



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Degrowth and the re-organization of work

-

a feminist perspective

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Central questions that to our understanding cannot be asked separately:

1. What are the relationships between feminism, (re)production and degrowth?
2. How can work be (re)organized under a degrowth perspective?

In the context of degrowth, reproductive activities are often described as being excluded from market exchange and considered as unproductive. Their contribution to “reproducing work”, like education or nutrition, is not included in the calculation of production costs and is not considered as generating economic value. Their inclusion in production costs would diminish current growth rates. Therefore, recognising them as being valuable for the economy is seen as essential and a reconsideration of the separation of paid and unpaid labour becomes imperative. Whereas we agree with the fact that reproductive work cannot be seen as a free gift, the way how these activities are valued and reconfigured is an important aspect of building a just social and ecological economy premised on degrowth.

Over the last decades a feminisation of market-based labour can be observed. Firstly, a growing number of reproductive activities have been economically valued.. Secondly, more and more women entered the labour market. Among others, this process grew out of the debate of *wages for housework* of the 1970s, demanding the valuation of reproductive

activities. Hence, the discussion about reproductive activities concerns both market based activities and non-market based ones.

While this tendency enabled women's emancipation within a market-based economy to a certain extent, it also helped to further entrench the capitalist logic. Instead of revaluing reproductive activities, it subsumed many of them to market logics and resulted into higher profits for capitalists. Furthermore, sadly, this job-market activation of women has not led to an equal distribution of labour. On the one hand, the marketised reproductive work is mostly done by women or is at least marked by a gendered division of labour. These activities are poorly remunerated by the market as they usually yield low rates of monetary return for capital. On the other hand, those reproductive activities that remained in the 'private sphere' continued to be done by women. Therefore, many women became double burdened. This is exacerbated by a retrenchment of the welfare state that even lowered the compensation for reproductive work and forced many women to do paid labour *in addition* to reproductive labour. At the same time, real wages are stagnating and an ever higher amount of paid hours becomes necessary to at least maintain monetary income that is necessary for reproductive activities. More inequalities and uneven distributions of work can be seen across race, ethnicity and classes.

An economic revaluation of reproductive activities has not led to desired outcomes. It has not tackled discrimination due to gender but entrenched a capitalist logic into society. Cheap and 'unpaid' or 'undervalued' carework persists which has to be overcome. Hence, the potentials of degrowth to find ways to tackle this twin challenge of valued and non-discriminatory concepts of labour become more and more important and have to be analysed. Concrete examples about a better way of configuring labour, reproduction and leisure can provide a way out and prevent an exacerbation of social conditions.

Models within the degrowth movement (i.e. in the group assembly process 2010) have identified a reduction of paid work as key in transitioning towards a better life. They provided welcomed concepts about reducing marketised labour so that more time and resources can be spent for reproductive activities. Already widely known perspectives are the 20- or 21-hour week. This would enable people to spend more time on 'do it yourself'-projects, skills sharing as well as family and friends which can reduce our resource usage. In addition, more time would be available for care work and it opens up possibilities to distribute reproductive activities more equally. The reduction of paid labour time can

further tackle unemployment because it spreads the work volume more evenly among the working population. Moreover, an enhanced access to childcare or job-sharing is promoted as key in enabling women to participate in paid-labour activities.

Yet, these approaches often remain within the separation of public and private sphere instead of tackling this assumption as a flawed division of social interaction. Furthermore, resting on the separation between paid and unpaid labour, unpaid reproductive activities stay in danger of being undervalued. A feminist perspective, like the Four-in-One Perspective by Frigga Haug, proposes to create four *equally valued* spheres of work, including market based work, self-work, reproductive work and work for the community. But also in this approach, a reorganization of work time does neither necessarily challenge the division of labour between genders nor the devaluation of certain activities. Therefore, we need to thoroughly rethink the concept of work so that it combats the gendered division of labour as well as the perception that labour within the public and the private sphere are fundamentally different concepts of work. That means that we not only need to find ways to organise “work” in our society in such a way so that “re-productive work” and “productive activities” receive equal recognition and valuation. Crucially, this organisation also has to ensure an equal sharing of all the tasks involved, regardless of which type of work is defined as re-productive or productive, public or private.

As a first step, Fraser's concept of redistribution and recognition seems valuable. She pleads for a combination of recognizing and redistributive policies. Redistributive activities enable socio-economic participation, recognition the acceptance of differences and the strive for the equality of identities. Hereby, it is important to not only consider *affirmative* e.g. redistribution options but to shape them in a *transformative* way, i.e. questioning existing ways of organizing and conceptualising work which entrench gender discriminations and enable them to persist. It is out of question, that these approaches have to include ways that problematise and overcome the market and monetary logic. Thus, it is necessary to reorganize our production pattern alongside a redefinition of labour.

Reorganizing the production process and deconstructing gender roles within this process is a long term aim, probing questions about the way that will bring about such a change. Concrete examples as well as holistic ideas and concepts are still missing. Furthermore, this opens up questions for present political strategies. Care, including health or

education, can serve as point of departure for political struggles. Care can be formulated as a fundamental social right. That way, it becomes a societal need and responsibility which would guarantee that care does not remain precarious. As an immediate step, union struggles within feminized jobs could be supported which would hinder a further precarisation and politicise women's concerns. Additionally, governmental policies and support should aim at supporting men to enter traditionally female roles (i.e. active encouragement for men as carers, monetary support for leave for child caring should be equally distributed amongst men and women). This should support women and men to have an equal access to the so called public sphere (i.e. by granting costless and high quality childcare, institutionalised support for reducing working hours). Yet, it has to be emphasized that these approaches are only preliminary steps to ensure a transition towards a more just distribution of labour. These propositions tend to have an affirmative character, entrench the division of the public and the private sphere and do not challenge our production patterns which are generally based on economic growth.

Consequently, the following questions arise: How can we think of and transform labour as an activity that transcends gender discrimination within a production process based on an understanding of communal resources? Importantly, how can we find ways that this concept of labour escapes market and monetary logics? What are the potentials and answers of the degrowth movement to this?

In order to establish degrowth perspectives, the organization of work is a necessary and unavoidable starting point. The way how we conceptualise and perceive labour is not only crucial to the questions of how much is produced and in what way, but also to the fundamental question of how societal relations are organized through the concept and division of work. We propose to take this as a starting point for more concrete examples about how we can conceptualise labour around an understanding of communal production processes and develop working models about how we can put these concepts into praxis. It is fundamental that these issues are addressed in any model building on a non-discriminatory concept of labour that respects gender justice and degrowth.