

Book Review

Adrian Wilkinson and Michael Barry (eds.) (2020) *The Future of Work and Employment*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. 255 pp. ISBN 9781786438249. Paperback US\$36

Reviewed by

Vicente Silva, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

In the last decade, the “future of work” has become a buzzword in international academic debates about social affairs. The term most frequently refers to technological change and digitalisation, and has rapidly become an umbrella term to denote a wide range of transformations expected to disrupt the world of work in the coming decades. *The Future of Work and Employment*, edited by Adrian Wilkinson and Michael Barry, appears precisely in that context, one of uncertainty about emerging trends in labour market dynamics and employment relations prior to the devastating consequences of the Great Lockdown. In that sense, the starting point of this review has to be that the volume is a sample of how academics viewed the world of work before the global event of the coronavirus pandemic. Any estimation or prediction now seems to risk becoming promptly outdated by the magnitude of this crisis and its unavoidable effects for workers and employers all over the planet. However, there are several elements in this book that provide a useful guide to labour-related issues regardless of the current business cycle, both for experts in this area and for readers interested in the future of work more broadly.

The volume has a range of contributions from scholars mostly based in Australia. It can be understood as a collective intellectual effort to position Australian experts in this broader debate, in which the most influential works have been produced by labour economists in the United States (e.g. Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2019; Autor and Salomons, 2018) or the United Kingdom (e.g. Frey and Osborne, 2017). Even though in Australia there has been a call to overcome colonial structures in knowledge production (Connell, 2007) – the same has happened in global labour studies (Nowak, 2021) – the book does not have a specific geographical focus. It aims to reflect a rather universal standpoint on future trends in work and employment. The reader will thus find a series of chapters about specific dimensions – from care work to biotechnology to global value chains – that in the past decade were showing signs of substantive transformation due to a diversity of factors. As the editors hold in the introduction, the book aims to “identify interesting areas of research” (p. 6) in order to build an agenda for students of work and employment relations.

The editors wanted to leave behind the two “competing grand narratives” that have shaped the debate on the future of work, between utopian post-work advocates and a less optimistic scepticism about the darker side of new digital technologies (p. 2). It does so without proposing an alternative framework or narrative, at least not explicitly. Despite not being recognised by Wilkinson and Barry, what the chapters of this volume offer to the reader is a nuanced and complex view towards the future. In my perspective, the key idea behind the book’s approach is that there are three future tendencies toward changes of work. The first is that it has to be

considered from a *multidimensional* perspective, understanding that technology is not necessarily the primary driver of change – as the pandemic is showing at present. Other similar interdisciplinary volumes published in the last few years were primarily concerned about the implications of digitalisation and the automation of production for workers and businesses, perhaps following the tone of the public conversation (Neufein, O'Reilly and Ranft, 2018; Larsson and Teigland, 2020; Skidelsky and Craig, 2020). In *The Future of Work and Employment*, however, the reader will definitely see a broader assessment of relevant areas that are going through substantive change beyond technology, for instance the challenges for meaningful work or the relevance of financialisation for projecting future trends.

A second notion in the book, intimately connected to the previous one, is the idea that from an empirical point of view there is not a predominant process in determining the reality of work for the next decades. Instead, what can be found is a *multilevel evolution* in which different analytical layers of work and employment overlap – national, sectoral and transnational (Lansbury, 2018) and also, to be sure, individual. An important number of the sections in the volume deal specifically with each of these levels. On the national level, Brewster and Holland devote their chapter to analysing the challenges that employment relations face at present, given the rise of non-standard employment in advanced economies; Foden on his part studies employment patterns in European countries. The global level is covered in studies on working conditions in the gig economy by Healy and Pekarek, a survey of studies on the risks of automation by Gekara and Snell, and an examination of global production networks and its governance challenges for the future by Huw Thomas. Perhaps the most innovative contribution of the volume can be found, however, in its treatment of the individual implications of future trends in the world of work. In a context of rapid technological shifts, where business can benefit from changing locations and management strategies, the questions of the meaning of work and its capacity to generate engagement are as central as ever – and they are treated in the respective chapters of the book.

The third significant idea that structures the volume is that the evolution of work and employment will bring benefits or perils *depending on the social categories we consider* (occupation, gender, age, and so on). There are challenges that are global in character, but the way in which groups and individuals face them is strictly related to their ascriptions and, to that extent, they are subject to inequalities that go beyond their agency. Several pieces in the book highlight this notion. Kaine and colleagues, inspired by previous works (e.g. Howcroft and Rubery, 2019), focus on the gender disparities associated with emerging trends such as the increasing number of women working in the gig economy or the automation of manufacturing jobs mostly performed by women. Age groups are also relevant to take into account. As described by McDonald and Grant-Smith in their chapter, young workers face their own kind of challenges: the dramatic expansion of higher education enrolment in advanced and developed economies has decreased the value of credentials. This trend has pushed youths to unpaid forms of work and internships, an increasingly common resource to make their profiles more employable. Occupational categories, on their part, are exposed to automation and algorithmic management in different degrees. The variety of scenarios that different social groups can expect to face in the future is well portrayed in the book and certainly emphasises the analytical value of diversity.

To finish this review, I can mention some points that could have been developed more appropriately in *The Future of Work and Employment*. As I have mentioned above, the importance of a multidimensional, multilevel and socially diverse scope remains implicit in the book, and a more substantive and elaborated framework could have operated as a backbone across its chapters. It is noticeable that at times the different parts of the book do not share the same

vocabulary or conceptual approach. This is, of course, valid for a diverse group of contributions, but in this case it seemed as though there could have been more reflection on that side from the editors, perhaps in a conclusion to the volume. On the other hand, there are macro-trends that will be crucial for the future of work and employment (ILO, 2019) that receive little attention in the volume, most remarkably demographic and climate change. Finally, considering the universalistic tone of the book, it could have had a stronger emphasis on differences and inequalities between world regions. There is one chapter dedicated to studying employment trends in Europe, but other geographical contexts are missing from its scope. To be sure, it is not reasonable to ask for a complete survey of trends in every region, but since labour markets and working conditions are highly geography-dependent, this would have certainly benefited this already valuable academic effort to make sense of the future.

References

- Acemoglu, D. and P. Restrepo (2018) *Artificial Intelligence, Automation and Work*. National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), Working Paper 24196. Cambridge, MS: NBER.
- Autor, D. and A. Salomons (2018) Is Automation Labor-displacing? Productivity Growth, Employment, and the Labor Share. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity (BPEA)*, Spring: 1–72.
- Connell, R. (2007) *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Frey, C.B. and M.A. Osborne (2017) The Future of Employment: How Susceptible are Jobs to Computerisation? *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 114: 254–280. DOI: 10.1016/j.techfore.2016.08.019
- Howcroft, D. and J. Rubery (2019) “Bias In, Bias Out”: Gender Equality and the Future of Work Debate. *Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work*, 29(2): 213–227. DOI: 10.1080/10301763.2019.1619986
- International Labour Organization (ILO) (2019) *Work for a Brighter Future*. Geneva: ILO.
- Lansbury, R.D. (2018) The Changing World of Work and Employment Relations: A Multi-level Institutional Perspective of the Future. *Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work*, 28(1): 5–20. DOI: 10.1080/10301763.2018.1427425
- Larsson, A. and R. Teigland (eds.) (2020) *The Digital Transformation of Labor: Automation, the Gig Economy and Welfare*. London: Routledge.
- Neufeind, M., J. O’Reilly and F. Ranft (eds.) (2018) *Work in the Digital Age: Challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nowak, J. (2021) From Industrial Relations Research to Global Labour Studies: Moving Labour Research beyond Eurocentrism. *Globalizations*, (online only): 1–14. DOI: 10.1080/14747731.2021.1874210
- Skidelsky, R. and N. Craid (eds.) (2020) *Work in the Future: The Automation Revolution*. Cham: Springer.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

VICENTE SILVA is a Fellow in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He did a PhD in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh, interpreting the expansion of the future of work agenda in global governance in the

2010s. He has studied the engagement of key actors in global labour policy – the ILO, the OECD, the World Bank, as well as social partners – with the social implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. His current research agenda looks at the involvement of global institutions and social partners with the institutional analysis and politics of labour policy. [Email: v.silva@lse.ac.uk]