

# Critical Perspectives on 'Sustainable Work' and 'Postwork'

16-17 May 2018, WU Vienna

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Work is one of the main mechanisms structuring people's everyday lives, society, and the environment. Whereas sustainable production and consumption has been at the core of sustainability research, the question of how to organise work in the context of a social-ecological transformation has been rather neglected. However, in the last years some attempts have been made to conceptualise work in relation to environmental questions.

In 2015, UNDP introduced the concept of sustainable work as a future alternative that enhances human development while minimising negative side effects. The aim is to sustain ecological foundations while securing the possibility to work also for future generations (UNDP 2015). The increasing relevance of work in sustainability discourses is also reflected in the adoption of the SDGs, including the demand for decent work. In contrast to mainstream perspectives that promote green growth and employment, there are also more critical approaches towards sustainable work. Some feminist scholars argue for a re-conceptualisation and re-evaluation of work, also taking into account the (re)productivity of nature and unpaid work (e.g. Biesecker et al. 2000). A more recent discourse, summarised under the term postwork, entails a profound critique of the wage labour relation and the centrality of work in modern societies. Instead of shorter working hours, productivity gains result in unemployment, or are reabsorbed into the economy via the creation of more work. In modern societies, paid work serves as the main mechanism for the distribution of income and social inclusion; therefore people are often forced to accept inhumane working conditions or meaningless jobs. In contrast, visions and concrete utopias of postwork societies are based on fundamental freedom, equality and human flourishing (e.g. Frayne 2015; Srnicek/Williams 2015; Weeks 2011). So far, however, postwork discourses have only touched upon the ecological dimension.

This research group meeting brings together critical perspectives on work in the context of a social-ecological transformation from different disciplines, including economics, sociology, political science, and social ecology. Together with national and international researchers, we discuss the following perspectives: work in ecological economics, postwork, utopias of work, value of time and quality work, sociological and feminist perspectives on sustainable work, as well as historical perspectives on work. The meeting explores differences and common ground between these approaches, and investigates the possibilities of integrating and further developing these concepts. For this purpose, we have invited two speakers from Ireland and the UK, in addition to local speakers:

**Dr. David Frayne** (UK, Cardiff University) is one of the most well-known proponents of postwork, who introduced a standard reference in 2015 with his monograph "The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work".

**Dr. Laurence Davis** (Ireland, University College Cork) focuses his research on the conditions of breaking down the capitalist separation of work and play, thus facilitating a non-commodified and liberating human relationship with work and time in general.

We are looking forward to insightful explorations of work for a social-ecological transformation.

Wolfgang Fellner, Stefanie Gerold, Ernest Aigner and Maja Hoffmann

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## WEDNESDAY, 16 MAY, 2018

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### RESEARCH GROUP MEETING

**Venue:** WU, Building D4, 3rd floor, room 106 (D4.3.106)

- 09:00 Wolfgang Fellner, Stefanie Gerold, Maja Hoffmann, Ernest Aigner: *Introduction*
- 09:45 **Sigrid Stagl:** *Perspectives on Work in Ecological Economics*  
Comment: Daniel Hausknost
- 10:30 Coffee break
- 11:00 **David Frayne:** *Capitalism and the Politics of Time*  
Comment: Melanie Pichler
- 11:45 **Wolfgang Fellner:** *The Value of Time*  
Comment: Franz Astleithner
- 12:30 Lunch buffet
- 14:00 **Andrea Komlosy:** *What is Work? Socio-Historical and Discursive Approaches*  
Comment: Maja Hoffmann
- 14:45 **Laurence Davis:** *The Craft Utopia of William Morris*  
Comment: Karin Schönflug
- 15:30 Coffee break
- 16:00 **Beate Littig:** *Sustainable Work? A Socio-ecological and Feminist Perspective*  
Comment: Petra Sauer
- 16:45 Open discussion
- 18:30 Dinner at magdas HOTEL

## THURSDAY, 17 MAY, 2018

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### PUBLIC PANEL DISCUSSION

*The Future of No Work? Critique, Utopias and Politics*

**Venue:** EA.6.032

**Time: 18.30**

Panel: **Andrea Komlosy, Sylvia Kuba, David Frayne, Laurence Davis**

**Moderation:** Stefanie Gerold

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## Speakers & Discussants

**Ernest Aigner** is a PhD candidate at the Department for Socioeconomics at Vienna University of Business and Economics (WU). His interests lie at the intersection of social, ecological and political-economic concerns. Currently he investigates paradigmatic orientations in economics analyzing a bibliographic dataset. He co-authored articles on the state of economics (e.g. 'Six Dimensions of Concentration in Economics') and discussed sustainable work in a working paper on 'Climate and labour market policies in Sweden'.

**Franz Astleithner** studied sociology and economics at the University of Vienna. His research interests comprise work and working time, industrial relations, inequality, educational transitions and ethnical businesses. Currently, he is researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Vienna and the Forschungs- und Beratungsstelle Arbeitswelt (FORBA).

**Laurence Davis** is College Lecturer and Director of the PhD in Government in the Department of Government and Politics at University College Cork, Ireland. He is the co-editor of *Anarchism and Utopianism* (Manchester University Press, 2014) and *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed* (Lexington Books, 2005), and a Series Editor of the Manchester University Press Contemporary Anarchist Studies book series.

**Wolfgang Fellner** is Assistant Professor at the Institute for Multi-Level Governance and Development at WU. His doctoral dissertation on time in the theory of consumption was awarded the "Egon-Matzner-Preis for Socioeconomics". After working on the role of time in consumption he chaired an empirical project on overall time use and time use preferences, including paid and unpaid kinds of work. In his most recent publications he develops and advocates an alternative concept of value inspired by the discourse around quality work.

**David Frayne** is a sociologist from the UK, specialising in critical social theory, the future of work, and alternatives to capitalism. In 2015, David published *The Refusal of Work* (Zed Books). The book introduces readers to 'postwork' theories, combining a critique of our present wage-based society with an original ethnography of people trying to live without work. David earned his BA in Sociology and Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, his MSc in Social Science Research Methods, and his PhD in Social Sciences from Cardiff University.

**Stefanie Gerold** is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Ecological Economics, WU Vienna, and at the Macroeconomic Policy Institute (IMK), Hans-Böckler Foundation. She received her MSc in Socio-Ecological Economics and Policy from WU Vienna. Her research focuses on working-time policies in the context of a social-ecological transformation, as well as inequality of working hours and income.

**Daniel Hausknost** is Assistant Professor at the Institute for Social Change and Sustainability (IGN) at Vienna University of Economics and Business. He studied politics and philosophy in Vienna and earned a PhD in Politics and international Relations from Keele University (UK). His research explores the transformative capacities of modern democratic societies, with regard to socio-ecological constraints in particular. He is currently interested in the co-evolutionary relationship between the modern state and the fossil energy system, in modern state legitimation and in the resulting challenges for a democratic state after the age of fossil-driven growth.

**Maja Hoffmann** studied Political Science, Nordic Philology, and Sustainability Science in Erlangen, Västerås, Stockholm and Lund, and just started her PhD at WU Vienna on ecological and postcolonial critiques of work. Moreover, she is involved in activist education and research projects; most recently with a book on the 'imperial mode of living'. Her research interests mainly comprise work and postwork, degrowth, economic democracy, green social theory, environmental history, postdevelopment and postcolonial theory.

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**Andrea Komlosy** is professor at the Institute for Economic and Social History, University of Vienna, where she coordinates the Global History and Global Studies programmes. She has published on labour, migration, borders and uneven development on regional, European, and global scales, including most recently: *Work: The Last 1000 Years* (Verso, 2018); and *Work and Labour Relations*, in: Kocka Jürgen/van der Linden Marcel (eds.), *Capitalism: The Re-Emergence of a Historical Concept* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

**Sylvia Kuba** directs the program 'Digitization' in the Austrian Chamber of Labour. In addition, she is member of the Austrian Council for Robotics and editor of the blog *Arbeit&Wirtschaft*. Her work focuses on the societal challenges of digitization and how it is changing the world of work. She recently edited the book *Überall ist Zukunft. Die Gesellschaft im digitalen Zeitalter gestalten* (Vienna, 2018).

**Beate Littig** is sociologist and head of the division Socio-Ecological Transformation Research at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna and lecturer at the University of Vienna. She has coordinated many national and international research projects mainly in the areas of environmental sociology, the future of work, gender studies and participatory technology assessment.

**Melanie Pichler** received her PhD in Political Science from the University of Vienna and is currently working as a senior researcher at the Institute of Social Ecology, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna. Her research areas include interdisciplinary sustainability studies, social-ecological transformations and critical state, hegemony and democracy theories. She is about to start a research project on the role of work(ers) and unions in the transformation of the Austrian automotive industry.

**Petra Sauer** is a post-doc researcher at the Research Institute Economics of Inequality (INEQ) and the Institute for Macroeconomics at Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU). Her research interests are the political economy of educational inequalities and the transformation of work.

**Karin Schönflug** works as an economist at Vienna's Institute for Higher Studies and she has been teaching economics and transdisciplinary studies at Universities in Austria, the US and New Zealand. She published *Feminism, Economics, and Utopia. Time travelling through paradigms* (Routledge, 2008) and more recently contributed to *Varieties of Alternative Economic Systems: Practical Utopias for an Age of Global Crisis and Austerity* (Edited by: Westra, Albritton, and Jeong, Routledge 2017)

**Sigrid Stagl** was the first graduate from the Ecological Economics program at RPI, New York (May 1999), making her the first PhD in Ecological Economics worldwide. She is now head of the Institute for Ecological Economics at Vienna University of Economics and Business. In addition to sustainable work, Sigrid's main research interests are modelling human flourishing within biophysical boundaries, sustainable behaviours, multicriteria analysis, agent-based modelling, sustainable energy and food systems.

## References

- Biesecker, Adelheid, Mathes, Maite, Schön, Susanne, & Scurell, Babette (eds) (2000). *Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften – Auf dem Weg zu einer Ökonomie des guten Lebens*. Bielefeld: Kleine.
- Frayne, David (2015). *The Refusal of Work. The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*. London: Zed Books.
- Srnicek, Nick & Williams, Alex (2015). *Inventing the Future. Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. London: Verso Books.
- UNDP (ed) (2015). *Work for human development. Human development report 2015*. New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme.
- Weeks, Kathi (2011). *The Problem with Work. Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.