

**PANTEION UNIVERSITY Centre for Gender Studies**

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## **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

**'Changing Gender! Research, Theory and Policy  
for Gendered Realities of the 21st century'**

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### **PAPER PRESENTED BY**

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### **TITLE**

**Cultural Roots of the Economic Crisis in Germany and its Consequences for Gendered Realities.**

In my talk I will prove the economic crisis to be in fact a political and a cultural one.<sup>1</sup> By not understanding this background, the current problem-solving shows dramatic consequences in view of missed opportunities for the development of our country in general and in a gendered perspective, in particular. Finally, I will present some reflections on alternative solutions in terms of possible gendered realities in future, not only regarding Germany.

#### **I. Phenomena of the German crisis**

For years the German public and political discussion has been full of complaints about the disaster of the economic crisis. Almost every evening you can listen to one of the talk-shows on TV with the same well-known speakers talking about never changing topics like, for instance: Can Germany still be rescued? How many unemployed can Germany endure? And so on.

Which facts are they referring to?

The *rate of unemployment* has been steadily rising since the middle of the 1970<sup>th</sup>. Even during stages of economic boom employment rates have decreased. This *structural* character of unemployment leads to an amount of more than five million jobless people, which accounts for nearly ten percent of the whole working force, women as well as men.

<sup>1</sup> The explanation of the connection between economic and cultural crisis follows Oevermann (2001). The arguments referring to the political crisis as a problem of legitimacy and the alternative of an unconditional basic income derive from Liebermann (2004), see also Liebermann et al. (2003).

Given the German *welfare system*, based on contributions of employees and employers there is a problem in consequence: The higher the number of unemployed, the less money flows into the treasury and a higher demand we have to face. Additionally, the national financial situation becomes more critical through the changing demographic structures. The more people grow old and older, the higher the demand for pensions. The social security system seems near its breakdown.

## **II. Current solutions**

Regardless of conservatives or social democrats, liberals or the greens, all of them prefer measures to maintain the present system both of social welfare and of paid work as the regular way to get an income. Thus the only solution which is thought of, is to enhance the employment rate. The concrete proposals differ between neoclassic and Keynesian trials to aim at full employment. That is, either to reduce the personnel costs, for example, by creating a low-wage sector (as the USA did), or to distribute the given work onto more shoulders, for example, by reducing day-time work and introducing job-sharing (as it is found in the Netherlands). A consequence of both ways is that earnings decline and the motivation to work is being undermined, because of the underlying pressure to work. This political constraint to paid work is underlined in the recently introduced "Laws for Modern Services in the Labour Market". The core of this new labour market approach is the following: everyone, who needs a public income, is expected to look for a job steadily, to prove their attempts and to except also low wages or a job on a lower qualification level as before. As a result, the granted income decreases and the number of the poor rises. But what is more important, we have to consider the effect of upgrading the underlying work ethic. The character of social transfers is emphasized to be an exception in relation to the normal and expected way to earn your income by paid work.

## **III. The political crisis**

Thus the implicit conflict becomes an obvious contradiction: present-day politics force everyone into jobs, which do not exist and will not exist in future, if we refuse to accept the above mentioned negative consequences of poverty and pressure. Because of the introduction of technology, automation of routine work and rationalization we have to face a decreasing demand of manpower to produce sufficient goods and services and rising wealth at all. Increasing productivity makes human labor more and more replaceable. Obviously, the obligation to work becomes a contradiction to the given possibility and necessity to take part in the work force. Thus the system of income distribution by paid work fails its target to divide the available prosperity into an equal and justified way.

Given the upholding of the obligation to work on the one hand, and the growing unemployment on the other hand, current policy leads directly to mistrust in the government's ability and willingness to find adequate solutions. Strengthened by the control and distrust against the citizens themselves, which are stressed by the new labor market laws, a big problem of legitimacy emerges, that renders the economic crisis actually into a political crisis, as Sascha Liebermann (2004) concluded.

## **IV. Gendered realities**

The unemployed are only the tip of the iceberg of those who suffer from the results of this dilemma. They bear the stigma of failure in both to fulfil the norm of the obligation to work and to take part in social life. The others as well are confronted with unnecessarily limited freedom, with useless limited options for leading a self-determined life, deciding by their own in which way they will contribute to public welfare: be it caring for children or for elder and ill people, volunteer work for the community, or achievement-oriented work within the labor market. Although all these forms of commitment are constitutive to maintain a nation-state, to run a community, current politics overemphasize the value of paid work. This has strong and destructive consequences for social life, the national development in general and for the gender relation in particular.

Under a *gendered perspective* labor market data as well as my empirical findings from biographic interviews point to the rise of contradictions in the individual's decision-making. At first sight the last decades have shown an enormous progress in the participation of women in all public fields, especially in politics and business. Despite of women are underrepresented in higher and prestigious positions, all in all, we can note a generalization of women's participation in the work force, following the same work ethic as men do, however with *gender specific consequences*: Certainly, they are suffering from unemployment at an equal extent, but female poverty is much higher than the male one (because of the lower wages for women, the lower unemployment support and the higher degree of being single-parent). It's true that they are pursuing a demanding professional career, but women's circumstances are more limited than men's: opposite the generalization of work ethic there is no adequate generalization of men taking part in the household work and child-care. Hence the sexual division of labor continues in "free-riding by husbands" in the household, as Carol Pateman (2004) pointed out.

On the background of the mentioned economic and labor market crises the position of men as the breadwinners is strengthened. "My dear", he might say, "one of us have to earn our livings. I need your support to serve my job". That would not be a problem, if there was not the high evaluation of work to be the outstanding mode to prove one's worth. And it would not be a problem, if he did not withdraw from home and family care to a growing extent, following an economic (and ethic) urge. Those who try to combine two work-lives, for example the dual career couples, suffer from the famous "time bind", of which Arlie Hochschild (1997) reported vividly and shockingly. One way or another, the consequences for families and children are enormous: either fathers are absent more than it helps, or both parents are under pressure.

Another tendency is noticed just in Germany but in some other European countries, too: The decline of birth rate, which does not derive from smaller families, but from a rising number of couples deciding not to found a family at all. We have to consider this effect as a reasonable reaction to both the insecure financial and employment situation on the one hand, and the high esteem of paid work as the dominant way of leading a meaningful life on the other hand.

Therefore we can realize that good old routines in problem-solving and decision-making fail today not only on an individual level, but also on the level of society. My empirical findings show gender-specific conflict-lines. As women give up a traditional oriented life-concept and claim their participation in the high estimated field of recognition of achievement, they find themselves confronted with restrictions: either they abstain from motherhood or they reduce their ambitions regarding their professional careers, either they fail in achievement or they suffer from double stress. The social consequences of, for example, declining birth rates, rising divorces, neglected children or failing socialisation, I only can mention here.

Taking first into account the high level of welfare and prosperity, second, the chance to get rid of replaceable, hard, dirty and monotonous work and third, the insoluble unemployment problem with its serious social and individual consequences, the following questions arise: Why don't we interpret unemployment as an expression of success, as a sign of innovation power? Why are we not proud of and lucky about this progress and the presented chances to win life-time for other meaningful activities?

## **V. The answer lies in the cultural roots of the crisis**

Our present day system of income distribution derives from the idea of justice that makes the individual's output the basis of sharing prosperity. Following that, income and work are inseparably connected. In short, we find this ethic in the Christian bible: Those who do not work, ought not eat! This way was suitable as long as everyone was provided with a job and everyone's manpower was needed, but the current situation differs from these justifying conditions. The fact that this gap and the necessity as well as possibility of separating the connection between income and work is not taken into account can only be

understood by the strong cultural and historical origin of the underlying ethic. It derives from religion-bound answers to the very human questions: How to lead a good life? What is accepted as good? How to be sure to save our soul?

In early times collective religious myths as, for example the Puritan or Protestant ethic, gave answers. The great importance of work arose as a consequence from the reformation of the Catholic belief. In modern societies we find this religious motive more and more transformed into an individual ethic to prove one's worth by individual achievement, as Max Weber described. Thus cultural roots are incorporated in current political decisions as well as in normative supported institutional settings.

Now we are coming to draw a conclusion of this diagnosis. If I am right and one of the main problems is the connection between income and work, I will dare to look beyond the end of one's nose and take a fundamental alternative into account: the unconditional basic income as a way to separate work and income!

### **Gendered opportunities under an unconditional basic income**

A really *unconditional* basic income would be paid to everyone from the cradle to the grave, without any control or a special need. It would be paid just because of being a citizen of any country, for example, Germany. Introducing such an unconditional basic income has lots of effects, the most essential of which is the absolute recognition of the citizen in its fundamental meaning for the community (Liebermann 2004).

Finally, I want to sum up consequences of a basic income for gender equality. Dethroning employment as the only work that really counts would change women's standing as citizens (Pateman 2004). All types of work and contributions to the community would be acknowledged as equally good, so would be the citizens without regard to their gender. A basic income for everyone "would give men the opportunity to do their fair share of the unpaid work of caring for others" (ibid.). Families would be relieved from stress and time bind. Children could grow up with present fathers. The sexual division of labour could find new and adequate structures, depending on the decisions of the couples and not brought about by normative and economic pressure. The traditional connection between masculinity and professional success would vanish. The question what it means to be a man or a woman could emerge newly and be answered openly.

Naive and idealistic? In the gender struggle the most disputed question is that of justice according to chances both to earn one's living and to find one's fulfilment to lead an autonomous life. In this context, economic independence and security are highly regarded as fundamental conditions for justice, freedom and individual self-government. A basic income could modestly provide these conditions. An answer to the question of Arlie Hochschild "of how women can become men's equals in a more child-oriented and civic-minded society" (1997, p. 250), could be: with an unconditional basic income.

Thank you for your attention.

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