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The fading scope of labour – remarks about the lost rationale of a common term

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Work and labour describe activities with a redistributive and a reproductive component. In addition, the terms have gained the function of creating social status and self-esteem. This paper argues that the shifts on the labour market during the past decades question both the redistributive and the reproductive functions of labour. An increasing number of activities are taking place both in paid and unpaid settings simultaneously. And the productivity of employed persons, particularly in the growing management sector, is increasingly difficult to judge. Moreover, the strong social esteem of paid work has led to economic misjudgements, inefficient political measures and consequences for our individual well-being. While it would be helpful to speak of paid and unpaid activities instead of labour, it is likely that the term will continue to be used due to its esteem-generating function.

Keywords: labor, redistributive/reproductive function, paid work, unpaid work

1. Introduction

After a lot of reading about the socioeconomics of work and labour¹, this paper was finally provoked by a teenager telling one of us about his father who retired now at the age of 53 after a professional career in the financial industry, “because he had been working very hard”. The picture which this remark provoked in us was that of a man on the top of a heap of coins, shoveling the coins on another heap, sweating and gasping. But how does it really look like to “work hard” in the financial sector? Assuming that the gentleman had been selling and buying stocks, we started to ask ourselves whether we were also “working hard” when we used online-banking to sell our own stocks. What, after all, was hard work? Or work in general?

When Rifkin [1] issued „the end of work“, arguing that there is no more room for mass employment, he sparked a large political debate. Since then, however, the labour market has undergone considerable changes, but generally they have not resulted in a sharp further rise of unemployment. This paper now argues that Rifkin was right in a slightly different sense than originally intended: It is not that work is an item whose scarcity becomes more and more alarming; rather the terms “labour” or “work” become more and more fuzzy and it becomes increasingly unclear what we mean exactly when talking about labour. The conclusion from this observation will be that the terms “work” and “labour” are hardly useful any more in a descriptive way.

¹ Despite of the definitional differences between the terms “work” and “labour”, our arguments cover both, so if sometimes it is just referred to one of them for simplicity reasons, usually both terms are targeted.

The definitions of work and labour always had one reproductional and one redistributational side. This dual definition of labour has first been described by Freyssenet [2; pp. 7]: “*Work would always have been this activity which consisted of using, mastering and dominating nature to produce from it the utilities necessary for humankind.*” This describes labour as a central production factor for our daily wants. However, “*work (...) corresponds (...) to the emergence of the labour relationship and ‘free worker’ selling her or his work capability.*” [2; pp. 7] which refers to the redistributational side of labour, because resources are redistributed within working relationships. Both of these aspects indivisibly constituted labour as a whole. They result in other, secondary functions of work, such as appreciation and self-esteem which has strongly been linked to the concept of work [3,4,5].

During the last decades the labour market has changed fundamentally resulting in an ongoing expansion of the service sector. Simultaneously, the mining, electricity, gas, water and manufacturing industries have lost a large share of the labour market.

After challenging one important labour definition in Section 2, this paper argues that the shifts on the labour market during the past decades question both the redistributive and the reproductive functions of labour. An increasing number of activities are taking place both in paid and unpaid settings simultaneously. Moreover, the lack of appreciation concerning unpaid activities causes economic misjudgements, inefficient political measures and negative consequences for our individual well-being. An evolutionary analysis of all of these functions of labour is carried out in Sections 3 to 5. It begins with the redistributive function, continues with the reproductive function and ends with the function of generating esteem. Section 6 criticizes the predominance of paid work from different points of view and Section 7 serves the unification of the different aspects of work and concludes.

2. The third-person criterion

It is certainly not easy to draw a clear line between paid, unpaid, volunteer work and leisure. In a generally accepted understanding, for paid work we get a salary and it is usually carried out in a stage of standard employment, part-time work or self-employment [6]. Unpaid work covers activities like household work, purchasing goods and services for the household and caregiving for household or neighbourhood members [7]. Instead a volunteer offers aid or a service like cooking in a soup kitchen or coaching the local soccer team he is not obliged to do. Miranda [8] tried to find a solution for the boundary between unpaid work and leisure. According to her, this boundary is determined by the “third-person” criterion what means whenever a third person could hypothetically be paid to do the activity (e.g. cooking, cleaning) it is considered to be unpaid work. In contrast: “*someone else cannot be paid to watch a movie, play tennis, or silently read a book on another’s behalf as the benefits of the activity would accrue to the doer (the third person), and not to the hirer.*” [8; pp. 7]. Such activities are therefore considered as leisure by Miranda [8].

While Miranda’s definition may sound plausible, her examples do not fully match the scope of today’s service sector where, to use one of her examples, quite a number of people are paid for playing tennis. Two institutional settings for that are available. One, tennis teachers are regularly paid for playing, and two, tennis professionals are paid for playing (and

winning) at competitions. This implies that asymmetries in the quality of playing, either between the two players or between the players and the audience, are the decisive factor that decide whether tennis playing is work or not.

On the marketplace, there is no fixed measure of asymmetry from which a payment is possible. If my tennis teacher plays only slightly better than I do, I may choose to abandon him, maybe looking for a superior teacher, or I may choose to stick with him, maybe because he is such a nice person. This makes the application of Miranda's third-person difficult to apply. If I am on the tennis court with a friend, it will be difficult to judge whether the degree of asymmetry between the two of us is large enough to consider our play as unpaid labour for either of us.

The social sphere, as Ariely [9] emphasizes, follows different laws than the market sphere. Not only talking about monetary reimbursements, but even thinking about it is a societal taboo on many fields. If drawing the borderline between paid and unpaid work is difficult on the marketplace, it will often be almost impossible to realistically apply the third-person rule for unpaid activities. Playing tennis with my small son may fulfil all the criteria to define it as unpaid work, but this solution may well be rather counterintuitive. Therefore, the third person rule is certainly not the ultima ratio for a helpful work definition.

3. An evolutionary look on the redistributive function of labour

Every human needs resources in order to survive. Since the societal division of labour was introduced, labour has always been the most important tool for resource distribution. It has, in the history of mankind, competed with four other mechanisms which, however, never were as quantitatively mighty as labour was:

- Entitlements through birth privileges were an important redistributive tool in feudal times [10] and have almost vanished since then.
- Some kind of relation can lead to resource distribution through inheritance or donation. The redistribution through inheritance can be based on blood relation, legal requirements or the "last will" of the bequeather. For example, in Germany the average yearly inheritance volume is 130 billion Euros (equivalent to around 5 per cent of GDP) [11] and is of increasing importance for resource distribution.
- Capital income has been created through capitalism and is, in its character, somewhat similar to entitlements through birth rights. The entitlements on which capital income are based, however, on property only, not on other rights. The share of capital income to total productive income in national economies is usually somewhere between 20 and 50 per cent and moves cyclical between decades [12].
- The newest redistributive tool to date is social policy. In many countries like the US or Russia, around 10 per cent of GDP are redistributed to the needy, while this share exceeds 20 per cent in a few other countries [13].

Once again, it is worthy to emphasize that, since exchanges between humans have been taking place, labour has always been the most important tool for wealth redistribution. Since

this is the case, however, the definition of labour has always been challenged by “unpaid work”. If the redistributive function of work is taken seriously as a constitutive element of work, unpaid work is an oxymoron. If work is always an activity for which a person is reimbursed, labour cannot be unpaid.

This contradiction has been recognized early. Freidson [14], for example, considers volunteer work as a challenge to the definition of labour. And Freyssenet [14; pp. 10] attempts to solve the problem through a redefinition: *“A person exercising the same activity – cooking for example – will be productive or unproductive from the capital point of view, depending on whether she or he sells their work capability to a restaurant owner or to an individual.”* It is unclear how useful this redefinition is since the term “productive” usually describes the generation of added value [15]. The productivity of cooking, traditionally defined, will depend on the amount and on the quality of the food, but not on the reimbursement and the institutional setting. Cooking for free is therefore certainly not unproductive, even if it should not be classified as work.

While unpaid or volunteer work is therefore a constant threat to the definition of labour, it has never prevented the ample and deliberate use of the term. This is probably due to the fact that the vast majority of activities used to be carried out either exclusively paid or exclusively unpaid, while the range of activities (like cooking) where both institutional forms coexisted, was very limited for a long time, except for the sphere of housewives, being largely invisible in the public discourse for a long time [16]. Men of farming families in the 18th century, being factory workers in the 19th century or heading middle-class families in the 20th century were paid for their activities and clearly considered as being in labour. Another explanation might be the different speed of economic and social development during the last decades. We currently face a dramatic shift in the labour market towards changing patterns of work whereas parts of the society still remain in this old understanding of labour as an activity that generates measurable outputs and salary.

A mesoeconomic perspective underlies that claim. The economic history has seen massive shifts from the primary, agricultural sector to the industrial sector and from there to the tertiary, service sector. In agricultural production, after the end of feudalism most people were self-employed and clearly worked in order to obtain resources, increasingly through exchanging their products for non-agricultural goods. The redistributive function of agriculture was not threatened by collectivization or corporate agriculture. Still, people worked on the field in order to make a living. Unpaid, volunteer work on the field or in the stable was always something very exceptional and restricted to special historic situations [17].

The rise of the industrial sector consolidated the redistributive function of labour and therefore the definitional solidity of the term. Even less people worked in the factory “just for fun” and without payment than in the stable. The factory is probably the playfield for the purest exchange between labour and money.

The same cannot be said about the service sector. There are many different activities which are both located on the market as paid services and provided on an amateur base in social networks. Playing live music is one case in point where this dualism has always existed.

Many amateurs occasionally invite friends for a house concert and do not charge them, while professional musicians make a living from playing for others. And also many semi-professionals switch between the paid and unpaid sector by offering music one evening for free and the other for money without any differences in terms of music's quality or quantity.

Within the service sector, two developments have contributed to blur the definitional boundaries of labour. One is what Freyssenet [2; pp. 12] calls the "mercantilization of human relationships". A large range of activities that have, for a long time, been a domain of social networks, get mighty and economically important substitutes on the marketplace. Mann [18] mentions care for the elderly, psychological counselling and tour reps as examples. While 100 years ago it was clearly the objective of one's social network to make holidays an entertaining experience, this task has partly taken over by commercial suppliers. And because the substitution processes in the different fields of our life have only been taken place partially (i.e. there are still friends and relatives around who listen to your problems, care for their parents and entertain you), this development has made it more difficult to distinguish between labour and non-labour.

The opposite direction of activities can be observed on virtual platforms. Benkler [19], Haruvi et al. [20] and Ma [21] have provided case studies for activities which were clearly a domain of the market and now shift into social networks. 100 years ago, nobody would have got the idea that it would be possible to construct an encyclopaedia without getting involved in the labour market, hiring people and contracting others. By now, however, the "wikipedia" platform is much larger than any printed encyclopaedia has ever become, but has hardly involved paid work. Likewise, programming software takes place today both on social platforms for free and institutionalized by employers who pay for the code.

Another current development on the labour market in the opposite direction has led to name some parts of graduates the "generation internship". The term describes a current situation in Germany where graduates are forced to choose an internship instead of entering the job market after finishing university. There might be various reasons for this development on the graduate's side such as finding access to the labour market or lack of confidence but in many cases companies simply try to turn formerly paid work into unpaid or less paid internships. The companies justify the internship creation among others with the inflexibility of the labour market which disallows short term contracts. The economic consequences of this development are controversially discussed [22]. However, the fact that formerly paid work is now done for less money or even for free shows that a monetary distinction doesn't tell us anything about the output or productivity aspects of work.

Politics is another example for a societal field where paid and unpaid activities strongly coexist, although the salary can influence the quality of output to some extent. Weber [23] pointed out very early the possible differences between someone who lives for politics and someone who depends on the salary he gets for being a politician (see also Sombart [24]). The need to get re-elected in order to make a living can have significant influence on the political orientation and decisions of the politicians. Therefore, whenever people turn politics into a job the redistributive function can negatively influence the reproductive function of work. The unclear relation between the redistributional and reproductive function is probably

also true for some parts of the service sector. The question is whether the output is higher if I would meet a spouse through an escort service instead of spending an evening with him or her apart from commercial services.

While the coexistence of paid and unpaid activities of the same kind has always been a challenge for the concept of labour, particularly among women, this challenge has not only spread to men, but has been magnified by many new activities in the service sector which now take place simultaneously on a paid and unpaid level. It is counterintuitive, however, to label identical activities as both work and non-work, depending whether it is paid for them or not.

Therefore, the main challenges for the redistributive function of work are both the vast expansion of the service sector during the past decades and the numerous activities for which a coexistence of paid and unpaid agent-recipient relationships have evolved.

However, this development of bifurcation has been spilling over at least to the primary sector as well. Activities like fishing and gardening, even farming small parcels of land, are increasingly pursued for leisure [25,26]. The question whether people “work” in community gardens or with a fishing rod on lakes is hard to answer, if the redistributive function of labour is taken serious.

One of the fundamental problems of Freyssenet’s labour definition mentioned above is the strong monetary/market focus. Following Freyssenet, whenever the agent-recipient relationship takes place on a market, formerly voluntary work turns into labour without changing the nature of the activity itself. Also the capital point of view and monetary element in his definition suggests a higher value of paid work compared to unpaid work. The narrowed view of labour as paid work seems trivial but can cause individual and social problems (see chapter 5). And since we are able to value non-market goods the economic value of unpaid work and therefore the misinterpretation of welfare gains of unpaid work in standard accounting methodology is starting to become more obvious (see chapter 6).

4. An evolutionary look on the reproductive function of labour

While the redistributive function of labour has made it difficult to define whether urban agriculture is labour, the reproductive function of labour may provide help: Through vegetable production, an added value is generated, be it on large-scale fields or on urban plots. Therefore, at least the condition of productivity is fulfilled. In general, the generation of an added value by human activities suffices the understanding of labour in this reproductive aspect. Is there, from this side of the definition, any threat that the definition of labour is blurred?

For a start, it may be helpful to note that not everybody who is employed is necessarily productive. The most obvious examples are train drivers in automated trains who have not been made redundant because of union pressure, although their trains would equally well run without them [27]. Another illustrating example are planned economies where unemployment has always been a relatively unknown phenomenon whereas the productivity per worker can easily reach zero.

Again, the question is a quantitative one and concerns the extent to which employed persons do not match the definition of work through failing the reproductive criterion. A mesoeconomic look similar to that in Section 2 provides clarity about the dynamics of the labour market. Many labour economists [28,29,30,31] show how the labour market is currently bifurcating. On the one end of the scale, the number of well-paid managerial jobs is rising at a considerable speed. On the other end, however, low-paid jobs in the service sector are also gaining momentum. In between, the number of average-paid jobs declines, particularly in fields of production.

Coming back to the reproductive side of labour, the easiest examples always come from this shrinking segment of production jobs, almost by definition. For vegetable growers, the reproductive function of their activities is as hard to deny and as easily measurable as for factory workers who assemble cars. The outcome of their labour day can be measured in illustrative ways, taking 1.6 working days to produce one Toyota car [32].

If the laws of the market work well, the productivity of high-end management jobs is even higher, otherwise there would be no reason to pay them as much as people in this labour-market segment get. However, the visibility and measurability of this productivity is very low. Scholars claiming that most managers were not worth their pay such as Ogger [33] reached a high attentiveness in public and could not be proven wrong. How could one possibly estimate the productivity of project management specialists or of communication executives working in public relations? How could one even prove that there is any positive productivity and that the business would not run better without one particular position? While unproductive activities will hardly be ever so visible as in the case of train drivers in automated trains, the productivity can only be proven for the system (the company) as a whole, not for the single constituents of management.

Apart from the management sector many economic activities changed their production target due to changing consumer preferences towards products like recreation, self-fulfilment, education and pleasure which are naturally hard to quantify or measure. For example, the sense of small scale agriculture and fishing has always been the supply of commodities such as milk, meat and fish. Since most of the people in industrialized countries have enough to eat we connect small scale agriculture or fishing also with recreational aspects and nature experience. Some people pay to watch a fisherman doing his hard job without judging him by the amount of fish he catches. And looking in the happy eyes of my daughter after spending a day with her watching and feeding a cow on a holiday farm I couldn't care less about the productivity of the cow in terms of milk and meat yield. Maslow [34] might deliver explanations for the changed consumer preferences along with economic development and transformation. However, the shift on the demand side makes it hard to judge the productivity of many jobs. One might answer that the reproductive function has only shifted from tangibles to no-tangibles and the product is pleasure instead of milk and meat. But if my daughter hasn't been able to enjoy the cow that day and I get sea sick on the fisher boat it doesn't mean necessarily that either the farmer or fishermen did a bad job.

If to work means to be productive, this indicates our inability to judge who really works in this segment of the labour market. The partition of activities in the generation of wealth has

reached levels on which only very rough estimates are possible about the productivity of a person in a management position. One can, of course, develop indicators of output that appear to measure productivity. One case in point familiar to most readers will be the number of peer-reviewed publications for scientists. It remains totally open, however, how strongly (if at all) this indicator is linked to real generation of added value in society. Therefore, this indicator has always been prone to criticism [35]. Frankly, it can be taken for granted that there are people “working” in the system who do not generate added societal value.

On the other end of the labour market, indicators are less important in the public discourse, as most activities are paid per hour or rates that do not cause envy. This does not mean, however, that their level of productivity would be unambiguous. Take a member of staff of a security company as an example. If his duty is to guard a bank by night, no serious estimate about his productivity could be estimated. Again, his contribution to the real societal output could even be questioned.

For other jobs in this segment of the labour market, the reproductive function is more clear-cut, as for their unpaid substitutes. Coming back to the example of taking care for the elderly from the previous section, no one will doubt that this activity contributes to societal welfare, be the activity paid (on the labour market) or unpaid (within the family).

Still, the reason why a growing share of people in the labour market carries out activities of which the productivity is unclear is that many of the clearly productive tasks have been taken over by machines. Generations of engineers are responsible for a world in which machines have taken over the extraction of milk from cows, the composition of TV sets and even some services on telephone lines. This has enabled the workforce to enter other activities which require stronger individual skills, but are often less connected to a visible output.

5. An evolutionary look on the esteem generating effect of labour and the fetish of paid work

It is important to emphasize that the beginning on the concept of labour was connected to the notion of punishment. Historians as Offe [36] and Unruh [37] emphasize that labour was over many centuries considered as a burden which men had to carry because of their sins. It was not before the beginning of modern times and reformation that labour received a positive connotation. While Marxism and liberalism have been battling on many fields over the last 150 years, they jointly created an ethics which considered labour as an almost intrinsic value. In liberal economics, labour, as organized by innovative entrepreneurs, was the foundation for wealth and growth and therefore for the utility of society. In the classical Marxist school of thinking, workers created the added value of society. Arendt [38] was the first to describe this joint achievement of liberalism and socialism in enhancing the status of labour into becoming a fetish. Since then, a large number of psychologists has shown that working contributes considerably to both self-esteem [39,40,41] and to status in society [42,43].

A German debate in sociology witnesses this development. Bude and Willisch [44,45] have inspired and framed the concept of “superfluous” members of the society. Their descriptive concept, however, is restricted to the sphere of the labour market. People who are made redundant or whose job is bound to disappear fall under this category, regardless of how essential their role is as a citizen or a family member. While therefore criticized as a concept in the sociological discourse [46], Hark [47] notes that the notion of “the superfluous” has left the sociological discourse and entered the self-description of the members of our society. Superfluous is exactly what a lot of people feel as soon as the labour market does not absorb them.

The nature of esteem which people get in return for work is apparently much less sensitive to sectoral factors than the redistributive and reproductive functions of work. While Schwalbe [48] as well as Pierce and Gardner [49] show that the degree of self-esteem is related to a lot of organizational factors like autonomy at the workplace, there is no indication that this function of labour is challenged by structural change in the economy, as shown in the previous sections.

We should remind ourselves, however, that historically the esteem-generating function of labour has never been a definitional feature. As it has been too obvious that non labour-related factors will also contribute to status and self-esteem, nobody would claim that “labour is everything which contributes to esteem in society”. This is an important distinction to the reproductive and redistributive function of labour.

Probably all types of work or activities we carry out contribute to our self-esteem to some extent. However, the predominant meaning of full employment and paid work hasn't changed significantly during the last decades. In order to underline the outstanding meaning of paid work it is worth to highlight empirical evidences concerning the individual consequences of unemployment. A broad literature shows the negative consequences of unemployment on mental and physical health [e.g. 50,51,52] even if the occurrence of the effects depends on the self-esteem and social background of the relevant people and the employment opportunities in the local job market [53,54]. For example, the unemployed suffer more often from somatization, depression, anxiety and higher mortality than employed people [53,51]. According to Kessler et al. [55] unemployed people show dramatic improvements in their well-being when they become reemployed returning to levels similar to steadily employed people [54]. Others provide empirical evidence that unemployed people face stigmatization which lead to lower chances of getting reemployed [56,57,58]. Based on their empirical work in Australia Jackson and Crooks [59] summarize the dramatic consequences of unemployment in an impressive statement: “You don't live when you are unemployed-you exist”.

If unemployment is related with negative effects on individual well-being one could argue that people get sick of doing less or nothing compared to the situation when they were employed and busy. Interestingly, there are strong indications that unpaid working time will increase proportionally with reductions in paid working time [6]. According to Hildebrandt and Linne [60] and Jürgens and Reinecke [61] time preferences of industrial workers after reducing their paid working time remained unchanged and paid working time has been

substituted by unpaid work. Therefore, if we get unemployed we tend to substitute paid working time by unpaid working time instead of consuming leisure time. Summarizing the notions above, we obviously have an individual working time preference and are able to substitute paid activities by unpaid activities but for our individual well-being paid work is obviously much more important than unpaid work.

One significant consequence of unemployment is of course the financial impact. In the short term unemployment can significantly reduce a person's income and, in the long run, their ability to save money for retirement [62]. So is the reduction of income due to unemployment the reason why people feel bad when they become unemployed? The question is hard to answer but there are some indications that the money itself is not the dominating factor. In Germany there is an ongoing debate about the "basic income" which means the government unconditionally pays you on an individual basis without work requirements. If people would be interested in the money only we would expect a strong social acceptance of the unconditionally paid basic income but there is a widespread disapproval and 40 % of the Germans would feel degraded by getting money from the government for offering "nothing" [63].² Furthermore, another study shows that 72 % of the respondents would retain their working volume after the implementation of the "basic income" [64]. Another illustrating example underlines the meaning of paid work instead of money only. There was an intensive debate in the German press about hairdresser who work for less than the living wage. Simultaneously, many of them receive differential welfare payments in spite of full employment in order to reach the legal living wage. But if people would be interested in the money only they would probably not want to work for it. And if people generate self-esteem from work no matter if its paid or unpaid work they probably wouldn't become sick from being unemployed. Obviously, there must be a special social appreciation for paid work.

We know since decades that human well-being depends on the psychic enjoyment of life rather than production and consumption [34,65,66,67]. It was Fisher [67] who called the services consumer enjoy the "psychic income". We can generate psychic income from the consumption and use of human capital, from being directly involved in production activities (paid work), non-economic pursuits (e.g. unpaid work, leisure) and natural environment [68]. Without knowing the explicit reason the psychic income generated from paid work seems to be higher than the one generated from unpaid work or leisure. There might be various cultural and social explanations behind the different emphasis of paid work in societies but in any modern society we face almost an intrinsic value of paid work or a fetish of paid work.

6. Critique on the normative annotations on labour

While the consensus of work ethics has always been strong, two movements have been formed that have been challenging the notion that paid work is something intrinsically superior to all other activities. One of them is the argument to appreciate unpaid work to the same degree as paid work. This starts with statistical attempts to show that the amount of unpaid work is, in most economies, almost as high as the amount of paid work [69,70] or

² Another study confirms the results and shows a slightly positive acceptance of the basic income (see Haigner et al. [64]).

even higher [71], so that official accounts focusing on paid work miss out a great part of economic output [72,73]. Spangenberg [6] mentions that monitoring our monetary income neglects the gender imbalance of paid and unpaid working time. Motivated by this criticism, in recent years we have seen increasing efforts to value unpaid work in order to underline its contribution to the standard of living (e.g. [74,7,]).

On the fringe of the political economy debate, there also has always been a minor stream of thought with its intellectual centre in Germany and France arguing for a general devaluation of labour in society, starting with the essay “The right to laziness” by the unloved son-in-law of Karl Marx [75]. A surprisingly steady line of reason since then of which Gorz [76], Ribolits [77] and Liebermann [78] are more recent proponents argues that our societal concern should be about a sufficient degree of wealth and about maximizing individual liberties. In that world view, neither creating jobs nor fighting unemployment deserves any merits, because labour is considered as a (sometimes) necessary evil rather than an asset on which everybody should participate.

It is probably the intersection of two evolutionary developments based on reward experiences which, as a result, is causing disutilities in today’s society. The one is the reward that people experienced through hard labour. Especially, the protestant work ethic which highlights success and capability in economic activities and profession as well as the renouncement of amusement and luxury led to the central meaning of paid work in societies [79]. Over centuries, the reward of hard work has been relative welfare so that hard labour has, successively, received some intrinsic value in the ethical system of society. Along with this ethical process the evolution of capitalism and industrialisation forced us to structure our life around production processes, operational procedures and labour organisation.

Similar rewards were gained through introducing trading over the initialisation of markets based on money. This system proved to contribute more to societal welfare than barter exchange, so that, successively as well, only items for which money is paid were thought to be valuable. As a result we took over at least parts of the principles of economics in our value system. Nowadays, money is a well-accepted unit of measure and we are convinced it makes it easy for us to compare the utility of activities against each other. This is the most plausible explanation for the overvaluation of paid work in society.

Over the last centuries we got used to markets and money and paid work which enabled access to both and we had no reason to doubt this system because it has been successful most of the time. But in times where we face a shift in the labour market and live with structural unemployment we find it difficult to change this paid work fetish. According to Ribolits [77] and based on the notions of Hanna Arendt during the long history of the glorification of paid work we forgot all the meaningful activities which enable us to now fill the time we got from the mechanization of production.

The argument that work and labour have become phantoms which have largely lost their factual substance would, if accepted, obviously solve the problem of this overvaluation. There can be no hierarchies that paid work is superior to unpaid work and that work is superior to leisure if we reject the notion that the term “labour” describes anything that can be sufficiently defined.

7. An outlook on the use of the term “labour”

Labour still exists. The miner who produces coal or the farmer who milks cows fulfil both the redistributive and the reproductive functions of labour as they always have done. However, such settings become rare in the developed societies of the 21st century. For a growing share of people, what they do and may consider as work, the redistributive function may or may not be fulfilled, and it is subject to debate to which degree (if at all) they contribute to productivity in society. The difference between the two categories is that it is clearly identifiable whether an activity is paid or not, while there will often be very different opinions of the reproductive value of a particular activity.

It would therefore be helpful to cease talking of “work” and “labour”, as the two necessary conditions that together constitute labour are becoming rare and uncertain. Instead, the descriptive value of talking about “paid activities” and “unpaid activities” is much greater and far less ambiguous. In writing this paper, we are sure that this is a paid activity (as we are paid to do research and to publish), but we are uncertain whether we actually “work”.

In spite of the precision which we forego when continuing to speak of labour and the danger of falling victim of the term as a fetish, it is highly likely that the concept of labour will stay around. This is not so much owed to clinging to habits, but rather to the esteem-generating function of labour. As soon as we do not claim to work anymore, this would - most likely – negatively affect both our societal status and our self-esteem.

We should therefore be prepared that the term “labour” will increasingly mutate from being a description of an activity to a status symbol which many members of society will carry with them as a self-defining element.

A reorientation in modern societies towards an increasing appreciation of unpaid activities might solve many problems along with paid and unpaid activities. For example, it is likely that an increasing esteem of unpaid activities might help to overcome the gender imbalance in paid and unpaid working time. Also the consideration of unpaid work in economic counts could highlight its contribution to the economic welfare. The same appreciation of paid and unpaid work would have political consequences and might diminish the psychological consequences of unemployment.

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