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Introduction to the Special Feature “Sustainable work: Exploring the requirements of a social-ecological approach to work”

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Abstract. *The exact meaning of “sustainable work” remains unclear. Its various dimensions have so far been explored mainly in separate literatures, while the political implications of calls for “sustainable work” have received little attention. This Special Feature points to the need for an integrated approach that addresses the political conflicts raised by the concept, its different dimensions and their potential. Our introduction discusses how the various contributions to the Special Feature shed light on these different dimensions and their political nature.*

Keywords: *sustainable work, ecological sustainability, social sustainability, conflict, democracy.*

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1. In search of “sustainable work”

The future of work is subject to the imperative of sustainability (ILO 2019) but “sustainable work” has not yet received much attention in socio-scientific research. Moreover, it is unclear what exactly sustainability means when it is applied to work. At least two interpretations can be discerned in current discussions. The first is a social interpretation that focuses on sustainability for individuals, considering working conditions, health issues and social relations, among others (Eurofound 2015 and 2021; Vendramin and Parent-Thirion 2019). The second is an ecological interpretation that focuses on the relationship with broader environmental systems, in the preservation of biodiversity and the reduction of CO₂ emissions, for instance (Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020). But how do these two interpretations cohere? The problem has sometimes been framed as one of conflict (“jobs vs climate”). And yet, societies clearly need to find ways of combining social and environmental requirements (Aigner et al. 2016; Méda 2018; Jochum et al. 2020).

The “just transition” approach promoted by the ILO (2015, 4–5) offers a first step in this direction by advocating the coupling of “green jobs” and “decent work”. However, adding up these two independently defined concepts overlooks the issue of their integration. This approach also adopts a conventional understanding of work as employment, which prevents us from addressing the implications of achieving social-ecological sustainability within the meaning and boundaries of work itself.

Thinking about work in the context of the environmental crisis raises larger issues about the place of human (re)production within wider ecosystems (Barca 2020). It invites a consideration of not only paid work in a traditional sense but also of the many forms of unpaid work (family work, other care work, volunteer work, political work, etc.) and informal work (paid or unpaid) through which human beings interact with each other and with their surroundings.¹ It furthermore invites thinking beyond national borders to address the global interdependencies of work.

In this Special Feature, we bring together scholars from various disciplines to reflect on a sustainable future of work. Theoretical approaches from philosophy, sociology, labour law and political economy are combined with ethnographic approaches that take into account social, psychological and health perspectives. By bringing them together, our aim is to contribute to the development of a conceptual matrix for the category of “sustainable work”, while addressing the political and ethical issues raised by its operationalization.

A common thread running through all the contributions to this Special Feature is the politicization of work with regard to sustainability. Each article looks at this from a different angle, ranging from the normative foundations of sustainability to issues of decoloniality, workers’ participation in deliberation at the shop floor level, corporate governance and trade union action.²

2. Towards a holistic and decolonial understanding of “sustainable work”

Thinking about sustainable work requires various changes in our understanding of work itself. Given the intergenerational solidarity that sustainable development involves (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, 43), sustainable work introduces a long-term horizon beyond the economic logic of short-term efficiency. It also brings a global perspective that goes beyond the scope of national labour regimes. Sustainability requires us to think about work in a holistic way. This involves moving away both from presentism

¹ This could also extend to non-human work (by animals, robots, nature, etc.). For reasons of scope, however, this Special Feature will focus solely on human work.

² Two articles on unpaid care work were originally intended to shed light on yet another aspect of the politicization of work in relation to its sustainability (Pruvost 2021) but their authors unfortunately withdrew their articles.

and methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) and integrating into a single framework the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability, which too often remain compartmentalized in different currents of research.

Many contemporary forms of work are embedded in global interdependencies marred by power imbalances, which allow an outsourcing of unsustainable practices to poorer countries. By describing these processes of outsourcing in purely economic terms, work has often been depoliticized and the voice of workers excluded. A conception of work that takes these problems seriously requires an honest discussion about the ways in which a colonialist, Eurocentric epistemology – rather than a truly global perspective – continues to dominate our thinking about work.

The first two contributions to this Special Feature address these challenges. In the article “Sustainable work: A conceptual map for a social-ecological approach”, Lisa Herzog and Bénédicte Zimmermann draw on an analysis of critical academic studies and of international policy literature to identify four desiderata for a holistic approach to “sustainable work”: (1) integrating ecological and social sustainability; (2) addressing work beyond paid and formal work; (3) considering local and global interdependencies; and (4) making the normative foundations of sustainability explicit. Integrating these four dimensions, however, is difficult in practice and requires the involvement of working individuals themselves. This in turn requires a re-politicization of work at various levels and, therefore, a connection between the calls for “sustainable work” and other approaches, so as to democratize the economy.

In their article “Narratives of sustainable work in mining-affected communities: Gleaning a decolonial concept”, Ania Zbyszewska and Flavia Maximo challenge the Eurocentric epistemologies that prevail in many discussions about sustainability and work. They focus in particular on forms of colonial, racial and extractivist capitalism and their impact on Indigenous peoples and the environment in non-Western communities. Drawing on grounded normative knowledge and counter-hegemonic practices leads them to develop a decolonial and emancipatory conception of sustainable work. Illustrating their approach by comparing narratives from two mining-affected communities in Brazil and Canada, they show that, while the mainstream notions of sustainable work are often instrumentalized for economic purposes, there are also understandings of “sustainable work” that emphasize different values and different relations to the natural environment.

3. How to organize “sustainable work” on the ground?

The concept of “sustainable work” also raises questions about how work should be organized in order to make it sustainable. Can this happen within the traditional framework of capitalist, profit-oriented firms or does it require fundamentally different governance structures? What kind of practical tensions need to be dealt with to realize sustainable work? Two articles in this Special Feature look at concrete organizational cases where the tensions between different dimensions of sustainable work are negotiated on the ground.

The article by Antoine Bonnemain, “Acting on the quality of work to increase its sustainability: An occupational psychology approach”, presents a case study among garbage collectors. In the ergonomic and clinical-psychological interventions developed and analysed by Bonnemain and his colleagues, active participation allowed the workers to negotiate in conflicts between different stakeholders and different dimensions of sustainability. These interventions were informed by considerations about the quality of work and its impact on workers’ health. The article shows that empowering workers to modify their conditions of work can have a major impact on public health and the protection of nature. Achieving this on a broader scale would require the widespread adoption of new forms of governance, consultation and deliberation at the workplace, as well as profound changes in the legal framework of companies.

In his article “Can collective deliberation on work make it sustainable? The case of a French collective interest cooperative company”, Geoffroy Gonzalez discusses the case of cooperatives with an explicitly environmentally sustainable business model, which aim to achieve both social sustainability and democratic empowerment (“collective interest cooperatives”). As Gonzalez’s extended case study shows, the implementation of a “holacratic” form of organization allows a wide range of stakeholders to be involved in decision-making processes. However, ecological sustainability takes a back seat to social sustainability when tensions arise between them, creating a blind spot with regard to the deeper ecological impact.

These cases show that realizing sustainable work on the ground requires participation schemes and governance structures that allow for permanent negotiations and adaptations, to keep the different dimensions of sustainability in view. They also raise questions about the possibility of change and identifying the *actors* of change.

The article by Ben Crawford and David Whyte, “Workers on the front line of climate change: Re-politicizing trade union climate action”, examines the role of trade unions in the struggle for environmental justice. The authors argue that when sustainability is applied to work it is too often limited to a presumption of “common interest” between workers and employers that effectively excludes it as a subject for collective bargaining. Capitalist labour markets and labour processes tend to harm both labour and nature. The transition to environmentally sustainable work will therefore require industrial action by workers, since the features of work organization, such as labour precarity and work intensification, harm not only workers’ bodies but also the environment. Therefore, demands for more stable, socially sustainable jobs must be understood as a climate demand and integrated into bargaining for a “just transition”.

4. Unfolding the potential of “sustainable work”

Taken as a whole, this Special Feature contributes to the literature on work by integrating theoretical concerns about sustainability along various dimensions (social, environmental and geographic) and by drawing lessons from examples of practical attempts to realize sustainable work. In doing so, it paves the way for a mainstreaming of the empirical study of sustainable work. It emphasizes the importance of a holistic perspective that takes into account not only all relevant stakeholders – especially workers – but also long-term temporalities and global interdependencies.

We also hope that the collected articles can prepare the ground for policy discussions concerning not only the systematic collection of data for addressing sustainable work but also policies that support sustainable forms of work, for example, by providing legal forms of work that make it easier to balance the different dimensions of sustainable work. “Sustainable work”, when understood holistically, is not a way of simply greenwashing existing categories of work; it has the potential to be the lever for a deeper revaluation of the character of our economic system and the scope for changing it. Understood in this way, “sustainable work” is an eminently political category.

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