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Work and Social Differentiation: How it Justifies a Basic Income

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Work, or more precisely, problems that induce work, emerge - from a constructivist's point of view - always in consequence of problems that have been solved before, or in other words, in consequence of work done before. E.g.: what a farmer considers work (or what he considers a problem) depends on the specific work he and his ancestors have done before (or the problems they have solved before), and so does, what a computer scientist considers work. Thus, the definition of work depends solely on work itself. In other words, work creates the point of view, from where work is considered as work. Work is therefore steadily growing more with every piece of work done and with every new change of perspective. Work therefore, together with society's demand for it, differentiates up to a point, where its remuneration becomes problematic. How this, and not any "end of work", should lead to the separation of work and income is subject of the paper.

The paper in hand is proposing a seemingly simple but may be quite productive change in the way we look at work. Abstracting from other definitions¹ I suggest to view work simply as a *problem solving process*, or more precisely, as a *process of trying to solve problems*.

(In not stating who's problems and what kind of problems are to be solved or who is going to solve them a whole range of attributes and phenomenon commonly associated with work become indistinct by this definition. Paid or unpaid work, work done at the workplace or work done at home, work done for others or work done for oneself, work of professionals or work of amateurs, manual work of industrial workers or brain work of scientists, work of men or work of women, work of humans or work of machines, or even more general "work of nature"² or "work of history", all this work forms are simply considered as *processes of attempts to solve problems*. Referring to the theoretical conception

¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of work definitions see Füllsack 2002: 13f; see also Krebs 2002.

this proposal is based on - the Theory of Social Systems as sketched out among others by Niklas Luhmann - this definition is abstract to a point that it even includes epistemological, biological, physical, chemical etc. “problem solving processes” regarding them in principal as *complexity reducing processes*, or more precisely, as processes of reducing the complexity of environments perceived as complex - and thus as problematic - by systems. In the context of this paper however, it does not seem overly “complexity reducing” to use the abstract terminology of system’s theory. We content therefore with a somehow weaker constructivistic conception regarding work as a problem solving process.)

So what - you might say - do we gain by choosing a definition of work so abstract that most forms of work currently subject to extensive discussions (about its remuneration, its disappearance, its inhumanity etc.) become indistinguishable?

To answer this question lets look a bit closer at the process of problem solving and before all at the *social* aspects of it. Lets consider a very simple society; lets say a fictive Stone Age society that faces basic problems of nutrition and shelter. For solving a part of these problems this society invents - or more precisely: it *achieves by working* - a simple method to make fire, a method that we for the sake of simplicity can call matches. From a classical point of view we can say that this society by inventing matches has successfully worked for its reproduction. Some necessities of every day’s life - nutrition, warmth etc. - have become a bit easier to obtain. A certain part of work has been done, or in other words: the society has acquired *surplus* by working.

Unfortunately though, this is only one side of the medal. By viewing work very abstractly as a “complexity reducing process” and on our level as a “problem solving process” - which is perhaps quite easy in the case of inventing matches - another side of the work process becomes visible. Besides *solving* certain problems of every day’s life, the achieved invention of matches also determines a

² This definition clearly borrows from the work conception of young Karl Marx who once described

new situation for society, a new *status quo* so to say, in which matches and therewith-easy access to fire are now available. The society thus has not just simply worked for its reproduction, but has, so to say, reached a new *cultural* level, a level on which on the one hand certain things certainly have become easier, but on the other hand *suddenly also completely new needs and necessities become perceivable, needs that were in no way to be seen before reaching this cultural level.*

This society might for example now see that it needs dry wood or other burnable materials to make fire, or it might see that it needs, lets say, some kind of chimney to dispose of the smoke. May be it can even see that it could prepare different kinds of food in the fire and that it might therefore hunt different kind of deer now. It could with the help of fire follow this deer into higher or more northern regions and therefore need as a consequence new forms of orientation and coordination, and so on. To put it short, the society who has just solved one problem in the course of its reproduction process suddenly starts facing a whole range of *new problems.*

To point out this fact lets for a moment consider problems of a more modern society. The first-world society of our days for example solved part of its mobility problems by inventing (achieving by *working*) cars. As a consequence, as we all know, it finds itself pretty much occupied by securing fuel provisions, building streets, issuing road laws or looking for parking spots today. This society has also developed medical treatments for a wide range of deceases and today faces increasing problems with aging populations whose pension systems are difficult to finance. And this society has also solved part of its communication problems by inventing computers and the internet and nowadays finds itself harassed by computer viruses, spam mails and internet hoaxes. From a classic philosophical point of view you might call this a consequence of the “Dialectics of Enlightenment”. *The decisive fact here however is that solving problems always and necessarily produces unforeseeable other problems.* And this is by no means

the development of the five senses as “work of nature”.

a singular or coincidental feature of the problem solving process. From the point of view sketched out in this paper *every problem solution determines a new standpoint from where new problems can be perceived*, or in other words, every solved problem enables a new distinction by which new problems become visible, or in terms of the Theory of Systems: every reduction of complexity is necessarily and unavoidably accompanied by a rise in complexity in other regards of the system.³

A first conclusion we can draw from this is the fact that the work process is by no means coming to an end in the process of work. On the contrary: the work process is by itself steadily producing the necessity for more work. One might even say, the work process itself is producing work. Popular diagnostics like the coming of an “End of Work” are thus easily unveiled as myths.⁴ *Problem solving is a never-ending process.*⁵

The second conclusion which seems to be simple at first glance is the fact that the problems becoming visible on every new level of the problem solving process, or in other words, on every new *cultural* level, are the *actual currently*

³ Luhmann calls this the „multiplication effect“ of complexity reduction. Cf.: Luhmann 1997: 433. By internally differentiating themselves systems gain the ability to react to their complex environment and thus secure their existence in this environment. At the same time however by differentiating they also create the possibility to perceive this environment more differentiated than before. In other words, they reduce complexity on the one hand but increase it on the other hand by creating a new status quo from where an other environment can be perceived.

⁴ Cf.: Arendt 1958/1981: 12; Dahrendorf 1980, 1983; Gorz 1994; Rifkin 1995.

⁵ And it is also – what is may be philosophically more interesting – a “never beginning process”. Since every problem is perceived as such only from a standpoint that is determined by the problems solved so far, no problem can be a “first” or “starting” problem. Every problem has its predecessors. And this means that no time or situation free of problems can be imagined. Translated into terms of Marxian critique this means that no state of society can be imagined in which society has no problems or in which society has a more immediate relation to its problems than today. Thus the Marxian term “estranged” turns out to be rather poorly defined. To put it very radical: from the point of view sketched out in this paper it is not possible to say that a multi-millionaire whose current problem might be to win his next yacht regatta is more estranged from his needs than any factory worker whose company operates on the brink of bankruptcy or any jobless urgently looking for work. Needs, interests and problems are, from our point of view, solely determined by the needs, interests and problems satisfied and solved so far. And this has, as we will see, far reaching consequences. See to this point also more detailed my critique of the Marxist term “Estrangement” in Füllsack 2002: 38ff.

pressing problems of the society or of the individual who has them. One of the actual current problems for example of our fictive stone age society who had just solved its fire making problem might be the collection and storage of dry fire wood. This society is (in the main) no longer occupied with earlier or more basic problems but perceives this *new* problem as the one lying at hand at the moment.

Thus we can say that the sole criteria for what is considered a problem by a society or by an individual are the results of problem solving processes undertaken earlier by this society or by this individual. Or in other words, *what is considered a problem depends solely and completely on the (so far culturally or individually stored) solutions of earlier problems*. The problem of dry firewood can only be perceived as such, because the problem of making fire was solved before. Dry firewood would not be a problem without fire.

Translated into terms of work this means that what a society or an individual considers work is solely and completely dependent on what this society or this individual has worked on before. Or in other words: *work is a social construction dependent on earlier work which was itself socially constructed in regard to the results of earlier work, and so on*.

Lets fix this point for the moment - we will come back to it later - and look from here at another consequence of the human problem solving process.

Although most concrete human problem solutions might actually be found by individuals, the problem solving process as we regard it here is first of all a *social* phenomenon. Since problem solutions (as problems themselves) are, as we said, necessarily always based on other problem solutions having been found earlier by society - just think on the many problem solutions even so simple things as matches are based on - the individual contribution to a new problem solution as we consider it is *negligible* and in any way very complicated if not impossible to measure. We are therefore regarding primarily *social* problem solving processes in our considerations.

If, as we said, from every level of solved problems new problems arise, it seems obvious that society for the sake of its existence permanently has to look for new ways to solve these new problems. Society in this regard is nothing else than a huge problem solving mechanism always on the hunt for new solutions.

More concretely we can assume that society - if it has the possibilities to do so - will assign some of its members to solve newly arising problems. Society will, in other words, enable some of its members to *specialize* on *special* problems. Society will, in other words, *differentiate* - for example in specialists for solving agricultural problems, defence problems and ideal, sense or orientation problems. It will, lets say, *differentiate* in farmers, soldiers and priests.

Each of these specialists will solve part of its special problems and will by solving these problems, according to our assumptions, necessarily determine new standpoints, new problem views from where he can perceive new problems. The farmer for example will concentrate on, lets say, soil, grain or seed problems, on problems of weather changes or problems of insect ravage and so on. He will solve part of these problems and by solving it perceive new problems that he did not count on before.

These new problems however now have a slightly different quality for society. They do not mean just new difficulties for our farmer; they also hold a new and now slightly different set of problems for society. Since their being a problem can only be seen by the respective specialist to whom these problems appear in the course of his specialized problem solving process, the rest of society will not immediately be able to consider these problems as problems. In other words, the problems of a farmer are not necessarily immediately and in the same way problems for soldiers and for priests - and vice versa. Due to *their* specialized problem solving processes, or in other words, due to *their* specialized work, in the course of which permanently new problems arise, their problems look different from the ones of the farmer.

Now transpose this assumption to more modern circumstances. The more the problem solving process, the more the work process differentiates and specializes the more the problem perceptions and therewith the problems individualize. They become highly specialized entities perceived as problems only by those who have solved the respective preceding problems. I suppose that every computer scientist nowadays can name a whole range of problems that will not be perceived as such by an expert for, lets say, Greek mythology and vice versa. Or to put it as a question in terms of work: Is, what an expert for Greek mythology considers as work, necessarily work for a computer scientist?

By itself and at first glance, the fact that modern societies have very differentiated problem perceptions might not seem to be a very dramatic problem. In general we as members of modern societies are pretty proud to be individuals and to have unique views on the world. A problem though this can become when some of the problem solving activities of modern societies are remunerated while others are not.

In general one would assume that the remuneration of problem solving activities, of work in short, should be a question of supply and demand. At least this is what neo-liberal politicians like to tell us. In other words, those parts of society who are not solving certain problems themselves but have a demand for respective solutions will buy these solutions from an other part of society who specialized on them. And they will gain the means for buying these solutions by producing other solutions themselves being on demand in the other parts of society. The farmer sells the products of his work to the soldiers and in return buys their products with the proceeds from the sale. This procedure of give and take works, as we know, perfectly as long as most parts of society have a demand for solutions found by other parts of society, or in other words, as long as they *perceive* these solutions as such.

In highly differentiated societies though, with highly specialized problem solving processes in which problems and their solutions become highly

individualized entities perceived only by those as such who have solved respective problems before, this practice can become problematic in itself.

Think for instance of the huge differences in problem solving processes of Third World and industrial or post-industrial countries. What is perceived, as a problem in Europe - for example the tight linkage of incomes and work - might seem just inconceivable somewhere in Africa. Or think for example of the problems of Australian white population perceiving the activities of Australian aborigines in the first place as laziness and reluctance to work, whereas the aborigines themselves see it as complicated and very important trial to gain access to “Dreamtime”, the much valued land of their ancestors, but having themselves no understanding for the widespread productivity and workaholic stress of white Australians. Or think of the problems of modern First World leisure society consisting to a huge amount of questions like where to spend holydays, where to go out for dinner, or which new movie to watch, but being inconceivable for lets say Russian industrial workers who face wage arrears for several months because their insolvent enterprises can not be shut down for political reasons. *All these problems however are genuine problems for those who have them*, or in other words, for those, who have solved respective earlier problems that determined *these* problems as such.

In a modern globalized world all *these* highly different problem perceptions have, as we well know, a good chance to collide with each other in manifold ways, causing huge problems for the integrative capacities of modern societies. The relevant problem in our context however is the fact that the diversity of problem perceptions in modern society seems less and less able to guarantee a sufficient *demand* for the different problem solutions produced by the members of modern society - a demand being able to remunerate *these* problem solutions in a way that society members are able to live on them. To illustrate this just think of the problem solutions of experts for Greek philosophy for example, think of astronomers, of particle physicians, of avant-garde musicians or other modern artists. All these expert professions, although they might still be reputed quite well in society, nowadays face problems to find paid workplaces to live on.

From a (neo)liberal point of view you might of course say that this problem is no severe problem at all. Sinking demand on the labour market is usually regulated quite effectively by itself. Professions which do not meet demand anymore simply die out. The problem solvers specialized on these professions but not being able to live on them will specialize elsewhere.

From our point of view however, this argumentation is shaky in several ways. First and may be most obvious from a moralistic point of view it simply implies a step backwards from the already reached level of problem solving which is, as we said, a *cultural* level, an *achievement* and not just another economic factor. If you want to maintain and use the high level of problem solving capacity that modern society has reached then you should not just leave it to the “self-regulating” forces of supply and demand.

Second and more in the line of our argumentation is the fact that differentiation and specialization seem to have reached a dimension in our times in which they affect *every* profession in the long run. Today no job, no qualification, however demanded it might be at the moment, can guarantee that it will meet this demand tomorrow as well. Demands today tend to vanish (and also sometimes reappear again)⁶ sometimes even in the course of educational and training processes. Just to learn to handle the newest computer software, lets say, in three months time can by no means guarantee that after this three months the program will still be state of the art and will help you to meet any lasting demand on the labour market. To put it in other words, the dynamics of problem solving activities and the dynamics of obtaining the know how to qualify for them (together with a lot of more different dynamics) have diversified in a way that endangers *every* profession to be swept away by a lack of demand.

If you analyze these facts on a more fundamental base it holds yet another severe catch for the assumption of liberal market self-regulation by demand and

supply. To see this catch clearly it seems helpful to go down again to a bit more abstract explanation level.⁷

At first glance one might think that a problem solution belongs to the problem it solves like the lid to a kettle. However surprising it may be, this is not necessarily the case. Lets look for example at the need to regenerate working power, a problem for which society, we suppose, considered it opportune (among other possibilities) to free one day in the working week of work. In our culture this solution is called Sunday and as such it seems to have a clear function or a value in use for the working part of society. One could think that the function to regenerate working power is the reason for making Sunday's valued elements of our society's culture.

Partly this is certainly true. Yet relevant social problem solutions do not become elements of society's culture exclusively in regard to their immediate function. Usually they are acculturated as well in regard to their respective socio-historic or cultural context. In other words, *problem solutions never exist independently from other problem solutions*.⁸ On the contrary, usually they become part of the cultural fund of a society only in manifold reference to and from other problem solutions being already valued parts of this culture. Sundays for example, whose immediate (or prime) function once was, as we assume, the regeneration of working power, became a valued element of the occidental culture by being put in manifold reference to and from the Christian religion. Sundays became what they are in our culture as a part of the religious normative context of our society.

⁶ Just think of the Schumpeterian "piglet-circle" induced by the policy of training computer scientists in Germany throughout the nineteen nineties. Cf.: Füllsack 2000.

⁷ For the following see more detailed also my explanations in Füllsack 2002: 55f.

⁸ In terms of the theoretical conception these considerations are based on, one would have to say that the problem solving process is becoming "autopoietic" thus stringing one problem solution after the other without clear connection to any original problem anymore. (cf. for this for example Luhmann: 1984: 61) Linguists speak analogically of the "arbitrariness" of linguistic signs, being defined solely by other signs and not by any transcendental "essence" that is designated by the signs.

And by being such a part (and not so much by having the function to regenerate working power) Sundays gained stability in time (and in space) that by and by let them become *independent* from their original function. Problem solutions can, in other words, separate (“disembed” as Anthony Giddens says) from their original problem context and start to *migrate in time and in space*. And this ability from our point of view is very essential. From it depends on the one hand the *cultural* availability of problem solutions for solving further problems. Only “disembedded” problem solutions can be used beyond their place of origin. The wheel therefore had not to be invented again. On the other hand this ability is also causing constant new problems by enabling different (and may be even functionally equivalent) problem solutions to collide with each other in time and in space.⁹

We all would probably agree, that Sunday in most modern societies has little to do with regenerating working power anymore. Members of modern societies often undertake more exhausting activities on Sunday than during their working week. Sunday however, is still regarded as a valuable problem solution by some parts of society while others fiercely criticize it. In times of global economic and social interactions, when shop owners for instance would like to enhance their competitiveness by opening their shops on Sundays, and other groups in society prefer to rest, lets say, on Sabbath and not on Sunday, it takes good arguments to promote Sunday as the prime day off in the week.¹⁰

What is relevant for our context is the fact that problem solutions can gain a certain *independency* from their origin and through this a persistence that can cause severe contradictions with other problems and problem perceptions, which are nevertheless still genuine problems, and problem perceptions of the ones who have them.

⁹ In several writings I have tried to analyze such cultural collisions of problem solutions and their consequences for social development. Cf. among others: Füllsack 1996, 1999, 2002.

¹⁰ It is probably not necessary to point out, that this fact again is a consequence of the differentiation and specialization of the problem perceptions of modern society.

If we regard now the factors determining the current practice to remunerate problem solutions i.e. work in our society from this theoretical standpoint, we can consider work regulations, wage agreements, social security regulations etc. and respectively the institutions and organizations determining them, i.e. trade unions, tripartite commissions etc. as problem solutions as well – as problem solutions found and acculturated in the course of the work process in reference to and from many other cultural problem solutions and having gained thereby a certain stability in time and in space and through this an *independency* from the problem context originally being the reason for their emergence. A much disputed example for this circumstance nowadays seem to be the policy of trade unions, who by defending the incomes of job owners tend to exclude those from the labour market who are not having a job and consequently also no income.¹¹ As political still powerful problem solutions *stabilized beyond their original function* trade unions are defending rights of a working class that does not exist any longer in its original form. Or more strikingly formulated: trade unions nowadays tend to solve problems that no longer exist.

What is relevant in our context however is the fact that the remuneration of problem solving activities (i.e. work) as it is defended by unions and regulated by laws today is by no means determined by supply and demand anymore, but by factors stabilized in the course of the problem solving process to an extent that in the long run seems to make these factors independent from the actual problems of society.¹²

¹¹ As André Gorz puts it: „Trade unions are on the way to become an insurance organization for a relatively small, privileged group of regular workers.” 1994: 317. Cf. also: Cutler/Aronowitz 1998: 9f; Siegenthaler 2000: 99; Der Spiegel 24/2002: 127.

¹² The reason for arguing this much disputed facts on such a theoretical level is to point out that these problems are structural and can not be appointed as guilt to any “conservative”, “inflexible” or somehow else “reluctant to change” union functionaries or politicians as is often implied in the media. The considerations in hand thus suggest a problem perception beyond left and right. Reforms and changes as well therefore have to aim at structural level and not at individuals or parts of society allegedly guilty for current problems.

Lets summarize our considerations at this point: We described two ways along which the current practice of remunerating work is becoming problematic. First we observed that the specialization of problem solving activities of modern societies has differentiated society's demand for problem solutions to an extent that not all specialists working on these solutions can live from the proceeds of their work because they simply do not meet enough demand for their special problem solutions anymore. Second we pointed out that the liberal argument according to which this problem regulates itself because too little demand just simply forces the specialized problem solvers to specialize elsewhere can not be to the point in a problem solving practice that steadily stabilizes problem solutions *beyond* their original function and therewith the remuneration of these solutions *beyond* their actual demand.

As a consequence of these two dynamics modern society is characterized by a situation in which some problem solving activities are remunerated quite well because they meet public demand, some others are remunerated well although they do not meet much or any demand at all, some are simply not executable although they would meet demand because wage agreements prevent their execution, and some are not remunerated and don't meet much or any demand. In short, in modern society some problem solving activities are remunerated pretty well and some others are remunerated not at all and both facts might have *no relation at all* to any actual demand and supply on the labour market.

However, what is clearly visible from our point of view is the fact that all these problem-solving activities are trying to solve *genuine* problems. No problem of a jobless can be called less genuine than the problem of an industrial worker or a bank manager, and no problem of someone whose problem solving activity does not meet much demand in society can be called less genuine than the problem of someone who by pure chance is still enjoying demand and is therefore yielding incomes at the time being.

This is a fact that seems worth to point out one more time: from the point of view outlined in this paper every problem can be perceived as such only in dependence of the problems solved before - be it by the whole society or by just a part of it. And to which society or to which part of it one belongs - be it to the well off part, mainly concerned already with leisure time problems nowadays, be it to the working part, threatened by wage and staff cuts because of growing global competition and rationalization, or be it to the jobless part, having spare time problems but not being able to enjoy them as such - *is a question of pure chance*. From our point of view all these problems are *genuine* problems. The activities undertaken to solve them thus have the *same* right to be remunerated. If society is no longer able to care for this remuneration so to say naturally - because demand on the one hand is vanishing for certain activities due to the differentiation of the problem solving process and on the other hand is switched off for others due to the stabilization of problem solutions - society might be well advised to *separate* the activities of solving its problems from the practice of remunerating these activities. *In other words, a separation of work and incomes by instituting a Basic Income might be a reasonable solution for this problem.*

Lets however not forget that from our point of view *every* problem solution determines a new problem view that allows perceiving new problems - problems that are not to be seen before. A Basic Income in this regard is itself nothing else than a problem solution and nobody is able to say in advance what kind of problems will arise with its institution. The only solution to *this* problem, from my point of view, is to institute a Basic Income as *indogmatic* and *flexible* as possible, so that the conception is able to react - if need be - to the problems it inevitably will create.

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