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.

Knut Laaser is Senior Researcher at the Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus–Senftenberg, Germany, Lecturer at the University of Stirling, UK and Visiting Professor at Aarhus Summer University since 2019. He has published on the moral economy of work and employment and more recently on meaningful work in international and world-leading journals.

The Politics of Working Life and Meaningful Waged Work

Knut Laaser
Brandenburg University of Technology
Cottbus–Senftenberg and University of Stirling

Jan Ch. Karlsson
Karlstad University
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Tables</th>
<th>page viii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part I Problems in Analyses of Meaningful Work

### 1 Meaningful Work
- The Job Satisfaction Paradox as a Theoretical Principle for Meaningful Work 6
- The Argumentation of the Book 13

#### 2 Contradictions in the Concept of Work
- Contradictions in Definitions of Work 20
- A Note on Hegel and the Formative Character of Labour 23
- Durkheim’s Limited Concepts of Work 24
- Weber’s Diverging Concepts of Work 28
- Marx’s Combined Concepts of Work 32
- Towards a Social Science Concept of Work 37

#### 3 The Ideological Meaning of Exploitative Work Forms
- Natural Slaves: The Ideological Meaning of Slavery 53
- Subordination in the Tripartite Society: The Ideological Meaning of Serfdom 59
- Possessive Individualism: The Ideological Meaning of Wage Labour 62

#### 4 The Politics of Working Life
- Agency, Structure and Tendencies 71
## Contents

Identity, Interest and Agency 74

Formal Corporate Agency: Work Organisation, Employer Associations and Trade Unions 78

Informal Corporate Agency: Self-Organisation, Worker Collectivity and Community of Coping 80

Conclusion 87

### Part II Theoretical Traditions in Analysing Meaningful Waged Work

5 Approaching the Meaning of Waged Work through Its Meaninglessness 91

Instrumental Work Orientation Is the Solution 92

Technological Development Is the Solution 94

The (Re)appropriation of Wage Labour Is the Solution 97

Stability and Belongingness Is the Solution 101

Maintaining the Ideal of Craftwork Is the Solution 102

The Solution Lies beyond Wage Labour 106

Conclusion 111

6 Designing, Organising and Managing Meaningful Waged Work 115

The American Dream of Unlimited Individual Self-Growth: Accounts of Meaningful Wage Labour in Classical Management Theory 116

The Neo–Human Relations Troika: Maslow, McGregor and Herzberg 121

Job Characteristics, Job Engagement and the Psychological Experience of Meaningful Waged Work 128

Leadership and Meaningful Waged Work 131

Conclusion 133

7 Meaningful Wage Labour as a Human Condition: Humanist Accounts of Meaningful Waged Work 137

The Search for Meaning: Humanist Approaches to Meaningful Wage Labour 138

Passion and Meaningful Wage Labour as Calling 144

Conclusion 152

8 The Political Philosophy of Meaningful Wage Labour 154

Virtue Ethics, Flourishing and Wage Labour 155
Contents

The Problem of Low-Skilled Waged Work 161
Liberal Political Philosophy of Meaningful Waged Work: Meaningful Wage Labour as a Preference 166
The Problem of Autonomy and Dignity under Capitalism 169
Conclusion 174

Part III Meaningful and Meaningless Waged Work: Theory and Empirical Examples

9 Objective and Subjective Dimensions of Meaningful Waged Work: Towards a New Meaningful Work Framework 179
Bridging the Objective/Subjective Meaningful Work Divide 181
Autonomy 186
Dignity 198
Recognition 209
Corroborating the Framework 223
Conclusion 230

10 Theorising Meaningful and Meaningless Waged Work Mechanics, Tendencies and Property Spaces 231
Empirical Tendencies and Case Studies along the Meaningful–Meaningless Waged Work Continuum 233
Conclusion 287

11 Conclusion: Meaningful Waged Work and Its Implications for the Critical Analysis of Work and Employment 288
Work Forms Structuring the Sphere of Necessity 288
Unions and Self-organisations as Employee Agency 293
From Dualities to Dualisms 296
The Framework from Meaningful to Meaningless Waged Work 297

References 301
Index 330
Tables

3.1 Comparison of ideologies of exploitative work forms  page 67
4.1 Presence and absence of properties in propositions and Archer’s definition of Corporate and Primary Agency 77
9.1 Meaningful Waged Work according to the Management and Organisational Behaviour Tradition 224
9.2 Meaningful Waged Work according to the Humanist Tradition 226
9.3 Meaningful Waged Work according to the Political Philosophy Tradition 227
10.1 Objective and subjective tendencies of autonomy, dignity and recognition 233
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: