

Faster, higher, better?

The race for growth and the consequences for families.

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Growth is closely linked to globalization which brings along fundamental changes for the work environment as well as for family relations. The consequences of globalization which can be currently observed, however, are not new. Marx and Engels, writing at the middle of the nineteenth century, described in their critique of capitalism the need of the bourgeoisie for “a constantly expanding market for its products” which involves hunting for new economic opportunities “over the entire surface of the globe” (Marx, Engels et al. 1848).

Economic growth has become a key goal of modern nations. National economies which do not grow become impoverished and are left lagging behind in the global competition. Economic growth prevents unemployment by bridging imbalances of rationalizations and increases the productivity. So far for the economy! But economic growth also seems to have an impact upon the quality of life

enjoyed by human beings. The gross domestic product correlates highly with the Human Development Index which – in addition to measuring the life expectancy of human beings – also measures the level of education which individuals have attained. Niklas Luhmann has postulated that economic growth will remain an illusion as long as the **paradox of scarcity** (one person’s wealth entails the impoverishment of another person) has not been overcome (Luhmann 1988).

That this perspective must be considered to be one-dimensional has become obvious in the case of the Lehman Brothers debacle of 2008 and therefore does not need further elaboration. And, of course, this insight can be transferred to private living conditions as well. Despite economic growth we might see, for example, a rise in unemployment which – as perceived from the perspective of private forms of life and of the family – is essentially a negative experience.

Moreover, this one-dimensional perspective of economic growth disregards fundamental aspects of sustainability.

At the same time, however, we can observe an **economization of life** which includes all aspects and dimensions of the life of individuals, social groups, organizations and families and which is accompanied by a strong instrumental rationality. The modern credo is “everything must pay off”, and each individual is expected to find his or her own way in order to meet the different demands of life. These two sides of the same coin are currently being addressed under the slogan “reconciliation of work and family life” (= “work/life balance”). Yet, what is quite irritating about this is the fact that **the issue of work-life balance is mostly considered a problem to be solved by women alone**. In more general terms, there is the question of how individuals may reconcile the demands of the labor market and corporate requirements with personal ideas, desires and goals for a good life.

Looking at the current situation in higher education from a structural perspective, universities must bow, for example, to economic factors: The

research support programs sponsored by Germany’s Federal Government and the individual state governments are no longer sufficient to finance the operation of universities and institutions of higher education more generally. Today, more than ever before, **researchers are expected to acquire third-party funding**. The programs providing such funding, however, are structured in ways that do not always match well with individual researchers’ profiles. Furthermore, it is expected that researchers present the results of their work at as many conferences, workshops and working group events as possible. Visibility in the national arena is no longer sufficient. Rather, research is increasingly expected to be visible at the European level at least, but **international presence beyond Europe is considered to be even more desirable**.

Is there a chance to overcome the paradox of scarcity? Must economic growth always result in more burdens on private life and the family?

The job locations as well as the working hours of modern individuals have constantly changed during the past two centuries. In addition, new types of work activities place new

demands on the working population. These demands are so deformed that they no longer offer a clearly defined structural frame within which workers might move: New self-organized forms of work and more flexible conditions for employment along with a normative subjectification of working conditions have resulted in the fact that paid work accounts for an above-average amount of lifetime and frequently enters private life in ever-growing dimensions. Even young workers, for example, do not want to work only for earning money, but place great normative demands on themselves regarding the meaning of their work and personal self-fulfilment.

This process is usually accompanied by an **acceleration of work**. Indeed, there are few work-related activities left which can be carried out without time pressure. This development must be seen as an immediate result of the rise of new technologies and the changing organizational structures resulting from such technological advancement which frequently require companies to run a 24-hour operation of business. On the other side, modern computer technologies, for example, enable new forms of home office. This, however, leads to a pattern known from work in traditional agriculture: **Work**

increasingly invades the private living space not only with regard to time, but also in its more spatial dimensions. It is up to the individual to find a solution for balancing both areas of life. The frequently inflexible working hours, the lack of childcare facilities in many companies and the demands for a nearly unrestricted mobility of individuals at the service of the employer – to name just a few examples – result in different coping strategies for men and women in the course of their lives. With regard to what is considered to be the ideal biography, men face the challenge to find a balance between the required workload and a personal life which includes recreational activities. One typical problem that arises is that **men may experience problems in their family life and partnership due to a lack of presence in their personal lives**. The fact that men who have a family are often more successful and also more satisfied with their lives in comparison to male singles, may reduce the familial disadvantages only to a certain degree. The lack of attention for family matters resulting from **too much time at the workplace especially affects children in a negative way**.

The results of empirical sociological studies present the ideal biography for young women as a complex structure made up of different demands: On the one hand, young women wish to live in „a happy family“ and on the other hand, they wish to work in a qualified profession. As the current political and economic campaigns for a “reconciliation of work and family life” demonstrate, **having a family and a qualified position is the official ideal for young women today.** Young men tend to support these ideals and nowadays more and more of them share the female perspective – mostly those men who are unemployed, and at least for a short time because they earn often much more than their partners. Starting a family, however, still presents a number of professional and familial risks that tend to be much higher for women because the question of how to reconcile work and family life is more closely linked to the female than to the male life course. For women having a family often means that they have to arrange their employment activities in a sequential manner: Women tend to work while still young. In the middle of their lives they tend to live for the family without being employed on a full-time basis and, beginning at age 50, women start re-

entering the workforce. That this sequential arrangement of employment activities almost inevitably results in a closure of professional career paths seems to be a self-explanatory fact. Moreover, professional careers and family life also seem to be incompatible with regard to the expected social roles for men and for women. Even though traditional ideas concerning the social roles of men and women have changed, care work which is crucial for a functional family continues to be carried out mostly by women. As existing research about dual career couples demonstrates, **the birth of a child almost always results in the re-emergence of traditional gender roles** and their respective patterns of male and female agency (Solga and Wimbauer 2005). This especially means that women – to a greater extent than men – adjust both their mental resources and their time budget to the demands of family life.

Even though many individuals feel overburdened by the working conditions that they encounter, the balance between employment and family life remains unsatisfactory within most families. The results of empirical studies demonstrate **three different strategies in coping with this situation:**

- Especially highly qualified women perceive the advancement of a professional career initially to be much more attractive so that they tend to **postpone starting a family** until it eventually becomes impossible due to biological barriers.
- Others, mostly the elderly or those who are established in their career as well as economically, **follow traditional role models** and live in clearly separated worlds in which men prioritize their professional careers while women prioritize family life.
- The third and largest group is characterized through the **double burden of professional career advancement and family life**. The central challenge for this group lies in the development of strategies to plan and manage the interface between the two areas of life as perfectly as possible.

Even though executive positions may bring much satisfaction to those who hold them – some authors even go as far as speaking about the „eroticization of management” – the family easily finds itself in an “objectification trap” (Hochschild 1997). **Leisure time needs to be perfectly organized at all times**. This particularly puts a strain on the relationship between a father

and his children as well as on the parents’ partnership that is often comprised of interactions for the purpose of familial coordination only.

A well-known US-American study of professionals situated on different levels of hierarchy in a company presents an even more extreme picture of the situation. The employees, who enjoy many offers ranging from flexible working hours to child care facilities in order to allow for an optimal balance of professional and family life, had no desire to leave work to go home and spend time with their families. Why would this be the case? **At their workplace the employees were able to enjoy a well-structured space within which they could move confidently, whereas at home they had to confront numerous unpredictable and unstructured demands**. For top managers, for example, it seemed to be a wonderful experience to act like a “good father” who is always available for his employees. The men found this experience to be especially satisfactory in cases where they had to deal with a pubescent son at home or had to confront demands made by their wives who asked for more time with the children. Leading professionals in top positions furthermore experienced

“time free from responsibilities” as particularly pleasing, for example the time spent in hotel rooms during a business trip. This was especially true for those men who had wives at home who managed the family, drove the children around, organized the household and praised the perfect interaction within the partnership (Hochschild 1997).

Since the 1970s the diversity of private forms of life has increased at least in the same way as demands for persistent growth have been directed at the economy. Now as before, family life occupies the highest rank of personal life goals. The structures of lives and the expectations for those who live them have changed: Contemporary lives have become more pluralistic and certainly will change even more in the future. For a

democratic society it is important to change the social conditions (such as working time structures, infrastructures for institutions of childcare and care of the elderly) in such a way as to allow human beings to develop and connect their ideas of partnership and family life in a satisfactory way. And if, in addition to that, human beings were able to put greater emphasis on aspects of sustainability and social interaction and find ways to balance them with demands for greater economic productivity, they even might manage to overcome the paradox of scarcity because growth – or to be more precise: economization – of one area of life will no longer negatively impact upon the other, and family life and professional activities might be compatible after all.

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