

Global Issues

The Future of Work and Workers: Insights from US Labour Studies

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The rollout of sophisticated digital tools – including advanced robotics, data analytics, machine learning and the Internet of Things – threatens to disrupt the distribution, role and nature of work in society. Raising the spectre of mass unemployment and social instability, researchers predict that technological progress will soon allow for the rapid automation of many tasks that are currently performed by humans. Already the pace of change appears to accelerate, with the spread of platform-based business models fuelling the growth of gig and crowd work. While reductions in labour supply due to demographic shifts and COVID-19 militate against mass displacement, the prospects for the offshoring of services enabled by information technology (IT) and even the most limited applications of artificial intelligence (AI) will challenge inherited divisions of labour across societies (Autor, 2015; Baldwin, 2016). Most workers, including those far up the skills ladder and those in high-status jobs, will experience some form of disruption to their work duties.¹ Concurrently, other trends such as climate change, financialisation and workplace fissuring threaten to accelerate the ongoing concentration of power across societies in the hands of the wealthy few, leaving workers with less bargaining power and greater uncertainty.

Given these developments, it should be no surprise that anxiety about the future runs high. In the United States (US), this has translated into more diverse and more contentious political debates. On the one hand, new visions for pooling collective risk, including the introduction of universal minimum income schemes, have entered mainstream thinking. Yet, on the other hand, policy-makers often continue with long-running efforts to undermine the fiscal power of the state, on which such new policy schemes would rely. Moreover, as economic inequality has grown and younger cohorts' prospects have dimmed, elites have taken more assertive steps to ensure against downward social mobility. Private investments in academic credentials have been a central means for transferring privilege from one generation to the next, whether pursued within or outside of increasingly stratified public education systems, and with the frequent tendency of weakening public provision. At the same time, sections of the population experiencing status erosion have begun to express their grievances in more forceful – and at times violent – ways.

Just when mastering the looming socio-economic transformation requires effective mechanisms for collective action, the public approval of societies' central political-economic institutions has fallen, from Congress and the Presidency to Corporate America. Sadly, this is more than justified, given that even mainstream scholarship has found “substantial support for theories of Economic–Elite Domination and ... Biased Pluralism” (Gilens and Page, 2014: 564). At the same time, public support for unions is at an all-time high in the United States, according to recent

¹ Take, for instance, professional work. Already, many tasks performed by high-skills workers can be offshored or automated, from doctors reading X-rays to bankers making decisions on loan applications. The more professionals' tacit knowledge can become formalised in automatable protocols, the more a future of “digital Taylorism” and associated deskilling looms.

Gallup polls, and academic research has found that nearly 50 per cent of non-union workers would like to have a union in their workplace (Kochan et al., 2019). However, existing labour laws, dating back to the New Deal era and significantly eroded by the Taft–Hartley amendments in 1947, are tilted toward employers who can invest heavily in undermining unionisation efforts, which has led to an underprovision of collective representation in the workplace. Furthermore, the reclassification and misclassification of many employees as independent contractors and managers makes them ineligible for the protections of the National Labor Relations Act.

It is during times of uncertainty such as the present that ideas matter the most. Ideas are the basis upon which actors can treat uncertainty as risk, attaching probabilities to outcomes, which in turn allows for rational problem-solving (Blyth, 2010). This article seeks to provide such ideas. It extends the core arguments from our recent book, *Revaluing Work(ers): Toward a Democratic and Sustainable Future* (Schulze-Cleven and Vachon, 2021), which offers a labour studies perspective on the future of work and workers, focused predominantly on the United States. Specifically, this article highlights ten crucial aspects that have remained underappreciated in contemporary discussions about the future of work and that we believe can help to guide organisations, labour unions, policy-makers and academics to respond in research, debate and advocacy. While the book – and the major points presented in this piece – are rooted largely in analyses of the United States, we think that many of the questions we raise and claims we make have application in a wider context. We also hope that our analysis can inform the ongoing debate about the core tenets of global labour studies (e.g. Agarwala, 2020; Nowak, 2021; Gallas, 2022).

Before introducing the ten points, we must pause first to establish that we believe a labour studies perspective is normative. The field shares this potential (and ultimately unavoidable) bias with other intellectual edifices that provide intellectual guidance, including the moral commitment of economists to markets’ promises of maximum efficiency (Schulze-Cleven, 2021a). Specifically, we argue that the labour studies perspective in the American tradition has been anchored in two beliefs:

1. Work should be rewarding.
2. Workers should be able to exercise voice at different scales of aggregation about how work is conducted.

Making this two-pronged anchor explicit helps us focus on pressing analytical issues.² The legal, political, social and technological tasks involved in re-regulating work and mastering the looming transition are immense, comparable in scope only to the New Deal’s efforts during the 1930s to manage the consequences of industrialisation and save American democracy.³ Given the central role that work plays for social integration, and as the current cross-national democratic backsliding indicates, failure to meet this challenge threatens nothing less than the survival of open societies.

We believe that a recognition of the ten points below will yield a better debate about the future of work and workers. A revised focus could empower firms, social organisations and public offices at the local, state, federal and transnational levels to serve as laboratories for forging a human-centred future of work that enlists technological advances for the benefit of workers, rather than to their detriment. We conclude with a call for researchers, practitioners and advocates to come to

² We admit that some US labour studies research has pursued an even broader agenda. See Gallas (2022) on the normative foundations of global labour studies.

³ We mention the New Deal to underscore the pressing need for institutional innovation today, not to paper over the drawbacks of that era’s political compromises.

the table in discussion and collaboration to help build a more just, democratic and sustainable future for all workers.

The Future of Work: Ten Crucial Aspects

Webs of institutional regulation

Work is ubiquitous, both paid and unpaid, whether regulated via legal contracts or performed informally. Located at the intersection of the economy and society, it sustains people's livelihoods and facilitates human reproduction. The particulars of its regulation – including labour and employment laws, personnel management practices, corporate governance codes, collective bargaining, education, and social insurance and welfare programmes – set the boundaries for treating labour as a commodity and people as human resources. Tensions naturally run high between a democracy's commitment to guaranteeing equal rights to its citizens and capitalism's highly differentiated valuation of individuals' work efforts.

In exploring the future of work and workers, it is important to acknowledge that societies regulate work through overlapping and interdependent webs of institutions. Given the continually shifting technological, social and economic contexts for work, no set of regulatory mechanisms can ever provide a “solution” for the multiple and often contradictory goals that policy-makers have for governing work. They are merely more or less adequate for managing the tensions between capitalism and democracy in specific circumstances. Moreover, in the face of perennially changing demands, the governance of work will have to be continually updated to maintain levels of worker protection throughout time. This includes adjustments in the roles played by all industrial relations actors, whether employers, workers or governments.

Labour markets are deeply social institutions (Solow, 1990). Flanking the operation of market mechanisms, webs of institutions seek to address the inequality of the exchange relationship between employers and workers, and to sustain a degree of “economic democracy” in the face of the structural desire of capital interests to control the labour process (Braverman, 1974; Dahl, 1986). Functionally, the goal has been to provide institutional frameworks that facilitate cross-class cooperation in the face of perennial class conflict. This also leaves state authorities with the task of regulating class relationships at various levels of aggregation (Streeck, 2005; Howell, 2016). Given the inherent contradictions of the variant measures taken by capitalist and democratic states, their legitimacy is constantly – and sometimes intensely – challenged (Habermas, 1975; Offe, 1984).

Institutional development as a continuous and contested process

There is nothing automatic about updating the governance mechanisms for work to maintain (if not bolster) a certain level of worker protection across time. Without active efforts of reproduction and adaptation, institutional drift will result (Hacker, Pierson and Thelen, 2015). Moreover, the continual challenging of given rules by both managers and investors leaves institutions open to frequent conversion in functioning.⁴

Institutional evolution is a political process, that is, one characterised by distributional conflict (Lasswell, 1958). Historically, this has turned institution-building into a process that proceeds in spurts, with historical junctures shaping national pathways of development. Moreover, responses to specific challenges such as technological progress have always expressed not just the distribution

⁴ See, for instance, the exploitation of the incomplete contracts and breaking with formerly implicit rules by private equity companies (Appelbaum, Batt and Clark, 2013).

of social power but also prevalent social norms. The social and regulatory programmes of the New Deal (and later the Great Society) in turn further institutionalised racist practices and outcomes, a fact that continues to haunt contemporary American democracy (Katznelson, 2013).

Just as in other countries, institutional engineering during 1930s America built a governance regime revolving around the notion of employment, including many social protections linked to it rather than to national citizenship (Castel, 2003). Institutional drift – and some overt retrenchment – has left this system heavily strained. Recent economic shifts have arguably exacerbated these strains, and looming changes are likely to cause even further strain. The rise of part-time, intermittent and contingent employment, and particularly the turn to gig work, has translated into – and will further exacerbate – high degrees of ineligibility for measures aimed at helping workers and regulating the safety of work.

The instability and unsustainability of the status quo

Now frequently referred to as the New Gilded Age, we live during a time in which the rapid financialisation of the economy has strengthened oligarchic tendencies. The growth of a global rentier class of super-rich demonstrates the decreasing capacity of welfare state institutions to mediate social conflict, with higher concentrations of wealth among the few challenging the social and political citizenship of the many (Dahrendorf, 1990; Piketty, 2014; Milanovic, 2016). Underwriting capitalism's drive for market expansion, the contemporary accumulation regime has proven to be economically unstable, and socially and environmentally unsustainable (Rosa, Lessenich and Dörre, 2015). Moreover, it is not delivering on democratic goals (Schäfer and Streeck, 2013). Individuals and families – tasked with higher degrees of responsibility under slogans such as “a hand up rather than a hand down” or an emphasis on “family values” – feel the effects (Cooper, 2017; Mounk, 2017). Additionally, as increasing social disorganisation has tended to underprovide public goods, disadvantages continue to cumulate so as to leave particular populations facing multiple forms of discrimination and even oppression, prominently stratified by race and gender. Unsurprisingly, mainstream debate now discusses if capitalism has a future (e.g. Wallerstein et al., 2013).

Any frank discussion of the future of work and workers needs to start from the recognition that the failure to update the social contract that lies at the core of work and employment is central to contemporary imbalances in our country's growth model and the increasingly toxic politics they have generated.⁵ Take the macro-economic consequences of failing to adapt the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act to changes in companies' production strategies and human resource management practices, such as vertical disintegration, franchising and on-site subcontracting. Significant drift in the effective legal protections for workers' collective representation on the ground has contributed to the inability of workers to translate productivity increases into wage growth. This in turn contributed to the financial crisis of 2007–2008 by making domestic demand increasingly dependent on rapid increases in the availability of credit for private households that could not make ends meet.

Moreover, in managing the fallout from the financial crisis, policy-makers have further concentrated income, wealth and security, doing little to halt the shifting of social risks from the state and corporations to families, or to ameliorate the intensifying zero-sum competition in parts of the labour market. While some workers had to personally experience un(der)employment and/or home foreclosures, many are now asked to contribute to servicing record levels of public

⁵ See Schulze-Cleven (2021a) on the market fundamentalism of recent neo-liberal policies, including the role played by economic analyses that do not consider social and political realities.

debt, which were predominantly incurred for the benefit of the minority of households owning substantial assets. Adding insult to injury, much of the policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic has followed the same script.

The plasticity of technology

The future is not predetermined, because technology is highly malleable. Rather than being inevitable, the effects of technology derive largely from the particulars of its implementation. Ignoring the social and political construction of technology, contemporary policy debate tends to adopt a deterministic outlook on the future that interprets technical possibilities as inevitable outcomes. This then quasi-automatically leads to recommendations to simply double down on existing strategies to increase the skill supply. However, emphasising human capital investments to allow individuals to keep up with rapidly changing requirements puts the adjustment pressure (including costs, often in the form of private debt) squarely onto workers and households. It is, of course, important to better understand and develop ways to improve the resiliency of individuals and communities, as well as to boost their capacity to better and more positively respond to change. But a strategy that does not seek to actively shape the environment to which individuals are expected to adapt is set to fail.

For instance, without increased privacy protections, individuals have little chance to resist the increasing scope for surveillance, control and value extraction that new technologies offer employers. Without new anti-discrimination rules, they cannot constructively respond to biases at the heart of algorithms that might inadvertently turn AI technology into means for deepening racial division and socially excluding the disabled. These and related phenomena of the digital era require collective responses that set limits on how corporations use technologies, and channel the conception and implementation of such tools in ways that support rather than undermine workers and their skills. For example, by involving workers in the design of technologies, there is scope for driving forward innovations that complement rather than displace existing human capital, an underappreciated approach that focuses on the demand for skills rather than solely on their supply.

In sum, our lives – including what we know – are socially constructed. There is ample room for choice and agency. Strengthening democratic elements in the design and implementation of technology could help build a better society (Rifkin, 2015; Kochan and Dyer, 2017). Yet politically creative approaches are needed to tap into this potential.

Reimagining and rebuilding worker voice

Labour has a role in designing the future, yet it is not predetermined what this role is, just as its future organisational forms and mechanisms of collective action are open. The bases of social solidarity have shifted, just as the economy has changed. Leverage in the current environment requires new strategies to wield power resources, from experimenting with intersectional organising to forming new coalitions at both local and global levels (Schulze-Cleven, 2017b; Lee, 2018). Recognising and opposing diverse and intersecting forms of injustice is central to the first concern, and flexibly scaling labour mobilisation to the most promising level of action is the task for the second.

In the United States, specifically, some avenues for increasing worker voice might involve reimagining or redeploying existing or past institutions and strategies. For example, as mentioned earlier, the Taft–Hartley amendments to the National Labor Relations Act outlawed various union actions that had been highly successful in the 1930s, such as secondary and mass picketing, solidarity or political strikes, secondary boycotts, wildcat strikes and sit-down strikes. Taft–Hartley also prohibited federal workers from striking, empowered employers to vigorously oppose unions

and to initiate decertification of existing unions, and authorised the President to intervene in strikes that created a “national emergency”. Finally, Taft–Hartley authorised individual states to outlaw union security clauses which require represented workers to pay union dues or fair-share representation fees. More than twenty-five state legislatures have since passed “right-to-work” laws, with the effect of reducing union resources and effectiveness as well as undermining union membership. A whole or partial repeal of these provisions would increase the power of labour vis-à-vis capital and significantly increase worker voice in the economy.

Other fruitful areas for consideration might involve broadening and deepening the scope of collective bargaining. For example, sectoral bargaining would allow workers to bargain over wages and working conditions across an entire sector involving multiple employers (Andrias, 2019). The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act originally allowed for sectoral bargaining in some industries, but that aspect of the law was repealed in the late 1940s. Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) seeks to expand democracy by reimagining the participants, processes and purposes of collective bargaining (McCartin, Smiley and Sneiderman, 2021). BCG efforts expand the scope of bargaining to include demands beyond wages and benefits, and expand the participants at the bargaining table by bringing union members and community allies together to develop demands jointly. The union and allies present their demands not only to the direct employer, but to the web of corporate and financial relationships that influence or control the employer. Most importantly, BCG efforts see the purpose of collective bargaining as not only securing material gains for specific workers, but also addressing deeper structural inequities. Changes in existing labour law could expand the scope of mandatory topics for bargaining and/or expand the bounds of bargaining unit membership to include vital stakeholders in the process.

These means of increasing worker voice, and others not mentioned here or not yet imagined, are going to be important for advocates and scholars alike to consider when envisioning a more just and sustainable future economy.

Visions of the future as powerful today

Scenarios about looming developments shape actions in the present. The consequences are three-fold:

- We should radically question our assumptions about the role and scope of paid work. For instance, should full-time employment – with its ability to provide financial independence to households and ensure individuals’ social integration – really be the goal of public policy? Or should we all strive to work less? This kind of questioning is the basis for innovation that does not remain hampered by past institutional settlements. To build a desirable future, it is likely important to chart new utopias (Wright, 2010; Bregman, 2017). Without a goal, however far away, it is difficult if not impossible to develop mechanisms to get there.
- There might be powerful evolutionary mechanisms driving humanity toward collaboration, but effectively tapping into them requires the active construction of new notions of the common good and the public interest (Berman, 2012; Christakis, 2019). This was the basis for effective social democracy in the twentieth century, and it remains the basis for this progressive ideology’s potential successor in the current context (Rothstein and Schulze-Cleven, 2020).
- Any visions for the future need to be comprehensive, embracing complexity, including the likely context of planetary conditions and the evolution of global commerce. Just as

in the past, there is a crucial global dimension to local efforts at institutional engineering.

In sum, the construction of shared visions for a more just and equitable future are an essential first step in the process of revaluing work to ensure that work is rewarding, and that workers are able to exercise voice in how it is conducted.

The importance of partnership, including with public universities

Partnership is central to building a desirable future, whether it is on the level of organisations and the relations between management and unions (Rubinstein and McCarthy, 2016), or with respect to policy implementation and the distribution of responsibility between public authorities and civil society (Fine, 2017). Invariably, the interconnectedness of present economic, political and environmental crises leads us to conclude there is a serious need for desilofication, including an expansion of the range of issues currently confronted by various organisations and institutions in order to develop the forms of solidarity and partnership that will be needed to chart pathways toward a new social contract.

At a time when old models are no longer adequate and new approaches take decades to reach the mainstream (Schulze-Cleven, 2017c; 2018), public universities can play a central role in sponsoring collaborative approaches and bringing multiple stakeholders together. Universities could function as public innovation hubs and points of access to global experimentation. From supporting efforts to reimagine the world of work to incubating new inclusive approaches to its regulation; from using research to mediate between contesting visions for the future to helping find agreement on conceptions of the public good; from working to ensure the better reproduction of our institutions through time to developing scenarios for innovation by partially replacing, functionally converting or adding new layers to existing institutions – universities can guide the populace in efforts to start building a human-centred future of work today (Schulze-Cleven, 2021b).

To that end, public universities are uniquely positioned to:

- leverage interdisciplinary collaboration to better understand the impact of the AI/data/automation revolution as well as the effects of climate disruption, decarbonisation and large-scale demographic shifts on the workforce and society;
- utilise the knowledge gained for imagining collective efforts to manage the inevitable disruption and consciously develop new opportunities;
- tap into the deep complementarities between the university's three missions of research, education and service by launching initiatives that cut across them.

Toward more clarity on the use and governance of markets

At this point, there seems to be a vacuum with respect to progressive visions for the future and clear notions of a public interest (Judt, 2010). Key questions about mechanisms for valuation and the role of markets remain to be settled (Mazzucato, 2018). For instance, does a progressive vision seek to actively engage in shaping market allocations? Or does it buy into the idea that market results should be accepted, which in turn limits measures to supply-side social investment?

The sustainability of work in the future will turn on a systematic exploration of how public authorities can update the functioning and outcomes of market processes, not least by preventing the market concentrations that technology-fuelled increasing returns to scale tend to generate.

Currently, many conservative and progressive policy proposals tend to overlook the need for expanded competition-sustaining regulation in markets of growing scale and scope. As isolated prescriptions, neither neo-liberal calls for the government to get out of the economy nor proposals to introduce a universal basic income to reduce individuals' dependence on work are adequate. Both scenarios would do nothing to prevent product-market monopoly and labour-market monopsony, and would likely further undercut social mobility. Moreover, if implemented without other complementary measures, such proposals would likely fail due to lack of attention to securing a stable income tax base.

It is high time to think beyond simplistic perfect-competition models of markets that view wages as expressions of workers' marginal productivity. Not only is it difficult to measure personal productivity in many contexts, but its level also tends to reflect work process design more than individual effort. Moreover, there is much room for pay to significantly and enduringly diverge from productivity levels, as the post-war practice of family wages across many sectors illustrates. In turn, there is nothing inevitable about low wages in many personal services that cannot be offshored (such as education, childcare and elderly care). Furthermore, the inevitable political obstacles to redistributing market incomes make attention to policies that shape markets' "pre-distribution" essential for a democratic and sustainable future of work and workers.

Arguably, the combination of winner-take-all economics and politics has shrunk the space for addressing other long-standing inequalities in the world of work, such as gender and racial wage gaps, and particularly the biased allocation and frequent undervaluation of care work and teaching, both of which are central to the social reproduction of human life. The emphasis of public policies on family values, including households' financial responsibilities, has tended to reinforce gender and racial division by increasing communities' dependence on the paid work of individual breadwinners and keeping most reproductive labour invisible within the private realm or subject to informal individual arrangements.

One important ingredient for future analyses will be interdisciplinary conceptual work on the types of strategies that promise to best align changing democratic values with market governance in the digital era. For instance, there are important questions to answer about the usefulness of the concept of human capital in debates about the direction of institutional change. Not only is human capital difficult to measure, differences in wages that are frequently attributed to the distribution of human capital can often be just as easily explained by differences in political power. Moreover, in the United States, policies aimed at increasing human capital have tended to spur further inequalities and undermine conceptions of the common good. Could a broad-based human capital investment strategy ever produce the egalitarian forms of capitalism that its proponents claim? What should be done if different forms of human capital are not created equal?

These issues are related to the more fundamental question of whether policy-makers should seek to sustain social integration by supporting the expansion of markets (that is, further merging the economic and social realms) or by limiting markets' reach. For instance, with respect to care work, how should policy-makers go about remedying biases in the provision of un(der)paid labour and encourage more appropriate valuations? Should they seek to deepen the division of labour by increasing the scope for market-based delivery of care (for instance, through publicly providing vouchers and more heavily regulating private-sector care services)? Should they try to sustain care outside of households but reduce workers' exploitation by restricting public subsidies to non-profit or even solely public offerings? Or should they encourage more care within households (including through a two-pronged focus on limiting overall working time in paid employment and increasing wages)? Finally, should these options be combined in particular ways?

Healthcare and education as key sectors

Healthcare and education make up more than a fourth of the US economy, and they are crucial for sustaining economic growth, providing jobs, addressing social inequalities in the digital era, and will play an important role in a decarbonised, climate-safe economy (Givan, 2016; Schulze-Cleven, 2017a). All too often, they are perceived as problem areas, given their dependence on public funding, limits that unions and professional associations put on managerial rule, and traditionally low productivity increases that have underwritten higher-than-average price inflation across both sectors. We argue that technological progress provides opportunities to turn these purported disadvantages into assets to tap into for proactively managing the two sectors in support of broader social goals. As new technologies dislodge outdated social settlements, they lay bare the socially constructed and inherently political nature of effective demand and supply in healthcare and education services, which opens space for renegotiating organisational structures across both sectors.

A focus on these two sectors is also central for reflecting about work's value for the public good rather than merely satisfying the immediate demand of markets. As a society, we can no longer pretend that care work, broadly conceived, is less "useful" than other more profitable forms of labour. Additionally, as personal services, they are less subject to international competition, a constraint often invoked to shut down reform attempts in other contexts. Indeed, for this reason, these areas of work have served as a trial ground for promising new forms of collective action in recent years that have led to substantial changes in the governance of work.

Toward new mechanisms of regulation

Mechanisms for the regulation of work have long been experimental in nature. Environments and conditions change, making the institutions for governing work a perpetual work in progress. Successful experimentation has many preconditions; arguably, two are central. First, we need to acknowledge the realities of capitalism, including the power of accumulation and disparities in wealth rather than just income. Second, we need to resist the glorification of the past so as not to be limited by it. This two-fold recognition should help us to search for new high-road models that are truly human-centred and empower us to tackle questions such as these:

- Should societies bolster and broaden the concept of employment to include workers providing gig work on platforms, or should they expand income protection, build disability programmes, and provide access to healthcare independent of employment status? Given the perpetual nature of change, what sorts of social safety net provisions should be in place to ensure a fair and just transition for workers facing job displacement (Vachon, 2021)?
- What rules are necessary to protect workers' freedom of association, given that contemporary US anti-trust provisions allow for market concentrations among business platforms such as Uber but prohibit collective action among its drivers? With most unionisation attempts failing due to employer resistance and worker mobilisation moving to online mutual-aid platforms such as coworker.org, what should be the role for unions?
- Can blockchain technology be used to ensure labour standards in digital supply chains? How can workers' privacy and equal treatment be protected? What can we learn from regulatory practices across the world, including the European Union's General Data

Protection Regulation, which seeks to protect citizens from the misuse of their personal information?

- What could be the political bases for each approach to the questions raised above? What kind of innovation is needed in constitutional doctrines? How much scope is there to build on existing legislation such as the Fair Labor Standards Act?

Conclusion

It is important to remember that the story of capitalism is a story of constant transformation. The steady cycle of transitions, driven sometimes by technology, other times by shifting social relations or other societal changes, has had significant and differentiated consequences for various social groupings within economies. It is for this reason that periods of transition are invariably accompanied by struggles between those set to lose and those poised to gain. The current period of accelerated technological change, accompanied by other megatrends such as large-scale demographic shifts and the unfolding climate crisis, is no different. The scale, magnitude and rate of change may or may not be greater than previous periods of rapid transformation, but the sense of uncertainty and anxiety and the increasingly contentious struggles over social and economic outcomes will be similar.

Our collective failure thus far to update the social contract, we contend, has created an unstable and unsustainable political–economic–ecological system. The overlapping and interdependent webs of institutional regulation currently in place are insufficient, generally derived from previous iterations of the capitalist political economy, and inadequate for managing the current tensions between capitalism and democracy. What forms of regulation are needed now? What processes should be established to ensure that those responsible for the transformation of regulations that will be needed again (and again) in the future are able to keep pace with the fluid nature of the capitalist system? The development of new institutions will ultimately be the result of contentious politics and conflicts over distributional outcomes, including worker organising and mobilisation to shape the design, adoption and use of new technologies, the degree of worker voice in the process and the extent to which markets should shape outcomes.

We have argued in this essay that it is during times of uncertainty such as this that ideas are most important. Ideas are the basis upon which actors can treat uncertainty as risk and engage in rational problem-solving. How can we best ensure that workers are protected and equity is centred in the process of institutional renewal? Drawing from a labour studies perspective on the future of work and workers, we have highlighted several crucial considerations and principles that have been missing from most contemporary US-based discussions and that we suspect can travel beyond the borders of the United States. Together, we believe, these insights can help guide attempts to build a future in which work is rewarding and in which workers have a voice about how it is conducted. Collaborative research efforts and partnerships between academics and practitioners to explore these elements and others are one way through which shared visions can be developed and the seeds for a more just and equitable future may be planted. We look forward to participating in such conversations in the days and years ahead and encourage you to join as well.

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