

How to compensate for social and environmental reproduction?

- Two dilemmas, one common solution -

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When it comes to traditional measures, such as wealth, employment and poverty, our generation is the first after the WWII to be defined by economic insecurity, precarious conditions and over all feelings of temporality. However, we are using the amount of resources and producing the amount of waste that sums to more than one and a half planets¹. Despite all the scientific facts and technocratic data, our behaviour hasn't changed. So, it has become clear, that social and environmental dilemmas should be addressed with ethical arguments.

Since the WWII we have been sucked into the growth imperative, which has become not only the measurement for success, but also our religion and our ethics. This is the modus operandi of the modern technocratic 21st century. It is also known as the rat-race lifestyle. Consequently, we are now living in a world where 62 individuals possess the same amount of wealth as half of the world's population², shows the latest Oxfam report.

The fundamental issue with capitalistic growth is, that on the one hand, it is built on the unpaid work in the realm of social reproduction and on the other hand it parasites on the environmental reproduction. These are both sides of the same coin that capitalism collects as free money. In the same way as the state collects the taxes, capitalism reaps its share without the consent of people or nature. The time is long overdue to address the elephant in the room, the societal and environmental issues are interconnected.

Firstly, social reproduction seems like a natural and desired way of how society on the whole works. On a smaller scale, people in general want to create their own families, which usually involves having children. Every parent knows that having kids involves a lot of work. We all know that this work however, doesn't count as real work. The reason is simple, but irrational, because it doesn't contribute to a higher GDP. Which means, that raising children- or should I say the future taxpayers, and doing housework is in its essence slave work for the system. Care work is generally not considered as work, but petty tasks. It isn't considered as labour but things we do for love. People who are performing care work are living their lives in very precarious positions, without recognition or redistribution for their contributions to society. Care economy is traditionally, although not always powered by women workforce and although our welfare and wellbeing depends on it, it doesn't reap the social respect as much as traditionally men dominated business economy.

Care nevertheless has a specific role in our lives and relationships. Luckily there has been some improvement lately in sharing both the invisible and visible care work between men and women. However this work sharing is still in its initial phase and it differs from country to country. There are even bigger gaps between continents. If care was equally shared

1 www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/

2 www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp210-economy-one-percent-tax-havens-180116-en_0.pdf

between men and women, people could devote less time to formal work. Paid employment could in this case be shared among higher number of people.

This means that both men and women should be working less than full time and share the emotional burden of care work within the household. Meaning that governments should implement strong policies to promote equality at home, at work and in public or political sphere. Irish scholar Murphy says that “Restoring democratic power and economic power are intrinsically linked and if degrowth can create time in people’s lives it can also serve to enhance democratic participation in the workplace” (Murphy, 2013: 85). A degrowth society would shape care and work in a more democratic, more autonomous and more just way.

Next, Austrian ecologist Exner says that reciprocity plays a role in creating social relationships, “its core principle is the recognition of the other as a human being.” (Exner, 2014: 5). The flow of money becomes inferior to the relationship, which is based on recognition. The basic structure of reciprocity are the commons, where all members have equal rights to natural resources such as air, water and sometimes land or at least public spaces. However, Exner claims that “Men and women are defined to belong to different realms, with different ontological status. Women are seen as being close to nature because they are equated with reciprocity, which is mostly ignored and often destroyed, and what is left is strictly instrumentalized by capital. Men are thought to embody reason because they are identified with the principle of exchange.” (Exner, 2014: 7).

Another angle of this debate looks at the environmental reproduction, which is similarly colonized by capitalism. The system that operates on ‘grow first, clean up later’ ideology. The degradation of biosphere is making it distinct that the global community will have to revive environmental reproduction and impose more regulation and taxes on pollution and resource depletion. The costs of restoring nature are being dropped on the future generations. But generational justice requires putting people before profit and enhancing solidarity. Compensating for both, reproduction in the social sphere and in the sphere of natural environment is becoming inevitable.

Clearly, UBI, preferably paid in a local currency as a provision for care work, financed by the green taxes, in particular a tax on consumption could reduce the environmental footprint and contribute to greater autonomy. In other words it would put people and nature before profit. UBI could enlarge the autonomous sphere in which we rear our children, cultivate our organic gardens and enjoy nature. When paid in a local currency it would promote local food markets and other local exchange and trade systems. A society based on a degrowth imperative could provide the income floor in the form of UBI and an income ceiling in the form of a maximum income. Degrowth represents a flourishing society, and high incomes are not contributing to flourishing, they are only contributing to wasteful consumption and increasing inequalities.

Promoting localization would further help with clearing the ecological space. On the flip side, globalization needs to diminish, both from the perspective of social and environmental justice. Clearly, there is a link between pollution & depletion of natural resources, on one side and poverty & inequality on the other side. But even if we don’t live in the polluted part of the world ourselves, we are nonetheless responsible for what we buy. Because there is a deep-seated intersection between inequality and climate change.

This brings us to the core of this issue. Shopping and the consumerist norms. Consumerism has its very instant and real material temptations, whereas scientific data sometimes looks too metaphysical. We just don't have the time to be bothered, when we are busy stuck in traffic trying to collect our kids from the nursery. Ecological footprint seems something very abstract in comparison to a new gadget we think we need. Advertising promotes extrinsic values, which can make us feel inadequate by their very nature. What is more daunting, our cultural values are shaped by the society we live in. It is not surprising that consumerist society promotes extrinsic values, such as power, competition, conformity and success.

German social psychologist Welzer (2011) observes how external world with the specific circumstances further forms our mental infrastructures. Quoting, "In modern societies, these infrastructures are not only determined by specific conditions of production, but also by conditions of consumption." (Welzer, 2011: 28). External support for individuals in consumerist societies comes from consumption. In the process of defining ourselves and searching for a sense of meaning we often turn to shopping. One way or the other, material possessions and especially positional goods are playing an important role in defining who we are.

Welzer further states, that cognitive operations reflect the world we live in. Consequently the choices we make as consumers tell a lot about who we are. The brands we buy are influencing our identity. Degrowth philosophy questions our sense of life in this dimension. A degrowth framework evokes a fear that everything we believe in and everything we worked for becomes meaningless, since our sense of self is so intertwined with the habits and patterns of consumption, says Welzer, (2011). Our mental and emotional bonds go very deep, we can't imagine our lives without certain goods, services and infrastructure.

Moreover, our blind faith in technology goes even deeper, instead of using the water carefully, we rather search for it on Mars. Although the green technology may seem to offer some solutions, it can't tackle the core issue, which is that we should simply consume less! Green consumption and production is in its essence still too often operating on the same level as the growth paradigm. What needs to change is not the technology, but our mind-sets; our thinking, acting and feeling. The only way to tackle this issue is changing the narrative, the rhetoric's and the technocratic language. There needs to be a distinction between the needs and the wants. Because what I want is not necessarily what I need and vice versa.

Consumption has always been regulated by taxes. Think only of the impact of taxing cigarettes or plastic bags. Introduction of progressive taxes on consumption, advertising and other environmentally degrading activities, would curtail globalisation and offer nature a chance to recover from human invasion. On top of that, this funds could go towards a basic income, as a payment for the work in the autonomous sphere.

References

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