


## Meaningful work and working conditions in the Third Sector. A critical approach for reflection through a theoretical review

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**EN Abstract.** This article reviews theoretical perspectives on the relationship between meaningful work and the political dimension of labor, focusing on the Third Sector. Based on scholarly literature from the 1970s to 2024, when the Third Sector emerged as a distinct socioeconomic domain, it examines the tensions between workers' aspirations for meaningful employment and their actual working conditions. The analysis of critical theoretical perspectives suggests the development of a new labor subjectivity that appears to seek reconciliation between personal fulfillment and social commitment amid increasingly precarious conditions. The review makes three primary contributions: first, it synthesizes existing research on the connections between meaningful work and labor conditions within the Third Sector. Second, it proposes a theoretical framework to guide future empirical studies. Third, it advances ongoing debates regarding whether workplace precarity acts as a catalyst for alternative political organization or hinders social emancipation. The findings highlight the need for a renewed political analysis of meaningful work in the Third Sector and identify significant gaps in empirical research that warrant further investigation.

**Keywords:** Meaningful Work; Third Sector; Vocation; Politic; Social Change; Precarity

### **ES Trabajo significativo y condiciones laborales en el Tercer Sector. Un enfoque crítico para la reflexión desde una revisión teórica**

**ES Resumen.** Este artículo presenta una revisión teórica sistemática que examina la intersección entre el trabajo significativo y la dimensión política del trabajo, con un enfoque específico en el Tercer Sector. La revisión abarca principalmente literatura académica desde la década de 1970 hasta 2024, período que coincide con la emergencia y evolución del Tercer Sector como espacio socioeconómico distintivo. Esta revisión teórica resulta necesaria debido a la escasez de análisis críticos que examinen las contradicciones inherentes entre las aspiraciones de trabajo significativo y las condiciones laborales reales en el Tercer Sector. A través del análisis de contribuciones teóricas críticas, el artículo identifica la emergencia de una nueva subjetividad laboral que busca combinar autorrealización y compromiso social, pero que se desarrolla en un contexto de creciente precariedad laboral. Los hallazgos de esta revisión sirven para: 1) sistematizar el conocimiento existente sobre las tensiones entre trabajo significativo y condiciones laborales en el Tercer Sector; 2) proporcionar un marco teórico para futuros estudios empíricos sobre esta problemática; y 3) contribuir al debate sobre si la precariedad en este sector representa una oportunidad para nuevas formas de organización política o un riesgo para la emancipación social. La revisión concluye señalando la necesidad de repolitizar el debate sobre el trabajo significativo en el Tercer Sector y de desarrollar más investigación empírica sobre las dinámicas identificadas.

**Plabras clave:** Trabajo Significativo; Tercer Sector; Vocación; Político; Cambio Social; Precariedad

**Sumario:** Meaningful work and its political dimension. Meaningful work and the Third Sector. A debate on precarity. Conclusions. References.

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## Meaningful work and its political dimension

The uprisings of “May 1968” are often considered a foundational milestone in the slow, silent, yet profound diffusion of so-called “post-materialist values” across the Western world, which subsequently had significant implications for labor relations (Overwell, 2008). Boltanski and Chiapello (2002)<sup>1</sup> argue that since the 1970s, capitalism has incorporated critiques from leftist movements. This appropriation of what they call the “artistic critique” has led to new forms of subjectivity within economy and labor. This process is closely connected to the social, political, and economic transformations that Beck coined “reflexive modernization” (Beck, 2002). This transformation is reflected in the workplace through new forms of labor subjectivity that navigate between expert discourses, in this way enabling dialogue with actors in other social spheres while staying within the framework of commercial contracts. (Cruces, Díaz de Rada, Velasco, Fernández, Jiménez de Madariaga & Sánchez, 2002). Nevertheless, this subjectivity remains conditioned by class, habits, and historical background (Atkinson, 2010; 2019).

This often translates into forms of professional careers, particularly adapted to the rise of immaterial labor (Lazzarato & Negri, 2001; Rodríguez, 2003). It represents a diffuse form of employment where the boundaries between social life and market logic become blurred, feeding off the social dynamics that foster networks of cooperation. (Corsani, Lazzarato & Negri, 1996):

forms of solidarity and reproducibility of both bodies and knowledge. Above all, they involve a whole set of potential synergies derived from new encounters and forms of cooperation between subjects (which constitutes their potential for growth) (Rodríguez, 2007, p. 199)

Formal and informal immaterial labor generates satisfaction, well-being, excitement, or passion in individuals who engage in it professionally (Hardt & Negri, 2000). This reality confronts and coexists with the accumulative dynamics of capitalist logic, potentially leading to emancipatory movements or capitalist appropriation of collaborative resources (Rodríguez, 2007).

These labor dynamics have also been theorized through the concept of “meaningful work.” This concept frames employment as a means of achieving self-realization, dignity, autonomy, freedom, and a sense of purpose or calling (Roessler, 2012), as well as facilitating self-transcendence (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). At times, meaningful work is associated with a commitment, both beneficial for employers and employees (Leiter & Bakker, 2010; Burton, Chen, Li & Schultz, 2017). In other instances, it coexists with labor dynamics that are detrimental to workers’ health and well-being (May, Li, Menci & Huang, 2013), negatively impacting their life outside of work (Oelberger, 2019). In literature meaningful work is described as a double-edged sword: on one hand, it entails sacrifices in terms of money, time, physical comfort, and workplace well-being, ultimately enhancing companies’ potential for exploitation (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). On the other hand, it fosters a perspective on work that heightens “expectations about management’s moral duty, facilitating employment relationships characterized by vigilance and suspicion” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 51).

The meaningful dimension of work takes on particular significance for those whose work reality is characterized by self-employment and purpose and fulfillment drive work experiences that align personal values with professional goals (Geldenhuys & Johnson, 2021). As Gorgievski, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2010) point out, the self-employed and employees are members of two qualitatively different subcultures, which raises the question of whether these constructs are equivalent, or not.

Moreover, meaningful work is interpreted differently by individuals from distinct social classes (Taylor & Roth, 2019). While individuals across all socioeconomic strata can perceive their work as meaningful and significant, members of lower social classes face greater structural barriers in accessing occupational roles that provide such intrinsic satisfaction (Allan, Autin, & Duffy, 2014; Lips-Wiersma, Wright & Dik, 2016). Recent studies (primarily quantitative and related to work psychology) have shown that there is a significant distinction between the desire for meaningful work versus the experience of meaningful work. The desire to access meaningful work is shared across social groups with distinct socioeconomic status. However, the experience of meaningful work is only described by individuals with high social status (Autin & Allan, 2020).

Similarly, vocational calling is also deeply shaped by the distribution of opportunity. Research by Douglass, Duffy, and Autin (2016) demonstrates that the ability to pursue one’s aspirations is largely constrained by socioeconomic factors like income, education, and social class<sup>2</sup>. Their findings suggest that predominantly privileged individuals have access to career paths aligned with their callings, while working-class adults show only modest correlations between occupational choices and vocation (Duffy, Autin & Douglass, 2016).

In addition, paid work is in constant evolution and is continuously facing challenges of different nature (Evetts, 2018), so that the concrete way in which a profession is developed is highly subjective. The same applies to the sense of meaningfulness one experiences in their profession (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Professional ethics is thus also affected, as it “is part of a culture that includes a set of knowledge, beliefs, values, and action schemes that guide practices in that field” (Yurén, 2013: 6). These elements in

<sup>1</sup> According to Schlosberg’s research (2019), new social movements are developing a renewed interest in materialist aspects, which coexist with thought patterns and beliefs focused on achieving post-materialist ideals. These new practices are shaping novel forms of collective behavior, both in activists’ personal lives and within their organizations, which he has defined as sustainable materialism. Alonso and Betancor (2017) refer to this phenomenon as the rematerialization of conflict.

<sup>2</sup> This study conceptualizes social class through Visacovsky’s (2008) ethnographic research, adopting a constructivist lens that foregrounds dynamic social processes. Moving beyond predetermined categories and criteria, it frames middle-class identity as emergent and evolving through cultural dynamics. As Visacovsky notes, these processes reveal “the conditions through which social groups become constituted as middle class” (p. 15), showing how identity materializes through both explicit and implicit social agency.

turn influence workers' subjective experiences. The ability to subvert established professional culture stems from professional and moral autonomy (Davis, 1996), an autonomy that is socially contingent and supported by other social structures. (Donchin, 1995; Martucelli, 2007). Professional behavior and identity depend on both individual intention and broader socioeconomic conditions. These conditions are maintained by various social institutions.

In response to these possibilities, a "hybrid professionalism" emerges - a reality associated with "attempts to link work to organizational and outside realities and establish socio-symbolic legitimacy in changing times" (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 780). In this context, workers are tasked with shaping their professional aspirations, creating opportunities to challenge the established moral principles of their guild or professional field. However, this potential also gives rise to conflicts between individual values and dominant professional norms. According to Yurén (2013), this forms the basis for the construction of the professional ethos:

The internalized professional ethicality (in the form of beliefs, values, and intentions), the criteria and skills for judging the correctness of a norm or principle, and the forms of self-regulation and capacity for prudential judgment constitute the professional ethos. This ethos is formed by a set of dispositions (knowledge, motivations, attitudes, ideals, intentions) and is established through the process of training and professional practice. These dispositions are activated when professionals must resolve field-specific problems that directly or indirectly concern the social domain (that is, human interactions, both within institutional frameworks and interpersonal relationships) and the moral domain (because potential solutions bring into play criteria of justice, kindness, and/or equity). In short, the professional ethos is the dispositional system which is triggered in the face of socio-moral problems in the professional field (Yurén, 2013, p. 8)

Challenging conventional professional norms/ethos can break the continuation of practices that keep the existing order and thus reduce situations of injustice. Professional agency creates the opportunity to construct forms of identification both with and for others, as well as for oneself, in a reflective and narrative manner (Dubar, 2001). According to Yurén (2013), "there may be practices that break to a greater or lesser extent with the established order and are aimed at meeting the radical needs of all; that is to say, to dignify life." (p. 11). This facilitates a perspective of critical professional ethos that seeks to transform both the profession and society, often in parallel to social movements (Ross, 1976), turning professionals into moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963; Abebe, Kimakwa & Redd, 2020). With this, it is not surprising that social movements are influencing the creation of new professional occupations (Agustine, 2019) or giving new significance to existing ones.

In this regard, Noguera (2002) argues for the necessity of a dimension of labor that connects with the practical-moral sphere in order to generate meaning in its activities beyond their mere instrumentality. According to the author, labor is inherently both a form of sociability and instrumentality, and it is within this duality that its social nature and aesthetic-expressive dimension become apparent: as a means for creation and self-realization. Dubar (2001) shows that when people develop their personal identities, it's not just about individual self-focus. While this identity development happens in the individualistic modern society, it necessarily involves connections with other people and groups, which can lead to emancipation. However, this must be undertaken with the understanding that "there remains no other way to overcome the risks of deadly confrontations between these two poles of humanity bound to coexist" (Dubar, 2001, p.15).

Thus, studies focused (exclusively) on changes occurring in specific professions, are particularly significant: social work, mediation, education (Ávila, Cassian, García & Pérez, 2019), or even in educational spaces (Garcés, 2020), although not limited to these professional domains only (Ross, 1977). Research on politicization and commitment to social change is less extensive in other professional fields, though these phenomena extend beyond specific professions.

## Meaningful work and the Third Sector

The described dynamics characterize the professional and political practices within the Third Sector. This complex concept has generated at least two contrasting interpretations<sup>3</sup>. The first approach links it to civil society and conceptualizes it as a space of opportunity for social change (non-class-based and "non-political"). In this framework, and with regard to its economic and labor dimensions, the pursuit of profit does not take precedence over the goal of implementing transformative social values through different forms of production (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016; Kendall, 2003; Evers & Laville, 2004). The second interpretation views the Third Sector as concealing class conflicts by promoting an illusion of social homogeneity (Montaño, 2005). This view suggests that the sector facilitates the state's withdrawal from the provision of social services, while redefining the state's role as merely a facilitator of collective processes. (Rossi, Cruz & González, 2015). It represents a space where people from different social classes come together, aggregated through various forms of participation and significant wage disparities (Taylor & Roth, 2019).

Meaningful work, viewed from its integration within the Third Sector, presents distinctive features due to its location within an economic space that is inherently pro-social. Some authors tend to emphasize its social

<sup>3</sup> The Third Sector has been chosen as a broad conceptual framework that even has legislative support in Spain. However, the self-understanding of many workers' activities within this field and their organizations often adopts different terminology: social and solidarity economy, commons economy, commons, fourth sector, collaborative economy, circular, rainbow, and green economy, social cooperativism... To speak of the Third Sector is also to speak of a process of colonization of resistance and reconfiguration of labor force governance in relation to mutations in the world of work that tend to manage social conflict through tactics of resignifying the meanings of work (Presta & Giavedoni, 2023).

utility, despite the fact that all meaningful work always possesses, to some extent, this characteristic (Taylor & Roth, 2019). In this regard, studies that link pro-social behavior with the selection of labor face the challenge of finding adequate measures for pro-social preferences. According to Lagarde and Blaauw (2014), the selection process in certain cases may be influenced by endogenous factors. For instance, professionals often begin internships in environments, such as NGOs, where they subsequently secure long-term employment. Additionally, self-selection can occur among individuals who share similar conditions and perspectives, particularly those driven by pro-social motives<sup>4</sup>.

Critics argue that the Third Sector's approach to generating social benefits through its organizations serves as a pathway to privatization. This effectively shifts social issues into market domains (Rossi *et al.* 2015; Revilla, 2015; Presta, 2016)<sup>5</sup>. For some authors, Third Sector organizations have played a significant role in the dismantling of the Welfare State (Alberich, 2007; Alonso, 2006) and the construction of the new workfare (Lazzarato, 2006)<sup>6</sup>. However, at least in the European context, according to Saurugger (2012), the effort to involve private groups in decision-making processes through various forms of participation, shows an attempt to improve effectiveness and, especially since the 1990s, addresses concerns about the deficit of government's legitimacy. According to Feldman, Strier and Koreh (2016), all of this leads to a liquid commitment to the Welfare State.

Academic debates about new approaches to social welfare management emerged in the 1970s and culminated in a period of crisis during the 1990s (Defourny, 1992). In this context, the emergence of the Third Sector is linked to two well-defined areas of crisis: that of "the Welfare State and that of liberal democracy" (Jerez & Revilla, 1997, p. 4). The Third Sector surged alongside the economy's shift toward service provision. This transformation altered how political action relates to work - a relationship that had defined much of the previous century (Jerez & Revilla, 1997). Montaña (2005) understands this correlation of events as the construction of a new social contract based on the restructuring of capital. Thus, Third Sector organizations, now responsible for an important part of social welfare, have experienced both a functional expansion and increasing competition for resources (Mikołajczak, 2021).

The resulting forms of work within the multitude of organizations (of highly diverse types, structures, degrees of formality, professional fields, etc.) that occupy this field participate in the dominant social models: fragmentation of the labor force, precarization, financialization and paralysis of the state's role in social reproduction<sup>7</sup>. In this context, volunteering serves as a strategy for labor market integration amidst a labor market crisis, contributing to the broader trend of precarization in the Third Sector (Zurdo, 2004). Third Sector organizations have attempted to move beyond bureaucratic logic by adopting new practices, identities, and political approaches (Dinerstein, 2017). These efforts create transitional spaces for innovative work arrangements, often inspired by social movements. (Bucher & Strauss, 1961; Walliser, 2013)<sup>8</sup>. However, authors more skeptical of these projects are reluctant to accept that the introduction of:

market mechanisms (or community mechanisms in more "collaborative" discourses) within the management of public services automatically generate creativity, competitive or collaborative spirit, wealth, well-being, innovative spirit, increased quality of supplied goods, harnessing of talent or automatic efficiency, to name just some of the virtues typically self-attributed by entrepreneurial and re-marketizing -or communitarian- discourses of the public sector (Alonso & Fernández, 2018, p. 158)

Therefore, in the Third Sector -as in any other- workers in its constituent organizations, paid or unpaid, experience varying levels of satisfaction with their work (Piñón, 2024). Depending on their title (volunteers<sup>9</sup>, self-employed, owner-promoters, etc.), forms of compensation are characterized by their material or symbolic nature (Taylor, 2015). Compensation in this sector remains lower than in comparable industries (Taylor & Roth, 2019). Consequently, the sector has become characterized by contracts of precarious nature, with poor working conditions and low wages, operating under unusual employment arrangements that contribute

<sup>4</sup> NGOs are being called upon to play a new role, with governments and international institutions assigning them more responsibilities and resources than they can and should often handle (Alberich, 2022). This way, the government withdraws from its direct social commitments. Seemingly inevitably, this leads to excessive professionalization and "managerialism" in some non-profit organizations, ultimately revealing cases of cronyism and nepotism, corruption and fraud (Alberich, 2012). In essence, "the recognition of the problem and that not everything is acceptable just because it's an association or non-profit entity. The scarcity of resources and being a "social volunteer organization" does not legitimize shoddy work, much less a hidden parallel economy" (Alberich, 2022, p. 258).

<sup>5</sup> For the Spanish case: See Law 43/2015, of October 9, on the Third Sector of Social Action, Chapter IV.

<sup>6</sup> According to Alberich (2022), "these privatization processes and/or arrangements with private companies and associations have been occurring in Spain since the late 1990s and have especially increased since 2008" (p. 241).

<sup>7</sup> Labor sciences termed this stage "post-Fordism" (Alonso & Martínez, 2007). Now, a more postmodern neoliberalism brought with it a new repertoire of practices and consequences through new labor dynamics based on: false job satisfaction, ideological control, self-exploitation, flexibility, soft control, precarity, individualization, relocation...

<sup>8</sup> A possibility explored by some subaltern groups -unemployed people, women, precarious workers, immigrants...- in their search for "decent work" (Dinerstein, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Regulated and professionalized employment in this sector faces situations rife with labor intrusion. The "volunteer" category serves as an entry point for individuals who, despite their good intentions and desire to contribute to social change, end up usurping professional tasks inherent to historically certified occupations (Ferreira & Torrel, 2016; Eslava, 2019). As Staggenborg (1988) indicates, these volunteers may also be professional in the sense that they can spend many years, even their entire lives, working for these organizations. However, they differ from professional managers in that they do not earn their living through such work. In this case, she refers to them as volunteer leaders. This situation can entail risks and conflicts that emerge from structural instability and work precariousness in organizations that have not fully achieved formal status yet provide services (Pérez de Mendiguren *et al.*, 2009). This is particularly problematic when they intervene in contexts they do not fully understand (Alonso, 1999). The Third Sector continues to be a field composed of diverse actors in tension (González-Portillo & Jaraiz-Arroyo, 2022).



to labor insecurity. (Leete, 2006). Despite this, union representation in the Spanish Third Sector has experienced a significant increase (Plataforma, 2024). However, this does not imply that tensions between unions and organizations have been resolved, particularly when moving beyond forming arrangements for service provision, when organizations face concerns in relation to their organisation of labor. In this regard, difficulties emerge when unions advocate for Third Sector workers' demands (García & Rigby, 2022).

### A debate on precarity

In this dimension of labor, work becomes inherently meaningful linked to vocation and a sense of freedom from bureaucratic constraints, regulation, and market imperatives (Smith, 2011). However, these aspirations stand in opposition to the high rates of temporary employment in the Third Sector and irregularities that simultaneously affect both the level of self-determination and degree of autonomy (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016). Thus, many have not hesitated to emphasize that, despite being driven by meaningful work and social commitment, workers in this sector face recurring exploitation and work-related psychosocial issues (Cox, 2009; Dempsey & Saunders, 2010). These are understood as the consequences of an increasingly depoliticized and de-economized Third Sector (Rossi et al., 2015). In the Spanish context, these issues spark internal debates: as organizations become more institutionalized, their ability to connect with other civil society sectors diminishes (Jaraíz-Arroyo, Marbán-Gallego & González-Portillo, 2024).

In a generalized context of precarization (Standing, 2011; Tejerina, Cavia, Santamaría & Carbajo, 2012; Lazzarato, 2006), this type of labor subjectivity is associated with employment that produce an increasing regime of precarity (Taylor & Roth, 2019; Roth, 2016; Baines, Cunningham & Shields, 2017; Cunningham, Baines, Shields & Lewchuk, 2016). According to Mikołajczak (2021), precarious employment in non-governmental organizations has not been subject to exhaustive scientific consideration until now, particularly through empirical studies. Among the initial approaches to the topic, it is noted that the limited sense of security in organizational management significantly affects employment policies. It also generates a broad spectrum of internal and external barriers to promoting permanent employment (Mikołajczak, 2021).

From a very different approach but embedded in an adjacent political logic, supported by Butler (2006, 2016; 2017) or Lorey (2008, 2016), precarity is defined by a state of insecurity, characteristic of the neoliberal governmentality model, that influences the common subjectivity of post-Fordism. And this is inherent to life itself (Butler, 2006; 2016), a "precarious condition" (Butler, 2017), which can only be resisted:

if resistance aims to create an alternative way of life, a more liveable life that opposes the differential distribution of precarity, then acts of resistance will say *no* to one way of life at the same time that they say *yes* to another (Butler, 2012, p. 18)

It means deciding to lead a good life within what people seem able to afford in their liveable lives (Butler, 2016a). From a perspective of precarity as a driver of political action different from that of Standing (2011), Butler explains that:

new governmental forms involved in the precarization of populations operate precisely through the cultivation of certain forms of subjectivation and possibilities for action; these can, and must, be disrupted through activism by precarized people that confront false promises of security, their managerial tactics, and their exploitation (Butler, 2016, p. 16)

Emphasizing the fight against these false promises of security and in an attempt to short-circuit the logic of economic subordination, many people consciously choose to indulge in precarization, to become part of this movement or political stance. Lorey (2008), who also acknowledges a lack of empirical and systematic studies in this regard, presents herself as an advocate for "precarization of the self" as a way to combat neoliberal governmentality and expand the sovereignty of resistant subjectivities (also termed "self-precarization"). According to the author:

one should consider precarization not only in its repressive and constraining forms, but above all in its ambivalent productive moments that emerge from techniques of self-government. In a historical period where new modes of valorization also succumb to contingency, the term *precarization as governmentality* allows us to capture the productive engagement with the incalculable, the immeasurable and the non-modularizable, with that which evades a government based on insecurity (Lorey, 2016, p. 29)

From this perspective, precarity and precarization emerge as a desired-yet-compelled space, where a precarious lifestyle is practiced: a form of escape from the dominant neoliberal reality, aiming to sustain resistance processes rooted in contextual struggles and direct democracy (Butler, 2016). Here, no role model exists for either worker or producer, as their reality is characterized by the plurality of experiences: thus, restricting its capacity for multitudinous involvement in a single identity (Charalambides, 2017). From this perspective, the concept of "precariat" will never be regarded as a unified political subject or identity. The lived experience of precarity reveals complex relationships between personal choices and political potential (Dezeuze, 2017).

In contrast to this understanding of precarity, authors such as Castel (2004) or Bourdieu (2000) question the future of social struggle once the unifying power of wage labor disappeared. Lorey considers this a reductionist argument, as the precarious and vulnerable people at risk of disaffiliation have become virtuous political actors (Lorey, 2008), whether through the forces of hegemonic neoliberalism or through their own desires:

becoming precarious means being open for an organisation in/of the present that disobeys the linear relation to the future and of which it is not yet known to where it leads and what it brings, an organisation in the present for which it is necessary to now take the time (Lorey, 2019, p. 164)

The precarity emerging from destabilized work patterns has generated new forms of struggle. However, these struggles currently operate outside of traditional political frameworks. However, as Bojana Cvejic and Ana Vujanovic assert: "This paradoxically leads not only to greater economic self-precarization, as Lorey points out, but also to political complicity with neoliberal capitalism" (Puar, 2012, p. 167). Zafra (2017) suggests that precarious work oscillates between genuine passion and manufactured enthusiasm.

In this context, precarity and precarization are undoubtedly conditioned by both objective and subjective aspects (Gasiukova & Shkaratan, 2019). These act as configurators of the self-precarized immaterial worker (Dezeuze, 2017): a type of creative worker that can be found across all professional sectors (Cunningham & Higgs, 2008; Hearn, Bridgstock & Goldsmith, 2014).

Finally, the few studies that have addressed this self-precarization across various sectors highlight the emergence of practices of self-censorship and concealment among professionals who do not want to expose their lives, or change their current lifestyle (Uršič, Jang & Nahm, 2018). This characteristic, according to the authors, inherently demonstrates that behind these desires one can find broader complex social processes that depend not only on personal choice and specific contextual circumstances. In Graeber's words (2018), "the subject of work is riddled with taboos" (p. 12).

## Conclusions

This paper analyzes the relationship between meaningful work and the political, focusing on the Third Sector as a space where both converge. It highlights how in recent decades a new labor subjectivity has emerged in search of self-realization, vocation, and social commitment in the workplace. This has led to ambivalent labor dynamics that, on the one hand, generate satisfaction and well-being, but on the other, can be appropriated by capitalist logic, increasing exploitation and perpetuating socioeconomic differences between agents involved in these socio-occupational and political processes.

In the Third Sector, these tensions are particularly visible. The sector facilitates the pursuit of meaningful work aimed at social change, while simultaneously being marked by high rates of labor precarity. Thus, idealistic aspirations confront the harsh reality of poor working conditions, deregulation, and low wages.

A debate emerges between those who view precarity as an immanent condition of neoliberal capitalism that must be resisted, and those who consider it an opportunity to experiment with new counter-hegemonic forms of life and work. Self-precarization contains inherent contradictions. It may ultimately reinforce neoliberal systems of control and production.

In conclusion, this article offers a critical perspective on how aspirations for meaningful work in the Third Sector conflict with a reality of increasing labor precarity. More empirical studies are needed to explore the complex dynamics between vocation, social commitment, working conditions, and political action in this sector. The findings point to the need to *repoliticize* the debate around the meaning of work, articulating struggles against precarity with broader emancipatory projects.

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