



Edited by
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The Future of Work



Seismo

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1 The New World of Work: Current Trends and Uncertain Prospects

Jacinto Cuvi, Camille Budon, and Christian Suter

1.1 Introduction

Is work disappearing or simply changing? If changing, is it set to become increasingly precarious for everyone, across occupations, income brackets, and world regions? And how do those at the margins of the labour market make a living and experience their social exclusion? This volume addresses these and related questions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time of economic crisis and deep uncertainty facing workers around the globe. Contributions were selected from presentations at the Congress of the Swiss Sociological Association on the Future of Work hosted by the University of Neuchâtel between September 10 and 12, 2019. They were turned into chapters in the course of 2020, as governments and societies around the world grappled with the pandemic and its economic fallout. The book thus captures the trends that have been reshaping work and labour markets for several decades as well as the impacts of a recent global event.

Work and its uncertain future(s) were popular topics of social scientific research and debate long before the pandemic, with echoes reaching far beyond academic circles. In fact, the changing world of work and the daunting fate of workers is one of those few areas on which the interests of scholars, the media, and the public spontaneously converge. A growing literature examines the general trends of precarization and digitalization as well as more specific issues such as youth unemployment (Weil et al. 2005) or the relations between work and gender (Bettio et al. 2013; Gatta 2014) or work and immigration (Raess and Burgoon 2015). As Simms (2019, 27) notes in *What do We Know and What Should We Know about the Future of Work?* ‘[t]he current tone of the debate is one of anxiety about whether paid employment will continue in the near future’.

There is good reason for such anxiety. The labour market looked grim even before the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Katz and Krueger (2019), precarious work accounts for virtually all net job creation since the 2008 financial crisis in the US, where estimates of the workforce employed in non-standard work arrangements before the pandemic ranged between 10 and 15.8 percent. Likewise, Gutiérrez Barbarrusa (2016) maps the rise in precarious work in Europe between 1995 and 2015 and finds that job insecurity affects over one-fourth of the workforce, up from about one fifth before the 2008 financial crisis (see also OCDE 2014). In Switzerland, too, there is a (slight) increase in the proportion of people affected by atypical and precarious labour conditions such as involuntary part-time work, reduced working hours, temporary jobs which amount to about 15 percent of the entire working population in 2014 (Ehrler et al. 2016, 49). While workers' reasons to engage in part-time work vary and there is much diversity in the profiles of workers who engage in atypical employment (Bühlmann 2013) as well as in their strategies to cope with precarious work (Preoteasa et al. 2016), the rise of part-time is a long-running trend that began in the 1970s (OFS 2006; OFS 2020a).

From a theoretical perspective, the spread of non-standard employment relations reflects an expansion of the market mechanism both inside the firm and beyond its boundaries, where self-employed workers compete for gigs. Whereas internal labour markets formerly insulated workers from competition, especially in large organizations, and provided employees with incentives to invest in the growth of their firm, workers increasingly find themselves on the lookout for opportunities everywhere, vying for jobs—including their own—with co-workers and jobseekers outside their organization (Spreitzer et al. 2017). As Cappelli et al. (1997, 15) note, '[u]nder the new arrangements, employees share much more in the risks of doing business, take on more of the responsibility for managing their own careers, and find that their relationship with management is governed to a greater extent [...] by market forces.'

Much of the existing literature on the ongoing transformation of work seeks to map out the landscape and trace its origins. The rise of neoliberalism is a recurrent theme in the literature on precarization (Standing 2011). But studies also point to more specific mechanisms, such as the advent of the financial model of the firm, which made shareholder value maximization the single focus of management (Kalleberg and Vallas 2017). Restructured firms resort to outsourcing and downsizing even during times of financial stability. Other causal factors include the secular decline of unions and labour power as well as globalization, which fosters worldwide competition among

workers in a context of growing trade and unhindered capital flows (Silver 2003; Stiglitz 2001; Suter 2009).

Another strand of research is centred on prospective analysis and policy implications, tackling such areas as workforce skill development or labour market regulation. A seminal paper by Richard Baldwin (2006) thus notes that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) upset conventional assumptions when planning for the future of work in Europe. Digital ICTs allow for the outsourcing not only of manufacturing, but also services, including high-skill tasks. Hence, a massive educational investment in digital training can backfire in a world where software engineers half-way around the globe can perform the same tasks at a lower pay. Likewise, a report commissioned by the European Parliament recommends ‘anticipatory policies’ to ensure social protection for workers in platform mediated employment, 70 percent of whom reported lacking access to basic welfare schemes (Forde et al. 2017).

It is not a coincidence that digital technologies loom large in the policy-oriented literature on the future of work. They hold the promise of drastic increases in productivity and carry the threat of massive layoffs at the same time. In fact, two centuries after the Luddites, technological fear is making a comeback among the public, with worries that computers or self-operating machines might replace humans in most tasks. The bots-eat-jobs scenario looms behind the catchphrase ‘Industry 4.0’, which describes a stage in digitalized production at which machines become autonomous thanks to machine learning and other forms of artificial intelligence, and at which computers take control of production processes through interconnection with physical equipment in so-called cyber-physical systems (Lasi et al. 2014). It is common practice in academic and private-sector studies of the future of work to make informed predictions about the type and number of jobs that will be lost to automation (Susskind and Susskind 2015; Manyika et al. 2017).

The thrust of this volume is to take a more comprehensive view that considers the effects of digitalization not only on the disappearance of paid employment but also on the everyday experience of those who continue to be employed, online and offline, and to flesh out the social context wherein technical change takes place. Given the relative novelty of the platform and gig economies, there is still much that we do not know about the ramifications of platform work on the lives of workers. Contributions to this volume consider trends, like informalization, that affect labour markets around the world (e.g. Tilly, Chapter 3) and they examine the effects of digitalization on workers, especially female workers (e.g. Jourdain, Chapter 7; Gajewski, Chapter 8). Finally, the book also considers how those workers at the margins

of the new economy—that is, those lacking the bodies, skills, and attitudes that define someone as employable—make a living and feel about it (Part IV).

The first of the book's five sections, titled 'Trends and Scenarios in the Future of Work', sets the general framework. It considers technological change as a historical trend within, or in relation to, other macro-social developments affecting work and social life more broadly. Part II, on 'Digital Transformations', takes a closer look at the effects of digitalization on different areas of the economy and its implications for work. Part III, titled 'Platform Work', examines digital platforms and their impacts upon the timing, experience, and distribution of work. It shows how digitalization increases workloads in surreptitious ways. Part IV looks at the perceptions, choices, and experiences of marginalized workers, from elderly workers' decision to retire or keep working based on their income levels to the feeling of shame jobseekers with disabilities endure when confronted with the welfare bureaucracy. Last but not least, Part V of the book examines the labour market trajectories and the future of work for researchers in and beyond academia. The remainder of this introduction synthesizes the contributions of each section to its subfield. By offering a socially embedded picture of the ongoing transformation of work and employment relations along multiple dimensions, from technology to welfare, and by discussing ways in which these dimensions intersect with each other, *The Future of Work* makes a timely contribution to understand the role of humans in 21st century capitalism.

1.2 Trends and Scenarios of the Future of Work

Conventional wisdom associates digitalization with automation and the disappearance of paid employment opportunities. Some research supports this view. According to Frey and Osborne (2017), 47 percent of jobs in the US are at risk of automation. A report by McKinsey estimates that 'between 400 million and 800 million individuals could be displaced by automation and need to find new jobs by 2030' (Manyika et al. 2017). To the concern that machines will replace human bodies in the execution of routine physical tasks—a concern as old as the industrial revolution itself—digitalization adds the risk of substitution in cognitive tasks as well as, increasingly, decision-making (Harari 2018). The 'smart machine'—as Zuboff (1988) described computers in her classic study—'informatives' production, that is, generates data about the process itself that can be used to further rationalize work. The skills originally embodied in workers are thus isolated, analysed, and, over time, replicated and transferred to non-humans. In this context,

Collins (2013) suggests, only the top 20 percent of students are likely to find a job. If so, for most of us, the future of work is joblessness.

Another body of work emphasizes the degradation of employment across sectors and geographical areas—but tends to leave digital technology in the background. Precarity is the watchword of this literature. In *Precarious Work*, Kalleberg and Vallas (2017) present the rise of non-standard work arrangements such as temporary work, part-time work, on-demand work, and independent contracting as a secular trend spreading across the Global North. These arrangements replace the ‘good jobs’ (Kalleberg 2011) of the previous era, characterized by a living wage, full-time employment, fringe benefits (e.g. age-old pensions, health insurance, paid sick leave, and paid annual leave), and promotion perspectives (see also Kalleberg 2000). As the edited volume by Armano et al. (2017) makes plain, the wave of precarization touches as much Japan as Greece or postcolonial Africa, and it affects precarious workers’ material conditions of existence as much as their subjectivities. In *The Precariat*, Guy Standing (2011) considers the political identity of this ‘new class’ that enjoys neither security of employment nor security of income. Some studies draw a link between digitalization and precarization, but, like Gray and Suri’s (2019) research on ‘ghost work’, usually focus on a specific set of occupations, such as Uber drivers or workers on TaskRabbit (Ravenelle 2019).

Part I of this book addresses the current historical moment in the restructuring of work and labour markets by connecting digitalization to other macro-social trends. Chapter 2 by Dominique Méda (in French) highlights the policy dimensions of precarization which, alongside technological development, contribute to emptying work of its meaningfulness and turn sensing human beings into abstract labour. Méda takes a long historical view to trace the evolution of the concept of work and discusses, against this background, the current challenges stemming from the brewing ecological crisis and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic. She outlines an alternative vision of work in society, which she terms *reconversion écologique*, and cites efforts to use the window of opportunity opened by the pandemic to enact lasting change.

In Chapter 3, Chris Tilly considers, for his part, the dual processes of digitalization and informalization—which, like precarization, refers to the spread of unsafe, insecure, and uncertain forms of employment. Tilly’s chapter complements Méda’s historical view with a conceptual inquiry into the forces driving the disenfranchisement of workers. He puts forward a theoretical framework that stresses the embeddedness of employment in institutional structures as well as the role of shifting power relations and learning processes, all of which contribute to job degradation not only by themselves but through

their imbrication with technological change. In his final remarks, Tilly also points to avenues for collective action and resistance against these trends.

1.3 Digital Transformations

Digitalization is spontaneously associated with manufacturing as technology affects, first and foremost, material processes of production. However, even the most casual survey of both the literature and real-life practices finds that digital technologies profoundly reshape organizational structures as well. For example, the corporate practice of outsourcing—both domestically through the use of contractors and internationally through global value chains (Gereffi 2018)—is facilitated by a dramatic fall of coordination costs thanks to new information and communication technologies. The old figure of the manager-foreman whose job was to ensure that employees did their work by—physically—supervising them has become obsolete in a computerized workplace where all activities performed by workers are or can be recorded, scrutinized, rated, and where workers themselves can easily be tracked and monitored in real-time, regardless of their location (Borja 2015).

On the other hand, the effects of new technologies are not uniform across fields or industries. The same tool—e.g. touchscreens, barcodes, spreadsheets, or credit cards—can have widely different impacts depending on where they are introduced, for what purposes, and who uses them (Guseva and Rona-Tas 2014). Of particular import to understand the different impacts of innovation is the role of technology in reshaping the interface between the firm and its customers, be it consumers or other businesses. Indeed, the technology-driven restructuring of economic organizations happens not only through a mandated revision of the organigram by higher management seeking to cut costs but also organically, through an incremental or qualitative change in how products are made and delivered to customers. And whether products are purchased (and delivered) online, as in the case of Amazon, in brick-and-mortar stores, or both, makes a significant difference.

Hence, Part II of this volume seeks to ground digitalization in more circumscribed areas of economic life. Chapter 4, by George Ritzer and Piergiorgio Degli Esposti, looks at relations with customers. It considers the partial realization of the end of (paid) work through the original lens of ‘prosumption’, a hybrid term combining ‘production’ and ‘consumption’. The authors argue that, thanks in part to digital innovation, work is not so much disappearing as it is being surreptitiously passed on to consumers, who are now increasingly—and oftentimes unwittingly—required to carry out

tasks formerly assigned to employees, from check-ins at airports to scanning groceries at the supermarket.

Chapter 5, by Ulrich Dolata, focuses on platform economies. Dolata nuances the idea that digital technologies—and platform economies in particular—revolutionize the organization of economic life; at the same time, he points to their broader impact on the structure of markets and on the rules and content of social exchanges, which platform operators define through their policies and algorithms.

1.4 Platform Work

To fully grasp the implications of digital change for the world of work, Part III focuses on the distinct forms of employment that have emerged in the wake—or in the shadows—of the platform economies. A recurring question in the academic debate on the digitalization of work concerns the costs or benefits of ‘flexibility’. Echoing the broader polemic about the opportunities and hazards brought about by deregulated labour markets, digital platforms raise various questions about control over, and the freedom of, workers in the gig economy (Ravenelle 2019; Spreitzer et al. 2017).

In *The Future of Crowd Work*, Kittur et al. (2012) point to the opportunities that this internet-based organization of work offers ‘for improving productivity, social mobility, and the global economy by engaging a geographically distributed workforce to complete complex tasks on demand and at scale.’ It is also the case that some workers with skills in high demand such as computer programming can take advantage of their independence as freelancers to decide when to work and for whom or to book last-minute vacations to Hawaii (Kessler 2018). A paper by Chen et al. (2019, 1) argues that ‘Uber drivers benefit significantly from real-time flexibility, earning more than twice the surplus they would in less flexible arrangements.’ In fact, the most enthusiastic supporters paint digital platforms as ‘entrepreneurial incubators’, as Vallas and Schor (2020) note in a recent review.

By contrast, critical perspectives present gig workers as exploited members of a postindustrial proletariat that has lost the stability of employment it enjoyed under industrial capitalism—a trend captured by neologisms like ‘flexploitation’ (see Bourdieu 1998) or ‘precariat’ (see Standing 2011). In fact, the EU parliamentary report by Forde et al. (2017) finds that workers in digitally mediated employment earn in most cases less than the minimum wage. And more gig workers are likely to hold multiple jobs than estimated by standard workforce surveys (Katz and Krueger 2019). Given high rates

of market concentration in platform economies, moreover, gig workers who derive the bulk of their income from a single platform belong to the expanding category of dependent self-employed workers or *faux indépendants* (Bernard 2020; Bonvin 2017). This relationship of implicit dependence can have serious consequences because, even if they do not present themselves as employers, platform owners retain ‘the right to supervise, discipline or discharge the worker or prevent their use of the platform’ (Stewart and Stanford 2017, 5). Indeed, platform workers cannot be fired, but they can be ‘deactivated’ (Kessler 2018). Hence the troubling description of the digitalized world of work as an algorithmic tyranny (Harari 2018).

Contributions to Part III of this volume paint a more complex and nuanced picture by showing that platform workers, while sometimes adhering to the narrative of flexibility, end up doing more work, paid and unpaid, for the benefit of others, and that digital technologies allow companies to transfer a share of work to consumers. Chapter 6 by Anne Jourdain studies the effects of the handcraft e-commerce platform Etsy on women’s work. Jourdain finds that instead of realizing the promise of making money while pursuing their hobbies, female workers on Etsy end up performing more unpaid, invisible work both for the platform and in their households. Indeed, women who enjoy the ‘privilege’ of working from home are often compelled to take care of household chores during the day and still depend on their husbands for income.

Chapter 7 by Eltje Gajewski studies crowd workers’ own understandings of their work and employment status. Gajewski finds that crowd workers adhere to the narrative of flexibility even as they experience tight constraints on their schedules and work routines. Workers dedicate more and more time to work and obsessively focus on improving their performances, which suggests platforms achieve as much if not more worker discipline at a much lower cost than the traditional, hierarchical, bureaucratic firm.

1.5 Work at the Margins

The globalization of labour markets coupled with skill-biased technical change and automation breed a surplus workforce that struggles to find employment in both the Global South and North. Yet the exclusion of workers is not only enacted through structural processes. Indeed, the world of work is organized materially—through the production techniques that digital technologies and globalization have disrupted—but also symbolically and institutionally, by the system of social categories that employers and the state apply to workers

and their work. A well-established tradition in the sociology of professions studies mechanism of social closure that bar potential competitors from certain types of work (Weeden 2002). Among the groups discriminated against or marginalized in the new economy are the youth (Weil et al. 2005), the elderly (Bouffartigue et al. 2017), foreigners, people of colour (Pager et al. 2009), and jobseekers with few years of schooling, no professional training, and/or lacking educational credentials (Blossfeld 1983; Bynner and Parsons 2002).

Women feature prominently among groups historically excluded from the labour market and unable to access the material and symbolic benefits associated with a career. Exclusion from paid employment, either by law or social convention, long co-existed with the undervaluation of house chores performed by women, subsequently conceptualized as ‘invisible work’ (Arborio 2017; Kergoat 2001). Starting in the 1960s, changes in legislation, public policy, and social attitudes enabled women to join the labour force in large numbers and to gain access to a widening range of occupations (Simms 2019). Nevertheless, closure leaves a long-term imprint, and the social division of labour is still shaped by widespread gender stereotypes and gendered practices around work (Buchmann et al. 2003; Ridgeway 2011; Le Feuvre et al. 2015; Ferrary 2018).

The historical experience of women points to the role of the state as an agent of integration into the labour market. Its protective role involves not only the adoption and enforcement of labour protection and gender equality laws, however, but also the provision of sustenance to those temporarily or permanently excluded from the labour market. On the other hand, the decommodification of labour is jeopardized by welfare state retrenchment, as eligibility requirements for social assistance become tighter and are tied to compulsory job searches (a policy known as ‘workfare’). In this context, it is usually assumed that socially stigmatized, disadvantaged job-seekers resort to precarious self-employment or ‘end up in low-status, low-paid, and insecure jobs’ (Gesthuizen et al. 2011, 264; see also Schilling et al. 2019). Working off the books is a common survival strategy—including among welfare recipients (Edin and Lein 1997)—identified in the literature (Venkatesh 2006). And economic informality is associated with lack of labour rights and subpar labour standards in developing countries—a problem aggravated by globalization (Centeno and Portes 2006, Cuví 2019).

Part IV considers alternative coping strategies along with the categorization and feelings of three disadvantaged groups: ageing low-income workers, low-skill workers, and people with disabilities. It uncovers the material practices and the subjective experience of marginalization. In Chapter 8, Rainer Gabriel and colleagues present a longitudinal study of poverty in old age in

Switzerland and examine causal factors behind both income-poverty and subjective poverty among people over sixty-five. They find that employment status in the *first job* is a strong predictor of both. Workers whose first job was blue-collar are more likely to fall into poverty during their old age. Finally, while early retirement is prevalent among workers with incomes above the poverty line, so is working after retirement. By using panel data from the largest gerontology survey in Switzerland, Gabriel and colleagues are thus able to isolate novel patterns in the relation between work and poverty.

Chapter 9 by Eva Nadai and Anna Gonon looks at the discourse and practices of management surrounding ‘low-skill’ jobs and workers in firms. They find that, notwithstanding a general discourse about the disappearance of low-skill jobs, employers in various sectors still need and hire workers with little or no formal qualifications for jobs employers cast as ‘simple’. Instead of recognizing those skills that they look for as qualifications for the job, managers frame them as personal qualities that some workers naturally have and that enable them to do work ‘that everybody can do’. By analysing these processes through the economy of conventions theory, the authors thus provide original insights into the logic of worker and skill valuation, which is far more complex than a cold assessment of individual worker productivity.

Jean-Pierre Tabin and his co-authors study in Chapter 10 (in French) the experience of workers in Switzerland identified as disabled—that is, according to Swiss law, ‘persons whose earning capacity is diminished because of a health impairment’ (Tabin et al. 2019, 1). These people describe their experiences through the language of shame associated with a status of inferiority embedded in the ableist vision endorsed by welfare institutions and society at large. The chapter thus teases out what it means to not work, or to not be able to work, and the multiple ways—from being suspected of taking advantage of the system to being sent back to school—in which those in that condition are told that they deviate from the norm.

1.6 The Future of Work in Academia

The dual processes of digitalization and precarization affect the work of scholars in many ways. For one, they change the methods of research quite substantially, as data becomes available in (digital) formats even quantitative sociologists are not always familiar with. Big data, in particular, offer countless opportunities to map and probe society, yet they require skills in recently created and constantly evolving languages, such as R or Python. Boasting about the social behaviours his colleagues were able to predict based on analysis of

Google searches, a computer scientist recently told one of the authors of this introduction that sociologists found themselves in ‘an arms race [they] cannot win’ and suggested collaborations as a possible way forward. On the other hand, social scientists have the potential to turn a theoretically informed, critical eye to the use of these tools and the results derived from them, as Noortje Marres (2017) argues in *Digital Sociology*. They can also illuminate through traditional methods how these tools are applied by, and change the work of, other actors and organizations (Brayne 2017).

At a deeper level, Mike Savage (2015) recently made the case that social change related to or driven by new technologies is also changing what the social sciences look like and the kind of work that gets attention from the public. Citing the success of Piketty’s (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and Wilkinson and Pickett’s *The Spirit Level* (2009), Savage noted that highly sophisticated theoretical endeavours of the kind that made famous the great social thinkers of the 20th century have lost currency in favour of works that tease out new trends in rich quantitative databases.¹ The jury is still out as to the devaluation of theoretical thinking in the social sciences and the role, if any, that digital technologies may be playing in it. But the need for creative and ambitious interpretative frameworks to make sense of the world in these unsettled times is undeniable.

More immediately worrisome, at least to the next generation of academics, is the lack of secure employment prospects. Not only is such insecurity of employment likely to deter promising candidates from pursuing an academic career, but the instability to which those who do so are subject to will affect the quality and volume of their research. The freedom to think detached from the urgency of procuring a livelihood is key to the making of scholars. As Standing (2011) argues, moreover, the material conditions of existence that characterize the precariat have long-term detrimental cognitive effects. If precarization is indeed a structural trend, as Tilly (this volume) and others suggest, then the scholarly mind may be a thing of the past.

Fortunately, academics are taking a stance against precarity across Europe and beyond, which suggests the issue is a global one (Neveu and Surdez 2020). However, its effects play out differently based on national and, in some cases, subnational contexts. In Switzerland, where the congress that gave birth to this volume took place, the massification of higher education took place against the background of a vertically structured system of professorial chairs, which remained in place. As a result, professorships are few, and many of the duties traditionally associated with them—including research and teaching—are

1 Mike Savage would subsequently nuance this claim, which did not go down well with his German audience.

performed by a large body of mid-level academic workers whose prospects of securing a permanent job in their home country are remote, to say the least.

Part V of this book examines the job market for Swiss academics at a time of both precarization, limited career opportunities in academia, and growing international exchanges. Chapter 11, by Pierre Bataille and Marie Sautier (in French), analyses the trajectories of PhD-holders in Switzerland who seek to pursue an academic career. Faced with the internationalization of the academic job market and research networks as well as the expectation of international experience from universities and funding agencies in Switzerland, these young researchers end up leaving the country where they would like to live and work, and they are sometimes unable to come back.

Based on results from a survey conducted in Switzerland, Chapter 12 by Rainer Diaz-Bone looks at what happens for those who stay in Switzerland but leave the academic field. Diaz-Bone argues that sociologists have been relatively successful at obtaining non-academic jobs in both the private and public sectors despite not having a clear career path associated to their background outside academia.

1.7 Back to the Future?

As the world came to terms with the scale of the Covid-19 crisis in early 2020 and governments scrambled to contain the spread of the virus by imposing drastic social distancing measures such as curfews and lockdowns, a line had to be drawn between workers deemed ‘essential’, who were allowed and even compelled to go to work, and others, who were instructed to stay home. As a result of the Covid-19 lockdown measures internet-based platform work has certainly increased (cf. OFS 2020b for data on the situation of platform work in Switzerland before the crisis).

For many, mostly white-collar workers, technology came to the rescue. Computer devices and collaborative software allowed them to carry on with (part of) their work routines and hold business meetings on Zoom, Webex, and the like. Telecommuting during the pandemic came at a price, however, as working parents had to grapple with the challenges of home-schooling and a lack of childcare. Still, the stress endured by these workers pales in comparison to the woes of millions of other workers who simply lost their jobs. In an unprecedented development, more than 6 million people filed for unemployment benefits in the United States in the third week of March, and then another 6.6 million the week after, bringing the unemployment rate to a historic high (Labor Department 2020). In a country where health

insurance is often provided by the employer, a job loss compromised access to healthcare for many workers at the worst possible time while also jeopardizing access to other basic services, such as housing. ‘No job, no rent’ read placards hanging from the windows of desperate tenants in the Bronx.

Essential workers kept their jobs (and mobility) but faced another set of challenges. As cases spiked at meatpacking plants and warehouses, some employees staged protests demanding protective equipment from their employer. Not all essential workers had health coverage, moreover. The steady increase in non-standard work arrangements and management strategies aimed at cutting labour costs had led to an erosion of employment-related benefits, including health insurance (Kalleberg and Vallas 2017). In the Global South, dependence on informal economic activity carried out on public spaces, such as street trade, or in crowded indoor spaces confronted a majority of the workforce to the tragic dilemma of having to either work and risk catching Covid-19 or go hungry. In April 2020, the International Labour Organization estimated that 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy were at risk of losing their livelihoods (ILO 2020).

In many ways, therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic laid bare deep-running problems with the structure of labour markets and the lack of social protection. As contributions to this book make plain, the re-commodification of labour involves not only the disenfranchisement of workers but also a breakdown of work into smaller tasks paid at piece rate and the extension and flexibilization of work schedules enabled by digital platforms (see also Cianferoni 2019). It erases boundaries that used to protect workers. At the limits, the re-commodification of labour has the paradoxical effects of forcing a share of the workforce out of the economy, as Saskia Sassen (2014) suggests in her book *Expulsions*, and of fostering unpaid work in institutions such as prisons or rehab centres.

In both the post-industrial North and the deindustrializing South, however, the Covid-19 crisis sparked calls for the reinstatement of social protections for frontline workers, laid-off workers, and independent contractors unable to work (Suzman 2020). From Brazil to Malaysia, governments enacted social programs aimed at providing economic relief to formal and informal workers. Under the CARES Act, gig workers became eligible for unemployment insurance in the United States. The crisis also triggered a collective recognition of value in the work of others, the most dramatic expression of which were the daily rounds of applause and pan-banging to acknowledge frontline workers. In fact, signs of a double-movement—to use Polanyi’s ([1944] 2001) famous

phrase referring to backlash against the expanding influence of market forces in society—preceded the Covid-19 crisis.²

And academic workers felt the pinch. Educators forced to teach online soon discovered the practical and pedagogical challenges of interacting with students on screens, often from each other's houses. Qualitative researchers had to rethink their fieldwork strategies in a context of mandatory social distancing and weigh the pros and cons of conducting Skype interviews. International conferences were cancelled, postponed, or moved online. These challenges added to the market-related stresses already facing the new (and not so new) generations of scholars, which have seen job opportunities and the terms of employment deteriorate in recent years (ASSH 2018). In the United States, budget cuts at universities following the lockdown led many graduating and soon-to-graduate researchers to consider employment outside of academia, and several top sociology departments froze admissions into their graduate programs. May the current crisis inspire a rethink of traditional structures and foster a more equitable organization of the field.

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2 In late 2019 and early 2020, France was paralysed by strikes against pension reform. The business community itself appeared to take notice of the dangers associated with unbridled labour markets when the CEOs of the largest corporations in the US, grouped under the umbrella of the Business Roundtable, pledged to embrace a more comprehensive approach to management that considers the well-being of workers and consumers instead of focusing exclusively on maximizing shareholder value.

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The Future of Work is a collective, interdisciplinary effort to grasp the trends that were reshaping the world of work before the Covid-19 pandemic along with its effects on the workers and labour markets. Written in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak, as countries around the world grappled with the economic fallout, the volume's twelve contributions from leading researchers and junior scholars draw on the rich debates of the 2019 congress of the Swiss Sociological Association on the future of work held at the University of Neuchâtel in the fall of 2019. The chapters, divided into five sections, cover issues ranging from the impacts of digital technologies and globalization to the experience of marginalized workers and the future of academia. Their critical insights into the historical dynamics and lived experiences behind the transformation of work provide a framework to understand the fate of workers and occupations in these unsettling times.

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