

Research Network Working Futures and Centre Marc Bloch  
**Summer Academy “Sustainable Work”**  
May 26 – 29, 2021, Caputh near Berlin, Germany

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### Call for Applications

The international research network “Working Futures” (a joint project of the research center Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History (re:work) and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin) and the Centre Marc Bloch Berlin are organizing a transdisciplinary Summer Academy on the topic of “Sustainable Work”. This Summer Academy will bring together 12 advanced doctoral researchers and early post-doctoral researchers (max. 2 years after PhD) engaged in dissertation research relating to the field of work/labor and sustainability. It will be held in Caputh near Berlin, Germany, from May 26 to May 29 2021.

In recent decades, work has undergone numerous mutations that present multiple facets and multidimensional effects. The Corona pandemic has accentuated many of these transformations. New questions arise about the perception and value of work, the impact of digitalization, the virtues of the welfare state, and the social and ecological responsibility of employers, employees and companies. All these changes within the sphere of work raise the issue of the sustainability of work in various ways: How can work be efficient and productive and at the same time environmentally and socially sustainable? How does the organization of work affect – strengthen or weaken – democratic structures in society? To what extent the perception of a global ecological crisis calls for transnational solidarity networks and international labor standards? What concepts of sustainability did economic actors and experts put forward in the past and how have they evolved? How do sustainable working conditions influence economic development and growth? Examining work-related transformations through the lens of sustainability allows us to reflect on the future of work also beyond the immediate effects of the Corona pandemic and, with the transformations of work always being a mirror of more fundamental transformations of society, on the future of social relations in general.

Against this background, the Summer Academy aims to explore the relationship between work and sustainability along four thematic axes.

#### 1. Sustainable Work and Ecology

Ecological sustainability has become an important indicator of what qualifies work as being sustainable and socially acceptable. Bridging ecology and work on the issue of sustainability opens different avenues of research. *First*, we are interested in contributions that deal with the seemingly conflictual relationship between market-oriented labor and the environment. From the beginning of industrialization to the contemporary climate crisis, trade unions have often opposed political decisions that limit environment-damaging outputs in the name of safeguarding employment or social fairness; this is separate from pro-industrial lobbying. The successive withdrawal from coal mining over the past 40 years, for instance, has created considerable frictions. Yet these frictions have at times also been the starting point for the successful transformation of occupations, giving birth to new skilled jobs in less-contested fields like service or the digital sector. *Second*, we welcome contributions dealing with the strategies and practices that aim to make work itself more ecologically sustainable, with the discourses legitimating them and the related controversies. *Third*, we encourage contributions reflecting on the evolution of transnational standards and practices for the protection of the environment and the rights of working people, i.e., through transnational trade union campaigns and the development of international labor law, as well as the challenges that arise from these developments.

## 2. Sustainable Work and Democracy

Sustainable work is an issue worth exploring from the perspective of democratic theory: the way work is organized influences social cohesion, the perception of the social order's legitimacy, and individuals' social habits, which in turn influence democracy. For example, one argument in the debate about workplace democracy, brought forward by Carole Pateman and others, is that citizens should learn and practice democratic deliberation and decision-making at work, so that they are better equipped to participate in democratic processes in the political realm. In contrast, authoritarian structures in the workplace can be expected to breed authoritarian habits, which do not prepare citizens to take part in political processes with others as equals.

One dimension of "sustainable work" is thus the compatibility with, or even the strengthening of, democratic structures in society. But existing forms of "co-determination" and worker protection, especially in European countries, currently seem to be under threat from trends such as precarization ("Uberization") and financialization. For many individuals, work is becoming less stable (and hence their income less reliable), which may mean that they are less able to focus on other activities, such as civic or political engagement. Hence, in order to think about "sustainable work" from a democratic perspective, we need to ask how to deal with such trends. We therefore invite submissions that deal with questions such as: Should social safety nets be reinforced, maybe by some version of an "unconditional basic income" (UBI)? Should the right to a voice at the workplace be strengthened, and if so, how could this be done? What other institutional reforms, e.g. with regard to educational institutions, might help to make work sustainable from a democratic perspective? What are the possible conflicts that arise in a transnationally connected economy when global enterprises meet local workplace habits?

## 3. Sustainable Work and Social Welfare

Sustainable work entails manifold issues for social welfare, in particular if we understand welfare both in terms of public welfare systems and in a broader sense of social well-being. These issues are also related to how we understand work and its sustainability. *First*, if we consider work a means of earning one's living, welfare systems are challenged by unemployment and poverty if work does not meet this basic requirement. Furthermore, with social welfare systems being financed by wage-based social security contributions, work and its sustainability raise both the issue of the financial sustainability of these programs and that of access to the benefits provided by these programs for people out of work. *Second*, sustainable work creates meaning and fosters agency, thus building self-confidence and empowering workers to take part in participatory processes in society. Unsustainable and unfulfilling working conditions may therefore lead to (mental) health problems, further challenging the social welfare systems. And *third*, sustainable work raises the issue of social status, identity, and recognition as part of social well-being. Precarious or unstable employment and unsustainable working conditions may contribute to depriving workers of a source of social affiliation and self-consideration. Most social welfare issues are mainly addressed within the framework of national welfare states. In a globalized world, however, the relationship between sustainable work and social welfare also takes on a transnational dimension and raises the question of sustainable working conditions and social welfare beyond national welfare systems, for example within international supply chains. We welcome contributions discussing the relationship between sustainable work and social welfare in its multiple dimensions, taking into account various meanings of work and specific interpretations of social welfare in different parts of the world.

#### 4. Sustainable Work and Economic Development

Sustainable work raises the issue of economic development. Academic debates reveal at least three different perspectives. The *first* one considers sustainable work as a means to support the generation of economic growth. The core aspects of the argument are that sustainable working conditions increase the work performance of the workforce and increase the potential for innovation. At issue are, for instance, the role of health-related working conditions as lifetime working hours increase, the impact of family-friendly working conditions on increasing participation in the labor market, especially among women, and the significance of autonomy, individually adapted working conditions, and opportunities for professional development as advantages in the competition for skilled workers. The *second* perspective, a more critical position, explores how sustainable work can contribute to making economic growth more sustainable on a macro-level. Economists like Joseph E. Stiglitz and Amartya Sen call for the inclusion of aspects such as quality of life and social and ecological sustainability in the calculation of economic development, alongside parameters such as GDP. A *third*, even more critical perspective is that of post-growth and de-growth approaches, which relate sustainable work even more closely to social and ecological sustainability by fundamentally challenging the striving for economic growth. The last two perspectives raise, for instance, the issue of entrepreneurs' social and ecological responsibility and the question of how to prevent an increasing ecological footprint and workers' precarization because of accelerated growth dynamics. Contributions from all three perspectives and research on possible tensions between them are as welcome as empirically oriented studies that deal with concrete experiences and thereby enrich the discussion of how to fill the concept of "sustainable work" with regard to both global trends and local settings.

#### Scientific Coordinators:

- Prof. Andreas Eckert, re:work Berlin / Working Futures
- Prof. Lisa Herzog, University of Groningen / Working Futures
- Prof. Jakob Vogel, Centre Marc Bloch Berlin
- Prof. Bénédicte Zimmermann, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and EHESS, Paris / Working Futures

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The proposed research projects are expected to address at least one of these four dimensions of "sustainable work". Both theoretical and empirical research designs, as well as comparative and single case study research, are welcome.

The Summer Academy promotes an interdisciplinary approach, welcoming contributions from every discipline. By sharing and debating their research projects with peer researchers and leading academics from different disciplinary backgrounds, the participants have the opportunity to gain new insights on their own research topic and approach.

## **Organization**

During the Summer Academy, each participant will present his or her research and comment on the work of a peer. The participants are expected to send their written contribution (4,000 words) by 30 April 2021 at the latest. Before the Academy, they will receive some key texts that they will be invited to comment on. During the Academy, internationally renowned senior researchers will give input lectures and comment on the participants' contributions, among them Rahel Jaeggi (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) and Antonin Pottier (EHESS, Paris) as well as the scientific coordinators of the Academy.

The language of the Academy is English. Applications from every country are welcome. The costs for travel, accommodation (single room) and meals will be covered.

## **Application**

For the application for the Summer Academy, the following documents are required:

- Letter describing the applicant's motivation
- Summary of the doctoral/post-doctoral research project (max. 1,000 words)
- Outline of the presentation addressing a specific topic relating to one of the four thematic axes of the Summer Academy (max. 1,500 words)
- CV
- Names and contact details of two academic recommenders

**The extended application deadline is December 31, 2020.**

Successful applicants will be notified in January 2021.

**Please send your application to: [katrin.sold@wiko-berlin.de](mailto:katrin.sold@wiko-berlin.de)**

We accept only digitally submitted applications!

### **Further Information/Contact:**

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