

Unfolding Gap

On the Structural Gap Between Work and Value

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of the Unfolding Gap. It denotes the structural gap between the real effectiveness of work and its economic recognition as value. The Unfolding Gap does not describe a subjective delay or individual failure, but a systemic property of certain forms of work whose effects unfold relationally, cyclically, and often over longer periods of time, and thus evade immediate quantification.

Modern economic orders, by contrast, are oriented toward immediate visibility, comparability, and measurable output. As a result, forms of work that sustain social, cultural, or ecological continuity either remain invisible or are forced into short-term performance formats that damage their actual effectiveness. The paper argues that this structural incompatibility gives rise to a central mechanism of contemporary crises, including persistent poverty, exhaustion, care crises, and a paradoxical form of innovation stagnation.

Against this background, the widespread assumption that innovation generally leads to gains in prosperity is also called into question. The Unfolding Gap makes visible that innovations may generate increases in efficiency and output, while simultaneously undermining real foundations of prosperity when they shorten the temporal, relational, and regenerative conditions of work. Prosperity thus appears not as an automatic result of innovation, but as dependent on whether innovation processes expand or destroy spaces of unfolding.

These phenomena are not understood here as distributional or efficiency problems, but as consequences of a value order that systematically translates processes of unfolding into output. In conclusion, the paper outlines alternative economic architectures that do not primarily evaluate work through immediate visibility, but instead stabilise the conditions of its unfolding (including, among others, concepts such as a Universal Care Income or context-sensitively bounded market forms). The aim is not to eliminate the Unfolding Gap, but to recognise it as a prerequisite for resilient social and ecological work.

Building on the following works:

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1. Introduction

Why can work be highly effective, sustain society, cushion crises, preserve knowledge – and yet be regarded as “unproductive”? Why do some activities appear immediately as value, while others become visible as contributions only after years, indirectly, or not at all? This paper argues that this difference is not moral or sectoral, but structural: it arises from an Unfolding Gap between work and value.

The Unfolding Gap is the gap between the enactment of work and its recognition in secondary-economic formats. The more strongly work is bound to relationship, context, body, regeneration, and cyclical time, the greater this gap becomes. Care work, artistic practice, education, conflict regulation, ecological regeneration, and large parts of epistemic work operate according to this logic: their effects are real, but not immediately balance-sheetable. Secondary economy, by contrast, demands immediate visibility. It operates through output, indicators, comparability, and time compression.

The central thesis is this: modern crises arise not only from scarcity or incorrect distribution, but from the systematic shortening and violent enforcement of the Unfolding Gap. Where unfolding requires time, secondary economy enforces pacing. Where effect requires relational density, it enforces abstraction. Where regeneration is a prerequisite, it generates permanent stress. The Unfolding Gap thus becomes a precise concept for the point at which value order and world-sustaining capacity fall apart.

The concept of the Unfolding Gap developed here is closely connected to the research practice described in *Radical Worker*. There, through a long-term, embodied engagement with work, poverty, and institutional violence, it was shown how world-sustaining activity systematically fails under secondary-economic visibility requirements. The Unfolding Gap provides a conceptual specification for this experience: it names the structural gap between lived effectiveness and economic recognition that was empirically and existentially documented in *Radical Worker*.

2. The Concept of the Unfolding Gap

The Unfolding Gap is understood here as the structural gap between the real effectiveness of work and its recognition as economic value. This gap is neither accidental nor subjective, but arises from the difference between primary-economic unfolding (ecosystem) and secondary-economic visibility-making (economy).

The Unfolding Gap does not denote a mere temporal delay in the sense of later payment or delayed recognition. What is meant instead is an incommensurability of logics: primary-economic work unfolds its effects relationally, situationally, and often cyclically, whereas secondary-economic systems depend on immediate, standardised, and comparable outputs. Where these logics diverge, the Unfolding Gap emerges.

The concept thus describes a systemic tension, not an individual problem. It explains why work can be highly effective without ever appearing as performance, and why attempts to make this work visible often damage it.

In this sense, the Unfolding Gap is not only an analytical category for work, but at the same time a criterion for evaluating innovation. Innovations can generate apparent gains in prosperity while simultaneously shrinking real spaces of freedom and complexity. Technical or organisational innovations then increase efficiency and availability, but reduce scopes of action, relational autonomy, or ecological diversity. The Unfolding Gap makes these losses visible by not asking whether innovation functions, but whether it expands or restricts the possibilities of unfolding, self-determination, and systemic complexity.

2.1 Dimensions of the Unfolding Gap

The Unfolding Gap is not a uniform phenomenon, but manifests itself in multiple, interwoven dimensions. These dimensions rarely occur in isolation; instead, they reinforce one another.

(1) Temporal Unfolding Gap

The effects of work do not occur synchronously with its enactment. Learning, care, relationship, healing, cultural practice, or ecological regeneration require time spans that do not fit into project logics or accounting periods. Secondary-economic systems respond to this with acceleration, which paradoxically reduces the effect.

(2) Relational Unfolding Gap

Primary-economic work operates through relationships: trust, social coherence, collective orientation. These effects are neither isolable nor individualisable. Secondary-economic evaluation systems, however, decompose relational work into individual performances and thereby lose precisely what constitutes its effectiveness.

(3) Epistemic Unfolding Gap

Many forms of work generate knowledge that is not propositional, but embodied, situational, and experience-based. This knowledge cannot be translated into indicators or metrics without loss. The Unfolding Gap arises here between knowledge as practice and knowledge as report.

(4) Regenerative Unfolding Gap

World-sustaining work depends on regeneration—physical, psychological, social, ecological. Secondary-economic systems, however, treat regeneration as interruption. The gap between

necessary recovery and demanded permanent availability becomes a central source of exhaustion.

2.2 The Unfolding Gap and the Value Threshold

The Unfolding Gap stands in a close relationship to the Value Threshold. While the Value Threshold marks the point at which work can appear as value or be excluded, the Unfolding Gap describes the space before this threshold: the domain in which work is already effective without being formatted as value.

Work below the Value Threshold is not ineffective, but not yet, or not adequately, translatable. The Unfolding Gap thus explains why the Value Threshold not only excludes, but also systematically produces blindness: it measures work precisely where unfolding cannot yet be visible.

In this sense, the Unfolding Gap is not a deviation from the value order, but an effect of its mode of operation. The more an economy depends on immediate visibility, the greater the gap between unfolding and recognition becomes—and the more world-sustaining work remains invisible.

Decisive is the fact that unfolding work is often performed as an irreversible advance contribution. Work is carried out, relationships are sustained, crises are buffered, and systems are stabilised without any guarantee of return into value, recognition, or security, while their effects can simultaneously be extracted in the form of gains in efficiency, returns, or stability. The Unfolding Gap is therefore not a neutral intermediate space, but a structurally risky domain in which work can be consumed without ever returning. Poverty, exhaustion, and biographical ruptures are not marginal phenomena, but direct consequences of this one-way structure.

3. The Unfolding Gap in Central Fields of Work

The Unfolding Gap can be observed across different fields of work without reducing it to “care” or “social work”.

In care work, effects often unfold only over years: stable life trajectories, crises avoided, social resilience. What becomes visible in secondary-economic terms, however, are only punctual interventions, not the prevented breakdowns.

In education, an Unfolding Gap emerges between learning processes and measurable outcomes. Examinations capture results, not the long-term capacity for orientation, critique, or self-regulation.

In artistic work, unfolding is often experimental rather than goal-directed. Effects arise through irritation, resonance, and cultural shifts—formats that cannot be planned without losing their function.

In the world of work, the Unfolding Gap appears where people perform additional work in order to stabilise relationships, protect colleagues, or buffer systemic ruptures. Formally, this work appears as inefficiency or deviation from rules; functionally, however, it sustains the system.

These examples show that the Unfolding Gap is not a marginal phenomenon, but a basic pattern of modern work.

4. The Unfolding Gap and Poverty

In dominant economic models, poverty appears as a lack of income, employment, or qualification. In the light of the Unfolding Gap, this interpretation proves to be reductive. Poverty is not primarily a deficit of work, but a deficit of recognition of unfolding.

Where work can unfold its effects only through time, relationship, and regeneration, a structural gap to the value form emerges. If this gap remains permanently unbridged, work becomes systematically invisible. Poverty, in this sense, does not denote inactivity, but the condition in which people continuously perform world-sustaining work without this work ever appearing as value.

In *Radical Worker* (book), this dynamic becomes visible not theoretically, but practically. The long-term experience of state-produced poverty described there shows how continuous primary-economic work—care, documentation, relational stabilisation, institutional resistance—is systematically held below the Value Threshold. Poverty appears here not as passivity, but as the result of a permanently blocked Unfolding Gap in which work is effective but not allowed to appear.

The Unfolding Gap explains why activation and integration policies regularly fail. They address people precisely where the gap is greatest and force them into formats of immediate visibility. As a result, the gap is not reduced but enlarged: unfolding is interrupted, regeneration prevented, relationships damaged.

Poverty is therefore not a marginal phenomenon, but a structural by-product of an economy that recognises unfolding only when it can be immediately translated into output.

4.1 Exhaustion as a Consequence of Shortened Unfolding

Exhaustion does not arise primarily from “too much work,” but from permanently interrupted unfolding processes. Where work must be made visible under time pressure, it loses its rhythmic structure. Pauses, transitions, repetitions, and errors—all central moments of unfolding—are eliminated.

In such systems, the Unfolding Gap is not tolerated but violently closed. People are forced to simulate effects before they can actually emerge. The result is not productivity, but overload, cynicism, and burnout.

This mechanism becomes particularly clear in care professions, in education, administration, and knowledge work. The greater the real Unfolding Gap, the higher the pressure toward self-acceleration. Exhaustion, in this sense, is not an individual failure, but a system indicator of a disregarded logic of unfolding.

4.1.1 The Unfolding Gap, Innovation, and the Myth of Prosperity Gains

A central aspect of the Unfolding Gap that has so far received little reflection concerns the relationship between innovation and prosperity. In dominant economic models, innovation is regarded almost automatically as a source of productivity and prosperity gains. This assumption, however, presupposes that innovation improves the conditions of work and world-sustaining capacity, or at least does not damage them.

In the light of the Unfolding Gap, this assumption becomes questionable. Innovations that accelerate, standardise, or densify processes can generate short-term efficiency gains, while simultaneously shrinking the unfolding spaces of work, relationship, and regeneration. In such cases, innovation does not lead to an increase in real prosperity, but to its systematic erosion.

The Unfolding Gap thus makes possible, for the first time, a distinction that is absent from classical innovation debates: between innovations that enable unfolding and innovations that interrupt unfolding. The former increase long-term social, ecological, and epistemic viability; the latter externalise their costs in the form of exhaustion, poverty, and vulnerability to crises.

Prosperity, in this sense, is not an automatic result of innovation, but a function of whether innovation respects the Unfolding Gap. An economy that evaluates innovation exclusively in terms of efficiency and output gains thereby destroys precisely those foundations on which sustainable prosperity depends.

4.2 The Unfolding Gap and Structural Violence

When the Unfolding Gap is systematically ignored or shortened, it takes the form of structural violence. This violence is not spectacular, but continuous. It operates through time regimes, evaluation formats, and institutional impositions.

Unfolding work is not prohibited in this process, but devalued. People are allowed to work, but only under the condition that their work is immediately visible, measurable, and comparable. Everything that eludes this logic is pathologised, moralised, or individualised.

The violence does not lie in the individual intervention, but in the persistent discrepancy between what work can actually accomplish and what it is permitted to accomplish. The Unfolding Gap thus becomes a precise category for describing those forms of attrition that appear neither as exploitation in the classical sense nor as open repression, yet nonetheless destroy bodies, relationships, and life trajectories.

The systematic shortening of unfolding gaps is not an accidental side effect of modern work, but the result of concrete power and interest configurations. Where evaluation is tied to real-time metrics, comparability, and scalability, those actors benefit who derive control, capitalisation, or governability from this shortening. Quarterly logics, platform economies, algorithmic performance monitoring, and activating social policies generate minimal unfolding gaps not out of functional necessity, but out of domination and valorisation interests. The Unfolding Gap is therefore not a neutral structure, but a politically contested space.

4.3 The Unfolding Gap and Neurodivergent Modes of Work

Neurodivergent modes of work particularly often come into conflict with secondary-economic visibility requirements. Not due to individual deficits, but because their forms of work are frequently characterised by a large Unfolding Gap: non-linear temporality, high context sensitivity, intensive preliminary phases, and delayed outputs.

Here, the Unfolding Gap does not appear as an exception, but as the rule. Neurodivergent subjects thus function as indicators of a general structural conflict between unfolding and value. Their experiences make visible what also affects many other forms of work, but is articulated less clearly.

It is explicitly important to emphasise that this is not a property of neurodivergent subjects as such, but an increased structural exposure to modes of work whose effects cannot be represented within secondary-economic temporal and evaluative regimes. Neurodivergence is not a special case here, but a magnifying glass for systemic blind spots.

5. The Unfolding Gap as a Linking Element between Primary and Secondary Economy

The distinction between primary and secondary economy does not denote a sectoral separation, but an ontological difference of effectiveness. Primary economy encompasses those forms of work through which the world is brought forth, maintained, and regenerated—social relationships, ecological viability, orientation, capacity to learn. Secondary economy, by contrast, denotes the formats in which this effectiveness is retrospectively made visible, comparable, and administrable. It does not operate at the emergence of the world, but at its translation into value, indicators, and organisation. Decisive here is the asymmetry: secondary economy is structurally dependent on primary economy, whereas primary economy can be effective even beyond secondary-economic formats.

The concept of the Unfolding Gap sharpens the distinction between primary and secondary economy. While primary economy denotes the work that carries, stabilises, and regenerates the world, secondary economy describes the formats in which work is made visible, comparable, and administrable. The Unfolding Gap marks the transitional space between these two levels.

Primary-economic work often unfolds its effects before, alongside, or beyond secondary-economic formats. It is effective before it can be measured. Secondary economy, by contrast, depends on formats in which effects are already completed, isolated, and representable. The Unfolding Gap arises precisely where these temporal and logical prerequisites diverge.

What is important here is this: primary and secondary economy are not separate spheres. They can coexist within the same course of action. When, for example, formal working time is used to protect relationships, secure collective orientation, or buffer crises, primary-economic logic operates within secondary-economic structures. What is decisive is not the institutional framework, but the direction of effectiveness: whether work extracts value or carries the world.

At this point, the structural consequence of the Unfolding Gap becomes visible: secondary-economic systems remain structurally blind to their own preconditions, because they operate only where unfolding is either completed or prematurely interrupted.

The Unfolding Gap thus makes visible why secondary-economic systems remain structurally blind to their own preconditions. They operate only where unfolding has already been completed or destroyed.

6. The Unfolding Gap and Universal Care Income

Universal Care Income (UCI) can be understood, in the light of the Unfolding Gap, as a structural response to a problem of time and recognition. UCI does not aim to eliminate or shorten the Unfolding Gap, but to make it sustainable.

Secondary-economic systems generate poverty and exhaustion by recognising work only when unfolding has already been visibly completed. UCI shifts this logic by guaranteeing subsistence

prior to the value form. This creates a space in which work can unfold its effects without having to be permanently translated into output, proofs, or metrics.

Decisive here is the distinction from classical basic income models (Universal Basic Income, UBI). UBI usually functions as a purely distributive instrument within existing value orders. It secures income without fundamentally changing the secondary-economic criteria of visibility, efficiency, and exploitability. The Unfolding Gap thus remains structurally untouched; primary-economic work continues to depend on subsequent recognition or remains invisible.

UCI, by contrast, does not primarily address distribution, but the conditions of unfolding themselves. It decouples survival from immediate visibility and thereby interrupts the compulsion toward permanent self-shortening. UCI neither replaces wage labour nor the market, but shifts the boundary condition under which work can attain world status at all.

In this sense, UCI is not a social-policy add-on, but a temporal and relational infrastructure mechanism. It does not pathologise the Unfolding Gap as a deficit, but recognises it as a necessary prerequisite of world-sustaining work.

The concept of work-integrated relational agency developed in *Radical Worker* can, against this background, be understood as a concrete practice that operates with a large Unfolding Gap. The forms of work described there integrate care, relationship, and orientation not retrospectively, but as conditions of productive activity. UCI can accordingly be read as the structural prerequisite under which such modes of work can exist without being permanently forced into secondary-economic short formats.

7. The Unfolding Gap in Living Markets

Markets, too, can be rethought from the perspective of the Unfolding Gap. Classical markets operate as if unfolding could always be immediately completed. Prices, contracts, and scaling presuppose that effects become visible and comparable within short timeframes. This is precisely where their destructive tendency lies.

Living Markets are market forms that do not negate the Unfolding Gap, but limit and respect it. They recognise that certain activities can only become marketable if their logic of unfolding is not destroyed. Growth, acceleration, and scaling are treated here not as criteria of success, but as risk factors.

Living Markets therefore operate:

- with temporal buffers instead of real-time pressure,
- with relational bindings instead of anonymous exchange,
- with limitation instead of expansion.

They generate value without closing the space in which unfolding is possible at all. In this sense, Living Markets are not morally better markets, but structurally limited markets that explicitly acknowledge their dependence on the primary economy.

8. Delimitation and Research Agenda

The Unfolding Gap differs from existing concepts such as “invisible labour,” “care economy,” or “human capital” in that it does not classify activities, but analyses structural conditions of effectiveness. It does not describe a sector, but a relational difference between unfolding and value.

Future research can proceed at several points:

- empirical studies on the temporal and relational unfolding profiles of different forms of work,
- institutional analyses of evaluative regimes and time structures,
- comparative investigations of poverty as a problem of emergence and recognition,
- neurodivergent modes of work as indicators of structural unfolding blindness.

The Unfolding Gap thus does not offer a closed model, but an analytical key for rethinking work, value, and economy beyond output logics.

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