The Social Value of Work

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Abstract

Coronavirus pandemic, war-induced gas shortages, residual emissions, droughts and other ecological constraints: the political decisions taken to cope with these phenomena have been (and likely will continue to be) justified on the basis of distinguishing and prioritising different kinds of work as to what is regarded essential or dispensable for society. However, it is unclear how such decisions have been taken. This corresponds to a profound gap in the literature that usually focuses indiscriminately on aggregate growth, job creation and full employment. The social value of work, its substantial variation regarding different kinds of work and how this can be assessed, has not been researched before. This paper therefore investigates the social value of work and on what basis it can be evaluated. It distinguishes the two key categories of sustainable work and essential work, and identifies and discusses criteria for assessing these categories based on empirical data. While for un/sustainable work relatively unambiguous biophysical assessment criteria can be developed, assessing in/essential work is less straightforward due to its contextual and political character, and because it depends on the specific aims of a given political unit that determine its vital needs and functions. Overall, not only a structured, science-based approach is lacking, but also democratic institutions for deliberating, organising, and discontinuing in/essential and un/sustainable work, based on principles of rationing and non-market allocation. Modern societies are thus likely to remain stuck in the structural and increasingly disastrous impasse of jobs at all costs as main political goal.

Keywords: work; sustainable work; essential work; social value of work; critiques of work; non-market allocation; biophysical realism; climate change mitigation; structural transformation

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"The field of value is always contested territory." (Graeber, 2019)

INTRODUCTION¹

What had been discussed in some strands of critical social science for decades (e.g., Gorz, 1989), 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 were closed to interrupt infection chains, regulations often only allowed 'essential workers' to continue crossing borders (European Commission, 2020a). As vaccines became available, who was getting vaccinated first was (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 were 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 and authorities 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 various interest groups, not transparent, and not disclosing which criteria were followed.

¹ This paper has been presented at the Momentum Congress in Hallstatt (Austria) in October 2021.

What is more, these questions continue to concern us beyond the coronavirus pandemic. In the context of gas shortages induced by the Russian war against Ukraine, rationing of fossil gas again brings up questions of (and decisions on) which kinds of economic activity, firms, types of consumption, even art objects are essential or non-essential, to be or not to be prioritised in a situation of overall energy scarcity – something that will become even more urgent in a future energy system based only on renewable energy. Related to that, on the horizon of future climate debates is another kind of ecological constraint, namely the question of 'residual emissions': who will be allowed to continue to emit greenhouse gases when under rapidly declining carbon budgets overall emissions must be reduced substantially? Besides questions of energy supply and emissions, also the consequences of the exacerbating ecological crisis already gesture in the same direction: For example, the recent droughts stirred discussions about which sectors of the economy are to receive limited water supplies - is agriculture to be prioritised over industry and nuclear power plants, and if yes, what kinds of agricultural production? Overall, it is increasingly clear that questions of rationing and non-market allocation on the basis of prioritising certain economic activities over others are here to stay. However, as during the pandemic, it is still unclear how such decisions were or can be taken, neither according to which criteria, nor on what kind of procedural or institutional basis (a fact that has already caused some actors in unions and industry to demand democratic, public debate about the fundamental question of what is essential for society, and what is not).

This corresponds to a profound gap in the literature: The focus in the relevant academic and public debates usually lies on growth in productivity and aggregate GDP, job creation and 'full employment', ignoring that not all kinds of work are equally beneficial for society. Work is mostly regarded as universally productive, an end in itself, and a moral obligation (Frayne, 2015). The social value of work – differentiating concrete kinds of work, whether they are

essential, unnecessary, or detrimental to society, and how this can be assessed – has not systematically been researched 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. If the value or quality of work is investigated, this usually refers to working conditions or benefits, not to the actual *purpose or content* of work. There is also a predominant focus on the decency of work, not its prevalent indecent and harmful side (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011; ILO, 2020b). Research also often only addresses the subjective level, the meaning or value to individual lives (e.g., Steger et al., 2012; Veltman, 2016), not to society at large. In the few cases where the latter (i.e., the value of work in its societal dimension including work's problematic, unnecessary, or harmful aspects) is actually the object of interest, recent research has only taken subjective accounts of individual workers (partly in aggregated form) into consideration, without discussing defining criteria or drawing general conclusions (Graeber, 2019; Dur & van Lent, 2019; Soffia et al., 2021).

This paper therefore sets out to investigate the social value of work² in a comprehensive sense: what society needs or benefits in terms of work, what kinds of work are socially useless or harmful, and upon what basis this can be evaluated. It aims at developing criteria according to which the social value of work can be assessed (and not at producing a definitive list of occupations). For this purpose, two dimensions or categories of work are distinguished: *essential work* and *sustainable work*, and their respective opposites. These two key concepts of work serve as 'proxies' to operationalise the notion of 'social value of work'. Evidently,

^{2 &#}x27;Work' is understood here in the specific modern sense as commodified gainful employment, including its norms, structures and institutions. In this predominant form, work is a peculiarly modern cultural phenomenon and one of the main social relations of modern industrial society. This definition of work is contested, and only partly for sound reasons. For a critique of extended notions of work see Hoffmann (2021). Moreover, 'work' means work *as such*; concrete activities, their content and purpose, according to which different kinds of work can be distinguished.

constructing a general notion of the social value of work is a substantial and complex task, which a short paper of this kind cannot accomplish sufficiently. The aim of this contribution is therefore to explore the two notions under investigation, sustainable work and essential work, give some indications of criteria for their assessment based on empirical data, and thus gain preliminary insights on the broader issues raised here. In the following, both notions will be addressed in turn, before drawing conclusions.

SUSTAINABLE WORK³

The global ecological crisis poses existential threats to life on Earth for timespans beyond human imagination. In particular, the intensifying climate crisis requires rapid and fundamental changes to modern societies and economies so as to ensure sustainable living conditions in the long term (IPCC, 2021). Modern-day work plays a central role in this context: it is a main driver of the ecological crisis and structurally inapt to support life and provide for social needs in a sustainable way, and accordingly has to be transformed to become sustainable (Hoffmann & Paulsen, 2020). To be relevant for the global challenges and crises of the 21st century and beyond, any meaningful notion of the social value of work therefore needs to incorporate the aspect of sustainable and unsustainable work.

'Sustainable work' as a concept is ill-defined – there are just few, and quite incoherent existing notions of sustainable work. For example, sustainable work as defined by UNDP (2015) acknowledges that some work is detrimental to human development and the environment and therefore needs to be reduced or terminated, along with the creation of new kinds of work and the transformation of existing work in order to preserve it. Otherwise, the notion is still uncritically rooted in the conventional sustainable development and SDG framework, including

³ This sub-section is based on Hoffmann (2022).

a commitment to economic growth, modern development and 'progress'. A second elaborated approach to sustainable work (Littig, 2002, 2018; Barth et al., 2016, 2019), in contrast, draws on a critical research tradition including feminist, Marxist, and Polanyian thought as well as critiques of growth and development. It argues for a fundamental social-ecological transformation beyond conventional 'green economy' proposals, and for work to be at the centre of this transformation. Yet, this approach is uncritical insofar as it naturalises work by obscuring its specific modern cultural form, and as it takes the typically modern elevated moral status of work as intrinsically good and an end in itself for granted.

Taking a different approach, the argument here is for starting from the premise of biophysical realism, which means recognising that all human activity is embedded within and dependent on the Earth's ecosystems, natural environment and fundamental laws of physics, and thus based on material and energy throughputs. Accordingly, all productive activity impacts the biophysical environment – and currently at clearly unsustainable levels (Hoffmann & Paulsen, 2020). Therefore, in order to develop criteria which allow one to assess which kinds of work are un/sustainable, ecological considerations need to be put at the centre of our analysis.

Environmental concerns are countless. Here, the climate crisis is taken as an illustration; it is one of the most existential global ecological problems and clearly decisive for (the collapse of) stable, life-supporting environmental conditions on Earth in the short term, and thus crucial for any discussion of sustainability. At the same time, climate change as a physical phenomenon is well understood, specifically concerning its drivers and what is required to mitigate it (IPCC, 2021). Taking climate change mitigation seriously, in line with the best available science and international legal obligations under the Paris Agreement, means for industrialised countries to undertake profound, rapid and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to *absolute* zero, to phase out the use of fossil fuels, and to achieve a structural transformation towards a post-fossil economy based entirely on renewable energy, all within the short timeframe of approximately 15 years (Anderson et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2019; Allwood et al., 2019).

From a physical science perspective, therefore, these basic requirements of climate change mitigation suggest an analytical focus on CO₂ emissions (and their reduction towards zero), fossil fuel use, and the potential for transitioning to renewable energy, i.e., full substitution of fossil fuels through renewable energy, assuming the current state of technology that is decisive for the relevant timeframe of less than two decades (Nemet et al., 2018). These aspects allow one to assess whether a concrete kind of work is un/sustainable with regard to climate change mitigation.⁴ In other words, *CO₂ emissions, fossil fuel use,* and *renewable energy potential* are necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for work to be un/sustainable, and therefore constitute concrete practical criteria for assessing the category of un/sustainable work. More precisely, if CO₂ emissions and fossil fuel use in a particular work activity tend towards zero and there is potential for reorganisation based on renewable energy, then this particular activity is in principle sustainable (unless other severe ecological harm is inflicted); otherwise, it is unsustainable. These criteria thus allow us to demarcate both what is sustainable and unsustainable work in terms of climate change.

By way of illustration, these criteria can be applied to the empirical case of the Austrian national economy as an average example of a modern industrial economy and 'developed country' signatory to the Paris Agreement. Drawing on empirical data on employment, CO₂ emissions, fossil fuel use, and renewable energy potential across all NACE/ISIC-classified branches of

⁴ These aspects are most central for climate change mitigation besides other necessary measures such as halting land use changes, and restoring ecosystems. Moreover, emissions of all other greenhouse gases besides carbon dioxide (especially methane) need to be strongly and quickly reduced as well. Yet, CO₂ can be regarded as the most relevant greenhouse gas given the nearlinear relationship between CO₂ emissions and global warming (IPCC, 2021, p. 36).

economic activity (for the years 2016 and 2017), the case provides a comprehensive picture of the un/sustainability of work with regard to climate change mitigation (Hoffmann & Spash, 2021).

Key findings include the fact that the overall implications for work are far more substantial and involve considerably more work in more sectors than the literature usually suggests. There is no field of work that is unproblematic in terms of CO₂ emissions and fossil fuel use; almost all economic sectors have emitted more than 10,000 tons of CO₂ per year, and many much more than that. Those sectors typically associated with low environmental impact exhibit considerable climate impacts (e.g., 'education' with 409,605 tons of CO2 or 'human health and social work activities' with 154,126 tons of CO2 in 2016). Moreover, existing renewable energy technologies cannot be deployed across a whole range of economic activities that are dependent on the specific properties of fossil fuels (e.g., in 'air transport' or 'manufacture of basic metals'). This means that these kinds of work currently cannot be reorganised on the basis of renewable energy – especially at the present scale of energy consumption; this amounts to nearly 30 percent of the total Austrian workforce in 2017 (Hoffmann & Spash, 2021). This approach allows us to conclude that based on the criteria of CO₂ emissions and fossil fuel use, almost all work in an average modern industrialised economy such as Austria is currently unsustainable and in need of reduction and reorganisation. In terms of renewable energy potential, between a quarter and a third of all work in Austria is structurally dependent on fossil fuels and thus unsustainable, i.e. it is work that cannot be sustained given the urgent imperative of climate change mitigation and hence needs to be discontinued, at least temporarily.

ESSENTIAL WORK

As described, biophysical criteria are ultimately decisive for assessing the kinds of work that are (in-)compatible with serious climate change mitigation, and thus un/sustainable. Where identified as unsustainable, work needs to be reduced or entirely phased out. However, there are certain kinds of work which cannot simply be reduced across-the-board, and would need to be prioritised for sustainable reorganisation due to their essential importance for the functioning of society (such as health care in the example given earlier). Moreover, there are vital social and ecological needs that are currently unfulfilled which would require the creation of new kinds of work (e.g., for provisioning of small-scale renewable energy, or ecosystem restoration). Therefore, besides the issue which kinds of work can or cannot be sustained from an ecological point of view, it is required to further take into account which work is or is not necessary for society (and the biosphere at large) to fulfil its needs and functions. This is where the notion of essential work comes in.

The coronavirus pandemic has clearly revealed the importance of the category of essential work and the difficulties with defining it. The pandemic containment measures required distinctions to be drawn between the socially essential and non-essential in terms of work – unprecedented in modern peacetime where economic growth has been the core indicator of interest independently of what activity causes the economy to grow. This novel distinction had farreaching consequences for workers, businesses and society as a whole, yet it remains unclear how it was done. National and regional governments and authorities have used differing definitions of what constitutes essential work, partly dependent on specific contexts and provisioning structures, partly also influenced by organised stakeholder or industry interests and what they deemed essential. As an academic concept and debate, there has been a surge in interest in this new notion since the pandemic's onset, however there is still quite little previous, systematic research on it, comprising just a number of 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; Herzog et al., 2022).

To investigate the category of (non-)essential work in terms of criteria by which it could be assessed, requires a different approach than in the previous section: It is not as straightforward as establishing a set of criteria based on physical laws (such as the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere compatible with habitable living conditions on Earth). It also needs a broader, more general basis for assessment than subjective accounts of individual workers (as survey respondents) judging on their respective jobs (as used by Graeber, 2019; Dur & van Lent, 2019; Soffia et al., 2021). Such a general, scientifically informed basis is lacking (Graeber, 2019; Lawlor et al., 2009). This also extends to the related, long-standing and elaborated debates on human needs, wants, and capabilities, which are evidently highly relevant when assessing the kinds of work that are necessary for society to fulfil its needs and functions. However, work as such has never played any systematic role in this body of literature – rather, income and work are usually assumed as needs and/or satisfiers themselves without distinguishing their actual content and purpose (e.g., Gough, 2019; Rauschmayer & Omann, 2017).

Empirically, the closest there currently is to draw on are the lists of essential work (or labour, workers, occupations, industries, infrastructures) that governments on several administrative levels (supra-national, state, sub-state) in several countries have issued in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic's various waves and lockdowns since March 2020. Studying and comparing these lists gives a number of preliminary insights into the kinds of work that can be regarded as indispensable for society. Using the lists that the Italian government (Governo Italiano, 2020), the German *Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe* (BBK,

2020), a dedicated authority of the US Department of Homeland Security (CISA, 2021a, 2021b), and the European Commission (2020b)⁵ have published, shows first and foremost that these lists are far from consistent. Just a small number of items appear uncontested, namely the kinds of work concerned with provisioning of public health and health care, agriculture and food production, wastewater. transportation and logistics, energy, water and telecommunications and information technology systems, financial and insurance services, as well as state and administrative incl. public safety, law enforcement and emergency services (BBK, 2020; CISA, 2021a, 2021b; European Commission, 2020b; Governo Italiano, 2020). Besides these commonalities, the lists differ, for example, with regard to child and elder care (included by the EU and Italy, not BBK or CISA), or retail trade, critical manufacturing, chemicals, and waste (including nuclear materials and waste) management (included by Italy and CISA, not EU and BBK). Apart from the kinds of work explicitly designated as essential, it is also instructive what is deemed non-essential (i.e. not included in the lists), which for the case of Italy (Governo Italiano, 2020) comprises, for example, car manufacturing, trade and rental, building construction, production and wholesale trade of a whole range of consumer goods, the hospitality industry including food services, advertising and marketing research, and tourist offices.

The incoherent picture is further complicated if the notion of essential work is broadened to include the aspect of meaningful work. Meaningful work often contributes to fulfilling fundamental human needs (such as 'affection' or 'understanding'; Rauschmayer & Omann, 2017), however may be interpreted as not strictly necessary in an essential sense. Accordingly, not all work which can be considered meaningful has been classified as essential, e.g. in arts,

⁵ These countries/authorities have been pragmatically selected primarily based on the availability of comparable data.

culture, or education: While Italy excludes arts and culture, sports, entertainment, recreation, and personal services concerned with physical well-being, BBK explicitly includes media and culture in a broad sense. Education is included by Italy and CISA, not by BBK or EU (BBK, 2020; CISA, 2021a, 2021b; European Commission, 2020b; Governo Italiano, 2020).

The issue of determining what society needs or does not need in terms of work then gets clearly contested if the fulfilment of societal needs and functions is extended beyond meeting basic needs to upholding a certain kind of social structure. This is very well captured in the German equivalent to 'essential', i.e. 'system-relevant', which not coincidentally has first been used in the 2008 financial crisis to designate banks and other financial institutions crucial for the capitalist, debt-based financial system to continue operating. Also the CISA's (2021a) formulation of 'maintaining resilience of the Nation's critical infrastructure' points towards what is deemed essential for a certain purpose, namely upholding "security, national economic security, and national public health or safety" (ibid.). This then includes the 'defense industrial base sector' (including military, intelligence, and space forces), the 'critical manufacturing sector', the 'energy sector' very explicitly containing all kinds of fossil fuel industries, and the 'financial services sector' including 'capital markets activities', amongst others. Also Italy (Governo Italiano, 2020) and BBK (2020) include financial and insurance activities (even including business consulting, and securities and derivatives trading, respectively), without any differentiation as to their social usefulness. Besides easily conceivable critique of privileging, without distinguishing, financial markets and modern large-scale military systems over activities of, e.g., child and elder care or cultural institutions, it is in particular ecological concerns which require to question these definitions of social necessity or dispensability more fundamentally. As discussed earlier, realistic climate change mitigation scenarios imply the downscaling of harmful kinds of work that cannot be reorganised on the basis of renewable

energy technologies. This means difficult implications for structural transformation if work under current conditions defined as essential is in certain instances work which in its present form must be reduced or phased out due to its unsustainability, e.g. in the aviation, chemical, steel, or fossil fuel industries (all classified as essential by Italy and CISA).

For the purpose of spelling out assessment criteria of the social value or necessity of work, it follows that there is evidently a different set of criteria for essential work for the aim of upholding the functioning of modern capitalist societies with their fossil fuel based and financialised economies and military-dependent, competitive national states, than what would be (criteria for) essential work if the aim was, for example, to create a social structure compatible with sustaining life on Earth. In the latter case, 'essential' would be assessed in relation to the fulfilment of fundamental human and ecological needs to support and sustain both social life, and life in general. Decisive for carving out criteria for defining 'essential work' must therefore be the question 'essential for what' – what kind of society and which social functions are to be maintained (or created), what is the goal or horizon against which essentiality is being judged?⁶

Even if this was determined, these questions will remain contested and vary over time and space. This requires not only public debate but a novel kind of institutionalised deliberation and valuation processes on various scales and levels concerning the amount, means and ends of work that a given society wishes to pursue for a given aim. Institutions which would be capable of organising this in a democratic way are currently clearly lacking. This relates to debates on

⁶ A historical example are the 'reserved occupations' which have also been detailed in lists issued by governments before and during WWII. Workers in the listed occupations were not allowed into military service to ensure a sufficient workforce in essential occupations for the provisioning of the civilian population and war production. In other words, the aim here was to maintain the resources and stability for successful warfare "in the general national interests". For a quite extensive list of pre-war Britain cf. Schedule of Reserved Occupations (1939).

economic democracy which refers to new institutions of substantive democratic control over the economy (Johanisova & Wolf, 2012; cf. also Gorz, 1989; Gough, 2019). In this regard, both coronavirus and climate crisis prove the point that the labour market as an organising principle for the allocation of commodified work is not only undemocratic, but structurally inapt for distributing, discontinuing, or creating work according to criteria of sustainability and social necessity (Hoffmann, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

To summarise, this contribution has made some first steps towards exploring the social value of work along the notions of sustainable work and essential work, and towards identifying criteria for assessing these categories. It argued for a conceptualisation of sustainable work that starts from its biophysical basis, i.e. the embeddedness of all human productive activity in the physical reality of matter and energy, and consequently, within the context of the global ecological crisis. This approach allowed us to derive fairly exact biophysical criteria for assessing the un/sustainability of work on the basis of empirical data on climate change mitigation. Taking an additional focus on essential work into consideration, i.e. what society needs or does not need in terms of work, no longer allows a straightforward approach given the concept's ambiguous, contextual and political character. Drawing on empirical material in form of the lists of essential labour that governments have issued during the coronavirus pandemic accordingly showed not only that they differ in important aspects, but also that a judgement on the non-/essentiality of work and respective derivation of assessment criteria depends on the specific aims and purpose of a given political unit (state/society/economy) which determine its vital social needs and functions. This is complicated further by the fact that not only a structured, science-based approach to differentiate various kinds of work, but also democratic institutions for systematically deliberating and deciding on such issues do not currently exist.

While in public debates on the social value of work in the context of the recent pandemic it has often been claimed that the crisis "has made clear that care and life-making work are the essential work of society" (Jaffe, 2020), this is only partly true for the rationales according to which current institutions have defined essential. If it really was the case that life-supporting work was put in the centre of political decision-making, this would have difficult implications. Not only would different criteria for essential work have been applied with the result that different occupations would have been classified as essential and non-essential. Also, certain kinds of work that under current conditions are deemed essential would need to be discontinued in a whole range of sectors because they are unsustainable, i.e. incompatible with sustaining life on Earth in ecological terms. The aim of sustaining life thus goes far beyond the meaning of 'essential' as used in the coronavirus crisis where maintaining the present type of society was the main purpose. Sustaining life would also be an aim or horizon which would yield relatively unambiguous biophysical criteria on the basis of which one could deliberate and weed out different kinds of work, giving guidance what is possible and required to sustain social life and all life on Earth.

These are evidently just first indications on a broad and complex topic that requires more substantial research – and political institutions of a novel kind. If taken seriously, this implies profound political changes, towards new structures and institutions for deliberating and deciding on, organising, allocating and discontinuing un/necessary and un/sustainable work, beyond commodified work in labour markets. This outlook is highly contested, especially given the specific constitution of modern industrial society as centred and structurally dependent on work, as well as culturally biased towards work as glorified and an end in itself and moral obligation, which restricts critical thinking and imagination of alternatives, and prevents more profound changes from happening by rendering work sacrosanct to any critique (Hoffmann &

Paulsen, 2020). Without questioning work more fundamentally, including its specific modern conception and underlying norms and morality, modern societies remain in the structural, and increasingly disastrous, impasse of job creation and full employment at all cost as main political goals.

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