

## The social value of work<sup>1</sup>

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What had long been discussed in some strands of critical social science, unexpectedly became common sense in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic: there is substantial variation in the social value of different kinds of work, and society cannot do without a certain kind of ‘essential labour’. ‘Frontline workers’ have suddenly been hailed as heroes, after decades of systematic neglect and underpayment. Many non-essential businesses were forced to reduce operations or temporarily close down as part of the pandemic containment measures, which led to an unprecedented rise in short-time work and furloughs in many sectors of the economy (Eurofound, 2020a; ILO, 2020a). Where borders are closed to interrupt infection chains, regulations often only allow ‘essential workers’ to continue crossing borders (European Commission, 2020). As vaccines become available, who is getting vaccinated first is (besides age and other risk criteria) also decided on the basis of which employees are considered essential for society and work on the ‘front lines’ (Smiljanic, 2020).

These phenomena are the effects of a forced temporary re-organisation of entire national economies by governments, decided and justified on the basis of prioritising work considered necessary for society, as opposed to work deemed dispensable. Hence, governments worldwide had to define what qualifies as ‘essential labour’ and what does not – however, it remains unclear how this was done. The decisions taken were influenced by powerful interest groups, not transparent, and not disclosing which criteria were followed. This corresponds to a profound gap in the literature: the social value of work has not been systematically investigated before (Graeber, 2019, p.10, p.196; Lawlor et al., 2009). The debate is fragmented, relevant notions are only rudimentarily developed or of limited scope. The focus usually lies on job creation and ‘full employment’ without differentiation which kinds of work are beneficial for society. Work is mostly regarded as universally productive, an end in itself, and a moral obligation (Frayne, 2015). If the value, quality or decency of work is investigated, this usually refers to working conditions or benefits (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011; ILO, 2020b), not to the actual purpose or content of work.

This contribution therefore sets out to *investigate the social value of work* – what society needs or benefits in terms of work, which work is socially meaningless or harmful, and upon what basis this can be assessed and decided. It aims at *developing categories and criteria according to which the social value of work can be assessed* (and explicitly not at producing a definitive list of occupations). For this purpose we distinguish three dimensions, or concepts of work: *essential work*, *meaningful work*, *sustainable work* – and their respective opposites. Taken together, these key dimensions of work serve as ‘proxies’ to operationalise the notion of ‘social value of work’.

The Coronavirus pandemic has clearly revealed the importance of the category of *essential work* and the difficulties with defining it. National and regional governments have used differing definitions, partly dependent on specific contexts and provisioning structures, partly also influenced by organised stakeholder or industry interests and what they deemed essential. Essential work or essential labour is a new notion which emerged in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic and lockdown measures. There is very little previous research on it, comprising just a few recent studies on various aspects of the notion, and related ones such as frontline workers (e.g., Malone et al., 2020; Rose, 2020; Tomer & Kane, 2020).

An important aspect of essential work is the notion of *meaningful work*: meaningful work contributes to fulfilling a range of fundamental human needs, however is in a number of cases not strictly necessary in an essential sense. Accordingly, not all meaningful work has been classified as essential by governments, e.g. in arts, culture, or education, spheres in which fundamental human needs such as ‘affection’ or ‘understanding’ are met (Rauschmayer & Omann, 2017). It is therefore relevant to understand such nuances of essentiality, meaning and social needs related to work. Research on meaningful work draws on a long, yet fragmented tradition (Rosso et al., 2010). The focus is mostly only on the individual level, on “work as a subjectively meaningful experience” (Steger et al., 2012; Veltman, 2016). Another typical feature in the

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<sup>1</sup> Dieser Beitrag ist auf Englisch verfasst da er auf einem englischsprachigen Forschungsprojekt basiert. Der Vortrag könnte problemlos auch auf Deutsch gehalten werden.

literature is a predominant focus on the positive attributes and impacts of work, the meaningfulness or decency of work – not its meaningless, indecent, or harmful side, which must be part of a general conception of the social value of work. This is what Graeber (2019) addresses with his theory of ‘bullshit jobs’, i.e. work that does not make a meaningful contribution to the world. However, Graeber explicitly restricts this notion to individual assessments of social value without drawing general conclusions. The related aspect of ‘socially useless jobs’ has been addressed by Dur & van Lent (2018), however, they do not address any criteria that were applied for judging on what is socially useful/useless.

Taking the exacerbating global ecological and climate crisis into account raises the necessity of identifying *(un-)sustainable work*. This is relevant because realistic climate change mitigation scenarios imply the downscaling of harmful kinds of economic activity that cannot be reorganised on the basis of renewable energy sources (Anderson et al., 2020). It is therefore crucial to know what both (un-)sustainable and (non-)essential work is in order to understand the dynamics and implications for transformation research and policies. For example, work under current conditions defined as essential is in some instances work which in its present form must be reduced or phased out under future climate change mitigation agendas, e.g. in the chemical or fossil fuel industries. Essential work should otherwise be prioritised for sustainable reorganisation. Sustainable work as a concept is ill-defined and used in widely differing meanings, and the debate on work and environment fragmented (Hoffmann & Paulsen, 2020; Eurofound, 2020b; UNEP et al., 2008). The UNDP's (2015) notion of sustainable work acknowledges that some work is detrimental to human development and the environment and therefore needs to be reduced or terminated, a crucial aspect which is also considered in the degrowth literature (e.g., Kallis et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2013; Mair et al., 2020). However, there is clearly a gap in research what kind of work exactly may be identified as un-/necessary, harmful, un-/sustainable or otherwise un-/wanted, and how.

Methodologically, the development of categories and criteria for assessing the social value of work by means of the notions of (non-)essential, socially meaningful/-less, and (un-)sustainable work, will proceed through research in three steps. First, a review of existing literature and research will be conducted, considering amongst others: secondary survey data on the issues under investigation by Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS), Sozio-oekonomisches Panel (SOEP), or the Work Orientations modules by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP);<sup>2</sup> the ‘jobs at risk index’ by the British think tank Autonomy;<sup>3</sup> research on ‘universal basic services’ identifying socially essential needs and services (Gough, 2019), or the notion of ‘socially useful production’ (Linn, 1987; Smith, 2014).

Second, the lists of essential labour that governments in some countries (e.g., Italy, Spain, UK, Norway, Germany, USA) and the European Commission have issued in the wake of the lockdown in March-April 2020, and in winter 2020-21, will be studied in detail, taking into account the politics of how these lists were created, which items were contested, and their respective differences and commonalities. Of interest is also how the lists differed regarding their purpose: whether they decided which economic activities are allowed to continue, which occupations are prioritised for vaccination, or which employees are allowed to continue crossing borders. These government lists on essential labour will be compared with information provided by states and specifically their defence units and civil protection authorities about industries, goods and services classified as essential in cases of emergency and war.

Third, this approach will be complemented with previous research by Hoffmann & Spash (2019) which provides first key findings on the question of the (un-)sustainability of work. This research assessed the climate impacts of all branches of economic activity of the Austrian economy, and the implications for employment. Under investigation were secondary data on employment, fossil fuel use, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and renewable energy deployment potential, across all NACE/ISIC-classified sectors. In order to match our previous research approach, to provide a comprehensive analysis of modern industrialised economies, and to enable comparability between national economies, different kinds of work will again be investigated across all NACE/ISIC-classified branches of economic activity. This also aligns with the approach governments have taken when deciding on essential work in the Coronavirus pandemic.

The presentation will draw on a larger research project starting in autumn 2021, which will further include a representative survey and expert interviews. By the time the written contribution is due, we will therefore not be able to give comprehensive answers yet, but provide first key insights and indications on the social value of work and criteria for its assessment.

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2 [www.esis.org/en/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-topic/work-orientations](http://www.esis.org/en/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-topic/work-orientations)

3 <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/jari>

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