PERSPECTIVES

Invited article
Original version
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0034-759020200506

THE FUTURE(S) OF WORK

Speculations about the future of work are notoriously slippery (Watson, 2008), ranging from technologically utopian and progressive narratives (e.g., Handy, 1984) to pessimistic predictions about the end of work (e.g., Rifkin, 1995). Yet the impossibility of empirically establishing what "might be" (Watson, 2008) means that a hefty dose of imagination is required in both formulating and evaluating such speculations. This is particularly true in times of social upheaval, which call into question the confidence around future inferences from past trends. In such periods—such as our own—workplace scholarship faces a delicate balance between demands to inform public debates around work on one hand, and the shifting socioeconomic coordinates that recontextualize such debates on the other. Imaginaries around human futures in the face of crisis act simultaneously as predictions and as performative gestures (cf. Roux-Rosier, Azambuja, & Islam, 2018), shaping as they predict, and mingling scientific and political responsibilities. The calm distance enjoyed by researchers in "normal" times shows itself as no more than the security of the privileged to maintain an illusion of normalcy. What could previously be justified as a disinterested consideration of publicly important questions appears, in crisis moments, as an abdication of social responsibility. In this sense, to write today about the future of work is to construct axes around which that future can be built.

In short, the future of work today is deeply uncertain, and this uncertainty must be acknowledged without letting it paralyze the sociological imagination or depoliticize social action. Seen from one angle, the COVID-19 epidemic has deeply challenged modes of work and organizing (Grint, 2020; Kniffen et al., 2020). Beyond the pandemic, a looming series of ecological and climactic crises will shake the foundations of productive organization (Roux-Rosier et al., 2018). In the meantime, the artificial intelligence and big data revolutions are predicted to radically alter the nature and existence of work as we know it (West, 2018). Yet, from another perspective, some argue that these crises simply deepen and accelerate existing workplace trends, such that far from enabling new work regimes to emerge, they may simply entrench and consolidate the most harmful aspects of current work regimes (Kniffen et al., 2020).

In the context of this double-sided view of the status quo vis-à-vis both rupture and continuity (or the entwinement of rupture and continuity), my intention is to reflect on the future without presuming to predict its concrete forms. To do so, I will focus on three arenas in which I believe the struggles over the future of work will take place. I consider these as "struggles" because their outcome remains undetermined, and yet the forms they take will constitute what activities constitute "work," who will be involved in those activities, and who will benefit from them. Running through these themes are concerns vis-à-vis the role of work in a broader and emerging social order.

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The boundaries of work

One of the most frequently discussed impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is the way in which the boundaries between work across social spheres have been reshaped through policy responses

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(or lack thereof) to the pandemic (Cho, 2020). On one hand, significant segments of work have been redefined as "tele-work," from bureaucratic office work and tele-medicine to education (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). These relocations of work to the home (or other online-connected spaces) have effectively converted those spaces into sites of (formally recognized) economic production, bringing with them the various norms and power dynamics that characterize the different social spheres (Hatton, 2017). At the same time, bringing the office into the household implies bringing the home-space into the office, making it possible to question prevailing workplace norms, such as the presence of children at work, the formality of work versus household conduct, and the requirements of constant connection versus "deconnection" time (cf., Morel, 2017). This blurring of the home–work interface has also made visible the "hidden" labor of maintaining a household (e.g., Hatton, 2017), making it more difficult to separate paid work from reproductive labor that has largely remained outside the monied economy (Fraser, 2014).

Loosening these home–work boundaries offers multiple possibilities. Erosion of the space between the home and the office can take the form of colonization, of the former by the latter; in the process the household "lifeworld" is converted into a rationalized "system" of economic production (Habermas, 1981). However, this loosening can also open spaces for de-rationalization, to the extent that workplace or professional decorum is relaxed as an adaptation to working from home. If rationalized work systems require sectioning off a space of work versus that of "life," the impossibility of this separation may force a reckoning between these spheres that carries emancipatory possibilities at work. It is (perhaps) more likely that rationalization will seep into the home itself, Taylorizing the home into an increasingly rationalized space where daily activities are organized around productivity. A struggle at this interface seems inevitable, and how it is resolved is a matter of both macro-level policy and micro-level negotiations, both of which will take place against the background of widening power asymmetries.

The wave of discussion concerning tele-work, however, must not obscure the fact that this transformation directly involves a very limited subset of workers. Most work will not, as yet, become tele-work. Just as professional and office work adapted online, a vast array of "front-line" workers remain physically exposed to contagion, and have been adapting to a changed work landscape without the possibility of tele-work (Parks, Nugent, Fleischhacker, & Yaroch, 2020). While the front line often receives attention and applause when it consists of medical workers (and without necessarily translating into material benefits for those workers), precarious workers in transport and delivery, food and agricultural production, and other manual-labor sectors constitute an "invisible front line." In many cases, such as industrial food production, these workers exist within spaces that are at risk for infection and many pay with their lives (Waltenberg, Victoroff, Rose et al., 2020). Moreover, in economies with large informal sectors, small-business retailers and other informal jobs have continued in the face of crisis, with the workers therein assuming similar risks.

In some of these situations, such as factory production, the formal boundaries of work are maintained, even as the dynamics of contagion spill over readily from work to home as families and colleagues are exposed to disease. For gig workers and other jobs at the periphery of the formal economy, the lack of formal protection forces precarious workers to choose exposure in the absence of economic options. In the first case, the lack of worker protections has led to the assertion of workplace boundaries against the interests of the workers. In the second case, a lack of boundaries has given workers a lack of safe haven as they spend their days seeking micro-rents on otherwise empty streets in the midst of a pandemic. In some jobs, such as those of Amazon workers, a mix of both situations is evident.

Third, as unemployment figures soar to unprecedented levels in much of the world (Blustein et al., 2020; Coibion, Gorodnichenko, & Weber, 2020), the boundary between work and life becomes a wall separating bare life from the possibility of materially earning a living. Despite the provision of help in the form of various unemployment protections, significant variations in impacts across populations (Acs & Karpman, 2020) are likely to increase inequality; moreover, such protections may be insufficient to sustain populations over extended periods. The dividing line between production and consumption, a formative myth of modern work, is sustainable only insofar as the gains from production can subsidize the necessary conditions of life. In the current context, it is difficult to imagine how this tacit contract between the worlds of work and life can be sustained.

To be clear, the issues of technological mediation and tele-work, precarity, and lack of worker protections, alongside inadequate unemployment safety nets, are not unique to the time of COVID-19; indeed, these concerns pre-existed the pandemic. However, the "stress test" of COVID-19 has accelerated their effects, making their outlines more salient and thus rendering these boundary issues central to public discussion. The future of work will depend, in part, on how these boundaries are maintained, removed, or reshaped in the wake of the crisis.

The solidarities of work

A corollary to the discussion about work boundaries is the question of reconfiguring communities in the face of work-related changes. To change the boundaries of work, after all, is also to change the social categories defined by those boundaries.

Contemporary discussions of postindustrial work have struggled with the difficulties of traditional "proletarian" conceptions of work, as well as the class-based social and political struggle tied to these conceptions (Baldry et al., 2007; Gorz, 1982). Challenges have come from many angles, concerning the shifting constitution of the "working class." Early discussions around managerialism questioned the relevance of an enlarged managerial class for defining workers. For example, should managers (as salaried employees) be thought of as workers, or are they (as agents of worker control) more akin to owners of capital (cf., Boltanski, 1982; Marks & Baldry, 2009)? Outside of organizations, as mentioned, a vast swath of hidden labor has been increasingly recognized as "hidden abodes" of production (Fraser, 2014), leading to expanded definitions of workers as including value production beyond the organization in the wider "social factory" (cf., Mumby, 2020). The increasing splintering of work production activities across an atomized global value chain (Gereffi, 2005) and in nonsalaried forms of labor masked as "independent contracts," "gig jobs," or the "sharing economy" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018; Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019) has made it increasingly difficult to locate the workplace as it becomes distributed across communities and geographies. Finally, the advent of digital labor and social networking—where participation and communication form data-driven business models rely on user-produced content and clicks (Scholz, 2013)—means that connection itself constitutes micro-work that is usually unpaid, but is nonetheless massively profitable for data aggregators such as Google, Amazon, or Facebook.

Although these and other developments in the world of work are distinct from each other and have different causes and effects, they share the common aspect of broadening the category of workers so as to include communities outside of the working class as traditionally conceived (Baldry et al., 2007). This development has been cited as part of a growing crisis of labour politics, in which the increased dispersion and pulverization of the workforce, as well as its lack of a common basis in geography, culture, or shared experience, create challenges in establishing solidarity or political action. Indeed, recent discussions around precarious work have highlighted the difficulties inherent in organizing across different publics and work types, individualized contracts, and part and full-time work; these constitute variations that make it difficult to find common demands and guarantee worker protections (e.g., Gibson-Light, 2018). Moreover, such pulverization makes it easier for different worker groups to consider each other irrelevant or as competitors; set against each other in this way, they find it more difficult to find among their unique grievances an overarching set of common struggles.

On the other hand, the extension (or recognition) of economic aspects in diverse kinds of social activities creates possibilities for broadened forms of social solidarity that could support radical democratic movements. Rather than represent a working class in the narrow sense, contemporary labor organizing may need to place itself at the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, and other social movements to build coalitions around distinct yet related justice concerns (cf., Fraser, Bhattacharya, & Arruzza, 2019). Doing so forces worker movements to look beyond narrow group interests and focus on pluralistic goals and long-term social change. Broadening beyond an immediate horizon for organizing at the level of formal organization (although this remains tactically important) forces work organizers to re-politicize work in the broad sense of promoting a more just society, rather than in narrow visions of power politics.

In summary, as the economically productive aspects of social life are decoupled from traditional salaried labor and spread between formal and informal work, home and office, and in the micro-practices of communication and participation themselves, what constitutes a "worker" changes. Not only workers, but consumers, contractors, sharers, and the catch-all category of "users" reconstitute the categories within which politics can take place, thus requiring new discourses and practices of solidarity.

The rents of work

Related to but distinct from the issues of work boundaries and communities, the questions of the economic status of work and its role within the broader socioeconomic system have been receiving increased attention (e.g., Dejours, Deranty, Renault, & Smith, 2018; Pitts & Dinerstein, 2017). Several of the aforementioned points—from the creation of economic value from the "social factory" (i.e., the unpaid sphere) to the pulverization and distribution of work across global value chains—imply that a one-to-one coupling of individual value creation and remuneration appears to be increasingly impossible. In fact, such a coupling, tied as it is to the ideology of meritocracy and individual-level performance, has always been a myth. However, the reconfigurations described above, coupled with reduced social mobility (e.g., Milburn, 2016) and system-level shocks such

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as pandemics, financial crises, and the coming climate crisis, are likely to make such myths increasingly untenable.

Specifically, as noted above, the economics of "use," in which social value production through participation, communication, socialization, and other unpaid activities support rent-extraction business models, decouple work from pay. This is most obvious in online platforms (e.g., Scholz, 2013; Zuboff, 2019), where social interaction is quantified into data that are commoditized, usually without remuneration: most of the rents of such work occur without the "workers" even being aware that they are working. Similar modes of "prosumption" mix rent accumulation into social consumption experiences, where individuals work for free or even pay to produce value for companies. While such free labor has always characterized the extractive economies of domestic housework and other informal economies, its systematization into global architectures of "sharing" has built an enormous machine that undertakes the corporate extraction of social value, decoupled entirely from the expectation of a salary.

Second, the disintegration of production that has marked global value chains (Gereffi, 2005) has made it increasingly difficult to understand the components of value in terms of individual inputs, making a just determination of pay-for-work impossible in many cases. Even when each step of a global value chain is tracked digitally, the relative contributions of actors along that chain have little to do with their remuneration, which is instead determined by their structural positions on the chain. The domino-like subcontracting structure of certain value chains—such as those relating to construction and agricultural work—have given rise to working conditions approaching or constituting modern slavery (Crane, 2012), with many taking advantage of and reinforcing geopolitical power asymmetries so as to extract value from parties while giving them little to no negotiating leverage. Under such conditions, the link between worker effort and compensation is illusory and does not provide the basis for a social contract between workers and society. An incentive structure through which such a contract is premised—namely, that workers build skills, deploy them for socially valuable ends, and are compensated for their efforts—becomes increasingly removed from reality.

Finally, the system-level events seen during the 2008 financial crisis, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and the likely future events that will relate to climatic and environmental shocks belie neoliberal dreams of sustaining life through individual enterprise and effort (Monbiot, 2016). Such events derive from global-level human activities, and so they require global responses (Fraser, 2008). Social safety nets (e.g., health care, unemployment insurance, and other public services) provide buffers against such shocks. These arguments are not new, but in the current context they take on particular urgency: in the current conjuncture, attempts to maintain a competition-based model of human wellbeing risk running a Malthusian gauntlet in which the isolation and security of a small group is bought at the price of mass suffering. This dystopian fantasy, always latent in liberal thought (Foster, 2000), has been able to coexist with a veneer of "civilization" in periods of sustained growth; in moments of hardship, however, civilization must be measured by the extent to which society protects its most vulnerable members.

Although not exhaustive, these three phenomena—namely, the emergence of mass unpaid work-as-use, the concentration of rents and spreading of precarity through complex value chains, and exposure to recurrent global shocks—all suggest the anachronism of tying monetary compensation to social value production at the individual level. Alternatives to such models, such as some forms of universal basic income and increased investment in public goods and other forms of socially just value distribution, are needed. Such alternatives could free work from its more coercive roles and allow it to take other forms in producing social goods.

Summary

Taken together, these three distinct but related issues around work—the establishment of its boundaries, the communities constituted by it, and the distribution of its rents—will shape the future of work. In each of the broad areas, several themes appear in various places, including the tense frontier between the home and the office/factory, the growing precariat and its relation to traditional work, and the possibility of major upheavals involving social and natural forces that render unstable and provisory any work arrangement.

Running across the broad themes is the sense of a dual, yet asymmetric, evaluation of the emancipatory versus oppressive consequences of each theme. The breakdown of the home–work boundary will (most likely) be at the expense of the safe space of the home, rather than the rationalized domination of work. However, the same opening provides an opportunity for work itself to be changed by the increased mingling with more human spaces of lived social value. The extension of digital platforms and "sharing" solutions most likely relates to the acceleration of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) and its data-driven commodification of everything. Nonetheless, it also opens new terrains of contestation in which democratic possibilities persist.

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ISSN 0034-7590; eISSN 2178-938X

Although the hopeful voices of digital democracy that were so vocal during the so-called Arab Spring (Boros & Glass, 2014) were soon supplanted by horror at its consequences, the proverbial jury may still be out on the democratic potentials of social media platforms, if decoupled from their corporate hosts (Scholz & Schneider, 2016). While the shocks of financial crises and pandemics will likely give rise to new forms of control and economic hardship, they may also open spaces for deep change in "business as usual."

Such likelihoods are, it goes without saying, not based on empirical analysis—and even if they were, these would be difficult to justify in the midst of uncertain times, when believing the future will resemble the past is no more than an article of faith. So from where do they come? My response is that to think about the future of work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic requires the sobering sense of a hard and overgrown road ahead—a road that is not a dead end, but rather one that is under construction. Our past ways of path-making have ultimately wrought destruction, but people in the future must remain hopeful (but careful) about overly progressive narratives or majestic visions of humanity. Where until now work has been considered a "way out," it must now become a way back in. Although it may not be recognizable as such, there remains and will continue to be work to be done.

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AUTHOR' CONTRIBUTION

The author declare that they participated in all stages of development of the manuscript. From the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, the theoretical review (literature survey), data collection, as well as data analysis, and finally, writing and final review the article.

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