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**Revaluing Work(ers) for
Democracy and Sustainability**

By

Tobias Schulze-Cleven

Todd E. Vachon



Labor Education Action Research Network
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
School of Management and Labor Relations
50 Labor Center Way,
New Brunswick, NJ 08901



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TOBIAS SCHULZE-CLEVEN
TODD E. VACHON
Rutgers University

ABSTRACT

How can we build a future of work that delivers for workers? How can we meet pressing challenges such as climate change, democratic erosion, and economic instability? This essay outlines the necessary parameters for a debate on the future of work that faces up to the interlocking ecological, political, and economic crises currently engulfing societies. It argues that collective political action targeted at revaluing work and workers can greatly increase the long-term viability of contemporary social arrangements by curbing capitalism's infringements on democracy, facilitating social reproduction, and reducing environmental exploitation. Rejecting the technological and market determinism characteristic of mainstream discussions about the future of work, the chapter calls for embracing the role of politics in adjustment and committing to workers' dignity as central to realizing the promises of democracy and improving sustainability.

We live in a period of deep uncertainty, with one calamity seemingly chasing another. From climate change to democratic erosion to economic instability—ongoing and interrelated ecological, political, and economic crises have revealed deep imbalances in our contemporary social order, laying bare the inadequacies of the institutional arrangements that govern our lives. The arrival and mismanagement of COVID19 has only further underlined this predicament. As the contradictions of contemporary democratic capitalism have grown, the system's ability to reproduce and sustain itself has come into doubt (e.g., Wallerstein et al. 2013).

The forthcoming volume, *Revaluing Work(ers): Toward a Democratic and Sustainable Future* (edited by the authors), addresses these fundamental tensions by presenting a labor studies perspective on the future of work and workers. Critically examining the socially constructed and politically sanctioned processes through which workers are managed and empowered, it explores how changes in the regulation of labor could help address today's multi-pronged systemic crises. The book argues that revaluing work—the efforts and contributions of workers—is crucial to realizing the promises of democracy and improving sustainability. Workers' collective agency is central to driving forward this revaluation agenda for the governance of work and workers. Moreover, the valuation of reproductive work—the labor efforts from care to education that sustain the reproduction of society—can function as a crucible of innovation. Success in this area is not only decisive for democracy and sustainability by itself, but it can also help expand the scope of potentially viable governance reforms more broadly.

This article appears as the introduction for: Tobias Schulze-Cleven and Todd Vachon, eds. *Revaluing Work(ers): Toward a Democratic and Sustainable Future*, the 2021 Research Volume of the Labor and Employment Relations Association, published by Cornell University Press.

This volume offers a deliberate counterpoint to the mainstream debate on the future of work, which fails to engage the real-world hurdles to building a future that serves the interests of workers (Gupta, Lerner, and McCartin 2018). Narrowly concerned with the effects of technological

change on the division of labor, and usually assuming that market forces will be determinative, the mainstream debate has tended to ignore the crises that contemporary societies are already experiencing. Not even the well-documented corrosive effects of financialization on evolving employment relations have received much attention. While ongoing socioeconomic changes arguably provide new openings for labor organizations to advocate for the concerns of workers, they do so after shifts in power among capital, labor, and government across societies have left many workers and their collective voice weaker than before (Vachon, Wallace, and Hyde 2016). Attempts to chart a future without truly appreciating the present, much less the past, are bound to fail. Our strategy to face today's major tensions head on is timely and unique among recent books seeking to challenge dominant narratives (e.g., Chamberlain 2018; Kochan and Dyer 2017; Peetz 2019).

This essay introduces the volume and its broader agenda in three steps. A first section elaborates today's interlocking crises and sketches how contemporary debate on the future of work neglects to address them. The second section spells out the necessary parameters for a debate on the future of work that actually speaks to the current predicament. The third section lays out how the volume develops and sustains its core propositions, starting with a second introductory chapter that makes the case for the unique contribution of labor studies for understanding and addressing contemporary challenges. The context and reflections advanced in this first introductory chapter provide a productive frame for the remainder of the book.

THE FUTURE OF WORK AMID INTERLOCKING CRISES

Current ecological, political, and economic crises are inextricably and inevitably interlocking because they frequently amplify and negatively affect each other. Most prominently, contemporary economic imbalances have undermined both the work-

ings of political systems and efforts to battle climate change. Today's calamities are global phenomena that deeply challenge all countries, including the rich democracies across the Global North (Wallerstein 2001). This volume, in turn, speaks to the United States in comparative perspective.

Economically, record levels of within-country inequality, widespread precarity, and the financial sector's supremacy have left individual livelihoods, countries' macroeconomies, and global markets extremely unstable (Kalleberg 2018; Stiglitz 2013). Across the wealthy democracies, greater access to credit has at times helped compensate for lagging wage growth by expanding consumption (Baccaro and Pontusson 2016), but it has done so at the price of increased volatility and without addressing how rising inequality hurts well-being, social cohesion, faith in democratic institutions, growth, and employment (Boushey 2019; Galbraith 2012). Governments have, moreover, been deeply challenged in managing economic instability. As the monetary policy of central banks has come to carry an ever-larger share of responsibility, rounds of quantitative easing have not only decoupled financial markets from the real economy, they also undermine the ability of societies to adequately price risks, which is a precondition for the efficient functioning of market competition (Chwieroth and Walter 2019).

Politically, democratic institutions and norms have weakened, with some countries sliding back on democratization (Lührmann et al. 2020). Right-wing populism has been on the rise cross-nationally, with systems of interest intermediation increasingly hollowed out and governing institutions' legitimacy frequently eroded (Levitzky and Ziblatt 2018; Mair 2013). The labor market consequences of new economic realities in particular have arguably wreaked havoc on political engagement, whether it has been through the breakdown of career trajectories encouraging personal drift (Sennett 1998) or status anxiety and social marginalization feeding resentment (Cramer 2016; Gidron and Hall 2020). On top of this, government policies

encouraging private investment—including in education, housing, or retirement provision—have frequently undermined support for the broader solidaristic public approaches that are necessary to curb rising inequality, or to at least buffer its effects on individuals and households (Ansell 2014).

Finally, ecologically, the continued exploitation of natural resources has produced environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, and climate change, all of which exacerbate existing economic, health, and social inequalities (Latour 2018; Purdy 2015). Current levels of fossil fuel consumption are stretching planetary limits by raising greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and air pollution to dangerous levels that are negatively affecting the well-being of billions and disproportionately affecting marginalized populations and those who have contributed the least to the problem (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2013). Record global temperatures and warmer ocean temperatures are increasing the odds of devastating hurricanes and extreme rain events in some locations and prolonged droughts and wildfires in others. If unchecked, climate change will deprive millions of people access to the bare necessities of life—food, clean air, and water—leading to increased conflict, migration, and widespread humanitarian crises. Yet many workers rely on fossil fuel extraction, production, transportation, and consumption for employment. Without easy access to alternatives that offer equivalent pay and benefits, they often display anti-environmental attitudes and behaviors that slow or prevent solutions to the ecological crisis (Vachon 2021).

All of this is true around the world, but nowhere is it as striking as in the United States, a country struggling with relative decline after dominating the 20th century. As patterns of population growth and economic development shift the center of the world economy elsewhere, the United States has lost leverage to turn external hegemony into domestic stability. In the process, the United States' frequently invoked exceptionalism has taken on a new meaning. These days, the country stands out

among rich democracies in rather unappealing ways, whether it is runaway income and wealth inequality at the top, hyper-partisanship, climate change denial, or forceful resistance to the overdue reckoning with institutionalized racism and its myriad consequences.

Having adopted lax neoliberal stances across policy areas, the United States not only vividly illustrates global crises, it frequently leads the world in producing them. Whether it is hands-off anti-trust policies that allow large firms to buck competition and maintain high consumer prices (Philippon 2019), loose financial regulations permitting corporations to binge on share buybacks that have filled the coffers of CEOs (Lazonick 2018), public supports for entrepreneurial ventures that socialize risk but allow rewards to be privatized (Mazzucato 2015), tax policies that have contributed to greater concentrations of income and wealth (Bargain et al. 2015), welfare-state retrenchment that has shifted the financial responsibility for life risks onto households and increased individuals' insecurity (Hacker 2019), or labor market policies that have grown the ranks of the precariat well beyond levels found in other rich democracies (Thelen 2019)—they have all helped contemporary American capitalism work for the few rather than the many. And this list does not even include high barriers to the availability of healthcare, which other wealthy countries provide via social citizenship, but which individuals in the United States, for all practical purposes, can only access in meaningful ways once they have submitted themselves to the disciplining effects of the labor market. Research tracking 50 metrics of well-being to assess the quality of life worldwide has found the United States to be one of only three of 163 countries—joined by Brazil and Hungary—for which scores have fallen since 2011. In access to healthcare, the United States now ranks 97th, and the country's overall standing on the composite “social progress index” has fallen from 19th in 2011 to 28th in 2020 (Kristof 2020).

Facilitated by politicians whose actions reflect the preferences of the elite and powered by Republicans who have been extremely adept at enlisting outrage-focused populism in the service of shoring up plutocracy, the resulting “winner take all politics” in the United States are literally killing people (Hacker and Pierson 2010, 2020). Well before producing an uncoordinated COVID-19 response that drove up fatalities during 2020, including disproportionately among communities of color and particularly for African Americans, they have nurtured “deaths of despair” among working-age White men and women without four-year college degrees. Having lost opportunities, meaning, and structure in their lives, the latter have succumbed to drug overdoses, suicides, and alcohol-related liver disease at increasing rates. As a result, life expectancy in the United States has been falling since 2014 for the first time in a century while continuing to rise in other rich democracies (Case and Deaton 2020).

Facing up to the toll of current arrangements and addressing their lack of sustainability is difficult—and, arguably, inconvenient for those who have benefited so much from them. As such, it should not be surprising that the ongoing debate about the future of work has stayed well within the parameters set by the neoliberal orthodoxy that has helped create the current predicament (Britton-Purdy, Grewal, Kapczynski, and Rahman 2020). Self-styled “thought leaders” on the impact of sophisticated digital tools—including advanced robotics, data analytics, machine learning, and the Internet of Things—have usually proceeded from assumptions of technological and market determinism. Whether they emphasize rapid automation or a far-reaching global reallocation of tasks, they agree that many workers will be subject to displacement and dislocation, including those far up the skill ladder and those in high-status jobs (Baldwin 2016; Susskind and Susskind 2015). One study estimates 47% of US employment to be at risk through computerization (Frey and Osborne 2013). Yet, despite the social instability implied by these scenarios, debates about appropriate policy responses have

generally centered on how to facilitate technical disruption to enable potential productivity increases (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Frey 2019).

The desire to ease opposition to disruption has admittedly helped the once-marginal policy option of universal basic income (UBI) gain some traction in mainstream debates (e.g., Van Parijs 1995). One of the candidates in the Democratic Party’s presidential primary in 2020, Andrew Yang, built his entire campaign around it, and the former president of the Service Employees International Union, Andy Stern, has also strongly endorsed it. Some of the short-term policies in response to the pandemic, moreover, have functioned not unlike UBI provisions and may well have changed public perceptions of this policy. Yet, beyond that, policy makers have generally failed to implement UBI schemes, and the discussed plans would not fundamentally challenge the labor market dynamics that have produced ever-greater inequalities. Effectively combating inequality requires “pre-distribution” policies to alter the market-based distribution of incomes, such as through active support for collective bargaining, raising minimum wages, instituting punitive taxes (or even limits) on high incomes, and embracing a host of other actions that would challenge inequalities of power in the contemporary economy.

Ultimately, policy recommendations have tended to continue along well-trodden paths. Returning to the mantra of a “race between education and technology” (Goldin and Katz 2008), these recommendations have largely left the pressure of adjustment on the shoulders of individual workers, perceiving a successful transition to depend on the ability of workers to be lifelong learners. In contrast, there has been little discussion of how to turn adaptation into a collective effort and how to build a human-centered future of work that would re-envision the role and nature of work in the interest of workers. Such an effort would explore how to channel the use of technologies to the benefit of the greatest number, including the use of technology to augment—rather than replace—

labor across the skill spectrum.

SHIFTING THE DEBATE ON THE FUTURE OF WORK

It is thus eminently clear that addressing contemporary interlocking crises requires different discussions about the future of work. Three changes appear particularly advisable: addressing concurrent threats to the sustainability of contemporary societies, accepting the role of politics in adjustment, and honoring the dignity of work and workers.

Addressing Threats to Sustainability

Any productive debate about the future of work needs to engage with pressing questions about the long-run viability of contemporary social arrangements, including capitalism's increased dominance over democracy, challenges to social reproduction, and the consequences of environmental exploitation.

Capitalism's Increased Dominance Over Democracy

The contemporary imbalance between capitalism and democracy is a central issue to tackle (Rothstein and Schulze-Cleven 2020). As a governance system, democratic capitalism is by its very nature never free from tensions, given that it brings together quite different logics of individual valuation. Generally speaking, the value of an individual (or, more precisely, the value of that individual's labor effort) under capitalism is never higher than whatever another entity (whether an employer or customer) is willing to pay, which in turn can result in great divergences among people's market value and the accumulation of capital among the few. In contrast, democratic principles prescribe equal voice and treatment—typically secured through the rule of law, structures of political representation via parties and elections, and a system of checks and balances among different branches of government. Historically, the

development of welfare states has done much to mediate tensions when claims to freedom and equality pulled into different directions, often by using social programs to provide greater equality of opportunity in the spirit of “positive liberty.”

Yet market liberalization over the past few decades has arguably strengthened the forces of capitalism while weakening those of democracy, whether in terms of global financial markets constraining democratic governments' fiscal leeway or market logics increasingly pervading how governments relate to democratic citizenries. In Europe, events such as the Eurocrisis and Brexit have illustrated how negative policy feedback from market-led political integration—including the partial pooling of monetary sovereignty—has undermined the provision of effective political counterweights to market forces (Schulze-Cleven 2018). In the United States, the simultaneous growth of public and private debt illustrates the limits of recent strategies to manage contemporary imbalances (Streeck 2016), as does the rise of plutocratic populism, which has significantly recast central features of one of the United States' two major political parties and upended inherited patterns of partisan competition (Hacker and Pierson 2020). As scholars of capitalism established long ago, without effective democratic controls stabilizing the system, capitalism's internal contradiction will put it on a road to deepening crises. To avert this outcome, societies need to take more assertive steps to shore up democratic controls, including in the governance of the workplace, where capitalist and democratic logics often clash most immediately.

Challenged Social Reproduction

The changing ability of societies to reproduce and sustain themselves across time should be an important concern, particularly in terms of how they provide the labor that is necessary for reproduction, not just biologically but socially. Following World War II, the institutions of Fordist capitalism encouraged a gendered division of labor, with welfare states and industry tending to support male-breadwinner arrange-

ments, including by aiming to ensure wage levels and wage-replacement benefits that could support entire households (Lewis 1992). Most of the labor necessary for social reproduction was provided by women within the family. Much of it revolved around the raising of children—including ensuring their comfort, literacy, and sociability. But social reproduction always involved a broader scope of unpaid activities, including feeding family members engaged in paid work; maintaining the safety, shelter, and emotional well-being of the entire household; caring for the sick, the elderly, or other family members unable to work; and building and maintaining relationships within the community, including the extended family (Briggs 2017).

As capitalism entered its post-Fordist phase, the demand for literate workers quickly opened pathways for increased labor force participation by women, typically in gendered occupations. Women of color and those from lower positions on the socioeconomic ladder more generally have always participated in forms of paid labor, but the rapid growth of female labor force participation beginning in the 1960s represented nothing short of a revolution in the labor market. The rising share of employment in services and simultaneous stagnation in wages helped fuel this transformation as families increasingly required two earners. At the same time, strong gender norms around domestic work endured, leaving many women doing double duty, with a “second shift” of care work waiting at home once the day’s paid work was done (Hochschild, with Machung [1989] 2012). As these strategies have run up against physical limits, increased external provision of reproductive labor has become functionally necessary. Yet many families do not possess the resources to pay for such care work. Moreover, those performing the work, whether as home health aides or childcare workers, often do so at poverty wages, in line with the long-standing low status of these activities.

The strain is particularly large in the United States, with its rampant job insecurity, falling access to in-work benefits such as paid sick leave or vacations, high share of low-wage work, and employers’ growing practice of paying for part-time work while expecting full-time availability. Led by the social democratic welfare states in Scandinavia, European countries have increasingly moved toward socializing both the cost and the organization of care provision, including making publicly sponsored (or at least state-subsidized) daycare universally available. These nations have done so in the name of “social investment,” driven not only by equity considerations but also by the realization that it helps reap the productive potential of all citizens for higher economic growth (Hemerijck 2017). The United States, by contrast, lacks a comparable care infrastructure, despite federal programs such as Head Start and innovations at the state level. In turn, it faces a veritable “crisis of care,” characterized by “time poverty,” the lack of work–family balance, and widespread “social depletion” (Fraser 2016).¹

It is crucial that the valuation and financing of reproductive labor (or work) receive wider attention. The social costs of contemporary arrangements—including their associated gender and racial inequities—provide great hurdles to sustainability. There is much scholarship to build on. Marxist feminists have not only long critiqued the traditional division between “productive” work for men on the one hand and women’s relegation to supporting and servicing the current and future workforce on the other, they have also argued that reproductive work is just as central to capitalist accumulation and tends to be particularly exploitative (Bhattacharya 2017). Historical research illustrates this very well, particularly as it has explored the centrality of enslaved women for the 19th century’s Atlantic economy, emphasizing their role in reproducing the predominant “capital” of the era (Morgan 2004; White [1985]

¹ Public discourses have also shown little recognition of how children, and appropriate care for them, sustain the long-term well-being of even the childless. The latter would not be able to receive pensions if it were not for children-turned-workers paying into public pay-as-you-go systems or using their purchasing power to sustain the corporate profits and stock-market valuations that ensure annual returns in private funded systems.

1999). Finally, research on contemporary migration has elaborated continuing global patterns of domination, with mothers from poorer countries leaving behind their own offspring to fill the childcare needs of richer nations (Parreñas 2015).

Last, but not least, it is important to conceptualize reproductive work broadly to include personal social services such as education and healthcare, which now fulfill functions once provided in the household. Just as is the case with care work, they—and public services in general—are crucial for sustaining the effective renewal of societies' workforces through time.

Consequences of Environmental Exploitation

Environmental sustainability has often been an afterthought in social science scholarship, leaving research on climate change solidly rooted in the natural sciences, with little attention to its social implications (Bjurström and Polk 2011; Frankel 2018). This is both perplexing and injurious, considering that human economic activity has been identified as the leading contributor to the GHG emissions that have contributed to the global warming process (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2013). Tellingly, the current era has been termed the “Anthropocene,” acknowledging the extent to which human activity has become interconnected with natural forces so that the fate of one is interconnected with the fate of the other (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, and Crutzen 2010).

In 2017, the US government's Global Change Research Program issued its Fourth National Assessment, reaffirming the established scientific consensus that (1) global surface air temperature has increased by 1.0°C (1.8°F) since 1900, (2) sea levels have risen 8 inches in the same period, (3) our weather is already being impacted by the warming climate, and (4) the warming is caused primarily by human activity, particularly the combustion of fossil fuels such as oil and coal (US Global Change Research Program 2017). Among

the key contributors to warming, electric power generation is the single largest, accounting for 25% of total GHG emissions annually. To keep global temperature increases below the 2.0°C limit prescribed by climate scientists and enshrined in the Paris Climate Accord, energy-related GHG emissions would have needed to peak before 2020 and need to fall by more than 70% by 2050. In other words, to prevent catastrophic climate change, a rapid and massive switch to renewable energy sources is required.

However, real commitments to renewable energy have proven politically difficult in the face of the entrenched power of the fossil fuel industry and the strong free-market ideology that influences economic policy making throughout the world. The most common efforts to reduce GHG emissions that are currently under way include various forms of carbon pricing (usually either taxation or, even more frequently, emissions trading schemes). Unfortunately, these efforts have not been aggressive enough and have generally proven inadequate. Private investment in renewable energy sources has also been insufficient in terms of meeting climate targets. According to the International Energy Agency, if all government commitments to clean energy were met by 2035, renewable energy would still stand at just 16% of all energy consumed globally (International Energy Agency 2017).

Current market-based solutions also reinforce or often exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities. Despite more energy being generated every year, 1.2 billion people still do not have regular access to electricity. Small island nations, which have contributed less than 1% of total GHG emissions, are confronting the very real prospects of annihilation due to rising sea levels. Polluting fossil fuel plants in wealthy countries are disproportionately located near lower-income communities and communities of color, while new green technologies, such as rooftop solar, are more likely to emerge in affluent areas. In sum, the current energy system and menu of solutions to climate change have created

an unequal distribution of environmental benefits and risks and are proving incapable of adequately reducing GHG emissions to the levels required to prevent serious harms from climate change.

In response, climate activists such as the Sunrise Movement have come to call for a Green New Deal (GND) to address the interconnected crises of climate and inequality (Aronoff, Battistoni, Cohen, and Riofrancos 2019). Unlike current market-based solutions, the GND explicitly confronts existing social inequalities and the job impacts of rapid decarbonization by calling for a “just transition” for workers and communities through massive government investment in physical and social infrastructures that offer low-carbon jobs, such as in healthcare, eldercare, and childcare and in education. Many fossil fuel workers and energy unions that comprise the AFL-CIO’s Energy Committee have come out in opposition to such efforts for fear of job loss among their membership; however, other unions noting the impacts of climate change and environmental injustice at workplaces and across communities have come out in support of the GND, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the American Federation of Teachers. Many labor–climate activists echo Naomi Klein’s call for the revaluation of low-carbon reproductive work, which has frequently been undervalued but will play such an important role in building and maintaining a more sustainable economy. Some labor groups such as the Minneapolis Janitors, SEIU Local 26, have worked with community partners to develop climate justice demands and then engaged in Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns (Vachon, Hudson, LeBlanc, and Soni 2019). Groups like the Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future and youth activists such as Greta Thunberg have brought a laserlike focus on the ways in which climate change interacts with issues of social, economic, and environmental injustice.

Accepting the Primacy of Politics

A second, no less crucial, element for a

productive reorientation in the debate on the future of work is accepting the inevitable role—even “primacy” (Berman 2006)—of politics in societies’ adjustment to changing external environments and internal pressures. One can pretend that markets decide how resources are used, but this ignores that all markets are political creations. Only rudimentary exchange is possible without political intervention, which—at its most basic—includes the provision of currency and the definition and protection of property through enforcing the rule of law but which—in practice—always extends to a much wider range of regulatory policies (e.g., Balleisen and Moss 2010). Historically, the “market revolution” that spelled the practical end of feudalism and propelled the rise of capitalism was the result of policy decisions, such as launching the enclosures that turned English common land into private property. Far from being spontaneous, it was a revolution that was “made” (Polanyi [1944] 2001).

Moreover, particularly when it comes to labor, there are strong social limits to using markets for the allocation of resources. We can treat labor as a commodity, but in the end, it remains the labor effort of human beings, who have physical and emotional needs and are subject to social obligations. These sellers of labor will never behave entirely as economics textbooks assume. Frequently, they provide more labor when wages fall (to make ends meet) and decide to work less when wages rise (to enjoy more leisure), meaning that individual labor supply curves bend backward rather than slope steadily upward as economic theory predicts. Moreover, in today’s context, workers enjoy many rights as democratic citizens. In turn, treating labor as a commodity is always “fictitious” (Polanyi [1944] 2001) and naturally comes with side effects that can threaten social and political stability. During the 1930s, those countries that recognized the social limits of markets and shored up social protection systems were best able to protect their democracies. Others, notably Italy and Germany, succumbed to fascism, an antidemocratic ideology that promised an altogether different version of breaking with market rule.

Distributional questions are the essence of politics (Lasswell [1936] 1958). How the costs associated with the implementation of technological change are distributed (i.e., whose jobs get eradicated or who gets laid off) is by definition political. In turn, it is important to recognize assumptions of market determinism in the debate on the future of work for what they—perhaps unwittingly—tend to be: expressions of “market fundamentalism,” even “free-market utopianism,” that fail to acknowledge the “reality of society” (Block and Somers 2014: 98, 218). This is not to deny that such assumptions about market dynamics are defensible in certain types of economic research. But using them as foundations in policy debates while failing to address long-standing market failures—including the inability of the price mechanism to put an end to labor shortages in the provision of care²—turns them into neoliberal policy prescriptions: conservative in character and seeking to elevate the role of markets in governing the social order so as to shrink and limit the room for collective political efforts.

Neoliberal approaches to governance gained traction—and ultimately hegemony—as a political answer to questions about the “governability” of advanced societies during the 1970s, which had brought increased unemployment and inflation (Hall 2013). Emphasizing the *theoretical* (albeit not necessarily *practical*) efficiency benefits of a decentralized market system, neoliberalism is deeply skeptical of the political voice of citizens. Powered by academic theorizing in such fields as “public choice” or “law and economics,” furthered by a well-organized conservative legal movement, and pushed by the legal, accounting, and lobbying firms serving wealthy clients, this approach has become enshrined at different levels of governance, usually with great advantage to the holders of capital (Pistor 2019; Teles 2010). Whether it is internationally through the World Trade Organization or domestically, neoliberalism has pushed the use of mar-

kets for social coordination while isolating their operation from political pressures, often institutionalizing strong biases against underprivileged workers and marginalized communities.

In the United States, neoliberalism’s influence is ubiquitous. Contemporary competition policy wields the axe against the attempts of “self-employed” gig workers to collectively represent their interests, but it has allowed increasing concentration among businesses, including the platform companies contracting gig workers, in the name of securing consumer benefits. In environmental policy, the rise of cost-benefit analyses and the trading of rights to pollute have replaced regulation of performance standards, yet the estimates of costs and benefits are often off, and the market-based pollution control of American cap-and-trade schemes has frequently concentrated pollution within poorer communities (e.g., Berman, forthcoming). Moreover, in the workplace, the lack of worker protections has allowed employers to curtail and control workers’ rights in ways that are inconsistent with democratic values (Anderson 2017). Crucially, even where neoliberalism’s ascendancy has not led to new laws, its pernicious consequences have been felt in the ossification and drift of old ones, including labor laws. These have come to represent mighty barriers for the attempts of union and “alt-labor” activists to promote the goals of equity and voice and move toward practices of efficiency improvements that price in negative social and environmental externalities (Budd 2003; Galvin 2019).

To be sure, accepting the primacy of politics does not automatically generate desirable results. Fascism’s version of overcoming market rule sacrificed individual rights, and its rationalizations of social exclusion provided the ideological grounds for Nazi death camps. Moreover, even “social democracy,” the 20th century’s most successful progressive political movement in sup-

² We thank Adam Seth Litwin for this point.

port of limiting market rule, has had its own limitations. Welfare states naturally stratify, and all social programs include an element of social control (Piven and Cloward 1971). At any moment in history, among all the undeniable good that collective efforts at limiting market rule have had, there has been a tendency for them to express underlying patterns of domination, including racism.

Take the New Deal in the United States, which depended on the assent of Southern Democrats who opposed policies that could upset the racial order in their states. In 1935, this political reality translated into excluding agricultural and domestic workers, among whom were a majority of Southern Blacks, from the benefits of both the National Labor Relations Act and the Social Security Act. Most social programs passed during the 1930s and 1940s disproportionately benefited White Americans. For instance, under the G.I. Bill of 1944, Whites received support for college attendance and home ownership at much greater numbers (Katznelson 2005). While New Deal programs provided unprecedented assistance to many African Americans, they did so in the context of highly unequal treatment that often increased disparities while relieving deprivation.

Whether one wants to simply understand or even improve society, there is no alternative to working from its political realities. Failing to acknowledge them only feeds capital's patterns of subjugation, whether with respect to class or race (Johnson 2018). For the debate on the future of work, this political perspective offers a more realistic take on the labor market as a social institution (Solow 1990) and concedes that inequalities in the market are often not justified by individual workers' abilities or efforts (Offe 2010). Finally, normatively, it boosts the case for extending democracy into the firm, with a focus on limiting the authoritarian power of employers over workers' lives and promoting genuine "economic democracy" (Dahl 1985: 111).

Once this foundation is laid, there are

many important discussions to be had about how to manage the inevitable tensions in labor markets and how to remedy existing inequities, particularly as they relate to cumulative disadvantage. On the one hand, an intersectionality lens emphasizes how class, gender, and racial inequities tend to concentrate and amplify each other, thus raising the need for policies targeted at those in greatest need. On the other hand, universal policies have frequently had greater long-term effects because of their broader political buy-in (Korpi and Palme 1998).

Emphasizing the Dignity of Work and Workers

A final necessary shift in the debate on the future of work, and a logical corollary of the discussion above, is the need to emphasize the dignity of work and workers. References to the imperative of respecting human dignity in the world of work have a long lineage. Laying an important baseline, lesson-learning from years of destruction during World War II produced international declarations that stressed the basic respect that all people are due by virtue of their common humanity, from the 1944 "Philadelphia Declaration," which spelled out the aims and purposes of the International Labour Organisation, to the United Nations' 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Two decades later, at the tail end of the United States' mid-century civil rights movement, striking sanitation workers in Memphis called for such respect. Keen to minimize the cost of public service provision, many American municipalities had relied on cheap, pliant, and heavily African American labor toiling in atrocious working conditions. When he spoke to striking workers, Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized the protection that the reproductive character of their labor deserved in particular, emphasizing that "whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth" (Jones 2020: 2).

More recently, social philosophers have come out strongly against the “tyranny of merit” (Sandel 2020), questioning the injustices involved in the construction of merit and calling on societies to emancipate themselves from the social Darwinism that contemporary market dominance entails. According to this line of reasoning, respecting human dignity at work would have far-reaching consequences. For instance, one prominent voice calls for acknowledging unemployment as an act of violence, given that it expels human beings from participation in crucial social relations against their own will; breaking with the recent acceleration of work because it undercuts creativity, productivity, and cultural heritage; and providing opportunities for workers to identify with the product of their labor because doing so meditates against alienation (Negt 2002). Increasingly, discussions on economic reforms also display concerns about workers’ dignity, whether in international development or domestically (Anner, Pons-Vignon, and Rani 2019; Sperling 2019).

It is in the threefold spirit of sustainability, democratic politics, and human dignity that this volume argues for revaluing work and workers. The case for raising the wages of many working people is so strong that it does not even require us to refer to the millions of “working poor” who are obviously without the economic means to lead a dignified life. Widening inequality powerfully illustrates the increased scope for domination and humiliation at the workplace, which a dignity-led reform agenda would seek to address. At the largest 350 American firms, CEO pay has crept up to 320 times that of typical workers, having grown 1,167% between 1978 and 2019 as compensation for the typical worker increased by only 13.7% (Mishel and Kandra 2020). Moreover, in line with an intersectionality lens, the evidence for the widespread accumulation of disadvantage is strong. Wages of Black women working full time in the United States display a “double gap” of both gender and race, reaching a mere 61% of wages received by White men working full time in 2017. This amounts to an estimated \$50 billion of wages per year that

African American women have involuntarily forfeited, benefiting the bottom lines of private, for-profit corporations (Holder 2020).

Yet, of course, the agenda of revaluing work and workers is an even broader one, extending to other employer responsibilities, such as healthy and safe workplaces; sufficient opportunities for collective worker voice, including via collective bargaining or through works councils; and publicly provided social protections, including transfer or social insurance systems that cover workers during illness, unemployment, old age, and disability.

There hardly could have been a better demonstration of this agenda’s worth than the effect the United States’ weak labor protections had on producing an overly harsh impact of COVID-19 on the working population (Leibenluft 2020). Sick workers often could not afford *not* to work, which helped increase community spread of the virus. Moreover, frequently, “essential” workers could count on only woefully inadequate safety protections, if any at all. Unemployment shot up quickly, within a few months reaching twice the level in Europe, where publicly financed work-share and short-time work arrangements successfully kept workforces employed (MacGillis 2020; Müller and Schulten 2020). By the end of summer 2020, an estimated 12 million people in the United States had lost their employer-sponsored health insurance coverage as they were laid off—right when many of them needed it most (Bivens and Zipperer 2020). Furthermore, while some large corporations introduced temporary hazard pay or more-generous sick leave provisions, they rescinded these measures quickly as the initial wave of the virus slowed. Finally, in line with long-standing patterns, the impact of the pandemic was highly unequal. Low-income workers; communities of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; and women disproportionately bore the brunt of pandemic-induced unemployment (Groeger 2020), and immigrant workers, particularly undocumented ones, often had the hardest time.

It is now time to take COVID-19 not merely as a lens for what has gone wrong—but to treat it as a catalyst for change. Attention to the deficiencies of contemporary valuations of work has markedly increased, moving from expert circles to mainstream newspapers (Ferrerias et al. 2020; Kobayashi 2020). Of course, the demonstrations against police brutality and for racial justice have also elevated the themes elaborated here, forcing onto mainstream discussions a broader reckoning with systemic racism and its far-reaching influences on people’s lives—both at work and beyond. From physical insecurity and criminal justice (Pettit 2012; Walker 2020) to housing (Desmond 2016; Rothstein 2017) and the distribution of wealth (Baradaran 2017), awareness of the astounding and cumulative racial disparities in the United States has significantly spread. At least in some quarters, there now appears to be growing recognition of the multiple interconnections between the different forms and realms of oppression that sustain racial hierarchy.

ROADMAP TO THE VOLUME

Having established the need for a very different debate about the future of work, the book elaborates a labor studies perspective on the topic. In Chapter 2, Tobias Schulze-Cleven reviews the advantages of labor studies for understanding and shaping the future of work. He emphasizes how the field provides much-needed new intellectual direction to challenge the hold that the “market fundamentalism” of neoclassical economics has had on discussions about the future of work to date. With its focus on the struggles of working people, interdisciplinary inquiry, and upholding workers’ rights, labor studies brings a greater appreciation of the power of collective action and the role of politics to the debate. The latter part of the chapter lays out the book’s main arguments about revaluing work, workers’ collective agency, and innovations in reproductive work, which act as a foundation for any further claims put forth in the volume.

The remaining chapters, which will be described briefly below, make the case for revaluing work and workers in three parts. Part I (“Articulating the Labor Studies Perspective”) explores different elements of the labor studies perspective on the future of work, including input from different disciplines, a focus on worker voice, and placing the revaluation agenda in the context of climate change. Part II (“Evolving Forms of Collective Agency”) zeros in on the role of workers’ collective agency in shaping the evolving world of work. Part III (“Reproductive Work as a Crucible of Innovation”) investigates how such collective agency has produced innovation in labor processes that help reproduce and sustain society, focusing on domestic work and education. The individual contributions are arranged with an eye toward allowing the volume’s argumentation to unfold steadily and relatively seamlessly throughout the book.

Articulating the Labor Studies Perspective

In Chapter 3, Michael Merrill and Dorothy Sue Cobble set the stage for Part I of the volume with a historical perspective on technological disruption that compares the scale and effects of the current labor market disruption in the United States to three previous transformations: colonization, commercialization, and industrialization. The authors contend that the massively disruptive changes accompanying today’s “smart machines” are not unprecedented in either scale or scope and that managing the effects of such changes requires that we pay as much attention to sociological as to technological possibilities. Building a more just and sustainable future of work, the authors conclude, requires fixing the social structure and power arrangements in which it occurs.

Chapter 4, by Tod Rutherford, extends the critique of technological determinism by deploying a geographer’s perspective to examine the differentiated negotiation over the adoption of Industry 4.0 technology across three countries—Germany, Italy, and the United States. Rutherford contends

that many perspectives on the future of work ignore how Industry 4.0 will develop in a geographically uneven or variegated fashion and that there is, and will continue to be, experimentation by unions and firms around the processes of adopting new technology. Upon documenting both successes and challenges in the exercise of worker voice, the author acknowledges that the ability to “scale up” and sustain such experimentation within the context of neoliberalism remains an open question.

In Chapter 5, J. Mijin Cha and Todd E. Vachon focus on societal-level adjustments against the backdrop of climate change. The necessary transition away from a growth-oriented “extractive” economy toward a sustainable and “regenerative” one will completely reshape existing labor markets, undermine the gains made over generations by workers in historically unionized sectors, and further shift employment into sectors where unions have been unable to gain a foothold. The authors explore three cases of recent socioecological transitions and consider the ingredients of and prospects for a “just transition” for workers and communities. They conclude that the inclusion of worker and community voice in shaping and implementing transitions is paramount to ensuring the potential for just outcomes.

Evolving Forms of Collective Agency

The collective action of workers has often been crucial in shaping outcomes, not least because it pushed both employers and the state into action. In Chapter 6, Naomi R. Williams and Sheri Davis-Faulkner open Part II of the volume by using a critical race theory and intersectionality lens to examine key moments within US history when workers managed to shape the political landscape and expand democracy and economic citizenship. Critically reassessing the tendency of the dominant historical narrative to treat the struggle for civil rights and worker activism as separate processes of contention, the authors emphasize the vital role of Black workers in building interracial coalitions. When such mobilization was matched with activist/

interventionist federal policy, workers’ agency increased, income inequality declined, and real wages rose. These experiences, the authors contend, provide valuable lessons on building, maintaining, and adapting class solidarity through a broad social justice view today.

Chapter 7, by Joel S. Yudken and David Jacobs, continues the push back against technological determinism by exploring various mechanisms through which worker voice can be expanded in the development and deployment of technologies in order to support the retention and creation of skilled, high-paying jobs while promoting a broadly shared economic prosperity. After first tracing the evolution of labor’s response to technological change historically, Yudken and Jacobs elaborate a contemporary model of craftwork to guide labor’s strategy on technology. In conclusion, the authors propose a robust program to restore worker voice that honors workers’ skills and empowers them across nodes of decision making.

In Chapter 8, Joseph A. McCartin, Erica Smiley, and Marilyn Sneiderman engage with two major focal areas of innovation in organizing collective worker voice: sectoral bargaining and Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG). Proponents of sectoral bargaining advocate for laws that empower workers to bargain for a whole sector rather than with individual employers. BCG efforts have sought to transform bargaining in terms of its participants, processes, and purposes by bringing union members and community allies together to develop joint demands that are presented not only to the direct employer but also to the web of corporate and financial relationships that influence or control the employer. The authors consider the range of new possibilities that might emerge from an effort to combine the broadening impulse of sectoral bargaining with the deepening impulse of BCG.

In Chapter 9, Victor G. Devinatz and Robert Bruno explore the role that US labor education and worker education can play in examining and shaping the future of work.

A historical analysis of US labor education programs reveals an initial focus on both “tools” classes as well as classes oriented toward “social transformation.” Following World War II, the normalization of labor relations led to a predominant focus on tools classes in the university-based labor education programs taking hold during the period. The authors contend that the erosion of a stable and widespread system of labor relations in recent decades necessitates returning labor education to focus on topics of social transformation, including a greater emphasis on issues of race, class, gender, immigration, and young workers, in order to help workers develop a vision and plan for shaping a more just future of work.

Reproductive Work as a Crucible of Innovation

Part III focuses on reproductive work as a crucible of innovation. We chose to focus on this realm in part because of its strategic importance for sustainability. No longer can we pretend that this work is less “useful” for our society; moreover, it is central for reflecting about work’s value for the public good rather than merely satisfying the immediate demand of markets. Finally, as a personal service, it is not subject to international competition, a constraint often invoked to shut down reform attempts in other contexts. As we shall see, this area of work has served as a trial ground for promising new forms of collective action that have led to substantial changes in the governance of labor.

Chapter 10, by Elaine Zundl and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers, explores how domestic worker organizations are innovating, including through organizing Domestic Worker Bill of Rights campaigns as well as creating new digital platforms with portable benefits, strengthening efforts to prevent wage theft, and reconceptualizing collective bargaining strategies to address the poor working conditions experienced by domestic workers. Such innovations in pursuit of benefits and protections for domestic workers, the authors argue, could also benefit other low-wage workers struggling

with precarious and nontraditional work arrangements.

In Chapter 11, William A. Herbert and Joseph van der Naald explore how precarity has not only affected domestic workers and care workers but increasingly those working in higher education as well, including graduate student employees. While legal rights to unionize have come and gone for private sector graduate workers, and universities have largely opposed unionization, graduate student employees have nonetheless voted overwhelmingly in favor of representation between 2012 and 2019. The authors find that militant and sustained organizing led to a variety of positive changes, with even unsuccessful efforts inspiring sustained cultures of resistance. These experiences, the authors contend, can provide lessons for workers in other industries facing similar obstacles.

Chapter 12, by Saul Rubinstein and John McCarthy, explores how neoliberal governance in secondary education has failed and how collaboration with teachers can improve school outcomes. The authors argue that collaborative school reform is a proven alternative to neoliberal governance and report on promising approaches to scaling the model. The focus is firmly on collective experimentation, including how experimentation might change the valuation of labor in the sector.

Chapter 13, by Alysa Hannon, Heather McKay and Michelle Van Noy, critically assesses the role of education and training in the changing labor market. The infrastructure for skills development in the United States is complicated and involves a myriad of systems, institutions, government agencies, and policies that are all heavily influenced by employers operating within a liberal market economy. After reviewing the conceptual parameters of skilling in the United States, the authors highlight key strategies that can promote worker interests within the country’s existing systems and empower workers to better buffer against the challenges of the liberal economy’s labor market.

In the final chapter, Tobias Schulze-Cleven looks toward the future. Rather than further summarizing the volume, he takes stock of the book as a product of the contemporary American academy and reflects on how labor studies can help enlist public research universities in support of building a human-centered future of work. As the chapter emphasizes, American universities have long been intricate bundles of contradictions, but recent trends have left them at a crossroads: Will they be able to reform and connect with a progressive reading of the original land-grant vision to support a future in the interest of workers? Or will their practices further drift away from a public-serving mission as they succumb to neoliberal expectations? Schulze-Cleven contends that the three constitutive features of labor studies illuminate crucial steps for realizing the much-needed innovations in higher education that can support the revaluation agenda developed in this volume.

We hope that this volume can serve as inspiration for broadening the debate on the future of work and re-centering it around people's needs. As the contributions to the book elaborate, labor studies provides fruitful guidance on *how* to do so. With its interdisciplinary and normatively anchored focus on the struggles of working people, the field can help publicly engaged scholarship deliver on its promises to support social change. We encourage readers to join the conversation.

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Contact Rutgers LEARN

Judy Lugo, Program Coordinator

judithwl@smlr.rutgers.edu

848-932-9504

Todd E. Vachon, Director

todd.vachon@rutgers.edu

848-932-9574

Design by Shiloh Estacio-Touhey and James Boyle



Labor Education Action Research Network
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
School of Management and Labor Relations
Labor Education Center
50 Labor Center Way
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8520
<https://smlr.rutgers.edu/LEARN>

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School of Management
and Labor Relations