

GENDERING LABOUR IN THE AGE OF AI

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Abstract: With the rise of post-industrial society, an ever bigger share of work takes the form of immaterial labour. While organizations of post-industrial economy continue to be gendered, the mechanisms for reproducing gender disparities are different than those in the traditional career path of the industrial era. Gender, which is the anchoring of a certain group of individuals in a specific sphere of social activities, gets re-produced as the segregation into 'more' and 'less' efficient workers takes place: quite often this is segregation into women and men.

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The problem with work

Why do we work? The answer seems obvious: most people might say that they work to earn a living, to meet their basic needs. From this point of view work is a necessity and quite often, unpleasant toil: Plato and Aristotle considered an exemption from labour a precondition for the fully human life of the mind, and Locke argued that work (by which he implied its manual version) was against 'human nature'. However, Karl Marx was of a different opinion: he believed that the 'drive' to labour was ingrained into human nature, and that through labour we develop our human potential, transform the environment around us and enter social relations that make the fabric of society. Formulated somewhat differently, as human beings we are not only creatures of need and desire but creative and productive beings (Sayer, 2005). It is



under capitalism, Marxists believed, that work becomes devoid of its creative potential and turns into the toil that many of us would love to avoid.

A critic of exploitative industrialism, Marx focused on material work with which we – if we lived in a better world – might overcome our division from nature and re-establish our unity with it. However, as humanity was moving to its post-industrial stage, a growing share of work was becoming immaterial. Daniel Bell (1976), a prophet of postindustrial society, was one of the first to predict still in 1975 that immaterial labour, e.i. research and development, services, information, entertainment, and so on would be the areas where most of the work was going to be done. Some proponents of post-industrial society argued that the productivity benefits of automation would liberate humans from meaningless ‘toil’ and eventually lead to a 15-hour workweek, while the remaining time would be reserved for creativity and personal development.

However, that was not to be, at least not yet. While contemporary work force tends to be more educated than at any previous point in history, most jobs rarely bring satisfaction to those doing them. Much of the actual work is still unwanted and unpleasant toil and, what’s more, those who do it quite often see no practical point in it. This feeling is so widespread that when American anthropologist David Graeber asked those who felt that the work they were doing was ‘meaningless’ to send him a message, he was swamped in replies. That was how he came up with the concept of *bullshit jobs*, first postulated in his 2013 essay “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs” and later developed into a popular book. The phrase itself turned into a meme that stands for “a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence although they usually do not say this openly” (Graeber, 2018, p. 28). Graeber argued that the pointlessness of many contemporary jobs in finance, law, human resources, public relations, consultancy, and so, was one result of the rise of financial and managerial sectors.

Some immaterial jobs can offer good compensation and ample free time, but this is not a given within the broader scheme of things. As Graeber was working on the idea of *bullshit jobs*, British sociologist Guy Standing (2011) came up with another analytical concept: for him, the most significant feature of the contemporary world of work is precarity. He coined the term *precarious work* that describes non-standard, unstable, or temporary forms of employment. While during the industrial period work could be ‘stupid’, physically hard, and even dangerous, the rise of mass manufacturing meant that many workers could keep their jobs for the duration of their work life becoming along the way the ‘infantry’ of growing labour unions through which they could stand for their rights. The shift from manufacturing economy to service and information economy coupled with globalization has created the (global) labour market that strives for endless flexibility. Its

workers may be both poorly educated illegal immigrants doing care work in affluent societies or, on the other end of the spectrum, educated, cosmopolitan urbanites doing creative projects. As different as they may seem, the two groups belong to the precariat class that has no job predictability or security. Its members may be self-employed or employed in part-time jobs, fixed-term work, on-call, and remote work, moving from one temporary and insecure employment to the next which affects their material or psychological welfare.

Most recently, the arrival of *Chat GPT* and other digital technologies united under the umbrella name of AI has been celebrated as a new step in automation that could potentially liberate humanity from much of the toil of tedious work. At the same time, there is a new wave of apprehension and concern. At this point, we have few clues as to whether these new wizards can relieve humanity from the drudgery of pointless tasks or how AI may affect civilization more generally. While university professors and Hollywood screen writers have their (well grounded) fears that AI might take over some highbrow jobs, there is little reason to believe that it might be capable now (or ever?) of doing some essential jobs encompassing care, social reproduction, and emotional support. Most of these tasks have been considered 'women's work', and at this point it would be quite appropriate to bring in the concept of gender in the discussion.

Gendering work at the time of AI

Social sciences postulate that the division of labour was a precondition for the rise of social order (or, put differently, of human civilization), with the first division of labour in history being the one between men and women. Gender is the main line of social delineation in all known societies and thus has cut through all types of work done since the beginning of time. Of course, the dividing line between women's and men's work had not been set in stone: alongside with tasks that were done by both genders, oftentimes jobs that initially had been women's work would later be taken over by men (weaving is one example) and vice versa. The gendered division of work has been shifting with the advent of new technologies, climate change, migrations, revolutions, and demographic transitions: for example, the percentage of Western women in paid labour in the 20th century rose steadily in response to the shift from manual to clerical work and an invention of the pill (an oral contraceptive) (Goldin, 2006). One thing is clear, though: at some early point in history the gendered division of labour turned out as one root cause of gender inequality, with men doing productive work and women doing that which sometimes is called subsistence work. The results of productive labour can be accumulated, exchanged, and become a source of wealth, while subsistence work which is about the

reproduction of life and thus socially essential, has no exchange value under capitalism: according to Marx, in the market economy, if a product is not sold, it does not exist.

Most often this 'labour of love' is that which women do under the ambiguous guise of housework, and in the 1970s, as educated Western women began joining labour force in mass numbers and to view work much in the same way that men did, several European feminists initiated *International Wages for the Housework* campaign. Sylvia Federici, one of its most ardent proponents, argued in her famous essay on the topic that housework had not only been imposed on women, "but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of the female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character" (Federici, 1975, p. 2). The unwaged condition of this labour was a powerful weapon reinforcing the common assumption that housework (and care, for that matter) is not work. However, emotional labour which is its necessary element is also an integral part of many occupations that are habitually considered women's because they provide various forms of care.

When American sociologist Arlie Hochschild put emotional labour into the focus of her 1983 book *The Managed Heart* that analyzed the plight of pink-collar (service) workers, of which the flight attendant served as an iconic example, she discovered that specific skills were required for these jobs. The salesperson, the flight attendant, the nurse, or the kindergarten teacher does not only sell their personality in return for a wage but engages in a distinctive kind of socially necessary labor which requires the production of subjectivity. For example, when the emotional performance of the worker is part of service work, seeming to 'love the job' becomes part of the job. Even more than that: "actually trying to love it, and to enjoy the customers and care about them, helps the worker in this effort" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 6). Thus, the production of subjectivity is at the same time the production of gender: personalities are gendered, and this is part of their value to employers in the service sector. This suggests that views of 'essential' or care work may oscillate between sentimentalized depictions of service work as a vocation, often a heroic one, and, at the same time, there is an opposing discourse in which service work is degraded for it is often seen as feminized, racialized, and informalized wage form.

Technology affects the division of labour and the perceptions of gender and sex, and immaterial labour in the form of digital/information technologies which for the past half a century have been occupying an ever growing share of the world of work might seem to be devoid of such gendered implications that service/care work has. Contemporary market systems are also often celebrated for being genderblind, for it is worker's efficiency, and not gender that matters there. The organization of real life, however, is more complex, for social reproduction needs to be sustained for society to continue, and while an ideal worker may be imagined as gender neutral, real individuals are gendered

and tend to have their gendered roles and responsibilities. In general, with neoliberal economics that spread with globalization and the disintegration of the socialist system over many regions of the world, the emphasis has been put on individual autonomy and one's own responsibility for one's well-being, and thus the contradiction between women's participation in production and reproduction remains and becomes newly meaningful. Organizations of post-industrial economy continue to be gendered, but the mechanisms for reproducing gender disparities are different than those in the traditional career path of the industrial era (Williams, Muller, Kilanski, 2012). Gender, which is "the anchoring of a certain group of individuals in a specific sphere of social activities" (The Logic of Gender, 2013), gets re-produced as the segregation into 'more' and 'less' efficient workers takes place: quite often this is segregation into women and men.

With flexible labor markets, precarious employment, and especially the politics of austerity which arises anew every several years, workers have to efficiently market themselves and be 'available' for the potential employer at any moment, 24/7; to make themselves interesting and successfully market their lives (hence the importance of social media among this group); they need to constantly enhance their CVs in order to have any chance on the job market. A 60-hour work week that is often required to make one competitive in the precarious environment would make most working mothers uncompetitive, and if workers have to market themselves and be available nonstop, women with childcare benefits (including extra leaves, a crown jewel of several welfare systems) may be considered 'unreliable' and, thus, uncompetitive or even 'incapacitated'. For them, reproduction has a social cost: "it becomes the burden of those whose cost it is assigned to — regardless of whether they can or will have children... in this sense, gender is constantly reimposed and re-naturalized", writes American scholar and activist Laura Briggs (2017) in the book titled *All Politics is Reproductive Politics*.

In 2023, Harvard professor Claudia Goldin was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for her work in advancing informed understanding of women's labour participation. Paul Krugman, another Nobel Laureate in economics (for 2008), stresses in his recent column in the *New York Times* that this event symbolizes the recognition of both Goldin's pathbreaking research and the immense importance of the subject of women's work (Krugman, 2023). In 'our' part of the world women's labour participation was, on the one hand, taken for granted: Soviet women began to join paid labour in the 1930s, and during the period of 'developed socialism' their labour participation was the highest in the world. On the other hand, the phenomenon was only studied sporadically or considered a minor scholarly issue. The disintegration of socialism and other events have had profound effects on the very organization and gendering of labour of which we don't know enough. The conference on immaterial labour that took place

at European Humanities University in the summer of 2023 and from which the current issue of the journal results aim to contribute to our understanding of women's/gendered work.

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