

Conference proceedings

Recognition of unpaid work in the perspective of degrowth

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**2nd Conference
on Economic
Degrowth**
For Ecological Sustainability
and Social Equity

BARCELONA
26th-29th March 2010

An illustration at the bottom of the page shows a grey train with black windows and doors. A red carpet is laid out on the ground in front of the train, and a large group of diverse people is walking along it. The scene is set against a white background.

Abstract

The decommodification of working activities is central for the conception of work in a degrowth perspective. However, the personal dependence on paid work is very high, whereas unpaid working activities, like care work, political participation and subsistence are more and more neglected. By using the analytical approach of recognition it will be argued that on a societal level, spaces and frameworks for unpaid working activities have to be strengthened. Regarding a development towards degrowth, the regulation of time, social security and a change of normative working paradigms are central in order to recognise the manifold activities of unpaid work in an appropriate way.

Keywords

degrowth; paid work, unpaid work, recognition

1 Work in the perspective of degrowth

Actual global economic trends are still strongly oriented on economic growth and technological progress. Recent developments show that work and employment are currently facing severe ambivalent challenges: In the frame of globalised markets, the ongoing course of fragmentation and flexibilisation of working processes are leading to increasing levels of precarious and insecure working conditions. At the same time, the high subjective and societal orientation on paid work remains unchanged. Rather, it becomes reinforced, as high performance requirements strengthen the personal dependence on paid work within several sectors. Thus, the individual as well as social dependence on paid work becomes even reinforced by economic growth in all industrialised countries (Sauer 2005). At the same time, in line of this development, fields of activities which are dedicated to unpaid work are losing more and more in importance (Krings et al. 2009).

However, in the perspective of degrowth, the focus on possibilities and challenges of unpaid work seems to be central to sketch future perspectives of working relations (Behrendt et al. 2007). In contrast to paid work which is strongly related to institutionalised and economic-based working activities, unpaid work, basically, is not profit oriented and is organised on an individual basis. It allows to follow sustainable life styles and consumption pattern as well as political participation, as empirical evidence show the field of unpaid work may cover manifold reproductive activities like cooking, gardening, doing handicrafts as well as becoming involved into voluntary charity work or citizen engagement.

Especially feminist as well as historic analyses have shown that a holistic definition of work integrates both types of work – paid and unpaid – which seem to be fundamental for the further development of society. When combining paid work with various fields of unpaid work such as uncommodified activities, voluntary work, and family work seem suitable to support social as well as ecological aims (Biesecker 2000, Brandl & Hildebrandt 2002).

However, the debate on such a holistic concept of work, integrating unpaid working spheres, has already a 20 year old tradition. Under the topic “the future of work” alternative concepts to the paid work model were discussed intensively (Bergmann 2004, Rifkin 1996). Strongly influenced by experiences of mass unemployment in industrial production due to rationalisation and automatisisation, in the 1980s and 1990s mainly three political strategies were proposed: 1. A redistribution of work by a reduction of working hours of the employees so that the human resources should be distributed between a larger amount of persons, 2. Deregulation of labour markets in order to increase work volume by flexibility measures based on economic growth, 3. The prediction of the end of full employment and the proposition of alternative social integration models to paid work (Senghaas-Knobloch 2000).

The third approach referred to a “future of work-concept” was based on two premises leading to a normative change towards work, which is still relevant when thinking about the relationship between work and degrowth: First, there is not enough work within societies and second, a variety of activities (care work, educational activities) are fulfilled – especially by women – which are not considered as active ‘workers’. The inclusion of unpaid work into societal visibility and recognition reflects a long debate in feminist research which pointed out that a broad range of non-market based activities remain invisible and are not recognised as work (Lenz 2008). In the debate on “the future of work” these activities have been defined in a societal sense: exchange pattern of work between society and individual are drawn on a comprehensive mutual exchange of resources and not only on monetary based principles (Kambartel 1994).

However, societal and individual orientations are still strongly focused on paid work by simultaneously neglecting unpaid working pattern. As unpaid working activities are crucial when thinking about society in a degrowth perspective, this contribution sheds light on specific qualities of unpaid working activities. Hereby, “recognition” in the approach of Axel Honneth (Honneth 1994) is used to analyse why paid work in relation to unpaid work continues to be of such a high individual and societal relevance. Furthermore

shows, which specific qualities of unpaid work are important for recognition and how they can be strengthened on a social level.

2 Analytical framework – theory of recognition

In this contribution qualitative results are discussed using the comprehensive theoretical approach on recognition of Axel Honneth (cf. Honneth 1994, Honneth 2004). The results are drawn from a qualitative study aiming to analyse the value of unpaid work. Which structures of recognition are prevalent in paid work? Which are prevalent in unpaid work? What is the value for the individual?¹

Taking into account the theoretical assumptions on recognition of Hegel and Mead², Honneth points to three different dimensions of recognition: love, equal treatment in law and solidarity (social esteem). In order to understand how recognition can be assessed regarding paid and unpaid work, Honneth defines recognition as a societal category of analysis which serves to analyse intersubjective aspects. Recognition provides a basis for self-confidence whereas disregard leads to a destruction of the self-conception which defines societal structures³. He outlines three dimensions of recognition: love, law, solidarity. The dimension *love* can be found in the private sphere in personal relationships where individuals are encouraged in their feelings and personal needs. Recognition through love takes place in personal relationships by family, friends, colleagues and is a mutual affirmation of personal needs, giving each other self-confidence. Struggle for recognition take place when the validity and warranty of personal needs is endangered. Disregard can take place on a physical and psychological level and can take forms of dispute, deception, withdrawal of affection or ignoring each other. The sphere of law is formed by the mutual recognition of individual rights through all members of the society providing self-respect.

On the level of *law*, individuals meet on an institutional level, where recognitions is institutionalised for all human beings (i.e. human rights) or specific laws for different social groups (i.e. workers in employment). Struggle for recognition is a struggle for the compliance of rights and its obligations which may occur for different societal groups. Disregard takes place, when the lack of social recognition, respectively changes of social interpretation leads to social abuses and hinders social integration.

Solidarity covers the field of recognition that arises from certain contributions to societal aims. Individual achievements which are important for societal aims give persons self-esteem. Based on this, individuals are able to assess their competences and their performance. They can develop a positive reference to their own skills, competences, and capabilities, which is seen on a societal level by rights as well as distribution of resources – in traditional sense money – and on a personal level by the recognition of individual skills and competences by personal relationships. Struggle for recognition takes place if achievements are underestimated. Disregard takes place in there is now positive valuation of own skills and competences in the societal system of values.

¹ On the basis of qualitative case studies in sustainable working concepts in Germany, specific features of unpaid work are outlined in order to uncover intrinsic qualities and possibilities of individual and societal recognition of unpaid work. In a multiple case study approach (Yin 2003) interviews with experts and members of three sustainable working concepts are conducted. They are analysed using the qualitative content analysis (Kohlbacher 2006). The cases were chosen by a theoretical sampling strategy aiming at a diverse picture on paid and unpaid working relations. The first case represents a project offering a setting where people can practice uncommodified activities for their own use, e.g. doing handicrafts. The second case consists of a project intending to offer various starting points for sustainable development through education. The third case is an anthroposophic company, which offers a comprehensive work-life balance program aiming to combine paid work with unpaid working activities.

² Hegel catches recognition as the permanent inner struggle of the subjects, between self-assertion and socialisation. Mead's work on identity is based on the relationship of the internal and external assessment for the formation of identity. In his attempt, the formation process of identity is understood as the integration of different identities which are on the one hand socially generated and on the other hand individually developed (cf. Holtgrewe/Voswinkel/Wagner 2000b, Sitzer/Wiezorek 2005).

³ In this paper, Honneth's approach is discussed very much on the surface as it is used as an analytical model to elaborate the recognition of unpaid work in a degrowth society. Please refer to Fraser & Honneth 2003, Honneth 2004, Young 2005 for a comprehensive framing of the theoretical approach.

3 Recognition for unpaid work

Using Honneth's theory of recognition as analytical approach for the personal and societal evaluation of paid and unpaid work, it becomes visible that there is a strong divide between the societal recognition of paid and unpaid work. Paid work is strongly embedded into recognition structures in terms of law and solidarity which cannot equally detected in unpaid work. In the relation to paid work, people receive recognition with regard to their societal position, the status, occupational belonging, and payment they get. They are able to count this as recognition in terms of solidarity based on formal labour regulations (law). If somebody is integrated into paid work, in a traditional sense, he or she receives recognition especially in terms of law as well as solidarity.

In contrast to recognition structures of paid work drawing on formal rules in terms of law and solidarity, recognition for unpaid work is much more based on informal relations and interpersonal negotiations. People can receive recognition by exploring new fields of individual competences using artistic, social, and handicraft potentials. This can provide people the experience of self-fulfilment, individual orientation and sense-giving and can support personal developments. These outcomes are based on individual approaches and form new forms of recognition in terms of solidarity. These solidarity forms of recognition are very different from those of paid work and have to be individually defined. They have the potential to strengthen social relations in family and friendships by the focus of mutual care in unpaid working activities and can therefore connect recognition in terms of love with recognition in terms of solidarity. It has to be taken into account that recognition for unpaid work is much more fragile because it is mainly independent from formal rules. Rather it depends on informal qualities, which are less stable and rely very much on personal relationships.

In order to strengthen unpaid work in society, pattern of recognition for unpaid work have to be integrated into formal societal spheres. However, it is a challenge to transfer the specific qualities of unpaid work, which are mainly based on individual aspects into societal spheres. Therefore, it is an important step to strengthen spaces and frameworks for unpaid working activities. Three crucial starting points for societal strategies are identified in the following:

First, it is important to identify niches and intermediate spaces, where unpaid work can flourish and develop its specific contribution to public welfare. Daily life is organised on the basis of working time models. The organisation of working time of paid work stays a very important factor of change. A reduction of working hours as well as innovative working time models should be still in the centre of action (Coote et al. 2010). Therefore it is crucial to have free time which gives room and space for unpaid working activities like the production of goods in private spheres on the basis of subsistence, living family and friendships, and participating in political processes.

Second, social security measures have to be adapted to the needs of unpaid work. Also here, niches and rooms for unpaid working activities have to be opened: Secure and stable working conditions provide important preconditions for unpaid work, because people do not have to be concerned about job security. All economic strategies which are related to basic income contribute to strengthen possibilities for unpaid work. Furthermore it is important to support places and rooms where people can follow activities contributing to subsistence like gardens or workshops etc.

Third, new paradigms of work have to be discussed. Work has to be redefined and unpaid working fields have to be strengthened. A holistic concept of work, combining paid and unpaid work in an appropriate way, has to be integrated into societal systems of value. In order to achieve a degrowth development the ratio between market-based and unpaid work has to be changed. It is central to "decouple" working achievements from commodified goods and performances. New forms of "achievement" in society have to be defined which are oriented on aspects like subsistence, ecology, or political participations in order to

meet the demands of degrowth. Motives for work should also be rooted outside the markets and should be oriented on common welfare at the level of local communities. Rather intrinsic values of work like meaningfulness and joyfulness should be detected. Recognition for non-market based goods and achievements should be re-established, like i.e. recognising people who are able to work for their existential needs and those which build up alternatives to the paid work system.

What are we losing with the concentration on the market economy? And what are we gaining by the recognition of unpaid work? These should be the guiding questions for the category of work in a degrowth society. The answer should be simple: the experience of life in all its manifold dimensions.

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