

## Chapter 12

# Parallel universes: the future of remote work and the remoteness of future work

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### 1. Introduction

The disruptions of Covid-19 have unsettled many of our assumptions about modern societies – about science, authority, regulation, economy, governance, community and, of course, about work. It has been a moment of awakening, with great potential for change. Standard notions of work have been questioned by millions of people who found themselves choosing between income and family, job and health, and life and death. But many of these concerns have been driven to the sidelines by the dominant players who found in Covid-19 an opportunity for intensified exploitation, surveillance and wealth accumulation. For these players, Covid-19 has created the best of both worlds – more wealth and less accountability – while for the majority of people it has been business as usual or worse. In short, Covid-19 has intensified the preexisting fissures in our societies, creating parallel universes.

These differences in our encounters with Covid-19 have deep roots in capitalism which, as Karl Marx pointed out 150 years ago, has constantly reconfigured the relationship between space and time in the interest of profit. Telework is the latest example of such a reconfiguration, which is mediated by digital technology in at least two ways. First, and most obviously, technology enables telework through the introduction of various mechanisms for the remote performance, delivery, monitoring, assessment and compensation of work. Second, and less visibly, the same technology provides the medium for faux automation – or heteromation (Ekbia and Nardi 2014, 2017) – enabling the attribution of credit to machines for feats that are, in fact, accomplished by human labour. Understood in this way, telework is yet another example of difference that builds on, and subsumes, all the earlier kinds of difference – spatial, temporal, technological and social – adding new layers to those fissures and differences. Telework, in that sense, is a universe of its own, with its attendant psychology, economics and sociology. At the same time, current working environments do not leave anyone, including hot-skilled employees<sup>1</sup>, immune from the shifting whims of corporate capitalists. This is indeed a whimsical capitalism that can ruin lives and livelihoods at the same speed that it creates them.

To capture these trends, this chapter examines the shifting notion of ‘work’ in modern societies as driven by the profit motive and the criterion of efficiency. To reverse them, the chapter proposes an alternative scenario in which dignity, solidarity and mutual

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1. A term preferable to ‘high skilled’ in that the demand for different types of skills at any given moment depends on what major corporations and other economic players choose to reward.

support governs the social order and where technology can provide the means of attaining it.

## **2. Parallel universes: the mall and the warehouse**

The first image that comes to mind when thinking about the future of work is the contrast between two scenes. The first contains a modern and vibrant shopping mall, generously lit, colourfully decorated, impeccably clean and shiny, and moderately crowded with human beings – shoppers dashing by, salespeople haggling, children riding a carousel, those at leisure licking ice cream cones into shape and the elderly watching all of this from the comfort of the chairs and benches set in the middle. The second contains an even more modern Amazon warehouse with industrial lighting, heavily packed with shelves brimming with objects, robots scurrying around and human employees struggling to catch up with the pace. Spatially, the world in the first image is organised horizontally, while that in the second is arranged vertically. Temporally, the first world runs with the linear rhythm of human motion while the second operates with the electronic clock of digital circuits, demanding ferocious focus and curbed multitasking. They both feature parallel structures, but they also represent two parallel universes – a human universe with a horizontal structure and a machine universe with a vertical structure – configured spatially and temporally according to different logics.

At a deeper level, these spatiotemporal logics speak to different social orders. The first provides a modicum of job security with a human face, often protected by union membership, while the second leaves employees at the mercy of computerised monitoring and surveillance systems, with little recourse to human judgment or collective rights. It is hard, in this respect, not to be reminded of the value placed on coal mining jobs among working class communities because of the agreeable terms of employment and the high union density which shaped the power and social dynamics in the interests of workers. The issue with places such as Amazon warehouses is the appalling terms and conditions, largely enabled by union busting practices – thus far, at least.

These contrasting social orders are well captured in the job titles and job descriptions of the two universes. The standard titles in a retail store are sales associate, inventory associate, customer service representative, cashier and floor manager; while in an Amazon warehouse they are water spiders, pickers, packers, amnesty teams, etc. This last job, which sounds like the most appealing on the list, was described by one employee as follows:

Watching an amnesty worker walk among the robots can feel a bit like watching a zookeeper mingle with lions. You know this is a trained professional who will probably walk in and out of the cage without incident. Yet you can't help wondering: what are the chances that this person gets mauled? (Scheiber 2019)

Another employee described their job at Amazon as a ‘hot miserable job’ where people are not allowed to go to the toilet and have to pee in a coffee cup instead (Vincent 2021) – a fact that Amazon initially denied but then apologised for in the face of the mounting evidence.

Lest we idealise the situation in the first world, let us remind ourselves of another crucial difference between the two universes. If I were to choose between these two as a place of work, I have no doubt which one I would choose. I say all of this with a strong sense of guilt, however, because I have to admit that I have never been a big fan of shopping malls, finding them epitomes of consumer capitalism. Neither have I ever been a salesperson. But when I put myself in the shoes of the thousands of people who used to work in shopping malls and who now find themselves pitted against robots in warehouses, I wish I had not been so critical of shopping malls. As the saying goes, we must be careful what we wish for. If the mall epitomises consumer capitalism, what type of capitalism does the warehouse represent?

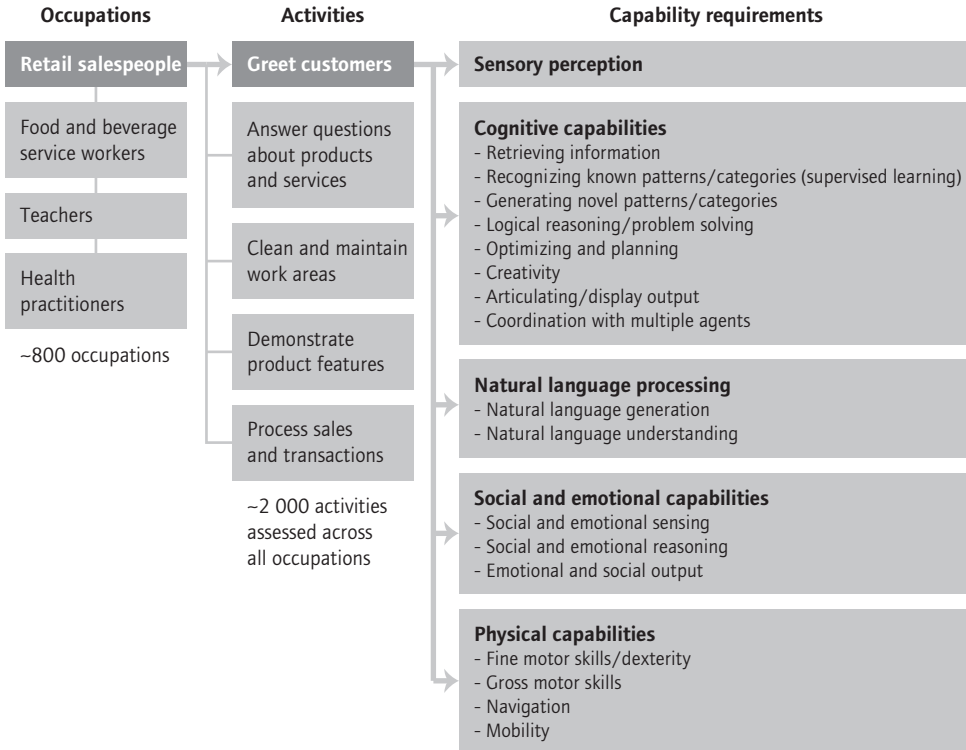
A whole slew of terms has been suggested to describe current capitalism – late, new, digital, networked, logistic, cognitive, platform, rentier, crypto, even post-capitalism – each with its own denotational logic and, hence, connotation; and there is some degree of truth to all of these. Rather than adding a new technical label, though, I prefer ‘whimsical capitalism’, not only because it continues to set our planet ablaze through the proliferation of server farms, electric cars and crypto currencies, and because it is enabling oppressive, racist and fascist politics around the globe, but also because it literally runs on the desires and impulses of a few billionaires who, with support from their political allies, can change their mind on a whim, creating a life of insecurity, indignity and precarity for the majority of global denizens.

### **3. Jobs: productive and unproductive**

To put this in perspective, let me step back and ask some basic questions. For a few years now, I have been teaching a course on the future of work from the perspective of AI and automation. The main purpose is for students to assess for themselves the risk of different jobs being lost to automation on the basis of standard analysis. Students are asked to identify a specific job or profession and try their best to learn precisely what the job consists of; that is, ‘what does it take to be a good X’ – a good plumber, a good teacher, a good chef, a good coach, etc. The process of answering the question is iterative, consisting of three stages: (i) building a ‘seed model’ according to standard task-based job analysis, commonly used in the current literature (McKinsey Global Institute 2017; see Figure 1); (ii) revising this model to include the intersectional issues of class, gender, ethnicity and so forth; and, finally, (iii) constructing a comprehensive model by accounting for the social, global and historical parameters of work.

Figure 1 Task-based analysis of jobs

To assess the technical potential of automation, we structure our analysis around 2 000 distinct work activities



Source: Adapted from McKinsey Global institute 2017.

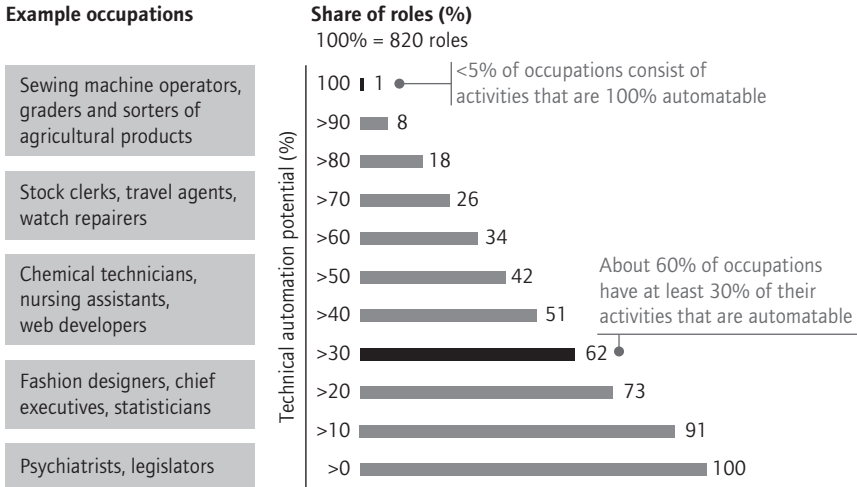
The purpose of this is to help students obtain a much better grasp of the complexities involved in jobs beyond simple task analysis so they can critically evaluate predictions of the type made by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (see Figure 2).

For students coming from a technical background, it is better to explain these jobs in non-technical terms – for instance, groups A and B as, respectively, productive and non-productive work. To avoid prejudice and normative bias, I explain that they should not understand these terms in moral or evaluative terms; rather in practical terms of what each job contributes to our society. Of course, not all students have the same assessment of different jobs in terms of their productive or non-productive nature. Some consider jobs such as financial analyst, telemarketers, lobbyists and the like productive; others disagree and find them non-productive. In the opposite direction, some students put refuse collectors, dockworkers and janitors on the productive side while others consider them low-skilled and marginal.

Figure 2 Automation risk

While few occupations are fully automatable, 60 percent of all occupations have at least 30 percent technically automatable activities

Automation potential based on demonstrated technology of occupation titles in the United States (cumulative)\*



\* We define automation potential according to the work activities that can be automated by adapting currently demonstrated technology.

Source: US Bureau of labour statistics; McKinsey Global Institute analysis.

David Graeber (2018) divides those same jobs that I mentioned into pointless jobs and beneficial ones, respectively. He describes the first category as jobs that are believed to be useless even by those who perform them; while the second is, of course, the opposite. As a general rule, he shows that, in modern societies ‘the more obviously one’s work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it’. Not everyone agrees with Graeber; some argue for example that it is ‘alienation’ at work that is the problem, not uselessness (Soffia et al. 2022). But Graeber’s main point is that ‘the phenomenon of [pointless] employment can provide us with a window on much deeper social problems’. He suggests that we need to ask ourselves not just how such a large proportion of our workforce find themselves labouring at tasks that they themselves consider pointless, but also why so many people believe this state of affairs to be normal or inevitable – even desirable.

#### **4. Essential work: a window into the future**

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, we faced a whole new category of workers that were referred to as ‘essential’ or ‘frontline’ workers – nurses, firefighters, garbage collectors, grocery workers, etc. These were the people whose work was so important to the survival of society and to the smooth operation of daily life that they absolutely could not stay at home. Many of the people who fall into this category also belong to the ‘productive’ group and to Graeber’s beneficial professions.

The phenomenon of ‘essential worker’ introduces many important questions about work, technology, income, fairness and even the survival of modern societies: what is the scope of ‘essential work’ in modern societies? How should we think about the status of work in human life? Can humanity survive without work, relegating it to machines in a fully automated economy? If yes, what would it take for us to get there? If not, how should work be divided among the members of society? Who should get what share of the income? What is a fair distribution of jobs, resources and incomes in a technologically advanced society? Each of these questions deserves a separate treatment and the answers that we provide can open a window on the future of humanity. In fact, similar questions have been asked by futurists, social theorists, social entrepreneurs, revolutionaries, philosophers and other commentators for many centuries, so we have at our disposal a broad range of ideas and alternatives. Here, we should step back and ask a very basic question about the core notion of ‘work’ and its place in human history. What is ‘work’, anyway?

#### **5. Work: its past and our future**

Work is historically and geographically specific. Its character and its meaning vary across cultures and regions, and these have changed throughout human history. The current understanding of work as ‘non-domestic, paid, legally codified, institutionalized and socially safeguarded employment’ is rather new, going back only to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it is also specific to the industrialised world (Komlosy 2017). The meaning of work has also changed drastically. While the ancient Greeks harboured a disdain for work, and the Romans divided it into necessary labour and noble art, the Judeo-Christian tradition has maintained an ambivalent view of work as joy or as a burden, as a blessing from God or as a punishment for expulsion from Eden. Medieval philosophy sought to resolve that ambivalence through the distinction of action and contemplation, *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, while protestantism finally elevated it to the level of prayer, as vividly captured in Thomas Jefferson’s rosy image of the yeoman farmer (1782):

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.

This image held a different meaning for another Virginia native, Thomas Roderick Dew, who saw in slavery the only means to ‘guarantee republican liberties for the propertied,

security for the propertyless and stability for the state and society’ (quoted in Mokyr et al. 2015: 38), and for reactionaries such as John Calhoun who praised chattel slavery for enabling the upper classes to live a life ‘elevated above the dirty, nasty nature of work’ (Calhoun 1837). In short, no coherent and persistent view of work is evident even from this narrow field of view, let alone from a more inclusive global perspective.

One aspect of work that has stayed constant in the face of this historic and geographic variability is the division of labour between different social groups: among men, women and children; among old and young; among the propertied and the propertyless; among natives and newcomers; among refugees and guests; and so forth (Komlosy 2017). A key question facing us is whether or not the same pattern will continue into the future. What division of labour is likely to prevail in the future? There is as much variation in answers to this question as there has been views of work in the past.

We first need some conceptual clarification because ‘work’ is part of a cluster of concepts that are often used interchangeably in writings and daily conversations. These include notions such as ‘activity’, ‘labour’, ‘task’, ‘skill’, ‘job’, ‘employment’ and others. To avoid confusion, Table 1 offers a basic understanding of these terms, using the notion of ‘activity’ as the base. My aim is to characterise these concepts as a cluster and not to define them in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions (Connolly 1974).

Table 1 The conceptual cluster of modern ‘work’

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <b>Activity</b>   | any form of physical or mental effort that requires the expenditure of time, energy and attention                             |
| <b>Labour</b>     | the physical and mental capacity to perform an activity   |
| <b>Skill</b>      | labour that requires training and practice to be effectively performed  |
| <b>Work</b>       | labour performed in return for some kind of tangible reward to the provider (financial, in kind, social benefit, etc.)        |
| <b>Task</b>       | a discrete unit of work with a pre-specified product or deliverable   |
| <b>Tool</b>       | the extra-human apparatuses needed to carry out a task  |
| <b>Employment</b> | work that is carried out within a legally codified institutional arrangement that provides task-related or work-related tools |
| <b>Job</b>        | employment that is compensated by a wage  |
| <b>Gig</b>        | task-driven work compensated according to task completion   |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In the above language, the recent trend has been away from work as employment in the form of waged jobs to work in the form of task-based gigs and alternative work arrangements. What has remained constant is the significance and prevalence of work in human life, while what has changed is the form that it takes. In other words, work has remained central but its form and meaning is shifting. With that in the background, two points should be kept in mind in thinking about the future of work.

First, no matter how different our social arrangements might become and how sophisticated technology might turn out to be, there are always going to be activities which need to be performed for human individuals to be able to conduct meaningful

lives and for human societies to operate effectively as collectives. We may not be able to survive a world in which the ‘time for our own instruction’ controls our days; and neither can we survive an insular life separated from others. We are social animals with a basic need for activity and collective life demands a social division of labour, whether it is taking care of children or the elderly, rubbish collection and recycling, or coordinating all of the above – in short, the necessary labour that has to be provided in order that all other things may become possible. Many ideas about the future of work (e.g. post-workerism) seem either to neglect these principles or to confuse notions such as ‘work’, ‘job’ and ‘employment’. We don’t have to have jobs or be employed in a post-scarcity society, but there is always going to be work to be carried out (Connolly 1974).

Second, one way to understand the current shift in the form and content of ‘work’ is to examine the cluster of concepts attached to it. As Connolly argued, cluster concepts are driven by values and evaluation criteria which give rise to conceptual disputes. To address such disputes, a good starting point is to be clear about the criteria behind the emergence of a cluster as well as one’s own vantage point. The key criterion behind the cluster in Table 1 and the shifting meaning of work in our times is ‘efficiency’, largely emanating from a capitalist logic that takes profit as the bottom line. It is because of this perspective and its criteria that terms such as ‘task’ and ‘gig’ have found their way into the conceptual cluster of ‘work’ in recent times.

Thinking about the future of work, however, does not have to be guided by such a perspective or by the efficiency criterion attached to it. In a post-scarcity society driven by a different set of criteria – for example dignity, solidarity, mutual support – a different cluster would emerge around ‘work’. What that cluster might look like would be a matter of social debate and collective struggle but, instead of ‘task’, ‘gig’ or ‘alternative work arrangement’, and even ‘job’ and ‘employment’, it might include terms such as ‘meaning’, ‘creativity’, ‘ACA’ (alternative communal arrangement), ‘service’ and ‘engagement’, for instance.

## **6. Technology: our past and its future**

Current debates about the role of technology in the future of work are largely focused on automation. There is a deep irony built into the notion of automation, however, that is often ignored in such debates. ‘The automatic control system has been put in because it can do the job better than the operator’, Lianne Bainbridge observed many years ago, ‘but yet the operator is being asked to monitor that it is working effectively’ (1983: 776). In current debates, too, the human provides the ‘template’ for how most systems (for instance, so-called ‘self-driving cars’) are designed but it is also ‘what must be erased, improved on, or displaced for the machine to be transformed’ (Ganesh 2020: 4). The irony of automation, in other words, has been deepened with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and related technologies in recent years. But human beings are also being erased in an economic sense, as I have argued elsewhere, or, otherwise, ‘put on the margins of machines and algorithms, providing labor in unrewarded or minimally rewarded ways’ (Ekbia and Nardi 2017: 365).



These observations point to the broader question of ‘who benefits from modern technology’ and the possibilities that it has created. In the context of Covid-19, this question can be re-phrased in the following form: ‘If automation and technology is as great as enthusiasts suggest, why do we have to put people’s lives at risk in order to get very basic things done?’

The answer to this question has multiple aspects — technical, socio-cultural and economic. The technical aspect has to do with the serious limitations of current technology for performing mundane tasks that are straightforward for humans – for example, flipping hamburgers or cleaning a bed in the hospital. As I seek to show elsewhere (Ekbia 2023), these limitations are partly to do with the current state of the art in technology and partly with the embedding socio-economic system.

The social aspect has to do with a technophile culture that puts a higher premium on machines than on human beings. It is in this culture that companies and corporations almost always showcase their technologies as opposed to their people as indicators of knowledge, power and competence. Some aspects of the Enron debacle in 2001 provide a prominent example of this (Ekbia and Kling 2005), but that same culture still has a strong grip on our society. A recent example comes from the case of a company that claims to use artificial intelligence to monitor and catch shoplifters in its European stores. The real AI behind the system, however, turns out to be a group of low-paid employees in Madagascar whose job is to watch remotely streamed video feeds from security cameras in order to report suspicious activities to a central desk that then alerts the business owners (Casilli 2022). This arrangement is at work in many other industries, including social media, where the dirty and gruesome job of content moderation is outsourced to educated but low-paid employees in Pakistan, the Philippines and elsewhere (Robert 2019).

## **7. Economics: no past; perhaps a future**

These examples speak directly to the economic aspect of automation, which is connected with the availability of a cheap army of reserve labour around the globe that makes it still profitable for corporations to hire human labour rather than invest in technology. The dominant discourse on this topic is often misleading, putting the technological cart before the economic horse. A key assumption behind it is that machines are taking jobs away from human beings – an assumption that is shared by commentators on different points of the political spectrum. As Benanav (2022), following economic historian Robert Brenner (2006), has shown, however, the main driver behind the decreasing demand for labour is not automation; rather, it is economic stagnation brought about by industrial overcapacity and underinvestment. A detailed treatment of this argument is beyond our scope here, but the brief argument is straightforward: technical improvements (for instance the use of robots in manufacturing) notwithstanding, the rate of productivity growth has been slowing since the mid-twentieth century in almost all advanced economies in Europe, Japan and North America. At the same time, output as a measure of the volume of production in a given sector has also been growing at a slower rate during the same period. Consequently, the rate of change in employment,

as the difference between the previous two rates (output minus productivity), has been negative in manufacturing (see Table 2). Benanav (2022: 23) sums up this trend as follows:

Again, it is the incredible degree of slowdown in the rate at which manufacturing production expands, visible on the world scale, that explains why manufacturing-productivity growth appears to have advanced at a rapid clip, even though it was actually much slower than in previous eras. More and more is produced with fewer workers..., but not because technological change has given rise to high rates of productivity growth. Far from it – productivity growth in manufacturing has appeared rapid only because the yardstick of output growth, against which it is measured, has been shrinking.

The overall outcome of this trend has been a lessening in the demand for labour. But to attribute this to automation is misleading for at least three reasons. First, it puts the blame in the wrong place, on technology rather than the capitalist economy. Second, it mischaracterises the current situation as unemployment, whereas in fact it is more underemployment in the form of, for example, precarious gig work. What we are witnessing is more of a displacement of jobs than the replacement of human labour by machines. Lastly, it misses on another major source of economic growth in current capitalism in the form of heteromated labour (Ekbia and Nardi 2014, 2017), creating a misplaced anxiety about the superfluousness of human beings vis-à-vis machines (Ekbia and Nardi 2019). Remote work has accelerated the trend toward heteromation, offloading many of the resources of job performance to employees, contractors, freelancers and others.

Table 2 Manufacturing growth rates: 1950-2017 (from Benanav 2022)

|         |           | Output | Productivity | Employment |
|---------|-----------|--------|--------------|------------|
| USA     | 1950-1973 | 4.4%   | 3.1%         | 1.2%       |
|         | 1974-2000 | 3.1%   | 3.3%         | -0.2%      |
|         | 2001-2017 | 1.2%   | 3.2%         | -1.8%      |
| Germany | 1950-1973 | 7.6%   | 5.7%         | 1.8%       |
|         | 1974-2000 | 1.3%   | 2.5%         | -1.1%      |
|         | 2001-2017 | 2.0%   | 2.2%         | -0.2%      |
| Japan   | 1950-1973 | 14.9%  | 10.1%        | 4.3%       |
|         | 1974-2000 | 2.8%   | 3.4%         | -0.6%      |
|         | 2001-2017 | 1.7%   | 2.7%         | -1.1%      |

Source: Conference Board, International Comparisons of Productivity and Unit Labour Costs, July 2018 edition.

The net effect of these developments is captured in a report by the conservative RAND corporation examining the trends in income in the US in the last 40 years. This compares real wages against a counterfactual situation in which the upward trends of earlier decades were to have continued; that is, someone earning 18-21 dollars an hour, or 40 000 dollars a year, should actually – in 2018 – have been earning 32-42 dollars an hour, or 92 000 dollars a year (Price and Edwards 2020). According to the report,

this difference between current reality and that counterfactual scenario amounts to 2.5 trillion dollars (see Table 3). The fact that this analysis comes from a conservative think tank such as RAND, considered by many as the bastion of American capitalism, says something about the current dire economic situation in the US and, by implication, around the globe. The RAND report describes this as a ‘transfer of wealth’, but a more accurate term might simply be stealing.

Table 3 Counterfactual distribution of income. Income distribution for full-year, full-time, prime-aged workers in the US in 2018 dollars

|                    | 1975    | 1979    | 1989    | 2000      | 2007      | 2018      | Counterfactual | $\omega$ |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|----------|
| 25 <sup>th</sup> % | 28 000  | 28 000  | 28 000  | 31 000    | 30 000    | 33 000    | 61 000         | 15.2%    |
| Median             | 42 000  | 42 000  | 43 000  | 47 000    | 46 000    | 50 000    | 92 000         | 16.0%    |
| 75 <sup>th</sup> % | 58 000  | 60 000  | 62 000  | 72 000    | 72 000    | 81 000    | 126 000        | 33.8%    |
| 90 <sup>th</sup> % | 77 000  | 82 000  | 88 000  | 109 000   | 115 000   | 133 000   | 168 000        | 61.5%    |
| 95 <sup>th</sup> % | 91 000  | 101 000 | 109 000 | 145 000   | 160 000   | 191 000   | 198 000        | 93.5%    |
| 99 <sup>th</sup> % | 257 000 | 226 000 | 349 000 | 830 000   | 1 058 000 | 761 000   | 560 000        | 166.3%   |
| Top 1%<br>Mean     | 289 000 | 292 000 | 467 000 | 1 121 000 | 1 311 000 | 1 384 000 | 630 000        | 321.1%   |

Source: Adapted from Price and Edwards 2020.

## 8. Social differentiation: telework, hot skills and whimsical capitalism

The counterfactual analysis conducted by RAND is emblematic of a deeper phenomenon. Capitalism is a socio-economic system that thrives on difference, producing and reproducing social difference whenever possible.<sup>2</sup> Whatever we call this – ‘social differentiation’, for instance – it is a much deeper and much more persistent aspect of capitalism than any other. Social differentiation can come about in different forms – spatial, temporal, technological and, of course, economic. The rise of telework is yet another example of this difference and, while certainly there are some benefits for particular jobs and particular groups of people, we have to connect these to the deeper underlying issues in our socio-economic system and warn against the possibility of telework largely working against the most vulnerable workers. Mounting evidence points to the practical realisation of such concerns (Piasna et al. 2022).

At the time of writing, news has started to emerge about the large-scale and simultaneous lay-offs of employees in Silicon Valley – 11 000 by Meta, 20 per cent by Intel and Snap, 13 per cent by Lyft, etc. – not to mention the hiring freeze by Apple and Amazon and the corporate takeover of Twitter by Elon Musk and the subsequent firing of half the employees along with the collective resignation of some 1200 others in response to demands for more intense work and a rise in ‘productivity’. Whatever the motivations

2. Notice that I say ‘difference’, and not discrimination, because I think that discrimination is the tip of a much bigger iceberg.

behind these lay-offs, they point to a basic fact about capitalism – namely that nobody, including hot-skilled employees, is immune to the shifting whims of corporate capitalists.

## 9. Looking ahead

What is to be done in the face of all this differentiation, layering and uncertainty? As I mentioned earlier, there is no shortage of ideas and solutions out there for creating a social order that would provide people with the means for a dignified, meaningful and fulfilling life. From early social utopians (Bellamy 1888) to more recent visionaries of a sustainable and equitable life (Bookchin 1982; Gorz 1985; Wright 2010), and including proposals such as a universal basic income (UBI) as a mechanism of social insurance, we have a trove of ideas to draw upon. The question is which one of these is going to reverse and correct the downward course of history in the last few decades and benefit the majority of humanity as opposed to a select few billionaires who cannot think of any better way to spend their vast fortunes than racing into space on private rocket ships. Let me end with some thoughts on the future division of labour between humans, with an eye on technology.

Current technologies have an ambivalent character. They are liberating, empowering and revelatory; yet, at the same time, constraining, oppressive and opaque. The ambivalence is not inherent to these technologies; rather, they largely derive from the embedding capitalist system within which they are designed and developed, a system that constantly coopts any positive potential and innovation while pushing to the core its more oppressive and anti-social aspects – in short, a depressive moral economy that promotes surveillance, rivalry, tribalism, greed and even fatalism. One way out of this situation is to reverse the prevailing tendency and to develop and promote technology's liberating and empowering aspects. How this happens should be a matter for collective deliberation by citizens, civic society organisations, labour and trade unions and elected officials.

Technology by itself cannot bring about liberation or welfare, but it can be part of a different future that would work for the majority of human beings instead of a select few. It is difficult, under these circumstances, to make solid predictions about the future of work, but we can imagine different scenarios of how things might unfold. As other contributors to this volume show, workers face numerous challenges in organising, mobilising, unionisation and contractual distancing, as well as issues of psychological health, work-life balance, micromanagement, surveillance and digital presenteeism, outsourcing, geographic variance, jurisdiction, employee misclassification and the oversupply of labour. As we take stock of these issues and challenges, we have to keep in mind that moments of great change in human history typically follow periods of extreme disparity. We are living through such a period. An intensification of the remoteness of work might actually be the first step toward establishing a different future for work, as distant a possibility as it might seem. This might be not just a moment of awakening, but also one of reckoning.

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