



Reconfiguring work and organizing for post-pandemic futures

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Introduction

The editorial of this open issue of *ephemera* is written against the background of a major global pandemic. The disease known as COVID-19 is believed to have started in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It rapidly spread across the world the following months, with various restrictive measures put into place to flatten the curve of contagion. Besides losses of lives globally, the pandemic has caused severe economic contraction on a historic scale (Hevia and Neumeyer, 2020). After the seeming slow-down of the virus during June-August of 2020, many governments attempted to go back to 'normal' and restart their national economies. Since then, the virus has been spreading with new force and mutations, adding record numbers of contagion and deaths, and causing governments worldwide to implement new restrictions on work and social life. While the old 'normal' currently seems to be again far away (if not altogether lost), a return to it is not only implausible but also undesirable. What we need, instead, is a socio-ecological transformation.

COVID-19 has exposed the systematic preference of profit-making over life-making in capitalism (Bhattacharya in Jaffe, 2020). The obsession with economic growth, relentless capital accumulation, and anthropocentrism

have been destructive for the planet and livelihoods (Barca, 2020; Chertkovskaya and Paulsson, forthcoming). COVID-19 emerged as a result of the so-called zoonotic spillover – the transmission of a pathogen from a vertebrate to the human population. Although pandemics have happened before, industrial agriculture and wildlife trade contribute massively to the loss of biodiversity and make zoonotic spillovers more likely (Wallace, 2016).

Meanwhile, the climate crisis is as pertinent as ever and the pandemic gives a vivid example of what life in a warming world will look like (Malm, 2020). The (post-)neoliberal era is incapable of meeting the needs of societies, having privatized and underfunded health, education, and other public provisions. The pandemic has made more visible the inequalities related to class, race, and gender (Cole et al., 2020). Those who cannot access healthcare, those who cannot afford housing, those who do not have internet access, those with job and life insecurities – all suffer more in times of pandemic. Therefore, this crisis is also a crisis of the state and capital (Zanoni, 2020). A different set of compromises, negotiations, and impositions between the two and the civil society will determine the future after COVID-19 (Bhattacharya and Dale, 2020).

Across the world, the pandemic has made many of us rapidly change (at least for now) how we organize, work, and live. As *ephemera* (2020) argued earlier this year, the present constitutes a crucial moment for critical reflection and raises a series of urgent questions. What is our relationship with the family, community, environment and the state? How should we structure our work? How do we value essential work and workers? How are we going to live, work, and organize differently in a post-pandemic world?

Amidst the switch to all things digital, we have seen how digitalization allows flexibility for those of us in the privileged position to work from home in the first place. At the same time, the difficult task of combining work and care commitments has put pressure on most people, especially those with kids and relatives in need of extra support in this difficult time. This makes us remember, again, the role of care that has been transferred to elders, teachers, daycares, nursing homes, and domestic workers, and the gendered as well as racialized nature of these roles. Inevitably, the notions of work,

workplace and working have all been reconfigured (again). More importantly, the pandemic makes us reconsider the priorities in organizing the economy and society.

The contributions to this open issue all reflect on the themes of work, digitalization, and alternative organizing. Although they were all written before the pandemic, the current situation has not made them less relevant, but, on the contrary, has accelerated their urgency. The contributions critically reflect on the current trends in the capitalist mode of production, to which a new wave of digitalization and reorganization of work are key. This adds to the long-standing discussion of capitalism and work in *ephemera* (e.g. Beverungen et al., 2013; Butler et al., 2011; Chertkovskaya et al., 2013; Chertkovskaya et al., 2016). Many authors also address another theme that has been actively pursued by the journal – that of alternative organizing (e.g. Graziano and Trogal, 2019; Johnsen et al., 2017; Phillips and Jeanes, 2018; Stoborod and Swann, 2014). Here, the voices within the issue envision a different organization of our societies, rethinking work, leadership, management, and governance in profound and far-reaching ways.

Drawing on the contributions to this issue, the rest of the editorial will proceed as follows. We begin by reflecting on the new configurations of work and production. We then zoom in on the current trend of digitalization. The remaining part of the editorial reframes work and economy in terms of care and shows how resistance and action for alternatives can be organized. It is concluded with some examples of initiatives for socio-ecological transformation that were articulated during the pandemic.

New configurations of work and production

From the industrialization era to the sharing economy, alongside the major technological breakthroughs and innovations, the way work is organized has always been contested. While fads and fashions such as total quality management, lean management, or self-managing teams come and go, the conflict between those who produce value and those who appropriate value remains constant. The task ahead of us is a matter of configuring how we

manage this conflict and contestation in and around the notions of work and value (Hardt and Negri, 2018; Harvey, 2018). Through new configurations of work, value is produced and distributed in different ways. These new ways can enable capital accumulation, but also post-capitalist ways of organizing, as highlighted, for example, by the difference between the corporate-driven ‘sharing economy’ and worker-owned ‘platform cooperativism’ despite both using platforms to organize work (e.g. Scholz, 2016).

A handful of papers in the issue explore and theorize new configurations of work and production. One emerging trend is that of ‘collaborative economy’, with the idea of collaboration supposedly being key to it. Stefanie Faure and colleagues explore what collaboration means in such settings and observe a fundamental paradox at the center of this work trend. Collaboration, they argue, involves a noisy dialogue between heterogeneous actors, yet recent examples of collaborative workspaces such as makerspaces and incubators are often structured around strict rules for how to maintain a quiet working environment. Such workspaces are thus governed by what the authors call a ‘logic of silence’. People participating in the collaborative economy are caught in a strange situation in which they are ‘alone together’. Drawing empirical inspiration from a French coworking space, the authors set out to explore the role of silence, arguing that there is more to the phenomenon than what intuitively seems to be the case. Silence, they maintain, is more than just a default setting – it is a multifaceted condition, pregnant with social as well as political possibilities.

In contrast to the trend of collaborative economy, some inherently collaborative spaces are aggressively pushed towards competing and showing their worth in comparison to others. In an article on competitive measures in higher education, Christine Schwarz investigates the reconfiguration of academic work in the age of neoliberal capitalism. Drawing on a large study of so-called ‘competition designers’ (i.e. third space professionals within universities and business schools), Schwarz explores how they make sense of their own work and justify the introduction of competition into a setting that often resists simple quantification. The author’s conclusion is that these managers are caught in a number of dilemmas concerning responsibility, representation, skills, and sense-

making. On the one hand, the managers' response to these dilemmas serve to soften the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism. On the other hand, they expose and question the credibility of competition as a particular type of rationality in higher education.

Another work trend that has flourished in contemporary society is downshifting, as explored by Rachel L. Cockman and Laylah Pyke. Understood as a decision to scale down on work and consumption in order to have more time for family commitments (childcare in particular), downshifting has become a response to increasingly demanding work-lives where the boundary between labor and leisure is blurred to the point of non-existence. Cockman and Pyke's main objective is to provide a critical reading of the academic literature on downshifting, while reflecting on the emancipatory potential of this new trend. Pursuing that objective, the authors ask: is downshifting really the solution to increasingly demanding work-lives, or should we rather view it as a polarizing activity for the privileged few? Cockman and Pyke opt for the latter approach by viewing downshifting as a discursive strategy that solidifies a number of taken-for-granted assumptions about work and leisure.

Notably, configurations of work and production are changing in industrial spaces, too. In the final piece within this thematic section, Simon Schaupp and Ramon Diab explore the introduction of so-called 'cyberphysical systems' and the 'industrial internet of things' in manufacturing. These are tangible manifestations of what in Germany is known as 'Industrie 4.0'. This new digitally mediated regime of production is characterized by even greater automation and flexibility than previous modes of production, rendering it the technical equivalent of capital's self-organizing logic. As such, Schaupp and Diab describe the ongoing automation of industrial production as a process of cybernetization, in which conventional managerial control is replaced by increasing self-organization and immediate feedback. In this way, the entire production process becomes an autonomous system, circumventing traditional management-worker relations, and responding directly to the logic of capital. The article presents a number of challenges to the way we normally think about (industrial) organizations and how we typically theorize relations of production.

Digital transformations at work

What is brought to light in Schaupp and Diab's article is not only how 'industrie 4.0' overturns labor processes that have existed for half a century, and how this shift in capitalist modes of production introduces a new type of market-based control at the workplace. It also shows how much this particular production regime hinges on digital technology. Digitalization is often heralded by techno-optimists and mainstream management authors as inherently progressive waves of transformation that 'contain more goodness than anything else we know' (Kelly, 2010: 359). However, numerous empirical studies have shown that there is a darker side to the introduction of digital technology at the workplace (Plesner and Husted, 2020; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020). For instance, while some have pointed to the role of digitalization in accentuating unhealthy workplace conflicts (e.g. Upchurch and Grassman, 2016), others have emphasized the enormous potential for worker surveillance that is embedded in digital technologies (e.g. Ball and Wilson, 2000; Van Oort, 2018; Zuboff, 1988). Furthermore, a series of studies have investigated tech-based challenges to the professional identity of various occupational groups (e.g. Petrakaki et al., 2016; Plesner and Raviola, 2016), and how digitalization sometimes creates illusions of human emancipation (e.g. Ossewarde and Reijers, 2017) and workplace democracy (e.g. Turco, 2016). Finally, while digitalization is often presented as something 'immaterial' and magically enabled by technology, it comes with a substantial biophysical throughput, manifested as the incredible amounts of energy, materials, and waste that are needed to make digitalization happen (the Shift Project, 2019).

A handful of papers in this issue continue the empirical examination of digitalization's darker sides. With online distribution platforms becoming a common tool for organizing work, Ilana Gershon and Melissa Cefkin bring up the question of what actually happens to work when it is organized this way. For them, the neoliberal context – where digital platforms are positioned as offering autonomy to entrepreneurial workers and efficiency to corporations – is a starting point for looking into the new sociology of work, its challenges and contradictions. Using the case of IBM, the authors explore some key features of work (design, dissemination, and control) in intra-

organizational crowd-work initiatives and specifically in work distribution via open calls. Attention is brought to segmentation in work design, the nature of working with strangers, and disciplining through reputation mechanisms, among others, illuminating well-studied issues surrounding work in new circumstances.

Digitalization does not only aid in distributing work, but also helps program technology that can minimize or eliminate the use of human labor altogether. Stefan Laser and Alison Stowell observe this trend by examining the curious case of Apple's recycling robots (named Liam and Daisy). Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Germany, India, UK, and Ghana, the authors show how competing valuation systems are clashing within the highly complex area of e-waste management. Apple's robots devalue alternative modes of organizing waste (e.g. reassembling instead of recycling electronic gadgets) and make certain actors redundant (e.g. people working at local phone repair shops in developing countries) by utilizing opaque high-tech procedures for recycling old iPhones. Giving voice to some of these otherwise marginalized actors is Laser and Stowell's way of exposing the less glamorous side of corporate sustainability initiatives, but it also allows them to illustrate how tangible and specific waste management often is.

Corporate-driven and enabled by digitalization, platform capitalism and gig economy take away workers' control over the labor process through new configurations, which poses a challenge for resistance and labor struggle. In a first-hand account of working for the food delivery platform Deliveroo, Callum Cant presents us the initial attempts of organizing worker resistance in the times of algorithmic capitalism in the case of Deliveroo workers' strike in Brighton, UK. Cant conducts a labor process analysis of the Deliveroo platform and demonstrates not only the developments in the technical aspect of capital accumulation through the lean platform of Deliveroo, but also the political challenges of organizing class struggle from a workers' perspective. While the workers organize themselves for direct action through invisible organizations, with the assistance of in-person and digitally mediated communication, Cant's ethnographic account shows how

collective resistance can be fragile due to class fractions leading to a loss of control over the labor process by workers and limited gains.

Transformations of work towards digitalization, as this section has shown, are often designed to benefit capital, coming with precarious flexibility, substitution of workers by technology, and new forms of exploitation. Furthermore, digitalization aimed at producing more will come with higher biophysical throughput and might prevent possibilities for repair or waste prevention in the first place. It is a radically different understanding of work and economy that is needed for socio-ecological transformation, to which we now turn.

Transforming work and economy with care

Transforming work and economy for ecologically sustainable and socially just futures requires a fundamental change in the mode of production. Collective and democratic forms of ownership would reconnect workers to the means of production (Marx, 1867/1996), allowing to put justice and integrity at the core of the organizing of work. However, it is not enough to focus only on changing the relations of production. The very purpose of societies needs to be reoriented from profit-making to life-making, recognizing the sphere of social reproduction as essential for it (Barca, 2020; Fraser, 2014). This would have implications for the purpose of economies and work, with 'care' being a key concept to describe such a reorientation (Dengler, 2017). Instead of the current focus on perpetual expansion, the role of the economy would be to satisfy needs and ensure well-being. It is work that serves these purposes that would be valued most. At the same time, work would leave the social pedestal that it occupies today, defining much less how we are seen in society. It is no surprise that work has been at the center of demands for radically re-organizing our societies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the capital-led trend of work digitalization outlined in the previous section, multiple voices have been calling for organizing work differently (e.g. Degrowth New Roots collective, 2020; Democratizing Work, 2020), which we address broadly in the

conclusion. Two studies in the issue also bring refreshing views concerning the relationship between work, care and economy.

Mariya Ivancheva and Kathryn Keating's article shows that repositioning care as a central activity in all human production and reproduction, within and outside paid labor, allows for a sharper critical analysis that helps to unpack potential venues of exploitation and liberation. For them, while precarity is usually opposed to stability, stable working and living conditions have historically been available to a minority of people engaged in productive work and free of care commitments, with the work of women and other marginalized groups often made more precarious, due to their labor not being given an equal value. Introducing the issue of precarious living conditions into the discussion of precarious labor, the authors argue, highlights how precarious lives of people with care responsibilities, who need flexibility in order to navigate their lives, can be destabilized by stability at work. The authors insist on the necessity to put solidarity, care, and love back into our workplaces in order to resist capitalist competitiveness and alienation, but also warn against the risk of such care labor being exploited by capitalist appropriation.

Enrico Beltramini's article, in turn, helps us to infer that for transforming work and the economy, we also need to transform the understanding of management, which is key to how work is organized and divided. Drawing on the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Beltramini connects the practice of management to the notion of economy or 'oikonomia' (understood as household management) rather than to the notion of politics. Agamben's conceptualization of management as oikonomia allows it to be recast as a type of praxis that is inherently domestic rather than political. Arguing that management derives from economy, Agamben suggests that management is not knowledge or science, but action, belonging to the economic-administrative rather than the political-juridical paradigm. This reading of management helps to problematize the superior position of management in organizing work, and opens for more democratic organization of the latter. At the same time, it does not discharge the notion of management completely, leaving space for the role of management in the transformation to an economy based on care.

The art of resistance and action for alternatives

The capital-driven trends in reconfigurations of work are at odds with the alternative visions of work and economy based on care. The COVID-19 pandemic points to a crack in the system and creates a momentum to act for radical change. While collective action becomes highly difficult in the current situation, it is not impossible (Chattopadhyay et al., 2020). Throughout 2020, we have seen a whole range of powerful collective actions, within and outside workplaces – such as workers striking at Amazon to resist horrible working conditions, women in Poland fighting for their reproductive rights, and the Black Lives Matter campaigners demanding to defund the police. During this time, however, progressive visions and social movements have to compete with the interests of the state, capital, and reactionary movements (Pleyers, 2020). Thus, it becomes crucial to find ways to organize creatively, and also to join forces by forging activist alliances. For example, climate and labor movements should come together to argue for a type of climate action that also pursues transformation of economies and work, which would ensure a just transition (Barca and Leonardi, 2018). Three contributions to this issue can help inform such collective action by bringing attention to leadership work in social movements, to the often-problematic role of social media in movement campaigns, and to the importance of policies and governance.

In doing all this, it is crucial to reflect on collective actions and positionalities, acting upon any closures created in the process. Leadership, in particular, is an important but also sensitive terrain in social movement organizing. Ruth Simsa and Marion Totter's article delves into the challenges and complexities of 'good leadership' work in social movement organizations by drawing on the case of the Spanish Indignados movement (15M). In conversation with the critical leadership studies literature and by empirically referring to interviews with activists, the authors provide a freshening framing of leadership in social movement organizations, which is autonomous, reflexive, and rule-based. The authors argue that we need a nuanced perspective in relation to the perceptions of leaderless protests, since the activists and social movement organizations have their clear expectations and objectives not from particular individuals/leaders per se,

but from the function of leadership work that serves the needs of the activists.

A combination of different methods and tactics can be used in social movement action, from small-scale interconnected grassroots action to bigger campaigns, acting in physical spaces. Digital means for organizing can also be used for organizing and campaigning, and may prove particularly helpful in times of the pandemic. However, it is important to be aware of their limitations, including social acceleration and distraction associated with them, their embeddedness in structures of capital accumulation, and energy and material requirements for using technology. Frankie Mastrangelo's note problematizes the role of social media in social movements today, showing how even when directed at resistance it can contribute to neoliberal worldviews. This is shown using the example of the immigrants' rights movement in the US and, in particular, the digital campaign for solidarity with undocumented immigrants that unfolded after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. While the campaign articulated a powerful message and fostered a national conversation on the topic, it was also reproducing neoliberal reasoning, such as arguing for the rights of undocumented migrants via presenting them as pursuers of the American dream. Mastrangelo's analysis is by no means intended to undermine activists' efforts. Instead, it calls for activists to learn to detect and prevent reproduction of neoliberal assumptions and practices within social movements.

With policies at different levels arguably being necessary to make a transformation happen, efforts of movements also need to be made to separate policies of the state from those of capital (Koch, 2020), as well as to advance and popularize transformative policy proposals. The article by Lucy Ford and Gabriela Kuetting brings attention to the problem that despite biophysical and social limits to growth, global environmental governance such as the Sustainable Development Goals has economic growth and economy at the center. The authors argue that both scholarship and praxis surrounding this broad field need to recognize the limits to growth, and to devise governance mechanisms that would go to the root of the problem. The academic-activist discussion on degrowth, according to them, presents a

frame with a coherent set of values and ideas that can offer an important contribution to global environmental governance. Instances when the limits of growth are somewhat recognized within the discourse of institutions such as the World Bank and the OECD, in turn, point to cracks in mainstream rhetoric. It is important to act upon these cracks, whilst making sure not to lose the broader picture of the scope of change needed for socio-ecological transformation.

What is to be done for the ‘new normal’?

While there is a light at the end of the tunnel thanks to the research programs on vaccinations, we are still in the dark when it comes to the conditions of the post-pandemic world. The contributions in this issue, on the other hand, invite us to reconsider what kind of a ‘new normal’ we can construct through transformations of work, economy, care and organization, and they are not alone. In May 2020, an open letter titled *Work: Democratize firms, decommoify, remediate* was published in various newspapers around the world (Democratizing work, 2020). Backed up by 6000 scholarly signatures, it argued for democratizing firms, decommoifying work, and remediating the environment (*ibid.*). The letter advocated saving certain sectors from the market, via schemes such as job guarantees, and democratizing workplaces, though without questioning the very ownership structure of these firms (Gerold et al., 2020). Calls for more fundamental transformations of work – and societies – are driven by degrowth and feminist voices as well as alliances between them (see also Paulson, 2020).

Published around the same time, the open letter of the degrowth movement was signed by more than 2000 activists and scholars and by multiple organizations (Degrowth New Roots collective, 2020). It advocated fostering collective forms of organizational ownership and argued to ‘radically reevaluate how much and what work is necessary for a good life for all’, including reduction of working time, just transition for workers from destructive industries and an emphasis on care work. The latter was most vocally articulated in yet another open letter from the Global Women’s Strike and Women of Color (2020), which called for a care income for ‘all

those, of every gender, who care for people, the urban and rural environment, and the natural world'. It stressed how work of care – invisible, mostly unpaid, with more than two thirds of it done by women – is crucial for the functioning of our societies, but never gets supported by governments. These two proposals complement each other and address the two splits characteristic of capitalist production. Locating work in collectively owned and run organizations restores the connection of workers to their means of production (Marx, 1867/1996). Care income, in turn, helps to reconnect the spheres of production and social reproduction (Barca, 2020; Fraser, 2014).

Furthermore, the degrowth movement letter included a broader demand to reorganize societies around the provision of basic needs and services, putting life at the center of societies and economies (Degrowth New Roots collective, 2020). As articulated in a statement by the Feminisms and Degrowth Alliances network that preceded it, this implies building 'a caring economy that democratizes all dimensions of life, delinks livelihood security from wage-work, equitably revalues both paid and unpaid care work and promotes its gender-just redistribution' (FaDA, 2020). There are many ways in which this can be done, with calls for a universal basic income, universal basic services, and a care income growing louder during the pandemic.

In response to the urgency of socio-ecological transformation, through various theoretical and practical interventions, this open issue indeed can help to address the question of 'what is to be done' in order to construct a new normal. Yet, the burning follow-up question of 'how is it to be done' clearly requires more answers from us all. In that sense, this issue invites scholars and activists to explore a number of pressing inquiries such as: How can we reconfigure work in a way that allows for flexibility and freedom without relying on sinister modes of disciplining and self-management? Or, how can we make digitalization work in the service of progressive ends and bypass problems of surveillance, polarization, acceleration and exacerbating environmental degradation? And finally, how might we build alternative modes of organization that can gain broad support and do not lend themselves easily to neoliberal co-optation? Such questions and concerns will obviously not be answered in the definitive any day soon, but pursuing

them is precisely what characterizes a society that is ready for a new era, in which solidarity and autonomy are finally reconciled.

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