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Politicising Automation

Ideas on Work, Technology, and Agency in the Swedish Political Debate

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Abstract

Over the last decade, rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and other automation technologies have sparked extensive and sometimes heated debates over the wider societal impacts of ongoing technological shifts. Even if there is wide agreement that policymaking will play a crucial role for how the future of automation will unfold, these debates tend to emphasise the technical and economic aspects of labour automation while largely overlooking its inherently political dimensions. In recent years, critical scholars within the social sciences have sought to challenge this narrow focus by bringing attention to the various biased effects that automation processes give rise to in terms of justice and power, but automation of labour as a political issue in and of itself remains underexplored. Given the broad acknowledgement of the importance of policymaking, what is especially needed is an increased understanding of how policymakers themselves interpret this issue, as well as their own roles in relation to it. This thesis aims to narrow this knowledge gap by examining the manifest and latent political ideas that underpin the ways in which Swedish policymakers interpret and negotiate the issue of automation, to thereby gain a fuller understanding of what key values that are at stake in the Swedish automation debate. To do so, an ideational analysis has been conducted using parliamentary documents, media and party texts, as well as semi-structured interviews with policymakers as data.

The analysis shows that while Swedish policymakers generally perceive automation of labour as a non-contentious issue in Swedish politics, their ideas on the matter are informed by underlying normative and empirical assumptions that lead to conflicting conclusions regarding both the desirability of increased automation and the roles of policymaking for governing the technologies in question. The analysis also finds that actors' views on automation are tightly connected to their views on a range of related, more fundamental, political issues – such as the character and values of human labour, and the role of the state in relation to the market. Since these related issues are indeed quite ideologically polarising in the Swedish context, the findings indicate that also automation is a more polarising issue than many policymakers perceive it to be. In other words, while the issue has yet to cause any explicit political conflicts in the Swedish debate, the identified disparities and ideational tensions clearly suggest that automation is not merely a technological inevitability but a complex, politically charged arena where different, if often latent, visions of the future contend.

Thus, the portrayal of automation as a politically neutral phenomenon risks obscuring its inherently contestable character and preventing the critical ideological debates that therefore ought to surround it. By bringing our attention to the different and sometimes conflicting political ideas that automation is subject to, the thesis aims to contribute to a more politicised automation debate in which said ideas are not shied away from but openly contested and deliberated over. Such a debate would not only be more democratic, but also more likely to realise some of the unprecedented opportunities that automation technologies grant us.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, automation, future of work, ideational analysis, political agency, politicisation, politics of technology, Utopia/Dystopia, work life

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