

Precarious wealth and sustainable consumption

The term “precarization” has been introduced into the social scientific debate about changes in the working society in order to analyze new forms of unequal employment opportunities. The debate revolves around claims that precarious employment is no longer restricted to the margins of society only, but now extends far into the middle classes. According to this thesis, jobrelated social insecurity and fears of precarization are spreading particularly among those segments of society that increasingly perceive their own, hitherto stable social status as insecure or even threatened. Sustainable consumption patterns can be observed especially among segments of society whose social status is secure or at least not vulnerable. Given the increase in living conditions characterized by insecurity and precarious wealth, we are faced with the question as to how this will affect the households’ willingness and capability to engage in sustainable consumption practices. Precarious social conditions hardly allow for a longer-term perspective in planning for everyday issues and life in general. Therefore, we can expect precarious living conditions to take their toll on the sustainability of private consumption. Bearing this in mind, the presentation pursues two objectives: First, I want to show how experienced (“objective”) and perceived (“subjective”) precarization affects the conduct of everyday life in private households, and how these effects then influence the social opportunity structures for sustainable patterns of consumption as well as the chances for their diffusion. Second, I will show the opportunities and limitations of sustainable consumption patterns under changing socio-economic conditions for prosperity. The approach is based on the working hypothesis that people by no means merely passively adapt to restrictive socio-economic conditions, especially in situations of uncertainty and insecurity, but that – with some gender-specific differences – they will proactively readjust the conduct of life, develop new patterns of time use, and change their ways of appropriating the material infrastructure of everyday life (products and services) in order to maintain or restore the quality of life.