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Session I: Degrowth from a Sustainable Consumption Perspective

Where do all the hours go? Time use, resource consumption and the dematerialisation of everyday practices

Short summary

The emergence of carbon-intensive systems of production, distribution and consumption as part of the modernisation process in Europe and beyond coincided with fundamental changes in how people view and use time. Predictions by advocates of modern time management that time-saving technologies will radically reduce working hours and enhance people's quality of life did not materialise, partly because of the subsequent intensification of work and consumption. Material and time-related rebound effects have also cancelled out many technology-aided efficiency gains. Overall, the fundamental question how people spent the time they save and how this impacts society and the environment has never been satisfactorily answered. This paper argues that a reduction in working hours alone cannot address over-production and -consumption and associated reductions in human wellbeing and ecological integrity. Instead, the quality and resource intensity of people's time use is equally important. Time-sociological arguments presented in this paper are highly suitable for investigating the (un)sustainability of particular time use patterns and can significantly contribute to the advancement of sustainability and degrowth debates.

Long Abstract

The emergence of resource-intensive, fossil-fuel dependent systems of production, distribution and consumption during the modern era has both shaped and reflected fundamental changes in how people view and use time. A reduction in average working hours as well as major changes in the quality of those hours in many European countries since the nineteenth century exemplify this temporal transformation. At the same time, modern practices to do with the regulation and use of time became established and expanded their impact on society, including the widespread use of clock time as a management tool for synchronising work, monitoring productivity and disciplining labour. This said, certain types of modern work-related time structures also offer important anchoring points in the organisation of everyday life in late modern societies characterised by acceleration and desynchronisation, a fact that is clearly revealed whenever people experience a lack of such structures in times of under- or unemployment (e.g. Jahoda *et al.* 1933/1975) or technology-aided changes in the structure of work and people's work-related experiences such as in the case of telework (Steward 2000, Hynes 2013). These nuanced and diverse reactions to the (lack of) work-related time structures confirm Young and Schuller (1991:95) argument that work-related temporal structures alone do not suffice to provide people with all the

advantages of organised time. Instead, it is also the *composition and quality* of these structures that matter, which becomes particularly apparent whenever highly structured, repetitive work processes culminate in monotony and boredom (cf. Glucksmann 1982/2009).

The realm of work also constitutes one of the main links between people and society through which individual notions of time become exposed to and regulated by powerful social pacers.

The control that work exercises over time is not just control over the time actually spent on it. Work dominates everything around it as a mountain dominates a plain. [...] Being without work is being without this organisational spine (Young and Schuller, 1991:93).

As a result, much attention has been paid to these connections between individuals' work-related time use and wider structural conditions emanating from the socio-political and material world that surrounds them. In particular, the sociology of work and its strong emphasis on historical materialism and political economy approaches, at least in the European tradition, has exerted an important influence on how the relationship between individuals, society and economy is viewed by both academic and non-academic audiences. While the sociological investigation of work has been somewhat sidelined in recent times by other concerns and topics, its influence on both social-scientific and lay perceptions of work remains significant.

More recently, the threat of accelerating climate change has drawn attention to the spread of socially and ecologically unsustainable time use practices such as car-dependent commuting over long distances. Solutions to these (un)sustainability challenges include recommendations by degrowth advocates for a more or less radical reduction in working hours (and resulting spending power) and an expansion of unpaid activities that enhance people's relationships and wellbeing. Proposals for an overall reduction in working hours (Schor 2010) or a twenty-one hour working week (New Economics Foundation 2011) reflect this debate.

Undoubtedly, these calls for a radical reduction in working hours to achieve a steady-state/degrowth economy and to address pressing sustainability challenges have opened up new and fruitful avenues for theoretically informed research and policy debates. However, they cannot be viewed in isolation from related debates on the causes and consequences of (un)sustainable consumption. For example, the question as to whether current consumption levels need to be drastically reduced (= degrowth) or whether a change in the quality of consumption (= 'greening' of existing practices) is sufficient to reign in socially and ecologically harmful forms of (over)consumption remains a key focal point of sustainable consumption debates. Many contributors to this expanding field have acknowledged the inherently social nature of everyday practices such as cooking, eating and travelling and have connected consumption to socially negotiated views of what it means to lead 'a good life' (e.g. Jackson, 2009; Shove, 2010; Hinton and Goodman, 2010; Heisserer, 2013). Others have cautioned against business-as-usual approaches that promise continued economic growth through a change in the quality of consumption. For them, calls to consume differently (rather than not to consume at all) simply prolong rather than fundamentally challenge the dominant growth-based economic system that threatens the social and biophysical foundations of human life (e.g. Latouche, 2009; Kirby and Murphy, 2011).

Recent critical debates regarding the relationship between consumption, development and quality of life have also provided opportunities for exploring more or less radical alternatives to current growth-based models of production and consumption. For example, some authors have put forward very convincing arguments, complemented by detailed empirical evidence, that consumption beyond a certain level does not significantly enhance people's quality of life (e.g. Jackson, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Yet others view the current economic crisis in Europe and beyond as an opportunity to 'imagine a very different future and establish an "ecological or ethical socialist model", with less focus on (quantitative) growth and consumption, and more focus on (qualitative) living well' (Murphy and Kirby, 2013). Nevertheless, there is currently little evidence of a fundamental shift in thinking away from quantitative growth and towards qualitative changes in how societies organise themselves and their economies. Instead, many governments in the European Union and beyond have concentrated on efforts to 'spend their way out of the current recession', with a view to returning to pre-recession levels of economic growth and consumption.

Given the propensity of time-saving technologies to intensify work, in turn producing consumption-related material and time-related rebound effects that cancel out efficiency gains, the fundamental question how people spent the time they save needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. However, the question of how much time people spend on different activities does not go far enough. Instead, this paper aims to show that both the quality of time use and its material resource intensity are equally important factors in determining the impact of particular time use patterns on society and the environment.

Time-sociological considerations presented in this paper are ideally suited to theoretically examine and empirically investigate the (un)sustainability of particular time use patterns and can significantly contribute to the advancement of sustainability and degrowth debates. Initially, arguments for an explicit and sustained focus on human time use and its connections with over-production and -consumption and associated challenges to people's wellbeing and environmental integrity will be outlined. Two time-related aspects seem particularly important in this context: 1) the material intensity of different time use practices and 2) the amount of labour time that is embodied in infrastructure, products, services and social activities and that frequently remains invisible. Following on from this, the paper examines how such an inclusive, time-centred approach could complement and broaden current proposals by sustainability and degrowth advocates for a reduction in working hours.

Key words: time use, consumption, sustainability, dematerialisation, degrowth

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