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# ACCOUNTS

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## WHAT DOES ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY OFFER THE WORLD?

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Message from the Chair Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, professor of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

I must admit that two years ago when I agreed to be a candidate for chair of Econ Soc, I thought I understood what I wanted to do. My quasi-plan was to use this small bully pulpit to promote a theoretical economic sociology of categorical [inequality in relational and institutional contexts](#). It turns out that in 2020 economic inequality was far from a theoretical exercise, but the visible face of human suffering. The centrality of categorical distinctions—race, gender, and class—to who lost jobs, got sick, and died were unavoidable. And then there was George Floyd. Televised brutality, state sponsored and protected murder, followed by violent and state sponsored repression of justifiable popular outrage.

Did economic sociology have anything to say? I think the answer is yes, but that we are not so good at saying it yet, at least not in a way that others can hear. As an intellectual collective we are not at all good



at amplifying our message, so that publics—news makers, movements, politicians—can absorb an alternative to market bromides. It seems to me that the intellectual might of this section has been put to good purpose undermining the notions that markets are asocial efficiency machines and that governments are impediments to economies, and replacing these untruths with an understanding that money is cultural, markets are relational, both actors and organizations are social, and institutions are powerful.

Well before Trump, some sociologists already knew that Black people were treated as disposable, immi-

grants as disposable, and the working class, regardless of race or nativity, as disposable. The statistics are so commonplace that we mostly look away, compartmentalize, rationalize. African Americans, whose enslaved labor created much of the original wealth in this country, [die younger](#), go to [jail more frequently](#), and as we are reminded again and again and again are [killed by police](#) all too often. The national [minimum wage](#) was worth about \$12, in current dollars, an hour at its peak in 1968, today it is only \$7.25, or 98 cents in 1968 dollars. Even prior to the pandemic [one in five](#) U.S. children lived in poverty. Among high-income countries, the U.S. has by far the most expensive, inefficient, and poorly performing [healthcare system](#). The U.S. has been [continuously at war](#) for this entire century, spending the lives, limbs, and legacy of its soldiers to advance the political and economic agendas of a few. What all these quotidian failings have in common is that at its core U.S. institutions treat its people, young and old, Black, Brown, and White, citizen and immigrant, as disposable. What do economic sociologists have to say about this disposable institutional order?

Potentially a lot, I think. But we need to adapt our powerful ideas to inform and clarify. Mark Granovetter's foundational insight that exchange relationships [can be embedded](#)—mutually regarding, trust filled, friendly—still stands. As designed it is a concept that allows us to understand why some relationships are not disposable. Where we have fallen down on the job is on the flipside. We need to update the notion of an asocial arms-length relationship inherited from economics and admit that asocial relationships are also amoral, most often immoral. The opposite of trust and friendship is not indifference, but the freedom to exclude and exploit. One of the profound failings of neoclassical economics was to assume away power asymmetry in market competition. There are times when I think economic sociology has done the same, but instead using norms as the neutral place to hide the dirty truth. Embedded relationships restrain the exercise of power to exploit and exclude.

When we move to the institutional level, we might begin with the observation that creating a system of exploitation and exclusion is not simply a cultural product but the proximate result of power dynamics in a system of interorganizational relationships. In a more fundamental cause framework, exploitation and exclusion as institutional norms in the U.S. can be traced to the original sins of Native genocide, African slavery, and their racist embedding in property rights and the development of both labor market and welfare institutions. Institutions are also not simply amoral historical products, but channel contemporary power to share and take.

Another problem may be that economic sociology has not cared very much about efficiency, production if you will, or distribution. We leave efficiency to econ and distribution to stratification and, interestingly, again to economists both micro and macro. During the pandemic, labor and stratification scholars had a lot to say. Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett repurposed their methodologically pathbreaking project on service sector firms to examine the [fates of essential workers](#). [Liana Landivar, Leah Ruppanner, and Buddy Scarborough](#) quickly documented that the COVID economic collapse hit women, especially mothers, hard. Focusing on how people remained attached to the economy during the pandemic, our team at the [Center for Employment Equity](#) examined the risks associated with [essential work](#) and the importance of employment for [infection](#).

Perhaps we need to redirect our tools to a broader set of economic topics? That markets are not what economists say they are, that relationships among actors and their institutional context matter are clearly fundamental. Perhaps our next step is to show how these ideas inform production, investment, and distribution? To be fair, economic sociologists like Steve McDonald, Sandra Kalev, and Emilio Castilla have been working on employment and distributional outcomes, so we even have local role models of how we might proceed.

This week I am wondering if there are some economic sociologists out there this month studying how people construct meaning around three rounds of stimulus checks? How defunding the police will unfold in different institutional contexts? And why some people find economic reparations for African Americans just and others incomprehensible? An important next step is clearly to build institutional avenues for transmitting and amplifying our message, which I will take a crack at discussing in the next issue of *Accounts*. ■

# FROM THE END OF HISTORY TO THE END OF NEOLIBERALISM?



Özgür Orhangazi is a Professor of Economics at Kadir Has University, Istanbul. He completed his Ph.D. at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and is an economist working in the fields of macroeconomics, political economy, and international economics. He has published extensively on financialization, financial and economic crises, and alternative economic policies. His recent research focuses on concentration and monopolization in the U.S. economy and financial fragility and crises in Turkey and other developing economies.

Gökhan Mülayim, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Özgür Orhangazi about the crisis of neoliberalism, the state of the field of economics, and the promise of interdisciplinarity—if any.

**Gökhan Mülayim:** Let me start with a broad question about our present moment of crisis. There is a growing consensus on the phrase “the end of neoliberalism,” which seems to express the transformation we have been witnessing for a while. Though it certainly sounds powerful, I am not sure exactly what that phrase means. Some researchers are preoccupied with the “Sustainable Development”; while others have been furthering this agenda with the “Green New Deal”; and during the pandemic, “the Great Reset” has become a buzzed about phrase. Is neoliberalism really over? What are your thoughts on the present crisis?

**Özgür Orhangazi:** The implementation of neoliberal policies resulted in a series of financial crises in the “developing and emerging economies,” especially in the 1990s, and neoliberalism has long been questioned in these countries. Yet in most of them, neoliberal policies were deepened in the 2000s. In the U.S., the questioning of neoliberalism intensified after the 2008 financial crisis, and the focus of the criticisms have been mostly on the workings of the financial markets and institutions and growing income and wealth inequalities. The talk about the “end of neoliberalism” was widespread after 2008. In addition to rising expectations of more tightly regulated financial markets, the Occupy Wall Street movement focused on inequalities. In fact, as the crisis spread to Europe many left-wing/

socialist coalitions rapidly gained popularity, and Syriza’s election victory in Greece was seen as a powerful indicator of the end of neoliberalism. The end of the 2000s and the early 2010s were also a time in which a “pink tide” has been rising in Latin America with left-wing parties with an anti-neoliberal rhetoric and redistributive policy frameworks were growing in power in many countries. Add to this the widespread protests labeled as the Arab Spring that seemed to have begun in response to both political oppression and economic difficulties and change was certainly in the air in many places. Much commentary and academic work has been produced in these years discussing the rise and the fall of neoliberalism.

However, by the mid-2010s the Obama administration had limited itself with very minimal regulation of the financial markets and not much else in terms of dealing with the income and wealth inequalities. The Syriza government that became a symbol in Europe ended up accepting the neoliberal conditions imposed by the Troika. The “pink tide” had already peaked and began receding as the redistributive policies put in place in many of these countries hit their limits as global commodity prices declined—and so on...

It certainly looked like the end of neoliberalism would take a lot more time than initially expected. At this point, it is also important to think about what we un-

derstand from the term “neoliberalism.” While there are various definitions of the term, in its more general sense I think neoliberalism should be understood as a set of policies that aimed to remove the fetters in front of accumulation of capital and commodification and marketization of every possible area to open them up for capital accumulation. This policy framework resulted in increased fortunes for capital, increased profit rates as well as an increase in the profit share within the GDP but slower economic growth, relatively low or declining real wages, stagnating investment, and growing inequalities. The 2010s have witnessed a continuance of neoliberal policies together with the rise of intellectual monopoly capitalism. While the global climate crisis began to be widely recognized and slowly addressed, the main solutions put on table were in line with neoliberalism in that market-based solutions were sought, such as carbon trading.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the massive government interventions required created a debate about the end of neoliberalism again. The “Great Reset” that began to be discussed at the higher echelons of the system opened up a debate on whether capitalism can be reformed to be more “resilient, equitable, and sustainable.” A European Green Deal is now officially being supported by the European Council. The Biden administration also seems to be working on a similar policy framework. Will the Green Deal(s) go beyond the logic of neoliberalism or limit themselves to creating/opening up new areas for capital accumulation? Do all these now mean the end of neoliberalism? Does the end of neoliberalism mean something better will replace it? How about the organization of the anti-neoliberal sentiments of the people by right-wing authoritarian leaders and/or movements? The rise of authoritarian regimes? It seems like one can certainly find signs and reasons to be optimistic or pessimistic, depending on your inclination.

**G. M.:** What are the implications of the crisis of neoliberalism for the science of economics, or so-called neoclassical economics? Could you please tell us a bit about what is going on in the disciplinary field?

**Ö. O.:** Economics and especially the neoclassical variant historically likened itself to natural sciences and attempted to come up with universal laws. The dom-

inant version has long been a model in which rational individuals and firms, using all available information and maximizing their utility and profits, make decisions at the individual level, which are coordinated through markets that self-regulate to reach to equilibrium. This is an approach based on methodological individualism. As it became evident that the assumptions of this version were not realistic at all, modifications to these assumptions were made in order to protect the essence of the theory through, for example, the introduction of “bounded rationality” or certain types of behavioral economics. In macroeconomics, the dominant dynamic stochastic general equilibrium models could also be seen as an example of this, in which a couple of market imperfections are integrated into the model but the general equilibrium essence is protected. When these models came under criticism after the 2008 financial crisis, as they completely ignored the financial mechanisms, another series of modifications were made to these models to integrate financial market “imperfections” so that the models could generate financial crises as well, without sacrificing methodological individualism.

In fact, when you look at recent research in economics, even when economists are doing empirical work on interesting and important issues, they start with pledging allegiance to this core with a small equilibrium model that, in the best case, is irrelevant for the remainder of the work, and, in the most cases, limits the research. The core of the discipline still requires you to be loyal to the ideas of markets, individualism, and equilibrium. Some economists that come from this core have also been writing lately about an idealized capitalism that might be being undermined by “wrong” institutions, increasing market power, etc. The idea that the normal workings of the capitalist system inherently produces instability, inequalities, and uneven development is still very much outside of the mainstream of the discipline.

**G. M.:** The adjective “heterodox” encompasses a broad field that includes schools of thought as diverse as Marxism, institutionalism, feminism, post-Keynesianism, and the like. What does it mean to be a heterodox economist today?

**Ö. O.:** With the neoliberal turn in the 1980s, all variants of economic thought other than the neoclassical one has been pushed out of the economic conversa-

tion and to the periphery of the discipline. Heterodox economics today is mostly a large umbrella that brings all these schools of thought together. Some think that the label heterodox does not say much as it is too broad, while some others argue that it essentially brings a pluralistic approach to studying economics. A main advantage of the rise of certain institutions, conferences, and journals that self-identify themselves as heterodox has been to provide a space for people working on a variety of issues with a variety of different methodological approaches that are usually marginalized within the economics discipline. This is especially important for young scholars trying to do unorthodox research. It also created a space in which researchers from different schools of thought could engage in a dialogue, opening up the possibility for a cross-fertilization of ideas with novel approaches to contemporary problems as well as increased connections among theoretical traditions.

It is also important to note that a lot of ideas that are banned from the neoclassical framework still make it into the mainstream analyses of the current economic problems, be it increased market power and monopolization tendencies, growing inequalities, the significance of institutions for growth and development outcomes, and so on. However, the leading figures in orthodox economics consistently refrain from referring to the vast literature of research done by heterodox economists.

**G. M.: What are your thoughts on interdisciplinarity in the field of economics? The neoclassical orthodoxy has long disregarded the broader field of social studies of the economy, ranging from economic sociology and anthropology to political economy and even to organizational studies. How do you think heterodox economics could benefit from that wider field?**

**Ö. O.:** It is true that the neoclassical orthodoxy has mostly disregarded the broader field of social studies of the economy, but, lately, economists coming from this approach, equipped with the latest cutting-edge statistical and econometric techniques, began invading all of the social sciences. It is not so much that they are becoming more interdisciplinary but more like imposing themselves and their methods onto other dis-

ciplines. Certain strands within heterodox economics are more open to interdisciplinarity and lines of communication are being built between economics and especially political science, sociology, as well as psychology. Yet, I think there is still more that heterodox economists could do in that direction.

**G. M.: Given your position as a U.S.-trained scholar who is currently not based in the United States, how do you see your work in the context of the continental divide? What are your thoughts on the state and the trajectory of economics at the center and the periphery?**

**Ö. O.:** I studied economics as an undergrad in Turkey and then moved to the U.S. for my Ph.D. studies. After I received my Ph.D. I began my research career in the U.S. before moving back to Turkey. Throughout the years I've also had chances to visit various universities throughout the world either for research or teaching purposes. All these gave me a chance to be closely acquainted with the trajectory of economics both at the center and the periphery.

The dominance of the economic theories and models developed in the center demonstrates itself first through economics education. For example, the typical economic curriculum is based on those in the U.S., most even using the exact same textbooks. Second, to a great deal the research agendas of the academic economists are also set in the center, not only because of the education they received, but also by the publishing requirements of the university systems who mandate that researchers publish in the so-called top international journals, which happen to be the journals published in the center. A great deal of research time is spent on replicating theories and models developed in the center, for example. Third, a good majority of the economists rely on theories and models developed in the center to examine the problems faced in developing economies. Finally, if an economist from the center happens to be studying and/or commenting on economic issues in the periphery, most of the time their ideas are somehow given more value and weight than local economists, perhaps showing the more general ideological dominance of the center over the rest of the world. ■



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# BOOKSHELF

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Juliet Schor is a Professor of Sociology at Boston College and a member of the MacArthur Foundation Connected Learning Research Network. Her research focuses on consumption, time use, and environmental sustainability. In 2014 Schor received the ASA's award for Public Understanding of Sociology. She has written many academically and publicly influential articles and books during her career, including a national bestseller. Her most recent book, *After the Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked and How to Win it Back*, was published in 2020.



Meghann Lucy, Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Juliet Schor about her new book.

**Meghann Lucy:** You employed a collaborative design for this project. What were some of the benefits and challenges of this approach? And why was this approach chosen for this particular project?

**Juliet Schor:** The project was part of a MacArthur network. Typically network members hire post-docs for their research. I saw an opportunity to involve PhD students who could use the research for the dissertations. The benefits were the funding and research experience for PhD students, who got to work on cases that interested them in a team context. It allowed us to cover a wide variety of cases, which gave us analytic insights that were not available to narrower projects. We developed a good collaborative process that accommodated individual case articles that were both solo pieces and co-written with me, as well as cross-case articles. The biggest challenge was organization. As the project grew in scope and complexity, we lacked systems for keeping track of things. The project manager role didn't gel until a number of years in, at which point one of the team members began operating as a manager and tightened up all our systems. But we had a lot of cats to herd.

**M. L.:** One central tension you explore throughout the book is that between the promises of the sharing economy and the reality of the effects as they have played out so far. Could you describe this tension and how it came to frame your project?

**J. S.:** The book focuses on this tension in part because our project moved along with it. We started early and

were among the first few people to research the sharing economy. We were interested in it because we saw its potential to provide goods, services, and livelihood for people as the Great Recession was raging. We also saw it as structurally transformative—creating more moral markets. This was also a theme in our informants' discourse about the sector. The promise was the combination of these new technologies which made person-to-person (P2P) economies more efficient, trustworthy, and appealing. But as time went on and we expanded to less-alternative sharing cases, the landscape was also changing. We began studying some of the big, VC-funded platforms like Airbnb, Uber/Lyft, and TaskRabbit. They started out as great opportunities for earners, but over time conditions were deteriorating. Sharing turned into exploiting. So, it made sense to frame the book around that trajectory. One great thing about this project was the freedom that MacArthur gave us to follow the sector wherever it went. So that's what we did—we went from studying ideologically-driven initiatives like food swaps and time banks, to Uber—described as “neoliberalism on steroids.”

**M. L.:** During your research, you found variation in job satisfaction among the “independent contractors” employed by sharing economy apps. Can you speak to some of the sources of that variation?

**J. S.:** A major finding of our project was that satisfaction as well as outcomes, such as hourly wages, autonomy, and flexibility, vary by the extent to which the earner depends on the platform to pay their basic expenses. “Supplemental” earners, who, when we

did our research, were the large majority on almost all the platforms, were generally happy, in control of their working conditions, less vulnerable to risk and bad outcomes, and able to earn more per hour. Dependent workers were the reverse. One conclusion is that the platforms, because they shift all the risk onto earners, do not work as places to earn a fulltime living. But over time more and more workers needed to do this, especially in ride-hail and delivery, two of lowest paid services. So, the platforms have become a nightmare for many, as we've learned with numerous accounts of drivers and deliverers living in their cars, earning below minimum wage, and going into debt.

**M. L.:** We hear a lot about the for-profit goliaths in the sharing economy, for example, Airbnb, Uber, TaskRabbit, and Lyft, but much less about the nonprofits. One of the exciting contributions of this book is that it brings into the conversation the nonprofit sharing sector and its influence in the creation of the sharing economy. Could you explain a bit more about your findings and why the nonprofit sharing sector hasn't scaled to the same extent as the for-profit sector?

**J. S.:** We started by studying nonprofits because we were most optimistic about their potential for changing economic relations. We were surprised at the extent to which homophily, striving for distinction, and contradictions between ideology and practice characterized our sites. We saw a lot of whiteness, class privilege, and in some sites, male-ness being enacted in socially exclusionary ways. That was one reason these sites didn't scale, and in one case failed in the course of the research. The other big factor is that they didn't structure themselves in ways that met the needs of larger populations. For example, the time bank attracted people who liked its ideology of equal value for every person's time, but those participants didn't really need much, so they didn't engage in too many trades. Alternative markets need to meet people's needs. In the Great Recession, many people needed money. That's why they flocked to Uber, Airbnb, and TaskRabbit. The non-profits all rejected money as a medium.

**M. L.:** Who do you think is responsible for the many problems we see with the sharing economy? To what extent do you think policy could help alleviate these issues?

**J. S.:** The biggest problems are the result of governments failing to regulate. In some cases, like Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb the platforms were permitted to break the law until they got too big to control. Now they're trying to put the genie back in the bottle, but it's not clear they can. If we'd had more powerful unions, that might have prevented this from happening, as it has in some countries, like Germany and Sweden. We do need policy, but the last few years have shown that some of the policies and new laws aren't curbing platform growth too much. I'd also like to see worker- or worker- and user- owned cooperative platforms. We did one case on a cooperative platform, which we discuss in the last chapter of the book.

**M. L.:** The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly been a shock to the sharing economy. How has COVID-19 influenced the sharing economy? Can you think of any lessons from this experience we can take forward?

**J. S.:** I'm currently doing research on a food donation platform called Olio. It's interesting because it's a gift platform—no money is involved—but it's a for-profit company. We are looking at whether COVID-19 has affected its activity, as many expected the virus would make people unwilling to engage in person-to-person transactions. (Ride-hail collapsed, for example.) We've found that after a brief decline, trading is back on a growth path. Obviously, the pandemic has shifted the structure of demand a bit, but I think the sharing economy is quite robust with respect to COVID. Perhaps the lesson is that we can design systems that engender trust among strangers even in perilous times.

**M. L.:** Even after exploring many of the unfulfilled promises and negative effects of the tech-enabled sharing economy, you still express hope for the future. In what ways might we be able to right the course?

**J. S.:** In the book we talk about "democratic sharing." It involves robust regulation and ideally worker- and user- owned platforms. Sharing is an ideology about solidarity, mutuality, and risk pooling. It's not about exploiting and controlling. If we are serious about sharing, we need structures of ownership and governance that will give us the former. Concentrated, investor ownership has led to the perversion of this promising sector. That's what needs to be changed. ■

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# PLATFORMS AND VENTURE CAPITAL INVESTORS

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Benjamin Shestakofsky is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania with a Ph.D. in Sociology from UC Berkeley. Broadly, he is interested in sociology of work and organizations, economic sociology, qualitative research methods, and sociological theory. His research focuses on how digital technologies are affecting work and employment, organizations, and economic exchange. In his recent book project, he analyzes how the imperatives of venture capital investors structure the relationship between work and technology in startup companies.

Elif Birced, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Benjamin Shestakofsky about his recent article on the role of relationship labor in the operation of platforms, the importance of capital in the analysis of work and technology and his forthcoming book *Venture Capitalism: Startups, Technology, and the Future of Work*.

**Elif Birced:** In your recent coauthored article, “Making Platforms Work,” you and your colleague, Shreeharsh Kelkar, introduced the concept of “relationship labor.” For our readers, could you briefly talk about what you mean by this term?

**Benjamin Shestakofsky:** When tech companies describe the platforms they build and maintain, they often emphasize the automated aspects of their systems. As Tarleton Gillespie has shown, keeping the focus on algorithms helps them maintain a veneer of objectivity and neutrality. And as Lilly Irani has argued, this rhetorical strategy can also promote investors’ belief that their companies can “scale” without incurring significant additional labor costs.

However, over the past few years, as researchers have begun to investigate platform companies’ business practices, we’ve started to understand the role that large, far-flung, behind-the-scenes workforces play in making platforms work. Algorithmic systems are not autonomous; like other supposedly automated technologies, digital platforms are better described as sociotechnical systems that achieve their ends by calling upon particular and contingent combinations of software and human workers.

Most of the emerging research in this area focuses on how tech companies hire armies of low-wage “digital laborers” to assist software systems by performing routinized, information-processing tasks. Mary Gray and Siddharth Suri call this labor “ghost work.” Sarah T. Roberts examines how social media companies like Facebook may recruit thousands of “commercial content moderators” to review user-generated content and remove hateful, violent, or otherwise objectionable material. Others have shown how human workers label images of city streets to train autonomous vehicles or rate search engine results to improve Google’s service.

When Shreeharsh and I talk about “relationship labor,” we’re describing another way in which workers help platform companies accomplish their aims, which has thus far received far less attention. We know that platforms have to manage a variety of competing concerns—for example, balancing their own financial interests with the needs and preferences of their users. But we know far less about what companies do to try to keep users engaged when they’re dissatisfied with the platform.

Drawing on ethnographic studies of two different platform companies, we examine the activities of “relationship workers”—agents of platform companies



with titles like “customer support specialist” and “community manager”—who engage in interpersonal communications with a platform’s users to aid them and persuade them to continue to use the platform. The first of our case studies was a digital platform called AllDone, which connected buyers and sellers of local services (e.g., house cleaning, wedding photography, tutoring, and plumbing). The second was edX, a startup that partners with institutions to offer Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, which are online courses that include text, videos, and machine-graded assessments. By leveraging variation in organizational contexts, we’re able to elaborate the common practices and divergent strategies of relationship labor deployed by each platform.

We found that in both companies, relationship workers engaged in what we call account management and community management. Account management practices are aimed at addressing users’ particular problems and concerns. Community management practices are designed to bring users together to collaborate with one another. The commonality of these practices across two very different platforms suggests that relationship labor is a significant yet overlooked component of the supposed “algorithmic management” of platform users.

However, the frequency of these practices varied across the two platforms: While AllDone’s experiment with community management was brief, it was a core component of edX’s governance strategy. We explain this divergence by arguing that a platform company’s mission, resources, and the attributes of its users shape how it organizes relationship labor.

**E. B.: How does a focus on relationship labor contribute to the ways in which sociologists think about the platforms?**

**B. S.:** I think there are a couple of ways in which focusing on relationship labor helps to advance how we think about platforms. First, as I suggested above, it enriches our understanding of the role of human labor in making digital systems work. As our economic lives become increasingly mediated by platforms, it’s likely that relationship labor will be needed to smooth over the gaps between users’ expectations and the realities of imperfect and often contested algorithmic systems.

A second contribution has to do with how we think

about the governance of digital platforms. As I mentioned above, platform companies have to manage a variety of tensions that arise among the users they connect and between users and the company itself. These issues raise the question of “platform governance,” or how platforms control the terms of users’ participation.

Existing research on platform governance emphasizes the impersonal and procedural dimensions of governance by examining how platforms’ rules are set, implemented, and enforced through algorithms and digital interfaces. Some exemplary work in this vein includes Alex Rosenblat and Luke Stark’s research on the “algorithmic management” of Uber drivers and Roberts’ and Gillespie’s research on the large-scale, “industrial,” and routinized nature of commercial content moderation. These elements of platform governance can leave users feeling frustrated and neglected, to the point where they may exit the platform. Nobody likes to be treated like a number or a data point; people like Uber drivers and YouTube content creators want the platforms they use to address the particular problems they create. But the existing research doesn’t have a lot to say about how platforms respond to user dissatisfaction.

Our article makes the case that researchers should take a more expansive view of governance that accounts for how platform companies try to stop user exit and incorporate user voice. Drawing on political theory, we view governance as encompassing not just regulations and procedures, but also how platform companies try to shape or change users’ behavior to achieve their goals. By adopting this more expansive view of governance, sociologists can develop a richer view of the social processes through which governance is accomplished by platform companies and contested by users. For those who are interested in challenging the power of platform companies, it’s important to get a more complete understanding of the technological, financial, organizational, and rhetorical strategies they deploy to get users to buy into their systems.

**E. B.:** In your recently published essay in *Communication and the Public*, you stress the importance of centering capital in the analysis of work and technology. Could you elaborate more on why it is important to focus on capital in the examination of work and technology?

**B. S.:** Over the past decade, technologists, journalists, and some researchers have been sounding the alarm about how the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) could bring about widespread job loss. Ethnographers of work and technology have made important contributions to the “future of work” debate by showing that the implementation and effects of algorithmic systems are likely to vary along with the social contexts in which they appear. Some have pointed out that firms will adopt AI systems at different rates depending on their size or industry. Others have shown how the introduction of algorithmic systems can actually generate new work processes (as I described above). Angèle Christin, Sarah Brayne, and others have demonstrated that the ways in which workers use and resist new digital tools will vary according to the institutional contexts and professional norms in which they’re embedded. And some scholars have looked at how the nature of resistance from workers and the public—as well as policy responses designed to moderate the consequences of innovation—will differ across space and time.

So, in just a few years’ time, sociologists and other critical social scientists have advanced the conversation by showing that there’s nothing inevitable about the future of work. But I think that in our zeal to counter narratives positing that the future of work will be shaped by the attributes of technologies alone, we’ve largely shifted our focus to accounting for variation—across workers, organizations, industries, and societies. Perhaps because this research emerged as a refutation of technologically deterministic approaches that posit monolithic effects, we’ve heard a lot less about how the outcomes of algorithmic systems can converge across diverse settings.

Scholars, including Ruha Benjamin, Tressie McMillan Cottom, Catherine D’Ignazio, and Lauren Klein, have begun the important work of linking the outcomes of AI systems not only with their immediate environments, but also with larger structural forces of racial domination and patriarchy. In addition to these approaches, I think it’s also important that we center how the interests, goals, and perspectives of the investors who fund new technologies and set design parameters influence the relationship between work and technology on the shop floor. We needn’t look any further than Amazon’s massive warehouses to see that that today’s tech companies, like their forebears, develop new technologies to monitor, control, and increase the efficiency of their workforces. Although workers in different settings may

respond to these strategies in different ways, it is the interests of capital that are driving the implementation of technologies in corporations, with the ultimate goal of boosting stock prices to reward investors.

However, centering capital in our examinations of work and technology also allows us to attend to the fact that not all capital operates according to the same logic. As Ching Kwan Lee argues, there are instead varieties of capital that advance the particular interests of owners and respond to incentives in unique ways. So, venture-capital backed startups may adopt different approaches to technological change than large publicly traded corporations because their investors may expect them to exponentially inflate the company’s perceived value within a year or two. Instead of steadily pursuing profit through efficient business practices, startups are constantly experimenting so they can grow as quickly as possible. Owing to the imperatives of venture capital, their technology, labor practices, organizational design, and business models are often built on quicksand as entrepreneurs prepare for the next “pivot” aimed at generating faster growth.

When we start looking into how different types of capital may be associated with different ways of structuring the relationship between work and technology, alternative models and politics of technological development come into view. Jessa Lingel has a great new book on Craigslist, which she suggests has never adopted the aggressive business practices of its Web 2.0 successors because it is privately owned, allowing its founder’s values to continue to shape the company’s trajectory 25 years after its launch. As Trebor Scholz has shown, worker-owned platform co-operatives can offer an alternative to the predatory practices of investor-owned platform companies. State-led investments can also fund ventures aimed at generating public goods like green energy technologies. At a time when the dominant narrative surrounding the future of work assumes that technology itself is the driver of change, centering capital helps to remind us that questions of technological design are in reality often questions of political economy—of who has power over how agendas are set and how resources are allocated, of who will take on risks and who will reap rewards.

**E. B.:** Could you please describe your research and the main implications of your book manuscript *Venture Capitalism: Startups, Technology, and the Future of Work*?

**B. S.:** As I've just suggested, we are starting to see a lot of great research on how digital platforms are changing how people find work and get work done. But what happens inside of the platform companies that create these technologies usually remains inscrutable to the outside world—as much of a “black box” as the algorithms that power their products.

My book project draws on 19 months of participant-observation research at AllDone, the digital platform for local services described above, which eventually achieved a valuation of nearly \$2 billion. I argue that it's shortsighted to reduce the story of the future of work to the technologies that are restructuring the nature of work and the relationship between workers and employers. I found that the continual reorganization of the AllDone platform that local service providers used to find work reflected and was driven by the continual reorganization of work inside the platform company.

From my unique perspective inside the firm, I was able to observe how everyday organizational activity was set in motion by the priorities of venture capital investors. Venture capital conditions startups to pursue rapid growth at all costs so that investors can achieve a massively profitable “exit” in a short time horizon. AllDone's managers prioritized continual technological experimentation and organizational change as they sought to attract successive rounds of venture capital investment. It was this organizational dynamism—mandated by the firm's participation in the venture capital system—that defined the relationship between work and technology at AllDone, called into being its globally distributed workforce, and shaped workers' everyday experiences on the job.

The book traces the evolving relationship between work and technology within the firm as managers confronted a series of strategic challenges. Software developers in the San Francisco office continually experimented with the product as they sought to identify new ways to maximize the firm's value. For them, the company's dynamism was a source of excitement, as engrossing challenges, observable successes, and their own financial stake in the company reinforced the belief that AllDone was poised to become “the next big thing.”

A team of work-from-home contractors in the Philippines performed repetitive, information-processing

tasks to stand in for or support AllDone's software. Because they constituted the company's behind-the-scenes human infrastructure, they were relatively insulated from the dynamism originating in the San Francisco office. Their organizational culture emphasized themes of love, family, and gratitude, reflecting the stability of their work and the company's reliance on their low-cost and reliable performance.

A third team of contractors working from home in the Las Vegas area provided telephone-based customer support to AllDone's users—the “relationship labor” that I described above. These workers took on tremendous organizational burdens generated by AllDone's ever-shifting systems, as they were forced to keep up with continual changes in the product while simultaneously managing the mounting dissatisfaction of AllDone's users. Their exposure to rapid change resulted in work experiences that were frustrating and sometimes even traumatic. In many ways, their experiences mirrored those of the local service providers who relied on AllDone to find work yet. Both AllDone's phone support agents and many of its users were forced to continually adjust to new rules and technological systems.

My book project reveals how startup workers' experiences with technological change are filtered through the organizational strategies that managers enact to meet investors' expectations. I show that when the imperatives of financiers are driving innovation, workers' degrees of exposure to and control over that change become important axes of organizational inequality. In foregrounding the consequences of the organizational dynamism characteristic of tech startups, I ask readers to consider who pays the price when tech companies prioritize rapid growth at all costs.

**E. B.:** Lastly, what are the major insights that your current research on venture capital investors can offer for economic sociologists? And how can economic sociologists build upon your work?

**B. S.:** One of my aims in with this project is to strengthen dialogue between economic sociologists and sociologists of work. Economic sociologists have long been interested in how the increasing influence of financial actors has led to the restructuring of firms and employment relations to reduce costs and increase strategic flexibility. If we think of venture-backed firms as a sort of a crucible for these kinds of pressures, then taking a closer look at startups like AllDone can help us

learn more about how financial logics directly impact labor processes on the ground. There's also the literature on entrepreneurship, which has a lot to say about how entrepreneurs experiment with resources and tactics as they try to manage uncertainty, but has devoted far less attention to how this kind of dynamism in the organizational core calls into being and structures the everyday experiences of workers in the periphery.

More generally, I hope that this project can help to set the stage for a research agenda dedicated to investigating how the structure of ownership influences a firm's technology choices. This approach can help us think about how companies and societies can distribute the benefits of innovation more broadly rather than allowing the lion's share to be captured by a select few. ■

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## BOOKSHELF

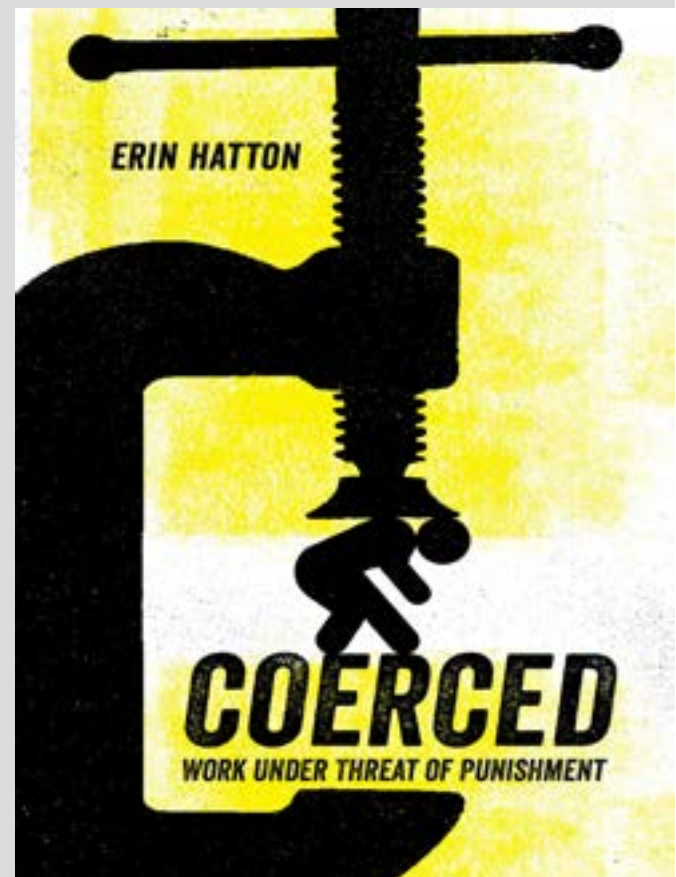
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**Hatton, Erin (2020)** *Coerced: Work Under Threat of Punishment*. Oakland: University of California Press.

What can prisoner laborers, graduate students, welfare workers, and college athletes have in common? While these four groups might seem unrelated at a first glance, Hatton argues that they are all part of a growing workforce of coerced laborers. By coercion, Hatton does not only refer to economic coercion. She argues that these laborers suffer also from status coercion, as they don't have any rights-bearing employment relationship with the organization for which they labor. Unlike economic coercion, status coercion happens as a result of supervisors' power to discharge these laborers from their status, which can result in depriving them of the rights, privileges, and any future opportunities that their status might bring to them. Hatton stresses that only looking at economic coercion, which operates through pecuniary compulsion, may not be not enough to understand the punitive power that employers have over workers.

Hatton's book provides an in-depth analysis of ideologies behind status coercion. She shows that narratives of immorality were helpful to cast prison laborers and welfare workers as people engaging in something other than rights-bearing work. Cultural narratives of privilege have a similar function, drawing boundaries between nonwork and rights-bearing work, and can delegitimize the work done by student athletes and graduate students—as well as discipline them. In addition to showing how status coercion operates and

interacts with various forms of worker subjugation, Hatton discusses possibilities for resistance and challenging hegemonic constructions of "work" as well. Her findings indicate the potential for relationships at work and organizational practices to deconstruct hegemonic understandings of work. As such, Hatton's *Coerced* offers some valuable insights on not only how status coercion is reproduced but also how it can be challenged.





# SPOTLIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALIYA HAMID RAO



Aliya Hamid Rao is an Assistant Professor of Qualitative Methods in the Department of Methodology at London School of Economics. She completed her Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania and a postdoctoral fellowship at Stanford University. She is a qualitative researcher working in the fields of work, organizations, gender, family, and emotions. Her book *Crunch Time: How Married Couples Confront Unemployment* was published by the University of California Press in 2020.

Gökhan Mülayim, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Aliya Hamid Rao about her new book and her experience with sociology as a vocation.

**Gökhan Mülayim:** Let me first congratulate you on the publication of your book *Crunch Time: How Married Couples Confront Unemployment*. Could you please tell us a bit about the story of this book? How and why did you go into the field of gender and unemployment research?

**Aliya Hamid Rao:** Thank you! Immediately prior to starting graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, I worked at the headquarters of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva, Switzerland. At that time the notion of “decent work” was a driving theme for the ILO and discussions of precarity floated through its hallways as well as in the conferences hosted there. A ways before that, I had been involved with some informal sector work on organizing rickshaw drivers in Delhi. I should also say that I graduated right into the Great Recession where talk of unemployment was ubiquitous. So when I came to graduate school, it was with a background where these ideas about insecurity of work were sort of whirling around in my head.

In my first year, I took a Sociology of the Family class with Annette Lareau, where we read Katherine Newman’s *Falling from Grace*. The stories of the unemployed managers in this book left a deep impression on me. But something also nagged at me—the absence of women from “the unemployed”—as though unemployment is something only in the male and masculine

domain of experience.

The more I read about unemployment, including classics like Mirra Komarovsky’s *The Unemployed Man and His Family*, the more it struck me that we needed research that would more completely theorize the experience of unemployment to extend beyond men’s experiences, and beyond insights into masculinity, to also understand women’s experiences. My key contention has been that since men and women continue to have different experiences and understandings of paid work (or employment), unemployment also likely matters differently for them. So that was the very simple starting point of my book, *Crunch Time!* The book uses interviews with unemployed men and women, interviews with their spouses, follow-up interviews, and “intensive family observations” with a subset of these families. This basically meant observing these families daily for several weeks (usually for at least 50 hours of observation per family) to get deeper insight into how unemployment shapes their daily lives. The design was intrinsically comparative to allow me to understand points of similarity and difference in men’s and women’s experiences and understandings of their unemployment. My focus on the book is quite a lot on what paid and unpaid work mean for my participants, and how men’s participation in paid work is evaluated as more salient—more important—than women’s.

**G. M.: Speaking of work, could you please tell us about your experience with sociology as a vocation? How did you become a sociologist?**

**A. H. R.:** I came to sociology by a rather circuitous path of first an undergraduate degree in English in Delhi. During and after my undergraduate degree I worked and volunteered in numerous organizations, including those pertaining to informal sector work, and especially informal sector work amongst women in South Asia. I enjoyed literature tremendously (I know for many, the demands of reading during graduate school kills their enjoyment of fiction, but for me it actually became even more necessary during the toughest patches of writing and research). I realized that though that that's not where my intellectual interests lay; I was a lot more interested in learning about empirical realities of people's lives and the social forces shaping those, especially when it came to the insecurity of work and gender. So, I went for a quite interdisciplinary master's degree at what was then the Gender Institute (now the Department of Gender Studies) at the LSE. I was taught by feminist geographers, feminist political philosophers, and feminist theorists amongst others. It was lovely!

I always had graduate school "at some time" in the back of my mind but I went to work at ILO right after graduating from my masters. And it was there at the ILO and also in the UN system that I saw the research people were doing, what drove their agendas, and that was the spur for me to apply for graduate school earlier than I had anticipated. Sociology as a discipline seemed like an obvious choice because of its expansive theoretical background and empirical concerns. So, I applied to sociology programs!

But of course "becoming" a sociologist is more complex than that. I think the way I think now—how broader patterns and structures intersect with personal biographies—is very much "sociology." But pinning down when these ideas became my intellectual basis is more difficult. I think a lot of this kind of intellectual consolidation happened toward the end of graduate school and after that; it seemed like everything I had been learning and reading that had been percolating in my mind for ages really coalesced together to form a more coherent basis of approaching intellectual problems and puzzles, or even more mundane things like news and current events, at this point.

A mentor in graduate school once remarked that once

you have your first peer-reviewed journal article, that's when you are a sociologist. So that's something that stuck with me. I guess it's still an ongoing journey?

**G. M.: You have been to many destinations in your academic journey, including Delhi, Philadelphia and San Francisco, Singapore, and lastly London. I am curious about how such diverse settings contributed to your research and teaching. How do you see your work in the context of the continental divides?**

**A. H. R.:** When you put it like that, I feel very fortunate to have had the chance to study in wildly different institutions with very different ways of "doing" academia. There are several important ways that this experience matters for my research and teaching, and I'll just mention a few.

First, it has taught me about being cautious about empirical findings and theoretical take-aways by paying a lot of attention to the context. Sometimes it seems to me that in US sociology there's a tendency to center the US and findings from there as necessarily generalizable, when the US is actually quite an anomalous country in many ways. So, this experience has emphasized a very simple point: the importance of context.

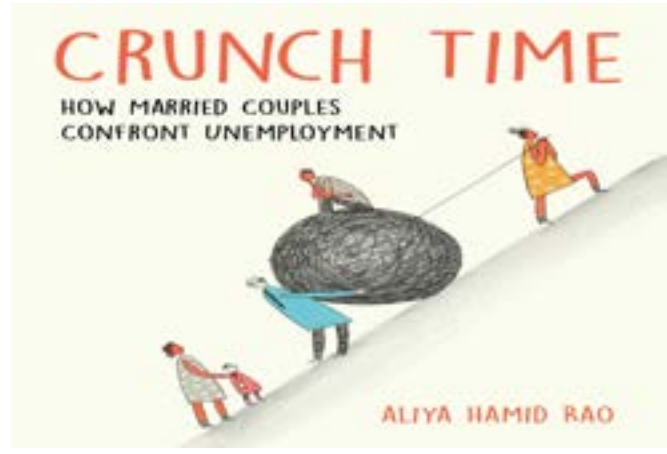
Second, I remember a professor in graduate school advising us that fieldwork in qualitative research moves along with your life stage. He described how for one of his earlier projects on nightlife, he was able to do that because he was not a parent so being out at night, while exhausting, was not as impossible as it may otherwise be. For me this also translates into seeing how your work can engage with where you are located, basically trying to leverage your geographical location to your specific research interests. Of course, this may not always be possible for everyone. What it has meant for me specifically is that I've thought about what aspect of work makes sense to study in the context I'm in. Because my postdoctoral fellowship was in the heart of Silicon Valley, I was fortunate to be invited to collaborate on a project on tech workers. In Singapore, which is a hub for tech and finance in the APAC region, I focused on this issue of working on geographically dispersed teams (a sort of "view from elsewhere"). Now in the UK, especially with the economic devastation of the pandemic, I'm turning my attention back to unemployment.

Finally, in terms of teaching, I think that having studied in very different institutions in different continents means is that I'm careful (or at least I hope I am!) to recognize that students bring different prior assumptions and experiences to the classroom, that I shouldn't take for granted a "shared" understanding. This is important in my teaching at the LSE, where I think something like 70% of our masters students (and here I teach at the masters and PhD level) are international. The other thing my own experience means in terms of teaching is the importance of the local context. This was especially true in Singapore, where I taught undergraduates and I wanted to be very mindful of explaining sociological concepts to them in a way that made sense to their lives (often examples from U.S. textbooks, etc., didn't really resonate). So for myself this meant trying to immerse myself in the local context by doing some obvious things like reading the main newspaper there; watching the main news-channels; having some sense of popular culture there; learning a bit more about the secondary educational system there; and reading more Singaporean sociology and using it in my teaching. I felt when I did that, that's when I was able to better communicate sociological concepts to students.

I think to sum up what I've said succinctly: My experiences of researching and teaching in these different places has actually emphasized the sheer importance of the local context for both teaching and research.

**G. M.:** As a qualitative researcher, what are your thoughts on the prospects of qualitative research in the age of quantities, shaped by the so-called big data on the one hand, and the pandemic, on the other? (Is qualitative research losing ground, or is it gaining a new significance?)

**A. H. R.:** I think qualitative research is really important to understand social life and to offer plausible explanations for it. I think if it loses ground, that is a tremendous loss to sociology. To me it seems to me that qualitative research may actually be gaining salience as tech companies in particular hire qualitative researchers as part of their research teams. I think it signals an acknowledgement that this kind of textured, nuanced understanding of social life, of behaviors, of meanings and experiences is quite necessary and will remain so. The pandemic has definitely impacted qualitative researchers, but I think they have been very innovative in finding workarounds to understand people's experiences even during these times. A colleague of mine Mar-



nie Howlett, recently wrote a piece published in *Qualitative Research* (and forgive me if I'm stripping her argument of complexities!) that with everything going online during the pandemic, online data collection, for example interviews, are simply not as "anomalous" and "low quality" as they have typically been considered to be. Her argument hinges on the idea that since we are living so much of our professional and personal lives mediated by a screen, albeit out of necessity, this means that when it comes to interviewing or conducting focus groups, doing so online simply isn't as peculiar and anomalous as it may have been 15, 10, or even 5 years ago. While I, myself, prefer in-person data collection (it can be energizing!), I do think it's possible to collect quite high-quality qualitative data even with the pandemic.

**G. M.:** What is on the horizon? Could you please tell us a bit about your future research plans?

**A. H. R.:** Sure, I have a couple of smaller projects, one on negotiations and another on geographically dispersed teams that I'm wrapping up. I'm doing a collaborative project with colleagues here at the LSE using experimental methods to study discrimination in online labor markets. Finally, the next big solo project that I'm in the process of getting off the ground is a project on unemployment in the UK. I see myself as a researcher who studies what paid and unpaid work mean to people—especially in the context of employment insecurity (i.e., job loss)—what their experiences are with these, and I do so by focusing on the professional middle class. One reason this social class appeals to me is because of its relative empirical novelty when it comes to dealing with employment insecurity: Until quite recently this class was the best protected from the vagaries of the labor market. It still is very protected, certainly, when compared to other demographics. Yet,

what it means to be part of this class is, I think, shifting and is generative in producing particular practices in the home and specific ways of understanding the self. In *Crunch Time*, I focused on these practices in the home. Now, I want to shift to thinking more about the self.

We know that over the decades, major economic shifts, including in terms of the insecurity of work and the employer-worker relationship, has meant the emergence of new subjectivities as people grapple with these shifts. Scholars like Allison Pugh, Marianne Cooper, Eva Illouz, Jennifer Silva, Ana Villalobos, Steven Vallas, Angèle Christin, Ilana Gershon, Michèle Lamont, amongst others, have written really incisive pieces examining these issues of insecurity, what Pugh has called the culture of insecurity. Scholars like Ofer Sharone have studied this in the specific context of unemployment, as has, to some extent, my previous work. One way my prior work built on this was by showing how the understanding and experiences of unemployment is gendered and matters differently for men and women.

Another way that I think we need to build on this research is by getting into the nuances of identifying how people's different situations in the labor market (even with ostensibly similar levels of education and so on)

and different contexts in terms of family structures (esp. the gender ideologies therein) may matter for how they experience unemployment and job searching. In my research so far I've tried to do this broadly in terms of gender, but of course gendered experiences intersect with race, and that needs further attention. So far I've focused on how unemployment is understood and experienced within a particular family structure: dual-earner, heterosexual, married parents. But of course, families take many forms and many people abstain from marriage.

So, in my ongoing project on unemployment, I'm sort of casting a wider net to investigate what unemployment means and how it is experienced in a broader way. Currently, I've conceptualized: 1) general media stories about unemployment; 2) political speeches about unemployment and the unemployed; 3) job-searching advice about unemployment during the pandemic in media outlets; 4) career coaches and job-searching; and finally, 5) the unemployed, as "key sites" where meanings about unemployment are constructed and contested. So this project as I'm currently designing it is relatively large and uses a variety of qualitative methods from content analysis to observations to interviews to get a grasp on how unemployment is understood and experienced by key stakeholders. I'm really looking forward to diving into this! ■

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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**From Bo Hee Min, editor-in-chief of *Work in Progress (WIP)*:  
Sociology on the economy, work and inequality**

[Work in Progress](#) is a public sociology blog co-sponsored by four ASA Sections: Organizations, Occupations and Work; Economic Sociology; Labor and Labor Movements; Inequality, Poverty and Mobility.

WIP publishes short (800-1,200 words) accessible articles of sociology, aimed at the general public. We publish three main types of content: research findings (summaries of published journal articles, working papers and books), news analysis, and commentary.

If you are interested in contributions, please send a proposed title and topic (one paragraph max.) to the editor-in-chief, Bo Hee Min (boheemin@gmail.com).

**Latest from *Work in Progress***

- [What is the "Value-Added" of teachers? How test scores perpetuate false understandings of the work of teachers and of the process of learning](#) (Dara Shifrer)
- [Patient Satisfaction is Not Medical Quality](#) (Cristobal Young)
- [How computerization has opened up new opportunities for enhancing the earnings of the already privileged](#) (Tali Kristal)
- [What explains racial/ethnic inequality in job quality for low-wage frontline workers in the service sector?](#) (Adam Storer)
- [In elite professional firms, skill development practices help and hurt racial and ethnic minorities](#) (Elizabeth Gorman)

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# TEACHING ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

Roi Livne is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan. His research lies at the intersection of economic sociology, the new sociology of morality, science and technology studies, medical sociology, and political sociology. His book, *Values at the End of Life: The Logic of Palliative Care* (2019), portrays how clinicians and patients reach end-of-life decisions among popular sentiments, moral arguments, and professional practices in the rise of the new economy of dying. The book received awards from the ASA's sections on Sociology of Culture, Sociology of Aging and Life, and Altruism, Morality, and Solidarity. He teaches Economic Sociology, Death and Dying, and Sociology of Medicine, Aging, Science, and Health Workshop.

Ya-Ching Huang, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Roi Livne about his experiences in teaching economic sociology.



**Ya-Ching Huang:** Could you walk us through your economic sociology syllabus? How do your research interests shape your course design?

**Roi Livne:** My undergraduate class centers on one phenomenon: the expansion of the capitalist market logic into new life domains. We spend the first two weeks learning Polanyi's economic sociology, beginning with his distinction between the substantive and formalist approaches. It's a bit of a sentimental beginning—I remember myself as an undergraduate student reading "The Economy as an Instituted Process" for the first time. It was among the main texts that drew me to field, and I still think his program is one of the strongest and most rigorous in the sociology of economic life. Following this introduction, the course has three parts, each approaching market expansion from a different angle: commodities and commodification, money and monetization, and the relationship between states and market economies.

My graduate class is quite different in character, although it begins from a similar point: Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* and the multiple concepts of social and political embeddedness that have circulated in our sub-discipline (from Polanyi, to Granovetter, to Krippner,

to Bourdieu and Zelizer's alternative approaches). In the weeks that follow, we analyze several different dimensions of economic life and economic interactions: the objects produced, consumed, and exchanged; economic agencies and various forms of economic habitus; media of economic exchange (including, but not limited to, money); economic designs (from models to market architecture schemata); organizations; modes of valuation; and rules, regulations, and various forms of governance. I save the last few weeks for a handful of more in-depth discussions on contemporary research topics. The last time I taught the class (fall 2020) we talked about surveillance capitalism, credit/debt relations, and racialized forms of economic inclusion and exclusion.

My own economic sociology work shares much with cultural sociology, the sociology of morality, and the sociology of knowledge, which obviously impacts how I approach teaching. I don't limit my classes to scholarship on capitalist markets, mainly because I think we should think of economic life as encompassing far broader social phenomena. I also assign readings from neighboring disciplines—history, anthropology, and philosophy. But I wouldn't say that my research to date fully prescribes the topics that I teach. Teaching is an opportunity to read and work on things beyond my immediate research

foci, and in many cases teaching has helped me reorient my research in directions that I would not have reached otherwise.

**Y. H.:** What topics or dimensions do you think used to be overlooked, but are now significant to incorporate into the course? How can they contribute to our understanding of economic sociology?

**R. L.:** Perhaps because of the history of our subdiscipline, many economic sociology classes take the form of critiquing neoclassical economics. So, we give one lecture about networks, two about institutions, another lecture about (ir)rationality, a few lectures about the state, and so on and so forth—with the goal of convincing our students that economists have gotten it wrong.

For the record, I too think that mainstream economics has gotten it wrong—tragically and terribly so. But I also think that we’re losing a lot of power when we teach (and perhaps think of) economic sociology as a list of footnotes, qualifications, and reservations about how neoclassical economists think. We have so much empirical research and theoretical insight into economic life—why restrict ourselves to commenting on economists’ models? And so, I began designing my classes from classical sociological readings, that is, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and others, as well as more contemporary work that, for various historical and interdisciplinary political reasons, is not included in what we typically call “economic sociology”—for example, literature on consumption, labor, race, gender, and postcolonialism.

Taking this approach has helped me fill in some blind spots in contemporary economic sociology. Until recently, I think we haven’t paid sufficient attention to social hierarchies and inequalities. We are still doing a miserably bad job in writing an economic sociology of race and racialization, although this is changing thanks to the excellent work of John Robinson, Taylor Keaniga-Yamahtta, and others.

**Y. H.:** What are the most frequent questions asked by students in the class? How might the questions reflect the debates within economic sociology?

**R. L.:** At least at the University of Michigan, economic sociology classes attract a fairly diverse group of students—only about half the participants are from so-

ciology, usually—so students have very different sets of questions. From students coming from outside of sociology, you often get questions that reflect the symbolic violence of neoclassical economics. It’s very hard for many of them to think in nonindividualistic terms. But I’d say that by the end of the semester, most of them realize the narrowness and limitations of the perspectives they have learned in economics departments.

Sociology students usually look for debates and categories that they have encountered in other sociology classes, especially the trio of race-class-gender. We read about this trio in my class, but I think economic sociology can approach race, class, and gender from a distinct and unobvious direction, which students sometimes take time to fully understand.

**Y. H.:** What do you enjoy the most when teaching economic sociology?

**R. L.:** Most generally, I enjoy smashing the image of economic life as something prosaic, technical, and dispirited. There’s an inherent joy in replacing the dull image of economists’ supply and demand curves with the political drama of Folbre’s treatise on national accounting, Zelizer’s heart-wrenching account of the monetary and sentimental valuation of dead children, and the intensity of Geertz’s description of the Moroccan bazaar. Observing students realizing how vivid and dramatic economic life can be is very rewarding.

I also enjoy seeing my sociology students come to understand how much they have to contribute to discussions in the area—and how important it is to challenge the monopoly economists have claimed over the analysis and governance of economic life. When it comes to students from economics or business programs, I wouldn’t say that I’m very good at converting them into critical sociologists, but every so often people tell me that my class was the most concrete and substantive economics class they have taken in college. I obviously enjoy such moments quite a bit.

**Y. H.:** How do you adapt to the new teaching model due to COVID-19? What are the strengths and weaknesses of remote teaching?

**R. L.:** Well, it’s been a learning curve for all of us. I do not find many advantages in remote teaching. It allows you to easily record lectures and adapt to students’

schedules more effectively, but this is a mixed blessing, since so many students have difficulties concentrating and catching up with the recorded lectures. Perhaps the only true advantage is that it has become very easy to bring in guest lecturers—my undergraduate students met with Dr. Luke Fletcher, executive director of Jubilee Australia, to talk about their critical report on development projects in Papua New Guinea. I'm quite sure we would have never managed to orchestrate that in a classroom.

The disadvantages of remote teaching are so numerous that I wouldn't be able to list them here. I also doubt I can think of anything people have not encountered already.

How did I adapt? Mainly by acknowledging the limits of my technological skills. I am lucky to work at a university that provides ample online learning resources, technologies, and gadgets to its teaching faculty, as well as technological support for those of us who choose to use them. But the sad truth is that I'm so incompetent technologically that using this abundance of software and gizmos would have resulted in a colossal disaster, upset my students, and led to a wave of resignations of exasperated IT support people. We cannot afford that in the middle of a pandemic! So, my rule of thumb has been keeping everything very simple. I use Zoom for lectures and office hours, Canvas for discussion threads (which allows students who take the class asynchronously to participate), and good-old PowerPoint for slides (uploaded to Canvas). I have a physical dry-erase board behind me, which I sometimes use.

In line with this approach, I'd say that I have kept my teaching style quite similar to what it was prepandemic. I hold "live" lectures at the formally scheduled times. I encourage students to attend the lectures and participate in them synchronously, while allowing those unable to do so to watch the recordings and ask their questions during office hours or in the discussion threads on Canvas. It has been time consuming, but definitely worth it: I respond to all posts that students write in discussion threads. In lectures, I make sure to stop every 10-15 minutes or so, allowing plenty of space for students to ask questions, challenge me, and debate—and I always take on opportunities to dedicate time (sometimes entire lectures) when somebody makes a particularly good

point or raises a good question. All in all, I'd say that lectures have been quite interactive, and I wonder if some of the students who participate actively would not have felt comfortable doing so in a regular in-class setting.

**Y. H.: What lessons have you learned in the transition to online teaching? Are there some tips or innovations that you find helpful for class facilitation?**

**R. L.:** I'll have to continue with the luddite tone. The greatest challenges the pandemic has posed to my teaching have nothing to do with class facilitation, and they cannot be solved with even the most innovative pedagogical techniques. My students' greatest difficulties have been personal: loneliness, economic hardship, resurfacing family problems (for those who returned to live with their families)—and this is before we even mention the many who have contracted the virus and those who experienced the death of a loved one. Remote teaching inevitably leads to a hard-to-bridge distance between the instructor and students, all during a very difficult time. More than half of my undergraduate class watches lectures asynchronously. Even with those who attend the "live" lectures and participate, it is often hard to intuit how they are doing, read their body language, and be attentive to their cues.

So, I have to create opportunities for students to communicate their situation to me and make the whole experience less alienating and more personal. Every few lectures, I say that I know many of them are going through a lot and that I'm ready to provide accommodations and help, to the best of my abilities. I offer twice as many office hours as I do in a regular semester—and my students use them. It consumes time, but the stakes are extremely high if you consider the fact that so many students live their lives in small and solitary dorm rooms, taking multiple classes over Zoom, experiencing very little face-to-face interaction, all while living a very stressful college life and being 18-21 years old. Mental health crises, even suicidal ideation, are all too common now—and as educators we have to do our best to flag warning signs and help our students endure this period. This is the lesson that I've learned. My tip to instructors is to not to get too lost in the technicalities of their remote teaching and instead to focus on maintaining human communication with their students, by all means available. ■

# WHEN POLITICAL POLARIZATION EXPANDS INTO APOLITICAL DAILY CHOICES



Daniel DellaPosta is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Pennsylvania State University. He specializes in social networks, economic sociology, political sociology, organizations and institutions, culture, computational methods. He focuses on the mechanisms bringing about intergroup cooperation, economic activities, and political and attitudinal alignments. His work has been published in the *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *Social Networks*, and other outlets. He received awards from the ASA's sections on Mathematical Sociology, Economic Sociology, and Rationality and Society.

Ya-Ching Huang, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Daniel DellaPosta about his work on mass opinion polarization and its implications in the post-Trump era.

## **Ya-Ching Huang: What interested you in studying mass opinion polarization?**

**Daniel DellaPosta:** The inspiration for my recent paper on polarization (“Pluralistic Collapse,” ASR 2020) came out of my earlier work with Yongren Shi and Michael Macy on a 2015 paper called “Why Do Liberals Drink Lattes?” While working on that article, I became struck by the fact that virtually everyone seemed to think that America has become more politically polarized in recent decades, and yet social scientists studying this question continued to find countervailing evidence that Americans remain pluralistic and “cross-cutting” in their beliefs. So, that was the tension that got me started thinking more about mass opinion polarization, especially trying to think not just about whether opinion polarization has increased but also how such an increase would look in population-level survey data. The usual approach in studies of opinion polarization is to focus on trends over time on a limited set of survey questions about core political issues like taxation, gun control, abortion, foreign policy, etc. However, one of the implications of the “Lattes” study was that the reason polarization feels like such a salient social fact may lie in its breadth—the fact that so many seemingly apolitical domains, from beverage preference to musi-

cal taste to belief in astrology, have become correlated with political beliefs. Studies that begin from a limited set of core political issues aren’t really designed to pick up the breadth of polarization in that way. The “Pluralistic Collapse” article was an attempt to integrate this more expansive conception of opinion polarization into our empirical models.

## **Y. H.: You use vivid metaphors of “a fence” and “an oil spill” in describing the structure of beliefs and how polarization occurs over time. What are the differences between the two perspectives? How does the oil spill model provide insights into mass polarization?**

**D. D.:** Earlier, I mentioned the usual approach of focusing on just a limited set of core political issues. From there, scholars can then see whether pairs of issues have become more correlated over time; for example, if someone tells you their opinion on abortion, can you predict their attitudes on gun control or taxation with greater accuracy than you could have several decades ago? This is what I compare to a “fence” getting higher or lower—the divisions don’t expand or move, they just get stronger or weaker depending on how well correlated the issues marking those divisions are with



one another. I still am not sure if the fence metaphor is the best one, but it is the best that I could come up with at the time. If we're using the "oil spill" metaphor instead, then polarization can grow not just through increasingly strong correlations between those core political issues, but also when political divisions expand to encompass other issues that weren't previously part of those divisions—like, say, the image of the "latte liberal" coming to represent a social fact despite the seeming irrelevance of beverage preferences to our political beliefs. So, instead of just asking whether attitudes on abortion and taxation are more correlated than they were in the past, we can ask whether either or both attitudes are correlated with a more expansive set of other attitudes, beliefs, preferences, or behaviors than they were previously. This expansion of political divisions into new areas matters because it exacerbates the "otherness" of people we disagree with on politics.

**Y. H.: Could you elaborate a little more about how "apolitical" attitudes, opinions, or lifestyles can be politicized or drawn into a broad and encompassing belief network? What's the mechanism between partisan and political ideology and "apolitical" issue positions?**

**D. D.:** In our "Lattes" article, we proposed homophily (our tendency to interact more with people we're more similar to) and social influence (our tendency to be shaped by those with whom we interact) as sufficient mechanisms for producing a world where initially weak social divisions become dramatically amplified. If I tend to interact more with people who I agree with on politics—whether that's by choice or just by virtue of the politically homogeneous communities and networks I'm embedded in—then I'm going to be influenced by those people in all kinds of other ways: perhaps what movies I'll watch, what kind of food I'll consume, or my religious beliefs. If this is happening at the population level, then any polarization on politics will spread to those other areas. I should add the important caveat that while these causal mechanisms are theoretically sufficient to produce polarization, they can't be directly tested in survey data like the General Social Survey in which we don't get to observe these network influences on the respondents. Still, I think the wealth of empirical evidence for these mechanisms' general operation makes them pretty good candidates for an explanatory theory. To use one admittedly anecdotal example, when I teach my undergraduate students about polarization, I always ask them whether they have ever "unfriended"

someone on social media or offline because of a political disagreement. Most of them have (I have too). Small actions like that make our networks more politically homogeneous over time.

**Y. H.: What are some potential explanations for the decline of cross-cutting alignments and the consolidation of the belief structures?**

**D. D.:** If you buy into the network mechanisms I talked about earlier, then one important question would be whether certain social forces have amplified peoples' ability to "self-sort" on politics, creating more homophilous influence. Maybe that would reflect the geographic "big sort" (to use Bill Bishop's term) leading to more politically homogeneous communities, or the rise of social media echo chambers. Or, frankly, there could be other explanations beyond the network mechanisms—maybe peoples' beliefs have become better aligned because politicians in both parties have become more ideologically consistent and elite opinion trickles down to the rest of the population. Unfortunately, while my study hopefully gives some empirical insight on how polarization has increased, I don't think that I can really assess how much of that trend owes to any one of these mechanisms.

**Y. H.: What are the implications of the polarization trend in the presidential transition between Trump and Biden?**

**D. D.:** I think a lot of us have felt disturbed by events since the last presidential election, especially the Capitol insurrection. The trend that worries me most is that it seems polarized partisan divides are increasingly spreading—if you want to use the "oil spill" metaphor—to include the basic rules and norms of democracy. Sadly, I think this is a pretty unsurprising development. There is no real reason to think that democracy itself as an issue would somehow remain sealed beyond the reach of polarization. I think scholars are now increasingly trying to think of what mechanisms might reduce polarization, but that is a difficult puzzle even on a theoretical level.

**Y. H.: Your research work lies at the intersection of social networks, economic sociology, political sociology, organizations and institutions, and computational methods. In what ways do your studies contribute to economic sociology?**

**D. D.:** I'm interested in the interplay between networks and institutions, which makes economic sociology a good intellectual home. I wrote my dissertation on the American Mafia with the goal of using institutional analysis, focusing on the rules, structure, and social norms of the mafia family, to explain the structure that the network of collaboration in illicit economic activity among mafia members took. My other work in economic sociology has less overall cohesion to it than my research on politics, but I still view it as equally central to my identity as a scholar. I've been fortunate to be involved in studies with great collaborators on topics like institutional change (with Victor Nee and Sonja Oppen); specialization of knowledge in tech economies (with Victor Nee); and the structure of entrepreneurs' networks in China (with Victor Nee and Lisha Liu). Nowadays, I'm really interested in projects that examine how our tendency to be influenced by the opinions of peers might distort our judgments of value in organizational and economic contexts. For example, I've been working with Minjae Kim on a project that uses online beer reviews to examine how social influence from previous reviewers of a product influences later reviewers in ways that affect the evaluation and prestige of products in cultural markets. Another current project uses an agent-based model to investigate the unpredictability of innovation diffusion in networks with social influence.

**Y. H.:** As a scholar in economic sociology, what lessons have you learned that could help doctoral students on the job market or at earlier stages of their careers?

**D. D.:** I think it's difficult for us to know what decisions or practices have contributed to our successes or failures; the "just-so" stories we tell ourselves could be deeply flawed. With that caveat in mind, though, I can think of a few lessons that I think have been helpful to me. First, try to write early and often—both in terms of trying to work on papers almost as soon as you start graduate school and in terms of starting the writing process early when you take up a new project. I often find that I need to start writing something first in order to figure out what exactly I want to argue. And it also takes a lot of practice before you start to develop a writing style that works for your research. Second, in addition to finding supportive mentors, I found it helpful to identify professional role models in the field: people doing the kind of work I wanted to do who were perhaps one or two stages ahead of me career-wise. I'd look at those peoples' CVs to figure out what journals I should be submitting to, what conferences might be good for me to attend, what kinds of awards or grants I could apply to, etc. Looking at what kinds of things your "role models" were doing when they were at your career stage can give you a guide for your own professional activities. Finally, I think it's so important to work on projects that really, genuinely interest you so that you'll have enough intrinsic curiosity and motivation to keep pushing them forward. External rewards may be delayed, intermittent, and unpredictable—even the best scholars I know have good papers rejected all the time. Most of my motivation for working on a project ultimately has to come from just wanting to know the answer to a question. ■

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Gökhan Mülayim is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Boston University. Working at the intersection of economic and cultural sociology; organizations, occupations, and work; and urban studies, he studies how the so-called extra-economic is being translated into the economic. He looks specifically into how peculiar goods and services are being economized, and how the markets for those goods and services are being constructed. Using ethnographic research tools, his dissertation examines the economization of security as a political, social, and affective good and service in the market for private security in Istanbul. He received his B.A. with honors in political science and international relations, and his M.A. in sociology from Bogazici University in Istanbul, Turkey.



Ladin Bayurgil is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Boston University. Ladin's work spans urban and economic sociology, sociology of work and occupations; particularly asks questions around urban precarious labor. Her research looks at intersections of urban and economic sociology by examining the ways in which intimate ties generated by community relations in the city get infused into economic exchange and employment relations. Using ethnographic research methods, Ladin's dissertation analyzes how urban risk-mitigation strategies, specifically earthquake risk-driven urban transformation in Istanbul, Turkey impacts community and employment relations in times of political and economic turmoil.



Meghann Lucy is a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Boston University. Her interests are in inequality, consumption, economic sociology, cultural sociology, and medical sociology. A recent project examines the roles of overconsumption and divestment in discourses of the self, class, and gender through a case study of "Tidying Up with Marie Kondo." Other research investigates the medicalization of overconsumption or overaccumulation, that is, of hoarding disorder. In this work she evaluates the extent to which socioeconomic status of individuals and neighborhoods influences how cities define, detect, and either treat or punish hoarding behaviors amongst residents.



Ya-Ching Huang is a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Boston University. Her research interests include economic sociology, cultural sociology, morality, and global health. She received her B.A. in the Interdisciplinary Program of Humanities and Social Sciences from National Tsing Hua University, and her M.A. in Sociology from National Taiwan University. Her previous research focused on Taiwanese pigeon racing, encompassing both the races and illegal gambling on them. She currently studies the production and distribution of cloth masks amid the coronavirus pandemic.



Elif Birced is a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Boston University. Her research interests center on economic sociology, sociology of work and occupations, and cultural sociology. In her dissertation, she analyzes how expertise is constructed in platform economies with a particular focus on Youtubers. Using qualitative methods, she seeks to explore how jurisdictional boundaries are determined in the Youtube ecosystem in Turkey. In her previous work, she analyzed economic and political precariousness of academic labor with a particular focus on social scientists at foundation universities in Turkey.