980s. Neoliberal economic policies were implemented, and a new corporate culture emerged – one that was not strictly hierarchical and gave the impression of being democratically organized by encouraging employees to participate in work processes. The hallmark of this new culture was the claim that it would acknowledge workers’ affective, personal, and subjective contributions, thereby overcoming the alienation of Taylorist corporate structures. However, this new corporate culture did not eliminate the conflict between work and democracy. Instead, workplace democracy debates in the post-1980 corporate culture focused on management strategies that mobilized employees’ subjectivity through performance management, accountability, creativity, and initiative. These strategies, categorized as *new management techniques*, have been conceptualized as *mobilization of subjectivity at work* (Linhart 1994; Lallement 2007; Dejours 1998; Durand 2004), *normative subjectivation* (Baethge 1991) or *appellative subjectivation* (Kocyba 2007). The critique of subjectivized work highlights how employees’ subjectivity is instrumentalized for corporate interests rather than emancipating individuals. In other words, the form of subjectivation expected by corporations does not empower workers but merely ensures compliance with corporate demands. Yet, corporate discourse shaped

employees' expectations by promising an employee profile that was not dependent on directives and whose subjective contributions were recognized. This promise also carried the implication that the workplace was a democratic public sphere (Yılmaz Deniz 2022). However, using Pateman's (1970) concept, this claim can be understood as a *pseudo-democracy of appearance*. Thus, the conflict between labor and democracy has acquired a new dimension in the neoliberal era, shaped by managerial strategies that instrumentalize employees' subjectivity.

Honneth (2023) argues that the fact that work is not democratically organized within the capitalist mode of production – and therefore that democratic values do not extend beyond the boundaries of working life – poses a problem for the necessity of all members of society contributing to democracy. He further claims that, especially in the neoliberal era, undemocratic working conditions have deepened the gap between work and democracy. Similarly, Cukier (2017) emphasizes the need for a democratic critique of work and proposes the concept of the *worker-citizen* (Cukier 2017), highlighting the intersection of workers' rights with citizenship rights. Yeoman (2014) on the other hand, argues that applying democratic values and practices in the workplace is key to ensuring that work is experienced in a way that is both non-alienating and meaningful. In the context of the political sociology of work, Ferreras, Malleon, and Rogers (2024) conceptualizes the corporation as a political entity. She points out that the contradiction between capitalism and democracy persists, particularly in terms of employees' representation. However, she also underscores the democratic potential of work through *bicameral* organization, in which a workers' assembly with equal authority to management could serve as a mechanism for democratizing corporate governance.

However, it is important to remember that all these theoretical discussions take place within the context of advanced capitalist societies with established democratic traditions. When considering a society like Turkey – one with a history of democracy but also marked by political and economic instability and repeated military interventions that have continuously disrupted democratic processes – it becomes necessary to shed light on how the conflict between work and democracy manifests in such a setting.

This article, therefore, seeks to examine what this conflict means in a society that, over a century since its founding, has not been able to establish an uninterrupted democratic practice and has experienced increasing challenges to democratic rights and freedoms since 2010, making it a subject of *de-democratization* debates (Eslen-Ziya and Kazanoğlu 2022; Fernandes 2024; Hintz and Moss 2024). In the context of theoretical discussions, work is often considered a domain that restricts democratic citizenship rights in advanced capitalist societies. But how does this dynamic play out in Turkey, a country characterized by late industrialization,

the formation of a working class only in the 1960s (Makal 2007), and its transformation into a *wage-earner society* in the early 2000s (Özatalay 2014), while also grappling with a persistent democratic deficit?

2 Methodology and Data

This study draws on a qualitative visual analysis of humorous Instagram posts shared by corporate satire accounts in Turkey between 2018 and 2024. The field research focuses on the *Instagram* account ‘Plaza Kafası’, which started producing and sharing content in 2018, along with similar accounts¹ that emerged in 2023 and 2024. These accounts were selected according to their number of followers and interaction rates. They often include terms like *plaza*, *corporate*, or *office* in their names, explicitly referencing the corporate work environments experienced in high-rise office buildings, commonly referred to as *plazas* in Turkish.

Two forms of data were collected. Firstly, in-depth case analysis of a single, high-impact post from the Instagram account *Plaza Kafası*, active since 2018. This post was selected for its clarity in combining visual and verbal irony, high engagement (likes, shares, comments), and representativeness of this research’s objective to demonstrate the link between democracy and work. Secondly, *comparative sample of multiple posts* from similar accounts active between 2023 and 2024.

The content produced by these accounts predominantly satirizes negative workplace experiences using humor, particularly addressing issues specific to highly qualified work. An analysis of the content shared on these accounts reveals a strong focus on working conditions unique to highly qualified employees. These aspects will be examined in detail in the following sections.

Examining such social media accounts is important for capturing the collective voice of highly qualified employees, as their representation through labor unions remains significantly limited. Consequently, when producing critical discourse on working conditions, this group has increasingly publicized their concerns through social media and blogs, particularly since the 2008 economic crisis. These employees face workplace censorship that prevents them from openly voicing their negative work experiences due to the undemocratic nature of their workplaces. However, even if it is subjected to censorships, social media too, with its potential to function as a democratic public space, provides an alternative platform for expression. Humor plays a crucial role in creating a space for *self-expression*, allowing these employees to articulate their frustrations in a way that is both engaging and critical. These

¹ Kurumsal hayatlar (corporate lifes), kurumsal pislik (corporate jerk), plaza hunisi (Plaza funnel), ofisten çıkamadım (I couldn’t get out of the office), plaza kafası (plaza mentality).

social media accounts, while drawing attention to workplace conditions by ridiculing them, also gain followers and engagement, thereby highlighting the significance of highly qualified employees as *self-reflective actors* who reinterpret their own experiences. Additionally, humor has long been recognized as a powerful tool for critique, particularly in undemocratic social conditions. In the Turkish context, the role of humor as a medium of social opposition in the digital public sphere has grown significantly, especially since the *Gezi Park Protests* of 2013 (Dağtaş 2016; Korkut et al. 2022; Aksan 2017).

All of these contents include a visual representation of a corporate environment. This setting typically features an empty meeting room in a skyscraper, a desk with a computer, or a vacant office. The use of such empty office spaces, dominated by black, white, and gray tones – with no visible employees or personal belongings – can be interpreted as a symbolic reference to the absence of employees' subjectivity in these environments. These images serve as the backdrop for the core message of the accounts' discourse, onto which short video clips are superimposed. The video clips used in these posts are taken from real-life footage, such as television programs, talk shows, YouTube videos, news broadcasts, or street interviews. They feature well-known personalities or ordinary people, capturing their verbal expressions and facial gestures. Additionally, a specific workplace issue is written on the visual, summarizing an experience commonly encountered in corporate life. It serves the process of creating different meanings by manipulating the context of these video clips. Through these posts, employees' experiences are *publicized* and, via the embedded videos, are both *articulated* and *deliberated* upon.

The prominence of social media as an outlet for workplace grievances highlights a key issue: *workplace censorship*. Many of these topics cannot be openly discussed within the corporate environment due to various constraints, such as company confidentiality policies, labor laws, or the implicit expectation that employees should not question workplace issues. This enforced silence within organizations aligns with Dejours' (1998) argument on *the denial of suffering in the workplace*, where structural issues are concealed under the guise of professional decorum, efficiency, or corporate harmony.

By transforming these suppressed suffering experiences into humorous social media content, these accounts function as an 'oppositional public sphere' (Negt 2007) where employees can collectively articulate workplace injustices that are otherwise unspoken. In this way, humor serves not only as a means of critique but also as a way to reclaim agency in a work environment where direct critique is often silenced.

3 Highly Qualified Employees and Democratic Deficit at Work

This section brings together three key analytical components concerning highly qualified employees: their reflexivity, their socio-historical context in Turkey's late industrialization, and the forms their democratic critique takes under contemporary conditions.

3.1 The Role of Reflexivity in Highly Qualified Work

In administrative texts related to social policies and in evaluations by international organizations (such as the OECD), highly skilled work that was initially introduced has later been widely used, particularly in migration studies, in the context of the migration of highly qualified employees. I propose extending the use of this concept to the field of the sociology of work as well. Additionally, the fact that no Turkey-specific term has been developed in the social sciences literature to describe these employees – likely because Turkey only transitioned into a wage-earner society in the early 21st century (Yılmaz Deniz 2017) – makes the effort to conceptualize these wage earners particularly significant.

The definition of *highly qualified employees* can be framed in reference to the OECD's (2001) classification, which defines highly skilled work as occupations requiring specialized knowledge and skills in a particular field, typically verified by a higher education diploma. Additionally, the ILO's (2012) skill levels classification highlights the ability to apply factual, technical, and methodological knowledge to complex tasks within a given expertise. High-level literacy, numeracy, and advanced communication skills are also considered key components of *highly skilled work*. Moreover, the ability to solve complex problems in a specific field is categorized as *very high qualification*, encompassing the capacity to analyze and present complex documents, engage in decision-making, exercise creativity, and demonstrate advanced problem-solving skills.

When analyzing the conflict between democracy and work, the work experiences of highly qualified employees in Turkey provide a crucial perspective. This is particularly relevant in a society that is becoming increasingly authoritarian and where labor rights are more restricted compared to advanced capitalist societies. This article argues that the conflict between democracy and work is most clearly visible in the experiences of highly qualified employees. As such, the focus on this specific group is a *methodological choice*, aimed at capturing the nuances of this conflict in a context where workplace democracy is highly constrained. In the Turkish context, highly qualified employees find themselves at the intersection of economic pressures and political constraints. While they are expected to

demonstrate high levels of expertise, autonomy, and initiative, their work environments are often structured in ways that limit their participation in decision-making processes. The contradiction between the neoliberal discourse of *empowerment* and the reality of hierarchical, undemocratic workplace structures is central to their experiences, making them a key group for understanding the broader work-democracy conflict.

My primary aim here is to emphasize that the qualities highlighted in the definition of *highly qualified* are fundamentally related to critical thinking, and professional and intellectual competence, which position the employees as a *self-reflective subject*. Although the flexible production model of post-1980 corporations sought to instrumentalize this subjectivity for economic purposes, it is important to acknowledge that the emerging workforce also gained, or at least had the potential to gain, this reflexivity. If we intend to understand the working conditions and experiences of these employees, we must place their distinct capacity for self-reflection at the center of our analysis. In this sense, while the *mobilization of subjectivity at work* through the post-1980 management strategies may pose a risk of new forms of alienation (Renault 2006), it simultaneously offers them the opportunity to engage in philosophical reflection on their own conditions and experiences ('sich philosophieren') (Negt 2007). In other words, the competencies developed to become a highly qualified worker can, as observed in this study, provide individuals with a genuinely critical perspective and self-reflexivity.

3.2 Highly Qualified Employees in Turkey's Late Industrialization Context

Due to Turkey's late industrialization, the proportion of wage earners in the total workforce only surpassed 50 % in the early 2000s. Within this wage-earning workforce, employment has been concentrated in the *service sector*, which has expanded since the 1980s. Since the early 1980s, highly qualified employees – distinguished by their salaries, benefits, social prestige, and spatial differentiation within urban areas – have also fueled debates in Turkish social sciences regarding the emergence of a *new middle class* (Kurtuluş 2011; Neyzi 1973; Öncü 1997; Rutz and Balkan 2009). However, by the 2000s, the conditions of highly qualified employees began to shift significantly. The *2001 economic crisis* led to mass layoffs, particularly in the banking sector, and since the *2008 global financial crisis*, the economic conditions of highly qualified employees have progressively deteriorated. Objective data support the increasingly negative subjective experiences of work. According to the *OECD Better Life Index*, Turkey ranks among the lowest in terms of *work-life balance*, largely due to its weekly working hours exceeding the OECD average. The extreme blurring of boundaries between work and leisure inevitably has a

significant impact on the relationship between democracy and work in terms of reduced participation in civic life and the erosion of labor rights.

The 2008 financial crisis marked a significant turning point in the work experiences of highly qualified employees in Turkey. They were particularly vulnerable to layoffs because the privileged position they had enjoyed up until that point had a critical downside: *the absence or severe limitation of union rights and the lack of class consciousness*. Although unionization efforts in certain professional groups yielded some results in later years, union rights remained highly restricted overall. This limitation led highly qualified employees to seek alternative forms of organization, primarily through *social media and blog-based networks*. These platforms served two main purposes: first, to allow workers to *share their negative work experiences* among themselves, and second, to *publicize these experiences and engage in deliberation* (Yilmaz Deniz 2022).

The deterioration of working conditions for highly qualified employees in Turkey during the 2000s coincided with the country's broader trajectory of *de-democratization*, which intensified after 2010. This political and social shift had particularly striking consequences for highly qualified employees. Their attempts to organize via social media in response to worsening workplace conditions also became spaces where demands for democracy were articulated. Being both a *worker* in their professional life and a *citizen* in society meant experiencing democracy's decline in a dual sense (Yilmaz Deniz 2022).

In recent years, migration sociology research has highlighted a significant increase in highly qualified migration from Turkey to Europe, with findings suggesting that this trend is strongly linked to experiences of de-democratization (Danış 2023; Orhan 2023). Many highly qualified professionals who have emigrated in the past decade have done so in search of better living and working conditions in European countries. The desire for a better quality of life often includes expectations such as equality and justice, freedom from discrimination based on political views, access to welfare state benefits, more equitable and high-quality education opportunities, and the possibility of living in a democratic society. Similarly, the pursuit of better working conditions is shaped by expectations such as achieving work-life balance, having longer paid leave, knowing they will not receive work-related emails or phone calls outside of office hours, and benefiting from stronger labor protections. This trend underscores how the erosion of workplace democracy and wider democratic decline have increasingly driven highly qualified employees to seek alternative futures beyond Turkey's borders.

The pandemic experience, combined with Turkey's specific socioeconomic conditions, has further deteriorated the already fragile work-life balance for highly qualified employees (Eşici et al. 2024). The post-pandemic global economic crisis, coupled with Turkey's rapidly rising inflation rates since 2021, has exacerbated the

living conditions of this group. For many highly qualified employees, the pandemic served as a turning point, prompting them to reassess their lifestyles and consider significant life changes. One notable response to this shift has been the migration of highly qualified employees from Istanbul, where they are most concentrated, to smaller cities and towns. While the option to work remotely has been the primary factor enabling this movement, many have also been driven by the expectation that leaving the metropolis for coastal or rural areas will offer a more humane and sustainable way of life. This process has triggered a reverse migration trend, where employees relocate to nature-rich coastal regions and small towns in search of a better quality of life.

However, highly qualified employees' responses to their worsening living conditions are not limited to geographic relocation. The *deterioration of economic conditions* – central to the focus of this article has increasingly led this group to seek public avenues to express their work experiences and frustrations. In this context, the emergence of social media accounts dedicated to critiquing workplace conditions reflects a growing need for public articulation of these experiences. My field research examines the origins and discourses of these social media accounts, situating them within this broader socioeconomic landscape.

3.3 Highly Qualified Employees' Democratic Criticism

The factors shaping the work experiences of highly qualified employees are not limited to the objective conditions discussed above. This article focuses particularly on the management strategies and the broader context of de-democratization, both of which restrict employees from expressing their authentic self in the workplace. However, it is also important to emphasize that objective conditions – rising inflation, increasing debt burdens, and job insecurity – further intensify the difficulty of expressing subjectivity at work.

At this point, I will analyze negative work experiences that contribute to an undemocratic work environment along two intersecting axes.

The first axis concerns corporate management strategies, which instrumentalize employees' subjectivity to create the *illusion* of a democratic workplace while failing to fulfill this promise. The expectation that employees demonstrate creativity, take initiative, transition from a duty ethic to an admiration ethic (Voswinkel 2007) – that is, to exceed job requirements by adding a personal touch to their work – and make unique contributions is central to this corporate culture. However, the limits of these subjective contributions are ultimately dictated by whether they align with corporate profit interests. This boundary also marks the exclusion of democratic values and practices in the workplace. I argue that the connection between negative work experiences and the lack of workplace democracy

is particularly significant in the Turkish context. My field research data reveal how employees articulate democratic demands through their work experiences.

The second axis relates to the rise of de-democratization in Turkey since 2010, which has manifested most clearly through restrictions on freedom of expression. This has made the paradox of corporate management strategies even more pronounced, reinforcing undemocratic labor relations. In other words, the constraints on free expression in society have heightened employees' awareness of their inability to express themselves as subjects in the workplace. Additionally, another facet of de-democratization – arbitrariness, where legal procedures are violated at will – has led to managers arbitrarily infringing on workers' rights. In this sense, I argue that the workplace has become a crystallized site of broader societal de-democratization.

As a result, employees are subjected to a double democracy deficit – both as individuals in society and as workers in the workplace. This makes it particularly urgent to critically examine work in an authoritarian society, where democratic erosion in political life is directly mirrored in workplace relations.

However, one may ask: If this issue affects all wage earners, why focus specifically on highly qualified employees? For instance, don't industrial workers also operate under similarly authoritarian conditions? Addressing this question requires clarifying why I prioritize lived experiences as an analytical lens – because not all worker groups experience the same objective conditions in the same subjective way.

The key distinction lies in unionization and labor rights. While highly restricted, workers still have some degree of organizational capacity and union protections (Birelma 2025). In contrast, highly qualified employees remain largely excluded from comprehensive union rights, which pushes them toward alternative forms of organization. Additionally, their intellectual capacity and heightened reflexivity make them more sensitive to negative experiences at work (included undemocratic working conditions) from which they suffer (Yılmaz Deniz 2022). The mobilization of subjectivity at work imposed on them also differentiate their experiences from those of industrial workers, leaving them more exposed to psychosocial risks in the face of de-democratization.

Thus, I argue that the social media accounts examined in my research field emerge from highly qualified employees' capacity for philosophical reflection on their own conditions. These platforms serve as a space where they articulate their experiences and critically engage with their deteriorating working conditions.

4 Findings

This section presents the results of the empirical analysis. It consists of a close reading of a key Instagram video post illustrating how political and workplace authoritarianism are visually and discursively linked and of the thematic findings based on multiple social media posts that reveal recurring critiques voiced by highly qualified employees working in corporate environments.

4.1 The Overlap of De-democratization and Negative Work Experiences

The core finding of this research is that the conflict between democracy and work manifests in Turkey as an overlap between de-democratization and negative work experiences, particularly in the context of highly qualified employees. The most prominent instance of this overlapping is exemplified in the post shared by the PlazaKafası account, which visually merges real-life footage of Turkish politicians with office environments. This content has since been shared by other similar accounts, reinforcing the connection between political and workplace authoritarianism.

In this post, PlazaKafası share a video edit in which politicians are placed into an office meeting setting. Around a conference table, the seats are filled with video clips of politicians, their gestures and speech synchronized with the corporate environment. At the head of the table sits the current President, whose speech to newly appointed district governors in 2023 is overlaid onto the scene:

[...] I expect you to dedicate yourselves to your work with a pace and motivation that will have you running 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

The choice to include this speech is highly significant. It deliberates the long working hours and lack of work-life balance that highly qualified employees endure by aligning their workplace struggles with the language of political authority. The authoritative figure at the head of the table represents both the country's political leadership and the corporate managerial class, suggesting a parallel between the rhetoric of political control and corporate demands on employees.

This discourse also underscores the erosion of legal protections, particularly in labor law. By positioning the President's speech in a workplace setting, the content highlights the arbitrary transgression of legal labor rights and exposes how employees are not recognized as legal subjects (Honneth 2000). In this way, the workplace becomes a microcosm of broader political authoritarianism, where employees experience both political and workplace de-democratization simultaneously. In the second row of seats around the meeting table, a video clip of the President's

son has been placed. In this clip, he appears silent, with his hands clasped and head bowed, while an 'Intern' badge is placed in front of him. This character represents someone who is generally voiceless and without agency. The choice to position this particular clip in the second row is likely related to his public perception as someone who follows in his father's footsteps and does not act independently of him. This visual placement further emphasizes hierarchical obedience, drawing a parallel between workplace dynamics and political power structures.

In the third seat, there is a video excerpt of a female opposition party leader from a February 2024 party group meeting. In this clip, she plays a folk poet's (Karaçaoğlu) song on her phone while visibly emotional, tearfully stating, 'Something has to change', in reference to the miners who lost their lives in a gold mine collapse in Erzincan. This moment is particularly striking in the workplace setting, as it contrasts genuine emotional response and ethical concern with the detached corporate culture where labor struggles are often dismissed.

The fourth seat is occupied by a video clip from the 2023 handover ceremony of Turkey's newly appointed Economy Minister. In this scene, the former minister hands a bouquet of flowers to his successor, saying, 'Welcome. May God help you.' The use of this scene in the post can be interpreted as a manifestation of the struggle employees face against unfavorable working conditions.

At the fifth seat, there is a scene from a TikTok video published in 2023 featuring a former mayor of an Istanbul district – who later ran several times for metropolitan mayor and is currently serving as a member of parliament from the main opposition party – in a conversation with a young man. On the table in the image, the words 'Human Resources' are written in front of the politician. In this scene, the young man says, 'Sir, I want to eat a donut,' and the former mayor responds angrily, 'My son, what do you mean by donut? Don't let your lack of sense keep you from even eating the root of it. God knows you even go to Starbucks.' When the young man replies, 'I'm going, sir,' the former mayor retorts, 'Brother, what's with your adoration for Starbucks? Are you sick? Go to Kahve Dünyası,' while physically pushing him.

The choice to use this clip in the post can be interpreted of how highly qualified employees experience a lack of democracy as individuals in the society they live in. In the quoted dialogue, there is an extremely hierarchical relationship between the young citizen and the politician. The politician does not acknowledge the citizen's request, openly disrespects his individual preference, scolds and humiliates him, and even resorts to physical violence. This is not a case of tacit disregard but a clear, deliberate dismissal and punishment of his request. Through this clip, we witness how legal democratic rights are violated – even though this violation has sparked public outcry, the politician was later elected as a member of parliament from the main opposition party. Associating this scene with the work experiences of highly

qualified employees deliberates that a similar form of authoritarianism exists in the workplace, constituting a part of their negative work experience.

In the sixth seat, there is a clip of the current mayor of Istanbul from a 2024 television interview conducted before the municipal elections. In this clip, while responding to journalists' questions and criticizing the ruling party, the mayor repeatedly states: 'This doesn't concern me. This doesn't concern me, too. This doesn't concern me at all.' The inclusion of this phrase in the post can be interpreted as a critique of workplace managers who refuse to take responsibility for negative situations or events they are accountable for. By repurposing this political statement within a corporate setting, the post draws a parallel between political evasion of responsibility and managerial indifference to employees' struggles.

In the seventh seat, there is a clip from 2014 featuring the leader of a party that was in opposition before 2018 but is now part of the ruling bloc. In this speech, the politician addresses an audience and says: 'With the belief that you will accomplish this, I salute you all with love and respect.' However, the key phrase here is '*all of you*' (*alayınızı*), which in Turkish can be used in a derogatory or even profane manner in certain expressions. At the time, the phrasing caused amusement because the politician paused mid-sentence, momentarily creating the impression that he was about to swear, only to then redirect the sentence into a respectful greeting. The deliberate use of a ten-year-old political clip in this post demonstrates that these video selections are carefully curated to reflect the experiences and critiques of highly qualified employees. The purpose of including this clip seems not simply to highlight the politician's words but to draw attention to the *implied profanity*, mirroring employees' frustration with their working conditions. In this context, the brief pause in the politician's speech symbolizes the hesitation of employees, who, despite feeling anger or frustration toward their work environment, ultimately self-censor and refrain from expressing their true sentiments. The post uses humor to articulate employees' silent but deeply felt reactions, highlighting the gap between what they wish to say and what they are allowed to express in the workplace.

In the eighth and final seat, there is a clip of the former leader of the main opposition party from the 2023 presidential elections. After previously claiming he would win outright in the first round, he failed to secure a victory and remained silent following the results. In response to growing media and public criticism over his lack of reaction, he later released a video from his home, where he slammed his hand on the table and declared 'I'm here! I'm here!' In the visual edit, a résumé is attached to the section of the table where the politician is seated. This modification symbolically aligns the politician's frustrated outburst with the experience of unemployment, where job seekers often feel unseen and ignored. The phrase 'I'm here' thus becomes a sharp response to being overlooked and erased, reflecting the struggles of those facing job insecurity and economic precarity. This carefully

curated content demonstrates how labor relations and politics are deeply intertwined, as political figures and workplace settings are merged within the same narrative framework. By placing political leaders within an office environment, the edit visually conveys how authoritarian discourse and practices directly influence workplace dynamics.

Thus, the findings in this research field reveal that while in a democratic society, work is often seen as excluded from democratic values and practices, in an undemocratic society, authoritarian values and practices inevitably permeate the world of work. This is because undemocratic conditions align with and reinforce the demands of capital, making workplaces a reflection of broader political authoritarianism.

So, what negative work experiences arise from the undemocratic practices that highly qualified employees expose in their workplaces – particularly as they link these issues to broader political dynamics? My analysis in this field demonstrates that highly qualified employees working in corporate companies use humorous narratives to critique four key areas: Psycho-social risks, Corporate culture, Co-worker relationships, Indebtness.

4.2 Undemocratic Working Conditions as Negative Working Experiences

4.2.1 Lack of Psychological Well-Being

An important theme encountered in these social media accounts is psychological distress and psychopathologies. In other words, undemocratic work experiences primarily result in employees developing psychopathological conditions. Before presenting the deliberations shared in these analyzed posts, it is necessary to first understand why highly qualified employees reference these mental health struggles. Why do the undemocratic work experiences we identify lead to psycho-social risks specifically for highly qualified employees? How can we connect the emergence of these risks to the broader conflict between labor and democracy? If the undemocratic conditions we discuss affect all wage earners, why do trade unions in the working class respond by focusing on reclaiming labor rights, while highly qualified employees instead share social media content referencing psychopathologies?

This difference in responses can be understood through how similar conditions produce different experiences. What, then, accounts for this difference in experience? Looking at the sociology of work literature, we can explain this phenomenon through the paradoxical managerial imperatives that govern highly qualified work (Bouilloud 2012). These paradoxical commands expect employees to both freely

express their subjectivity at work while also strictly adhering to directives. As a result, the reality of work is denied and unrecognized (Dejours 1998).

The mobilization of subjectivity in the workplace does not lead to recognition or valuation of the worker as a subject. Instead, because subjectivity is instrumentalized for corporate interests, it produces subjective alienation (Dejours 2006; Renault 2006; Durand 2006). One of the key consequences of subjective alienation is the emergence of psycho-social risks and psychopathologies in individuals. This theoretical approach also explains the patterns observed in my empirical analysis – why highly qualified employees frame their experiences through mental health struggles rather than traditional labor rights discourses. Their sense of alienation and the paradoxical demands of their work environments create conditions where their distress manifests as individual psychological suffering rather than collective labor grievances.

The reality of highly qualified labor carries an inherent ambiguity. However, the field data reveal how this ambiguity is experienced differently under democratic versus undemocratic social conditions. One of the most defining aspects of this experience, I argue, is the sense of futurelessness among highly qualified employees. As de-democratization deepens, leading to economic crises and high inflation, feelings of anxiety and hopelessness about the future intensify. More than just uncertainty, many highly qualified employees express a complete absence of future expectations. This futurelessness, shaped by political and economic instability, directly impacts psychological well-being and the way employees experience their work lives. One example of this sentiment is summarized in a September 17 post by the Instagram account ‘Kurumsalpislik_Backspace’, which reads:

Social life: 0, life energy: below zero, future expectations: none. And once again, we start another workday.

This statement reflects how undemocratic conditions do not remain confined to the political sphere but permeate into work life, creating an existential crisis for employees. Rather than seeing work as a pathway to stability or progress, employees seem to experience a collapse of meaning, where work becomes a mere function of survival, devoid of future-oriented aspirations. This suggests that de-democratization and economic instability not only affect labor conditions but also erode the psychological resilience of employees, reinforcing alienation and mental exhaustion as dominant experiences in the workplace.

4.2.2 Corporate Culture: The Struggle for Recognition and Expression

Criticisms of corporate culture primarily center around the lack of recognition of employees' subjectivity and the restriction of their authentic self-expression. This

issue extends beyond employees being unable to make unique contributions to their work – it also means they cannot voice their criticisms about their working conditions. A clear example of this is found in a July 11, 2024 post by the Instagram account ‘Kurumsal_mizah’, which features an angry outburst from a football club executive speaking to the press:

Enough! We’ve had it up to here. Why are we leaving our families and children to come here? Why are we working regardless of snow, rain, or anything else? No one can speak. They don’t let us speak. They can ban me for life – I’ll quit this job anyway. Who are we even serving? What’s the point?

By repurposing this frustrated speech, highly qualified employees express their own workplace grievances, using someone else’s words to articulate the reactions they cannot voice directly at work. This post highlights two key areas of critique: The inability to speak or be heard – employees emphasize that they are not free to express themselves in the workplace, either in terms of their opinions or their criticisms. A profound loss of meaning in work – employees point to a crisis of purpose, where they struggle to understand what they are working for and who ultimately benefits from their labor.

The intersection of these two negative work experiences – the loss of meaning and the absence of free expression – suggests that these employees do not merely feel unheard but also alienated from their work’s purpose. This dual experience of silencing and meaninglessness can be analyzed through Yeoman’s (2014) concept of ‘agonistic democracy at the workplace’, which offers a framework for overcoming the conflict between labor and democracy. By acknowledging dissent, embracing workplace deliberation, and fostering participatory structures, agonistic democracy challenges the corporate tendency to suppress critique and instrumentalize workers’ subjectivity. In this sense, social media platforms become alternative spaces for democratic deliberation, where employees compensate for the lack of recognition and expression in their actual workplaces.

Yeoman (2014) argues that there is a direct relationship between meaningful work and workplace democracy. In other words, a democratic workplace fosters a labor process where employees can create meaning. Within this framework, agonistic practice is proposed as a way to overcome the monolithic culture that results from the instrumentalization of employees’ subjectivity. Put differently, agonistic practice – characterized by debate, struggle, confrontation, and persistence in one’s ideas – creates an environment where everyone’s subjective contributions are equally recognized. This recognition, in turn, allows employees to assign positive meaning to their work.

A workplace that supports agonistic democracy enables employees to freely express their authentic selves while ensuring that the meaning they ascribe to their

work is acknowledged. Instead of being reduced to passive laborers whose subjectivity is merely exploited for corporate goals, employees in such an environment can engage in meaningful deliberation, contestation, and co-creation, ultimately fostering a more democratic and fulfilling work experience.

In this context, an intriguing finding emerges from the field research. When examining the relationship between speech suppression in the workplace and the experience of meaninglessness, the data appear to validate Yeoman's argument – namely, that workplace democracy is essential for meaningful work. However, the findings also highlight a key issue: the workplace itself is not a suitable space for agonistic practice, as employees explicitly state that they are 'not allowed to speak.'

The aggressive rhetoric of the individual whose words are repurposed in these posts illustrates that employees – deprived of the ability to express themselves directly – have shifted agonistic practice to social media. However, in this transition, two layers of mediation emerge: Humor as an intermediary – the frustration stemming from work experiences is not expressed directly but filtered through humor, turning anger into ridicule and satire. Indirect speech through well-known figures – the words used in these posts do not belong to employees themselves. Instead, they are spoken by a public figure whose statements are repurposed to reflect the employees' sentiments.

The use of humor in this context suggests that employees do not feel they can openly express their anger about work, even on social media. This is because social media is also a space where individuals are monitored – not only as citizens but also as employees, meaning that freedom of expression is constrained by both political and corporate surveillance. Since agonistic speech in the workplace can lead to termination, and outspokenness on social media can result in legal repercussions such as detainment, employees must resort to coded, humorous expressions to articulate their grievances. This example raises a critical question: Can agonistic democracy in the workplace truly democratize labor in a de-democratizing society?

The limited field data analyzed in this study suggest that its applicability is highly contested. While agonistic democracy offers a compelling theoretical solution to workplace authoritarianism, the political and legal constraints in de-democratizing societies may render it ineffective in practice. Instead of fostering open deliberation in the workplace, employees are forced to shift their agonistic expressions to external, indirect, and humorous modes of discourse, revealing the structural limitations of democratizing labor in an increasingly undemocratic context.

4.2.3 Co-worker Relationships: The Breakdown of Workplace Solidarity

The social media posts on co-worker relationships primarily highlight the harm employees inflict on one another, emphasizing the lack of solidarity in the workplace. One of the main factors driving this erosion of solidarity is the performance-based management strategies that isolate employees and intensify competition among them. These strategies discourage mutual support, replacing it with workplace rivalry and individualism.

Dejours (1998), in *Souffrance en France*, argues that in the new corporate culture, employees experience psychological suffering when they witness injustices against their colleagues but remain silent. The social media accounts that publicize the work experiences of highly qualified employees in Turkey reflect a critique of this phenomenon, exposing how competitive corporate environments hinder workplace solidarity.

One example can be seen in a November 8, 2024, post by the Instagram account ‘Kurumsalhayatlar’. This post features a video clip from a television program, in which an angry female news anchor suddenly stands up and yells, ‘Sit down and don’t drive me crazy!’. The clip is superimposed onto an open-office setting, making it appear as if the anchor is confronting a co-worker in the workplace. Similarly, a June 28, 2024, post by the account ‘Plazahunisi’ follows the same editing technique. This post integrates multiple clips from a Turkish television series, all featuring the same character. When the dialogue is stitched together, the character delivers a contemptuous tirade, repeatedly saying: ‘You know nothing. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.’ The caption of the post reads, ‘This is me walking around the office all day.’ This framing makes it clear that the insult is directed at a co-worker, capturing the hostile and unsupportive nature of the workplace. By using humor, these posts critique the normalization of workplace hostility. Employees expose their frustrations with toxic co-worker dynamics not through direct complaint but through satire, turning corporate alienation and lack of solidarity into comedic content.

Ultimately, these posts highlight a crucial paradox: while highly qualified employees experience alienation and loneliness, their responses remain individualistic rather than collective, reinforcing the very culture of workplace division they critique. These social media posts reveal that employees do not respect one another, harbor resentment, and disregard their co-workers. This highlights a fundamental failure to establish workplace collectivism, which is essential for democratic labor relations.

A clear parallel emerges between the lack of public spaces for open debate – due to political restrictions on freedom of expression – and the inability to foster respectful, democratic engagement in the workplace. In both settings, deliberative exchange is stifled, preventing individuals from recognizing and valuing

each other's subjectivity. Drawing from Landemore and Ferreras (2016), who conceptualize the workplace as a political entity and a public sphere, this research suggests that the absence of a democratic public sphere in broader society is mirrored within the workplace. If public deliberation is suppressed in society, it is unlikely that a functioning public sphere will emerge in the workplace either. Moreover, the absence of democratic practices in the workplace – where individuals fail to engage in mutual recognition and respectful deliberation – acts as a barrier to fostering democratic engagement in broader society. The inability to practice deliberative democracy at work reinforces its absence in public life, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle between workplace alienation and societal de-democratization. Thus, the poor quality of co-worker relationships and the broader process of de-democratization are not separate phenomena but mutually constitutive, reflecting how authoritarian dynamics shape both labor relations and political life.

4.2.4 Indebtedness: The Financial Struggles of Highly Qualified Employees

The economic crisis that began in Turkey in 2018 has intensified in the post-pandemic period, exacerbated by inflationary policies and the worsening living conditions of wage earners. For highly qualified employees, economic precarity has become a defining aspect of their work experience. One of the most significant findings from the field research relates to indebtedness. Social media posts frequently highlight how employees struggle with financial insecurity, including, not receiving the salary they deserve, being unable to pay off their credit card debt, spending their entire paycheck on repaying debts.

Once again, humor plays a central role in how these experiences are articulated. Instead of directly voicing financial distress, employees use satirical and self-deprecating humor to cope with and critique their economic struggles. This pattern suggests that debt is not only an economic issue but also a deeply embedded social experience – one that is normalized and publicly discussed through humor, even as it reflects serious financial instability and declining work conditions for highly qualified employees.

Social media posts frequently use humor and pop culture references to express the financial distress experienced by highly qualified employees. These posts highlight how economic hardship is internalized as a mental and emotional burden, particularly in an era of rising debt, inflation, and stagnant wages. A February 10, 2025 post by the Instagram account 'Ofistençıkamadım' features a male TV character repeatedly saying: 'Patience. Patience. We will endure.' The caption of the post reads: 'It's the first workday of the week, and my debt has come to mind.' Here, patience and endurance – phrases often used in religious and cultural contexts – are reframed as coping mechanisms for financial struggles, reinforcing how

employees feel trapped in a cycle of debt and unfulfilled labor. Similarly, a November 1, 2024 post by ‘Kurumsalhayatlar’ uses a clip of a helpless-looking TV character, overlaid with the text: ‘Your workplace is testing your patience, but you’re too poor to resign.’ This post explicitly links economic dependence to the inability to leave toxic workplaces, illustrating how financial precarity undermines employee agency and freedom.

Another post, shared by ‘Kurumsalpislik’ on September 11, 2024, underscores the mental health consequences of debt. The post combines: A TV interview featuring a pop singer known for his massive gambling debts, stating:

‘I have no mental health, no emotional health. I don’t think anyone does. Everyone should be on antidepressants.’, A video of another singer crying, an office desk edited to include a box of antidepressants and credit cards, a caption listing financial struggles:

‘Three maxed-out credit cards, two unpaid loans, 10 years of seniority, zero promotions, and my mental state.’ By juxtaposing real-life financial struggles with corporate work culture, these posts satirize the normalization of debt and its psychological toll. The message is clear: for many highly qualified employees, financial survival has become inseparable from mental exhaustion. Through humor, these posts function as a collective expression of economic frustration, demonstrating how wage stagnation, financial insecurity, and corporate exploitation contribute to both professional and psychological deterioration.

These social media posts reveal that indebtedness has a decisive impact on the agency of highly qualified employees. The inability to change their working conditions due to financial dependence also limits their ability to express their subjectivity in the workplace. This is why employees often reference endurance (‘sabr’) and losing their mental health, as seen in the analyzed posts. Debt does not merely restrict their financial freedom – it also undermines their capacity to demand democratic working conditions. In this sense, financial precarity creates a structural barrier to workplace democracy. Employees who are struggling to make ends meet are less likely to take risks, engage in collective organizing, or push back against exploitative management practices. Put differently, debt enforces compliance – highly qualified employees have no choice but to accept the conditions imposed on them because economic survival takes precedence over workplace rights and democratic agency.

5 Conclusions

This research demonstrates how theoretical discussions on work, democracy, and subjectivity are empirically reflected in Instagram content created by highly

qualified employees. The analysis of these posts reveals how employees articulate their struggles, frustrations, and critiques through humor, while also illustrating how undemocratic working conditions affect their agency, well-being, and workplace relationships. Instagram posts analyzed in this article serve as indirect forms of democratic work critique and as alternative spaces for workers to articulate grievances that cannot be voiced in workplace.

This study highlights the need for a revised perspective when analyzing the relationship between work and democracy in societies undergoing de-democratization. The research reveals that the democratization of the workplace and the democratization of society are interconnected, but for employees to voice their democratic demands, they need to create an oppositional public sphere. At the same time, managerial strategies that suppress workplace democracy create intensified pressures on highly qualified employees, pushing them toward indirect and mediated forms of expression. However, the ability of highly qualified employees to critically reflect on negative work experiences and publicly deliberate these experiences through humor plays a crucial role in keeping democratic demands alive, even in constrained environments.

Social media, in this context, functions as a crucial arena where employees can reclaim their agency, share their frustrations, and critique undemocratic work structures – albeit in a mediated, indirect, and often humorous manner. Ultimately, this study underscores that workplace democracy is not only a labor rights issue but also a fundamental component of democratic engagement in society. As de-democratization intensifies, the conditions of highly qualified employees illustrate how economic precarity, workplace alienation, and lack of democratic participation intersect to shape contemporary work experiences. If meaningful change is to occur, understanding and addressing these issues will require rethinking the role of work in democratic struggles and identifying alternative avenues for employees to reclaim their voices.

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