

Paper: (Re)Productivity in a Perspective of Material Feminism

1) Perspective

Arguing from a feminist perspective, we assume that grappling with a sustainable society implies a reflection on relations of power, hierarchies and discrimination as structuring elements of western industrial-capitalist societies. One of these powerful institutions is the dichotomization of nature and culture, which leads to the domination of the latter over the first.

Thus talking about sustainability we connect to the principle of strong sustainability following the theoretical group for Caring Economy (cf. Theoriegruppe Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften 2000; Schultz/Hummel/Padmanabhan 2010), which exceeds the mainstream understanding of sustainability (cf. World Commission of Environment and Development 1987). Within this concept, economy can not be dissolved from social and ecological processes as it is embedded in temporal and spatial scales of human and non-human contemporaries (cf. Biesecker/Hofmeister 2006: 19). Hitherto the distinction between economic, social and ecological sustainability becomes redundant. Based on this the concept of (Re)Productivity, introduced by Adelheid Biesecker and Sabine Hofmeister, seems to be an analytical possibility to associate feminist theory and degrowth in conceptualizing the pursuit of good life in a broad perspective. The underlying assumptions on nature in their work are going to be exposed in this paper and further theories of Material Feminism are examined regarding enriching perspectives on blank spaces.

2) (Re)Productivity

The concept of (Re)Productivity proposes an analytical and practical category which is supposed to overcome dichotomies upon which traditional economic theory is based. Due to those dichotomies hierarchies are constructed, by which ecological as well as (socially) female achievements are ignored, undervalued and taken for granted at the same time (cf. Biesecker/Hofmeister 2013: 137). Thus life in current western societies is not sustainable and crisis-laden phenomena can be found in various contexts (cf. Wissen/Brand 2011; Becker-Schmidt 2011; Winker 2011). Biesecker and Hofmeister (2006), whose research is embedded in the activities of the Network Caring Economy developed (Re)Productivity as a conveying category which is supposed to describe a “processual unity of all productive processes in nature and society while being distinct at the same time” (Biesecker/Hofmeister 2006: 19). From this point of view a new concept of economy as the unity of paid and unpaid activities, embedded in spatial and temporal scales of human and non-human contemporaries starts to unfold.

Central for our undertaking is the recourse to conceptions of nature in the work of Biesecker and Hofmeister. There are two theoretical ties: First to Ecological Economy, which understands the

ecological system as superior to the economic system (cf. Theoriegruppe Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften 2000: 40). Biesecker and Hofmeister see their works in this tradition but step further and connect to conceptions of Societal Relations to Nature (cf. Hofmeister 2013: 133). Based on the assumption of dynamic relations between society and nature this concept challenges the hierarchical relations between the two terms by stating that they rather point constitutively towards each other. Societal Relations to Nature as a crisis-oriented “differential conveying concept” (Becker/Jahn/Hummel 2006: 197) stands in the tradition of critical theory and is based on a critique of a dichotomy of “scientific cultures” (ibid. 2006: 183): humanities and science, which they see as one societal binary differentiation containing hierarchies amongst others. Subsequently the practices of naturalizing and culturalizing are main focus of critique in Societal Relations to Nature (cf. ibid. 2006: 175). In the concept of (Re)Productivity this is expressed through the conceptualizing of human beings in a conveying perspective within a “double-nature” (Theoriegruppe Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften 2000: 41): as part and as a counterpart of nature.

3) Material Feminism

At first sight theories and concepts of material feminism seem to match very well with the concept of (Re)Productivity. Theorists like Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue for a reconceptualization of the relation between nature and culture as well. In their point of view matter and nature should no longer be received as the mere resource for cultural and industrial activities, envisioned as something passive and static. Rather they should be understood as something active and transformative, something that causes consequences affecting both the non-human and human world (cf. Alaimo/Hekman 2008: 4). Consequently, Material Feminists also criticize the dichotomous conception of nature and culture which however appears to be more radical since it suggests to understand nature as a self-acting agent, constituted by “intra-acting ‘component[s]’” (Barad 2008: 133). Nevertheless, this ‘component’ is not positioned ‘outside’ or ‘somewhere’, in fact it is part of each and every human. Material, discursive, corporeal, human and non-human as well as technical phenomena are intra-acting, causing significance and agency (cf. Alaimo/Hekman 2008: 5). This also implies a transformation of approaches of environmentalism given that nature can no longer be perceived as a model of wilderness at some distant place but rather that ‘environment’ is part of each and every context (cf. Alaimo/Hekman 2008: 9).

4) Conclusion

Since the concept of Societal Relations to Nature includes gender relations as one central perspective and is based among other critical threads on a feminist critique, it gives a first

theoretical basis for challenging gender-related hierarchization which lead to unsustainable societal processes, mirrored in the concept of (Re)Productivity. However, it gives little evidence, firstly on how inter- (respectively intra-) action between nature and culture is going on exactly, and secondly how binary constructs of gender and heteronormativity could be questioned. Hence theories of Material Feminism can be quite enriching by filling yet blank spaces, especially since the theoretical implications of a Material Feminism go along very well with the intentions of the conception of (Re)Productivity. New perspectives on dissolving the binary construction of culture/nature and thereby male/female start to unfold. Consequently, this provides a basis for questioning the institution of heteronormativity which is constitutive for the distinction between the private and the public, respectively economic sphere.

However, Material Feminism challenges central assumptions of human self-conceptions and many questions appear subsequently: How can ideas of agency, emancipatory potential and self-determination be held up in this perspective? Which theoretical as well as practical conclusions have to be drawn if the subject-object dichotomy is dissolved completely and 'matter/nature' receives the same agency as 'human beings'? Which concepts of power and processes of power emergence can be attached? Generally aspects of power and of historicity of power are yet quite underdeveloped within theories of Material Feminism and the question should be raised whether it is possible at all to take issues of power into consideration within these theories. Certainly, there are various approaches of Material Feminism and it is important to take a closer look in order to reflect critically on their implications and possible conclusions. Nevertheless, the questions and critical comments stated here should be taken as a possible starting point for further elaborations and cross readings of Material Feminism and Caring Economies.

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