

‘To be allowed to see oneself like this once again, that is certainly great luck’

At the end of the congress, after a touching laudatory speech by sociologists Sarah Speck (Frankfurt) and Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky (Munich), the women’s and gender researcher Regina Becker-Schmidt was honoured as one of ‘the giants on whose shoulders we stand’ (DGS chairwoman Birgit Blättel-Mink) and given an award for outstanding life work as a sociologist. Becker-Schmidt, sitting in her home office with the printed lecture in front of the camera, was visibly overwhelmed by the laudation at the beginning of her speech and said: ‘To be allowed to see oneself like this once again, that is certainly great luck, it has made me really happy. I am 83 years old ... Now it can be over, now I can do something else’. Thereupon she began her lecture titled ‘Critique as the Ferment of Sociology’.

References

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Conference Report on the Austrian-Czech Symposium ‘Where Does Work Stop, Where Does Life Begin? – The Transformation of Work in Austria and the Czech Republic’

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The world of work is changing rapidly. While this may not be a new discovery, it is still of high political, economic, cultural, and social relevance. The biggest trends include globalisation, transnationalisation, the digitalisation of work, and the flexibilisation of work with new standards for employment (e.g. part-time work, teleworking, positions with changing workplaces, virtual teamwork). In modern societies, the expectation

of being geographically mobile, spatially flexible, and available online at all times is increasing. As a consequence, the formerly clear boundaries between the areas of work, family, and private life are becoming increasingly blurred. On the one hand, the 'blurring of boundaries at work' allows employees to design the work process more according to their individual ideas and to organise work according to their own needs. On the other hand, work and its functional principles are also penetrating the private sphere and it is increasingly challenging for employees to align their lives with economic goals. Although there are some universal trends in the world of work, it is questionable what form these developments will take in the different countries of Europe and what opportunities and risks are associated with it.

From 23 May 2019 to 24 May 2019 scholars were discussing the chances and risks associated with these changes in an Austrian-Czech symposium titled 'Where Does Work Stop, Where Does Life Begin? – The Transformation of Work in Austria and the Czech Republic'. The symposium took place at the University of Ostrava and was funded by 'AKTION Czech Republic – Austria'⁵. It was organised by Dr phil. Nicole Horáková (Department of Sociology, University of Ostrava), Dr Julia Grulich, (at that time a guest member of the Department of Sociology, University of Ostrava), and Dr Kristina Binner (Institute of Sociology, Johannes Kepler University Linz).

The first day of the conference was divided into three thematic areas that reflect some of the major trends in work studies: (a) neoliberalism, rationalisation, and the economisation of the social; (b) skills shortages and working (time) policy; (c) family and the gender-specific division of labour in private life. In each session both countries contributed their perspectives on the topic.

The symposium started with a historical introduction by Stanislav Knob (Centre for Economic and Social History, Ostrava) on the subject of work and life in the industrial age. The lecture dealt with the transformation of work in the Habsburg Empire during industrialisation and clearly showed both the geographical and the historical connection that exists between Austria and the Czech Republic when it comes to the topic of work.

The first thematic session was 'Neoliberalism, Rationalisation, and the Economisation of the Social'. The country-specific perspectives on this topic promise to be very controversial, as both countries took different pathways: Austria implemented neo-liberal policies comparably late in relation to other Western European countries, but in recent years they have been more and more radical in certain welfare sectors – for example, higher education. In contrast, the Czech Republic which is characterised by the experience of the transition from a planned to a market economy and the early

⁵ This programme funds bilateral cooperation in education and research at the tertiary level between the Czech Republic and Austria. It is a joint programme of both countries' ministries of education.

adoption of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s. Fabienne Décieux (Johannes Kepler University, Linz) presented the consequences of neoliberalism for (early) childcare and asks for the consequences of the economisation of the social in the sphere of social services. Her contribution highlighted that love, affection, upbringing and care work are difficult to rationalize in numerical terms and that attempts to rationalise might lead to a loss of quality in both performance and working conditions. *Kateřina Cidlinská* (Czech Academy of Sciences) presented the neo-liberal discourse in Czech academia and its impact on HR policies and academic careers from a gender perspective. It shows how economic criteria are increasingly being transferred to science in order to make scientific performance more measurable and better comparable. However, on the one hand only certain achievements are measured (especially the number of certain publications) and on the other hand it is ignored that female researchers have worse starting conditions due to their poorer integration into mostly male scientific networks and their double burden with work and family.

In the second session the focus was on the 'Skills shortage and working (time) policy'. The shortage of skilled workers in both countries is considered a serious economic problem. In many industries and services, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find and recruit skilled and / or qualified workers. *Karin Sardadvar* (Vienna University of Economics and Business) presented empirical results about 'Current working time regimes' in the cleaning and care sectors, using the example of split shifts, a working time model in which the workday is interrupted by one or more hours of an unpaid break and, thus, poses particular challenges to the individual mobility and compatibility of work and life. The Czech lecture by *Kateřina Nedbálková* (Masaryk University) on 'The precarity of female workers in the Czech Republic' was unfortunately cancelled due to illness.

The final session was titled 'Family and the Gender-Specific Division of Labour in Private Life'. Marta Vohlídalová (Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Science and AMBIS College) and Kristina Binner (Johannes Kepler University, Linz) independently presented country-specific studies on the situation of women scientists. It turned out that not only are the questions very similar, but the results are comparable as well. In both countries, it is difficult to reconcile academic career and family, which is then one of the major mechanisms of exclusion experienced by women in science. The system of full-time employment is based on the gender-specific division of labour in the private sphere, which declares women to be primarily responsible for raising children and caring for relatives. This division of labour is still very pronounced in 'family-oriented' Austria – even if childcare options have been expanded in recent years and legal options for paternity leave have been given. The Czech Republic has the longest maternity leave and subsequent parental leave in all of Europe. Mothers are expected to stay at home and look after their children for at

least three years. As soon as the child attends (all-day) kindergarten, most mothers work full-time again and are therefore exposed to an enormous double burden.

On the second day the participants jointly made an excursion to the industrial area Dolní Vítkovice (DOV). In the 19th and 20th centuries, this industrial area was famous for its coal mining, iron production, steel refining and processing, and mechanical engineering and it still shapes the cityscape of Ostrava. Although the Ostrava region is characterised by coal mining, it is also a region in transition, where the industrial work of the past is increasingly being replaced by new knowledge work. This also raises questions about which forms of employment are being lost, whether working conditions are improving, and which groups of people are benefiting from these developments and who is being left behind and is at risk of unemployment. The visit to the DOV-area offered valuable cultural and historical dimensions to supplement and round out the academic programme.

So, what are the results of the symposium?

The country comparison proved to be important, especially because universal trends assume different forms locally and nationally. The everyday work is influenced, among other things, by nationally shaped labour market structures, juridical frameworks, welfare states, and family norms (e.g. the male breadwinner model) and culturally supported gender relationships (e.g. the gender pay gap, the gender-specific division of work in the private sphere). A look at the neighbouring countries of Austria and the Czech Republic, with their shared past, seems particularly worthwhile, because despite the geographical proximity there are sufficient differences between the countries and a wide range of developments can be discussed. Against this background, the symposium was devoted to the similarities and differences between the two countries in terms of how work has changed. A country contribution was included in each session, which stimulated and intensified the international dialogue and cooperation on specific topics.

The symposium was just the beginning of more joint and transnational research. The questions of what constitutes decent work, what do good jobs look like, and how do we want to live always need asking. Future research needs are particularly evident in the area of the digitalisation of work, in new work (time) models, and in precarious forms of employment. It is to be hoped that this event will give impetus to further Austrian-Czech research exchanges – for example, through Erasmus cooperation and the associated exchange between students and staff, in the form of joint publications and applications for EU research projects, or through the networking of local scientific communities such as the Austrian Society for Sociology (ÖGS) and the Czech Sociological Society (Česká sociologická společnost / ČSS).