

Report on the “Research Network Working Futures” and the Centre Marc Bloch Summer Academy “Sustainable Work”

Organizers: Andreas Eckert (re:work), Lisa Herzog (University of Groningen), Jakob Vogel (Centre Marc Bloch), Bénédicte Zimmermann (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin)

Venue: Online

Participants: Hildegunn M. Aslaksen, Katharina Bohnenberger, Maria Giovanna Brancati, Thomas Chevallier, Imene Diaf, Maud Hetzel, Francesco Laruffa, Pamela Nogales, Léa Renard, Selina Schröttle, Sangay Tamang

Keynote speakers: Sophie Bernard (IRISSO-Paris Dauphine University), Anke Hassel (Hertie School), Rahel Jaeggi (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Antonin Pottier (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Centre Marc Bloch)

Introduction

by Sandra Engelbrecht

The Research Network Working Futures and the Centre Marc Bloch Berlin co-organized a transdisciplinary Summer Academy on the topic of “Sustainable Work.” The Summer Academy took place from 26 to 29 May 2021 and brought together eleven advanced doctoral and post-doctoral researchers engaged in research relating to the field of work and sustainability. During the Academy, keynote lectures were given by Sophie Bernard (Fellow 2020/2021, Université Paris Dauphine – PSL), Anke Hassel (Hertie School, Berlin), Rahel Jaeggi (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) and Antonin Pottier (EHESS, Paris). The scientific coordinators Andreas Eckert (re:work), Lisa Herzog (University of Groningen), Jakob Vogel (Centre Marc Bloch) and Bénédicte Zimmermann (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin) served as discussants during the Summer Academy, as did Léa Renard (Freie Universität Berlin). Initially planned to take place in Caputh, Germany, the Summer Academy was instead held via computer screen due to the Corona virus.

The transformation of work in recent decades has put a number of new questions on the agendas of researchers and policy-makers, including questions about the social and ecological responsibility of employers and workers, the impact of digitalization, the virtues and weaknesses of the welfare state in twenty-first-century capitalism, and the role and value of work in our societies. These changes within the sphere of work all raise the issue of the sustainability of work. The Summer

Academy “Sustainable Work” has demonstrated how examining work-related transformations through the lens of sustainability allows us to reflect on the past, present and future of work.

A central question that reoccurred during the Summer Academy pertained to the fundamental issue of what is sustainable work? To answer this question, a number of presentations first addressed the issue of what exactly sustainability is. In his keynote address, Antonin Pottier noted that there is still no general agreement on what defines sustainability; the meaning of sustainability remains contested and a variety of actors have attempted to substantiate the concept. From an environmental perspective, a broad guiding principle is that sustainability allows human societies to live within the planetary boundaries (Steffen et al. 2015). Scientific coordinator Lisa Herzog concluded that all interesting concepts are contested; this calls for transparency and critical reflection, but should not deter researchers from using and discussing such concepts, including the concept of sustainable work.

The dominant understanding of sustainability has three main pillars: social, ecological, and economic sustainability. While this understanding recognizes an interdependence between the economy, social welfare and the environment, the discussions in the Summer Academy suggested that this understanding is outdated and inadequate. Several participants made a strong argument for moving beyond this understanding and instead recognizing the embeddedness of the economy and society in the environment. Scientific coordinator Bénédicte Zimmermann added that one should be attentive to the role of politics in influencing all interrelated components of sustainability.

In addressing the issue of what work is, answers offered in the Summer Academy ranged from more narrow definitions based on gainful employment to unpaid work in the private sphere. In her keynote address, Rahel Jaeggi noted that there is no universal idea of or broad agreement on what precisely work is, and she drew attention to a narrowing of the socio-political treatment of work. This trend was reflected in several discussions during the Summer Academy in which the point was raised that work, whether sustainable or not, is often forgotten in favor of employment. As a response, Jaeggi proposed a normatively rich concept of work as sharing or partaking in the universal resources of society, focusing on the role and function of work in our society. Katharina Bohnenberger raised the point that in spite of the dominant role played by work in our lives, only a very marginal strand in the emerging literature on sustainable work asks what the purpose of work and employment is in our society. Bohnenberger called for a more critical questioning of the value of employment in itself, noting that lower labor productivity is actually a good thing from a sustainability perspective and, for instance, is associated with low energy consumption.

The presentations in the Summer Academy also highlighted that the dominant approach to sustainable work by governments, international organizations and businesses – namely green jobs – reinforces the centrality of employment. Several presentations also revealed that, upon closer examination, jobs typically categorized as green may in fact be environmentally destructive. The participants concluded that compared to other related concepts such as green jobs, sustainable work is based on a broader understanding of work and more encompassing in terms of environmental, social, democratic and economic concerns. Francesco Laruffa proposed that a central step in moving toward sustainable work may be to replace the current exchange-valuation of work with a use-valuation of work, defining sustainable work by considering what work is socially and ecologically useful – and conversely, what work is useless or damaging. Rahel Jaheggi similarly argued that a normative understanding of the pathologies of work can improve our understanding of what is unsustainable work and – by extension – what is sustainable work.

In concluding, the Summer Academy confronted an even bigger question, namely is capitalism compatible with sustainable work? Scientific coordinator Andreas Eckert noted that some observers have claimed that capitalism has historically shown a remarkable ability to adapt, but not toward sustainability. While the question was left unanswered, Anke Hassel's and Sophie Bernard's keynote addresses pointed toward a liberalization of labor relations as driven by platform firms in digital capitalism. Hassel's and Bernard's keynotes suggested that platform firms play a seminal role in the restructuring of work beyond the gig economy and that digital capitalism in its current form contributes to the degradation – rather than promotion – of sustainable work.

The Summer Academy specifically explored the relationship between work and sustainability along four thematic axes: sustainable work and ecology, sustainable work and democracy, sustainable work and economic development, and sustainable work and social welfare. In drawing on a selected bibliography and the keynote speeches as well as on presentations and discussions in the Summer Academy, three working groups undertook a detailed examination of sustainable work in relation to ecology, democracy and economic development while also contemplating the role of social welfare. The sections below summarize the results of these discussions. First there is a statement on sustainable work and ecology (by Hildegunn M. Aslaksen, Katharina Bohnenberger, Maud Hetzel and Sangay Tamang); this is followed by a statement on sustainable work and democracy (by Francesco Laruffa, Pamela C. Nogales C. and Selina Schröttle); and the report ends with a statement on sustainable work and economic development (by Maria Giovanna Brancati and Imene Diaf).

Sustainable Work and Ecology

by Hildegunn M. Aslaksen, Katharina Bohnenberger, Maud Hetzel and Sangay Tamang

Sustainable work is a fruitful concept that can help reconcile ecological requirement with the domain of work – be it formal, paid employment, informal jobs or unpaid work in households and communities. However, sustainability is a concept frequently used in undefined ways, partly even misused for greenwashing. One reason for this is that the “pillar” understanding of sustainability sees the social, ecological and economic pillars as unintegrated and of equal value. This approach is outdated and should be replaced by the circular understanding of sustainability: the economy embedded in society and society embedded in nature. A circular understanding is more adequate to capturing the real relationships between nature and humans and can lead to better policymaking (Raworth, 2017).

Similarly, a critical approach should be applied to another concept relevant to conversation on sustainable work and ecology: the concept of *green jobs* (Boromisa et al., 2016; Poschen, 2015). This concept poses several difficulties if used in a scientific perspective and must in many cases be deconstructed. Can we really talk about green jobs if the job helps lower carbon emissions while at the same time endangering a natural area and threatening biodiversity (Aslaksen, 2021)? Talking about green jobs means confronting a dominant discourse engaged in by large companies and public institutions.

Two other difficulties relate to the scientific analysis itself. Firstly, the concept of *green jobs* means considering all its facets. Are we talking about the environmental impact of production, the impact of the job on personal life, or the ecological nature of the workplace (Bohnenberger, 2021)? The second difficulty lies in the construction of tools. Many analytical tools employ greenhouse gas emissions as analytical variable (Pottier, 2020). How can we take into account the multiplicity of ecological-analysis criteria, including not only greenhouse gas emissions but things such as the depletion of natural resources and biodiversity?

There is an evident need to be self-conscious in researching sustainable work, as this is a highly *political* research field. Political discourses point to different understandings (Wagenaar, 2011). There is, for instance, a spectacular discrepancy between the understanding of *sustainability* and *green* from the perspective of ecomodernism – i.e. saluting the extraordinary social, economic and technological powers of humankind that allow for decoupling and a “good, or even great, Anthropocene” (Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015, p. 6) – and the perspective of degrowth (Kallis, Demario and D’Alisa, 2014) or stable state (Büchs and Koch, 2019), advocating sufficiency or full

reconstruction of the socio-economic system. What does *sustainable work* or *green jobs* look like from such divergent perspectives, and which perspective is influencing what is considered the right understanding of things? When politicians and experts call for global solutions, specific kinds of knowledge production are in demand, while other forms of knowledge may seem less important (Turnhout et al., 2016).

Therefore, understanding the concept of *sustainable work* demands engagement with its multiple meanings, which vary from context to context. In the specific context of the Global South, the notion of sustainability resonates with the idea of *environmentalism of the poor*, which manifests itself through conflicts that include ecological elements, social justice claims and improvised populations struggling against the state or private companies (Guha and Martinez, 1997; Guha, 2004; Martinez-Alier, 2002). Hence the idea of sustainability is not just about becoming “green” but about protecting the livelihood, culture and autonomy of local communities whose right to land ownership and resources and whose relationship with nature has been (re)configured by forces stemming from colonialism and capitalism. Thus, historical engagement with the idea of *nature* as constructed by outside forces and manifested through local struggles needs to be undertaken, while reconceptualizing the idea of sustainability. Whose nature needs to be conserved and for whom? There is a material dimension of ownership in sustainability, and hence we need to ask questions like who is *responsible* for sustainable development – the welfare state, capitalism or the local community?

The question of welfare is crucial. Today’s societies depend on jobs to finance the welfare state and generate citizens’ income. However, jobs can also destroy the environment and thereby lead to new social risks, increasing the demands of the welfare state. Thus, the relationship between the welfare state and jobs is ambivalent. Environmental policy can be interpreted as a preventive social policy because it precludes the emergence of social crises through environmental destructions (e.g. flooding or heat waves). In order to bring the welfare state and environmental demands together, we have to rethink who is protected by the welfare state and whose lifestyles are supported. Has everyone access to welfare or just the workers in well-paid sectors that potentially harm the environment? It may serve the research community of *sustainable work* to investigate the research field of *sustainable welfare* (Hivilammi and Koch 2020).

Sustainable Work and Democracy

by Francesco Laruffa, Pamela C. Nogales C. and Selina Schröttle

A point that emerged (even if mostly in implicit fashion) from many presentations during the Summer Academy is the weakness of capitalist markets in promoting collective wellbeing – including environmental sustainability. For example, many well-paid jobs in contemporary society are actually damaging the environment whereas “useful” and “sustainable” work is often badly paid or even unpaid. This suggests – contra the (neo-)liberal credo – that markets do not always know best. Hence democracy may be better than the market as a mechanism for taking collective decisions, that is for coordinating individuals’ freedoms and aggregating citizens’ preferences, and for shaping social change and our collective future.

Defining democratization as *the effort to take up collective responsibility for conscious self-government*, the solution to many contemporary problems may then be that of partially replacing the “unconscious” logic of markets with conscious decision-making, thereby transforming the organization of decisions regarding production and investment into matters of democratic deliberation about what should be produced and how. This would make the economy more responsive to the needs of society. From this perspective the ecological transition cannot be (entirely) left to the market. In order to distinguish “needs” from “luxuries,” for example, we need a strong democracy if we do not want to end up with a “green technocracy.”

Taking such an approach raises a number of empirical questions that require further investigation. Do policies with more public consultation (more democratic decision-making) lead to better policies in terms of reconciling social development and environmental sustainability? What do citizens want – jobs and increasing consumption or preserving nature? Similarly, do “democratic companies” that give a “voice” to their workers score better in ecological terms? Or do workers use their power to protect ecologically destructive jobs? In other words, does democracy at work automatically promote environmentally “sustainable work”? If it does not, then under which conditions can a positive link between democracy and sustainability become possible?

The idea of partially replacing the market mechanism with democratic deliberation also raises the issue of scale. Participatory-deliberative democracy may work very well at the small scale – as shown by many local “experiments” involving the self-government of communities that democratize their economies (e.g. eco-villages, community-supported agriculture). But can this model be scaled-up to the global level? Ecological problems and their root-cause (capitalism) are clearly global phenomena. Does this mean that we need a *global democracy* to solve them? Without a global

democracy we do not have “hard law” and we are left with the private responsibility of actors – single individuals (as consumers and workers) and companies – that voluntarily adhere to ethical and environmental standards. This does not challenge (neo-)liberalism, where ethics functions as a *substitute* for democracy. A problem related to the issue of scale concerns the “kind” of democracy involved. Participatory-deliberative democracy may demand social solidarity and trust among citizens – and possibly works best when citizens share similar values. But this communitarian understanding of democracy conflicts with other understandings that see diversity, pluralism and even antagonism and disagreement as fundamentally unavoidable – and even highly valuable – features of democracy.

One of the questions addressed in this working group was what possible democratic solutions there are to influence the future of work in a sustainable way. The discussions in the Summer Academy suggested that the future of the economy is being determined by big-tech companies that consequentially shape the future of work. These companies control key functions of the market and “drive the transition towards new patterns of consumer behavior, business models, work organization and infrastructure at great speed” (Hassel and Sieker 2021: 3; Browne 2018). This has led to the development that work is increasingly task-based and makes traditional employment obsolete, as seen in the case of Uber (Sophie Bernard keynote address). Platform companies try anything to avoid taking responsibility for their employees by “(1) operating in legal grey areas (2) being too big to ban and (3) mobilizing users for political support” (Hassel and Sieker 2021: 4).

There are different ways in which this could be resolved democratically. One way would be a statist approach, another would be by collective participatory determination. The global scale on which big-tech companies are operating and the enormous size of their market power make it hard or even impossible for single nation-states to regulate them legally. An example for solving this by state regulation was provided by Maria Giovanna Brancati. In view of this global problem of the increasing precarity of work, Brancati is pursuing the project of democratizing the economy by means of the law. Since market participants are treated unequally and unfairly, she seeks to trace that unequal treatment legally. Since laws are bound to the nation-state and the problem tend to unfold on a global scale, she recommends a combination of hard and soft law. But how can companies be incentivized to comply to soft law, especially if legal hideouts continue to exist?

Statist approaches in “producing” sustainable work has the further problem of structural constraints (Cohen 1989). The governments of nation-states are themselves subject to the constraints of capital. This introduces the problem of the welfare state. If the state takes responsibility for essential necessities of employees (like health care or unemployment) labor

investors seem to feel less inclined to demand these from the company. This gives companies even more leeway in terms of bad working conditions. An example of this is Amazon, which has the worst working conditions in Great Britain and can be attributed to a universal health-insurance scheme that is independent from the employer (Anke Hassel keynote address).

Another option would be a more participatory approach. However, the “old” institutions of industrial democracy are no longer effective, like unionism or codetermination. One reason for this is that these new forms of employment do not fit traditional categories anymore. The problem is not only that labor investors feel less connected to a firm but that crowd-work does not fit into the legal categories of employment. Though these jobs are precarious, people often choose crowd-work over other precarious jobs because they value independence and self-determination (Sophie Bernard keynote address). It seems as if they would try to escape those hierarchical structures of the workplace that are unsuitable to the democratic culture of the societies they live in.

These observations and reflections presented during the Summer Academy raise a number of important questions. How can we democratically determine the future of work in a sustainable way? What are categories of sustainability for work? And how does the quality of a job relate to democracy?

The research featured over the course of the Summer Academy has presented a stark image of social inequality and a growing power imbalance. We know that collective bargaining is at a historic low and that the downward-trending union density in the private sector over the last century mirrors the upward-trending percentage of income going to the top 10 percent of the population. Moreover, given that only 7 percent of the working population is organized, union representation does not in any meaningful way give voice to the concerns of laborers. For today’s workers, the choice between “green” and “brown” industries remains entirely theoretical, since without the success of full-employment reforms, the fear of unemployment will remain the deciding factor. We have learned that a monopoly of four companies (Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, and Alphabet) sets the terms across the digital economy and that when international institutions like the United Nations set “Guiding Principles,” or when the International Labour Organization passes resolutions on fair and decent work, these remain non-binding and – just like the Right to Disconnect legislation – there is no mechanism for enforcement and no consequences for noncompliance by employers. On a smaller scale, we learned that experiments in workplace democracy would be thwarted in publicly traded companies where they are subject to the authority of shareholders who have no reason to surrender their managerial powers to employees. Decisions on the basis of profitability and risk-aversion in the marketplace would undermine democratic

decisions based on needs. The rights of working people to enter into a free contractual agreement for employment are circumscribed by the constant threat of unemployment, which drives many to increasingly precarious work. To supplement their income and secure a degree of autonomy within their precarious positions, many urban laborers have accepted task-based work for new platform companies like Uber and Lieferando, where in addition to their labor they are also expected to supply vehicles for transport and delivery. Taken as a whole, the institutions of democracy – including international bodies, state governments and works councils – come up against capital imperatives which undermine the capacity to take collective responsibility for the conscious self-government of society. This raises the question: Do we have at our disposal institutions that reflect a democratic ethos, or only ones that perpetuate an undemocratic logic?

Throughout our conversation, we turned to Joshua Cohen's definition of the "structural-constraints argument" in order to think through the present obstacles to reform. Cohen argues that the fate of parties and government depends on the health of the economy: "The health of the economy is dependent on investment decisions by capitalists, and investment decisions by capitalists on their expectations of profits" (Cohen 1989). These remain the social conditions for democratic government today. What this means is that the logic of political decision-making is molded by pressures that fall outside of this conscious decision-making realm. For example, state-led projects to globally reduce carbon emissions will take place within the fundamental framework of the need to increase the productivity of national capital vis-à-vis global trade and to manage the surplus populations of global labor. If the state itself is subject to the constraints of capital, how can this logic be superseded at a national level? The problem of state-led "democratization" leads us to more questions than answers. What would a conscious self-government of society look like on a global scale? What type of coordination across industries and governments is required so that production and investment is subject to democratic deliberation?

Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch (2012) have shown how fear of a general strike (and potential revolutionary activity) among political leaders helped to fundamentally shape the concessions made by the welfare state. European labor policies that embraced state responsibility also aimed to stave off the threat of revolution. They were what Daniel Rodgers (1998) has described as "capitalism's ambulance wagon"; that is to say, extrinsic political pressure was necessary to secure the gains of social welfare. The neoliberal era was a response to the crisis of the welfare state, but we must acknowledge both continuity and change. Neoliberalism is a form of global capitalist society based on intensifying market forces through deregulation and privatization, upward redistribution to the wealthy, and global capital flows. This is an exacerbation of previous trends, rather than a qualitatively new phenomenon. However, neoliberalism is different from earlier periods of

capitalism insofar as it sits atop a defeated labor movement. All of this raises complicated political problems with a longer history than just the past sixty years. We as scholars can at best be honest about the conditions we face today and recognize the gap between where we are and where we need to be. Only when we have a clear picture of that chasm can we evaluate the efficacy of future democratic reforms.

Sustainable Work and Economic Development

by Maria Giovanna Brancati and Imene Diaf

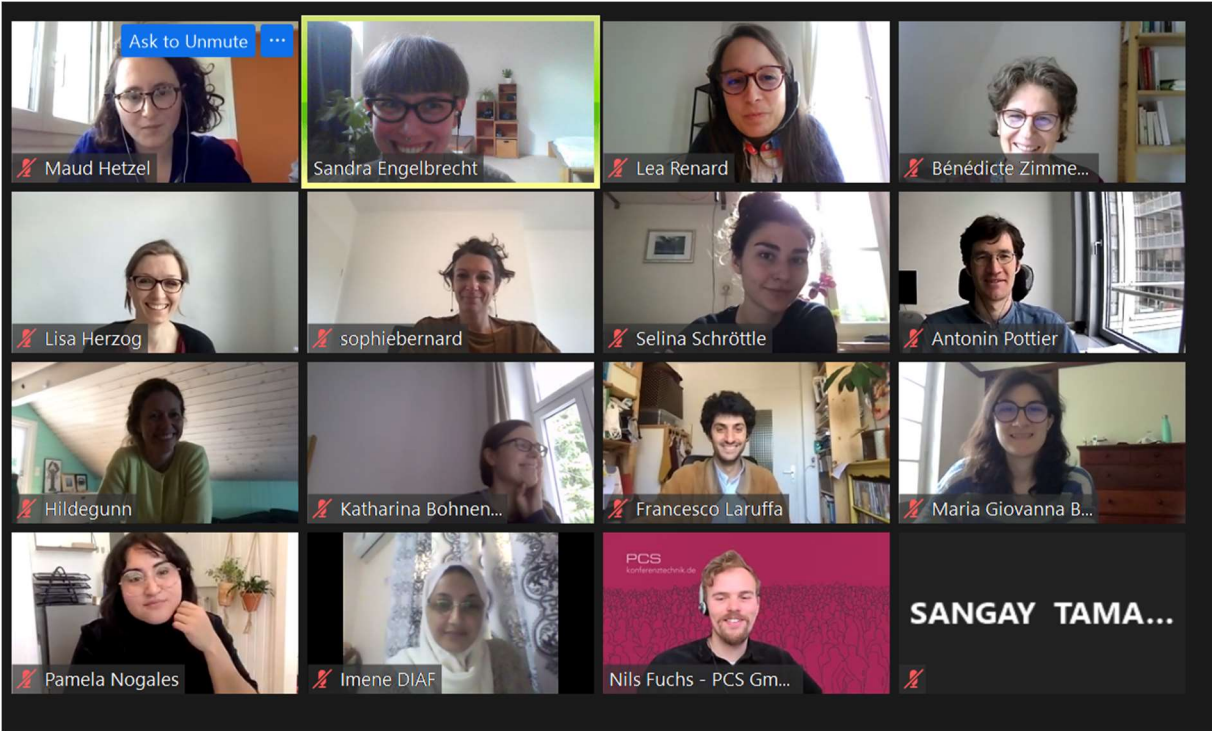
During the Sumer Academy, issues related to sustainable work and economic development emerged in almost all presentations and discussions. Boromisa et al. (2016) notes that “the concept of sustainable development is ... holistic and includes economic, social and environmental considerations.” The presentations in the Summer Academy showed that a close connection has indeed emerged between the sustainability of human labor and the environmental sustainability of global economic and social development. In his presentation “Rethinking ‘Sustainable Work’ for the Socio-Ecological Transformation,” Francesco Laruffa argued that both neoliberalism and social democracy, while sharing the emphasis on paid employment as the gateway to social inclusion and democratic citizenship, fail in reaching desirable environmental and social standards of sustainability. Laruffa therefore proposed a model that goes beyond these structures and is focused on a social-ecological transformation aimed at subordinating the economy to social and ecological needs. In doing so, an understanding of work as the practice of taking care of the world becomes key, whereby the precise meaning of the latter should be defined democratically. Civil society, corporations, labor movements, governments and shareholders should be included in the process of defining the roots of the economic development as related to sustainable work.

Maria Giovanna Brancati’s presentation “What if Human Labour’s Sustainability Was a Commodity? Economic Analysis of Entrepreneurs’ Priorities and Attempts to ‘Humanize’ Them,” focused on the role that corporations should play in the process of economic development. In recent years a corporate-compliance system for defining codes of ethics has gradually established itself worldwide. This system tries to strike a balance between respecting the requirements of economic and business activities and protecting fundamental human rights. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) are two central components of this compliance system. In light of the Corona virus, it has been argued that damage to people’s health or the environment can result in a failure of global

health systems and lead to continuous outbreaks that create substantial harm to businesses. Corporations should therefore be interested in preventing and avoiding such bad consequences. Accordingly, Brancati claimed that corporations must be involved in the processes of establishing rules or codes of conduct. Criminal offenses relating to labor exploitation depend on structural flaws in our economic and social systems. An engagement of corporations in sustainable economic development would therefore also be useful in preventing such crimes.

Another concern of the working group was the use of language in this field of research; concepts are very broad and sometimes ambiguous. For instance “sustainable” or “sustainability” does not have a single meaning but multiple and even very different ones depending on the context in which they are used. Another example pertains to green jobs, green economy and green growth, which have emerged from different sources but are used almost interchangeably. Our discussions suggested a need to go beyond the classic paradigm of “green job,” since it seems unfit for the actual demands of environmental and human labor sustainability. The use of underspecified or ambiguous concepts is not only problematic in the academic literature and scientific analysis but it also raises issues as to whether these theoretically developed concepts are to serve as a basis for legislative regulation, which requires precise and well-defined terms. A more fundamental question that arose in our discussions was whether we should consider economic growth and economic development as synonymous, or whether they refer to different epistemological spheres. The etymology of certain words would seem to suggest a type of evolution that takes into account not only progressive accumulation in an augmentative sense (i.e. growth) but the enhancement of all those instruments that allow a system – whatever it may be – to progress through changes in a positive direction.

Picture of Summer Academy participants



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