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ORIGINAL PAPER

Power in the future of work: production, reproduction, and reconstruction

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Abstract

Labour studies have always been concerned with power, so how do concepts of power inform an understanding of the future of work today? Luke's Three Dimensions of Power reveals how past contests over the normative outcomes and policy choices of future labour also present for platform capitalism. But while modern conceptions of power capture the realignment of productivist power relations under rentier capital, they fall short in explaining the legacy of colonial capital on the future of work. Drawing on a wide range of post-colonial and post human literatures, structural power is shown to forget the futures of many exploited, dispossessed and subaltern workers where productive alliances may be formed. Understanding power in these terms also shows how power relations can be confronted and challenged in a post-productivist agenda that could inform new ways of understanding the future of labour.

Keywords Three Dimensions of Power · Labour · Productivist

1 Introduction

Modern notions of power describe the exercise of influence through violence, process and ideology. An analysis of power therefore exists among many contested forms that might focus on how an actor exerts their will over another or how agendas are set or reality is manipulated (Lukes 2005). Such assumptions around power help us to understand the consequences of how we understand the future of work, not just in the immediate relationship between worker and employer, but in the ways that this is structured through the value the work has in the production of commodities or in the labour market. The concept of power does work in itself, attributing political meaning to concepts and politicising them (Guzzini 2005). Labour may be seen

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as a factor of production, a human act and a system of value creation, but it is more than an ephemeral construct because it is explicitly linked to the material realities of accumulation. Work, in contrast, need not take economic value but can describe how effort is experienced and how reward and better outcomes are conceived. The dynamic between work and labour reveals the hopes and fears we may have for the future and so also offers an insight into the ideological and material power dynamics of work under capitalism.

The "polycrisis" illustrates how power relations could inform the future of work. Defined recently as "the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects" (Lawrence et al 2024), the term polycrisis implies an almost existential threat to life as we know it. Ageing populations—too old to work but too young to die—have loaded lasting obligations on the workers of the future to provide for them. But this is also because public pension funds and welfare resources have been depleted from the financial crash and the costs of the pandemic. Technologies such as AI present future worlds of work that change so quickly that they are difficult to imagine, let alone train future workers for. Yet this uncertainty replaces hard won political compromise that distributed accumulation as welfare in Europe for generations. As the global liberalism that structured domestic welfare regimes fragments, the violent legacy of European colonialism now undermines the moral authority of western enlightened liberal capitalism. The international conventions that framed the last century—on human rights, decent work and territorial sovereignty—have been diluted by contemporary global security challenges. Presented as a moment by the World Economic Forum, the concept of a polycrisis does much to wake us up to the need for bold leadership, practical solutions and urgent action. But authority, pragmatism and speed were tropes Marinetti proposed when confronting a changing world old order one hundred years ago (Marinetti 1909). It certainly looks like Europe is sliding into fascism again but whether we see this as a novelty or a simple retrenchment of past relations depends very much on how we understand power.

Work was the focus of power relations that structured the social and political compromises of European modernity. Enlightened scholars formulated theories of political economy around the centrality that work played in the creation of value. Work brought people together to normalise power structures that regulated workers and the products of their labour. This created futures. But differentiating work (the value created by using our bodies) from labour (the value added to a commodity) valorised work through the creation of commodity value rather than other activities (Dowling 2016). Reproductive work, for example, precedes labour, while culture sustains many forms of unpaid work. The relationship between labour and work is therefore best seen as an expression of power and as a regulatory or emancipating resource that constitutes alternative futures for workers. Utopian offerings that connect ideals and experience around work to create a better world generate the powerful resource of hope (Olin Wright 2020). Power, work and the future may therefore all be reflected in collective ideas of work that have not yet been inscribed with the legacies of labour's violent past.

The focus of this paper is primarily on how modern notions of power, and in particular those of C20th European thought, have privileged economic futures of

work and forms of labour. These futures carry power relations from Europe's past into the present and then the future. As the future of work takes form during a phase of capitalism that values assets over labour (Piketty 2014), we need to reflect on how assumptions over work, labour and power that were forged in the C19th and C20th also sustained imbalanced futures that are repeated today. In particular, we will explore how the modern idea of productivism linked labour and capital in a competitive relationship that allowed them to coexist and share a common future. Markets, welfare states, technology and the state all rested on the idea that Europe had a different history to the rest of the world. An essential part of this Europeanism was the capacity to continue to reinvent Europe through modern assumptions of rational order, knowledge and growth. The shift of periods of accumulation from production to reproduction therefore reinforce many productivist agendas.

But the common future constructed by modern social thought also locks out groups from social compromises, dismisses their knowledge and silences their voices. Constructions of power have linked production to labour relations that have also denied the history of work done by others. The value created by subaltern workers in colonial economies, for example, remain systematically ignored. Work valued outside the labour market has often been negated (e.g. childcare) or dismissed and downplayed within European society. The market basis or political compromises that characterised Europe's progress around productivity have both ignored the centrality of colonial extraction in sustaining these welfare state compromises and hidden their real costs (Bhambra 2022). The politicisations of these limits are now evident across a range of political and theoretical debates, as the cement that bound the past with the future has weakened. Labour has lost its collective position at the heart of Europe in the C21st, just as European democracy's privileging of white reason over black knowledge has become dominant in addressing current affairs (Mbembe 2017). Protest, or Arendt's "agonism", has re-asserted the place of exceptionalism in democracy as antagonistic positions embrace the right to disagree on disagreeable terms (Mouffe 2013). In many cases, these protests are based on asserting ontological differences that have been eroded by a governance of comparison and benchmarking (Massumi 2015). Yet while universal categories have been emancipatory in European enlightenment, they also confound difference and so sustain long held injustices (Hooker 2009). A cursory engagement with the literature and political debates over the definition of refugee status brings these themes into a terrifying focus—stateless refugees fleeing destruction are defined as criminal simply because states use criminal justice systems to manage their borders (Stumpf 2006).

The paper recognises these positions not as critiques of Eurocentric modern social thought, but as an invitation to reframe them around new research agendas. Rather than focusing on Lukes' three dimensions of power alone, each should be reframed to consider how these contestable dimensions of power around agency, organisation and history have rendered invisible other forms of power. In particular, the focus on labour value over asset value has hidden important dynamics in contemporary political economy. We begin by tracking how the shift from labour value to asset value has changed power relationships over work. Dowling describes this as valorising "affective remuneration" to illustrate the shift from privileging productivism (which focuses on labour value) to privileging

reproductivism (which focuses on asset value) in C21st capitalism. This reframes the power relations around transaction costs economic's idea of asset specificity, rather than labour value. This helps to reveal the conservative orientation of rentier capitalism in contemporary politics and explains why Europe has been trapped in its past. To reframe work into a progressive direction that reconstructs Europe, we can draw on other intellectual resources from around the world to challenge how the power of agency constituted in the past can be replaced in the present and future by work that is based on care and that values life. In this way, we can move from production through reproduction to reconstruction.

Debates about the future of work in the twenty-first century have been dominated by the presence of platform capitalism. Communication, digital and artificial intelligence technologies appear to have reduced or bypassed many of the structural impediments to free market forces that had been won through industrial conflict. Lukes' much cited Three Dimensions of Power helps to reveal how power permeates assumptions about technology, work and the future. The one-dimensional view of power beneath shows that, by sharing convergent preferences, self-employed people can share a productive future with platform capitalism in the Gig economy. This view of power contrasts with one that valued the social institutions of late capitalist and their commitment to welfare compromises and democratic rights, which we explore after. Finally, the financial crash, and the massive and unequal redistribution of capital that followed, shows how structural power favoured eugenicist elites to make decisions over who might deserve welfare, who has the right to live and the long-term future of humanity. Each of these describes the potential of modern notions of power to set up the basis of a political modern economy. The paper reviews these insights into power and the future of work in relation to technology, labour value and rent before drawing on a post humanist agenda to inspire a reframing of how we might relate power to the future work.

2 Free labour and the future of work?

Online labour platforms like Amazon's Mechanical Turk allow businesses to crowdsource workers to deliver piecemeal work. STINT matches peak service times in London's hospitality industry with the gaps between undergraduate student lectures—service economy demands are matched to the future workers of the service economy in an individualised hyper flexible work relation. LIMBER fully embraces the liberating potential of platform capitalism like this:

> *This is gig economy 2.0. This isn't about turning the world into temps. This isn't about digitizing the race to the bottom world of staffing agencies. This isn't about random people turning up to shifts in pubs. This is empowering people to live a happy, flexible and varied work life*. (https://limber.work/about/ 2024)

They invite workers to

Be your own boss, and find flexible work with limber. The UK's leading app for hospitality shifts.

The framing of the future of a self-employed worker on zero hour contracts working in the weakly regulated service sector as an independently emancipated boss is quite the ideological construct! Only the tyranny of neo liberalism could construct a world of work in which gig economy 2.0 appears as progressive, especially if compared to the precarious work of a gig economy 1.0 (Inversi et al 2023). This reformulation of capitalism and society towards the virtual has also rewritten many of the material social orders that have organised the world. Platforms reconnect us at different levels of abstraction and location to challenge once sacred notions of sovereignty and to present new channels through which change can trickles through into platform progress (Bratton 2015). Political compromises that delivered stability at the national and international levels have been even superseded as the reconfiguration of work and life around "the stack" has reconnected humanity at the "planetary", "cloud" and "address" levels of everyday life (ibid).

The willing production of data by users and its easy accessibility through networks and flows of information has changed the nature of work to confound traditional class distinctions over labour (Terranova 2000). A new "immaterial labour" built on personal expression emerged in the late C20th (Lazzarato 1996) with a multitude of workers navigating life under a borderless and timeless empire (Hardt and Negri 2000). Today, power relations visibly intersect as the availability of information renders obsolete Lefebvre's privacy of place. His observation that it was difficult to "find much information as to the manner in which ordinary men and women spent that day, their occupations, preoccupations, labours or leisure" (Lefebvre 1971:1) seems like a statement of privilege in today's saturated world of social media.

But despite the novelty claims of LIMBER and STINT, these were not so much innovative forms of "fast companies", as the "flexible firms" outlined in the 1980s (Atkinson 1984; Jessop 1993). "Flexible worker" was a term used to explain the way that labour would be organised in the economy around skills. This differentiated the core of multi-tasking labour from the periphery of part time—and expendable—workers according to their human capital, or skills. This flexible managerial ethos informed the formative years of the post-industrial era in publications like Piore and Sabel's 1986 *Second Industrial Divide* and was central to Porters 1990 *Competitive Advantage of Nations* both of which focused on how institutional design led to "competitiveness". At the same time, the Washington Consensus II placed significant emphasis on the role of social capital in facilitating competitiveness through market flexibility, weak ties and other commodified relations that could ease transaction costs (Fukyama 2001, Fine 1999).

Individualization and changing patterns of state capital relationship around labour spread the idea that risk would prevail over traditional structures of social inequality (Mythen 2005). But in policy terms, this period saw a widescale promotion of self-employment and enterprise as the paradigmatic response to globalisation (Perren & Jennings 2005; Dannreuther 2007). As organised labour became to a significant extent disorganised self-employed entrepreneurs, market

coordination became the focus of banks supplying credit, regulators costing legislation and accountants spreading profitable practices. The service economy exploded around an infinity of new points of revenue extraction. But the consistent focus of enterprise policy was to disassociate the individual from the labour relation and cloak them in an institutional milieu supporting a *petit bourgeoisie* (Weiss 1988).

App-mediated labour markets therefore did not emerge into a void. They came after active labour market policies and pro skills agendas and replaced the labour market protections and collective bargaining institutions hard won by generations of workers with isolated workers. For decades, these "workfare" policies intensified the pressure on workers to adapt to the demands of capital through the creation of a reserve army of casualised, precarious and self-employed labour (e.g. Peck and Theodore 2010, Seing et al 2015). Digital employment platforms entered a labour market in desperate need of coordination due to the desiccation of labour institutions and the atomisation of units of production. Indeed, some have argued that the platform workforce have reproduced forms of Taylorist work practice that extended control from physical labour to thoughts, intentions and actions (Mengay 2020). The technology may have looked new, but the extractive power relations remained the same.

At the same time, as platforms were becoming hegemonic, the economic inequality cemented in the 2008 financial crash accelerated under COVID between 2020 and 2022 as states doubled down on protecting asset value through quantitative easing. Gorged on cash and other assets, a new wave of philanthropic AI capitalists had already begun to promote welfare philosophies based on new buzz terms like "Effective Altruism" and "longtermism" to deliver "techno utopian fantasies of donors while ignoring questions about the sources of their wealth" (Crary 2023: 49). Without a clear strategy on the European left, political mobilisation in the new economy seemed more attracted to the right wing populism of folk politics than radical left alternatives (Srnicek and Williams 2015). A continued failure of the left to organize and coordinate a response to the hegemonic pressures of individualisation, neo liberalism and financialization also failed to mobilise against the existential threat to European democracy that the right now presents. Indeed political parties in post-growth capitalism became polarised around a radical universalism and a new right wing populism (Reitz & Jorke 2021) that were reflected in the 2024 European Parliamentary elections (Hix 2024).

In this simple example, we see how Lukes contested dimensions of power illuminate competing narratives of the future of labour. The first dimension describes a post capitalist world where individuals are emancipated by the removal of market failures in a new platform-mediated economy of services and enterprise. The second shows how workers have seen that their working careers pressurised or outsourced to small businesses, while governments locked themselves into the straightjacket of macroeconomic prudential risk. The third dimension shows how platforms capitalism sustains rampant inequality while allowing eugenicists like Nick Bostrom (Torres 2023) to decide the future of humanity. Structural power exercised by elite decision-makers through debates concerning "longtermism" aim to determine the future

of planetary life, while Silicon Valley continues to degrade the past, present and future (Kemper 2024).

3 The productive worker and the technological market structure of modern labour value

Lukes' contested dimensions of power tells us that we can read the future of labour in different ways. But it also raises questions as to why the transformational technologies of 2024, like platforms or AI, return the same forms of power structure to those familiar to political theorists writing fifty years before. The next section proposes that this is because the structure of power in political economy shares a common concern with the modern pursuit of increased production. This in part shows how productivism holds contested interests together through the promise of a share of the spoils of capitalism. It also shows how the shift to reproducing asset values, which we discuss after this section, can tear societies apart.

The need to produce remains a powerful assumption in modern economic and social thought (e.g. Rodrik 2023). Productive relations informed the institutions, concepts and rights that would later sustain capital accumulation as they emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Brenner 1976). Classical economist debated the relationship between wage levels and productivity, whether low wages should drive down costs or if rising wages would increase productivity in capital intensive economies (Groenewegen 1969). The low wage advocates, from international trade and manufacturing interests, proposed that necessity spurred productivity, an argument rejected by Adam Smith and William Dafoe, who observed:

> *Why do our People fare better, &c? It is because they do more Work. And why do they do more Work than other Nations? It is because they fare better.* (Dafoe in Groenewegen 1969)

The core assumption in these debates was that wages and productivity remained intrinsically linked through the market (Groenewegen 1969). The debate concerned whether a future agenda for work and labour would be coordinated either by the invisible hand of the market or the visible hand of the corporation or state. In this neo classical view, agents were utility maximisers competing in a market for wages or profits in a zero sum game mediated in transparent labour markets. The power of an employer would be expressed in hire and fire decisions and the power of labour in their ability to extract resources from industrial actions. The winner would win (A over B power) in full view of both parties. Both parties could win if both realised their expressed preferences.

The great welfare responses that decommodified markets to create market societies (Polanyi 2002, Esping Andersen 1990) all did so to resist the "necessity arguments" of liberal and conservative political economists. New political agendas offered different collective futures for workers and their families that protected against the assumptions of the past. Liberal and colonialist internationalists

both saw slavery as a legitimate form of labour during the C18th and C19th era of British liberal hegemony (Williams 2021). Conservative political economists drew heavily on the arguments of the pro slave lobby to defend property rights, international liberalism and a powerful naval force (Taylor 2020, 2014). These conservative ideologies embraced the discipline that an international labour market pitching the labour of slaves directly against that offered by British workers. Imperial expansion suppressed labour in colonies, but also enabled more surplus to be extracted by ensuring that European places of work were ruled by necessity, not reward. Workers in Lancashire Cotton Mills knew this which is why they struck in solidarity with American plantation workers and protested against slavery in the C19th (Linebaugh & Rediker 1990).

The political compromises of the mid C20th, described by Ruggie as embedded liberal compromises (Ruggie 1982), were reactions not to an abstract market, but to the vicious competition presented by this C19th economic liberalism and the social unrest this led to. As well as easing the transaction costs of international trade, welfare states were a choice against the recirculation of slave corporation profits into manufacturing and industry (Stern 2023) that threatened to sustain the ties between slavery and the circulation of money (Mcnully 2020). The industrial relations regimes that emerged post WW1 were a reaction to international liberalism's tolerance of brutality, unspeakable work practices and the competitive drive to keep the value of labour down.

Industrial democracy also made labour market regulation make sense in the C20th—work was valuable not just economically but also politically. By organising, labour could secure rents from their control over assets in mass production plants that would create better livelihoods and conditions (Korpi 1974). Businesses understood and supported the value that better skilled workforces could offer for productivity (e.g. Martin & Swank 2008). This would form the bedrock of democratic political compromise that came to characterise European social models. But the maintenance of industrial democracy was only ever conceived at the spatial level of the nation state. It fixed capitalism into industrial compromises linking state, labour and business processes that shared economic trajectories along a national narrative. Political parties elections and voters complemented the technocratic foundations of these political economies with the regular performance of democratic routines and displays (March & Olsen 1983, Hall 1986). These modern systems of capitalisms would be divided predominantly along national lines that were in turn defined by the truces and international laws that resolved generational conflicts (Mann 1987). National capitalisms supported modern democracies through practices like parliamentary scrutiny and elections in Europe so that corporatist interests could prevail (Schmitter 1974).

The unity of this productivist relationship has always been most clearly expressed in the form of the nation state. Here, the history of labour value was contested in its material form through welfare state compromises and the ideological apparatus of the state prescribed a democratically legitimated future of labour. The twentieth-century European nation states evolved into legitimate political compromises that validated the power structures by supporting political agendas that translated labour value into accumulated wealth to the benefit of capital owners. At a basic level, the

state was the concrete expression of the social forces that reproduced labour value because it promoted the fiction that surplus value extraction was a legitimate way to coordinate a society (Balibar 2017: 48). By locking the production of labour value into periods of stable accumulation through social institutions that manage the social tensions that arose from such an unequal system, the future of labour was locked into a path. Social institutions (church, state, school) provided the ideological state apparatus to regulates conflict within the confines of a stable capitalist regime. These would regulate the social and economic contradictions and conflicts that created and directed value from labour to capital to stabilise accumulation regimes over periods of time and even nature (Althusser 2014; Boyer 1990; Lipietz 1987).

These epochs of stable accumulation were mainly regulated through the depoliticization of labour conflict (Burnham 2001). Scientific or technological paradigms, like the industrial revolution or Fordism, were presented as at the heart of long run economic growth with the intensification of labour productivity a key rationale for capital investment and higher wage levels. For Mokyr, the industrial enlightenment improved knowledge of natural phenomena to make it available to people who could make use of it (Mokyr 2011). Baconian principles of cumulative, consensual and contestable knowledge enabled nature to be tamed to deliver safer cities, longer journeys and greater rates of capital accumulation. Europe's great C19th expansion of metropolitan cities was possible as engineers like Bazelgette city created sewerage systems that sanitised cities.

But in transforming the relationship of city dwellers with nature, these infrastructural technologies were not concerned with conservation so much as reducing the costs of commodifying nature (Moore 2015). The industrial revolution established a form of fossil capitalism that drove dependency on coal and oil (Malm 2015) with processes and technologies responsible for destroying huge swathes of natural habitat and species (Lewis & Maslin 2018). More often than not state, or inter-state, attempts to regulate technological advances exacerbated the extraction of depleted natural resources as different capital interests aimed to gain advantage over their competitors (Rocha et al 2014). Enlightened capitalism also accelerated the death of the planet.

The enlightened capitalism of the industrial revolution also introduced racial divisions within classes as it brought migrants to work alongside local workers at lower rates and under worse conditions. Water bearers and infrastructure labourers were the worse paid and given the lowest status in society (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). The distinctions made between those who were deserving and undeserving poor created procedures and assumptions in the welfare state that normalised "the racialized amelioration of labour exploitation" (Bhambra 2020). Domestic political compromises around war and welfare rewarded idealised national citizens who were White and European. A combination of medicalised definition, citizenship rights and racialized rhetoric denigrated the status of migrant workers, while the resources of the global south were plundered to maintain high welfare standards.

The future of industrial labour was carefully linked to the institutions of the "transnational mercantilism" that mediated liberal international markets and domestic political compromise (Graz 2004). Labour markets promised personal prosperity for productive work, while the promise of electoral victory offered the opportunity

for democratic change at the national level as a mechanism for legitimating the international and national power structures that differentiated sophisticated metropolitan modernity from subaltern squalor. Furthermore the pursuit of the knowledge that created these prosperous futures for all entrenched the idealised subjects of modern life as the White European male. Women, nature and colonised peoples around the world were marked by such institutional compromises as beyond the scope of the state, the people and sometimes even knowledge itself. Power was exercised explicitly over marginalised groups, implicitly in the systemic and gendered bias of electoral suffrage and structurally in the scientific and cultural institutions that justified the racial capitalism of the modern nation state.

4 Rent, reproduction and the remaking of work

The consistent evolution of institutions that reproduce conditions favouring capital accumulation should not be seen as a coincidence. Institutions fix the future of work by defining basic routines and rules that constrain uncertainty, facilitate understanding and communication and fix the needs of capital and labour in a time and place. The durability of these fixes as hegemonic or as everyday experiences has generated some debate, notably between Althusser and Thompson, about the ways that structural forms of power exercise domination. Unlike Lukes' previous two dimensions of power, in which the future of labour is clearly constrained either by the might of a more powerful actor (e.g. a company or a class) or the second dimension where workers are fully aware that their preferences are being ignored, structural power is exercised at the historical level as well as in everyday life (Arrighi 1994).

Macroeconomic or structural explanations of power relations in labour markets have characterised the ways that configurations of class relations have produced social value. The periodization of accumulation regimes (e.g. as by Regulationist scholars) into eras of cyclical and then structural crisis has captured shifts in the structuring economic conditions in which welfare capitalism and Fordist mass production technology constituted each other for decades. Gramscian scholars have looked to hegemonic positions (such as "neo liberalism") to capture how organic intellectuals confirmed the common sense routines characterised in stable periods of accumulation. This presents the opportunity for a counter hegemonic narrative, the activation of a class consciousness and the possibility of an alternative project for a political party to advocate for power on. Srnicek, for example, presents platforms as hegemonic structures based on neo liberal principles to frame his alternative, and evidently feasible, propositions around social reproduction (Srnicek & Williams 2015; Srnicek 2017, Hester and Srnicek 2023).

Platform work, like mass production, rests on a new form of technology through which human/nature relations can be constituted, despite retaining many of the characteristics of Toyotaism (Mengay 2020) and of factories (Altenried 2020). Platform work has offered governments new mechanisms for labour market coordination. The expensive labour programs and employment services that characterised C20th welfare, and even the flexible worker based employment strategies of the 1990s, have been replaced by self-employed people investing and selling their human capital

online. Some individuals have become wealthy just through the fact that they exist on platforms. The reframing of the reality of these material relations through platforms has reconfigured international relations (Bratton 2015).

What differentiates the business models of platforms has been their ability to extract rent from intangible assets, such as the data they collect and the access they grant to their algorithms (Boyer 2022). Rentier capitalism is particularly evident in platforms and the intellectual monopoly capitalism that platforms exercise through their global value chains (Durand & Milberg 2020; Rikap 2021). But it is also part of a broader return to rentier capital accumulation in post-industrial economies that pervades the global economy since the 2008 financial crash (Christopher 2020).

While platforms raise issues about firm boundaries (Baronian 2020) and the originality of institutional technologies like the blockchain (Davidson et al 2018), a focus on power demonstrates far great similarities between platform capitalism and capitalism in other worlds of work. Rentier behaviour was clearly recognised by the early political economists like David Ricardo, who understood the relationship between the distance to market and land rent, as well as its secondary relationships to labour value. Marx explained how the "original sin" of primitive accumulation was premised on the expropriation of the land from the peasant (Marx 1972), which is a theme that denies the humanity of land and place. Post-colonial studies have recognised the writing of an "abyssal line" that communicated the limits of civilisation (de Sousa Santos 2007) and legitimated the violent forms of extraction that would follow (Moore 2010), especially in relation to women (Federici 2004). But rent has always been based on property, violence and dehumanisation. Histories of enclosure now recognise how presenting agricultural workers in England as devoid of rational thought and civilisation mirrored the dehumanising of subaltern labourer in British colonies (Griffin 2023). Just as enclosure transgressed space, it now also transgresses time with digital and algorithmic colonisation a feature of the contemporary labour (Kwet 2022).

Creating highly original content and selling access to it may be at the heart of many Instagram accounts, but it is also a form of rentier behaviour. Indeed mainstream transaction cost economics (TCE) (Williamson 1973) explains it well: If an asset has rare value due to its relatively specific (geographical, physical, social or legal) features, skilled work is required to translate its value to a market. In other words, the more specific and unique the asset, the higher the transaction cost to reach the market. Instagram accounts can therefore generate revenue because the accessing of content by someone scrolling the platform is hugely reduced. This makes it easier for the asset owner ("influencer") to derive rent from offering users access to the online assets they offer.

Platforms have, like other forms of rentier and imperial capitalism, created new worlds for workers to inhabit and for liberalised entrepreneurs to speculate in. Just like other forms of rentier, platforms have charged both of these groups to access their world (Langley 2021, Birch & Ward 2022). The processes controlling access—known as assetization—are widely diverse and across different sectors and spaces but share characteristics of ownership, enclosure and extraction (Wu & Taneja 2021; Grabher & König 2020; Kwet 2019). In creating assets, property rights are asserted

over algorithms, data source access become prerequisite for use, and terms are negotiated for data use that can even escape the governance of nation states (Bratton 2015).

Platform work therefore operates according to different logics to economic institutions based upon labour value (Srnicek 2021; Christopher 2021). Workers in precarious platforms live as risk bearing entrepreneurs in isolated lives, working and relating very differently to the material industrial or service workers that had realised the social institutions of the C20th. This kind of work has created new stresses for employees with unpredictable outcomes (Beradi 2015). Some sectors of platform work have organised to secure rights for workers (Stuart et al 2023; Keogh & Abraham 2022) with notable successes against UBER (Bessa et al 2022). But platform structures have redefined social relations. Just as finance (Gomber et al 2017) and industry (Shwab 2016) grew increasingly obsessed with the transition to a "digital economy", so the welfare state response to social needs adopted the language, technology and values of the digital economy. Asset-based welfare became a buzz word for social policy reformers from the turn of the century (Watson 2009). These approaches built on legal approaches to supported the realisation of rights through the market, in particular through the targeted support of different forms of social capital. Asset-based welfare strategies were meant to enhance interventions while offering a financial safety net (Gregory 2014) but have tended to have perverse consequences for inequality (Bryant et al. 2024) while generating high levels of shareholder value for banks (Froud et al 2000; Crouch 2009). Despite the popularity of such social democratic interventions at the national and supranational levels (Dannreuther 2007, Dannreuther & Perren 2013), these forms of digital entrepreneurship have failed to deliver equality on the macro and micro levels (Martinez Dy et al. 2018).

But while structural explanations of the impact of platform technology and rentier accumulation regimes offer insights into the challenges faced by workers, there are also strategic limitations to structural approaches to power. Even in 1968, it was clear that "there will be no crisis of European capitalism so dramatic as to drive the mass of workers to revolutionary general strikes or armed insurrection in defence of their vital interests" (Gorz 1968: 111). Instead, Gorz predicted "a fatal tendency for electoral logic to play into the hands of those political leaders for whom the role of the 'left' is reduced to carrying out 'better than the right' the same policies as the right" (114). Structuralist interpretations of class reduced the agency of working people by situating them as disempowered, rendering them subordinate and passive. EP Thompson noted that structuralists, like Althusser, had "simply taken over a reigning fashion of bourgeois ideology and named it 'Marxism'" (Thompson quoted in Fuchs 2019:10). As he, and others, have argued, history "is made from below" (Bhattacharya 1983).

Unlike the epochal changes associated with platform capitalism and approaches that embrace the agency of things and ideas, the rise of platform capitalism should not be seen simply in terms of technological change or structural changes in financial practices and the elevation of asset values. Debates around class that focused on the social categories inscribed onto society by

accumulation processes should not be the starting point of the analysis. Rather, the focus should be on the ways working people demand change and how they secure it.

5 Reconstructing work

While asset-based accumulation has widened the scope of what work means, and platforms have increased the scale at which it can be accessed, there remain fundamental problems with the extent to which it can help people "fare better". Structure plays an important but non determinant role in an assets based economy as the consequence of working in a liberal market and an authoritarian (Gioia Babbage) labour market are significant (Pagano 1991). In the former, workers could reduce transaction costs by learning new skills that would improve productivity. In the illiberal labour market where job roles were confirmed by tradition and status not ability, there would be no improvement over time (Pagano 1991). Markets value asset specificity in different ways, so market forces outside a firm do not necessarily select workers solely on "efficiently" criteria, as Williamson implies. Put more strongly, powers beyond the firm or institutional level structure markets, and these also influence how company assets are valued (Granovetter 1985).

What would happen if we took this idea seriously and sought to establish new ways of valuing labour that were beyond the productivist dichotomy of "necessity" or "faring better"? Could ways of valuing work go beyond producing value for markets and hierarchies, perhaps to protect assets that were public and natural? Could work be more than simply bullshit jobs (Graeber 2019, Delucchi et al. 2021) and are there more useful things to do with a life than labour? Many of the productivist answers to these questions post to platform capitalism repeat the modern tension between "authoritarianism and creativity" (Bhambra 2007 92) and assume that technology will win the day, provide universal incomes and even solve the ecological crisis. Different value structures that favoured carbon neutrality or biodiversity would require different work to translate the value of an asset to those wanting to use it.

The histories and theories of European modernity are based on the assumption of colonialism. These marginalised other world views (Chakrabarty 1992) and in particular the productivist national welfare bargains that managed social regulation and emancipation. The decolonial literature however highlights an abyssal politics between the metropolitan and colonial space (de Sousa Santos 2017). Productivist relations that cemented labour relations in Europe were not only not extended to workers in the south, but they were at the expense of labour in the global south (Careja Harris 2022). As the global technologies of platform capitalism extend, the reach of the labour market national compromises tremble, stretched by the instabilities of the financial, security, reproductive and political systems that had sustained them. Waves of suicide have accompanied workers torn between the shifting alignment of demands from home, work and self (Beradi 2015). They find themselves trapped in the wildly divergent temporalities of accelerated and instant demands of

platform work and the far future framing of long termism. Yet both of these serve the interests of the hypermodern platform capital (Kemper 2024).

Perhaps the "culture wars" that are raging under the platform imperialism of the C21st are not dissimilar to that experienced by the subaltern cultures of British or American imperialism of the C19th and C20th? Contested truths, ascendent violence under corporate control and the doubling down on racial others are certainly shared characteristics of now and then. The three dimensions of Lukes power are so wrapped in the traditions and cultures of European modernity that they fail to entertain how even critiques of false consciousness can condemn workers to authoritarian systems. Yet there are many resources available that allow us to look beyond the modern conception of power to envisage different futures of work. We need to begin with a competing ontology of work before establishing how this might create new ways of valuing assets that recognises the potential for an economy based on humanity, sustainability and global justice.

Beneath we replace the three contested dimensions of modern power that Lukes describes with three other voices that describe radically alternative ways of understanding the value of work and the future that it may offer. They all transcend the motivation to organise work as labour alone and to only see work as motivated by a free labour market determining labour as "out of necessity" or "doing well". These three voices speak of care, kinship with nature and one that embodies the past. Each locates work within value structures different to productivism and modern market exchange and proposes the sources of conflict and change that each might encounter.

5.1 A) A future of work based on love

The radical nature of love is to see the world from two perspectives and not from one. This contradicts the individualistic ideology of capitalism (Gilman Opalsky 2020). That labour is unloved, and that capitalism does not recognise the love that goes into making work happen, is one of the great achievements of bourgeois ideology (Folbre 1994). An economy based on love is a radical idea, yet it is also inconceivable that the world could exist without it. The literature on social reproduction reverses the valorisation of work by placing to the fore the analysis of under-valued work required for capitalist reproduction to take place. Focusing on practices of social reproduction (Bakker & Gill 2019), rather than structures or cultures (Gottfried 1998), the aspects of everyday life that are both fundamental in facing the material needs of human life can be explored (Bruff 2011).

But what would it mean to determine the value of assets, like care homes, by selecting them according to their ability to deliver life, rather than profit? During COVID, care systems clearly failed to provide dignity to the old and infirm in the UK. The privatisation of care, and the concentration of its ownership by private equity companies, had already led to:

> *Extensive transfers to the world's richest via the servicing of basic needs for some of society's most vulnerable people, financed by taxes and lifetimes' savings*. (Bayliss & Gideon 2020:2)

The work of carers was recognised by popular expressions of gratitude and applause for nurses and doctors during the pandemic. But the financialisation practices that determined the value of the care work only valorised the revenues extracted by the care contracts and not the affective labour valued by the clapping crowds (Dowling 2016). The subsequent public outcry may not change this perspective but the recognition that caring mattered has mobilised support for nurses and hospital staff to unprecedented levels. Valorising assets around their reproductive potential, initially through state regulation, could offer new means and counter practices that work towards new futures.

To start, we might consider where communities care beyond what is normally seen as possible or acceptable. Sharing homes and the distribution of an "altruistic surplus" through platforms could be a way of exploring this (van Doorn 2023). Homes had long been priced beyond reach as financial markets (Tepe & Montgomery 2017). The financial crisis of 2008 was at its roots a housing crisis, as it was the collapse of the securitized subprime loans that contributed to the loss in confidence of some of the most significant economic institutions in the world. Yet despite this, the relationship between wage levels and local housing prices has continued to travel in different directions (Wijburg 2021). Certainly, there are variations in the ways housing finance interacts with the economy (Fernandez & Aalbers 2016), but the experience of housing mixes financial innovation with crises that are intimate and often connected to local struggles (Fields 2017, Guzman 2023, Montgomery & Tepe 2017). Yet the ability to organise at the local level has contributed to effective movements that challenge the powerful financial interests that control housing in global cities. Guzman's research has highlighted the possibility of tenant collaboration in organising effective rent strikes that have undermined the business models of asset management companies to enable people to access affordable accommodation near where they work (Guzman & Ill-Raga 2023).

A macroeconomics that valued care would therefore look dramatically different to one that valued money supply above other criteria. Rather than focusing on the relationship between employment and inflation, it would focus on the capacity of a society to sustain its most vulnerable through a series of basic care indicators. These would include supporting those giving care at the beginning and end of life. It would embrace, rather than ignore, the contradictions between asset speculation and the housing needs of essential carers to live in the communities they care for. It would ensure that there was not a tax on workers who chose to care for the vulnerable.

5.2 B) A future of work based on life

Despite the extreme nature of the climate crisis, and the dramatic status of the imbalance between what the world can produce and what humans can consume, the value of nature has been reduced to that of an asset category or a potential provider of a wide range of ecoservices (Bennett et al. 2015). Technology's triumph over nature has been central to the progress of industrial capitalism and to the Enlightened Economy (Mokyr 2011). Yet the progress of science has not always been congruent with the protection of nature. Most obviously, the increased productivity of

labour through capital and energy intensive machinery contributed to excessive climate change. But above this was the refusal to consider alternatives energy sources because the industrial compromises were based on intensive energy use (Malm 2016).

To rethink the relationship that we have with water, for example, requires us to think past the idea that nature is made of things that humans can understand, control and commodify and to think of water as kin (Cohen et al 2023). This "modern water" paradigm has known, accounted for, and represented water as something that is distance and apart from its social context (Linton 2014). To reconsider our relationship with nature and the ways we work alongside provokes a reconsideration of the relationships with water that have long been forgotten, denied or unvalued. This recognition of humanities connections with water has provided a wealth of new understandings of the potential for wellbeing and mental health of being near water (e.g. Britton et al 2020). The idea that people can live alongside water requires the recognition of the foundational material relationship that humans have with water. Offering water bodies legal rights is a positive step (Hodgson 2006). But to understand how we can repair and recognise the importance of clean water to our communities requires that it is valued beyond the formal properties of legal protection or even the revenue streams of ecosystem approaches (Martin Ortega et al. 2023). Many indigenous communities recognise their relationships with water bodies and rivers through stories, spirits and traditions to celebrate the meaning and relationships that have been developed and shared over time (Wilson et al. 2021). This form of relationship with water requires work and understanding and time that captures the value of water beyond its rateable value and its quality beyond a narrow definition of pollutants. Understanding the material culture of water may lead to a fuller understanding of the consequences of water loss, a better connection with nature in its location and an understanding of the limits that hydrology and other colonial sciences can have in managing water as climate change makes us rethink how we relate to water again (Matanzina 2024). Kinship offers us a way of valuing water in ways that predate the objectification of water and its commodification.

5.3 C) A future of work that recognises the past: an agenda for reconstruction

At the top of the piece, we discussed how notions of work that have inherited assumptions over the relationship between necessity and "faring well" had colonial origins. A central requirement of any post-colonial political economy is to recognise the past and the contradictions between the need for cheap migrant labour and the existential vulnerability that European states feel (Bhambra 2023). In Necropolitics Achille Mbembe (2019) observes:

> *Democracy the plantation and the colonial empire are all objectively part of the same matrix.* (Mbembe 2019: 23)

There has been no end to the colonial need for cheap labour and there has been no attempt to address the debt that democratic economies of Europe owe to the nations whose wealth they stole hundreds of years ago. The inability of European political discourse to address the legacy of slavery is more than a lack of political willpower. The very constitution of European renaissance thought was to render the White man of reason superior and distinct from the reason of Black men. The lack of understanding, empathy and recognition for the humanity of refugees and migrants seeking safety, security and sanctuary in Europe continues to remain a stain on Europe's conscience. Europe continues the disappropriation of migrants by creating and enforcing "legal and juridical measures that lead to material expropriation and dispossession" (Mbembe 2017:78). The degradation of non-White groups and refugee populations through informal ostracism or through the relentless othering of public administration remains a form of "social death". This degradation is relentless in the practices of applying for a school place, securing a doctor's appointment, getting a bank account, finding somewhere to live and getting a job which on every occasion reminds the visitor that they do not enjoy the fruits of citizenship. As the international division of labour relocated work, the lack of identification of the workforces with places has rendered everyone to a greater or lesser degree a nomad in the global economy (Mbembe 2003: 31). As others have shown, racial profiling is not a uniquely European phenomena (Toney & Hamilton 2022; Vijaya & Bhullar 2022).

By way of illustration, Alexis Pauline Gumbs presents her position as a Black feminist by drawing on the experience of marine mammals. She speaks to the drowning of ancestors unable to breathe to link violated people with violated nature. Linking stories of marine mammals to inspire survival in our extreme world shows how the past is present in everyday acts. Her book was published shortly after the death of George Flloyd compelled millions to march and say "I cant breathe" (Apata 2020). Gumbs reminds us that "breath is a practice of presence" and tells how a Weddel seal pushes her pup into the icy water, so it can learn that it can breathe underwater. The pup does not know she can breathe under water "Until she does" (Gumbs 2021: 23). Gumbs asks how many years a right whale will breathe of the 100 years that it could live. She asks what the intergenerational practices have been that teach blue whales to fast all day and eat at night and how dorsal fins emerged to stabilise some species. What, she asks, does that tell us about how we have learned to live stable lives?

There have been many attempts to engage with indigenous knowledges or "more than human" ontologies that tend to reframe and reproduce practices of subordination and control (Chipato & Chandler 2023). So it is worth bearing in mind the approach that Gumbs takes is to challenge how the world is by remaining directly connected to the core necessities of life. Much of the innovation around how we work and who we need to be are locked into exactly the same forms of modernity and accumulation that we know and feel will drive us and our children to an early grave. When we think about the future of work, perhaps the greatest work that we need to do is to rethink how we understand who we are?

6 Conclusions

The future of work is laced with notions of power and contest. Ideology and violence sit beneath the surface of any exploration of the future of work, with productivist assumptions of power from the last century framing many of the contemporary conceptual infrastructure. The explicit overt manifestations of power exercised over Deliveroo drivers, and the hidden violence that rentier behaviour has normalised over centuries, are all carried into the ways we understand the future of work today. These have been shown to privilege some views over the possible future of work over others.

Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power have helped to trigger a critical reflection of the kinds of power that may be entertained in the future of work offered by platform or AI technologies. At the most superficial level pluralist, actor-based notions of power privilege the visible manifestation of victorious interests in a transparent fight. Agendas set by political compromise also structure who is involved in determining the contracts and possible futures of work. The structural view looked to ideas and knowledge that depoliticise the material and extractive relationships that characterised industrial capital and colonial knowledge. But the future of work may well extend beyond the traditional assumption that production will offer labour a value in the reproduction of capital. Rentier behaviour, with its long reach back into colonial enclosure and extraction, offers a very different future for work than industrial capital. Furthermore the power of rentier capital has every opportunity to reframe the flow of capital around the inconvenient transaction costs and contingent presence of democracy and its constitutional checks on the abuse of power.

The future of work could describe a retrenchment of a pre-democratic feudal order that is different to the market exchange of labour that defined capitalism (Durand 2022). The capacity of democracy to endure AI systems and platforms also presents new organisational principles for the exercise of power. It could be that new coalitions work out how to respond to a form of work that coordinates asset value over commodity production that these lessons crash over and overwhelm the ascendent nativist volk that Srnicek warned the left to beware of (Srnicek 2015). It could be that new forms of organisation of collaboration and connection transcend the arbitrary national boundaries that have legitimated the violent defence of property and the othering of cosmopolitan workers. A shift to working to value assets could challenge patriarchal property systems and spawn new forms of collaboration (Folbre 2021).

Declarations

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

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