RESEARCH PLAN

FOR THE AMMODO PROJECT

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1. Title: The political philosophy of work – expanding our vision

2. Subject(s): Political philosophy, in interdisciplinary exchange with neighbouring disciplines (law, sociology, organization studies, history, anthropology, etc.)

3. Summary (scientific question/proposition and approach)
3.1 The need for an expanded vision of the meaning and organization of work
Grownups in Western societies spend a large chunk of their time at "work," in the sense of formal employment contracts or self-employment. Many of them spend additional hours on care work or volunteer for associations or NGOs. The way "work" is understood and structured has a massive impact on our daily lives and on our biographies: Where, how, and with whom do we spend our days? What counts as a "successful" live? What gives meaning to our activities? Who are we, and how does our work play a role in defining our identities? Philosophical questions about work reach from the very applied and practical (e.g., what is a fair way of accommodating private care responsibilities when making promotion decisions at work?) to the deeply existential (e.g. to what extent "are" human beings "working animals"?).

Despite the centrality of work in our lives, the Western mainstream of political philosophy has not paid much attention to the question of work in the last few decades. With a focus on theories of justice,[1] the main question became that of the distributions of the fruits of work, and of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation more broadly speaking – certainly an important dimension, but by no means the only one that matters about work. More recently, however, there has been renewed interest in this topic, driven not least by the changes that the digital transformation of work (e.g. platform work) has brought.[2] While some researchers call for an "end" to work (in a "post-work" society[3]), others call for a fairer distribution of wage work and care work,[4] or for changes in the organization of work that give workers more voice.[5] Last but not least, the challenges of climate change raise serious questions about whether our "working society," with its patterns of production and

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[1] See notably Rawls 1971, Dworkin 2000, Cohen 2008, and the numerous debates that followed them.
[2] And indication is the list of conferences and workshops to which I have been invited in recent months (as speaker, commentator, or keynote): Conference "The "Betrieb" (organization, firm, establishment, …) as corporate actor – a theoretical and empirical challenge" (HHU Hamburg, April 2021), Conference "Egalitarianism and the Future of Work" (University of Stockholm, May 2021), Panel at the LSE PPE Program on the Future of Work, with Ken Loach and Elizabeth Anderson (LSE, May 2021), Conference "Working as Equals" (Saint Mary's College of California and the Wharton School, June 2021), Workshop "Labour Justice and the Transformation of Work" (University of Pompeu Fabra, July 2021), Conference "The Significance of Work (University of Tilburg, August 2021), Workshop "All work and no play?" (University of St. Andrew, September 2021).
[3] For an overview see Beckett 2018.
[4] This is, of course, an old feminist topic, see e.g. Fraser 2016.
[5] For an overview of the recent debate about workplace democracy see Frega et al. 2019.

consumption, living and commuting, etc. is fit for the future, or needs to be fundamentally transformed – which would inevitably also require a rethinking, and restructuring, of our work lives.[6]

Arguably, the way in which work is conceptualized and organized in Western societies is stuck in several outdated paradigms that have long been refuted on a theoretical level, but that continue to influence many of our social practices of work (e.g. routines of task allocation, criteria of selection and promotion of candidates, notions of what counts as "good" work, etc.).

- An assumption about the need for <u>hierarchies</u> at work; these hierarchies resemble the non-democratic political structures of our feudal past but are justified in a meritocratic way: the idea is that those at the top of hierarchies are somehow *better* and therefore deserve power over others. This assumption often goes hand in hand with assumptions about human nature that focus on the need for control and that hold that the main motivator for work is either monetary or careerist (to climb up in the hierarchies in order to earn a higher income and higher status).

  o But the legitimacy of such hierarchies has long been criticized on a theoretical level, as can also been seen by the growing interest in workplace democracy.[7] On a more practical level, a growing movement in management studies challenges the assumption that traditional hierarchies are necessary or even useful, and practitioners experiment with new forms of non-hierarchical or less-hierarchical workplaces, sometimes captured under the term "evolutionary" organizations.[8] Moreover, psychological research has long shown that the human motivation to do good work is *not* primarily monetary (instead, Dan Pink summarizes the results of many studies as showing three main motivators: autonomy, mastery, and purpose[9]). This raises additional questions about the usefulness of traditional "carrots and sticks" (bonuses, promotions, etc. – or the denial of these) in the workplace.

- An assumption about the <u>legitimacy of single-minded profit-seeking</u> that holds that if individuals or companies pursue financial gains, their activities will, by the alleged "invisible hand" of the market, lead to the common good. According to this doctrine, there is no need to ask for the purpose of work, and work organizations (e.g. companies) are mere "portfolios" to be combined and recombined according to the profit logic. The *ways* in which work contributes to making profits is side-lined in favour of a purely quantitative consideration of less vs. more profit. Moreover, on the societal level, this outdated assumption goes hand in hand with a prioritization of profit-seeking companies as the "normal" case, with other organizational forms (public, not-for-profit, mission-driven, etc.) considered as outliers.

  o But a plethora of research shows that a) the origins of the "invisible hand" metaphor in the history of economic thought have been thoroughly misunderstood;[10] b) markets can easily lead to inefficient outcomes, e.g. when there are "market failures"[11] or "information asymmetries,"[12] and need to be carefully regulated to turn profit-seeking into societally useful channels

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[6] On "sustainable" work, see e.g. Littig 2018.
[7] See notably Ferreras 2017.
[8] Laloux 2014.
[9] Pink 2011.
[10] Herzog 2013.
[11] Arrow 1969.
[12] Akerloff 1970.

– but such regulation is absent in many markets, especially at the global level; c) a focus on profit (or other quantitative indicators) can all too easily undermine the orientation of workers towards the purpose of their activities and thereby introduce various kinds of distortions.[13] While even many business leaders have recognized that the focus on profits and/or shareholder value alone is misguided, in the everyday life of many organizations it continues to be an imperative that profits be made. Moreover, not-profit-oriented organizations (e.g. purpose-oriented cooperatives or public services) are an important part of our economic systems. They often generate high societal value, even under the difficult circumstances of an otherwise capitalist economic system.

- An assumption that all economic activities, including work, should be oriented towards <u>growth</u>, because growth is good for societies and enables greater human flourishing. In politics, a growing GDP (sometimes together with raising share prices in financial markets) are often taken to be *the* measure of success for the economic policies of a country. In the past, a growing GDP usually went hand in hand with higher life expectancy and greater well-being for large parts of the population.[14]

  o However, in recent decades a number of issues throw doubt on the validity of this assumption: a) Since the 1970s, a lot of growth (as traditionally understood and measured) has happened in the top tier of the income scale, where it is questionable whether it contributes to the overall good of society.[15] b) Ecological limits, most of all with regard to CO_2 emissions, raise questions about the ethical permissibility of traditional forms of growth. c) The notion of economic growth, as measured by GDP, pays no attention to the *kind* of economic activities (for example, first causing and then repairing environmental damage, instead of avoiding it in the first place, might lead to a higher GDP). Nor does it pay attention to notions of preservation or maintenance (of the environment, of cultures, etc.), and it invisibilizes numerous forms of work – including unpaid care work, with all the implications for gender justice that comes with this fact – that do not show up in the balance sheets in which "growth" is measured. While developing countries may still need growth in the traditional sense (I here remain agnostic on this question), for developed countries it is highly questionable whether "growth" is still a useful measuring rod for capturing economic activities, and hence also the contributions that individuals make in their work.

Thus, the role of work in our economic system deserves to be fundamentally rethought (together with other elements of our economic system, to be sure – but in this project, my focus will be on work). What place should it have in our lives? How should it be organized? What values should orient it? I suggest exploring the notion of "work" around three axes:

- The "<u>meaning</u>" of work: how it is understood? Why is it seen as valuable (or not)? Who conceptualizes the meaning of work, and for whom? Which cultural traditions (e.g. a "Protestant work ethics") do we carry around with us even though we do not actually believe in the worldviews that underpin them any more? What does work mean for the individual (e.g. as a contribution to a "good life"?) and for society (e.g.

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[13] Muller 2018 provides numerous examples.
[14] On the history of GDP see e.g. Lepenies 2016.
[15] Piketty 2014.

as "social contribution")?[16] And how can it be understood as integrated into the socio-ecological nexus that ties human individuals to non-human animals and the natural environment? These questions may appear abstract and philosophical, but the answers that have traditionally been given to them have, arguably, sedimented into patterns of behaviour and cultural and social norms that are also of high practical relevance.

- Justice with regard to (the fruits of) work: What is considered a just distribution of the outcomes of work? Who has to work "for" whom? What counts as "exploitation"?[17] Who has access to what forms of work in the first place? Traditional discussions of this topic turn around the issue of "wage justice," while other theorists have argued that there can be no such thing, because wages are determined by markets (but arguably, this amounts to the claim that market wages are just).[18] But "justice with regard to work" concerns also non-financial dimensions of work, e.g. the distribution of activities that are considered desirable or undesirable.[19] It is a deep-seated intuition that "justice with regard to work" must include some notion of proportionality between contributions to society and material rewards, but this nexus is, arguably, not at all given in our society (as evidenced by some of the debates about "essential" workers during the Corona crisis and their low wages). But it is also notoriously unclear how exactly a notion of "desert" that could serve as a basis for wage justice could look like, and what would ultimately justify it.[20] More generally speaking, there currently often seem to be different sets of rules for privileged and less privileged workers, which raises questions not only about justice, but ultimately also about social stability, because the legitimacy of the economic system is undermined.

- The organization of work: who decides who does what? Who has power over others, and on which basis? What kind of authority relations do we see at work? Is work organized in large, bureaucratized structures, or in small-scale, self-organizing teams? And to what extent is this organization predetermined by the kinds of tasks in questions, to what extent can it be flexibly reshaped? How can unjustified power relations be reduced and the dysfunctionalities and injustices of unnecessary hierarchies be reined in? In my previous book, *Reclaiming the System: Moral Responsibility, Divided Labour, and the Role of Organizations in Society* (OUP 2018) I have argued, based on an in-depth, empirically grounded analysis of the moral challenges within organizations, that work should be governed more democratically: with voice for workers and representative structures (e.g. expanded forms of co-determination) that ensure that their interests are taken into account. However, there are many different ways in which democracy at work can be realized: in representative or participatory structures, in antagonistic or deliberative modes, through lottocratic methods (randomly sampled participants) or elections, in combination with consensual or consultative processes. Widening our view of the meaning of work and justice at work will, hopefully, also contribute to a better understanding of how these different approaches can be used for different forms of

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[16] On "meaningful work" see e.g. Veltman 2016, Yeoman 2014, Yeoman et al. 2019, Bailey 2019.

[17] For an overview of the debate about exploitation see Zwolinski & Wertheimer 2017.

[18] For a discussion see e.g. the special issue on wage justice and desert in the *Erasmus Journal of Economics* 11(2) (2018), https://www.ejpe.org/journal/issue/view/21

[19] Gheaus & Herzog 2016.

[20] For a discussion see e.g. the special issue on wage justice and desert in the *Erasmus Journal of Economics* 11(2) (2018), https://www.ejpe.org/journal/issue/view/21

work.

3.2 Looking back, looking beyond

Over the last years, I have worked on many of these questions – in what one could call the "political philosophy of work" – within the Canon of Western philosophy, including both its history and its contemporary systematic debates.[21] What I would like to do more in the future is to analyse specific case studies, e.g. of cooperatives, and to understand the ways in which they organize work, but also what deeper understanding of work underlies their practices.

But the depth of the current crisis pushes us to think beyond our standard frameworks. In the Ammodo Project – which allows for unfettered "basic" research – I would like to branch out further. I do not yet know how fruitful these explorations will be, but it is exactly this risky nature that makes these questions suitable for the Ammodo Project. More specifically, I want to explore what we can learn from expanding the philosophy of work in two dimensions:

- Historically. The interest in alternative understandings and forms of work has seen ebbs and flows. For example, in the 19th century there were numerous attempts to develop alternative forms of work, not only in theory, but also in social experiments (e.g. Owenism, Fourierism, cooperative movements). Such "real utopias"[22] are particularly interesting to study, not only with regard to their successes, but also with regard to their failures. I plan to draw on studies by historians in order to better understand how these social experiments function, and to combine these insights with an analysis of the theoretical writings of their founders. To be sure, some of these writings and practices are likely to embody values and principles that we, today, can no longer embrace (e.g. because they lack attention to the natural environment, or because they are embedded in religious worldviews that limit their usefulness for modern, pluralistic societies). Nonetheless, studying these past ways of imaging other forms of work and the attempts to put them into practice, and bringing them into a dialogue with the contemporary debates about the future of work, should deliver fruitful insights (not least by making explicit which historical assumptions we might have implicitly carried over until today, even though we do not endorse them anymore).
- Towards non-Western sources. Work is, arguably, an almost universal human experience; very few individuals in world history do not work at all. So, what do other cultures and social traditions have to say about the role of work in human life and human society? For example, how is the relation between human needs and work understood in societies that live under extreme climate conditions? Can we learn from how indigenous people, with less pronounced forms of the division of labour, understand the role of work for their identity?
  This is the most explorative and uncertain part of the project because I do not yet know what I will discover. I will not do primary research, but rather draw on sources from anthropology and the philosophical texts of other cultures (where they exist), to see what insights might be relevant for thinking about the future of work. My aim is to start with an exploratory phase in which I will search for promising paths, and then

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[21] Gheaus & Herzog 2016, Herzog 2018, Herzog 2019, Frega et al. 2019, Frega & Herzog 2020, Gerlsbeck & Herzog 2020.
[22] The notion of "real utopias" has been coined by Eric Olin Wright (2010), but I take it that it can also be applied to earlier historical examples.

to choose a few of them and to go into more detail. The invitation of visiting researchers (see below) will mostly focus on these themes; for example, if it turns out that exploring the notion of work in early Buddhist writings is most promising, then I would try to find a specialist on this topic to come to Groningen and to join the project for a short period of time. In order to find my way into these questions, I plan to a) form an informal advisory board for the project that includes experts from different fields (e.g. the historian Andreas Eckert and the sociologist Isabelle Ferreras); I will also draw on networks such as the International Association of Women Philosophers and the Democratizing-Work-Network in order to find dialogue partners and potential collaborators.

The overall aim is to develop an understanding of work – its possible meanings, its principles of justice, and its organizational structures (and the relation between these) – that sheds the untenable assumptions described earlier. In particular, I would like to consider forms of work organization that are less oriented around competition as a driving force (note the omnipresence of sports metaphors in the world of work!) and more around notions of social purpose and community. But I would also like to hold an honest reckoning with regard to the extent to which such forms of work are compatible with modern values such as individualism and pluralism (or ways in which a balance could be found between them).
    Moreover, I would like to contribute to a better understanding of what *hinders* the development of work relations in which work is experienced as meaningful for the individual and contributes positively to society, but understanding which obstacles past experiments with alternative forms of work have encountered. This last question will also require zooming out from the immediate focus on work and taking into account other levels, such as the legal framework, the organization of finance in societies, etc. My previous work on markets and financial institutions will help me to connect this project to such broader questions. Moreover, a project on "organizational decay"[23] that will run in parallel might also lead to interesting cross-fertilization, because it tries to understand how cooperation in organizations can break down (something that successful alternative work organizations would obviously need to prevent).

3.3 Method: problem-driven, "non-ideal", interdisciplinary
My way of "doing" philosophy, which I also plan to apply in this project, is characterized by three features:[24]
-   Problem-driven: my research starts from societal and/or political problems and asks how philosophy can a) make a contribution to understanding them better by offering conceptualizations and imaginaries that help to make sense of the situation, b) draw on the resources of traditional philosophical research (history of ideas, systematic ideas and arguments) to think about potential solutions, c) offer systematicity by evaluating and integrating the insights from specific scientific disciplines, exploring their relation to normative principles, and providing a coherent picture.
-   "non-ideal": the term "non-ideal theory" (in contradistinction to "ideal theory") is used to describe an approach that does not so much ask about the best of all possible worlds (e.g. what would an "ideally" just society look like?), but rather starts from the problems of the here and now, explores the normative principles and values

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[23] See project 9.4. at https://www.scoop-program.org/program-projects/698-sustainable-organization-project.
[24] For a similar account see Wolff 2019.

that are at stake in them, and asks how improvements could be reached.[25] This approach – while distinct, and still at some distance, from policy advice – is closer to the "messy reality" we live in, acknowledges its complexities, and aims to provide a sense of what improvements could look like.

- Interdisciplinary: Given that my research deals with societal and political issues, it is crucial to take stock of the ways in which researchers in other disciplines (including, but not limited to, sociology, law, history, organization studies, anthropology, or psychology) have explored the phenomena in question. This requires a lot of reading (with a critical eye on the methodologies used, and possible underlying normative assumptions), but ensures that the philosophical discussion is based on a solid grasp on the empirical scholarship on these questions. It can also involve a certain amount of own empirical work, e.g. in the form of a qualitative in-depth analysis of an interesting case study (with methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and embedded observation), a method that I have used in the past and that has proven quite successful.[26]

3.4 Additional activities

Philosophical research consists, to a great extent, in reading, writing, and discussing (and rewriting – a lot of rewriting…). This will also be the main activities of the PI and postdoc in this project. However, I plan a number of additional activities to support the goals of the project. These will take place in the institutional setting of the *Center for Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (PPE) at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Groningen, which provides an excellent academic (and administrative) home for the topics and activities in question.

- Visiting researchers: the idea is to bring researchers from other countries, especially from the Global South, to Groningen to engage in an intensive dialogue about the topics of the project over a period of 1-3 months (depending on their availability). Such intensive engagement allows for a deeper understanding of other cultural mindsets or other historical periods and thus supports the interdisciplinary dimensions of the project. However, a challenge, in this context, is to find suitable researchers. Language barriers, lack of informative websites, the need for academics to take on additional jobs to earn an income, etc., can make it difficult to find the most interesting thinkers and to invite them to an event or a research stay. Nonetheless, I hope that over the course of the project, and not least by help of the democratizing-work.org-network of which I am part, it will be possible to find the right people for fruitful collaboration.
- Travel: Before Corona, traveling to conferences or to other departments to give talks and to receive feedback was an essential element of academic life. It is still unclear how much of this will be possible in the coming years, and for reasons of climate change, every trip needs to be carefully justified. Nonetheless, I take it that some amount of travel – whether in the form of conference trips or somewhat longer stays, e.g. to understand a certain organization in some depth and to conduct interviews – will be part of the project.
- Events: At the beginning and at the end of the project, I would like to organize some events – a smaller, academically focussed workshop at the beginning, and a larger international conference. The first is meant mainly to get a deeper understanding of the topics of the project by inviting leading experts to give papers and to provide

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[25] For overview of the debate see Valentini 2012.
[26] See Herzog 2018 and, for methodological reflections, Herzog & Zacka 2019.

feedback on the project plans. The second is meant to also disseminate some of the results of the project and to strengthen the research networks that the project will, hopefully, create.