

## CALL FOR PAPERS: SPECIAL ISSUE OF ORGANIZATION

### DOES WORK HAVE A FUTURE?

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#### Call for Papers

The catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and its disastrous economic consequences have laid bare key vulnerabilities of our current modes of social and economic organisation that pre-existed the crisis. At the heart of these structural vulnerabilities stands the disputed status of work. The brutal shutdown of entire sectors of the economy has shown the gap between the right of every citizen to decent living standards and the demands of the current economic system, in which income is dependent to employment for most. In many countries, governments were suddenly prepared to extend support to populations they had thus far condemned to below subsistence social security and the strictures of workfare. This has highlighted the extent of precariousness that large sectors of the working population were already under, both financial and in working conditions. We have also become acutely aware that the most important work is not done by the high-flying entrepreneur or the cashed up CEO. Rather, the people who ultra-modern societies rely on are those who give the human labour of caring, healing, providing services and transport. Thus, on the one hand the pandemic crisis seems to have accelerated suspicion towards the centrality of work as preeminent form of social integration, whilst making socially useful labour more necessary than ever.

This renewed attention to the disputed value of work has emerged against the background of a growing anxiety about its very future. Technological change is central to this disquiet, as cognitive and physical machines become able to perform tasks once the unique domain of humans. Headlines herald the 'end of work' as we know it, as dastardly robots steal our jobs. There is a unique, if not idealised, dystopianism at play that sees the honest working person stripped of any agency over their own fate, as the march of history tramples them in its pursuit of that which is called progress. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, stories of machines and other technologies rendering human labour redundant have returned at regular intervals (Marx 1973 [1857]; Morris 1993 [1890]; Keynes 2010 [1930]; Wiener 1988 [1950]; Gorz 1985; Rifkin 1995; Paus, 2018).

While the call to a work ethics may have won over that of a leisure ethics, the sanctification of work as a virtue has been especially exacerbated and exploited by a neoliberalism that demands each person take responsibility, through their personal efforts, for their own fate. Yet work is becoming more fragile in its certainty, as employment conditions worsen (Standing, 2011; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018), at the same time as it is becoming more demanding in the actuality of its concrete implementation. Meanwhile paid employment remains a central political drawcard as

poll chasing politicians cry ‘jobs, jobs, jobs’ as if a return to a post-war patriarchal idyll was both possible and desirable. Amidst this, inequality expands (Piketty, 2014) between social classes, across racial divides, and from nation to nation. Concurrently, the hope for redemption through work remains intact. Many think that the pathologies of modern work are just too significant and too many for this hope to be maintained, that it is time to move to a ‘post-work’ model of social organisation (Weeks, 2011; Frayne 2015; Livingstone 2016; Cohen, 2019).

Even as late capitalism renders paid employment both necessary and insecure, there is a long history of seeing work as an intrinsically human need, one that is connected to all kinds of “goods” (Herzog, 2016): autonomy (Schwartz, 1982; Roessler, 2012; Breen, 2019), personal identity, collective pride, community, and, ultimately, a meaningful life (Veltman, 2016; Yeoman, 2019). This steadfast valuing of the importance of work transpires alongside the whimsical fantasies that yield confident predictions about how work is changing intrinsically. There is much more to the possibility of a future for work than bland assertions to the technological determinism of a fourth industrial revolution demanding new skills and training or opening up a new economic era made up of ‘green jobs’ and ‘green growth’. We are faced with the more fundamental question of whether work itself has a future beyond a seemingly irreversible widening of inequality that separates the ‘us’ of rapacious capitalism from the ‘them’ of the newly insecure post-proletariat. The desire for meaning through enterprising labour promised by neoliberalism is increasingly hard to attest to, and yet the many goods attached to working activities continue to haunt the imagination of many. And there is urgency in canvassing new ways of defining what counts as economic contribution, efficiency and social usefulness.

While much contemporary evidence points to the idea that work has been reduced to being a mere tool that feeds capital accumulation benefitting the few, we wish to consider more affirmative possibilities. These are possibilities that emerge out of a much longer history that has valued work as a uniquely human capacity central to the possibility of life’s meaning (Cockshott, 2020). Similarly, maintaining decent life conditions in the face of accelerating environmental degradation will demand new imaginaries of work and of its place in social organisation. Keeping the environmentally and socially destructive status quo of wage-based, profit-driven, productivist economy seems likely to drive us into the wall, “Green New Deal” or not. Life under the Anthropocene requires new visions of the activities and values of maintenance, care and reproduction that can sustain individuals and communities (Fraser, 2016). The special issue will work at the interstices of the philosophy of work, organisational theory and labour studies. In so doing questions of work central to contemporary life will be addressed in a manner that set an agenda for the possibility of how meaningful and decent work can be part of a more equal, just and socially transformative future.

With this special issue we seek contributions that address the fundamental question of whether work itself has a future, as a socially necessary activity, as a value and as a bundle of goods. Central to this questioning is the constitution of what work is and what types of human endeavour count as work. Also pivotal is the question of whether it is still possible that work might be anything more than a simple exchange of labour for money for the purpose of survival. Dismissed by this economic rationalism is both the possibility of meaningful work, as well as a recognition that not all work has had the

luxury of being a financially productive activity. Most commonly, this is the informal work of care and provisioning that still falls unequally on women in the home, and defines the position of women in the division of labour (cf. Federici, 1975) as well as sustains the reproduction of the workforce.

Possible questions that submissions might address include, but are not limited to:

- How is work a universally meaningful human activity, and how is its value culturally and historically contingent?
- The meaning of work as a category of social life – is work still central? If so, in what sense?
- Are new forms of work and new modes of organizing work leading to new forms of worker alienation?
- The repertoire of meanings that people assign to or derive from their work – are they changing or staying the same? Should they change, in the face of new ecological and health challenges?
- What forms of political activity might reinstate work as a driver of equality and shared prosperity?
- What is the gendered character of work, as its meaning is unequally distributed across the spectrum of sex and gender?
- How does intersectional politics relate to the value of work?
- How can we retain the idea of work as a social value in an era of modern slavery?
- How does the global expansion of inequality change the meaning and experience of work?
- Is emancipation still relevant as a political force when it comes to addressing the forms of oppression, exploitation and discrimination that characterise much work?
- What are the implications of demands for more democratic and meaningful work for organisations today and into the future?
- What kinds of organisations are more likely to produce meaningful work?
- How should collective action problems be addressed, at what scale?
- How does online technology and tele-working affect the meaning of work for individuals and work collectives?

Submission: Papers may be submitted electronically from 1 September 2021 until the deadline date of 1 October 2021 (final deadline) to SAGETrack at: <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/organization>. Papers should be no more than 10,000 words, excluding references, and will be blind reviewed following the journal's standard review process. Manuscripts should be prepared according to the guidelines published in Organization and on the journal's website: <http://www.sagepub.com/journals/Journal200981/manuscriptSubmission>. For further questions about the special issue please use the guest editors' contact email: [workfuture.organizationSI@gmail.com](mailto:workfuture.organizationSI@gmail.com)

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