

Upward Mobility in Degrowth Societies

Paper for the special session

“Degrowth and social inequality: Eating the rich or governing the poor”

Abstract

Upward social mobility is a promise of modernity and a normative claim. It refers to the principle of merit which historically was the battle cry against the privileges of the aristocracy and the inclusion in the conditions of birth and origin. This promise expresses expectations towards a better life, more autonomy, life options and civility. During the Golden Age of Capitalism upward social mobility was understood as a collective phenomenon. The majority of people expected - or articulated the claim to - upward social mobility. As a result of the huge capitalist growth in these times improvements of the quality of life was an experience of many people especially of the working class, too, without changes in the relations of social inequality. Ulrich Beck called this the “elevator effect” (the better metaphor is Robert Castel’s “escalator effect”). This collective upward social mobility was based on several conditions and it moderated the character of upward mobility as a highly conflictual zero-sum-game becoming an essential of the social-democratic utopia.

Currently (in the developed countries) some of these conditions are eroding. Economic growth is diminishing or has come to an end and the ecological crisis has become an important argument against the idea of progress by growth. The “escalator” does not move anymore or it stutters. At the present time upward mobility is more than ever a zero-sum-game and it becomes more competitive and individualistic with paradoxical results: People don’t think anymore that their children will live a better life, they expect worsening instead of advancement. And on the other hand: The discourse of career is everywhere. But now it became totally individualized. And often investments on more performance, more efforts or education are seen as necessary only to maintain the status and being in conflict with claims for a “good life”.

Scepticism about the validity of the principle of merit in combination with the effects of a culture of success results in different phenomena: Orientations on Success/upward mobility without reference to the principle of merit; commitment to performance without hope for success - the orientation of the German social policy called “activation”; “status fatalism” as the loss of performance commitment because of the hopelessness of social advancement.

A postgrowth/degrowth society is seen as a threat or as a promise for escaping the iron cage of economic growth. But conceptions of a post-growth/degrowth-society have to consider the implications for social inequality and for the claims to upward social mobility. Otherwise they risk functioning as a justification of social renouncement. Concepts of a “good life” must not be played off against the diminishing of social inequality.