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Won't Get Fooled Again? Theorizing Discursive Constructions of Novelty in the 'New' World of Work

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Abstract

This article outlines how notions of novelty define today's work practices and debates what the discursive construction of work as 'new' means. On the one hand, we highlight a misplaced emphasis on change and novelty that can lead to unnecessary dichotomization in the characterization and discursive construction of work practices and organizational phenomena. On the other, we specify substantive continuities in a range of strategic, organizational and employment arrangements. As such, we contend that a critical evaluation of key characteristics of contemporary work reveals that they are often not unique. Instead, these characteristics reflect the extending, rebranding or reshaping of measures and processes fashioned in earlier forms of value production. Ultimately, we theorize how the promotion of the 'new' world of work reflects

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structures and practices somehow altered in appearance, yet still analogous in substance, to those found in the traditional employment and production fabric of organizations.

Keywords
discourse, epochal, future of work, novelty, work practices

Introduction

Researchers in industrial and organizational behaviour have described the immense amount of change experienced in the world of work in recent decades (Fayard, 2021; Khaw et al., 2022; Sweet and Meiksins, 2013). For example, we have seen the rise of the 'gig economy' (Aroles et al., 2019; Ashford et al., 2018; Friedman, 2014; McDonnell et al., 2021), the emergence of platform-based and app-based work (Duggan et al., 2020; Veen et al., 2020), the development of new forms of entrepreneurial collaboration (Manca, 2022; Miles et al., 2005), the threat of automation (Ford, 2015), the increased embeddedness of technologies (Faraj et al., 2018) and the integration of artificial intelligence (Vrontis et al., 2022). Further, 'alternative' work arrangements (Spreitzer et al., 2017), or nonstandard forms of work (Ashford et al., 2007), also impact the ways formal organizations operate in time and space (Aroles et al., 2021; Stephenson et al., 2020). Although some have emphasized the *novelty* of these practices and their transformational dimension, many, however, have aptly noted how the so-called new world of work continues to reflect concerns and problems encountered in more traditional forms of employment, notably when considering issues of precarity (Patrick-Thomson and Kranert, 2021; Stuart et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2019), inequality (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Gerber, 2022; Howcroft et al., 2021; Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015), discrimination (Adermon and Hensvik, 2022; Barnes and Mercer, 2005) or control (Liu, 2023; Sewell and Taskin, 2015).

The tensions between new and old, or change and continuity, echo warnings against the 'tyranny of the epochal' (Du Gay, 2003; see also Jensen and Westenholz, 2004; Sipfle, 1969) or, in this case, the frequent adoption of new work and management exemplars, and the problematic implications of such adoption. Here epochalist is defined as 'the use of a periodizing schema in which a logic of dichotomization establishes the available terms of debate in advance, either for or against' (Du Gay, 2003: 664). Epochalist schemata rely on predefined dualities and oppositions that exaggerate discontinuities between past and future, thus performing both as distinct, static and stable spheres. Much of the practitioner-oriented and -originating literature, a proportion of contemporary research on work, management and organization, as well as media discussions, are framed in epochalist terms and there is undoubtedly a sense of performativity underlying this trend.

In the practitioner world and public arena, such dichotomization emerges as a rhetorical strategy used in the pursuit of personal interests (see Ismail, 2014). In academic spheres, portraying phenomena as new might simply be a pragmatic answer to calls for novelty, notably in management research and scholarship (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2016).

This produces a forced dichotomization between new and old – one tending to obscure structural and experiential continuities alongside changes encountered in the contemporary world of work. The implications of such dichotomization are profound in that the more they provide a set of generic or universal interpretations of an historical period, the more immaterial the form of interpretation becomes. The result is such that the 'systematicity promised by the epochal formulation' – as, for example, in Fordist/post-Fordist; bureaucratic/post-bureaucratic; modern/postmodern dichotomies – is accepted 'at the cost of a denial of locatedness and of specificity' (Du Gay, 2003: 669).

In developing this position regarding narrative forms linked specifically to the 'new' world of work, we seek to problematize the dichotomized (and dichotomizing) discourse on 'novelty'. Novelty is 'not a fixed property of an object, theory or form of social action . . . (but) . . . instead, an achievement worthy of study' (Pickersgill, 2021: 603). We understand novelty as a discursively constructed feature of the world of work resulting from broader technological, economic and social transformations, which imply further changes for both practice and research (Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Dunbar and Starbuck, 2006). Interrogating novelty in and for itself opens the way to deconstructing the 'myth that whatever comes next must be better than what went before' (Robins, 1995: 149; also McMurray, 2010). Against this backdrop, two interconnected research questions direct this inquiry: *How does the discourse of novelty create analytical rupture in the contemporary world of work?* And, *Why, despite evidence to the contrary, are 'new' ways of working considered different from erstwhile forms?*

The focus of our analysis is thus on the discursive construction of work practices as new and the impact of such constructions. Pursuing this entails delving into the interplay between old and new, continuity and change in the world of work, with the argument made that our understanding of the latter would benefit from consideration of engrained continuities relating purported past, present and future practices. We make the argument that novelty can be conceived of as a discursive device through which visions of the world of work are materialized. In turn, these visions are performative since they nourish and materialize narratives on the necessity to change, transform and adapt existing practices. We thus contend that the underlying characteristics of the so-called 'new' world of work are rarely novel. Instead, the 'new' forms of work and organizations that characterize this world are merely attempts at reforming, rebranding or extending work-related practices and processes that have been in place for decades or longer (Hauptmeier and Vidal, 2014; Newsome et al., 2015; Steinberg, 2022; Thompson and Smith, 2010).

In this article, therefore, we show how claims that changes to contemporary work are profoundly novel are habitually exaggerated. In fact, we argue that current discourses overlook significant historical continuities (notably in terms of value production, relation between individuals and organizations, etc.) and reinforce performativity as they invoke change as a positive, driving force of improvement, thereby concealing underlying, enduring dynamics of capitalist exploitation. Our work thus connects and extends research into novelty at work, changes in work and manifestations of the 'new' world of work. It does so to understand better how work practices variously emerge, sustain, evolve, or even 'melt into air' (Marx and Engels, 1848).

The article is structured as follows. We first provide a brief presentation of our approach to the literature, which consisted in a problematizing review (Alvesson and

Sandberg, 2020). We then delve into the discourse of novelty, highlighting first how the world of work is discursively constructed through novelty and then how this framing creates ruptures between old and new, thus dichotomizing discourses on work. Then, we unpack claims of novelty by highlighting continuities underlying work practices over time, illustrating how historicizing work practices reveals significant continuities in our understanding of past and present. In our discussion, we critically examine the performative dimension of the claims of novelty connected to the world of work, highlight the limitations of this article and suggest future avenues for research. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main contributions and takeaways of this article.

A problematizing review approach

Prior to presenting our argument, we first provide a brief account of how we engaged with the literature. In building and developing our main argument, our focus has revolved around the exploration of novelty in the contemporary world of work. We followed the logic of the 'problematizing' review, which is based on four key principles: ideal of reflexivity, reading more broadly but selectively, not accumulating but problematizing and the concept of 'less is more' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020).

The *ideal of reflexivity* 'emphasizes the need to mobilize a broad spectrum of intellectual resources for understanding the forces that guide research behind the researcher's back, such as paradigms and fashions' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020: 1297). Seeking to engage with 'alternative points of departure, vocabularies and modes of interpretation' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020: 1297), we focused on the gap between the discourse of novelty and actual practices. Signally, we navigated the literature with the view of identifying how work is discursively constructed as novel, while also seeking to capture the essence of research and scholarship that has documented the many continuities between existing and so-called new forms of work and employment. Our research process unfolded by way of a series of 'reflexive moments'. We sought to uncover the contours of a body of scholarship through careful consideration of its component parts, and how they fit together. Each step in this process represented a 'moment' where we paused to reflect on the position of an idea, claim or assumption, in the matrix of discursive hegemonies around work and society. The concept of reflexive moments also implies subjectivity, an appreciation of our own positionality. Our project was underpinned by a commitment to sociology as demystification, and to demystification as critique. Beyond dominant ideas and discourses, but always interwoven with them, are the lived experiences of people at work. Key to our own subjective, reflective practice, therefore, was to consider how the status of a particular way of characterizing work and its development shapes in turn the way it is experienced and patterned in society. Ideas matter, we believe, precisely because they have the power to shape experience.

The second principle, *reading more broadly but selectively*, 'rejects the full store inventory approach, and its neglect of the highly varied, and often problematic, credibility of existing studies' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020: 1298). We followed a three-step approach. First, we focused on some of the core readings within the specific area of literature concerning us here. For this, we conducted various searches on Google Scholar

in 2022 with terms related to work, organizational practices, novelty and continuity. We developed, in consultation with the members of the research team, a list of terms that we used to begin our search. After a few initial searches, we refined our search terms and thereby narrowed our focus. These search terms notably included 'new work practices', 'work and novelty', 'continuity and discontinuity in the history of work', 'discourse and practice of work', and so on. Our aim was to collect a sample of academic and practitioner articles that would serve as the basis for our exploration of the different discourses of 'new' forms of work. Second, we adjusted our focus and considered broader texts 'either in the immediate neighbourhood of the targeted domain or more broadly relevant for the perspectivation of the review domain' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020: 1298). This led us to consider articles across the fields of sociology of work, employment studies and management research. Third, we examined classics and contributions, within social sciences, with wider and somehow less direct relevance to our original focus. This was done with the view of encouraging us to think more expansively about our topic.

The third principle, *not accumulating but problematizing*, entails questioning 'rather than trying to identify missing pieces in the accumulating domain jigsaw puzzle' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020: 1299). We sought to problematize assumptions that underlie this literature to reopen the debate and provoke – in the sense of challenging ways of thinking and raising new questions – by reframing existing historical, critical perspectives.

Finally, in line with the fourth principle, *less is more*, we focused more on fewer readings with the view of articulating new and unpredicted insights. Through this approach, we sought to 'combine critical and constructive considerations of a research domain, to open it up for serious consideration and reconstruction in ways that help us think "better" and differently about the world and ourselves' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020: 1301). Below we outline the discourses that were most prevalent in discussions about 'new' forms of work and examine the ruptures that emerge from such framing.

The discourse of novelty

Constructing the contemporary world of work through novelty

Both institutional and organizational contexts tend to value concepts and ideas that are framed through discourses of novelty (Corbett et al., 2014; Rhodes and Pullen, 2010; Roper et al., 2022). The world of work is increasingly depicted in management and organization as 'new' (Beck, 2000; Hassard et al., 2013): witness the growing literature on '*new* forms and modes of organizing' (De Vaujany et al., 2021; Puranam et al., 2014), '*new* forms of work organization' (Appelbaum, 2013; Palmer et al., 2007; Smith, 1997), '*new* work practices' (Aroles et al., 2019), '*new* ways of working' (Kingma, 2019), '*new* forms of practice' (Barley and Kunda, 2006) and '*new* working arrangements' in the '*new* economy' (Cappelli and Keller, 2013). Literature describing the status and character of the contemporary world of work offers various images and themes related to the concept of novelty: ranging from 'changing contours' (Sweet and Meiksins, 2013) to 'drastic changes' (Kingma, 2019), 'radical shifts' (Davis, 2016), 'disruptions' (Constantinides et al., 2018) and 'transformations' (Steinberg, 2019).

Placed in a positive light, these images of the contemporary world of work are counterposed with more traditional (or conventional) ways of working, managing and organizing, which are portrayed customarily as passé, outmoded or dysfunctional (Cefis et al., 2023). Indeed, it has become common in management and organization research to argue that existing theories have less value to explain new and emerging forms of organizing (Hassard et al., 2013; Puranam et al., 2014), despite their enduring capacity to illuminate organizational phenomena (Pfeffer, 2013). This mirrors Cappelli and Keller's (2013: 575) argument that 'distinctions that appeared to make sense for classifying work in the past . . . no longer appear useful, hindering our ability to build knowledge about these new arrangements'.

Let us take the case of 'new ways of working', which are loosely defined as a diverse assortment of practices. New ways of working are often related to levels of flexibilization, diversification and discretion – from remote work to collaborative entrepreneurship to digital nomadism (Aroles et al., 2019). New ways of working are also associated with '*new*' modes of value production – as noted, for example, in the form of platform capitalism, the platform economy, or platform-based work (Srnicek, 2016; Steinberg, 2019), with their corresponding '*new*' forms of labour accompanied by the development of a 'new class' of worker (Florida, 2002), the constitution of a 'new model' worker (Hancock and Spicer, 2011), as well as 'new forms' of collaboration and co-production (Spreitzer et al., 2017). These 'new' forms of work are often contrasted with, and described as impacting on, the classic (permanent-contractual) employment model (Casilli, 2019; Constantinides et al., 2018). As such, new ways of working are generally expressed in the form of 'new managerial practices' that favour self-management, empowerment and decentralization (De Vaujany et al., 2021).

Novelty is central to discussions of the contemporary world of work (Garud et al., 2015; Hussenot and Missonier, 2016; Puranam et al., 2014). Given this context of novelty as a regular descriptive characteristic of work in the management and organization studies literature (Chia and King, 1998), we address the first of our research concerns: what actually *is* new in this world of work? In so doing, a Marxist perspective helps us understand how the implications of work transformations can be conceptualized in terms of value production, managerial practices and work relationships and arrangements (Hitt et al., 2007). For Marx, there is a constant need to revolutionize the means of production. Such a stance allows us to explore how novelty should not merely be conceptualized as an incidental consequence of broader organizational changes, but also and increasingly as a strategic end. Novelty is not only an observation, but also a prescription and ordinance. Novelty is promoted hegemonically by a plethora of fads and fashions, mantras and metaphors – frequently as peddled by a cadre of management consultants and business 'gurus', and even corporations themselves (Baber, 2024; Clark and Salaman, 1996; Morris et al., 2021; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020; van Elk et al., 2021).

Framing work through the discourse of novelty: A source of ruptures?

Value production. As emphasized, the current world of work tends to be discursively constructed as new and, therefore, typically associated with broader transformations in structural arrangements of value production (Constantine, 2017). This is made tangible

through the move to the so-called platform economy (Kessler, 2018; Parker et al., 2016; Srnicek, 2016), with platforms enabling and relying on an unprecedented type of value-creating interaction (Jacobides et al., 2018). Experiencing significant growth over recent years, platforms are considered by many management scholars as an 'historic shift' in the world of work and organizing (Parker et al., 2017: 256) – a major disruption in the technological, social and economic landscape (Waldkirch et al., 2021), and one often associated with the notion of 'revolution' (Parker et al., 2016). Platforms are often presented in academic research (and beyond) as a rupture with traditional modes of organizing, existing business models and spatially consistent full-time work (Constantinides et al., 2018). It is frequently argued that they reshape markets and industries, and lead to the creation of radically new business models.

Such arguments may even have been actively shaped by companies themselves, according to Baber (2024: 725), who uses the term 'labour market engineers' to capture the sense of how intermediaries such as 'gig work' platforms 'insert themselves between the employee and employer to extract value, exert control and transfer employment risks and costs onto workers'. Baber (2024) draws attention to the way novel practices are promoted at both the cultural level, and in tandem, solidified through lobbying for favourable legislation, at which point they become even more structurally embedded. Here, discourses of novelty and opportunity are seen as part of a palette of strategies employed by platforms and other systems. For Baber (2024: 728), 'the adaptability and influence of these institutions in finding new ways to maintain the same forms of exploitation' is critical to their success.

Whether or not we now truly live under 'a new regime' (Steinberg, 2019) of value production, platform capitalism – like Fordism, post-Fordism and postmodernism (Clegg, 1990) – is framed as a 'transformative moment' (Steinberg, 2019), with the accompanying implication that platforms will necessarily result in new organizational forms (Lehdonvirta et al., 2019). In a context that questions the economic viability of the classic corporation, the latter could arguably disappear or be radically transformed through the emergence of alternative forms of work organization, such as producer/consumer cooperatives, mutual/commons-based production and the generalization of platforms directly connecting buyers and sellers (Davis, 2016). Likewise, it is argued that the gig economy is reshaping the public sector (Ganapati and Reddick, 2018) as well as large corporations, and notably through the conveying of fresh insights and expectations by recent graduates (Chopra and Bhilare, 2020). Against this backdrop, there is a clear sense of dichotomizing that emerges from discourses surrounding the platform economy, articulating past practices as outdated and their contemporary counterparts as a source of opportunities.

Work and management practices. Changes in terms of value production are inscribed by, and have exacerbated, the supposed transformation of management as a practice, notably regarding the evolution of roles, functions and responsibilities (Foster et al., 2019; Hassard et al., 2012). As several writers have noted, major changes in managerial work have reflected drastic shifts in organizational forms from so-called bureaucratic hierarchies to post-bureaucratic networks (Alvesson and Thompson, 2006; Heckscher, 2016; Johnson et al., 2009). Noting the devolution from supervisors or coordinators to facilitators and

developers, along with the loss of responsibilities and delegation of authority, many have long predicted the progressive demise of both bureaucracy and hierarchy (Kanter, 1989), the 'demise of the traditional manager' (Hales, 2005: 472) or even, in more prophetic terms, the 'end of management' (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2002).

Much has been written on the shift from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic, network or modular structures (Hodgson, 2004; Özmen, 2013; Pollitt, 2009) and the implications of such changes. When responsibility for day-to-day planning and monitoring of work operations shifts from managers to 'empowered' employees or team members, managers are said to lose their supervisory function. Simultaneously (and paradoxically), they are supposed to 'enrich' their roles with facilitating, coordinating, mentoring, coaching, training, inspiring or leading functions (Hales, 2005). Thus, senior managers are encouraged to act as leaders and employees to self-manage (Hassard et al., 2012; McCann et al., 2008). Technologies have further exacerbated this trend, evidenced through the 'Taylorization' of white-collar work (Carter et al., 2014) and the increasing automation of what were formally managerial activities (Carey and Smith, 2016).

As well as platform and project-based work, such changes find full resonance in the context of the gig economy, where work is increasingly depicted as more flexible, disembodied, autonomous, collaborative and entrepreneurial than ever. The rise of digitally enabled forms of mass collaboration, cooperation and modularity (Brüggermann, 2012; Cress et al., 2016) suggests complicated endeavours could soon be accomplished with virtually no corporate management structure. In turn, work emerges as an amalgamation of competencies devoted to specific projects, such that organizations could soon represent a loose web of individuals, tasks and technologies, with traditional organizations soon giving way to ephemeral teams of peers who are assembled to tackle individual projects before disbanding (Murray, 2010). Further, this new form of work is associated to an almost complete absence of traditional control and physical managerial surveillance in the gig economy (Jabagi et al., 2019). Here again, we identify an epochalist discourse that relies on a narrative of technological development and advancement in management systems to fabulate a work-world of flattened hierarchies and frictionless teamwork.

Worker relationships and arrangements. The changes discussed, in terms of how work practices are discursively framed, impact worker relationships and arrangements, cascading down from macro and meso levels to those micro dimensions that frame individual working lives. Such shifts transform the experience of the individual, as reflected in the development of increasingly precarious work in the context of the gig economy (Ashford et al., 2018; Friedman, 2014; Gandini, 2019), in an apparent 'race to the bottom' (Semuels, 2018). Traditional corporate forms and systems of collective activities – as bounded, stable ensembles dominated and legitimated by a clear set of stakeholders – are increasingly challenged by emerging social, technological and economic developments (see Davis, 2016), factors that have clear repercussions for individuals and how they relate to organizations (Hassard and Morris, 2022).

Arguably, the possibility to work anytime and from anywhere (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Jeffres et al., 2009; Okhuysen et al., 2013) alters working conditions, work relations and the boundedness of work to place or time (Choroszewicz and Kay, 2020;

Hughes and Silver, 2020). This is notably where the discourse around autonomy and flexibility finds its source, reinforced by and through the so-called democratization of independent forms of work, crystallized through new forms of 'entrepreneurship' (Djellal and Gallouj, 2013). It is upon the promise of autonomy and flexibility that the gig economy is promoted, with labour market intermediaries such as platforms 'carefully crafting narratives around flexibility and entrepreneurship' (Baber, 2024: 738). Friedman (2014) acknowledges the optimism of discourses that frame gig work as being perfect for the younger generation who (supposedly) do not desire to perform stable work for an employer and can instead work at home via a networked computer. Sliding across the generations perhaps, gig work can also be seen as beneficial for those who need more flexible work to fit around childcare routines. Additionally, the new entrepreneurs of the gig economy can expect to learn new skills related to running a business and expanding their portfolio of marketable abilities. Despite the attractive narratives, however: 'Few of the workers in the gig economy actually enjoy this happy life-style. The relatively well-paid independent contractors are happy with their alternative arrangement, but solid majorities of workers in the other categories of contingent workers would prefer traditional jobs' (Friedman, 2014: 180).

At the lower-skilled, lower-paid end of the gig economy in particular – of which driving and delivering for Uber is emblematic – the company continues to frame working experience in the familiar language of 'flexibility', offering drivers the opportunity of 'setting their own schedules to make work fit into their lives, not the other way around' (Uber, 2023). In various national and regional contexts, however, they have been obliged to accept that rather than drivers being truly self-employed (and thus under the discursive ambit of entrepreneurialism), their relationship is in fact one of employer and employee in the more traditional sense. The Supreme Court in the UK, for example, found that drivers were 'in a position of subordination to Uber', since the company retained control over various aspects of their work and monitored their performance, with penalties for non-compliance (Carby-Hall, 2021).

How can we understand novelty beyond appearance?

Understanding novelty beyond appearance entails being attentive to the underlying continuities framing work, employment and management practices and thus of challenging, or contextualizing, discourses of novelty that, as we have seen, frame work activities in an epochalist manner. The new world of work is associated with the development of increasingly autonomous ways of organizing, working and living (Shibata, 2020). Platform-based entrepreneurship, mobile and remote work, co-working, the flex office, virtual collaboration and digital nomadism, for example, epitomize ways of organizing work that purportedly align productivity, performance and value creation with freedom, autonomy and choice. However, while capitalism undeniably reinvents itself in form (the platformization of work being, as we write, its latest manifestation to date), in essence it remains structurally consistent, since it invariably relies on the same core and enduring principles, creates familiar problems, repeats existing structural inequalities and experiences persistent conflicts and contradictions (Vrousalis, 2021).

Additionally, in themselves, labour-based platforms only account for a small proportion of the labour market despite receiving a lot of attention in the sociology of work literature (see Azzellini et al., 2022), thus disproportionately fuelling the novelty narrative. The discourse of novelty and appearance of 'new' forms of work of value production, management practices and worker relationships obscure the enduring content, logics and ideologies (Barley and Kunda, 1992) that are inherent to work under capitalism (Burawoy, 1982; Vrousalis, 2022).

Yet, if work becomes a more liquid, diffused, fragmented and emergent set of social relations (Bauman and Lyon, 2013; Kallinikos, 2003; Sewell and Taskin, 2015), it nonetheless remains at odds with the aforementioned rhetoric of emancipation and freedom. 'New' modes of value production are performed by 'untethered' workers conceived of as interchangeable atoms (De Vaujany et al., 2020), with this resulting in new forms of competition (Wood et al., 2019), and the critical transfer of responsibilities and risks from the organization to the worker (Friedman, 2014; Kaine and Josserand, 2019) – both within and without 'traditional' forms of employment. In that sense, the absence of classic employment contracts, of long-lasting relations and of emotional attachment with an organization (arguably a novelty, at least in scope, in our current world of work) leads to increased precarity (Peticca-Harris et al., 2020), job insecurity, as well as experiences of isolation and alienation (Howells, 2012; Spinuzzi, 2012). Such a system creates a clear distinction between winners and losers – protagonists may be different over time, but such framing remains impervious to change. In parallel, the increasing individualization of collective activities calls for the development of new forms of solidarity to maintain or extend a minimum sense of belonging and community (Fayard, 2021; Garrett et al., 2017; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020), thereby, paradoxically, striving to rebuild what was discursively framed as no longer central to work.

We note in this regard how ethnographic studies have revealed paradoxical experiences associated with the new world of work (Fisher and Downey, 2006; Miller, 2021; Van Maanen, 2011). Such research highlights continuities with past practices – revealing a reinforcement of previous logics. Examples here include the intensification of labour processes, the extension of working hours, the irresistible flexibilization of labour markets, the resurgence of (neo)bureaucratic forms of control and the desegregation of work relations – all amid the enduring search for increased efficiency (Hislop and Axtell, 2009; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Sewell and Taskin, 2015). It can be argued that current work developments – those premised for example on the gig economy – do not constitute new practices per se, but instead are inscribed in a rich tradition and history. Steinberg (2019, 2022), for example, argues against the periodizing claim that capitalism itself has become 'platformic' in nature and wonders how genuinely 'new' platform capitalism is.

An illustrative example is the parallel between Taylorist assembly lines and the logic of crowdwork platforms, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (Alkhatib et al., 2017). In essence, MTurk is a crowd employment platform through which tasks are distributed to many anonymous workers, with Amazon both mediating and selling work capacity. This enacts a tripartite structure comprising Amazon (which owns and develops the platform), third-party requesters (who broadcast tasks – known as human intelligence tasks, or HITs – on the platform) and external workers (referred to as Turkers, who complete the HITs). For organizations, this is an opportunity to leverage the 'crowd' (external

agents) to perform a task that could have been performed internally by employees. At the individual level, workers tend to be low paid, complete highly repetitive (and low-skilled) tasks and rarely see the end product of their labour. Crowdwork employment can be understood therefore as an instance of digital Taylorism, which refers to the ways digital technology facilitates novel modes of standardization, quantification and surveillance of labour; frequently through forms of semi-automated management and control (Altenried, 2020). The possibility to outsource various aspects of work activities, however, not only concerns so-called low-skilled tasks, for in leveraging the potential and affordances of platforms, organizations can operationalize the possibility to further externalize or outsource many more sophisticated aspects of their operations – such as accounting or legal tasks and activities (Everaert et al., 2010).

In modern organizations, while managerial practices have evolved, notably allowing more employee 'participation', they still seek primarily to bolster effectiveness by controlling not only the individual's actions but also increasingly perception and consciousness through sophisticated management and control mechanisms (Casey, 1995; Reed, 2025). Much managerial experience can be understood in terms of corporations purposively instilling a perceptual 'insecurity message' in managers, essentially as part of a tangible control strategy directed at the inexorable ratcheting-up of management productivity demands globally. In that context, the maxim 'nothing new under the sun' seems to capture adequately the limitless capacity of capitalism to reinvent itself in pursuit of its erstwhile interests.

Discussion

Whither the 'new' world of work?

Above, we have outlined a wide array of discursively constructed ruptures associated with work practices. At a macro level, a widely shared narrative puts the emphasis on a rupture in the processes of value production – instigated, notably, by the emergence of platform-based and app-based work (Duggan et al., 2020; Veen et al., 2020). At a meso level, such ruptures are associated with a broad narrative on the emergence of new trends in the world of work, such as the development of entrepreneurial collaboration (Miles et al., 2005), automation and the 'second' machine age (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Ford, 2015), the increased embeddedness of technologies and integration of AI in organizations (Vrontis et al., 2022), and the emergence of collaborative workspaces (Avdikos and Pattas, 2021). Finally, at a micro level, we highlighted the performativity of such visions, in that they further justify the necessity to change; we described how such ruptures meant employees learning new (e.g. digital, collaborative, entrepreneurial) skills, accepting the importance of innovation and creativity, experiencing changes in work contracts and 'traditional' employment systems, having to embrace greater flexibility and autonomy at work, and seeking self-development through work (Ekman, 2015).

Beyond claims of novelty, we argue, in line with other critical accounts discussed above, that the core strategies and processes at the heart of contemporary forms of work are frequently not novel at all. In fact, they often correspond merely to the reshaping, rebranding or direct extension of practices in place in the early 1900s. In other words,

many of the 'new' ways of working have been seen previously in one guise or another and have a historical dimension, rather than appearing unexpectedly (Lawler, 2013) in an ad hoc fashion. That is, they are analogous in terms of strategic objectives, technological dynamics, social relations and means of organizational control. Present forms of precarity, rampant in gig work, reflect past ones (Patrick-Thomson and Kranert, 2021; Stuart et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2019). Issues around inequality and discrimination, discursively constructed as solvable through the 'empowering' narrative of flexible and autonomous work, are very much alive and reminiscent of enduring institutionalized inequalities (Adermon and Hensvik, 2022; Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Gerber, 2022; Howcroft et al., 2021; Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Similarly, contemporary resistance to automation and the pervasiveness of control within work systems resonate with older social movements and so on (see Liu, 2023; Sewell and Taskin, 2015).

The recent promotion of various types of digital technology at work provides a medium through which historical configurations of value production can be altered in technical form yet remain analogous in social and economic substance (Baber, 2024; Briken et al., 2017; Howcroft and Taylor, 2014). Digital technologies provide a 'new' system through which existing practices can be altered in form yet remain substantively similar. In labour process theory, the 'digitization of work' can be understood in class-based terms, such as in the coming of age of the 'cybertariat' in the global economy (Huws, 2014). Highlighting these trends and patterns is an increasingly important task in a world of work characterized by and framed around rapid developments in mobility, nomadism and 'third' workplaces, together with digital modes of social production that blur the lines between working and living, producing and consuming (Aroles et al., 2020; Okhuysen et al., 2013; Valenduc and Vendramin, 2016).

Through the promotion of new strategies, development of new technologies and effecting of new means of coordination and control, what we observe are largely changes in the scope of existing practices, rather than the unfurling of genuinely innovative undertakings. Discourses develop in such a way that they create meaning, exert power (Foucault, 1969; Roper et al., 2022) and play a central role in legitimizing this process of 'novelty hunting'. For instance, in the context of innovation management, Janssen et al. (2015: 1981), speak of 'situated novelty', highlighting that 'what is considered "new" is situational within a specific historical context', a point that resonates with our argument here. Specifically, our attention, in this article, has been to emphasize the generative and performative role of discourses regarding the 'new' world of work. In challenging the novelty of the discursive claims of this narrative 'world', we question the ideological underpinnings of the concept of the 'new' itself. We argue there is a broad spectrum of reasons – pragmatic or normative in nature – operating in this regard. Significantly, 'discourses include imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be. [. . .] Discourses as imaginaries may also come to be inculcated as new ways of being, new identities' (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2022: 188).

The intensity of discourses around new ways of working and forms of organizing tends to ebb and flow ideologically, featuring prominently in the media as well as in research and teaching activities. Such framing is not specific to discussions surrounding the world of work though – 'enthusiastic and sometimes messianistic discourses of

novelty still engulf "new" media technologies and practices' (Carpentier, 2011: 517). Regardless of the context of their utterance, with such discourses are associated all sorts of myths, hopes, promises or representations about the new world of work. In a micro context marked by anxiety, unemployment, stress and burnout, the discourse of novelty undoubtedly carries the promise of renewal: of a better world of work in which new opportunities arise (see Prassl, 2018). Novelty is thus seen as a source of progress, improvement and change: it is potentially perceived favourably by those disgruntled with their professional lives. With work often seen as a constraint, the emphasis on novelty is seen to address people's expectations of self-determination, freedom and autonomy; novelty is a way to envision a more positive future.

Conversely, novelty can be viewed to give legitimacy to a plethora of actors involved in so-called new ways of working (consultants, agents, gurus, writers, life-coaches, etc.) – actors who need novelty to exist to sustain their activities (Aroles et al., 2020; Roper et al., 2022). Their legitimacy rests on their ability to portray themselves as expert authorities of change and novelty (Collins, 2020) and to ceaselessly reinvent themselves. Here we see discourses employing the rhetoric of 'the new' with ideological intent, by actors in need of novelty (Du Gay, 2003). Novelty then goes beyond being a mere rhetorical device to become a product that can be packaged, merchandised and sold. Novelty is thus a discursive device through which certain visions of the world of work are given form and endowed with legitimacy. Novelty is a 'forward' discourse, one that sells and one that operates as a 'win–win imagery' (Ekman, 2015), positioning career success as out of reach only for those lacking passion and a will to 'go the extra mile'. By the virtue of being future-oriented, the discourse of novelty ultimately leads to people overlooking, and progressively forgetting about, historical continuities. It thus amounts to a way of disguising the dark side of the evolution of modern capitalism and the highly cyclical dimension of work practices.

Limitations and future research

In attempting to explore the intricate relation between continuity and change with regards to new work practices and how such practices are discursively framed through the lens of novelty, our article inevitably presents some limitations. Here, we wish to highlight three main constraints.

The first concerns the scope of our problematizing review. With this article, we had to grasp an expansive, and constantly expanding, body of literature. While we endeavoured to engage with a wide array of sources connected to new and old ways of working, and change and continuity in the world of work, we are aware that, in seeking to advance our argument, we have inevitably overlooked several important studies. This could be partly addressed through a systematic literature review focusing on one specific aspect of the continuity/discontinuity interplay in work practices.

The second limitation is linked to the heterogeneity and richness of work practices. In this article, we can provide only a partial account of work practices. In deciding which cases and examples to mobilize to support our claims, we had to set aside, nolens volens, many dimensions of work, management, employment and organizing. While we do not believe this undermines our main argument, we contend that a more exhaustive

engagement with work practices, in all their diversity and richness, would have provided a more holistic overview of the processes at stake.

The third limitation relates to our process of theorizing. In this article, we theorize at a meta-level, thus inevitably overlooking fine-grained characteristics and dimensions pertaining to specific country, sector or profession. A downside to this is that the validity of our argument may potentially be challenged at an empirical, localized level.

Fascinating questions were thus left aside due to issues around the scope of the problem investigated and length restrictions. We see the three following themes as fruitful avenues of research. First, it would prove insightful to flesh out, through a deep engagement with the literature, the common and enduring qualities of work across changing conditions and contexts. We touch on this, somewhat indirectly, in the present article but a thorough account of such dimensions would undoubtedly constitute a noteworthy addition to the literature while paving the way for more research. Second, most of the discussions and debates referred to in this article revolve around a Westernized framing of capitalism and work. A promising avenue of research could explore the extent to which our argument holds in a non-Western context, with the view of comparing different cultural and economic systems. Finally, we believe there would be much interest in exploring changes and continuity in work practices in a defined empirical context. This could take the form of a thorough exploration of a given industry and involve weaving together historical accounts of such sectors with in-depth ethnographic work.

Conclusion

In challenging claims of novelty in the 'new' world of work, we have questioned the ideological underpinnings behind those claims and argued against accepting contemporary periodizing at face value. The focus on novelty, increasingly glorified in depictions of contemporary work practices, leads to a dichotomization of thinking on and around work, management and organization. Contemporary work practices reproduce concerns and issues seen previously under one labour process guise or another (inequalities, precarity, discrimination, work intensification, etc.). Overlooking historical connections may lead to specious statements and a lack of understanding of how it is inscribed economically as a 'logical' development of the capitalist model. In turn, the contemporary obsession with novelty in the world of management and organizations precludes us from addressing fundamental, often-structural, issues plaguing the workplace. Rather than attempting to rectify what does not work, there is a tendency to be on the look-out for *different* practices, framed through the discourse of novelty. While this might be a short-term solution in terms of the accrual of profitability, it serves to displace key problematics, thus inevitably leading to the re-emergence of enduring dilemmas. Understanding continuities and discontinuities in the world of work is thus essential to articulating, framing and conceptualizing future policies.

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