

July 2023

Building the Future of Work Today

A Labor Studies Perspective

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Working Paper 2023.02



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ABSTRACT

What can labor studies contribute to ongoing debates about the future of work? In a recent edited volume, *Revaluing Work(ers): Toward a Democratic and Sustainable Future* (Schulze-Cleven and Vachon 2021), we put forward a set of propositions that have sparked lively discussions at academic conferences over the past two years. This essay introduces a symposium on “Labor Studies and the Future of Work” that extends these earlier conversations and makes them accessible to the labor studies community. The article clarifies the main arguments and the broader agenda of the book before briefly addressing selected reactions to our claims. Finally, it summarizes the contributions to the symposium by a diverse group of scholars, reviewing what they have to say on the nature and purpose of labor studies as well as its promise for debates about the future of work and workers.

KEYWORDS

Future of work; workers; labor studies; democracy; sustainability

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Please cite the published version of this article, which is forthcoming in the September 2023 issue of the *Labor Studies Journal*.

INTRODUCTION

What can labor studies contribute to ongoing debates about the future of work? Our recent edited volume, *Revaluing Work(ers): Toward a Democratic and Sustainable Future* (Schulze-Cleven and Vachon 2021), puts forward a set of propositions for the United States in comparative perspective with the wealthy democracies of the Global North. The volume seeks to show the power of labor studies to broaden and deepen the debate about the future of work, focusing it on the prospects for democratic governance as well as social and ecological sustainability. In effect, the book makes a two-pronged intervention, one within labor studies on the current state of our field, and one aimed at the public on the need for adjustments in contemporary discourses about the evolution of work.

This article introduces a symposium that brings together seven essays to reflect on, discuss, and extend our propositions, examining how labor studies provides valuable tools for both analysis and practice. In consultation with the journal's editors, scholars from both within and outside of labor studies programs were invited for their diverse backgrounds and complementary expertise to critically evaluate the argumentation and empirical analyses in *Revaluing Worker(ers)*, with a view toward strengthening the debate about this pressing topic for our field and beyond.

The symposium comes at the heels of fruitful conversations about the volume at various academic venues in recent years. As an annual research volume for the Labor and Employment Relations Association (LERA), the book was discussed at several LERA events. However, connecting with the “engaged” and “integrating” traditions of labor studies scholarship (Boyer 1996; Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017), we sought to reach beyond the borders of the United States and into neighboring academic fields. Panels on the volume were sponsored by the Canadian Interuniversity Research Centre on Globalization and Work (CRIMT), the Global Labour University (GLU), the International Labour Process Conference (ILPC), and the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE). We also published an article on the lessons of our analysis for worker-focused inquiry around the world in the *Global Labour Journal* (Schulze-Cleven and Vachon 2022).

In this essay, we briefly elaborate why we believe a labor studies perspective on the future of work is needed and then speak to some of the novel insights that such a perspective brings forward. Subsequently, we address selected themes that have emerged in discussions of the volume, followed by short summaries of the essays in the symposium. While the contributions to the symposium differ in focus, they all speak to the state of field, both past and present, as well as to considerations for the future. Where do we go from here? Or, “what is to be done?”

THE NEED FOR A LABOR STUDIES PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUTURE OF WORK AND WORKERS

Revaluing Worker(ers) proceeds from the diagnosis of a misalignment between the fragile state of political, economic, and environmental realities on the one hand and narrow and unimaginative discourses about coping with today’s challenges in the world of work on the other. As we see it, the neoliberal assumptions denominating mainstream debate about the future of work have shifted attention away from viable and arguably necessary adjustments built around workers’ needs and desires.

We are living in a time of multiple, inter-related, and compounding crises—or what has increasingly come to be termed a “polycrisis”—and the world of work is a central node through which the different crises connect. Imbalances and institutional drift in employment regulation underwrite distrust in government, contribute to economic instability, and undermine efforts to curb climate change. Moreover, together the different crises tend to create new inequalities and exacerbate existing ones, especially along the lines of race, class, and gender. Major tax breaks for the wealthiest, windfall profits for major corporations, and record income for top managers are coupled with a weak social safety net, eroding employment-based benefits, stagnant wages, and increased precarity for workers. As the contradictions of contemporary democratic capitalism continue to grow, the system’s ability to reproduce and sustain itself has come into doubt.

Yet none of this tends to be on the table in the mainstream debate about the future of work. While exchanges about the future of work have been sprawling and intensifying in recent years, the mainstream debate remains narrowly focused on the impact of technological change and the need for individual rather than collective adjustments. Exhibiting both technological and market determinism, the debate appears to remain stuck in “neoliberal economism,” which can serve as an analytical and political distraction with respect to a comprehensive understanding of work. We contend that a labor studies lens offers a much-needed corrective and is better positioned to guide societies’ reflections on the evolution of work and contribute to collectively shared understandings of the broader challenges.

Drawing on contributions from across the many disciplines that permeate the labor studies field, our volume examines the socially constructed and politically sanctioned processes through which workers are managed and empowered. In this way, we can speak to how changes in the regulation of labor could help address today’s multi-pronged systemic crises. Throughout the book we argue that revaluing work—the efforts and contributions of workers—is crucial to realizing the promises of democracy and improving sustainability. We, moreover, emphasize that collective action and workers’ collective agency are central to driving forward this revaluation agenda for the governance of work and workers. Finally, we maintain that ongoing innovations in the organization

and regulation of reproductive labor from care to education can function as inspiration for the valuation and governance of work more broadly.

It is during times of uncertainty that ideas matter the most. All intellectual frameworks that actors use to interpret the world around them are built on the foundation of certain core ideas, and it is these ideas that help actors treat systemic uncertainty as risk. Only by embracing a set of specific ideas can actors attach probabilities to particular outcomes, which enables them to embark on rational problem-solving.

Yet the ideas at the core of all frameworks, regardless of discipline or persuasion, rest on assumptions about how the social world works or should work. These assumptions come with implicit and often deeply normative biases, including economists' commitments to allocative efficiency and lawyers' allegiance to social order. It is thus of critical importance to reflect on how appropriate the assumptions underlying any framework are for the challenges at hand: Do their implicit biases help achieve particular goals, or are they likely to undermine such efforts?

We contend that a labor studies lens has at least three unique advantages when it comes to understanding what goes into building a democratic and sustainable future of work and workers.

First, it puts working people—and their struggles—at the center of analysis. Increasingly, that has meant that the field takes a holistic human-centered approach that includes not only paid, formal, and “productive” work, but also informal and unpaid work, including questions of reproductive labor. Attention to workers' lives on the ground, moreover, provides deep insights into patterns of social disadvantage as well as the shifting social, ideational, and organizational basis of social mobilization.

Second, as an interdisciplinary approach to the study of work, labor studies is conceptually open, bringing to bear the theoretical insights from quite different strands of academic inquiry. At the same time, the defining focus on labor and work sustains a common vocabulary that unifies diverse conceptual tools.

Finally, the field is explicit about its normative anchoring in a desire to uphold worker rights in the spirit of individual freedom, human dignity, and social justice. That is, we argue, it proceeds from a dual democratic commitment to work being rewarding for all workers, and all workers being able to exercise voice in the design of the labor process. Given that the institutions for governing work are socially constructed and politically sanctioned, labor studies sees them as open to change through collective action. It is a perspective that actively embraces human beings' ability to re-make their lifeworld while recognizing the constraints acting upon this collectively constituted process.

We thus feel that the core concepts and tools associated with labor studies—from ontology to epistemology—help us more clearly see the real political and organizational challenges ahead. We also acknowledge that our interpretation of the field extends traditional conceptions in core respects, from the attention to race and the inclusion of intersectional analysis to an emphasis on environmental sustainability and reproductive work.

This contemporary labor studies perspective can expand the future of work conversation in several important ways:

- *Beyond market competition*: Unlike neoclassical economic models that define away the political realm and government policies, a labor studies perspective acknowledges and engages directly with the democratic processes of rule-making that govern the scope and dynamics of market forces.
- *Beyond technology's impact*: A labor studies perspective recognizes the myriad factors influencing the future of work and interacting with rapid technological change, including demographic shifts, climate change, and inequality-increasing institutional shifts in the economy, from financialization to workplace fissuring.
- *Beyond structural determinism*: Dominant analyses of workers' future emphasize structural constraints on the evolving world of work. Yet this is only one part of the picture, given that all social forces, technology included, are plastic and subject to creative collective social action. A labor studies perspective emphasizes the power of collective agency in recasting multiple structural transformations, shaping the interactions between them, and devising new approaches to absorbing the costs of transition. As we discuss in the book with respect to institutional changes in the care infrastructures that organize reproductive labor, there is nothing inevitable about certain workplace tasks or even entire occupations being low status or low paid.

We want to keep this summary of our approach brief, given that references to different parts of our book in the essay contributions to the symposium will naturally flesh out additional content of the volume. For now, let us simply say that beyond two introductory chapters and a conclusion written by either one or both of us, the book contains a foreword and eleven empirically oriented chapters by other authors. Substantiating the agenda sketched out above while also developing independent arguments, these chapters cover such issues as workers negotiating over algorithms, prospects for a just transition, workers' political engagement, new bargaining strategies, worker voice in technological change, labor education, and innovation in reproductive work from care to education. In sum, the chapters bring in one of the most important factors that has remained absent from most mainstream discussions on the future of work—workers themselves.

EMERGING THEMES ON THE PROMISE OF LABOR STUDIES

Responses to the book have produced lively conversations. As contributions to this symposium demonstrate, other scholars would have framed parts of the analysis differently. Depending on where colleagues sit politically or analytically, they have read our intervention as more or less radical. For instance, while some on the left would have liked our analysis to engage more with the general properties of capitalism, more moderate voices have cautioned against excessive criticism of neoclassical economics or our emphasis on the normative grounding of labor studies.¹

We certainly recognize capitalism’s systemic properties and have analyzed them elsewhere (e.g., Rothstein and Schulze-Cleven 2020, 307-309). In the book, we decided to focus on capitalism’s contemporary neoliberal variant, given that it has underwritten “capitalism’s increased dominance over democracy” (Schulze-Cleven and Vachon 2021, 8). For those interested, we feel that recent theorizing that locates nature in capitalism (Moore 2015) and explicates how capitalism tends to divide labor along race, gender, and class (Fraser 2022) offers productive leads for further inquiry. In terms of the role of the state (as emphasized by Jackson and Meer in their contribution to the symposium), we acknowledge that public policies have played a strong role in giving capitalism more room, but we chose to stress the potential for policymakers to increase the scope for political over market-based allocation of resources as an equally crucial dynamic. Finally, on neoclassical economics, we believe in the potential for all disciplines to productively contribute to interdisciplinary conversations and remain skeptical of any one discipline serving as a dominant lens in contemporary debates.

Beyond differences of opinion or emphasis, the symposium also reveals important areas of agreement. Three points are worth highlighting. First, while early scholarship in labor studies was arguably framed as a “radical” alternative to the supposedly “reformist” industrial relations, there is much that connects the two fields today (as emphasized by Doellgast in her essay below). Such convergence could be a powerful driver for drawing more scholars into the field of labor studies and put it in a position to function as a space where critical analyses from various corners of the social sciences and related disciplines, including critical management studies, could productively engage with each other.

Second, there is shared acknowledgement among the participants in the symposium that labor studies research needs to move beyond a traditional class-based analysis, even if the scope of that change is still debated (see de Leon’s contribution in particular). Finally, the symposium makes clear that conversations about the lessons from labor studies for the future of work cannot be solely focused on the United States or even on the rich democracies. Multiple contributions convincingly demonstrate the benefit of a global frame embedding local analyses. We conclude this article by introducing the essays that comprise this symposium.

¹ These points were made at the ILPC conference and in journal-based book reviews respectively.

MOVING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

In the first essay, Marissa Brookes argues that an international political economy (IPE) lens, combined with the existing strengths of labor studies, could help illuminate pathways to achieving many of the ideas and policies set forth in *Revaluing Work(ers)*. Brookes contends that the link between labor studies and IPE has been neglected for too long. With considerable influence from the field of economics, IPE is well-positioned to identify and analyze the existing constraints on policies, but often lacks insight into labor as an actor with agency. Labor studies, she argues, is somewhat the opposite in its ever striving to get beyond constraints. Viewing labor studies through an IPE lens, Brookes argues, means taking real structural barriers to collective action into account while also figuring out how labor is empowered. To demonstrate this connection, Brookes draws upon her own research on workers' use of structural power, institutional power, and coalitional power in global supply chains to compel employers to make changes that benefit the workforce.

Following Brookes, Bob Bussell draws on his 25 years of experience as a university-based labor educator to consider how the field of labor education should respond to the myriad challenges faced by workers today. Seeing workers as “total persons” with both workplace and community lives, Bussell believes that unionists need both a diverse set of tools and a strong cast of supporters to fulfill their more visionary ambitions for a more just future of work, including public officials, the labor movement, and professional organizations such as UALE and LERA. Labor studies and labor education programs, he argues, must also continue to cultivate new relationships on campus, diversify their sources of funding, and exemplify the integration of teaching, research, and service in order to weather the ongoing and potential future attacks on such programs. Labor studies scholars and labor educators act as an essential counterpoint to “market fundamentalism” and can advance discussions about the future of work that center workers.

Taking a more critical stance, Cedric de Leon contends that labor studies should endeavor to transcend the norms of respectability in the future of work literature to embrace socialism and ground this orientation in an analysis of the history of Black labor more explicitly. Without such a corrective, he argues, labor activists and scholars run the risk of having capitalist creative destruction overwhelm us yet again at some future historical juncture. That is, he contends, we should not be asking how we might make the future of work sustainable for workers and the environment but instead consider if we really want to do this repeatedly. Should we not be more explicitly pursuing a fundamentally different alternative? To that question his answer is firmly in the affirmative.

Like de Leon, Virginia Doellgast reflects on the tensions between different approaches to achieving a democratic and sustainable future of work. On one side are reformist arguments that the economy and society will benefit from strengthened employment regulations and employee voice at work. On the other side is more radical mobilization, based on broad worker solidarity

and an oppositional ideological consensus. Unlike de Leon, Doellgast finds the labor studies perspective put forward in *Revaluing Work(ers)* as falling on the more critical end of the spectrum, skeptical of mutual gains arguments and consensus-oriented policy proposals. However, she notes, a focus on strengthening cooperative and institutionalized regulation of markets also permeates many of the chapters. She reflects on the difficulties of attempting to synthesize these two approaches by drawing from her own work.

Nantina Vgontzas builds on the reflections in *Revaluing Work(ers)* about the normative stakes involved in the future of work debates. Engaging with the human-centered visions for progressive futures spelled out in the volume, she puts forward a spirited call for the U.S. labor movement to develop new political alliances against today's center of neoliberal power. Vgontzas warns that labor officials in the age of digitally-enabled services should eschew the mistake of the industrial era when workers gave up control over production technology in exchange for rights and social protections. Failing to contest algorithmic control and employment status in compromises with big tech, she contends, would both lock in insecure work and undermine the formation of broader social coalitions that are needed to address societal challenges co-produced by algorithmic control.

Subsequently, the contribution by Jason Jackson and Ayan Meer examines how labor studies analysis would be framed if the experiences of workers in the Global South—the majority of workers in the world—were taken as the empirical anchor. Tracing divergences, similarities, and interdependencies across the North-South divide, the authors make the case for a truly global approach. Highlighting radically different contexts in the South—long-standing informality in the labor market, booming manufacturing employment, and the continued extreme importance of agricultural work—the authors show that parallel trends, such as movement toward platform-mediated work, can have contrasting effects from those in the North. At the same time, long-standing informal practices in the South might provide insights into what kinds of challenges we can expect to emerge in the North. A globally informed empirical basis might thus even pay off conceptually for locally focused analyses.

In the final essay, Mark Stuart and his colleagues from the University of Leeds practice such a global perspective when they analyze the struggles of platform workers in the food delivery sector across 36 countries. Following our proposed approach of putting the experiences of working people at the center of the analysis, the authors study how workers defend and advance their interests through collective action. Central to the essay's argument is the concept of associational power as an important tool for helping to understand the evolving patterns of labor unrest. It is only through such associational power, Stuart and colleagues contend, that platform workers will be able to build a future of work based on more human-centered and democratic concerns.

Engaging with different aspects of *Revaluing Work(ers)* and doing so in quite distinct ways, the essays in this symposium provide a highly complementary set of suggestions about how to move

forward in our field. We hope that readers of the *Labor Studies Journal* will engage with these important contributions as they examine and/or seek to shape the world of work.

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BIOGRAPHIES

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