

Working within and beyond the market – Individual and societal recognition for sustainable work

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1. Sustainable work within the market

Already for 20 years, the debate on the “end of work” has been focusing on “sustainable working concepts” which stress the societal and individual importance of unpaid work in relation to paid work. The main idea of these debates is to overcome the centrality of paid work on a societal and individual level in order to find new modes of social integration and cohesion. Whereas in the beginning, the debate was motivated by high unemployment rates due to automation, today – in the face of current globalisation leading to flexible, precarious and insecure working conditions – the debate seems to be still highly relevant. It seems that in current working conditions the individual and social dependence on paid work becomes even more accentuated in all industrialised countries. At the same time, fields of activities which are dedicated to unpaid work are losing more and more importance. Looking back to the original ideas of the debate on the “end of work”, current developments strongly reinforce the need to renew the idea of sustainable working concepts in modern societies as unpaid working spheres have manifold potentials and societal values.

In Germany, the debate on a sustainable concept of work (combining paid and unpaid work) began in the 1980s as employment rates were steadily declining due to an increase in industrial efficiency. Ten years later, discontinuities in working life continued. Standard employment relationships – until then providing lifelong full-time employment – became fragile also for highly qualified work. The development of information and communication technologies, the growing pressure of global markets as well as deregulation formed the basis for the flexibilisation of career paths and increasing insecurity on individual levels again down to the present day. As a reaction in these years, three main political strategies were proposed. First, a redistribution of work was called for, reducing the working hours of individual employees so that available work could be distributed between larger numbers of persons. Second, deregulation of labour markets was proposed in order to increase work volume by flexibility measures based on economic growth. Last but not least, the diagnosis was made that regulated full employment could no longer be a reference for a societal definition of work. Based on this, the “crisis of the labour society” was also regarded as a chance to integrate unpaid work into the societal division of labour (Senghaas-Knobloch 2000).

In line with the third approach the societal definition of work thus opened up to a manifold set of working activities, many of which had not been previously recognised as work. The purpose was a positive reassessment of unpaid working activities like do-it-yourself work (DIY), voluntary work, and family work. As such, the narrow definition of work to include only paid work was broadened for (nearly) the first time¹. The following definition of Kambartel (Kambartel 1994) serves as basis for such a broad understanding of work: “Societal work means an activity dedicated to others, which takes part in the societal exchange of goods and services at a general level“.

Normative foundations for such an understanding of work arose from different lines of thought like the critique of capitalism (Gorz 2000), feminist theory (Fraser 1994) as well as sustainability research (Biesecker 2000). In this debate, manifold potentials and values of unpaid work thus began to be explored: Unpaid work can contribute to changed forms of social cohesion as it allows social integration for those unemployed or suffering from highly precarious employment. It contributes to a new social contract of work and serves to support interpersonal relations through personal care relationships or mutual learning between generations (Kambartel 1994). Last but not least, in a Marxist perspective on alienation, the individual organisation of unpaid work permits the individual to work in a self-determined way, thus expressing intrinsic values and exploring creative potentials. In this paper, the normative concept of “mixed work” is chosen as guiding model for a sustainable working concept (Brandl & Hildebrandt 2002). “Mixed work” was developed in the context of sustainability research. In this concept, paid work is combined with uncommodified activities such as DIY, voluntary work, and family work, which seem in combination suitable to support social as well as ecological aims.

In the remainder of this paper, after this short introduction to the debate on “end of work”, the analytical framework of “recognition” in the approach of Honneth will be introduced. On this analytical basis the results of a qualitative case study dealing with the realization of mixed work within a company are presented, which will be followed by a short conclusion.

2. Analytical and Methodological Approach

This paper intends to shed light on the question why such a promising concept of work has not got more importance in society. Following Honneth’s social theory approach on recognition, hereby “recognition” will be regarded as fundamental to understand and explain the evolution of societal processes as well as the motivation for individual action. Hence, the term “recognition” is used as analytical category to explain which meaning sustainable concepts of work can have on a societal as well as individual level.

Taking into account the theoretical assumptions on recognition of Hegel and Mead, Honneth points to three different dimensions of recognition: love, law, and solidarity (social esteem) (Honneth 1994). The sphere of law is defined by the mutual recognition of individual rights by all members of the society. It provides the subject with self-respect. Solidarity covers the field of recognition that arises from individual performance and its contributions to societal aims. It gives individuals self-esteem. Based on this, individuals are able to assess their competences and their performance (Holtgrewe, Voswinkel & Wagner 2000). The dimension, love, can be found in the private sphere in personal relationships with family, friends, and colleagues where individuals are supported with their emotional and personal needs. The individual gains self-confidence. Honneth's approach is used here because it allows for the systematic analysis of recognition in the field of work with a special focus on individual motives. Following Honneth, recognition can be systematised by mapping personal (love), performance-related (solidarity) and institutionalised (law) patterns of recognition.

3. Case Study – The Nature Corp.

In terms of research methods, the following analysis is based on a multiple case study approach using qualitative interviews (Stake 1995, Yin 2003, see also Nierling 2011, forthcoming). In this contribution, one of the cases, the Nature Corp., was selected in order to show how recognition patterns can be described and interpreted within sustainable working concepts.

The Nature Corp. is a limited company with 700 employees in Germany, situated in a small town. It was founded 80 years ago with an anthroposophical intention which is up to the present day guiding for the production principles of the company. It is the aim of the company to act according to the principles of sustainable development both in an ecological sense, regarding issues like the sustainable use of resources as well as in a social sense dealing with the employees in a fair and respectful way. Although the company is according to its organizational structure profit-oriented, the employees have a prominent place within the corporate culture expressed by several measures of human resources management. Hereby, an important component of human resources management is the compatibility of family and career: several measures are provided like a day care centre, family friendly working time arrangements for men and women, further education for parents, career development also for part-timers, support in phases of re-orientation. Following the conception of mixed work, doing paid work stands in the centre of the working concept of the Nature Corp. However, the concept of paid work is extended to "life", thus several actions are developed and are to be taken in order to enable a sound connection between paid work and the 'rest of life' respecting different needs within different biographical stages. Hence, respecting the

different parts of life and supporting a “good” relation between work and life for its employees is an important goal of the company.

The orientation on well-being and the fulfillment of human needs takes are central goals of the Nature Corp. Although these principle are in daily working life sometimes covered, not least because of economic necessities. Nevertheless, the employees experience a sustainable recognition of their person: They feel recognized in their achievements. They have the possibility to develop within the company. Their working potential is not only measured by performance and because personal aspects are integrated, they feel not directly replaceable. Although, modern management strategies playing on identification and self-responsibility of the employees are used, the functional exploitation of the work force is not the first aim in this integrated working concept. Rather, the “whole” human being gets a place in the frame of its individual working activities and the possibility for development – hereby, there is no distinction between the development in professional and respectively private concerns.

Looking at the concept of sustainable work, the company offers a broad range of working time arrangements as well as measures to combine work and life. With that concept only family work is explicitly addressed while do-it-yourself-work or community engagement is not taken into account. However the organization of working time would allow focusing more on these types of working activities. At first glance, it seems that such scopes are very seldom used; rather paid work has clear priority providing personal satisfaction and fulfillment. At second glance, it seems that the interviewees enjoy a 40-hour-working week, providing both an interesting job as well as a satisfied private life (family, hobbies). The fact that the employees give priority to paid work in the company while other working activities play a subordinate role, leads to the assumption that they do not feel a need for other types of working activity. It seems that the Nature Corp. supplies the need for an autonomous, creative and fulfilling (paid) working activity, at the same time, the employees have the feeling that they can intensify other types of work in different stages of life, i.e family building.

4. Conclusions

Using Honneth’s theory of recognition as analytical approach for the personal evaluation of sustainable work, employees can perceive recognition based on formal labour regulations (law), e.g. payment. Furthermore, the integration of subjective needs into working life are especially important for the recognition of own performances regarding individual development process (solidarity) as well as personal needs (love). In the context of sustainable work, the case of the “Nature Corp.” can be regarded as an example how a sustainable concept of work can be integrated successfully into the organizational structure

of a company. The integration of "life" and the "pitfalls" of biographic upheavals into the institutional as well as organizational structure of working life (law) seem to be promising when thinking about a sustainable conduct of life.

Notes

1. Before, such an understanding of work was only discussed in feminist debates on work, as unpaid work was mainly performed by women in the private sphere. By the 1970s feminist research showed that domestic work had to be conceptualised as being work in order to open it up to public negotiation. However, while debates on a holistic concept of work started with this feminist critique, later, dependence on this feminist tack alone was itself critiqued as insufficient.

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