

51st ITH Conference (Berlin, September 2015)

Conference Opening, 17 September 2015

Opening remarks on the conference theme by Andreas Eckert, Humboldt University Berlin / re:work

The theme of this year's conference is "work and non-work". This theme, we think, is particularly relevant. The present scenario of work is currently undergoing massive transformation. The present state and the future of work are now very much a part of academic and policy discourse. Not only are definitions of what constitutes work and what is excluded from it of central importance; so also are practices and policies surrounding them. What is legitimate work and what is illegal has been for long a matter of state policy. Between labor and crime the line of demarcation has always been fuzzy, shifting and adjusting to needs of regulatory regimes of state and market. In the same manner the demarcation of work and leisure so starkly contrasted in the modern period is getting blurred as new forms of work acquire shades of leisure while leisure itself has been industrialized.

The other great division linked to this topic is that between paid and unpaid work, the work outside as opposed to inside households or between men's work and women's work. A number of studies suggested that the home and the domestic sphere always been the hothouse for evolving the regimes of discipline and deployment of labor. The question then is this: Are these divisions that are being invented, abolished and resurrected regularly only recent ones? It may be useful to cast a look backwards and have a long term perspective on the division between work and non-work. And it appears crucial that explorations of this important theme must take into account temporal and spatial dimensions of the question. Studies on work and work relations must go beyond the modern era. At the same time work and non-work must be understood as having culturally specific meanings: a comparative perspective will act as a salutary medicine against too insular a reading.

A crucial context of our conference is the ongoing debates about notions of work. These notions have been substantially revised in recent years. Post-colonial and post-socialist transformations – different as they are - triggered a re-evaluation as did the increasing prominence of global perspectives. In turn, the longstanding reduction of work to wage-labor and gainful employment seems to have been overcome.

1.) New research on popular practices of the everyday have re-opened the debate: One crucial question has been: what constitutes the dividing line between 'hard work' and those irregular activities that blend leisure (or idleness) with rigorous discipline and goal-orientation? Examples are ample and range from work proper ('Blue Monday', informal breaks) to all forms of sport.

2.) Moreover, the global scope underscores not only the massive scale and the diverse features of migration. Rather, this view also reveals its *longue durée* and multifold traditions, resonating with “vagabondage” in European Early Modern Times. In a parallel move, domestic labor and performance of domestic chores emerged as work as did child-rearing or care-taking for disabled and the elderly.

3.) In a third opening, ‘play’ is appearing less as the principal antithesis to work. Instead, the reproductive features and creative potentials of games and plays (whether in sports or in the arts or among children) seem to reconstitute this sphere into a resource for making work as a playful event. Not to forget: the realms of games promulgated by digital means and the Internet may have re-charged child-labor, not the least in societies generally considered beyond that temptation.

4.) This leads to a fourth theme, of which re:work is very fond: Work and non-work across the life course: The issue at stake is to explore shifting activities across individual and family life courses, their labelling as work or non-work and their varying evaluations.

Not all of these topics will be discussed during our conference, but a number of further topics that I did not mention will come to the fore. Finally, conferences like this are always grey zones between work and non-work, work and play, work and leisure, paid and unpaid work. Still, academics love so much to talk about themselves, so this time we should focus on our historical subjects.