



## *The Politics of Working Life and Meaningful Waged Work*

Can waged work under capitalism be meaningful? How does this meaningfulness express itself in the politics of working life? More fundamentally, how should work be socially and economically valued, rewarded, organised and regulated to become more meaningful? Knut Laaser and Jan Ch. Karlsson address these questions and provide a novel theory of meaningful work that is deeply ingrained in Critical Social Science approaches. The authors conceptualise work on a continuum between meaningful and meaningless that rests on objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy, dignity and recognition, all pushed and pulled by the multilayered control and power dynamics of waged work. They challenge the tendency to promote unpolitical concepts in the scholarship of meaningful work. The explanatory power of the meaningful work framework is illustrated by the analysis of empirical case studies on Norwegian industry operators, British bank employees, Indian security guards, German university academics and Swedish cabin crew members.

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-009-09857-1 — The Politics of Working Life and Meaningful Waged Work  
Knut Laaser, Jan Ch. Karlsson  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,  
a department of the University of Cambridge.

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education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009098571](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009098571)  
DOI: 10.1017/9781009089692

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First published 2024

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Laaser, Knut, 1981– author. | Karlsson, Jan Ch., 1948– author.

Title: The politics of working life and meaningful waged work / Knut  
Laaser, University of Stirling, Jan Ch. Karlsson, Karlstad University.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge  
University Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023037475 | ISBN 9781009098571 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781009089692 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Work – Social aspects. | Work – Psychological aspects. |

Work – Political aspects. | Industrial sociology.

Classification: LCC HD4904 .L23 2024 | DDC 306.3/6–dc23/eng/20230830

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023037475>

ISBN 978-1-009-09857-1 Hardback

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## *Preface*

Why another book on meaningful work? As sociologists of work we are baffled that the discipline has so far shied away from conceptually and analytically engaging with debates about meaningful work that take place in other disciplines, most prominently psychology and philosophy, as well as in interdisciplinary discussions, primarily within organisational and managerial discourses. One could argue that sociology has contributed to understandings of meaningful work by debating and developing concepts such as job quality, good work, job satisfaction or decent work, and yet these are not the same. Useful as they are, they are focusing on very particular aspects of work and employment such as job conditions, employment conditions, the nature of job tasks and their complexity, availability for learning and skill development and so on. Indeed, sociology has been heavily engaged in discourses about good and bad jobs (Kalleberg, 2011), job quality (Warhurst and Knox, 2022), mapping good work (Williams et al., 2020), job satisfaction (Berglund and Esser, 2020) and similar concepts. These concepts and the debates they have informed have been useful for making policy recommendations for improving working conditions, identifying precarious employment conditions, promoting the importance of workers' voice and strengthening skill formation systems. Yet concepts such as job satisfaction have been criticised for resulting in a rather one-dimensional understanding of work and the meaning it provides to workers. For example, many surveys about job satisfaction mix intrinsic and extrinsic factors but lack robust definitions of them. The so-called Skills and Employment Survey is a case in point. Exploring the work orientation for over twenty-five years, the survey collects data from workers about a wide range of work characteristics. Here, the most important dimension of good work for more than 20,000 respondents is a rather vague one: 'Like doing it'. Without doubt this survey and similar ones provide invaluable data about the experience of work. They pave the way for



timely policy interventions and inform further working life research. But the under-theorisation of items coupled with the combination of intrinsic with extrinsic factors muddy the water. We are left wondering what it is that workers like doing. The tasks? The people they are doing it with? The people they are doing it for? The reputation that comes with it? The belonging to a workplace in general and the comfort routines in particular can offer? A combination of some or all of these aspects?

So, a crucial question that emerges from the lack of sociological theory and empirical studies on meaningful work is: why is there such an absence? We think that sociologists have so far avoided conceptualising and researching meaningful work because it does not seem to fit the critical agenda many sociologists have when it comes to waged work. Indeed, as we will illustrate in Chapter 5, the majority of social theory and empirical research on work portray it negatively. Here work is seen as a burden and necessity that suppresses autonomy and freedom, violates dignity and fosters inequality. In fact, sociologists have been rather eager to engage in opposite discourses such as about the end of work as wage labour, about the meaninglessness of modern work and about the importance of refusing work, rather than contemplating the meaningfulness of work. As we consider ourselves to be critical social scientists as well, we are sympathetic to these approaches and consider wage labour as contested and in many ways problematic. And yet we think it is important to reclaim the field of meaningful work and develop a critical vocabulary and, essentially, a framework for exploring under which conditions waged work is nevertheless meaningful and how this meaningfulness expresses itself. Our ambition with the meaningful work framework that we present in this book is to provide a framework for capturing the complex nature of contemporary waged work as well as its experience. In doing so, our ambition is to provide a critical social theory that offers, in Axel Honneth's (2010:225) words, a vocabulary for those who 'not only fear losing their jobs but also the quality of their jobs'.

## Acknowledgements

Robert MacKenzie gave us invaluable comments on the book in one of its later stages. We are forever grateful. We also wish to express our heartfelt gratitude for comments from Stephen Ackroyd, Jonas Axelsson, Lars Ivarsson, Robin Jonsson, Kristina Palm and Chris Warhurst. Our thanks and appreciation also go out to Sharon Bolton, who worked with one of the authors on a meaningful work framework for low-skilled work and thereby contributed important ideas to the meaningful work project (Laaser and Bolton, 2022). The usual disclaimers apply.

Permission has been granted for selected use of material from the following:

Jan Ch. Karlsson (2013) *Begreppet arbete. Definitioner, ideologier och sociala former*. Lund: Arkiv.

Jan Ch. Karlsson (2015) Work, passion, exploitation *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 5(2): 3–16.

Jan Ch. Karlsson and Per Månson (2017) The concepts of work in Marx, Durkheim and Weber. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 7(2): 107–119.