
A proposal for a critical conception of work for a social ecological transformation

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Abstract

Work is one of the main mechanisms structuring people's everyday lives, society, and the environment. Conceptions of work, however mainly rely on the dominant perception of work as a productive activity that satisfies consumer demand, allowing for self-realisation and social inclusion. In this paper, we challenge that perception and argue for a threefold reconceptualization of work.

First, work is usually conceptualized as a productive activity that transforms inputs into consumer goods and services. However, work can also be understood as energy- and resource-using activity. This becomes obvious when we apply energy and material accounting commonly used to assess different time-use categories in the realm of private consumption also to work. For example, with respect to air travel, one of the most carbon-intense activities, one fifth of all flight trips in Austria are business trips, and thus fall into the realm of working time. Comparing the CO₂ intensities of one hour of work to non-work time shows that work is a highly resource-intensive activity. Applying a time-use perspective to work thus reveals that work is a biophysically highly intensive activity – an aspect that is usually concealed by an output-centred understanding of work.

Second, focusing on the activity of work as such also has implications in terms of work choice and employees' agency in the production process. With the shift to post-Fordism, hierarchical working conditions were increasingly superseded by the principles of autonomy and creativity. This, however, does not only impose new risks of self-exploitation via the mode of heteronomous self-determination. A genuine autonomy in the production process would grant workers a say in what is being produced, and for which purpose. As the value of a work product is mostly evaluated in monetary terms in capitalist societies, other value dimensions are mostly ignored. Work, however, is not only able to produce exchange or use value, but also more complex, often incommensurable multiple values.

Thirdly, paid work is often understood as an activity that produces goods and services according to consumers' demand. At the same time, the centrality of work in our societies also has to be seen as an ultimate driver of resource-intensive consumption. With productivity gains mostly channeled into rising incomes rather than more leisure, employees in affluent countries are trapped in a work-and-spend cycle, a pattern of long working hours and increasing consumption levels. Moreover, long working hours, unpleasant working conditions and pointless jobs enhance compensatory consumption. In addition, paid work is actually the only way by which most of us can meet our basic needs. In combination with a strong work ethic, work has to be seen as a social convention and disciplinary apparatus rather than

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an economic necessity. The social and inclusionary function of employment thus also serves as exclusionary mechanism, where segregation often takes place along racial lines. From this we conclude that work might also be regarded as a biophysically intense, heteronomous and consumption causing social-control institution. As a result, we argue that a social-ecological transformation requires to fundamentally question the centrality of work in our society. In practice, this means that work and its cultural and material drivers have to be reduced drastically, and limited to meaningful, autonomous, and biophysically as well as socially regenerative work.

Keywords: work, social, ecological transformation, postwork, working time reduction, work ethics