

Nick Kratzer

Comment to Karl Ulrich Mayer

Internationale Konferenz „Discontinuities and Continuities of Modernity“
im Rahmen des Sonderforschungsbereichs 536
„Reflexive Modernisierung“
3./4. April 2001

1. Introduction

When I read Karl Ulrich Mayers paper I was quite pleased. This might be a surprise - considering his very critical opinion towards the Sonderforschungsbereich in general and the theorie of „reflexive modernisation“ in particular.

I was pleased, because his paper provides – besides all disagreements – an argument, we certainly agree with: This is the demand for an empirical proof of discontinuities. This demand perfectly suits the position of our institute, since we have been doing empirical research for more than 30 years.

But as an emirically working institute we have come to an opposite conclusion. Especially for the last decade we have been observing a changed quality within the ongoing process of reorganisation of companies and rationalization of work. Therefore we think it is justified and necessary to ask about discontinuities.

2. Examples for a changing quality of reorganisation and rationalization

In the following I will give some examples for this process, refereing especially to our project within the SFB, which is titled „Die Auflösung des Unternehmens. Zur Entgrenzung von Kapital und Arbeit“; in a translated version: „The Dissolution of the Company – On the Debordering of Capital

and Work“. This might give an idea about what is meant by a modified quality of reorganisation and rationalization. Instead of boundaries, debordering, eroding boundaries are now on the agenda:

Certain boundaries played a constitutive role for the fordistic firm and its organisation of work: For example the inside of companies was more or less strictly separated from the markets. The labour market showed a distinct structure of segmentation with qualified workers in internal labour markets and a predominantly unskilled workforce in the external labour markets. Within the companies, the organisation of work was predominantly structured by division and a hierarchy with a clear distinction of above and below, of people controlling and others being controlled. And last – but certainly not least: One of the most constitutive element of this system was the separation of work and private life in different spheres.

Compared to this reference, we have been observing processes of debordering: Such as

- The eroding boundaries of companies due to processes like outsourcing, decentralization, reorganisation in networks and so on.
- A process we call the internalization of markets, which means that market principles are gaining a new role in organisations.
- In the concepts of self-organized work it is primarily the boundary between employer and employee that is becoming increasingly obscured.
- an increasing amount of a high-skilled workforce on the periphery.
- the increasing flexibility in terms of time, workplace and working contracts lead to eroding boundaries between work and life.

This process is also causing a new form of interaction between the formerly divided spheres of work and life of the individual: this is manifesting as the internalization of market requirements and corporate goals within the context of self-organized work groups, as the dissolving division between the place of work and the home as in tele-work or freelance and self-employed activities, and as more fluid boundaries between work and life within the context of a new “freedom of working hours” or private training and qualification activities. This development is also reflected by the infusion of demands from the private and personal sphere made on the vocational

sphere (commitment, social competence, conflict and team capabilities) and vice versa, vocational sphere demands being made on the individual's private and personal sphere.

These empirically discernible current trends towards the dissolution or erosion of standard employment can indeed be understood as an expression of a fundamental change of gainful employment. The diffuse periphery of standard employment, the erosion of normal daily working hours and normal, standard employment contracts are only the most visible indicators of an extensive development in which the boundaries of standard working conditions are being dissolved ("Entgrenzung"). These developments are also impacting those cores of standard employment that have appeared stable to date: an erosion of the central characteristics of the institutionalization of labor is setting in and dissolving those aspects that were typical and structurally defining for the Fordistic and Tayloristic organization of work.

3. Conclusion

These empirical observations are merely examples for the tendency we call „Debordering of capital and work“. We didn't only find this tendencies in spectacular cases like new economy firms or start ups but also in quite „normal“, medium sized companies in traditional sectors.

At present we don't know much about these changes, about their spreading, if and in which way they are coupled with processes like globalisation, changes in the system of industrial relations, cultural changes and so on. Neither do we know much about the consequences for companies, employment system or employees and their lives. Shortly: We don't know much about the heterogeneity and the ambivalence of modern working lives.

But we do know for a fact, that there are hints for a modified logic of reorganisation and rationalisation. And we know, that if we want to analyse these changes, it's going to be necessary to improve our analytical and methodological instruments or at least to take a closer look at our common and established ones.

This concerns our specific empirical approach as well as a macrodata based approach. All the more considering, that some of the changes mentioned could be below the surface or beyond the established indicators. We are quite conscious about the risks of immunization, but perhaps looking for continuity is more risky in this sense than looking for discontinuities.

If there are changes, which could be interpreted as hints for a paradigmatical change, we would also be in need – I think that is common ground – of a empirically but also theoretically based conversion, a renewal of our paradigmatical Design.

Nothing more – but nothing less – is our job in this SFB.

Thank you