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# *Beyond Market Fundamentalism: A Labor Studies Perspective on the Future of Work*

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# Beyond Market Fundamentalism:
# A Labor Studies Perspective on the Future of Work

by

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The debate about how to build a desirable and sustainable future of work appears stuck. On the one hand, today's interconnected economic, political, and ecological crises have nurtured widespread skepticism of neoliberal policies' uniform emphasis on the promises of free markets and individual choices. Policymakers' reliance on simplistic – and often deeply normative – notions offered by economists in support of such policies has attracted particular criticism (e.g. Appelbaum 2019; Skidelsky 2020). On the other hand, most contributions on the evolution of work remain denominated in the neoliberal terms codified in economic theories. This includes the assumption that markets and technology will determine – rather than merely effect – the looming reorganization of social life.

Of course, the influence of economics on policymaking has neither been absolute nor direct, given that a plethora of mediating circumstances across countries has conditioned the discipline's intellectual guidance. Yet the increased professional authority of economists, their institutional positions in government, and the diffusion of their styles of reasoning have had a profound impact (Hirschman and Berman 2014). Perhaps most crucially, economists have even come to speak for leftist political parties, calling on them to overcome long-held skepticism of market-led policy solutions and to embrace neoliberal policies as "modern" and context-appropriate approaches (Mudge 2018) – often with disastrous consequences for these parties' electoral prospects.

In the United States, recent empirical research has led many progressive economists to abandon core neoliberal beliefs, and a growing number of them now readily admits that the discipline has been wrong to push neoliberal policy prescriptions (e.g. Krugman 2019; Romer 2020). Yet economics textbooks and mainstream discourse frequently fail to reflect these reservations. For instance, the nation's best-selling introductory textbook flatly asserts neoliberal

mantras without any qualifications, from the supposed trade-off between equity and efficiency, to the negative effects of government redistribution on economic growth (Mankiw 2015: 5). This flies in the face of empirical realities, including the positive association between higher taxes at the top of the income distribution and faster growth across countries (Boushey 2020).

What guiding ideas can take the place of neoliberal assumptions, and what academic research can governments turn to in order to build a sustainable and inclusive future of work, i.e. one that is actually desirable for workers and thus for citizens? Credible alternatives, or at least complements, to economic theories are needed to loosen and potentially dislodge neoliberalism's hold on contemporary thinking about work, the economy, and their evolution. Without alternatives, there is little reason to think that neoliberalism's contemporary resilience will diminish (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). The American debate certainly points in this dispiriting direction. Mainstream contributions generally fail to appreciate the role played by neoliberalism in facilitating populist plutocracy and have little to say on what it would take to keep democracy from fully degenerating into oligarchy (Winters 2011; Purdy 2018).

This chapter argues that the academic field of labor studies can provide intellectual direction. With its focus on the struggles of working people, interdisciplinary inquiry, and upholding workers' rights, labor studies brings a much better appreciation of the power of collective action and the role of politics to the debate on the future of work. All social scientific analyses are selective in terms of the questions they ask, the data they interrogate, and the type of abstractions they strive for, which means that they highlight, even prioritize, some parts of a complex social reality over others (e.g. Immergut 1998). I contend that both the analytical choices and normative commitments of labor studies are well aligned with the looming tasks laid out in this volume's introduction.

This chapter spells out the essential contribution of labor studies in three steps. A first section recounts the rise of neoliberalism and economics to illustrate the influence of ideas on policymaking and to make the case for unchaining the future of work from the market fundamentalism that neoliberalism and economics have promoted. The second section presents labor studies as the source of an alternative set of ideas that comes with unique advantages for understanding what needs to go into building a democratic and sustainable future of work that delivers on workers' interests. A concluding third section builds on the preceding analysis to elaborate the volume's main arguments.

## UNCHAINING THE FUTURE FROM MARKET FUNDAMENTALISM

While neoliberalism is an ideology and economics is a social science discipline, they share a commitment to the efficient management of scarce resources through markets, which generally means opposing collective political decision-making that could undercut market efficiency. This joint normative vision has fundamentally shaped the world of work globally over the past few decades and now acts as powerful constraint on a future of work that would address societies' interlocking ecological, political, and economic crises. This section sketches the historical trajectory of these ideas, before delving into three key hurdles that prevent many mainstream economists from productively engaging in the debate over building a democratic and sustainable future.

### The Historical Trajectory of Neoliberalism

The main promulgators of 20$^{th}$-century neoliberal thought borrowed heavily from Adam Smith, the 18$^{th}$-century moral philosopher turned father of economics. According to Smith,

market society would challenge what he saw as the unwarranted political privileges and restrictions of feudalism. Allowing for a greater degree of specialization and a deeper division of labor, markets would provide greater opportunities on the individual level and promote the wealth of nations by aggregating individuals' self-interested decisions. Neoliberals turned Smith's arguments against the democratic welfare states and international institutions built after World War II. When progressive policymakers defended regulatory limits on markets' reach and devised Keynesian macro-economic management in the name of serving the "common good" and the "public interest," neoliberals like August Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman diagnosed political overreach and collusion. While Smith had objected to the monarchically sponsored monopolies of chartered trading companies, 20th-century neoliberals were skeptical of the organizational power wielded by both public authorities and labor unions.

As the postwar Keynesian regime ran into long-predicted trouble during the 1970s, with businesses rebelling against workers' newfound power that governments' full-employment strategies had provided (Kalecki 1943), right-wing reformers successfully called on neoliberal ideas and popularized them in the political mainstream. In the words of Ronald Reagan, government was the problem, not the solution. Britain's Margaret Thatcher was arguably the most outspoken critic. Thatcher stated flatly that there was no such thing as society, only individual men and women, and families, thus denying the existence of the collectivity whose interests had motivated policymakers' postwar quest to more extensively flank the economic sphere with institutions of social protection.

The diffusion of neoliberal ideas has not been uniform, but labor market reforms were soon adopted across countries, as were broader deregulatory initiatives launched to spur economic adaptability (e.g. Schulze-Cleven, Watson, and Zysman 2007; Schulze-Cleven and

Weishaupt 2015). Where the collective has remained a reference point, individuals' relationships to it have been deeply transformed. While postwar welfare states had emphasized society's obligation to sustain individuals' well-being by expanding social citizenship, contemporary neoliberal discourses tend to stress individuals' responsibilities to support their country's global competitiveness (Lessenich 2008).

*Modern Economics Arrives*

Economics itself moved quickly beyond Smith's underspecified notion of markets working as if an "invisible hand" led them. By the late 19th century, the outlines of neoclassical economics were established. This approach spells out with mathematical precision how – in a hypothetical state of "perfect competition" – variable prices can match supply and demand in market equilibria. This matching process, neoclassical theory argues, maximizes the utility of all (rational and self-interested) participants, given their preferences and resource endowments. According to the theory, equilibrium prices equal both a purchaser's marginal benefits and a seller's marginal costs. In the labor market, this translates into individual wages representing a worker's marginal productivity rather than the result of a bargaining process.

In terms of assessing the worth of goods and services, the neoclassical approach decidedly breaks with the labor theory of value of classical economists. Embracing a thin utilitarian theory of worth, it views value as entirely subjective, expressed in the prices of transactions that themselves are a function of scarcity and individual preferences. No judgment of an activity's worth for the collective is necessary, given that outcomes are treated as revealed preferences; and the value of collective economic activity – including its growth – can be easily captured through the aggregation of transactions as the gross domestic product.

By the mid-20th century, a new neoclassical synthesis incorporated the macroeconomic insights of John Maynard Keynes. While this codification of knowledge further marginalized non-mathematical analyses, including the institutional tradition, it did not mean that disagreements had been removed from the discipline.[1] Yet whatever the discipline's shifting controversies were, they never cast doubt on the neoclassical model's main propositions, which meant that introductory economics courses could forcefully advance the case for the power of markets. Serious discussion of the long list of unrealistic assumptions underlying the neoclassical model (and, in particular, its general equilibrium formulation) – including a timeless economy with unlimited future markets, companies' ability to flexibly adjust labor-capital ratios in production (i.e. the differentiability of the production function), complete information, and perennial full employment – became relegated to advanced courses. Moreover, when theorizing got a bit closer to real-life markets, such as with respect to the "non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment" (NAIRU), this did not appear to undercut economists' faith in neoclassical meta-theory. Notwithstanding the fictional character of the theoretical edifice provided by modern economics, right-wing politicians easily mobilized it to bolster their criticism of labor markets' "rigidities" and promote deregulation.

*The Left Turns to Neoliberalism*

When progressives eventually embraced neoliberalism during the 1990s, they did so under the banner of offering a third way between popular neoliberal conservatism and old styles of socialism that had become further delegitimated by the fall of the Soviet Union. Intellectually, they drew from economists' theories about human capital, flanked by some reliance on endogenous growth theory, which offered a way out of the dual obstacles the left was facing by

the end of the 20th century. In the realm of policy, the leaders of leftist parties were looking to maintain welfare state generosity and avoid the type of retrenchment that the right was implementing, even as progressives themselves came to think that fiscal expenditures had little room to grow. Moreover, politically, they were searching for ways to expand electoral support beyond the shrinking working-class vote, which de-industrialization and the weakening of unions had undermined, and to appeal to voters from the middle class, many of whom were more skeptical of redistribution due to their own wider asset ownership (Hall 2020).

Emphasizing the skill-biases of technological change, human capital theory offers the expansion of education as the primary way to contain rising economic inequality in the context of increasingly knowledge-based capitalism. For the optimists on the left, this education-focused path promised to turn the tables on workers and companies, empowering individuals to have companies compete over them and enlisting the process of capital accumulation for workers' own benefit (Andersson 2010). Yet this modernization strategy also entailed significant shifts away from traditional social democratic conceptions of human progress, including equating cultural and social values with economic ones, as third-way reformers embraced markets as the primary means of socio-cultural inclusion and encouraged workers to conceive of themselves primarily as entrepreneurs focused on leveraging individual human capital (Bröckling 2015).

*Assessing Neoliberalism's Impact*

In hindsight, the limits of the left's neoliberal strategy are striking. As third-way reforms sought to support those workers able to compete in the knowledge economy, they had little to offer to those workers who could not. Plans to socialize at least part of the costs associated with investments in human capital often fell short, and companies soon discovered that human capital

was available around the world – often at lower cost than in the advanced democracies (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). Workers unable to compete increasingly fell behind, and many began to support right-wing populist parties and movements.

Moreover, just when the education sector was supposed to empower workers for successful market-based competition, policymakers increased the role of markets in the governance of higher education (Schulze-Cleven 2020). This produced "varieties of academic capitalism," which shifted power to those individuals with the highest endowments of financial and human capital (Schulze-Cleven and Olson 2017). While the prospect of improved living standards for the next generation have dimmed for many workers, the marketization of education has left the financial elite with expanded "neo-feudal" opportunities to transfer their status to their offspring via the purchase of educational credentials (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017). Unsurprisingly, parts of the left moved away from neoliberalism as the negative feedback of third-way reforms became evident, yet no agreement on how to re-regulate the economy or reconnect with former voters has emerged.

Looking back at the last half a century, the impact of neoliberal thinking has been remarkable. Providing a new "software" to run the economy's "hardware," neoliberal ideas have starkly recast processes of market allocation (Blyth 2019). Most economists have tended to encourage this reorientation, whether it was policymakers' move from demand management to supply-side strategies, the abandonment of unemployment prevention in favor of inflation minimization, or attempts to leverage liberalizing and assets-focused reforms – not just in education but in pension and housing policies as well – for encouraging workers to think more like capitalists. As an epistemic community, economists have had less to say about the distributional consequences of these decisions, given that the discipline has no conception of

social relations beyond markets, generally ignores the role of ideas, and defines away social conflict (e.g. Rodrik 2015).

**Barriers to Productive Engagement in a Debate on the Future**

Economics continues to evolve, of course. Some high-profile economists have pushed hard against the limitations of their own discipline, emphasizing the role of democratic decision making in setting limits to market rule and containing increased inequalities (e.g. Stiglitz 2020; Banerjee and Duflo 2019). Innovation in teaching is particularly pronounced, with efforts to place abstract theories in real-world contexts, including the 2007-08 global financial crisis. In research, moreover, there is growing recognition that the entire edifice of modern macroeconomic policy is rather unstable, with scholars revisiting long-standing theories about fiscal and monetary levers (e.g. Blanchard and Summers 2019).

Nevertheless, economics' ontological and epistemological conventions continue to contribute to a truncated debate on the future of work. First, and particularly problematic, some economists still aim to establish the total primacy of markets in social relations and erase all notions of the "social" (and the "political"). Practically, they seek to turn the fictional – and arguably dystopian – neoclassical model from a benchmark device for positive analysis into a normative framework that "messy" real life should approximate (Ackerman and Beggs 2013). One prominent voice recently presented this position as a "Just Deserts" perspective that aims to ensure workers' compensation "congruent with their contributions" and restricts government interventions to cases of market imperfections that prevent any individual earning exactly "the value of his or her own marginal product" (Mankiw 2013: 32).

Second, and more broadly, what is considered knowledge in the discipline continues to be tilted to what can be theorized through formalization in mathematical models, a phenomenon that Paul Krugman long ago described as the "remarkable extent to which the methodology of economics creates blind spots" (Krugman 1993: 26). Debate about the sources of global patterns of inequality – slowly decreasing among countries and rapidly rising within them as divergences between classes become more pronounced (Milanovic 2016) – is a powerful case in point. For instance, even after Krugman had modeled how the presence of increasing returns could undermine neoclassical theories of international trade, he fervently criticized non-mathematical analyses of trade policy that diverged from neoclassical conceptions (Krugman 1996). Only recently did Krugman admit that he was wrong on the benefits of free trade, and he now acknowledges the drawbacks of globalized markets. Rather than trade, economists emphasized technological change as a source of inequality, a reading that far better fit with the neoclassical reference model, even as evidence against it was mounting (Lauder, Brown, and Cheung 2018). Some economists have admittedly come around to acknowledging the importance of political decisions, including steps taken to weaken unions (Stansbury and Summers 2020). Yet this recognition appears largely limited to empirical analysis, making few inroads into theorizing.

Third, the discipline's narrow scope of analysis inhibits its ability to build knowledge over time in other ways as well. One important mechanism for such reduced capacity operates through the types of researchers that the discipline attracts and promotes, and the subset of research questions and empirical domains that the profession sees as relevant for the highest-profile journals. Centrally, the American economics discipline has long been overwhelmingly white and male. For instance, only about 20 of the more than 9000 professors of economics in the U.S. are Black (Child and Duffin 2020). The challenges associated with contemporary social

selectivity were widely reported in the case of Lisa Cook, who sought to place an article about the effect of violence on the patenting activity of Black Americans (Cook 2014). Not only did this process take a decade, it also exhibited her colleagues' restricted knowledge of history and required interventions from disciplinary leaders (Child and Duffin 2020). It appears that this "social" constraint on the discipline's aggregation of knowledge contributes to a less than steady process of continually challenging long-standing principles in the discipline.

Having elaborated the far-reaching influence and analytical limits of neoliberalism and economics, it is now time to turn to labor studies as an alternative source of ideas that proceeds from, rather than sidelines, the social realities of economic exchange.

## THE UNIQUE ADVANTAGES OF LABOR STUDIES

The advantages of labor studies for clarifying and guiding how to move toward a democratic and sustainable future stem from the field's particular focus. In contrast to the organization of economics around the goal of maximizing efficiency, labor studies seeks to understand the experiences of working people, which it tackles through interdisciplinary inquiry and with a commitment to upholding worker rights. By challenging disciplinary biases stemming from the interdependence of theorizing and methodology, and by being explicit about its normative agenda, labor studies has the potential to provide a truly transformative understanding of work. Given the field's integrated, problem-focused and context-sensitive lens, it is well-prepared to counter the increased uncertainty of the 21st century, allowing us to more clearly see the political and organizational challenges lying ahead. This section first provides some background on the history of labor studies, then discusses the field's main features and particular benefits for thinking about the future of work and its human impact.

**A Short History of Labor Studies**

As an interdisciplinary field, labor studies is naturally a broader tent than any specific social science discipline, particularly compared to economics' narrow grounding in the neoclassical core. At times, the phrase "labor studies" is used so widely that the focus of the field might appear fuzzy.[2] Briefly skimming academic journals that carry the phrase in their titles around the world shows great variety, including labor economics and labor education, as well as both nationally specific and comparative analyses. Given this diversity, there are many ways to write the history of the subject and distill its essence.

From a North American vantage point, the field has strong roots in labor and worker education, first British and Danish, then later American, with U.S. universities offering night-school classes since the late 19th century, and more specialized innovative institutions being founded in the 1920s (Gray 1966; Dwyer 1977). The industrial relations programs launched on the heels of World War II to promote labor-management cooperation provided the immediate institutional context for the development of labor studies, e.g., Harvard in 1942; Berkeley, UCLA, Cornell, Minnesota, Illinois, and Rutgers between 1945 and 1947; as well as Michigan and Indiana in the 1950s (Wong n.d.). These offered worker education in addition to, and sometimes in collaboration with, trainings that unions were offering themselves.

Labor studies arguably came into its own in the United States during the 1960s, with the first graduate program launched at the University of Massachusetts in 1965, and the first undergraduate degree at Rutgers starting in 1967 (Dwyer 1977: 199). Social mobilization for civil rights, the federal government's sponsorship of the expansion of higher education, and academic professionals' rising power within universities arguably provided crucial background

conditions for the field's emergence (e.g. Jencks and Riesman 1968). Parts of society increasingly recognized human differences, and universities moved to credential knowledge about how such differences were associated with distinct life experiences. While labor studies focused on the effects of class, other new fields such as Black studies or Hispanic studies explored those of race (Dwyer 1977: 198).

Labor studies thus represented more than simply the "academization" of labor education, as one critic insinuated (Lieberthal 1977). In addition to a stronger academic professionalization of the faculty, the birth of labor studies included a clear shift in emphasis away from the utilitarian "tool" courses offered in universities' labor education and extension departments at the time. Instead, labor studies embraced a liberal arts approach that sought to integrate knowledge from a range of (mostly social science) disciplines about the "nature of work, those who work, and the organizations they create to advance and defend their interests" (Dwyer 1977: 201). In its normative orientation toward advancing "industrial justice," moreover, labor studies set itself apart from the neighboring field of industrial relations, which focused more on functional cooperation across the class divide and remained dominated by institutional economists (Dwyer, Galvin, and Larson 1977).

By the mid-1970s, labor studies had experienced substantial growth, including at community colleges, with certificates and degree programs being offered at forty-three institutions (Gray 1976: 35). The *Labor Studies Journal* launched in spring 1976. Arguably, the declining strength of American unions eventually weighed on the development of the field domestically (Parsons 1990), and there has been some organizational consolidation that more closely linked labor studies and labor education, as well as university-based and union-based programs. Specifically, the United Association for Labor Education (UALE) has brought

together university and union-based labor educators since 2000, with the *Labor Studies Journal* acting as the UALE's official scholarly outlet. At the same time, the field successfully developed new audiences. While labor studies course offerings were initially aimed at working adults with union backgrounds, they today attract many younger students as well.

One area of labor studies where there has been substantial recent growth is cross-nationally comparative and even truly global research (Burawoy 2009; Brookes and McCallum 2017). Building on such path-breaking scholarship as Beverly Silver's study of shifting global patterns of labor unrest since 1870, contributors to global labor studies have produced in-depth research on workers' experimentation with new ways to build labor power and renew their agency repertoires in different parts of the world (Silver 2003; Eaton, Schurman and Chen 2017). Occurring in parallel with the rise of "global labor history" (Van der Linden 2012), the expansion of global labor studies has benefited from support by the International Sociological Association's research committee on "Labour Movements." Another organizational pillar has been the Global Labour University, a network of trade unions, universities, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the International Labour Organisation that offers MA-level degrees in five different countries. Centered around the *Global Labour Journal*, the scholarly community of global labor studies is filling a space that had been left open by the disciplines. For instance, the political science subfield of international political economy has had little to say about labor, and it took the new section on "Class and Inequality" of the American Political Science Association a while to embrace labor politics. At the same time, global labor studies appears to be consciously leveraging the particular advantages of specific disciplines, including wider and more analytically-driven selection of cases, more conscious temporal anchoring, and broadened geographic reach (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017). Transnational labor alliances and the effects of

transnational labor markets on worker strategies have been important recent themes, with the growth of precarity in the Global North providing an important linkage to long-standing patterns in the Global South (e.g. Brookes 2019; Mense-Petermann 2020).

Having briefly outlined the field of labor studies, let us now turn to the benefits of the field's core features for informing debate, policy, and scholarship on the future of work.

**Working People at the Center of the Analysis**

More than half a century after the first labor studies degrees were introduced in the U.S., the field continues to focus on the experiences of working people, their shared struggles, and the organization of their collective voice – grounded in an appreciation of the social function of work (Budd 2011). Seeking to speak to people's "total labor effort" (Golatz 1977: 2), the field takes a holistic human-centered approach, examining both formal and informal, paid and unpaid work. The focus is on appreciating working people's lives in their complexity, paying attention to political, economic, and social contexts, and examining the governance processes through which workers are managed, empowered, and ultimately valued. This explicitly includes examining how workers make sense of their work situation and conceive of ways to change it, from individual strategies to collective efforts, whether through unions or other means.

Three aspects of this approach are particularly important for overcoming blind spots in the contemporary debate on the future of work and refocusing it on democracy and sustainability. The first is the ability of labor studies to speak directly to the perennial social question, which explores how to refashion formally free but substantially un(der)protected wage labor in the face of social crisis and heightened distributional conflict. While the social question is a product of the enlightenment and the industrial revolution in the 18$^{th}$ and 19$^{th}$ centuries, it

continues to be with us and poses itself forcefully for the future (Breman et al. 2019). Making substantive headway in addressing the drivers of contemporary economic instability, political backlash, and climate change turns significantly on improving protections for wage labor.

Historically, European nations were most successful in answering the social question during the 20th century, with pressure from industrial unions proving decisive for building genuine "welfare capitalism" that provided open-ended employment contracts and extensive public social protection programs (Esping-Andersen 1990; Castel 2003). Yet, even this relatively successful strategy came with exclusionary tendencies domestically (such as on matters of gender and race) and internationally (e.g. encouraging brain drain from the Global South to the North). Moreover, the model has since lost much of its shine, as corporate strategies have shifted and former class compromises are becoming undone. Institutional retrenchment and drift, i.e. conscious cuts and the failure to update both public and in-work social protections to changing circumstances, have increased workers' precarity. The symptoms are widely known, including a declining wage share of GDP; the breaking apart of core features of long-term employer-worker relationships, as evidenced in the rise of outsourcing, self-employment, and gig work; increased contingency and a move to both part-time and fixed-term employment; and reduced coverage for collective bargaining.

The need for rethinking institutions at the work-welfare nexus has been clear for decades, yet private companies and state authorities have continued to shift financial responsibility for social risks onto the working population (Supiot 2001; Hacker 2019). Apart from the very top of the income distribution, where wage growth has been strong; maintaining living standards has frequently depended on turning to cheap imports for consumption, which is a form of cost externalization due to its frequent reliance on atrocious working and environmental conditions

abroad (Lessenich 2016). Arguably, at this stage, the social question is not satisfactorily answered anywhere in the world. Recent experiences under Covid-19 and expectations of a K-shaped recovery from the pandemic-induced recession only further underline that. Moreover, as sectoral change has eroded strong industrial bases, and working-class identities have become less coherent, weakened industrial unions alone are not able to push for the renewal of social contracts. Instead, new political pathways will have to be found to drive the resettlement of increasingly dysfunctional institutions – from workplace regulations and labor relations provisions to social security systems – across a variety of local contexts.

A second important benefit of labor studies' worker-centered approach is that it reveals the contemporary crisis of social reproduction and the associated undervaluation of "reproductive work" in the United States. Paid and unpaid care work – which is one of the key forms of reproductive work – is a case in point. The closer one looks at the struggles of families unable to afford care and caregivers receiving poverty wages, the clearer become the individual and collective costs associated with the lack of a proper care infrastructure with paid parental leaves, public cost pooling, and regulated labor standards. In many cases, individuals and families simply cannot live up to the ever-greater expectations of personal responsibility that they have been tasked with under such slogans as "a hand up rather than a hand down" or an emphasis on "family values" (Cooper 2017; Mounk 2017). Attention to workers' lives on the ground also suggests that welfare state investment in expanding the care infrastructure is crucial for addressing the accumulation of multiple forms of disadvantage in the labor market for women, non-white populations and single mothers (Mezzadri 2020). Yet, the undervaluation of reproductive work is a broader phenomenon, and labor studies scholarship has made similar observations in other areas of reproductive work, from healthcare to education (e.g. Givan 2014).

Finally, there is a third advantage of the focus on working people: It reveals how the dynamics of workers' collective action are changing in response to contemporary gaps in worker representation (Rosenfeld 2019). In the context of lower union membership, the service economy, and the continued feminization of employment; and recognizing that racial and gender divisions frequently support processes of proletarianization; workers have increasingly embraced intersectional forms of organizing and solidarity that seek to build bridges with other social movements (Tormos 2017; Lee 2018). There is clear momentum among some parts of the labor movement to embrace a "noninstitutional strategy" of voice, focused on building "a mass movement that is broad, intersectional, yet ideologically coherent enough to replace postracial neoliberalism as the common sense of our times" (De Leon 2020: 8). At the same time, of course, there is innovation within more traditional institution-focused approaches. For instance, some unions seek to focus collective bargaining on the "common good" and broaden its reach toward whole sectors, as McCartin, Smiley and Sneiderman review in their contribution to this volume.

**An Interdisciplinary Lens**

Since labor studies leverages tools from the entire breadth of the social sciences, it is conceptually more open than any particular discipline. Bringing to bear theoretical insights from quite different strands of academic inquiry allows for a deeper understanding of labor and work. One might even speak of labor studies as particularly – maybe even radically – empirical, not in the sense of being atheoretical but rather in terms of being committed to appreciating and addressing reality to the fullest degree possible.

Engagement across disciplines is an important corrective to any one particular discipline's conceptual biases. The goal of this engagement is explicitly not to displace

disciplines, which rightly remain functionally differentiated pillars of the academic world by providing the main frames of reference for scientific inquiry, knowledge accumulation, as well as the reflexive interplay between scientific evolution and social organization (Stichweh 1984; Wagner, Wittrock, and Whitley 1991). But disciplinary discourse communities often operate with tight ontological and epistemological corsets that serve to defend and reinterpret an inevitable pattern of core principles (Abbott 2001; Heilbron 2004). With disciplines being less committed to any particular empirical realm, their mechanisms of control and focus of attention can translate into merely partial understandings of work and labor.

While labor studies thus provides more room for analytically eclectic approaches, drawing on the repertoires of various scholarly discourse communities to advance knowledge on work can be a conflictual process. Whenever scholars from different disciplines engage with each other, "tussles over turf" can be expected as the central terms of exchange are hammered out (Dixon 2020: 2). Yet with appropriate reflexivity about particular approaches' distinct advantages, multidisciplinary scholarship can be an experience of mutual learning (Joas and Kippenberg 2005). The continual questioning and challenging of the appropriateness of particular preconceptions and assumptions can produce language that helps synthesize knowledge. Scholars of labor studies regularly engage in such efforts to bridge different theoretical camps, for instance with respect to comparative political economy, regulation theory, labor process theory, industrial relations, and global labor studies (e.g. Vidal and Hauptmeier 2014; Schulze-Cleven 2017).

There remain, however, untapped opportunities. For instance, the focus on workers' lives provides leverage to bring the humanities and social sciences more closely together, maybe even to push for a "rehumanization" of the social sciences through developing thicker theories of

action that operate with a conception of worker interests as not just material but also ideational (e.g. Joas 2005). Whether it is Max Weber's humanistically informed historical sociology or works such as E. P. Thompson's analysis of the collective construction of working-class agency during British industrialization, there would be much to build on. Moreover, recent progress in comparative historical analysis bodes well for the successful pursuit of this agenda. As scholars have brought historians' sensibilities of the *long durée* to social science scholarship on cross-national similarities and differences in countries' welfare and employment regimes, they have significantly rethought causal processes in the world of work (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990; Thelen 2014).

Crucially, with respect to debate about the future of work, labor studies can help elevate and integrate the work of economists who question their own discipline's mainstream. Alternatives to neoclassical conceptions of valuation – both in terms of process and goals – are a particularly important topic for which critiques of the neoclassical model by leading economists have laid important foundations (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009). Fruitful cross-disciplinary engagement has since emerged on distinctions between value creation and value extraction, the role of non-market valuation processes in the face of existential ecological crisis, and the potential for post-growth or de-growth strategies (e.g. Mazzucato 2018; Rosa and Henning 2018; Gough 2020).

Finally, there is particular scope to engage Thomas Piketty and his collaborators, who have provided powerful new data on shifting patterns of income and wealth inequality (e.g. Alvaredo et al. 2017). Theoretically, Piketty's magisterial *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* challenges economists to think more broadly about markets and engage the dynamics of capitalism, in the context of which he argues that the long-term returns on capital exceed the

long-term growth rate, thus structurally driving up inequality (Piketty 2014). In Piketty's recent follow-up, *Capital and Ideology*, he pushes even further beyond the conventions of the discipline by resolutely focusing on power and ideas (Piketty 2020). Delving into the changing ideologies that have driven the evolution of inequality throughout history, the volume makes the case for markets, profits and capital not as natural but as historical constructs. He further identifies the struggles for equality and education as the main drivers of human history, not the establishment of property rights in pursuit of stability, as economists typically claim.

Scholars of labor studies would find much to agree with here, but a labor studies perspective would push Piketty's work further in at least three respects. First, it would seek to draw more from other disciplinary approaches to arrive at the type of analysis that Piketty himself proposes, i.e. one that is "at once political and historical, multipolar and multidisciplinary" (Piketty 2020: viii). Deeper engagement with political science and greater attention to gender seem particularly important (Boushey 2020). Second, labor studies scholars would strive for a more realistic theory of change. Piketty hopes that better disaggregated measures of inequality can drive ideological renewal, which in turn could power a far more assertive social democracy to produce what he calls "participatory socialism" (Piketty 2020: 966). Yet, as contemporary responses to climate change highlight, hard evidence will hardly suffice to shift the course in the face of winner-take-all dynamics and political systems' decreasing legitimacy. Such a transformation will need a much better theory of collective action that addresses how diverse groups can cooperate at a time when institutional liberalization has reduced their capacity to do so (Ornston and Schulze-Cleven 2015). Finally, a labor studies perspective would move beyond a focus on reducing economic inequality to an emphasis on realizing substantive democracy. Strong labor organizations are important for pursuing this more

encompassing goal, as illustrated by the association of declining union density with lower voter turnout, falling vote shares for progressive candidates, and reduced legislative responsiveness to the citizenry (Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez, and Williamson 2018).

**Anchoring in Normative Commitments**

The third feature of labor studies to mention in terms of the field's power to inform debate on the future of work is its explicit commitment to upholding worker rights in the spirit of individual freedom, human dignity, and social justice. Given that the institutions for governing work are socially constructed and politically sanctioned, labor studies sees them as open to change through collective action. While the field acknowledges constraints, trade-offs, and conflicts in the quest to change governance systems, it emphasizes human beings' ability to remake their life worlds in line with particular goals. Two beliefs about how to implement substantive democracy anchor the field: Work should be rewarding for all workers, and all workers should be able to exercise voice in the design of labor processes. In its focus on two kinds of rights, this normative grounding offers a stark contrast to the analytic focus in economics, which emphasizes usefulness over humanity and explores how market processes express differences in workers' purported marginal products through wage dispersion.

To some observers, concepts such as dignity and social justice might appear slippery, given that one could conceptualize them quite differently. Neoliberalism's progenitor August Friedrich von Hayek, for instance, thought of social justice as merely a "mirage" (Hayek 1976). Admittedly, there has been a proliferation of concepts that highlight different aspects of social justice, including economic justice, racial justice, intergenerational justice, and environmental justice. So, obviously, there are many considerations that would go into constructing a "just"

solution to the valuation of any one worker's efforts. Yet Hayek's alternative of a "total market" is neither practical in the context of democracy nor free of normative preconceptions (Supiot 2012). Even economists operate with conceptions of "fairness" as spelled out in theorizing on "welfare economics." A key difference is that neoliberalism and economics tend to accept and proceed from the unequal distribution of resources, whereas labor studies is committed to realizing equality in core respects.

For labor studies, social justice is not merely an abstract principle but a substantive ambition about how human beings should be able to engage with real-world institutions. In that quest, labor studies focuses less on individual choices and more on how collectivities construct choices. This includes if broader legal structures and labor market institutions provide human beings with the capacity to self-actualize based on their innate creativity rather than focus on turning individuals into human resources and human capital for the immediate productive usage by corporations (Supiot 2012: 104-116). This particular attention allows labor studies to speak to the mediation of the social conflicts that are associated with the broader economic, political, and environmental crises faced by contemporary societies, and for which progress ultimately depends on engendering new forms of solidarity. This also includes addressing the challenges associated with overcoming institutionalized racism in the United States. In its focus on justice, labor studies has room both for arguments in favor of universal approaches to refashioning workers' social protections and for demands to address particular cumulative disadvantages through targeted initiatives.

Scholars of labor studies do not necessarily agree on how best to realize these normative commitments, but they tend to share a general sense of the necessary direction. In the spirit of scenario planning, or "envisioning real utopias," some have thought through particular reform

pathways (Wright 2010; Bregman 2017). Expanding our imagination and defining potential prospective states of the world, these visions can be important guides for building the future and overcoming the limitations of past institutional settlements. Together with labor studies' other central tenets – placing workers at the center of analysis and embracing an interdisciplinary lens – the field's clear normative anchor can help policymakers better cope with contemporary uncertainty by facilitating rational problem-solving. The world view of labor studies reduces complexity by defining clear priorities, which makes it possible to attach probabilities to particular future scenarios and turns an uncertain future into one with calculable risks (Blyth 2010).

## TOWARD A FUTURE FOR WORKERS

As elaborated throughout the volume, a labor studies perspective on the future of work suggests a reorientation away from the strategies emphasized by neoliberal ideology and its purveyors in mainstream economics, and instead advocates for revaluing workers, exploring possibilities through collective agency, and appreciating reproductive work as a crucible of innovation. Below I elaborate on these three shifts.

### Beyond Technology's Impact: Toward Revaluing Work(ers)

A labor studies lens suggests abandoning the almost singular focus in the current debate on the effects of technological change and instead paying more attention to strategies for revaluing work(ers). Undoubtedly, technology-facilitated automation has affected the task content of work and productivity growth (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2019). But this is a long-running story, and while it will continue in the future, its intensity might well have peaked

already (Gordon 2016: 579). Methodological choices have arguably led to inflated predictions of technology's impact on job displacements (Arntz, Gregory, and Zierahn 2016). Moreover, technology is highly plastic, providing much room for users to shape and deploy it in different ways (e.g. Helper, Martins, and Seamans 2017). This is one of the main lessons from the "varieties of capitalism" literature that has explored cross-national differences in the organization of contemporary economic life, and there are many more examples throughout history (Hall and Soskice 2001; Merrill and Cobble in this volume). In any case, the impact of technology should be considered in the context of the economic, political, and environmental crises engulfing societies, as well as other overarching trends such as globalization, demographic change, the increasing concentration of capital, and the growing fragmentation of labor. How can we build a future of work that addresses interlinked systemic crises and strengthens the sustainability of social arrangements in the face of these broad trends?

As starkly illustrated by the coronavirus pandemic, it is at the intersection of multiple pressures that societies will have to find new ways of organizing and valuing different forms of work that are performed by diverse groups of workers. In addition to understanding how transformational processes interact to radically alter the foundations of work, it is important to address how to actively shape the world of work and move toward the revaluation of workers' efforts. Invariably, this is a discussion about how real-world markets, and labor markets in particular, function quite differently from the dynamics theorized in economic models of perfect competition among price-taking firms. Not only can market concentrations allow firms to exercise monopoly power in product markets and monopsony power in labor markets, but individual workers are generally structurally disadvantaged vis-à-vis their employers, given that they depend far more on a particular job than employers do on a particular worker. In turn, the

governing institutions of democratic capitalist societies frequently restrict managerial control and regulate market competition to safeguard social stability, realize democratic principles, and prevent market failures associated with such phenomena as information asymmetries and increasing returns.

Dedicated to sustaining a "human-centered" world of work, a labor studies perspective openly acknowledges and directly engages with the democratic processes of rule-making that govern markets and determine the direction and strength of market forces. Just as during the "golden-age" boom years of the 20th century, when American manufacturing companies paid wages that diverged from ideal-typical scenarios of market-generated allocative efficiency to (typically) white and male breadwinners, there continues to exist scope for the collective design of markets and organizations that function in accordance with evolving social goals. In exploring the room for such institutions at different levels of the polity, the field of labor studies emphasizes how individuals' productivity is rooted in the organization of work as much as it is in individual "human capital." Moreover, it acknowledges that perceptions of efficiency depend greatly on the attention paid to both market externalities and the allocation of property rights.

The scope of this agenda is broad, and includes addressing the increasing monopolization of businesses, particularly in the platform economy, where monopolization's far-reaching effects on work are probably most direct and which, within niches, offers opportunities for worker cooperativism (Scholz and Schneider 2016; Kenney and Zysman 2019). Similarly, it concerns itself with new technologically-driven forms of performance control, including the potential that insufficient regulation of data usage can "automate inequality" and produce a form of "surveillance capitalism" (Eubanks 2018; Gerber and Krzywdzinski 2019; Zuboff 2019). To be clear, this is not a program to close off increases in efficiencies. Rather, it seeks to push the

development of markets and platforms into the direction of decent working conditions and real room for worker voice, with empirical research on successful cases leading the way (Krzywdzinki and Gerber 2020). In terms of how technological advances are affecting work, this is the agenda that workers themselves would like to see. In addition to a lack of access to training, workers are most concerned with the decline of full-time jobs with benefits and increased employer surveillance (O'Dea 2020).

**Beyond Constraints: The Power of Collective Action**

Current debate about the future of work highlights structural constraints on the evolving world of work. In contrast, the labor studies perspective emphasizes the power of collective agency in recasting multiple structural transformations, shaping the interactions between them, and devising new approaches to absorbing the cost of transition. Rather than narrowing the options for coping with powerful technological change in the spirit of "managing the future of work" (as an initiative at Harvard Business School frames it), the labor studies perspective contends that there is scope to dramatically expand the range of responses appropriate for evaluation.

Historically, workers' collective efforts have often changed the valuation of work. Current attempts at worker agency have similarly shown success, from the fight for a $15 minimum wage in the United States to the transnational campaign for workplace safety after the 2013 Rana Plaza fire in Bangladesh. This volume goes over many more such efforts, from attempts of American, German and Italian workers to negotiate the algorithm behind automation in industry (chapter by Rutherford) to efforts to achieve climate justice (chapter by Cha and Vachon), from worker-driven innovation in the home health care sector (chapter by Zundl and Rodgers) to attempts to leverage education for successful worker advocacy (chapter by Devinatz

and Bruno). No doubt, the reregulation of work has a lot further to go, but goals for job design have been proposed – such as on "recrafting" (Yudken and Jacobs in this volume) – and visions for how workers can exert collective agency have been refined with respect to new forms of social and sectoral bargaining in the United States (e.g. Andrias and Rogers 2018). Of course, progress is far from automatic. Rather, movement toward better answers to the social question is typically the result of active struggle, and success often depends on intersectional patterns of solidarity.

**Beyond Production: Reproductive Work as a Crucible of Innovation**

While care, education and domestic work are crucial for enabling all other forms of work, the debate on the future of work tends to have little to say about the evolution of such "reproductive" activities. Labor studies, in contrast, sees them as a crucible of innovation. Tensions abound at the boundary of social reproduction and economic production, but so do opportunities for reform. For instance, paid reproductive work often takes the form of a personal service, which means that – to a great degree – it has to be provided in place. This leaves it much less affected by international competition and opens important room for political solutions that emphasize the dignity of work (Poo and Shah 2020). At the same time, reproductive work is important for achieving such goals as sustaining economic growth, providing jobs, targeting climate change, and addressing racial inequalities. Spending on healthcare and education already adds up to more than a quarter of GDP in the United States. Job growth, moreover, is particularly vibrant in home health care and personal care, which both feature small carbon footprints and thus are key areas for boosting environmentally sustainable employment. Finally, the sub-standard working conditions of paid care work disproportionately affect people of color. Yet, as

international comparisons show, there is nothing inevitable about the designation of care work as low status and low paid in contemporary America (Gautié and Schmitt 2010).

Against this backdrop, there are already signs of the scope for innovation in reproductive work. Labor mobilization and coalition building in California have led to stronger public regulation and worker voice in healthcare (Eaton and Weir 2015). In Oregon, organizing and union representation have transformed the home care industry, the lives of caregivers, and the welfare of those who are served (De La Cruz and Bussel 2018). After COVID-19 struck nursing homes particularly hard, with more than 40% of all reported virus-related deaths occurring in such facilities, we have seen pay increases for workers in long-term care across New Jersey (Stainton 2020). Moreover, improved labor standards and worker voice have paid off in better collective outcomes, including during the pandemic. The presence of health care worker unions in nursing homes significantly improved residents' chances of survival, with research on outcomes in New York State finding a 30% relative decrease in the COVID-19 mortality rate in unionized facilities compared to non-unionized facilities (Dean, Venkataramani, and Kimmel 2020). Finally, there is also important movement in the valuation of work and workers across different areas of education, as this volume elaborates with respect to high schools (chapter by Rubinstein and McCarthy), universities (chapter by Herbert and van der Naald), and workforce development (chapter by Hannon, McKay, and Van Noy).

Innovation can take many forms and paths, and key questions about mechanisms for valuation, forms of public intervention, and the role of markets remain to be settled with respect to reproductive work and other forms of work. In this context, there is much scope for pulling together new approaches anchored in the public interest and concern for individual dignity that could produce positive-sum solutions through greater collaboration, including labor-management

partnership. Moreover, given investors' desire to co-locate production with particular available human capital and consumer bases, i.e. with global finance capital being less mobile than is often thought (Iversen and Soskice 2019), there is room for the innovation in regulating reproductive work to inform approaches in other sectors of the economy as well.

It is time to briefly review and conclude. I have argued that labor studies can make an essential contribution to the debate about the future of work by challenging its market fundamentalism with a focus on the struggles of working people, interdisciplinary inquiry, and workers' rights. Rather than approaching the evolution of work with a narrow analytical repertoire, the field acknowledges societies' interlocking crises, contextualizes the influence of technological change, and clarifies the enduring political construction of markets. On that basis, labor studies highlights the promise of collective action for revaluing work and workers, including in the much-overlooked realm of social reproduction. As recent history – including the fallout from Covid-19 – has made it harder to ignore the longstanding concerns of labor studies, we have more than ever to gain from engaging with the field's propositions.

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[1] The Cambridge capital controversy on the nature of capital between Marx-inspired Post-Keynesians Joan Robinson and Piero Sraffa from the U.K. on one side, and Neo-Keynesians such as Samuelson and Robert Solow from the U.S. on the other, was a prominent case in point. Neo-Keynesian macroeconomists also budded heads with Monetarists on the right over government intervention. Later, after Robert Lucas successfully pushed for microeconomic foundations in macroeconomics, the central division became one between New Classical Economics on the right and New Keynesians on the center-left. Marxist and heterodox economists tend to operate outside of the discipline's mainstream.

[2] Compare references to labor studies in economics with those in sociology and industrial relations (Rosenfeld 2019; Viscelli and Gutelius 2020). The Labor Studies Program at the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) is one of the largest and most active at the NBER, producing almost 200 working papers annually.