

# ‘Careering’ – toward radicalism in radical times: Links to human security and sustainable livelihoods

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## Abstract

In this Age of the Anthropocene, the world of work is being radically disrupted by mass precarity, rising wage and income inequality, habitat destruction, and the rise of artificial intelligence. Facing such insecurity, people, we show, are careering toward radical ways of making a living. They range from radical professionals to social media influencing and environmental activism. Human security is fundamentally enhanced by sustainable livelihoods, and we explore ways not only to de-radicalise, but also to accept and embrace radical careering, if and whenever it serves the purpose of making people’s livelihoods more sustainable for society, economies, and ecosystems. The article concludes by introducing an Index of Sustainable Livelihoods (SL-I). Success to the successful. The Sustainable Livelihoods Index (SL-I) is designed to be a ‘visible hand’ for end-users, including career counsellors, students, and workers undergoing career transitions, by Corporate Responsibility Officers, and by government ministries supporting just workforce transitions into sustainable livelihoods.

## Keywords

Ecosystems, polarisation, Anthropocene, artificial intelligence, radicalism, sustainable livelihoods

## Anthropogenic context

This era in human history has been dubbed the Anthropocene, meaning that human beings are now the principal drivers of dangerous changes to the earth’s biosphere – including through human activities like work and careers (see Hopner, 2023). The world of work cannot be separated from its ecosystemic/environmental (E) issues like global warming, its social (S) issues such as wage income inequality, and its governance (including economic) issues (G), such as precarious and unfree work, (Hopner, 2023). In the face of these triple environmental, social, and governance (ESG) challenges, the United Nations (UN) has argued that society finds itself in the midst of a great polarisation, meaning increasing social division and radicalisation of beliefs and identities, which collectively pose a significant, Anthropogenic threat to human security (UN News, 2024).

Vocationally, a clear majority of the world’s workforce experiences precariousness and working poverty (Carr et al., 2023). These now threaten ‘the very meaning of a successful professional career’ (OECD, 2023, p. 1).

Portfolio careers have been one step towards making professional livelihoods more sustainable (Rinne, 2021). However, they may not be sufficient to stop the future world of work in general from becoming more polarised and radical. This article therefore considers other ways that radicalism can be countered – and indeed even sublimated – through a radical *vocational* lens. The purpose of the article thereby becomes to advocate that the field of careers is broadened to be more inclusive of these radicalised livelihoods, as they become increasingly normative in an ‘Age of the Anthropocene’.

Conceptually, the term ‘career’ has two meanings: (1) as a *noun*, it means ‘an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person’s life and with opportunities for progress’. In addition, it can be/is (2), a *verb*, to career, which means to move swiftly in an uncontrolled way (<https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>). Unifying and bridging both meanings is the idea, a metaphor, of career trajectory – which has velocity as well as direction. In a polarised vocational landscape, the UN above (2024) are suggesting that people are often hurtling, vocationally speaking, towards and along extreme – and

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mutually antagonistic, unsustainable – career positions and pathways.

### Mass precarity

One of the root causes of today's precariousness in the world of work (Carr et al., 2023) is Arbitrage (Hopner, 2024; Stobierski, 2021). According to Stobierski, it 'is an investment strategy in which an investor simultaneously buys and sells an asset in different markets to take advantage of a price difference and generate a profit' (2021, p. 1). Through globalisation and the neo-liberal ideals of the Washington Consensus from the 1980s (for a review, Carr, 2023), the mass practice of shifting labour to cheaper offshore centres, and then selling in wealthier, higher-price-paying economies, has meant the generation of rustbelts in countries and economies like the United States.

Historically, in the *Wealth of Nations*, published in the 18th century, Adam Smith proposed that another metaphor – the 'invisible hand' – would help to curb capitalistic avarice like this, and encourage investors, specifically through an inherent sense of patriotism, to keep employment onshore, in their own country. This moral sentiment has not come to pass, and instead, today, we see a deep anger across the rustbelts, and the rise of populist leaders who promise to bring steady-state jobs, and careers, back to their home country. Such rustbelts have arguably become war cries for the return of steady-state, career-supporting jobs, in industries like coal and gas, across countries like the US and Australia, often at great cost to the environment and ecosystem.

These promises of populist leaders, however, are likely to be broken. Jobs themselves are under threat. Even before the pandemic, the International Labour Organization (ILO) was warning that almost two-thirds of the world's workforce (of 3.3 billion people) was working informally, that is, without any formal job, or attendant securities (ILO, 2019). Furthermore, even among a third of the world with formal jobs, almost two-thirds again were reporting that they were struggling to make ends meet (ITUC, 2018; for a review, see Carr, 2023). As Tsing (2015) argues 'precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious – even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined' (p. 2).

During and after the pandemic, this crisis of precariousness has not improved. Indeed, according to the ILO (2024), if anything it has worsened, with unemployment remaining fixed at 435 million, the number of working hours shrinking, temporary platform work proliferating, wage and income inequality are still rising, with automation and artificial intelligence (AI) is threatening the jobs and hours that remain (ILO, 2024). Decreasing job security, loss of benefits, repetitious and at times debasing employment have brought about less fulfilling work, mental health issues (Kelloway et al., 2023) and greater financial insecurities (Hanschu &

Johnson, 2022). Under all of these threats to vocational and economic security, the ILO (2024) now warns that profound structural changes are now well underway across the entire world of work, and thus the everyday working world.

### Rising inequality

Just as much of the working population has fallen into mass working poverty, the top of the wage distribution seems to be getting richer (OECD, 2023). According to the OECD, 'This trend remains unchanged despite growing awareness, even at "business leadership level"', and 'wage inequality explains only a part of the inequality in total income, but it plays an important role' (2023, p. 19). As wage groups grow further apart from each other, and middle-income groups fade from view, the UN in its latest Human Development Report is heralding this era as the 'Age of Polarization' (UN, 2024).

At an everyday level, a range of perceived unjust transitions are clearly motivating careering. These transitions can range from school-to-work, with young people in China for instance starting an online 'lie-flat' movement, to resisting the very idea of going to work on a lifelong treadmill. Inside workplaces, in turn, we hear of mass 'quiet quitting', where people retreat into doing the minimum for their minimum wages and poor treatment. The latter can include people losing their jobs from off-shore and out-sourcing arbitrage and/or downsizing or quiet cutting of job size by employers due to AI or automation. Understandably, therefore, after the pandemic, some people may choose not to go back to their precarious jobs and unstable careers, but instead career into a 'great resignation'.

Sea-changes like these are not of course driven solely by inequality, but they are perhaps in part fuelled by them. They are also in part about meaning, or rather a search for more meaning, for a role in which people are not demeaned as underlings or servants of economic power, but free to recast themselves into more meaningful, perhaps even heroic roles (Rogers et al., 2023). In this disrupted, great unfreezing moment, the article tacks toward one central idea: All of us, career professionals or not, need not 'in'-visible but more *visible* hands to guide vocational decisions. Any such hand probably needs, right now, to be more verb than noun. In a nutshell, it must help people career towards livelihoods that are comparatively secure and above all, *sustainable* (Di Fabio & Cooper, 2023; Di Fabio & Rosen, 2020; Di Fabio & Svicher, 2024). In that sense, careering away from precariousness can be seen as more positive and proactive than simply feeling uncertainty and anxiety; indeed, as seeking meaning over insecurity. Insofar as careering is a form of polarisation, it may also be driven by social psychological processes, notably Social Facilitation, Comparison (Informational and Normative), and Identity (Carr, 2003).

## Historical perspective

Historically, the last time the world witnessed anything quite like the present levels of uncertainty was perhaps the 1930s, during the Great Depression and a subsequent build-up to the Second World War. That era also witnessed a range of polarisations, from the rise of far-right and far-left groups, to the war itself including the horrors of the Holocaust. In its prelude, for example, levels of uncertainty, insecurity, unemployment, and fear of the unknown have been invoked to explain an episode of mass hysteria. This followed Orson Welles' radio broadcast of HG Wells' *War of the Worlds*. The broadcast dramatised the novel's Martian invasion as if it was really happening; and was being reported live by radio journalists at the time. The net result was a mass panic, including many who fled the cities of the US in their cars, believing that the planet was being invaded by aliens.

Since that time, there have been other documentation of mass hysteria, driven likewise by uncertainty in periods of great upheaval, for example, following the collapse of long-standing political systems (MacLachlan et al., 1995). As MacLachlan et al. argued, such reactions can be seen as a form of protest, against social and political changes, and disruptions to the social order. Indeed, many of the conspiracies and protest movements we see today could, we submit, be seen in a not dissimilar light, namely as having hysterical, bizarre elements in them. Some of these reactions, moreover, may be linked to livelihood activities, or at least to radical disruptions in them. It is toward these disruptions that may polarise people *to career*, either towards extreme orthodoxy or heterodoxy.

## Careering and radical professions

The original meaning of radical was to get to the root of a 'social problem' (Powers, 2014, p. 234). In the 20th century, radicals influenced by left-leaning social movements such as feminism, civil rights, and anti-war strove to carry their convictions and ideals into humanistic professions, which held people at the centre, such as social work, medicine, education, and law (Wagner, 1990). There was a proliferation of radicalism at work in the decade between 1965 and 1975, when '... hundreds of radical collectives, caucuses, and journals were formed among radical professors, social workers, lawyers', doctors, and health care workers' (Wagner, 1990, p. 2). Radicals of the 1960s and early 1970s who pursued these human-centred careers were motivated to engage in purpose-driven, and meaningful work for intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards. These intrinsic motivations were found to endure across time with people desiring to stay in careers, which worked towards the security of human beings in some form (Braungart & Braungart, 1980). Although the radicals of this time sought to change the nature of their work, the structures and

rhythms of their careers largely remained stable and secure.

By the end of the 20th century, however, the world of work and typical career trajectories was undergoing monumental change. Globalisation, digitalisation, and non-standard work arrangements heralded restructuring, downsizing, and relocation of organisations (Heine, 2020). Worker demographics had changed, and there were a greater number of career couples, working single parents, and older workers. Rather than a linear progression, careers became more dynamic, seen in terms of 'an individual's work-related and other relevant experiences, both inside and outside of organisations that form a unique pattern over the individual's life span' (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009, p. 1543). This was an era of the boundaryless, Protean career (Inkson & Carr, 2004). These were careers characterised by psychological and physical mobility where the worker shifts across multiple contexts, is open to new and radical possibilities, and is guided by a moral compass, which factors family and other personal relationships into career decisions (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002).

## Radical career change

A radical career change can be the result of choice or involuntary loss of employment (Mellor, 2007) but either way can offer possibilities for a realignment of values and often precipitates a desire for meaningful work. Financial security, technological platforms, and global mobility can further enable radical career change (often midlife), as people have increased freedoms and wider opportunities to take on work that benefits society (Mellor, 2007). As people age, at least in wealthier economies, their subjectivity may become less defined by hitting major work milestones, and financial rewards, and more by what they can do for others (Mellor, 2007). These career changes may often mean a drop in income and social status (extrinsic rewards) in payoff for a congruent fit between wellbeing, personal morals and ethics, and livelihood activities (intrinsic rewards).

Questioning the moral value of career choices and seeking change has led to recent and relatively seismic shifts in the world of work, through processes such as Quiet Quitting and the Great Resignation (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). It is believed that the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting result in part from people seeking existential purpose through meaningful work that aligns with the functions and goals of the employer (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). People seeking meaningful work appears to be in part driven by issues of sustainability and desires for sustainable livelihoods, especially those centred on the protection of the environment. This was shown to be the case for both young (Impakter, 2023) and older workers (Wiernik et al., 2013).

Within the fast-paced flux of the 21st century, globalised consumer culture joined with the communication technologies of social media may well offer individuals' a means to create subjectively meaningful and sustainable

work in progressively insecure employment contexts (Khamis et al., 2017). Increasingly, people are engaging with social media to create new and somewhat radical careers that step away from steady-state jobs and 'normal' career trajectories. It is estimated that over half the world's population actively uses social media (Statista, 2022). The rise of the social media influencer as a career option can be highly lucrative as businesses capitalise on influencers in brand marketing that typically realises 11 times more return on investment than traditional forms of advertising (Kirkpatrick, 2016). The global influencer marketing market value in 2023 was worth US\$21.1 billion and has tripled since 2019 (Statista, 2024b). Social media influencing as an exercise in self-branding marries up with a particular message or orientation. In aspirational terms, the celebrity career and status which comes with influencing speaks to the '...growing agency, enterprise and business acumen of everyday media users' (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 197).

### Radicalised careering

Social media influencers are not only career entrepreneurs but also 'ambassadors of ideology' (Rothut et al., 2023, p. 1). Eco-influencers/green influencers share sustainable living information that protects the environment whilst also offering advice on how to create green businesses. Building incomes through product promotion, sponsored posts, and affiliate marketing (Hope, 2022) grows the use of sustainable practices, and product use. Consumer demand and purchasing power can shift markets and diminish indecent or obscene conditions for both people and animals. Green influencers focused on social justice issues tackle issues such as the destructive impacts of fast fashion through launching campaigns to secure living wages, safe conditions, and other human rights for garment workers (Townsend, 2022). Digital influencers are gaining prominence through user-generated content that promotes sustainable tourism (Palazzo et al., 2021), mostly through Instagram and its network of 2 billion users (Statista, 2024a). This promotion has been found to encourage environmental conservation, alongside awareness of social and cultural histories and identities (Palazzo et al., 2021). Perhaps even more radical are digital opinion leaders such as Greta Thunberg, an 18-year-old climate careerist who reportedly receives no personal income for her activism but has created a social media brand. Her brand receives global media coverage that messages the increasing insecurities brought about by climate change. Such coverage has been leveraged to place pressure on policy makers to take action to mitigate global warming (Mede & Schroeder, 2024).

Other social media influencers create careers as parasocial opinion leaders commenting on social or political issues (Rothut et al., 2023). The contemporary *Tradwife* online subculture features prominent women who build careers as cultural influencers through commodifying right-wing ideologies. These women embrace the

biological differences between men and women and advocate for heteropatriarchal traditional gender roles (Sykes & Hopner, 2024). As cross-platform influencers, they present their views on homemaking, femininity, beauty, health, and socio-political issues such as reproductive rights, vaccinations, and immigration (Sykes & Hopner, 2024). Tradwives monetise their right-wing belief systems through brand collaboration, advertising revenue, and the creation of small online ideologically aligned businesses. Tradwife influencers offer security through ideological reinforcements for some groups but for others, they contribute to insecurity through anti-LGBTIA+, anti-immigration, and xenophobic rhetoric (Sykes & Hopner, 2024).

It could be argued that social media influencers offer a form of radicalised careering for people struggling to manage the ethical perils and economic insecurities of everyday life in Western countries. In other parts of the globe, neoliberalism, colonialism, wars, and conflicts have destabilised many parts of the world leading in many instances to economic instabilities of many nations, unemployment, and limited job prospects. Such poverty of opportunity means little to no possibilities for wealth acquisition and secure lives (Benevento, 2023; Jacobs, 2013). Displacement has led to the loss of language, culture, sustainable food practices, and social and community ties. Growing industrialisation and automation, competition with cheaper goods often manufactured through practices of global arbitrage (above), and increasing wealth inequalities have led to a decline in wages and work opportunities, alongside less fulfilling, and more precarious work for many (Hansch & Johnson, 2022).

Dislocation and loss can lead to ruptures in self and social contexts, and when people are unable to access the resources they require to cope and adapt, they can become drawn to sources of compensation such as substance use, fixes such as get-rich-quick schemes, and ideological movements (Hansch & Johnson, 2022). People who feel left behind or socially discarded sometimes look to particular political movements, identitarian groups, social activism, and both online and offline communities for financial incomes and compensation, belonging, coherence, and sense-making (Hansch & Johnson, 2022). As people commit to these groups, movements, and communities, they can become enmeshed in radicalism and for some individuals, entrenched in the 'process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs', or becoming radicalised (Borum, 2011, p. 9).

The notion of a career(ing) in terrorism has long been mooted (Horgan & Taylor, 2016). Some terrorists have long-term employment in terrorist organisations inhabiting both vertical and horizontal functions and positions with role migration (e.g. recruiter, fundraiser or fighter), across time (Horgan & Taylor, 2016). More recent conflicts have opened up other possibilities for further radical career restyling. In 2022, Ukrainian officials publicly noted that 20,000 foreigner fighters from over 50 countries had committed to the nation's defence against Russia (Kaunert et al., 2023). Of this number, a

small group of foreign fighters defined as ‘resetters’ deployed to Ukraine in the hopes of creating new careers as military contractors that would go beyond the Russo-Ukrainian War. The conflict was seen as a way of reinventing oneself through radical new careers in order to sustain their future economic security as mercenaries (Smith et al., 2022). While radical possibilities arise for career resetting, experiences of civil war, inter-state war, and acts of terrorism typically have destructive consequences on both natural and built environments. In both the short and long term, there is severe environmental destruction with contamination of water sources, widespread deforestation, and significant impacts on air quality. Buildings and cities are destroyed. Food production becomes disrupted, personal health is damaged, and people become displaced from homes, jobs, and communities.

## Consequences

### *For human security*

As the last section implies, radicalised careering carries deep implications for planetary and species security. According to the UN, human security is multifaceted, including economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political dimensions (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 1994, 2016). Accordingly, since ‘human security relates to much more than security from violence and crime [then] A report team wanting to look at the security of people’s livelihoods (economic, food, environment, or health security) might apply a human security approach’ (UNDP, 2017, p. 1, parenthesis added). Post-pandemic, that call has been issued even more loudly, in the Age of the Anthropocene (UNDP, 2022).

Applying that approach, we have recently developed a measure of human security facets as they are experienced in everyday life (Carr et al., 2021). We have expanded its facets conceptually to include digital, national, and global (Carr et al., 2021; Hodgetts et al., 2023). Collectively, our studies have indicated that economic insecurity, principally through the insecurity of livelihood, often has a ripple effect on food, health, environmental, community, and political security (above). In other words, there are potential consequences from livelihoods not being subjectively secured, stemming from subjectively experienced work precariousness (Seubert & Seubert, 2024). These likely include, and in turn may stem from, polarisation (UNDP, 2022).

### *For human sustainability*

Viewed through the lens of human security in general, and threats to the sustainability of livelihoods in particular, populist leaders and rhetoric have played on people’s insecurities and promised them simple solutions in the form of returning jobs, for example, in mining and fossil fuels, to their former economic glory. Narratives

like these, perhaps partly heroic in tone, oblige the suppression, and preferably reversal, of any concerns about the ecosystem. The logical and psychological result would be a polarisation of radical anti-environmentalism, in the name of re-securing livelihoods.

A problem for this kind of dissonance reduction, and potential related conspiracy theorising, is that the climate is in reality more in danger of entering a death spiral that would eventually threaten these same livelihoods themselves. Alternatively, a just transition to cleaner energy forms of work and production might be a safer bet for preserving livelihoods. However, whether a transition is just, is in the eye of the beholder, and if job losses are perceived as unjust, then polarisation towards a re-assertion of jobs or careers that damage the environment and in the long term are unsustainable is almost inevitable. De-radicalising these careers and moving to sustainable livelihoods becomes a real challenge for human security.

### *For sustainable livelihoods*

Livelihoods transcend the formal job or career, they can be either formal or informal, and comprised from more than one activity (Carr, 2023). In order to be sustainable, they need to protect people from crises, and protect the livelihoods of others, both present and future generations (Chambers, 2009). Clearly, the examples of radicalised careering given above vary in their degree of each of these. The question then becomes, which forms of livelihood, including both non-careering and careering, are more versus less sustainable, *compared to each other?*

Making informed choices about these careered and careering pathways, radicalised and not, becomes potentially existential for species and individuals alike. Navigating the choices we face, and in many cases, non-choices we face (e.g. in tackling unfree work and other forms of economic slavery) becomes a question for career seekers, and anyone wishing to preserve their own livelihood – including career professionals. In other words, radicalised careers, and including them in career studies and practice, is reflexive.

## Conclusions

*Reclassify work.* The concept of radicalised careering implies a need to rethink the boundaries of work, and with it, of career itself (OECD, 2024). Work is not synonymous with job, and career is not synonymous with work security. Careering is a reaction to mass in-work precarity, and it needs to be included as a concept in the armamentarium of career development, and career services.

*Reconceptualise ‘career’.* Extending the boundaries of career from noun to verb enables the field to incorporate and include the dynamics of radicalised careering, and to more fully respect the actual forms of livelihood increasingly engaged in by people who are navigating human insecurity in general, and livelihood insecurity in

particular. At root, people are motivated to career towards work that is not only materially supportive but also meaningful, just, and dignified (Blustein, 2006; Blustein et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2016; Peiró, 2024). We can turn attention to the role of digital influencers as entrepreneurs who inhabit modern versions of the protean and boundaryless career (Heine, 2020). We can better understand the role of persuasion and opinion leadership in the quest for sustainable work that is decent, protective of the planet, and benefits society.

*Identify career(ing) pathways.* Recognising radicalised careering creates a need to identify the pathways that people can and do take in education (Kenny et al., 2023), and to calibrate them in some way for sustainability (Guichard, 2022; Maree, 2024). There is more than one criterion for sustainability, namely in addition to environmental, social, and governance (ESG, above). Even more fundamentally, work needs to be re-classified to reflect the diversity of livelihood forms that have been enabled and are being enabled by technology.

*Index for sustainability and human security.* The Age of the Anthropocene is full of both uncertainty and opportunity. Using the latter to navigate the former is a forte of Career Development. What gets measured, in a useable way, tends to get managed, and measuring the sustainability of livelihoods would be a useful way to help people make careering choices that will sustain them and their future generations, alongside other measures of sustainability, notably leadership (Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018; Peiró et al., 2023). This is why we are co-creating, with a wide range of career professionals and scholars, a new sustainable livelihoods index (*SL-I*). This index ranks livelihoods which are measured against three criteria (1) decent work (e.g. income and hours conditions) (2) benefit to society, and (3) impact on the environment – land, air, and sea.

*Incentivise sustainable livelihoods.* Indexes are not separable from the open system in which they exist and inform the wider public. The UN's own Human Development Index, for example, ranks countries on their standards of living, and in so doing may inadvertently, according to the systems dynamic of Success to the Successful, reinforce the very same hierarchy (who wants to invest in a third-tier country?). On the other side of the coin however, an Index such as the *SL-I* stands to motivate students to make sustainable decisions (towards more sustainable livelihoods), to aid career counsellors to help them make that decision, to encourage/nudge companies and sectors to move themselves up the index and help governments to allocate workforce resources towards those most deserving – that is, sustainable.

In the Age of the Anthropocene, humanity is facing an existential crisis hurtling towards unprecedented threats to both secure work and a healthy planet. Globalisation, growing unemployment, shrinking hours, income inequalities, and the automation and digitalisation of work are cementing profound structural changes that are irrevocably shifting our everyday worlds of work. For some these changes have brought flexibility and mobility,

which have increased freedoms and opportunities to make radical career changes that are personally fulfilling, and in service of the security of other human beings or protective of fragile environmental and cultural ecosystems. For others, these societal upheavals and the changing nature of work have led to a radical careering that seeks to exert socio-political influence, which promotes a contingent ideological security, dependent on a particular group or community membership. What is clear is that an inclusive and encompassing approach to human security is fundamentally underpinned by sustainable livelihoods which protect people, planet, and society. We need to reconceptualise careers as sustainable livelihoods and use indexes as moral guide sticks to incentivise and measure how work can secure both humanity and the planet we inhabit. Adam Smith's metaphorical invisible hand of patriotism that was supposed to be secure jobs within national borders must be now the visible hand of globalisation that connects sustainable livelihoods as an open system across the world to ensure human security.



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