Perspectives on Meaningful Work

In capitalist societies, appropriation takes place by ascribing meaning to work. In doing so, employees apply a large variety of ways. Some relate to social benefits of their work, others to their professional contributions and others raise expectations of self-will that often clash with organisational interests - just to mention few examples. This workshop aims at relating structures and social contexts to the various ways subjects assign meaning to their work. By this, a wider understanding of current conditions and processes contributing to the formation of subjects in modern workplaces is targeted.

Social scientists from Great Britain, Austria and Germany will present their research findings and receive comments by colleagues working in similar research areas. The event is open to the public with advanced registration welcomed.

Organisation & Contact

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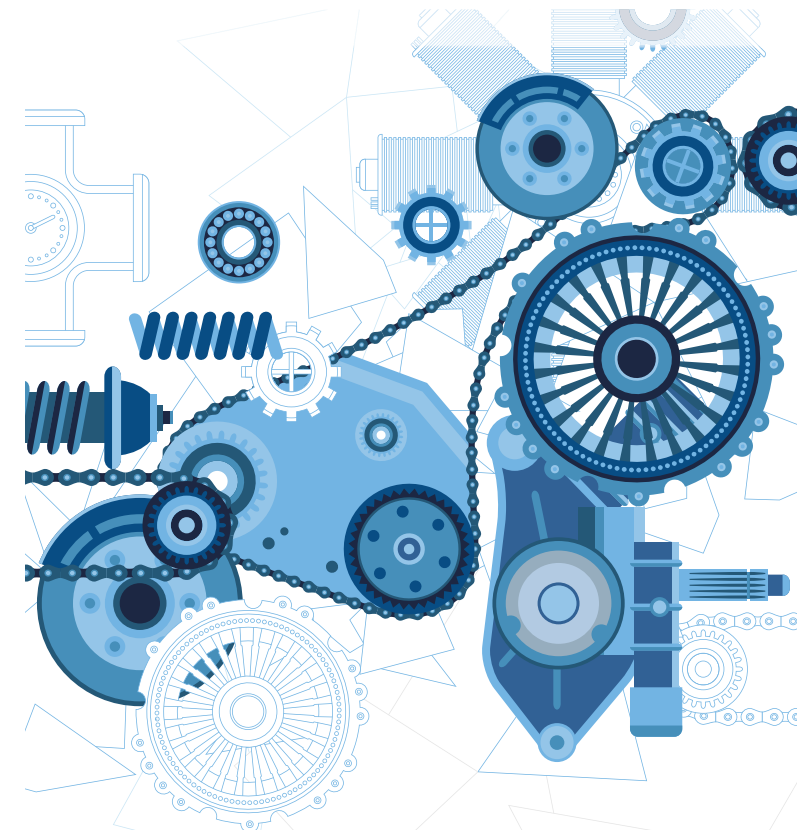martin.kurth1@mailbox.tu-dresden.de

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Workshop

Perspectives on Meaningful Work

21st & 22nd February 2020

Friday, 21st February 2020

4.00 pm   Welcome

4.15 pm | **Dr. Charles Umney**, University of Leeds
Class and classification in the sociology of work

Class still matters. However, current sociological mainstream has tended to put too much emphasis on the development of new systems of classification, as an end in themselves. This classificatory impulse has given rise to concepts such as the "precariat", the "elites" and the "traditional working class", which are often analytically problematic and politically highly loaded. Instead, I consider what it may mean to recentralise core Marxist categories of class for our understanding of work. It requires a renewed focus not on typologies but on processes and relationships. It prompts us to focus on the nature of the relationship between those who depend on selling their labour power in order to survive, and those who profit from this labour power. Looking at the sociology of work from this perspective implies a shift towards using categories such as the idea of control in a cross-cutting way and to examine changes in the sociology of work by understanding the idea of class as a dynamic relationship.

4.45 pm   **Comment** by **Dr. Sarah Nies**
            Institute of Social Research e.V., Munich
            Discussion

5.10 pm | **Prof. Dr. Nancy Harding**, University of Bath
On meaningful work as an impossible utopian dream

Organisations bring together all sorts of people, and some of them do not act in nice ways, but may even justify their destructive behaviours. Therefore, I criticise the possibility of meaningful work. I use Schopenhauer's concept of 'the will' and Judith Butler's interpretation of precarity to argue against a universal theory of meaningful work in favour of an individuated approach that recognises that what can be meaningful for some can be meaningless for others. I develop a bully's theory of meaningful work, a narcissist's approach to meaningful work, and a sociopath's account of what meaningful work might mean for them, alongside that of an ordinary, everyday person who seeks only instrumental purpose in her/his work, and regards work as a necessary interruption to a meaningful life. The aim of this analysis is to look towards a notion of work as less meaningless rather than more meaningful.

5.45 pm   **Comment** by **Dr. des. Falk Eckert**
            Institute of Social Research e.V., Munich
            Discussion

Saturday, 22nd February 2020

9.30 am | **Dr. Friedericke Hardering**, University of Frankfurt a.M.
Meaningful work and the question of a contribution to society

In the discussion about meaningful work it becomes apparent that for employees the social benefit of their occupation is important, but is often less important compared with other sources of meaning at work such as well-being or collegial relations. In order to understand these findings, a reconstruction of 57 employees' everyday knowledge and views on society was conducted. The sample consists of physicians, social workers in management positions and social entrepreneurs. Results of the reconstruction of the work-related biographical narrative interviews indicate the reason for considering contributions to society to be less important: employees rely on the overall functioning of the societal division of labour as contributing to social benefit, of which their work forms one part.

10.05 am   **Comment** by **Dr. Stefan Kerber-Clasen**
             University of Hamburg
             Discussion

10.30 am | **Dr. Silke Roth**, University of Southampton
Finding purpose after leaving the Armed Forces – Meaningful work in the Third Sector

While there is a considerable body of research indicating that volunteering is good for well-being, research into meaningful work in the Third Sector has been more limited. Overall, current writing on meaningful work in the Third Sector tends to repeat normative narratives of motive rather than presenting empirical research, which investigates how those active in their sector organisations understand their work as meaningful. In this contribution, I discuss preliminary findings from my ongoing ethnography of the disaster relief organisation Team Rubicon UK and discuss in what respect the organisation offers meaningful work for volunteers, interns and staff. My data indicates that work in this charity needs to be understood in a life-course perspective and is related to prior, concurrent and future work experiences.

11.05 am   **Comment** by **Franziska Meyer-Lantzberg**
             University of Hannover
             Discussion

11.30 am   Break

12.00 pm | **Dr. Stefanie Hürtgen**, University of Salzburg
Meaningful work and the constitution of citizen-workers

I discuss, both theoretically and empirically, that for the subjective constitution as an active, self-confident citizen-worker, the reference to one's own work as useful for society is crucial. While theoretical perspectives emphasize the relation between the perceived content of work and the worker's self-constitution, empirical research shows that workers develop a strong normative linkage between their work and its societal content on the one hand and the social and political rights they refer to in their daily working-life, individually or collectively, on the other. Given the widespread deteriorating working conditions and precarization of social rights, the linkage between societal usefulness of work and the subjective constitution as citizen-worker is de facto under attack. Thus, the need to grasp this relationship theoretically and to ask for its emancipatory potential becomes a matter of urgency.

12.35 pm   **Comment** by **Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Menz**
             University of Hamburg
             Discussion

1.00 pm | **Dr. Ruth Yeoman**, University of Oxford
Work in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is an informal but popular term used to describe the present condition of life upon the earth, where 'humankind has become a global geological force in its own right' (Steffen et al., 2011: 843). A neglected aspect of the necessary transition is the nature of work in the Anthropocene. Green jobs, green growth, and the Green New Deal maintain a narrative arc of work that is tied to neo-liberal economic conceptions of employment and labour market competition (Bowen, 2012). Instead, we need a new ethico-normative framing of work consisting in three kinds of activities: the creation of an identity based on responsibility, stewardship and care; work of creating and participating in inter-subjective space of values and meanings; and work of organising valuable beings and things into associational ecosystems.

1.35 pm   **Comment** by **PD Dr. Stephan Voswinkel**
            University of Frankfurt a.M.
            Discussion