

Primary and Secondary Economy

On the Ontological Distinction Between Value Formation, Work, and Systemic Extraction

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Abstract

Contemporary economic theory predominantly treats work as market-organised, monetisable activity. What remains invisible in this view is that a substantial portion of socially necessary, life- and system-sustaining work does not arise within the market, but precedes it.

This paper introduces the distinction between **primary economy** and **secondary economy** in order to specify this structural blind spot.

Primary economy is understood as that form of work which directly brings forth reality, livability, and social coherence: care work, commons practice, cultural and epistemic work, ecological reproduction, as well as self-determined, enactively embedded activities. This work is not substitutable, not arbitrarily scalable, and eludes complete monetary representation.

Secondary economy, by contrast, describes those economic processes that extract, formalise, administer, and skim value from the primary economy. It is derivative in nature, operates on the basis of abstraction, standardisation, and control, and tends structurally to obscure its own dependence on primary value formation.

On the basis of neurodivergent, artistic research and enactive systems analysis, it is shown that the systematic overvaluation of the secondary economy leads to the exhaustion of social, ecological, and epistemic resources. The distinction proposed here allows for a re-

conceptualisation of work, value, and productivity beyond capitalist value thresholds and forms a foundation for alternative economic models that prioritise livability over growth.

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

Modern economies operate under the tacit assumption that value arises primarily where markets take place. Work is considered productive when it is monetarily remunerated, accounted for, and transferred into formalised exchange relations. Activities that evade this logic appear as subordinate, inefficient, or at best as morally relevant supplements to an otherwise functioning system.

This assumption is not only empirically false, but structurally destructive. It shifts the focus from the question of what actually brings forth life, society, and ecological stability to the question of what can be made to pay. The result is a systematic devaluation of those forms of work without which markets themselves could not exist.

1.2 Research Gap

Although extensive debates exist on care work, commons, post-growth economics, and social reproduction, these approaches have convincingly shown that large parts of socially necessary work take place beyond the market and wage form. They nevertheless remain largely on a normative, political, or sectoral level: they criticise distribution, recognition, or institutions without shifting the underlying structure of value formation itself.

What has so far been missing is an ontological distinction of work that explains why certain activities are structurally world-sustaining, while others merely access an already existing world in a derivative manner—regardless of whether these activities are politically desired, morally recognised, or institutionally supported. Without such a distinction, it remains unclear why even well-intentioned reforms repeatedly encounter the same boundary: they attempt to make primary-economic work visible, efficient, or marketable within secondary-economic categories, thereby reproducing precisely the logic they criticise.

Without an ontological clarification of the asymmetry between world-constituting and value-extractive work, even critical economics necessarily reproduces the categories of the system it seeks to overcome. It corrects effects without addressing the mechanism and thus unintentionally stabilises the structural dependence on invisible primary work.

1.3 Thesis and Objectives

This paper advances the thesis that every functioning economy is based on a primary economy that does not represent value, but brings it forth. Markets, institutions, and monetary exchange systems, by contrast, constitute a secondary economy whose function lies not in the production, but in the administration and extraction of this value.

The aims are:

1. to precisely define the concepts of primary and secondary economy,

2. to expose their structural asymmetry,
3. and to show why the conflation of these two levels leads to systemic exhaustion, social violence, and ecological instability.

1.4 Methodological Approach

The argument of this paper is based on a neurodivergent, enactive research practice in which knowledge emerges not through distanced observation, but through long-term, embodied participation in processes of work and life. Work is not analysed as an abstract function, but as a concretely enacted relation to the world that takes place under specific social, economic, and institutional conditions.

Concretely, the theory developed here is based on a multi-year, continuous investigation of primary-economic work under conditions of structural invisibility. This investigation included, among other things:

- the author's own practice of care, cultural, relational, and epistemic work outside stable market integration,
- the repeated confrontation of this work with secondary-economic institutions (labour market, administration, funding logics),
- as well as the systematic observation of the effects this confrontation had on work capacity, exhaustion, world-sustaining capacity, and social coherence.

The process of knowledge production was not retrospective, but iterative: concepts and models emerged from repeated tensions between the real effectiveness of work and its economic non-appearance. These tensions were not evaluated normatively, but read as stable invariances from which structural categories could be derived (primary/secondary economy, value threshold, conditions of emergence).

The neurodivergent perspective here is not merely a perspective on the field, but part of the measuring instrument itself: through heightened sensitivity to incoherence, contradiction, and loss of context, those rupture points become visible at which secondary-economic categories fail while primary-economic work continues to remain effective.

This approach was complemented by artistic research as a form of non-reductive model building (diagrams, films, texts), by autoethnographic long-term documentation, as well as by systems-theoretical and critical political economy analysis. The validity of the resulting concepts does not arise from subjective plausibility, but from their invariant explanatory power across different contexts.

This methodological approach makes visible what cannot appear within the dominant economic paradigm: work that carries the world precisely because it eludes secondary-economic formalisation.

1.5 Value Threshold and Diversity Threshold as Structural Thresholds

The following analyses presuppose two concepts that have been developed in detail elsewhere and are introduced here in condensed form, as they are central to understanding the primary/secondary economy.

The Value Threshold designates that structural threshold at which work shifts from real, effective activity to economically visible value. Work always exists as action, effect, or relation to the world; however, it appears as value only when it fulfils specific criteria of visibility, quantifiability, and institutional assignability. The Value Threshold is therefore not a measure of effectiveness, but a filter of appearance that determines which forms of work are recognised, administered, and remunerated within economic systems—and which remain invisible.

The Diversity Threshold designates the threshold above which systems become capable of emergence. It marks the point at which difference, incommensurability, and tension are no longer smoothed over, but can give rise to new forms. Below this threshold, systems operate efficiently, stably, and controllably; above it, new form, transformation, and future viability emerge. The Diversity Threshold is thus not a normative ideal, but a structural condition of innovation beyond mere variation.

Together, the Value Threshold and the Diversity Threshold describe the two central bottlenecks of modern economies:

the boundary of what can appear as value, and the boundary of what can emerge as future.

The following distinction between primary and secondary economy examines how economic systems operate with these thresholds—and what consequences arise when they are systematically distorted or undercut.

2. The Primary Economy

Work as World-Constituting Activity

The concept of the primary economy is not used here in a sectoral, historical, or moral sense. It designates neither a “first economic sector” nor a politically preferred form of work. Rather, it functions as an analytical category that distinguishes work according to its ontological function: whether it brings forth and sustains the world, or merely accesses an already existing world.

This shift is decisive. It allows work to be analysed independently of market form, wage relation, or institutional recognition. In this sense, primary economy does not denote a domain within the economy, but a condition of its possibility. Only on this basis can it be determined precisely which activities are structurally world-constituting—and why they remain systematically invisible within the existing economic paradigm.

Against this background, the concept of the primary economy is specified below and defined through constitutive criteria.

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

In this paper, primary economy is understood as that sphere of work in which reality is translated into livable world.

Primary-economic work is not defined by market integration, but by ontological function: it generates, sustains, or regenerates the conditions under which society, subjects, and ecosystems can exist at all.

Primary economy therefore denotes neither a sector, nor an occupational group, nor a morally privileged activity, but a functional class of work.

The distinction between primary and secondary economy does not describe spatially or institutionally separable spheres, but different functional logics of work. In concrete situations of action, both logics can be operative at the same time. Primary-economic work can take place within secondary-economic formats—for example when formal working time is used to secure relationships, protection, or continuity. What is decisive is not the institutional framework, but the direction of effectiveness: whether work carries the world or extracts value.

2.2 Five Constitutive Criteria of Primary-Economic Work

Primary-economic work is characterised by the following features:

(1) World-Sustaining Capacity Instead of Output

Primary-economic work does not produce isolated output, but sustaining capacity: it stabilises relationships, rhythms, life contexts, and spaces of possibility. Its success is not measured by quantity of production or efficiency, but by whether the world can continue to exist.

(2) Enactive Embeddedness

Primary-economic work is embodied (in relationship), situated, and relational. It arises from direct interaction with people, things, bodies, and environments. It is not abstractly plannable, not fully standardisable, and not arbitrarily scalable without losing its character. In this way, it structurally contradicts the industrial ideal of work.

(3) Non-Substitutability

Primary-economic work is not functionally interchangeable. Care for relationships, care work, social cohesion, epistemic orientation, or ecological regeneration cannot be replaced without loss by other actors, machines, or processes. Substitution here does not lead to gains in efficiency, but to loss of quality, entropy, or breakdown.

(4) Capacity for Emergence

Primary-economic work operates above the Diversity Threshold,

because it does not smooth over incommensurable modes, but sustains them.
It is conflict-capable, open to tension, and ambiguous,
and thereby generates new forms rather than reproducing existing ones.
Innovation emerges here not as a goal,
but as a side effect of sustained difference.

(5) Pre- or Sub-Value Positioning

Primary-economic work usually exists below the Value Threshold.
It is real, effective, and system-sustaining,
yet does not appear, or appears only in distorted form, as economic value.
Its invisibility is not a historical accident,
but a structural precondition
for the possibility of secondary value extraction.

2.3 Typical Manifestations (Non-Exhaustive)

The primary economy includes, among other things:

- care and caregiving work
- educational and relational work
- cultural and artistic practice
- epistemic work (orientation, sense-making, critique)
- ecological regeneration work
- commons maintenance and conflict regulation
- self-determined, non-market forms of work

What is decisive is not the field,
but the function:
to sustain the world before it is valorised.

2.4 Delimitation from Existing Approaches

In Relation to Care Economics

Care theories name the relevance of invisible work,
but do not explain its structural subordination.
Primary economy describes care not normatively,
but as the ontological foundation of all further value processes.

In Relation to Commons Theories

Commons approaches focus on forms of ownership and use.
Primary economy goes deeper:
it describes the work through which commons can exist at all.

In Relation to Social Reproduction

Social reproduction describes restoration.
Primary economy encompasses reproduction, regeneration, and emergence.

It is not backward-looking,
but future-capable.

2.5 Interim Conclusion

Primary economy is not an alternative to the market,
but its ontological precondition.

It generates the world

at whose expense the secondary economy operates.

Those who confuse primary economy with “unproductive work”
confuse the value form with reality.

3. The Secondary Economy

Value Extraction, Administration, and the Simulation of Productivity

The introduction of the concept of the secondary economy does not pursue a moral critique of markets, but a structural clarification of their function. Secondary economy does not denote a malfunction of the economy, but that level of economic organisation which necessarily arises once value is abstracted, made comparable, and administered through institutional procedures.

What is decisive here is not the existence of this level, but its systematic overestimation. In modern societies, secondary economy appears as the site of productivity, innovation, and value creation, although it is structurally dependent on an already brought-forth world. Its processes do not operate creatively, but representationally, processually, and distributively.

The following section therefore specifies the concept of the secondary economy not as a counter-pole to the primary economy, but as a derivative, functionally necessary, yet ontologically subordinate level, whose expansion without re-localisation inevitably leads to the exhaustion of its own preconditions.

3.1 Conceptual Clarification

Secondary economy is understood as that sphere of economic activity which does not bring forth the world, but extracts, formalises, and administers value from an already existing world.

Secondary economy is neither a fraud nor a malfunction,
but a functionally necessary yet ontologically derivative level.

Its systemic error begins where it denies its dependence on the primary economy and stages itself as the source of value, innovation, and progress.

3.2 Central Function: Representation Instead of Production

Secondary-economic work is characterised by the fact
that it represents what has already come into being elsewhere.

It operates through:

- standardisation
- comparability
- measurability
- scaling
- interchangeability

In doing so, it does not generate new world, but translates existing reality into exploitable forms. Productivity here does not mean world formation, but throughput optimisation.

3.3 Criteria of Secondary-Economic Work

Secondary economy can be characterised by the following structural features:

(1) Dependence on Emergence

Secondary-economic processes cannot bring forth anything that has not previously emerged in the primary economy. Every commodity, every service, every form of capital presupposes already existing relationships, capacities, meanings, and ecological stability. Secondary economy lives off a stock of world that it does not itself renew.

(2) Substitutability

Secondary-economic work is in principle interchangeable. Actors, processes, or locations can be replaced without the function itself collapsing. This interchangeability is not a flaw, but a precondition for efficiency and scaling. It becomes destructive, however, as soon as it is applied to primary-economic activities.

(3) Efficiency Dominance

Secondary economy operates structurally below the Diversity Threshold. It depends on limiting difference, smoothing tensions, and organising processes in such a way that they remain comparable, repeatable, and governable. This sub-criticality is not a side effect, but a condition of secondary-economic operability. Incompatible logics, open conflicts, or non-standardisable modes of work endanger throughput, calculability, and control. Secondary economy responds to this by actively reducing diversity, fragmenting it, or translating it into functional categories.

In this sense, secondary economy does not merely operate below the Diversity Threshold, but systematically pushes systems beneath this threshold.

It stabilises efficiency by neutralising precisely those differences from which emergence could arise.
Innovation therefore appears within this logic not as categorical new form, but as variation of the existing: as optimisation, scaling, or recombination of already accepted forms. Genuine new form is not prevented because it would be undesirable, but because it is not integrable within secondary-economic structures.

(4) Orientation Toward Visibility

Secondary-economic work operates above the Value Threshold. It depends on activities appearing—that is, becoming visible, quantifiable, comparable, and institutionally assignable. Only what crosses this threshold can be administered, accounted for, priced, or capitalised.

This orientation toward visibility is not contingent, but a structural necessity. Secondary economy can operate only with what is formally representable. Activities whose effects are relational, temporally delayed, situational, or qualitative evade this logic and must therefore be translated, simplified, or excluded.

In this sense, the Value Threshold is not an external filter, but a threshold mechanism actively produced and stabilised by the secondary economy itself. It defines which work appears as value—and which is screened out as pre-economic, private, or irrelevant. This boundary drawing enables secondary-economic order, while simultaneously producing a systematic invisibility of primary-economic work.

The damage to the primary economy arises precisely at this point: the more the Value Threshold is absolutised as a precondition of economic rationality, the greater the pressure becomes to force primary-economic activities either into visible value forms or to devalue them as unproductive. In both cases, these activities lose their world-sustaining function.

Invisibility is therefore not a marginal phenomenon of secondary-economic systems, but their operating condition. The progressive erosion of the primary economy is not the result of incorrect decisions, but the logical consequence of an order that recognises only what appears above the Value Threshold.

(5) Administration of Scarcity

Secondary economy requires scarcity in order to stabilise value differentials. This scarcity is often not natural, but is actively produced or intensified through:

- access restrictions
- time pressure
- qualification filters
- institutional barriers

3.4 The Illusion of Productive Markets

The central misunderstanding of modern economies lies in regarding the secondary economy as primarily productive. Markets appear as sites of value creation, although they merely organise value attribution and redistribution.

This illusion is stabilised through:

- monetary feedback loops
- narratives of success
- growth indicators
- privileges of visibility

The more successful a market appears, the more invisible becomes the primary economy on which it lives.

3.5 Expansion as a Structural Self-Contradiction

Secondary economy can expand in the short term by accessing ever deeper layers of the primary economy. In the long term, however, this expansion destroys its own basis of existence.

Typical symptoms of this contradiction include:

- burnout and exhaustion
- care crises
- ecological overexploitation
- cultural impoverishment
- innovation stagnation despite growth

The system produces more value form while world-sustaining capacity declines.

3.6 Interim Conclusion

Secondary economy is necessary, but not autonomous.

It must not be abolished, but re-localised.

As soon as it understands itself as a primary source of value, it begins to consume the world instead of sustaining it.

4. Structural Asymmetry

Why Primary and Secondary Economy Are Not Co-Equal

The preceding analysis has shown that primary and secondary economy do not merely designate different forms of work or economic organisation, but operate on different ontological levels. While primary economy brings forth and sustains the world, secondary economy organises value forms derived from this world. This difference is not gradual, but structural.

The resulting asymmetry is not a normative judgement, but a consequence of the thresholds introduced earlier: the Value Threshold and the Diversity Threshold. Primary-economic work can be реально effective without appearing as value, and it can be capable of emergence without being efficient. Secondary-economic processes, by contrast, depend on visibility, comparability, and sub-criticality. They are thus structurally dependent on conditions that they themselves cannot generate.

Section 4 explicates this relation of dependence and shows why attempts to treat primary and secondary economy as co-equal or symmetrical spheres necessarily fail. The question here is not which level is “more important,” but which one carries—and which one burdens.

4.1 Asymmetry Instead of Dualism

The distinction between primary and secondary economy does not describe a dualism, but a directed structure of dependency.

Primary and secondary economy are not two equivalent sectors, but two ontologically different levels, only one of which enables the existence of the other.

The relationship is therefore not reciprocal:

- primary economy can exist without secondary economy,
- secondary economy cannot exist for a single moment without primary economy.

This one-sidedness is not a normative judgement, but a structural statement about the emergence of the world.

4.2 Relation of Derivation: Why Secondary Economy Is Derivative

Secondary-economic processes presuppose:

- stable bodies
- functioning relationships
- cultural orientation
- psychological regulation
- ecological viability

All of these preconditions are not produced by markets, but by primary-economic work.

Secondary economy processes the world; it does not generate it.

Its value does not arise from its own productivity, but from access to already constituted reality.

It is therefore structurally derivative, even if it appears historically dominant.

4.3 Why Exploitation Becomes Systemically Necessary

As soon as the secondary economy understands itself as a primary source of value, an irresolvable contradiction emerges:

it must consume the world in order to legitimise its own output. This contradiction is not accidental, but constitutes the structural core of capitalist value production.

In this sense, capitalism is not a neutral market system, but an order that produces isolated value by systematically denying its dependence on primary-economic world work. In order for a one-sided value construction to remain stable, ecological, social, and temporal relations must be screened out. Were they to become visible, every accumulated value would immediately enter into competition with the world that sustains it—and would be relativised.

Exploitation is therefore not a moral failure of individual actors in this model, but a logical consequence of false level attribution. Capitalist processes can maintain their own legitimacy only by outsourcing the costs of world-sustaining capacity from the domain of value.

Typical mechanisms of this systemic exploitation include:

- the externalisation of regeneration costs onto individuals, communities, and ecosystems,
- the rendering invisible of care, maintenance, and relational work,
- the compression of time through acceleration and permanent availability,
- as well as the individualisation of systemic damage in the form of guilt, failure, or pathology.

These mechanisms are not correctable misincentives, but operating conditions of capitalist secondary economy. They cannot be voluntarily abandoned without calling its own value logic

into question. An economy that acknowledges its primary-economic dependence necessarily loses the possibility of constructing value as an isolated, competition-free quantity.

4.4 Why Reforms Within the Secondary Economy Fail

Classical reform approaches

(e.g. higher wages, redistribution, efficiency gains, ESG, green growth)
remain within the secondary economy.

They modify:

- distribution,
- access conditions,
- evaluative scales,

but not:

- the dependence on invisible primary work,
- the structural invisibility of world-sustaining capacity,
- the prioritisation of visibility over effectiveness.

Such reforms shift symptoms,
but often intensify extraction pressure,
because they generate additional efficiency demands.

4.5 Asymmetry and Primary-Economic Modes of Work

The structural asymmetry between primary and secondary economy does not affect only fields of activity, but modes of work. Certain ways of working are primary-economic, regardless of whether they take place in care, art, research, relational maintenance, or ecological regeneration.

Such modes of work are often:

- sensitive to context and relationship,
- situational rather than standardised,
- not arbitrarily scalable,
- rhythmic, cyclical, or resonance-based rather than tactically clocked.

Precisely these properties stand in structural conflict with secondary-economic logics that prioritise comparability, efficiency, and throughput. Accordingly, primary-economic modes of work appear within these logics as unproductive, inefficient, or disruptive—not because they are ineffective, but because their effectiveness cannot be translated into secondary-economic categories.

Neurodivergent subjects come under particular pressure in this context, not due to individual deficits, but because their perceptual, attentional, and working modes are less compatible with

secondary-economic standardisation. They thereby make visible what also applies to many other forms of primary-economic work: that the world is sustained without appearing as value.

The systematic devaluation of neurodivergent subjects is therefore not an isolated prejudice, but a consequence of a confusion of levels in which secondary-economic criteria are declared the general norm of work. Neurodivergence functions here not as an exception, but as an indicator of a general structural conflict between world-sustaining work and value-centred economy.

4.6 The Central Error of Modern Economy

The fundamental error of modern economies is this:
they treat the secondary economy
as the origin of value
and the primary economy as a cost factor or an exploitable resource.

This inversion produces a system
that is efficient in the short term,
but self-destructive in the long term.
The more successful the secondary economy appears,
the more intensely it draws
on the invisible substance of the primary economy.

4.7 Interim Conclusion

Primary and secondary economy do not form a balance,
but a load-bearing structure.
Primary economy carries.
Secondary economy burdens.

When this relation is ignored,
growth emerges without world,
work without future and broader context,
and value without sustaining capacity.

5. Systemic Consequences of the Confusion of Levels Poverty, Exhaustion, Ecological Crisis, and Innovation Stagnation

The distinction between primary and secondary economy developed in the preceding sections, together with their structural asymmetry, does not remain at the level of abstract theory. It generates concrete, recurring patterns of social reality. When these patterns are considered in isolation, they appear as separate fields of crisis; when traced back to their common structure, however, they reveal themselves as necessary consequences of the same confusion of levels.

Section 5 therefore does not pursue an exemplary or illustrative approach, but a systemic derivation. It shows how poverty, exhaustion, ecological destruction, and innovation stagnation arise from the continued prioritisation of secondary-economic value logics alongside the erosion of primary-economic world work. These phenomena are not expressions of individual

failure or external disturbance, but functional outcomes of a miscalibrated economic architecture.

Against this background, the following subsections are not treated as individual problems, but as structurally interconnected symptoms of a system that consumes its own foundation.

5.1 Confusion of Levels as the Fundamental Mechanism of Modern Crises

Most contemporary crises appear in politics, economics, and public discourse as separate phenomena: social inequality, care crisis, burnout, ecological destruction, innovation weakness, or supply instability. This fragmentation obscures their common origin.

Within the model developed here, these phenomena can be traced back to a fundamental structural error: the systematic confusion of primary and secondary economy. Secondary-economic processes—market, administration, efficiency enhancement—are treated as productive sources, while primary-economic world work is regarded as background, cost factor, or private matter.

The consequences of this confusion do not affect only social issues such as poverty or care, but also undermine those domains in which the secondary economy is supposedly superior.

In innovation, for example, it becomes apparent that genuine new form does not arise from efficiency, scaling, or competition, but from open, conflict-capable, often fragile processes of primary-economic work: from cultural practice, experimental research, craft knowledge, informal collaboration. When innovation is organised in secondary-economic terms—through metrics, time pressure, and valorisation logics—it remains confined to variation and optimisation of what already exists.

In agriculture, the structural error becomes particularly visible. Soils, biodiversity, and regional knowledge forms belong to the primary economy: they generate long-term sustaining capacity. When they are treated in secondary-economic terms—as input factors, land yield, or objects of scaling—short-term gains in output arise alongside a simultaneous erosion of foundations. The result is soil loss, dependence on external inputs, and declining resilience to crises.

Similar patterns appear in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and digitalisation. Wherever primary-economic activities—relationship, care, orientation, regeneration, sense-making—are organised according to secondary-economic efficiency criteria, throughput increases in the short term, while quality, trust, and future viability are lost in the long term.

The crises described here are therefore not external disturbances of an otherwise functioning system. They are systemic outputs of an order that does not recognise its own preconditions. Resource scarcity, individual misconduct, or insufficient efficiency are not the primary causes; rather, it is the disregard of the ontological dependence of secondary value processes on primary world work.

5.2 Poverty as a Consequence of Missing Emergence

In classical economic models, poverty appears as a lack: of income, employment, qualification, or individual performance capacity. Poverty is described as a deviation from the normal state of

productive market integration and is accordingly addressed through activation, control, or demands for adaptation.

Within the framework of the distinction between primary and secondary economy developed here, this interpretation is fundamentally insufficient. Poverty is not a production problem, but an emergence problem. It arises where primary-economic world work is systematically displaced, devalued, or interrupted.

People can work intensively, continuously, and with high effectiveness—stabilising relationships, preserving knowledge, providing care, producing social and cultural coherence—and nevertheless remain poor if this work remains below the Value Threshold. Poverty thus does not arise from inactivity, but where the world is carried without appearing as value.

In this sense, the poor are not comparable to deficient market actors, but to dried-out ecosystems. What is lacking are not individual abilities, but the conditions under which emergence would be possible: time, stability, relationship, regeneration. Poverty here denotes not a lack of productivity, but a collapse of primary-economic cycles.

This perspective has far-reaching consequences. If poverty is understood as a consequence of missing emergence, then poverty reduction does not mean activation, qualification, or disciplining, but the restoration of primary-economic sustaining capacity. Policies that address poverty through compulsory work, sanctions, or permanent evaluation intensify the condition they claim to remedy. They push people further into secondary-economic forms that destroy their remaining primary-economic effectiveness.

At the same time, the displacement of primary-economic work sinks systemic knowledge: local competencies, relational intelligence, experiential knowledge, and social orientation are lost because they are not permitted to appear as value. Poverty, in this sense, is not only a social but an epistemic disaster—a loss of world knowledge that cannot be reconstructed once the corresponding carriers are permanently exhausted or excluded.

Poverty therefore does not mark a marginal area of society, but an alarm state of the system. It indicates where primary economy has been so thoroughly dried out that neither social nor cultural nor ecological futures can emerge.

In this model, poverty is not a contingent side effect of secondary-economic processes, but their necessary consequence. An economy that ignores or actively displaces primary economy can produce value only by outsourcing the costs of world-sustaining capacity into bodies, relationships, and life trajectories. The seemingly unilateral gains of the secondary economy do not arise abstractly, but are cut directly from the embodiments of those whose work carries the world without being allowed to appear as value.

This form of value production must therefore be understood as systemic violence. It operates not primarily through open repression, but through structural deprivation: time is compressed, regeneration prevented, relational care delegitimised, bodily and psychological exhaustion individualised. Poverty arises where people are forced to consume their own world-sustaining capacity in order to stabilise a system that simultaneously renders this work invisible.

The violence here does not lie in the moral misconduct of individual actors, but in the architecture of the value order itself. As long as secondary economy is regarded as the primary source of value, certain bodies must be exhausted, certain ways of life devalued, and certain forms of knowledge erased. Poverty, in this sense, does not mark a failure of integration, but the functional site at which the costs of a one-sided value construction are concentrated.

5.2.1 Work-Integrated Relational Agency as a Counter-Model

Opposed to the described mechanism of systemic impoverishment stands a fundamentally different understanding of work, referred to here as work-integrated relational agency. This denotes a form of work in which relationship, care, orientation, and contextual work are not outsourced or externalised, but understood as integral components of productive activity.

Work-integrated relational agency does not follow the logic of isolated value production, but the logic of primary-economic cycles: work takes place in relationship, generates resonance, regenerates scopes of action, and stabilises the world, while at the same time fulfilling concrete tasks. Productivity here does not arise through the separation of function and relationship, but precisely through their non-separability.

In contrast to the secondary-economic organisation of work, which externalises relational costs and subsequently compensates for them through poverty, exhaustion, or care crises, work-integrated relational agency integrates these dimensions prior to value formation. It thereby prevents that form of structural violence in which gains are drawn from the exhaustion of embodied primary work.

In this sense, work-integrated relational agency does not represent a niche model, but a systemically necessary counter-architecture if poverty is no longer to serve as the functional site of cost concentration. It shifts work back into the domain of world-sustaining capacity and makes visible that sustainable productivity can arise only where relationship is recognised not as a disruptive factor, but as a condition of work.

The practice outlined here is described in detail in *Speed's Work* (2025) as an embodied long-term experiment.

5.3 Exhaustion and Burnout as Structural Symptoms

Burnout, depression, and chronic exhaustion are often individualised or pathologised. Within the model developed here, they are systemic indicators of overload.

They arise where primary-economic work must be performed under secondary-economic efficiency criteria.

Typical constellations include:

- care work under time pressure,
- education under output logic,
- artistic or epistemic work under pressures of valorisation,
- social relationships under conditions of permanent economic availability.

The body here does not respond to “too much work,” but to categorically misplaced work. Exhaustion is therefore not a failure of the subject, but a signal of faulty system architecture.

5.4 Ecological Crisis as a Consequence of Secondary Expansion

Within this model, the ecological crisis can be read as a classic case of secondary overextension.

Ecosystems structurally belong to the primary economy: they generate sustaining capacity, regeneration, and long-term stability.

When they are treated in secondary-economic terms— as resource stockpiles, input factors, or cost items— the system destroys its own condition of existence.

Ecological destruction is therefore not an external side effect of economic activity, but an internal contradiction of a system that misinterprets secondary economy as primarily productive.

5.5 Innovation Stagnation Despite Growth

A central paradox of modern societies is this: high innovation rhetoric alongside declining real new form.

Within the model, this paradox is easily explained: secondary economy produces variation, but not emergence.

Efficiency gains, digitalisation, and scaling modify existing forms without generating new categories.

Genuine innovation arises where primary-economic work can carry difference, tension, and uncertainty. When this work is marginalised or accelerated, growth emerges without future.

5.6 Social Fragmentation and Loss of Trust

Another effect of the confusion of levels is the loss of social coherence.

Primary-economic work stabilises:

- trust,
- relationship,
- capacity to carry conflict,
- shared temporality.

When this work is devalued or rendered invisible, social stability must be secondarily replaced by control, bureaucracy, surveillance, and moral regimes.

The loss of trust is therefore
not a cultural accident,
but a direct consequence of primary-economic erosion.

5.7 Interim Conclusion

The major crises of the present
are not multiple problems,
but multiple symptoms of a single structural error.

As long as secondary economy
is regarded as the origin of value
and primary economy is treated as a cost factor,
the following will be reproduced:

- poverty,
- pathologised exhaustion,
- ecological destruction,
- simulated innovation.

A sustainable transformation therefore requires
not optimisation,
but a reversal of priorities.

6. Consequences for a Different Economic Architecture

Primary-Economy-Centred Systems, Universal Care Income, and Living Markets

The preceding sections have shown that poverty, exhaustion, ecological destruction, and innovation stagnation are not isolated malfunctions, but necessary consequences of an economic order that treats secondary economy as the primary source of value. If this diagnosis is correct, the consequences cannot lie in piecemeal corrections or efficiency gains within existing structures.

Section 6 therefore does not present a catalogue of reforms, but an architectural derivation. It outlines which principles of economic order emerge when primary economy is no longer displaced, but recognised as the load-bearing level. The following considerations do not aim at the abolition of markets or organisations, but at their re-localisation within an order that understands world-sustaining capacity, emergence, and relationship not as costs, but as preconditions of productive activity.

Against this background, Universal Care Income and living markets are introduced not as isolated political measures, but as structural elements of an economic architecture that takes seriously the asymmetrical dependence between primary and secondary economy.

6.1 From Optimisation to Re-Localisation

From the preceding analysis, a clear consequence follows:
a future-capable economy does not arise through a more efficient secondary economy,
but through its re-localisation within a primary-economic overall architecture.

This does not mean:

- the abolition of markets,
- a return to pre-industrialisation,
- the moralisation of work.

Rather:

secondary economy becomes serving,
primary economy becomes guiding.

The question therefore is no longer:

How do we increase value creation?

but:

Which forms of work must first be sustaining, so that value can make sense at all?

6.2 Primary Economy as the Systemic Reference Point

In a primary-economy-centred architecture, the following applies:

- world-sustaining capacity is not a side effect, but the primary criterion,
- regeneration takes precedence over accumulation,
- emergence takes precedence over efficiency,
- relationship takes precedence over throughput.

This fundamentally shifts the logic of evaluation.

Success is not measured by

how much value is extracted,

but by

how much reality can be sustained and expanded

without producing collapse, exhaustion, or impoverishment.

6.3 Universal Care Income (UCI) as a Structural Lever

Within a primary-economy-centred economic architecture, Universal Care Income (UCI) does not function as a social benefit, compensatory payment, or redistributive instrument, but as an economic structural mechanism. Its purpose is not to offset income deficits, but to change the conditions under which work can exist as socially effective at all.

This fundamentally distinguishes UCI from concepts of Universal Basic Income (UBI), which generally remain within a secondary-economic logic. A UBI can create income security, but leaves the underlying value order untouched. It often stabilises precisely those secondary-economic processes whose continued extraction from primary-economic work produces

poverty, exhaustion, and ecological destruction in the first place. In this sense, there is a risk that a UBI cushions poverty while its causes continue to operate.

UCI intervenes at a different point. It does not primarily address distribution, but the conditions of appearance of work. Its function is:

- to make primary-economic work capable of emergence,
- without forcing it into secondary-economic valorisation logics,
- and thereby to reduce the permanent extraction pressure on bodies, relationships, and life contexts.

UCI replaces neither market nor income. Rather, it shifts the boundary condition under which work can attain world status. Activities that sustain the world—care, relationship, cultural practice, ecological regeneration, epistemic work—no longer have to justify their own existence by deforming themselves in secondary-economic terms.

In this sense, UCI does not mean “distributing more money” while value continues to be accumulated in isolation. It means structurally upgrading primary economy by treating its work no longer as a cost factor, but as the foundation of social productivity. In doing so, it does not stimulate consumption, but allows more world—and for the first time explicitly acknowledges the dependence of secondary-economic processes on that world.

6.4 Living Markets: Markets After Asymmetry

In a primary-economy-centred economic order, markets do not disappear.

What disappears is the illusion that markets could be autonomous sites of value creation. Living Markets denote those forms of markets that recognise their secondary position and explicitly re-anchor themselves to primary-economic processes.

In contrast to capitalist markets, which treat value as an isolable and scalable quantity, Living Markets do not operate autonomously with respect to value, but dependently on the world. They are not abstract exchange machines, but situated, relational arrangements that rely on ongoing regeneration. In this sense, they are not “more social” or “fairer,” but structurally limited.

As elaborated in *Radical Worker*, markets do not emerge where work is maximally efficient, but where relationship, trust, temporality, and context can be sustainably carried. Living Markets are therefore not optimisation machines, but transitional sites between primary and secondary economy: they translate primary-economic work into limited value forms without destroying its world-sustaining function.

Living Markets are therefore characterised by the following structural features:

- Embedding in ecological and social regeneration cycles
Markets operate only within cycles that allow regeneration. Growth is not externally limited, but internally rendered impossible once primary economy would be exhausted.
- Acceptance of non-scalability
Scaling is not treated as a measure of success, but as a risk indicator. Activities that are viable only in situ, relationally, or within limited temporal frames are not artificially expanded.

- Coexistence of incommensurable logics
Living Markets accept that not all values are comparable. Price does not replace meaning, and efficiency does not replace sense. Market transactions exist alongside, not above, other value forms.
- Limitation of efficiency in favour of resilience
Efficiency is not maximised, but deliberately constrained in order to allow disturbance, deviation, and learning processes. Productivity is measured in terms of survival and adaptive capacity, not throughput.

In contrast to capitalist markets, which systematically externalise primary economy, Living Markets operate at the cost of their own limitation. They generate value without denying their preconditions and thus remain functionally dependent on care work, relational maintenance, local knowledge production, and ecological stability.

Living Markets are therefore not “less market,” but market after asymmetry. They exist only where primary economy is not displaced, but explicitly sustained. Their aim is not maximal efficiency, but minimal destruction with sufficient coordination. In this sense, they do not represent a utopia, but a necessary re-form of markets once their secondary character is taken seriously.

6.5 Work Beyond Wage-Centrism

A further consequence concerns the concept of work itself. Within a primary-economy-centred architecture, wage labour loses its exclusive status as the measure of contribution, dignity, and participation.

Work is reconceptualised as:
any activity
that sustains, expands, or regenerates the world,
regardless of its market form.

This makes visible
that large parts of real work
are not “informal” or “precarious,”
but ontologically prior.

This shift decouples work
from permanent justification
and allows forms of activity
that are rhythmic, cyclical, and situational—
in particular for neurodivergent subjects.

6.6 Institutional Consequences (Without Detailed Policy)

From the new architecture follow institutional shifts, without this paper having to propose legislation:

- evaluation systems orient themselves toward sustaining capacity, not output,
- education prioritises orientation and emergence, not exploitability,

- care, art, and commons are treated as infrastructure, not as costs,
- ecological limits are handled as primary-economic thresholds.

Politics thus does not become more technical,
but ontologically more precise.

6.7 Interim Conclusion

A different economy does not emerge through moral appeals
or better management within existing logics.

It emerges

when the asymmetry between primary and secondary economy
is recognised and implemented architecturally.

Primary economy carries.

Secondary economy organises.

Where this order is reversed,
the system loses its future.

7. Conclusion

Work, Value, and the Return of the World

This paper has shown that the current economic crisis does not result from misdistribution, inefficiency, or a lack of innovation, but from a structural confusion of levels: the equation of secondary economy with productive value creation and the simultaneous devaluation of primary economy as a cost or background sphere.

The distinction introduced between primary and secondary economy is not a normative proposal, but an ontological clarification.

Primary economy designates those forms of work through which world, viability, and future come into being at all. Secondary economy, by contrast, organises, administers, and distributes value forms that emerge from this world, without producing it itself.

The relationship between the two levels is asymmetrical.

Primary economy can exist without secondary economy, but secondary economy cannot exist without primary economy. When this asymmetry is ignored, a system emerges that generates growth in the short term but destroys its own conditions of existence in the long term.

Central social pathologies—poverty despite work, burnout, ecological overuse, innovation stagnation, and loss of trust—cannot be understood in this model as isolated problems, but as necessary consequences of this confusion of levels. They are not deviations from the system, but expressions of its inner logic.

A future-capable economic order therefore does not require a further expansion of secondary-economic efficiency, but a re-localisation of markets within a primary-economy-centred architecture. Instruments such as Universal Care Income and concepts such as Living Markets or work-integrated relational agency are, in this context, not social-policy add-ons, but structural levers for restoring ontological coherence.

The central shift proposed by this paper is therefore:

Value does not arise where markets function,
but where world is sustained.

Economy thus loses its character as an abstract calculating machine and becomes again what it always was before it misunderstood itself:

a practice of maintaining, enabling, and continuing the world.

8. Delimitation and Research Agenda

Positioning within the Theoretical Field and Open Lines of Continuation

The preceding argument has developed an autonomous conceptual architecture that is not derived from existing economic schools, but shifts their central assumptions. This necessarily creates a field of tension with established approaches, which must be made explicit in order to avoid misreadings, appropriation, or reduction.

Section 8 therefore does not serve retrospective classification, but precise boundary-drawing. It clarifies the relation of the concepts developed here to existing economic, social-theoretical, and systems-theoretical approaches, identifies where points of connection exist, and where categorical differences remain. At the same time, it outlines a research agenda that follows from the present analysis and enables empirical, institutional, and theoretical further work without undermining the ontological core distinction of this paper.

The following subsections are thus not intended as an overview of the discourse, but as a safeguarding of theoretical autonomy and as an invitation to precise further development under clearly named conditions.

8.1 Delimitation from Existing Economic Approaches

In relation to classical and neoclassical economics

Classical as well as neoclassical economics treat value as the result of scarcity, productivity, or market equilibrium. Work is considered productive insofar as it can be translated into prices, wages, or output.

The approach developed here fundamentally contradicts this basic assumption. It locates the emergence of value not in the market, but in the primary-economic production of world. Markets thus appear not as origins, but as secondary mechanisms of representation and administration. The question of this paper is therefore not how value is distributed or priced, but where value can come into being at all.

In relation to Marxist value theory

Marx locates value in labour, in particular in socially necessary labour time.

The present paper shifts this perspective without negating it.

Not every labour produces value, but only that labour which appears as world.

Marx's question of how value emerges is thus supplemented by the question of when and under which conditions labour can attain value status at all.

Exploitation appears here not primarily as a wage relation, but as the ontological exclusion of primary-economic labour from the domain of appearance.

In relation to care economics and social reproduction

Care economics, feminist economics, and theories of social reproduction have convincingly shown that unpaid care work sustains societies.

What they mostly lack, however, is a structural explanation of why this work remains systematically invisible.

The present paper offers no normative appeal, but an ontological justification:

care work is primary-economic and is marginalised in secondary-economic terms precisely for that reason.

Primary economy is not a political category here, but a functional class of world-work.

In relation to degrowth and post-growth approaches

Post-growth and degrowth theories rightly criticise the ecological unsustainability of permanent expansion.

This paper complements that critique with a theory of work and value that explains why growth continues despite its destructiveness:

because secondary economy is falsely regarded as productive, while primary economy remains invisible.

Degrowth without primary-economic recentring therefore remains symptomatic, not structural.

In relation to systems theory and complexity research

Systems-theoretical approaches analyse functional differentiation, self-reference, and autopoiesis.

The approach developed here shifts the focus from functional description to ontological dependence.

Not every functional differentiation is future-capable. What is decisive is whether a system can regenerate primary-economic sustaining capacity or not.

The distinction between primary and secondary economy supplements systems theory with an asymmetrical depth dimension.

8.2 Relation to Diversity Threshold and Value Threshold

This paper is explicitly not a replacement for the concepts of the diversity threshold and the value threshold, but a structural derivation from them.

- The diversity threshold describes when systems become capable of emergence.
- The value threshold describes when work appears as value.
- The primary/secondary economy distinction describes how economy is organised when these thresholds are systematically distorted.

Together, the three concepts form a closed architecture for analysing work, value, and future-capacity.

8.3 Research Agenda

The present paper does not claim empirical completeness.

It formulates a theoretical foundation from which several testable research programmes can be derived.

(1) Empirical mapping of primary-economic work

- identification of activities with high world-sustaining capacity,
- development of qualitative indicators for regeneration, relationship, and emergence,
- differentiation between output logics and effect logics.

The aim is not monetisation, but the visibility of structural dependencies.

(2) Institutional experiments

- pilot projects with Universal Care Income,
- observation of emergence, diversity development, and reduction of exhaustion,
- comparison with UBI and work-compulsion models.

Here, the focus is not efficiency, but system stability.

(3) Neurodivergent work and primary economy

A field that has so far been scarcely researched concerns the structural affinity of neurodivergent work to the primary economy.

It must be explicitly emphasised that this is not a property of neurodivergent subjects as such, but an increased structural exposure to primary-economic modes of work that are systematically marginalised within secondary-economic orders.

Research questions include, among others:

- Why are neurodivergent working modes often world-sustaining, but market-alien?
- How do secondary-economic efficiency norms exert pathologising effects?
- Which economic architectures enable neurodivergent emergence?

(4) Measurement of world-sustaining capacity

In the long term, a primary-economy-centred economy requires new indicators:

- regenerative capacity,
- capacity to carry conflict,
- relational density,
- resilience to disturbance.

These measures do not replace GDP, but expose its blind spots.

8.4 Final Positioning

This paper does not understand itself as a contribution to an existing school, but as a shift of the theoretical frame of reference.

It argues that any economy that ignores its primary-economic basis necessarily leads to exhaustion, poverty, and ecological self-destruction—regardless of ideology, technology, or political intention.

A different economy therefore does not begin with new markets, but with the recognition of that which makes world possible at all.

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