

# What if all kinds of work were considered ‘real jobs,’ and everyone who worked had a job? Using imaginary thinking in the context of Swedish municipal activation services

Economic and Industrial Democracy

1–19

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0143831X251326205

[journals.sagepub.com/home/eid](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/eid)

Maja Östling , Sara Nyhlén  
and Katarina Giritli Nygren

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University, Sweden

## Abstract

This article explores active labor market policies through a utopian lens, focusing on Swedish municipal activation services. Users of such services participated in visionary workshops and were invited to dream about what could be different in their (working) lives. In the analysis of the participants’ dreams, a tension between the internalization of and resistance to employability narratives, market logics, and capitalist structures emerges. By examining these dynamics, the article demonstrates how utopian thinking, rooted in experiences from the margins of the labor market, can inspire critiques of current labor systems and help in envisioning possible futures.

## Keywords

Active labor market policies, critical theory, future of work, marginalized labor experiences, sustainable welfare

## Introduction

In recent years, critical studies on active labor market policies have highlighted how racist and ableist norms affect both what is considered a ‘real job’ and how and by whom work should be performed to qualify as a ‘real job,’ thus excluding many people from participating in so-called activation services (see, e.g., Caswell, 2019; Scholz and Ingold, 2021). Many activation services are similar to regular employment, such as internships

---

### Corresponding author:

Maja Östling, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University, Holmgatan 10, Sundsvall, 851 70, Sweden.

Email: [maja.ostling@miun.se](mailto:maja.ostling@miun.se)

at typical workplaces, or are conducted as work-related activities in which participants perform work tasks in and for the municipality (Giritli Nygren et al., 2022). Consequently, activation services might prolong cheap or unpaid labor (Friedli and Stearn, 2015; Pieper and Haji Mohammadi, 2014) and enable a destabilization of what is considered a ‘real job.’ In practice, welfare recipients can be employed by the municipality with state subsidies and work in the employment center under a supported and adapted form of employment. This situation considerably raises the risk of people finding themselves ‘stuck’ in an activation process, doing work that is not considered a ‘real job’ (cf. Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich, 2016). Although the colloquialism ‘real jobs’ has been shown to have different meanings in general, as well as for people affected differently by the business cycles inherent in capitalism, we focus in this article on how a ‘real job’ is generally seen as defined by earning a wage and resulting in financial autonomy (Clair, 1996; O’Connor and Raile, 2015), rather than the actual content of the job. Inspired by Ruth Levitas (2013: 149), who argued that a better world may be ‘accessible only through an act of imagination,’ we utilize a kind of *what-if* theorizing as a form of contrarian imagination that we argue allows us to think of more desirable pathways for work in the context of municipal activation services. The empirical material that we use as a starting point for our *what-if* theorizing was produced in a research project<sup>1</sup> focused on Swedish municipal activation services – that is, local labor market programs (LLMPs) – which are part of the activating paradigm. In many of the interviews we conducted, we noted that participants as well as managers and politicians conceptualized skills and measures of productivity in a way that inherently excluded individuals whom they code as incapable of performing a ‘real job’ in line with the imposed requirements. This showed how the activation programs reproduce inequality based on ableist and racialized perceptions of ability, capability, and productivity, producing very diverse discourses of human needs and human flourishing but, at times, also creating spaces of inclusion by questioning the idea of a ‘real job.’ Therefore, we also wanted to explore visionary imaginaries concerning work through workshops with participants in municipal activation services whom we asked to dream, or envision, another organization of (working) life that would include them. Using this *what-if* theorizing and utopia as a method (Levitas, 2013) would provide us with critical tools for exposing the limitations of current policy discourses, enabling us to engage in holistic thinking about possible futures. Our aim was therefore to use imagination as a tool for performative research by articulating how utopian ideas regarding work can be formulated in relation to lived experiences in the current system and theorizing other ways of structuring work. This approach enabled our research to generate imagined futures that allow space for exploring the good and potential transformation (e.g., Garforth, 2009).

## **News from somewhere: Utopian thinking by ‘distant’ women**

Work has played a central role in much of utopian thinking, particularly for utopian thinkers aiming to critique capitalism. As early as 1890, William Morris used utopian thinking in his book *News from Nowhere*, on which the title of this section is based. This

work of fiction takes us to the land of Nowhere through the eyes of the character William Guest, who one day finds himself in a post-revolutionary England (Morris, 1890/2017). While traveling through this utopian land, he finds that a communist revolution has transformed England into a classless, stateless, and moneyless land populated by artisans. Throughout his travels in Nowhere, William Guest meets people doing various forms of work, and although much of this work has instrumental value, people carry it out primarily because they derive something from the work itself. Morris thus identified the expansion of markets as the ultimate degrader of working conditions. In Nowhere, the economy is reimagined; there is no consumerism, and production is motivated by art and needs rather than profit. The starting point for Morris's utopian thinking was his theory of work as prosperity, as key to human well-being, which is the utopian news Guest receives in Nowhere. In our attempt to use utopian thinking to reimagine work, we do not, however, start from a fictional Nowhere but from Somewhere: the very real position of a group of women constructed by the Swedish labor market system as being 'distant from the labor market.' These women were assigned to a municipal activation program – that is, a particular group for women only – with a name symbolizing housewife, mother, madam, or matron. The group has been active for many years in the municipality, which is a commuter municipality near a larger city in the geographical center of Sweden. At times, the group has been coordinated as an integration project but, at the time of this research, it was organized as part of the LLMP. While all women in the group were immigrants, the group was very diverse. Some of the women had lived in Sweden for 10–15 years and some for only a few months; some had academic qualifications from another country, while others were illiterate; some were in their early 20s and others were over 50 years old. Parallel to their participation in this group, some of the women were attending 'Swedish for immigrants' courses or vocational training intended for the trainees both to learn an occupation and to practice the Swedish language in an occupational setting.

To situate the participant group within the restructured Swedish welfare and labor market systems, we will briefly discuss the relevant policy field. Although the labor market policy is essentially a state responsibility in Sweden, the municipal labor market measures, which mainly target people 'distant from the labor market,' have increased to such an extent that one can now speak of two partially overlapping labor market policy systems: (1) an economic one aimed at increasing the proportion of employed people and (2) a strategic one focused on activating, mediating, and retraining the unemployed population (Brauer, 2024; Olofsson and Wadensjö, 2009; Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 2017). The first system, functioning at the state level, is directed at those receiving support from unemployment funds, while the second system operates at the municipal level and is directed at those who receive income support (Govender, 2023). The latter system includes the participants in this study. Municipalities organize the work within LLMPs, and although these are not statutory activities, nearly all Swedish municipalities have established some kind of program or activation service targeting people labeled 'distant from the labor market' (Panican and Ulmestig, 2017). This group is defined as those who have been unemployed for five years or more and are discursively constructed as having 'weak' competitive abilities in the labor market (see Östling, 2025). Due to the strong autonomy of Swedish municipalities, they have substantial discretion in determining the

structure and content of activation services (Brauer, 2022), which therefore vary in regard to policy emphasis, administrative structure, the role of service providers, and cooperative arrangements (Bergström et al., 2023). In terms of content, these activation services at the margins of the labor market can include job seeking, coaching, vocational training positions, subsidized employment, and more. Vocational training positions often involve undertaking work tasks in and for the municipality, such as maintaining forests and parks or working in elderly care services (Ulmestig and Panican, 2018). However, these work tasks take the form of activation services rather than waged work, thus aiming toward ‘real jobs’ rather than being considered ‘real jobs’ in themselves.

As at many sites, the ideal promoted is to work on yourself to become employable (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). Östling (2025) has discussed how this formulation of the problematic individual naturalizes the position of being ‘distant from the labor market,’ which hinders a systemic critique and conceals the structural inequalities that might be present within the labor market system. The critically based research that has been carried out with a focus on those defined as ‘distant from the labor market’ has further highlighted how normative expectations concerning the functional capacity of the able-bodied individual exclude many people who fall under this label (see, e.g., Scholz and Ingold, 2021). In studies based on the participants’ perspectives, the path to employment has been described as a non-linear process with periods of movement ‘closer’ to the labor market and periods characterized by immobility or a kind of horizontal movement within the system (Danneris, 2018; see also Hirsland and Kerschbaumer, 2023; Schön et al., 2023). For work to appear like a realistic possibility, many feel that their own lives and well-being must be normatively stabilized in relation to the labor market’s inability to be flexible in meeting varying work abilities (cf. Schön et al., 2023).

Against this background, we argue that the specific group of immigrant women in the present study, constructed as ‘distant’ from the labor market, presents an especially interesting site of study for an inquiry regarding contemporary work imaginaries, and particularly the economic role of an unemployed subjectivity. Our intention in adopting the methodology of utopias is to be able to discuss the dreams connected to the idea of (having) a ‘real’ job and what a ‘real job’ might symbolize. Furthermore, we discuss what kinds of dreams and utopias are accessible with or without a ‘real job’ and endeavor to trace various possibilities for another, more equal, labor market.

## **Thinking through utopia and (against) work**

Since the early 2000s, utopian thinking has re-emerged as an important component of interdisciplinary work aimed at critiquing existing hierarchical sociopolitical and economic arrangements and moving toward a more egalitarian and compassionate society. This includes utopian thinking about critiques of the centrality of paid work in contemporary Western economies (e.g., Gorz, 1999). One example is Levitas’s (2001) criticism of how the UK Blair Government, elected in 1997, focused on the combination of the economic and moral centrality of paid work. In response, Levitas argues that the link between ‘work’ and income must be breached to ensure an adequate livelihood for all.

The institutional and conceptual frameworks of work as it is understood and constructed in modern capitalist societies have a function in that they are limited to

market-driven practices and exclude many unpaid human activities (Levitas, 2001: 450). To understand and discuss what having a ‘real job’ entails, we must therefore look beyond the current frameworks of work. Levitas (2001: 450) further suggests that ‘sometimes the most important social policies may be those that do not immediately look like “social policy,” but which bear on the whole structure of the (global) political economy and hence the social fabric.’ The centrality of work is underpinned at the individual level by both the economic necessity and ideology of paid work as the moral duty of welfare subjects. In quoting André Gorz (1999: 54), Levitas (2001: 460) states that work must lose its societal centrality, and

The place of work in everyone’s imagination and self-image and in his/her vision of a possible future is the central issue in a profoundly political conflict, a struggle for power. Any transformation of society . . . requires the capacity to think differently, or quite simply to formulate what everyone is feeling.

Similarly, in her book *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks (2011) assesses and imagines how to confront present work ideologies as well as the discourses that support them, arguing that they are not only constraining our freedom but also our imagination and subjectivities. Weeks (2011: 8) notes, ‘the wage relation generates not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members.’ In the context of this study, municipal activation programs are therefore considered sites where governing takes place as well as spaces of negotiation about the meanings of the wage relation and ‘work.’

Both Levitas (2001) and Weeks (2011) are inspired by Ernst Bloch (1986), who argues that traces of utopian thinking could be found in a vast array of social and cultural forms – what he calls ‘anticipatory consciousness’ of the future in the present. Against the view that such traces only constitute compensatory fantasies, he asserts that they may be understood as a set of real but not existing possibilities; therefore, the transcendental aspects of utopia could be located within the immanent, material world. Weeks (2011) argues that it is possible to recover a notion of concrete utopias from Bloch, in contrast to abstract utopias, which, as Weeks (2011: 195) notes, ‘are conjured up without sufficient regard to present trends and conditions that could render them possible, as opposed to impossible, futures.’ In this vein, we use imagination as something that enables us to learn about the world as it is, as a departure point that can allow us to see ‘what we *are* doing in the light of what we *could* or *should* do’ (Gorz, 1999: 113). According to this line of thinking, rather than seeing the welfare state as a regime securing the fundamental dignity of every citizen and thus setting the stage for their flourishing, the welfare state could be seen as a regime to which the subjects are obliged to become economically productive, loyal taxpayers. Hence, as an inhabitant of Sweden, it is one’s duty to work or take action to become self-sufficient, especially since one is always already in debt to the welfare state, if for no other reason than that one, for instance, is the recipient of public education and has access to health care (cf. Dahlstedt, 2009; Nord, 2018).

It is against this background – of a restructured welfare state, economically sound but in other ways stretched thin, that sees its inhabitants as economic actors who owe it to society to be economically productive – that we, in this article, seek to articulate

experiences and utopias of living as welfare citizens from those labeled as ‘distant from the labor market.’ We do this by analyzing narratives in the empirical material that can tell us something about the current system and the ‘distant’ individuals’ enactment of ideas of the system. In other words, we strive to determine if and how the participants negotiate their interpellation as economically productive subjects within a (welfare) system built on capitalist logics. Departing from utopia as method, we do this through three interwoven elements. The first element is the ‘archaeological’ excavation of the utopian fragments underpinning various cultural and political phenomena as a means of uncovering and scrutinizing the unacknowledged models of ‘the good society’ that operate within them (Levitas, 2013: xvii). The second element is an ontological discussion of the new and different selves, social relations, and ways of being within reconstituted worlds (Levitas, 2013: 177). The third element is the ‘architectural’ construction of new institutions and delineation of societal structures (Levitas, 2013: xvii). Even though Levitas (2013) does not intend for utopia to be a method for conducting social research, we draw from her insights as we believe they have the potential to link ethnographic investigations of dreams and hopes to current and future conditions and to imaginaries of alternative worlds and frameworks of work.

## **Utopian workshops as methodology**

Departing from utopia as method and the idea that ‘an act of imagination’ can contribute to a better world (Levitas, 2013: 149), that we need to be creative to be able to make a difference and create something new, we conducted workshops with the participants. We did this not as an exercise in naïve optimism but as a strategy to enable the study of the current order, its limitations, and the agency of subjects (cf. Gorz, 1999; Paaby et al., 1988). The workshops departed from the concept of future workshops as formulated by Jungk and Mullert (1987: 12, 52, 115–122) that start in a phase of critique, followed by a fantasy phase, and lastly an implementation phase. Following Jungk and Mullert, other researchers (Paaby et al., 1988, 1992) have further developed future workshops by adding art forms, such as acting, painting, and singing. By combining the structures of the future workshops with Bloch’s (1986) theories of how art and culture can provide closeness to not-yet-conscious utopian desires (Moir, 2018: 204), we aimed for our workshops to provide a space where the participants could depart from the ideas of utopia and consequently discuss individual and collective dreams and critique what is perceived as problematic in the current order based on what people dream about.

Here, we provide a brief overview of the data collection, and the following sections go into more detail. We held three workshops each involving 8–13 participants. Some participated in all three workshops, while some participated in only one or two. The first two workshops were held at the municipality’s premises in February 2024 and the last one at the researchers’ university in April of the same year. Each workshop was approximately three hours long. We always brought a selection of beverages and sweets for everyone to enjoy. All participants were informed about the aim of the workshops and the larger research program to which the workshops belonged, and the participants all signed written consent forms.<sup>2</sup> We especially stressed that participation in the research was voluntary, and if anyone wanted to participate in the workshops without being a part

of the research material, they were able to do so. Nevertheless, everyone chose to participate in the research.

To transcend language barriers and create a playfulness in meetings with the research participants, as well as a space for individuals to be able to express what they felt was most important, we developed visionary workshops involving visual methodologies, asking the participants to make individual collages. Based on the collages that they made, we then had group conversations about dreams, hopes, life, working life, the municipal activation activities, and the labor market system. The group conversations were transcribed verbatim and, together with the collages as well as the researchers' field notes, constitute the empirical material analyzed in this article. We started the work with two workshop sessions focused on fantasies and dreams, inspired by Paaby et al. (1988), resembling the archeological and ontological phases as described by Levitas (2013). In these sessions, our aim was to create an open and welcoming space where utopian ideas could be formulated and developed rather than held back. In the third session, we entered a phase resembling what Levitas (2013) described as architectural and Jungk and Mullert (1987) as critical and implementary. In this phase, we wanted to see if we could explore the participants' narratives for deepened critiques and a more architectural mode, where the dreams could suggest new designs, and what suggestions for (systemic) change the participants would formulate if given the opportunity.

The first two workshops were held at the groups' meeting premises in the municipality and the third workshop was held at the university, as requested by the participants themselves. The first workshop focused mostly on presentations, getting to know each other, and the idea of the project and workshops, introducing the idea of collective dreaming or imagining work, as well as working life and life in general. This was done by encouraging each individual to focus on the present situation and (working) life but also on dreams and hopes for a different order or system. In the second workshop, we asked the participants to create collages using their own photos (taken on cell phones<sup>3</sup>) or photos and clippings from various newspapers and magazines supplied by us. We prompted the collage work by asking the participants to 'dream freely,' beginning with questions such as 'Where do you see yourself in five years?' 'What did you dream about five years ago?' and 'What did you dream about when you were five years old?' Participants voluntarily presented their collages to the group and were also encouraged to talk about how they wanted to achieve their dreams. During the presentations, we also asked if anything, and if so, what, must change for the dream to become reality. The presentations stimulated discussions about what the participants were doing in their daily lives when they were not at the municipal activation group, what it meant to them to participate in the group, and how they related this group to participating in other activation activities organized by the municipality.

The third workshop was held at the university as the participants wanted to see the researchers' everyday working lives and the university premises. Several participants who had obtained a university degree abroad also wanted the opportunity to ask questions about university studies in Sweden and did so with both the researchers they met but also other employees at the university, such as university library staff. After a campus tour, the third workshop session started with the participants looking at all the collages created during the second workshop and discussing them in a gallery-like setting.

Some conversations were held among specific participants, in their mother tongue or Swedish, and some with the whole group. We then asked the participants to formulate concrete suggestions for changes that must be made for the dreams to approach reality. All suggestions were gathered on a large whiteboard, and the participants each received three Post-it notes that they were to use to give points to the suggestions deemed most important to change. The suggestions with the most points were then discussed in-depth by the whole group. This phase became more radical than the previous two as critiques of the system were presented rather than personal changes within or relating to the individual.

Using the methodology as an epistemological point of departure, combined with inspiration from future workshops (Jungk and Mullert, 1987; Paaby et al., 1988, 1992), we chose to adopt thematic analysis to assess the dreams and hopes in the material (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding the data, categorizing the codes, and seeing how the categories fit into the three themes structuring the analysis allowed us to understand the material in light of an array of discourses operating in Swedish society as well as how such discourses affect the possibility of what can be said and therefore dreamt about (cf. Braun and Clarke, 2006: 81). The dreams described by the participants were thus both seen as something produced in relation to disciplining and ideological mechanisms and as something that could go awry. The workshops enabled us and the participants to uncover and discuss what the current system consists of, what needs to change, and the frames that the activation programs constitute in the participants' daily lives by departing from more or less accessible utopian dreams. Inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006) we coded and analyzed the material, focusing on *how* and *if* participants expressed critical hints of a different world but also the ways in which the utopian ideas might *break down* or *remain silent*. This allowed us to study the condition of utopia in this work-related location, positioned within the margins of the labor market system, by discussing questions regarding what desires for the future of work (and the world) can be found there and what insights into subjectivity as it is produced (or not) at the site the use of utopia as a method can yield.

## **Dreams and critiques by participants in activation processes**

In the material, we identified three overarching themes. One we labeled 'Becoming the loyal taxpayer,' focusing on the *contribution* to the general society and reforming the self to become employable. We labeled the second theme 'The rules of the (labor market) system,' relating to parts of the utopian dreams that concretely critique the bureaucracy of the Swedish welfare system. The last theme, labeled 'A radically different world,' contains narratives about transcending the system and explores sites for critique as well as the silencing of that critique.

### ***Becoming the loyal taxpayer***

[O]ne has to work really hard. (WS2)

This was the first statement by a participant, which was met with mumbling agreement from the rest of the group. This theme was a prominent feature of many conversations during the workshops and turning back to Gorz (1999) we can trace how work is a central theme in everyone's imagination and self-image, and in the individual's vision of a possible future. Throughout our discussions, work, as well as working hard and a lot, were framed as important not only for the self, in terms of becoming more educated or employable, but this was also situated in relation to contributing to the Swedish society through taking responsibility for oneself. Most participants had gone through several years of Swedish courses, unpaid internships, or other vocational training to develop their skills and become part of the regular labor force, outside of the activation program – activities that demand hard work but do not count as 'real jobs' within the institutional framework to which they belong. These conversations thus exhibited an inherent criticism of the capitalist logic where work is understood as limited to market-driven practices and excludes many other activities (cf. Levitas, 2001). At the same time, we can see the lingering notion of an individual responsibility to take action to become self-sufficient and get a 'real job' (cf. Dahlstedt, 2009; Nord, 2018).

We can further see how such multiple perceptions of the meaning of work surface in the discussions of dreams, where notions of mental well-being are important. Descriptions were given of keeping oneself occupied in order to not 'think too much,' wanting to have a lot to do all the time, making oneself tired and to prevent 'overthinking,' and one participant said:

I want to be busy, yes, not sitting around thinking; [when I am] tired then I can't [. . .] In the morning, when I wake up at seven, then I can do anything. If you wake up at ten, the days are just passing [laughing]. So, I want to be busy; I want to work a lot. It's my – what is it called – my personality. (WS2)

The strategy of keeping busy to prevent overthinking and wasting time by the days 'just passing' is formulated in terms of having a personality of 'wanting to work a lot.' In this way, the individual fits the system quite well in being a person who finds fulfillment in the desire to immerse herself in doing work. While this is certainly a valid self-perception, it is also closely linked to the ideals of the employable, loyal taxpayer-citizen (cf. Scholz and Ingold, 2021) who works hard to 'contribute' and not be a 'burden' on the welfare state (cf. Marston, 2008). Similarly, many other participants talked about 'working hard' and stressed the need to be 'independent' to achieve their goals and dreams. In this context, the participants also discussed how they perceived the need for them to work harder than others to achieve their goals or the goals of the current labor market logics. One participant said, 'We work hard, harder, twice as hard' (WS2). Here, we can see how participants navigate structural inequalities, which play into them being positioned as 'distant,' in conjunction with a utopian idea of the ideal worker and taxpayer who shoulders the moral responsibility of enhancing oneself out of unemployment. Following Bloch (1986), working hard becomes an 'anticipatory consciousness' of the future within the present. The centrality of work is reinforced in the participants' narratives, and the moral duty of work, to 'contribute' (cf. Levitas, 2001), is stressed. Nevertheless, participants also emphasized the economic necessity of being part of the

regular labor market and securing waged employment – a ‘real job’ – as an important factor in being able to achieve some dreams.

The dialogues unfolding from the collages reveal the boundless diversity of dreams: they have different purposes and are of different temporalities. One participant (WS2) explained that her greatest dream was to get a driving license and to work with art, to make paintings, perhaps by becoming a make-up artist. However, she further explained that as a mother, she had been assigned by the LLMP services doing job training at a kindergarten. She continued by describing how she also dreamed of becoming a kindergarten teacher, to which she added that she is a ‘kind person’ who ‘likes children.’ This highlights how the activity of doing job training as a kindergarten teacher transforms the dream into something that seems closer to the reality of one’s current position, something more accessible within the frame of being/becoming employable and becoming something closer to the loyal taxpayer who ‘contributes’ to society. Through this line of thinking, the welfare state through the LLMP becomes an arena for human flourishing mainly regarding the development of economic productivity within the subject. Inspired by Weeks (2011), we can trace how wage relations in this sense not only generate income but also discipline individuals by redirecting dreams toward a more productively logical trajectory, aligning with a capitalist logic of employability. Similar themes can be seen in how discussions regarding dreams of leisure, such as traveling the world and being able to do gardening at home, often had an inherent element of considering skills relevant to one’s employability. In one conversation (WS2), a participant described enjoying exploring new cultures, new languages, and new environments by traveling. Afterwards, a third participant stated, ‘traveling is great; you can learn a lot by traveling.’ Here, the dream of having enough resources to be able to freely travel and ‘explore’ is placed in a context of learning relevant qualifications and essential skills. Though the way in which this conversation took place might have been affected by the activation service, which strongly emphasizes developing skills for waged work and enhancing one’s employability, it is still interesting to note how the practices of an activating paradigm (i.e., labor market skills enhancement) affect how the dream is understood and discussed. The formulation of dreams of leisure as learning thus mirrors the logics of an economic subjectivity within the ‘good society’ where people work to enhance their skills to be able to produce higher value in the labor market.

Parallel to this, the discussion above also shows how the utopian dreams contain elements of existing relevant qualifications in the labor market but that these qualifications somehow do not seem to count. As an example, one participant is asked by another participant (WS2) how many languages she speaks, she answered ‘four,’ except for Swedish. While the skill of being fluent in four languages and learning a fifth is a competency that could surely be seen as valuable in the labor market, after one is categorized as ‘distant’ by the labor market policy and placed in the activation service, this skill is absent from what is considered employable and worth cultivating. Several participants also described losing previous technical skills when they did not practice them in their work or labor market activities, such as inserting needles or taking blood samples (WS2 and WS3). These negotiations over the meanings of skills in the group closely relate to norms and regulations produced by the labor market policy and by being assigned to the LLMP. This specific group of women, as a site where governing takes place, shows how

different frameworks play out differently for different bodies. What is categorized as a lack of Swedish language as a skill in this forum thus becomes a sort of governing practice that delineates according to certain logics. The self-evident hierarchies reinforced by ableism are also connected to racist structures, where practices and discourses around Swedishness emerge as unchallenged and unnamed norms, serving as societal conductors (Pieper and Haji Mohammadi, 2014). Although viewing ableism and racism solely as byproducts of capitalism would be overly simplistic, they do form a close connection with the current capitalist market logic aimed at shaping economic subjectivities that contribute to the idea of a ‘good society’ and where certain skills are constructed as more important than others.

In this section, we have highlighted the narratives of individuals within the system and thereby excavated the logics of the ‘good society’ operating as governing structures within them, as expressed in the narratives. Through this, we have explored the individual desires as produced by, as well as reproduced in, disciplinary mechanisms (cf. Levitas, 2013). The next section turns to critiques of these disciplinary mechanisms in the form of the bureaucratic system.

### *The rules of the (labor market) system*

During the workshops, we often contemplated what insights we could draw from the visionary workshops, utopia, imagination, and dreaming. The participants themselves also touched on this as they asked us how they can know what is possible to dream about, since they are unfamiliar with Sweden. One participant said it ‘doesn’t work like that,’ that it is not possible ‘to just dream; I need to know beforehand what is possible to dream about – what am I supposed to do here’ (WS2). At the same time, we got feedback from participants after the first workshop, as well as during the second and third workshops, that they appreciated the discussions and being able to dream collectively. Therefore, although we aimed to not be restricted by ‘reality’ in the fantasy phase of the workshops (Jungk and Mullert, 1987: 37), both the dreams and critiques were sometimes limited by the boundaries drawn by being at the municipal activation site. This nevertheless resulted in several concrete critiques based on the experiences of being part of the labor market welfare system. For example, one participant referred to interviews conducted by staff within the labor market system as ‘interrogations,’ where her competencies needed to be ‘mapped out’ in a way that made her feel inadequate (WS3) – a statement met with general agreement from the group. Here, the possibility of dreaming together, and thus to consider pursuing one’s dreams, was framed as an uncommon luxury in the participants’ daily lives.

Concrete critiques of the bureaucratic system were further formulated when participants discussed job training as an activity. The participants discussed the need for the system to allow multiple ways, more individually adapted, to perform waged work (WS2 and WS3). Several participants referred to the staff in the activation service as people who, despite sometimes individually recommending which way to approach waged work, did not realize how long these roads are or can feel. One participant described being directed to the activity of job training in a shop for three years, but when the job training activity ended, she could not continue her work there in the form of a regular

employment position (WS2). This was an experience that many participants shared, and one of the main ‘architectural’ (Levitas, 2013) suggestions of the group was that job training positions should be shorter to prevent getting ‘stuck’ in training activities (cf. Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich, 2016). Other critiques concerned the content of the job training positions. In a discussion about vocational training, several participants described that their assigned activities did not mainly focus on ‘learning what one needs’ (i.e., speaking Swedish in an occupational setting) but, rather, on carrying out a work task, such as sorting clothes donated to a second-hand shop – a task that did not include communicating with any other people (WS3). Furthermore, this is a job task that would, under different circumstances, be categorized as a ‘real job’ but was instead constructed as a job training activity. When trying to find the Swedish word for how she felt about this, one participant used a translation service on her smartphone to make herself clear; the word she was looking for was the feeling of being exploited, and when she uttered this, it was met with mumbling agreement from the group (WS2 field notes and participants). In this sense, a continuous theme of concrete critique in the workshops was the restructuring of the labor market activities toward being both better adapted to the individual’s dreams and competencies and more regulated in terms of temporal limits. Certainly, what is important is also to adjust this restructuring so that the feeling of being ‘exploited’ or ‘stuck’ becomes less prominent, allowing space for growth and agency.

Having power over one’s time was another central topic of discussion in regard to other parts of the Swedish welfare system – namely, the migration process, which all participants had experienced. A participant described this as follows:

There are people who came to Sweden when they were young, then there is a long wait for a residence permit, [ . . . ] they don’t think about continuing studying; they are just ‘what am I going to do. . .’ just waiting for a residence permit in Sweden. Then after five or ten years, when they receive their permit, then time has passed. (WS3)

This discussion illustrates what earlier research described as temporal governance by the state (e.g., Mulinari, 2021; Philipson Isaac, 2022), where the bureaucratic processes force people into a period of life characterized by waiting. The fact that one might have to wait several years, for instance, for something as vital as a residence permit makes one put one’s life on hold, and as described above, this affects which hopes and dreams feel reachable in the future. Thus, both utopian critiques and visions regarding (working) life are affected by lived experiences defined by racialized processes.

During the course of the three workshops, we repeatedly revisited the dreams expressed in the collages and discussed if the participants still had the same dreams or if they had changed since our last meeting. During the third workshop, which was held two months after the first one, a participant expressed that she had changed her dream. She no longer wanted to pursue getting her academic degree validated in the Swedish system; now, she wanted to receive any education for a maximum of one year and start working (WS3). She expressed how the system discourages dreams:

The dreams get weaker. You stay on the same level. If those with an academic education could learn Swedish in an academic milieu, it would be easier to become motivated. (WS3)

All participants agreed with this critique, and one added that she had attended ‘Swedish for immigrants’ courses for eight years and had not yet passed. She described being tired of trying to learn Swedish through this system, that it was not helping her acquire the ‘skill’ (WS3). Several participants also emphasized that their mandatory courses in Swedish for immigrants were held online and that it is difficult learning a new language on your own through an educational program on the internet. This also entails many writing and reading exercises and not as much practice in speaking Swedish as in a real (working) life context, as well as a poorer connection with the teacher. One participant said, ‘if I would study face-to-face, I would understand more of what the teacher means’ (WS3). The discussion on online courses was also held in relation to having to take on student loans, where several participants anticipated a risk of losing income as it is conditional upon their results in the online course. There was also general anxiety about taking loans and not being able to pay them back, since taking the Swedish course does not guarantee getting a ‘real job.’ The general critique of the system’s lack of adaptability was reiterated in a discussion between two participants who did not see how a high school education would get them ‘closer’ to either waged work or other dreams:

- P1 :            They tell me that I can’t [work]; I need to go to high school.  
                   Then I need to study one more year, and after that, I need to study  
                   two more years. So, ok, I don’t want to study; I want to work.
- P2 :            I also want to work.
- P1 :            Yes, I’m telling you, I want to work.
- P2 :            It makes it difficult to dream, right?
- P1 :            Yeah, difficult to dream.
- P1 and P2:    [laughing] (WS3)

One of the main critiques from the group was thus directed at the Swedish bureaucratic system, which they perceived as too narrow, treating people as if everyone were the same. A participant expressed this during the third workshop by saying, ‘different bodies have different needs; different people have different needs,’ but the system neither has nor makes space for these differences. For example, some participants (WS3) raised how needs differ between age groups and that the system must be better adapted to different life stages as young people might want to study, whereas older people might prefer not to take on student loans but instead take up waged work that does not require education. By using the dreams and imaginations of the participants to see what we could do through what we are currently doing (cf. Gorz, 1999), this discussion points us toward a more individually adapted system where formal education might be for some but not for all, highlighting the need of pathways that take into consideration individual needs and aspirations.

### *A radically different world*

We also chose to analyze the empirical material to determine if and how the participants presented critiques beyond the Swedish welfare system, the way in which they did this, and when this utopian thinking was possible and when it broke down. The critical and implementary phases of the future workshops informed this stage of the analysis (Jungk

and Mullert, 1987), corresponding to what Levitas (2013) called the ‘architectural’ construction of new institutions and delineation of societal structures.

One trace of dreaming of a radically different world was when the dreams involved the act of helping others, such as when discussing other kinds of education, or working toward enhancing equality in Sweden, or for ensuring peace in war zones. Participants described this work as important both personally and in relation to a community and often tied it to their own experiences of living in war zones or being immigrants and experiencing inequality. These dreams were not necessarily framed in the shape of waged work but could also be voluntary work or work in terms of activity. One participant (WS2) described how she, in her past, had done volunteer work for the Red Cross in a war-torn country. Though she had an academic degree from another country, not yet validated in Sweden, she mentioned this dream of helping others before the urge to secure waged work, a ‘real job,’ in her current situation. Several ideas of helping others through education and the transformative power of learning recurred during the workshops. One participant (WS2) talked about how ‘educating women means educating the world,’ thus tying a feminist vision of education to wider hopes of a changed, more peaceful, world order. Participants also connected education more concretely to a communitarian idea of work as activity. Several participants shared dreams of teaching children different sports or sharing the joy of dance with other women (WS2), not as waged employment but as another type of work. Sometimes, this was also linked to a strong will to help to reduce social isolation, especially among other immigrant women, as events such as these would provide opportunities to leave their homes and socialize. As Levitas (2001) argued, utopian thinking is one way of formulating a critique of existing hierarchical sociopolitical and economic arrangements. In this case, the participants expressed a desire for a more egalitarian and compassionate society through their dreams, with critiques and a resistance against the capitalist market logics inherent in those dreams. Though the LLMP as a site of governing is aimed at fostering certain types of subjectivities, the ideas in these discussions beyond the individual person or the Swedish welfare system – ideas of a radically different world – became apparent.

Turning back to Weeks (2011), who discussed how dominant work ideologies and the discourses sustaining them constrain not only our freedom but also our imagination and subjectivities, we see how this lens is particularly relevant for analyzing both the enforcement of waged work’s ideological grip and how participants’ dreams envision alternative constructions of work and life, challenging the prevailing wage-centric system. For instance, some participants’ dreams were centered on others, such as the participant who shared her aspirations for her children’s education and future, emphasizing that this dream extended to ‘every child’ (WS2). This participant, who was illiterate, expressed a form of collective care in describing how her children’s multilingual abilities allowed them to assist her by reading documents. Her narrative reflects a dual reality: both a resignation that dreams of education for herself are no longer meaningful, and an expansive vision of education as a shared good that transcends individual circumstances. Such dreams extend beyond individual survival within the capitalist wage labor system, connecting instead to imagined communities, envisioning a world structured around collective well-being.

Similarly, dreams involving (extended) family and acts of care surfaced in discussions about the collages (WS2), where participants' artworks depicted activities, like cooking festive meals or maintaining a welcoming home, as acts of work built around community. These visions recast traditionally undervalued tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, often relegated to unpaid or underpaid labor, as meaningful and fulfilling work tied to connection and love. Narratives like these reflect a reimagination of work as an activity defined not by its adherence to the wage relation but by its capacity to foster community and care. Such dreams, particularly in their departure from the strictures of municipal activation programs, embody what Weeks (2011) termed 'concrete utopias.' They imagine work not as the production of 'governable subjects' or 'worthy citizens' but as a means to build and sustain relationships and communities. While participants often expressed aspirations tied to waged work, their narratives also revealed a fragmentation of the traditional linkages between wages and work, opening up a space for alternative futures.

### **Utopias of labor?**

Using *News from Nowhere* (cf. Morris, 1890/2017) as our point of departure, we have explored how utopian thinking based in the margins of the labor market can point us toward critiques of the construction of economic-productive subjectivities, concrete structures of the welfare system, and perhaps the more diffuse architecture of capitalism. By attending to the utopian elements of the participants' narratives, we can see how dreams are often limited to capitalist logics and the aim of becoming 'employable,' expressed in the participants' 'anticipatory consciousness' (Bloch, 1986) as real but not (yet) existing possibilities. In other words, the critiques here stem from dreams of something else but remain confined within the parameters of the market logics offered in the LLMP. Similarly, when participants imagined alternative labor market systems, their critiques and suggestions for change often remained constrained within the existing frameworks. However, in critiquing the concrete activities undertaken within the welfare system, the participants also experienced and expressed the inconsistencies inherent in how the system does not function in accordance with its intended purpose. Following these streams of utopian thought led the participants to formulate critiques that transcended the individual and the current political frameworks to explore ideas concerning another way of structuring the (labor market) system, to imagine a world where other, and all kinds of, work are considered 'real jobs.'

Grounding the discussion of dreams and work in the concept of utopia – both in its critiques and its transformative potential – illuminated participants' engagement in acts of imaginative resistance. Their narratives challenge the dominant wage-centric ideology while also highlighting pathways for imagining work and life beyond the capitalist labor market. In this sense, departing from utopia points us to constructions of the meaning of work and a 'real job' and allows us to critique the fundamental structures that prevent these dreams from coming true (cf. Levitas, 2001) and also to draw out what a radically different world might entail. By recognizing these dreams as rooted in concrete conditions yet striving toward unrealized possibilities, we can better confront the ideological constraints of the present and envision transformative futures that decenter wage work as

the primary source of validation and meaning, offering an alternative grounded in collectivity and care.

What emerged from the participants' narratives was thus a tension between the internalization of and resistance to the market logics inherent in the labor market structure. In conducting this analysis, we consistently considered *what if?* What if the labor market was structured differently? What if the enhancement of 'skills' was not dependent on one's role within the labor market system? What if all kinds of work were considered 'real jobs'? With waged work being a fundamental cornerstone of the capitalist system, questions such as these, grounded in the hope of alternative futures, must be asked to grasp the possibility of a radically different world. As Levitas (2013: xviii) argued, the explicitly hypothetical nature of utopias allows for a provisional, reflexive, and dialogic approach while uncovering visions of the 'good society' veiled in the current political structures. In our discussion of these visions in relation to the construction of economic labor subjectivities, and sometimes the breakdowns of linkages between wages and work, it became apparent how certain logics work in various ways for various people. To conclude, we therefore argue that 'news from Somewhere,' based on lived experiences and aiming at a utopian condition, could be part of imagining potential transformations of the current circumstances.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to express our gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback, which significantly improved this paper. We also thank Ida Sjöberg for assisting in the data collection for this study.

### **Data availability statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy concerns regarding the research participants.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The study was funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, grant number: 2021-01550.

### **Ethical approval and informed consent statements**

The study has obtained ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, registration number: 2023-08059-02.

### **ORCID iD**

Maja Östling  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3481-1620>

## Notes

1. Olofsson G, Giritli Nygren K, Bergström G, Bolin M, Klockmo C, Nyhlén S, Sjöberg I and Tjulin Å (2024) Study protocol: Local labour market programs – institutional structures, organizational forms and lived experiences. *PLOS ONE* 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296242>
2. The consent form was translated into seven languages to make it more accessible to the participants.
3. None of the participants ultimately used their own photos; instead, they all worked with clippings from the magazines.

## References

- Bergström G, Klockmo C and Tjulin Å (2023) *En beskrivning av arbetsmarknadsenheternas (AME) innehåll och arbetsprocesser i åtta kommuner: En delrapport*. Sundsvall: Mittuniversitetet.
- Bloch E (1986) *The Principle of Hope* (1st American edn). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Brauer J (2022) *Labour market policies: Structure and content, space and time*. Dissertation, Örebro University, Sweden.
- Brauer J (2024) Austerity through rescaling and layering in the Swedish welfare state. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 1–15. DOI: 10.1080/04353684.2024.2336045.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Caswell D (2019) Talking policy into being: How street-level bureaucrats and vulnerable unemployed talk about labor market participation. *European Policy Analysis* 6(1): 23–37. DOI: 10.1002/epa2.1071.
- Clair RP (1996) The political nature of the colloquialism, ‘a real job’: Implications for organizational socialization. *Communication Monographs* 63(3): 249–267. DOI: 10.1080/03637759609376392.
- Dahlstedt M (2009) *Aktiveringens politik: demokrati och medborgarskap för ett nytt millenium*. Malmö: Liber.
- Dannaris S (2018) Ready to work (yet)? Unemployment trajectories among vulnerable welfare recipients. *Qualitative Social Work* 17(3): 355–372. DOI: 10.1177/1473325016672916.
- Friedli L and Stearn R (2015) Positive affect as coercive strategy: Conditionality, activation and the role of psychology in UK government workfare programmes. *Critical Medical Humanities* 41(1): 40–47. DOI: 10.1136/medhum-2014-010622.
- Garforth L (2009) No intentions? Utopian theory after the future. *Journal for Cultural Research* 13(1): 5–27. DOI: 10.1080/14797580802674787.
- Garsten C and Jacobsson K (eds) (2004) *Learning to be Employable: New Agendas on Work, Responsibility and Learning in a Globalizing World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giritli Nygren K, Olofsson G, Sjöberg I et al. (2022) Närmare men inte nära nog – hur arbete osynliggörs vid kommunala arbetsmarknadsenheter. *Arbetsmarknad & Arbetsliv* 28(2): 54–72.
- Gorz A (1999) *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Govender L (2023) *Crumbs from the rich man’s table? Municipal labour market policies and recognition of welfare recipients in Sweden*. Dissertation, Linnéuniversitetet, Sweden.
- Hirsland A and Kerschbaumer L (2023) A relational approach to understanding welfare recipients’ transitions from long-term unemployment to employment and the role of case work. *Social Work & Society* 21(1): 1–18.
- Jungk R and Mullert N (1987) *Future Workshops: How to Create Desirable Futures*. London: Institute for Social Inventions.
- Laliberte Rudman D and Aldrich R (2016) ‘Activated, but stuck’: Applying a critical occupational lens to examine the negotiation of long-term unemployment in contemporary socio-political contexts. *Societies* 6(3): 28. DOI: 10.3390/soc6030028.

- Levitas R (2001) Against work: A utopian incursion into social policy. *Critical Social Policy* 21(4): 449–465.
- Levitas R (2013) *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marston G (2008) A war on the poor: Constructing welfare and work in the twenty-first century. *Critical Discourse Studies* 5(4): 359–370. DOI: 10.1080/17405900802405312.
- Moir C (2018) Ernst Bloch: The principle of hope. In: Best B, Bonefeld W and O’Kane C (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*. Los Angeles: Sage, pp. 199–215.
- Morris W (1890/2017) *News from Nowhere*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Mulinari P (2021) Policing time – creating labour: The temporal control of the unemployed. *Nordic Social Work Research* 11(2): 117–128. DOI: 10.1080/2156857X.2020.1861069.
- Nord T (2018) *Arbete som rättighet eller skyldighet: Föreställningar om arbetsmarknadsfrånvaro i välfärdsstaten*. Dissertation, Karlstads universitet, Sweden.
- O’Connor A and Raile ANW (2015) Millennials’ ‘get a ‘real job’’: Exploring generational shifts in the colloquialism’s characteristics and meanings. *Management Communication Quarterly* 29(2): 276–290. DOI: 10.1177/0893318915580153.
- Olofsson J and Wadensjö E (2009) *Arbetsmarknadspolitik: Förändrade förutsättningar och nya aktörer*. Stockholm: SNS.
- Östling M (2025) Deemed as ‘distant’: Categorizing unemployment in Sweden’s evolving welfare landscape. *Social Sciences* 14(3): 129. DOI: 10.3390/socsci14030129.
- Paaby K, Nielsen KA and Nielsen BS (1988) Fremtidsværksteder som foregrebet utopi. *Kontext* 51: 4–60.
- Paaby K, Nielsen BS and Nielsen KA (1992) Erfaringer med fremtidsværksteder. *Social Kritik: Tidsskrift for Social Analyse og Debat* 18: 110–127.
- Panican A and Ulmestig R (2017) *Lokal Arbetsmarknadspolitik: Vem gör vad, hur och för vem?* Växjö: Linnéuniversitetet.
- Philipson Isaac S (2022) Temporal dispossession through migration bureaucracy: On waiting within the asylum process in Sweden. *European Journal of Social Work* 25(6): 945–956. DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2022.2077317.
- Pieper M and Haji Mohammadi J (2014) Ableism and racism: Barriers in the labour market. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 3(1): 65–92. DOI: 10.15353/cjds.v3i1.147.
- Scholz F and Ingold J (2021) Activating the ‘ideal jobseeker’: Experiences of individuals with mental health conditions on the UK Work Programme. *Human Relations* 74(10): 1604–1627. DOI: 10.1177/0018726720934848.
- Schön U-K, Tranquist J and Astvik W (2023) Managing a fragile motivation within an unfit organisation: Young adults’ experiences of support to achieve employment. *European Journal of Social Work* 27(3): 638–649. DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2023.2266785.
- Statens Offentliga Utredningar (2017) *Vägledning för framtidens arbetsmarknad*. Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet.
- Ulmestig R and Panican A (2018) Att vistas i arbetsmarknadspolitikens ingenmansland. *Sociologisk Forskning* 55(4): 467–486. DOI: 10.37062/sf.55.18782.
- Weeks K (2011) *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

## Author biographies

Maja Östling is a PhD student in sociology at Mid Sweden University, specializing in the politics of the Swedish labor market, with a particular focus on local activation programs. Her research interests include experiences of labor market interventions, discourses on work and unemployment, and the role of wage labor in contemporary Swedish society.

Sara Nyhlén, PhD, is a senior lecturer in sociology and an associate professor in political science at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Mid Sweden University. Her research focuses on critical policy analysis in different empirical areas with a particular interest in intersectionality, power and policy as well as in methodological development in the field of sociology and political science.

Katarina Giritli Nygren, PhD, is a professor of sociology at Mid Sweden University. She is interested in the sociology of gender, intersectional analysis and critical theory. Her research addresses different forms of governance relationships with a general focus on social transformation and a particular focus on the spatial and temporal aspects of intersectional disparities.