ACCOUNTS

IN THIS ISSUE

1 .... Message from the Chair Ashley Mears
2 .... ASA Award Winners
3 .... From Digital Platforms to Cloud Empires: An Interview with Vili Lehdonvirta 0
6 .... On Researching Digital Platforms: An Interview with Niels van Doorn
11 .... On Workplace Conflict in Hospitals: An Interview with Pablo Gastón
13 .... Section Office Holders
14 .... Spotlight: Interview with Melike Arslan
16 .... Bookshelf: *When Work Becomes Religion*
19 .... Bookshelf: *Misconceiving Meri*t
22 .... Editorial Committee

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

Hello colleagues. I'm Ashley Mears, incoming Chair of the section, with a welcome message in this issue of Accounts.

I write this while prepping my upcoming grad seminar, "Culture, Markets, and Inequality," which always takes a new shape as I discover works by fellow economic sociologists. This year, we're engaging the issue of climate change as a moral discourse and an economic challenge, via Rebecca Elliott's *Underwater: Loss, Flood Insurance, and the Moral Economy of Climate Change in the United States*. And with the ongoing war in Ukraine, we'll situate displacement as both a cultural and economic process via Heba Gowayed's *Refuge: How the State Shapes Human Potential*. As in years past, racial inequalities are at the forefront, following calls from section members to broaden the boundaries of economic sociology while centering race and racism (with a nod to a readings spreadsheet and amendable resources put together by former chair Donald Tomaskovic-Devey in 2020).

At these past ASA meetings in LA, I got to sit in on one of the roundtables of the Economic Sociology section, and at the end of it, a Ph.D. student looked surprised that I was there; she hadn't anticipated an audience at her table. I always try to make it to at least one of them during the ASA meetings, because you never know who and which ideas you'll encounter. Coming to ASA in person after two years, it felt especially good to take a seat with the next generation of economic sociologists and see the creative directions they are taking in the field. Earlier that day, at the section session, "A Future for Economic Sociology: Offering Solutions," I was likewise inspired to see

critical reflections on the architecture of market design (Georg Rilinger), neoliberal policy (Emily Barman), entrepreneurship (Olav Sorenson) and credit (Frederick Wherry). Hopping from roundtables to invited sessions is a good analogy for what I'd like the section to do this year: connect scholars and scholarship across ranks and boundaries.

As we move into the new academic year, I invite you to reflect on what the section can do to build our intellectual community. I would like the section to advance its efforts to include historically marginalized topics and voices and also to be an active space for building ties at and beyond the ASA meetings. To those ends, plans are underway among the council to organize a forum mid-year to showcase our award winners and discuss the behind-the-scenes of their publication and research processes. Suggestions and offers to help organize are always welcome. I also invite you to brainstorm sessions we can present for the next ASA; just email me (mears@bu.edu). We'll also keep working with the ASA mentorship program, with thanks to council member Carly Knight for spearheading these efforts.

Finally, a big round of thanks to all of you who make the section a vibrant space, including:
Our 2021–22 Webmaster: Isabel Jijon;
Our 2022 ASA Roundtables organizer: Ian Robert Carrillo;
Our 2021–22 members of Awards committees:
- Dali Ma, Chair, Shuang Song (Best Student Paper in Economic Sociology and Entrepreneurship by the Kauffman Foundation)
- Georg Rilinger, Chair, Christopher Andrews, Laura Adler (Ron Burt Student Paper Award)
- Roi Livne, Chair, Ryan Calder, Brittany Friedman, Grace Tien (Granovetter Award for Best Article)
- Klaus Weber, Chair, Raphael Charron-Chenier, Marc Ventresca, Megan Tobias Neely (Viviana Zelizer Best Book Award) ■

ASA Award Winners

Best Student Paper in Economic Sociology and Entrepreneurship by the Kauffman Foundation
Committee: Dali Ma, Chair, Shuang Song
Jun Zhou, "The Work-family Circuit: Doing and Undoing Gender through Monetary Flows in Immigrant Women Entrepreneurship"

Ron Burt Student Paper Award
Committee: Georg Rilinger, Chair, Christopher Andrews, Laura Adler
Patrick Sheehan, "The Paradox of Self-Help Expertise: How Unemployed Workers Become Professional Career Coaches"
Honorable mention: Julia Melin, "The Help-Seeking Paradox: Gender and the Consequences of Using Career Re-entry Assistance"
Honorable mention: Luis Flores, "Crabgrass Rentiers: Land-Use Zoning and the Making of American Residential Property"

Granovetter Award for Best Article
Committee: Roi Livne, Chair, Ryan Calder, Brittany Friedman, Grace Tien
Dan Hirschman, "Rediscovering the 1%: Knowledge Infrastructures and the Stylized Facts of Inequality"
Honorable mention: Adam Goldstien and Charlie Eaton, "Asymmetry by Design? Identity Obfuscation, Reputational Pressure, and Consumer Predation in U.S. For-Profit Higher Education"

Viviana Zelizer Best Book Award
Committee: Klaus Weber, Chair, Raphael Charron-Chenier, Marc Ventresca, Megan Tobias Neely
Co-winner, Angele Christin, Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms
Co-winner, Rebecca Elliot, Underwater: Loss, Flood Insurance, and the Moral Economy of Climate Change in the United States
Honorable mention, Mitchel Abolafia (one of the founders of the section), Stewards of the Market: How the Federal Reserve Made Sense of the Financial Crisis ■

FROM DIGITAL PLATFORMS TO CLOUD EMPIRES: AN INTERVIEW WITH VILI LEHDONVIRTA

Vili Lehdonvirta is a professor of Economic Sociology and Digital Social Research at the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford. His research examines how digital technologies are used to reshape the organization of economic activities in society, from gig platforms to online marketplaces and virtual currencies to crowdfunding. He is a former member of the European Commission's Expert Group on Online Platform Economy and the High-level Expert Group on Digital Transformation and EU Labour Markets. His research has been supported by several agencies including the European Research Council and the UK Economic and Social Research Council. His first book Virtual Economies: Design and analysis came out from MIT Press and has been translated into Chinese and Japanese. His new book, Cloud Empires: How Digital Platforms Are Overtaking the State and How We Can Regain Control is coming out from MIT Press in September 2022.

Gökhan Mülayim, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Vili Lehdonvirta about his research on platform economies and his forthcoming book, *Cloud Empires: How Digital Platforms Are Overtaking the State and How We Can Regain Control.*.

Gökhan Mülayim: Thank you for joining us in this issue. Could you please tell us the story of how you entered the field of digital technologies and platform economies? What inspired you?

Vili Lehdonvirta: I was a bedroom programmer as a child. During the first dotcom boom I was hired as a software developer for a hyped-up Internet company. We were cocksure that our code was going to change the world. Then in 2001 all of the dotcom stocks crashed. Our company was broken up and sold, and all the code I wrote disappeared. I learned that social and economic forces shaped technological development, not just the other way round. I got interested in studying sociology and economics and eventually did a Ph.D. in economic sociology.

G. M.: The question of power occupies a central place in your research on digital platform economies. In "Antagonism Beyond Employment," you and Alex J. Wood use the concept of "subordinated agency" to make sense of the contradictory power dynamics in remote gig economies, which can both empower and disempower workers. Could you tell us a bit about the implications of such contradictory processes for our understanding of the broader field of platform economies?

V. L.: Sociology is often about uncovering the power dynamics present in a situation. But sometimes we get a bit lazy and impose a familiar script on a new situation without checking how well it fits. The capital–labor dichotomy is so ingrained in our thinking that often we simply equate platforms with capital. But in this research with Alex, we observed how platforms empowered workers against certain capitalists (clients) whilst subordinating them to others (platform owners). Workers were able to "fire" abusive clients more easily thanks to the platform, but they were not able to "fire" the platform itself. We called it subordinated agency, and it helps to explain how these workers could simultaneously feel entrepreneurial while also desiring

to form unions.

One broader implication of this finding is that we should not simply equate platform company interests with established capital interests. We should examine platforms as an interest group in their own right. I have started to use another familiar script—the role of the state—as an analogy for what giant platforms are and do. In setting the rules of the game, platforms wield state-like power over workers and small businesses on the Internet.

G. M.: In your forthcoming book, *Cloud Empires*, you broadly focus on the question of power by delving into how the Internet, contrary to its promise of liberating us, has become a field where Big Tech gained control and dominance over us. Could you please tell us a bit about the story of this book?

V. L.: Internet visionaries and Silicon Valley technologists promised that the Internet would empower individuals and communities and liberate us from domineering institutions like abusive states and monopolistic megacorporations. They promised a sort of cyberlibertarian or cryptoanarchist utopia. But today it is plain to see that they delivered almost the opposite: a digital world dominated by giant technology companies so powerful that in some ways they challenge the state itself. Why did this happen? That's the first central question of the book. I address it with a sort of economic history of the digital economy from the 1980s to the present, recounting the stories of iconic platforms and people, and analyzing them through the lens of fundamental social science theory.

According to one explanation, the reason that the Internet's promise was betrayed is that the visionaries' talk about technology as a means to liberation was always just a sham. "Competition is for losers," confessed PayPal founder and Facebook funder Peter Thiel in 2014. But this is an overly simplistic explanation. I show that many of the technologists were really quite sincere about their desire to empower the underdog. For instance, eBay founder Pierre Omidyar was an immigrant who tried very hard to create an egalitarian marketplace underpinned by community instead of top-down authority.

The efforts of sincere technologists like Omidyar ultimately failed. eBay evolved into a top-down authority that monitors, disciplines, and punishes its merchants. Merchants describe it as a "police state" now. But this didn't happen because Omidyar was hungry for power. He was very reluctant to take his platform in this direction. It was just that every time the market failed in yet another way, the only workable solution was for Omidyar to intervene with the power of a central authority. Bit by bit, Omidyar and other well-meaning technologists ended up recreating much of the regulatory machinery of a modern state. The Internet recapitulated the past 3,000 years of economic history in 30 years, except that instead of governments we now have giant technology companies monitoring and policing us.

A major problem is that like any unaccountable ruler, these tech giants eventually end up abusing their powerful position. Upwork multiplies the "taxes" it extracts from freelancers. Apple bends the rules of its app marketplace to favor insiders. Amazon outright steals successful product lines from independent merchants. It's the ancient problem of political science: Authorities protect us, but who will protect us from the authorities? Unlike democratic states, the Internet has no political institutions for collective decision-making, so users are stuck at the platform princes' mercies.

This, then, is the second central question of the book, and I address it with a history of certain notable attempts to challenge the platform aristocrats' power, including attempts to create decentralized platforms via "blockchain" technology, and growing efforts by platform users to organize and resist their digital overlords through collective action—just as people have successfully resisted emperors in the past.

G. M.: It seems to me that, as the platforms are overtaking the state, our conventional, citizenship-based understandings of social movements and change would need to be coupled with denizenship-based ones. I am curious about your thoughts on how and on what grounds we should think about democratizing the ever-growing power of digital platforms.

V. L.: Yes, that's exactly it! The users of a transnational platform are often spread thinly across many different countries. As one of my informants observed, for instance, even if Upwork's users in a given country were able to organize successfully, they would be too few for anyone in government to care. In the political economy of a given state, the users of a particular digital platform tend to be a rather marginal interest group. Thus regulation tends to be weak and lag behind. But in the political economy of a platform itself, the users are the largest interest group. If workers or small businesses are able to overcome geographic boundaries and organize themselves along the lines of platform membership, then they become very powerful and can demand a voice in how the platform is governed.

The book contains examples of both unsuccessful and successful actions, and I use well-established theory to draw out the reasons behind the triumphs and failures. The Internet changes everything insofar as territory is replaced by membership; but once you get your head around that, then the Internet actually changes very little. The democratization of digital empires in some ways appears to be unfolding along lines not dissimilar from the historical democratization of Europe: Successful workers' revolutions are very rare; the norm is gradual bourgeois revolutions perpetrated by a growing middle class enriched by the market.

G. M.: Could please tell us about the methodological challenges of researching this field?

V. L.: The emergence of both sociology and economics as disciplines was historically connected with the rise of the nation-state as a form of social order. The nation-state establishes a well-defined population that the government monitors via administrative records, statistics, and social surveys. The existence of such data gives rise to the possibility of a science of the society, sociology. But this fundamental link between sociology as a discipline and this particular form of social order that emerged in 19th-century Europe becomes problematic once we want to examine other examples of social order, including digital platforms.

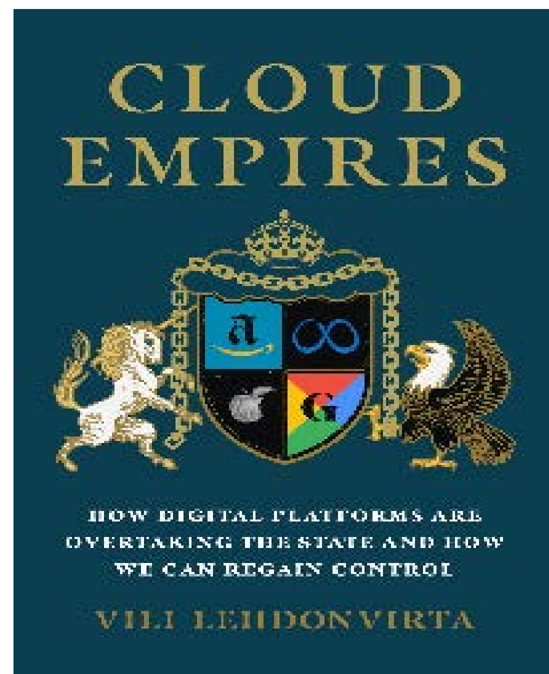
For instance, platforms have vaguely defined and overlapping denizenships. To obtain access to platforms' administrative records or representative survey samples, we'd need permission from their overlords, who are unlikely to give it unless it serves their interests. Thus in methodological terms our research sometimes inevitably falls short of standards established in nation-state sociology.

We try to compensate for these weaknesses by constantly trying out new things. I used to go to Silicon Valley industry conferences to drink with startup founders. Some of those startups grew into big companies, and I got inside access to their data. But relying on privileged access quickly becomes problematic for a variety of reasons. So with funding from the European Research Council, I led the development of the Online Labour Index, an automatic data collection system that tracks the websites of all major online labor marketplaces. It downloads all the latest gigs from the marketplaces and generates statistics on the market in a way that's independent of the platform companies. We handed over maintenance of the system to the International Labour Organization, and the statistics are available for researchers at onlinelabourobservatory.org.

Just like government records and social survey responses, platform data rarely tells the whole story. It's just as important to go and build rapport with some people and talk to them. For instance, in one study, our quantitative platform data showed that workers were getting a lot of five-star reviews from clients. But when we went to talk to the workers, they told us that it's because they vet the clients beforehand and refuse to work with anyone who has a history of giving anything less than five stars. So the quantitative data didn't really convey any useful information in this case. The real selection process happened before the quantitative measures kicked in, and could only be discovered by talking to these people on the field in Southeast Asia. I found this a useful reminder lest we get carried away by the supposed power of "big data."

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

V. L.: A classic conundrum in the social sciences is that we are supposed to study society whilst simultaneously being members of it. Inevitably our vision will be clouded by some myopia. I suppose living in unfamiliar contexts can be helpful in that it can help us gain some analytical distance from society as we are used to seeing it. I'm privileged to have had the opportunity to live in different places. Fortunately, analytical distance can also be sought and found in history books. ■



ON RESEARCHING DIGITAL PLATFORMS: AN INTERVIEW WITH NIELS VAN DOORN

Niels van Doorn is an assistant professor of new media and digital culture in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He holds a Ph.D. in communication science from the same university and worked as a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. His research has been supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the European Research Council (ERC). Currently, he is the principal investigator of the ERC-funded Platform Labor research project, which aims to determine how digital platforms are reconfiguring the gendered, classed, and racialized organization of labor and social reproduction in post-welfare societies and asks if/how they generate new vulnerabilities or tools for empowerment.

Gökhan Mülayim, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Niels van Doorn about his research on platform economies and social inequalities.

Gökhan Mülayim: Thank you for joining us in this issue. Could you please tell us the story of how you entered into the field of digital technologies and platform economies? What inspired you?

Niels van Doorn: Thank you for inviting me! I first entered the field of new media studies as a student in the Department of Communication Science at the University of Amsterdam, during the late 1990s and the first half of the 2000s. This was an emerging field at the time and I was particularly interested in how gender and sexual dynamics were playing out in digital spaces—particularly in relation to the visual and textual performance of embodiment online. Some of my earliest publications stem from that initial interest, which led first to an M.A. thesis on the topic and then to a Ph.D. project. I graduated in 2005 and (after working as a junior researcher for a while) started my Ph.D. in May of 2007. During this time we saw the introduction of blogs and social network(ing) sites, i.e., the types of technologies that later came to be associated with "Web 2.0" and its imperatives to connect with others and share content. At the time I was particularly interested in studying how gendered and sexual(ized) sociality was constituted in "old" and "new" spaces on the web, which formed the substance of my Ph.D. project. After finishing my Ph.D. in communication science, I obtained a grant to conduct postdoctoral research abroad and subsequently moved to Baltimore to work on a new project in the Department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. I was there for two years, increasingly drifting away from the topic of digital media technologies and getting deep into all kinds of other themes and issues that proved to be pertinent to the predominantly black queer communities I was studying there. This research led to some journal articles and a book (*Civic Intimacies*, Temple University Press, 2019).

At the time, in 2012, I had no intention to return to Amsterdam nor to the study of digital technologies. I wanted to stay in the U.S. and pursue a more sociological/anthropological research trajectory, focusing on the survival strategies of marginalized/minority communities. However, a very tight job market ultimately brought me back to the University of Amsterdam, where I landed the job I still have today: Assistant Professor of New Media and Digital Culture. I must confess that the first few years there were pretty diffi-

cult, as I was trying to redefine my identity as a scholar. There was a lot of new media scholarship to catch up with, and while I was teaching all these new courses I was attempting to finish my book manuscript. Fortunately, there were a lot of really smart and inspiring colleagues in my department, which was developing a reputation for pioneering a critical, materialist account of digital media technologies and the cultures developing around it. People like Anne Helmond, Carolin Gerlitz, Bernhard Rieder, Thomas Poell, and Michael Dieter were doing cutting-edge work on digital interface design, algorithmic governance, and datafication around the time when the web became subject to what Helmond started to refer to as "platformization." It was around 2013-2014 when I first encountered an emerging body of scholarship on platforms—a term that had been around in other fields (e.g., economics) but that was being critically reconsidered by new media theorists. My colleagues were exploring some really interesting questions regarding new formations of value and valuation on social media platforms, focusing on the emerging application of metrics for evaluating and ranking the quality of content, people, and relationships. Their explorations got me excited about digital culture again, especially with respect to the (cultural) economic implications of platform-mediated sociality.

Around this time debates on free, data-generating user labor were proliferating, led by people like Trebor Scholz and Christian Fuchs who built on earlier discussions of this topic by scholars such as Tiziana Terranova. The more I got to think and read about labor issues in relation to "platformized" digital environments, the more this topic appealed to me, and it was in 2016 that I decided on a new research focus: platform-mediated gig work. There was only a very small body of work on this topic back then, and it was especially scholars like Juliet Schor, Alex Rosenblat, Lily Irani, and Antonio Aloisi who were instrumental in shaping my early thinking on how platforms are reconfiguring work and the ways people earn a livelihood. Informed by my previous (postdoc) research, I was particularly interested in the gendered, classed, and racialized dimensions of gig work, which at the time had not received much attention—especially in the European context. Quite frankly, I think these dimensions are still generally underappreciated by scholars in the field, although recently some really great work has been appearing. The platform economy is (part of) a political economy, which necessarily means that its opportunities and risks will be unevenly distributed along lines of gender, race, and class. We need a better understanding of how and why this distribution plays out the way it does in various geographical locations and on different interconnected scales.

G. M.: Your research on digital platforms focuses on the question of power and inequalities in the field of digital platform economies. And it seems the work of platforms in this regard is not simple; rather it is quite complex as these platforms are empowering as well as disempowering workers, whether on the basis of class, race, or gender. Could you please tell us a bit about the complex role of digital platforms in reconfiguring social inequalities?

N. v. D.: I think that this complexity stems at least in part from the fact that there are numerous types of digital platforms, each operating differently and mediating various kinds of work. Similarly, the user bases of these platforms are generally also very heterogeneous (a point very well made by Juliet Schor in her recent work). In other words, different platforms are different things to different people. Furthermore, most labor platforms offer relatively easy access to income opportunities and give workers forms and levels of scheduling autonomy that they haven't previously experienced—especially in low-wage service industries. So in this sense platforms can be seen as empowering, particularly to marginalized groups (racial minorities, [trans] women, migrants) who otherwise have difficulties finding work and usually experience the workplace as a degrading, oppressive, and/or insecure environment. At the same time, labor platforms come with their own forms of insecurity and are often associated with the degradation of work and the employment relationship. Many aspects of platform labor can be understood as disempowering: the lack of income security, lack of labor protections, lack of accountability coupled with a risk of sudden deactivation (i.e., getting booted from the platform without clear reason or opportunity to appeal), and opacity of pricing and/or evaluation mechanisms. The platform economy is marked by severe information and evaluation asymmetries that favor the platform and customers over workers.

Overall, then, platform labor is a double-edged sword, particularly for labor market outsiders: It offers much-needed income opportunities when one is faced with few (better) alternatives and it can give you a sense of being in control of your own workflow, which is especially useful when you have care responsibilities. Yet it also forces you to absorb all the risks that come with being an independent contractor—even when in most cases you are not truly independent. Indeed, as a gig worker you are platform-depen-

dent to varying degrees and the more you depend on a platform to provide you with access to clients and a livelihood, the more risk you are bound to experience (i.e., the more precarious your gig economy experience will be). If, on the other hand, you have other income sources, then your relationship with a labor platform and its customers will be less high stakes and thus less stressful (again, see Schor's work on this point). The question is, or should be: Do we accept that already marginalized workers, who tend to be more dependent on platform labor, absorb significant economic risks in the gig economy? And if not, how can we alleviate this risk? This is where the topic of regulation and social policy comes in. Gig economy regulation and broader employment standards, norms, and laws, in addition to social (welfare) policies, also determine how empowering or disempowering digital platform companies can be, as comparative research shows. It's great to see that policymakers and regulators have become more critical of the "innovation" ostensibly brought by gig economy platforms and are introducing new legislative proposals on various scales, but too often there is an outsized and unwarranted focus on platform culpability. This is driven by a "platform exceptionalism" that sees the gig economy as somehow a distinct industry or sector, rather than a phenomenon (i.e., a set of HR/management practices and standards) that is quickly becoming generalized across sectors whose existing regulations are seen as partly outdated in the face of digital innovation. This diverts our attention away from the historical inequalities that have marked these sectors and indeed society at large—inequalities that platforms ultimately tend to amplify despite also reconfiguring how they are articulated. The marginalized social groups who initially seemed to be emancipated by freelance labor platforms are those who eventually end up subordinated not by a boss and an exploitative employment contract but by an app and a predatory user agreement that leaves them with few rights or prospects when things turn sour.

G. M: Besides media studies, your research draws on political economy, economic sociology, and organizational studies as well. Could you tell us a bit about the promise and limits, if any, of interdisciplinarity in researching digital platform economies?

N. v. D.: I believe research on platform economies has to be inter/transdisciplinary, given the complex and multifaceted nature of digital platforms and the economies they create and/or reshape. Each discipline or research field offers a potential entry point, or conceptual and methodological perspective, with which to approach and make sense of a particular problem related to platform economies. These entry points are often complementary, or at least they can be rendered complementary if you are willing to do the work and make connections across boundaries. I tend to have a "maximalist" attitude: I guess my ambition is to tackle pertinent problems from as many theoretical and disciplinary angles as possible in order to get a better grip on not just what's happening but also on the various conditions of possibility that inform that "happening." In contrast, a more "minimalist" or modest approach would focus on what is "social," "cultural," "technological," "organizational," or (particularly) "economic" about the challenges and opportunities that platforms offer. Of course, isolating these dimensions is impossible in practice and mostly works on the level of heuristics and (again) conceptual entry points, but still I find that research on platform economies is too siloed along disciplinary lines, creating a rather fragmented scholarly landscape. Now, I am not objecting to platform economy research being published in a variety of different disciplinary journals, let alone to approaching the topic within the disciplinary context of one's training. But I do wish there would be a more concerted effort to bridge the gaps that currently still exist between disciplines and their preoccupations with particular aspects of (certain types of) digital platforms. For example, to schematize for a moment: New media studies focuses primarily on social media and platforms for cultural production, while sociology, HRM, and organization studies tend to focus more on gig economy platforms, and political economists (as well as some legal scholars) mostly tackle the impacts of Big Tech platforms on market competition, governance, and the public good. Having said this, there is fortunately a quickly growing and diverse body of very inspiring interdisciplinary scholarship on platforms and the economies they intermediate. Work on "platform urbanism," for example, brings together insights from geography, urban studies, and political economy, as well as sociology, political science, and anthropology, thereby deepening our understanding of the locally embedded and variegated nature of platform economies that are shaped by multiscalar regulatory environments, labor and capital markets, and urban infrastructures.

As I noted earlier: Different platforms are different things to different people. If you truly want to do justice to this heterogeneity and complexity, then relying on just your own disciplinary framework and approach won't suffice. We need more organized and sustained conversations about the impacts of digital platforms between social scientists, humanities scholars, and economists. There is so much to learn from

each other, as I keep finding out myself. Collectively, we may be able to solve more pieces of the "platform economy puzzle" than we ever could if we stuck to our own disciplinary comfort zone.

G. M.: Could you please tell us about the methodological challenges of researching this field?

N. v. D.: To follow up on my last answer, another reason we need interdisciplinary research initiatives that interrogate platform economies (or platform societies more broadly conceived) from a variety of angles is that each discipline will run into particular methodological challenges and blind spots, oftentimes not due to any inherent shortcomings but rather because of the limits imposed by our object. Studying digital platforms and their variegated impacts is difficult, let there be no doubt about it. And many if not most of the reasons it is so difficult have to do with the fact that platform companies make it very hard for researchers to grasp what their businesses and digital platforms are actually doing, i.e., how they are operating, what decisions and data inputs this is based on, and enacted by which technologies or people, etc. As noted before, platform companies have been so successful because of how they create and manage information asymmetries, which can produce artificial bottlenecks and inequalities that enable platforms to enact gatekeeping power. To quote Julie Cohen (2019:40), platforms essentially "represent infrastructure-based strategies for introducing friction into networks." Such strategies, which weaponize opacity and (legal) uncertainty, are executed through technological as well as legal means, i.e., through the design of platform architectures and contracts that allocate full control to the company while minimizing user agency. Obviously this "black box" arrangement poses formidable challenges to empirical research—whether qualitative or quantitative. Yet just identifying this "black box" and lamenting the limitations one faces with respect to data access, algorithmic transparency, or nondisclosure agreements is only going to get us so far. Fortunately, then, some wonderful colleagues have started to think of methodological approaches to the study of digital platforms that try to circumvent, counter, or otherwise creatively negotiate the closed nature of our research objects. Two published examples that come to mind here are pieces by Fields, Bissel and Macrorie (2020) and Van Der Vlist and Helmond (2021). Recently, our Platform Labor team also held an international workshop on what we have called "actually existing platformization," where we invited a number of renowned platform scholars to reflect on the methodological challenges and opportunities involved in the study of digital platforms. If the reader is interested in this topic, I'd highly recommend reading our write-up of the discussion here. Ethnographic methods have something to offer here too!

G. M.: Your coauthored article with Julie Yujie Chen, "Odds Stacked Against Workers," provides one of the first crossnational comparisons of two food delivery platforms in two giant platform economies, the U.S. and China. This article is a *post hoc* product of two separate research projects you and Chen conducted individually. I am curious about the challenges you have faced in bringing two cases and datasets together. Could you tell us a bit about this process?

N. v. D.: The challenges we faced mainly had to do with commensurability and translation. As you noted we each conducted our own fieldwork individually, guided by our own set of research questions, which produced particular interview questions and fieldnotes. To be sure, we did not yet personally know each other around the time we conducted our fieldwork, although we knew each other's work. We met in Montreal in October 2018, at the annual Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference, shortly after I had finished my research in New York. During our conversation it turned out that there were many resonances between our findings, which we were quite excited about and decided to explore further. More (virtual) meetings followed and it fairly quickly became apparent that our interviewees experienced very similar issues related to how their work was being managed and remunerated, with gamification of the labor process and of wages emerging as a common denominator. At the same time, however, there were many significant differences between how American and Chinese food delivery platforms hire, govern, and pay their workforce, which were exactly the kinds of regional/national differences we wanted to tease out in order to make the case for the importance of crossnational comparative research on gig economy platforms. Now, ideally this research would be coherently planned and organized from the start, as it has been in the context of my Platform Labor project (which compares gig economies in Berlin, Amsterdam, and New York City). In this instance, however, we had no other option than to see if we could meaningfully bring together our research findings in a post-hoc manner, which we felt confident was possible due to the many resonances we had initially identified. Nevertheless, a major challenge was that we had finished our fieldwork and we could not easily return to our research environment and subjects to ask follow-up questions that only came up during

our conversations and data comparison. Another obvious obstacle was the literal translation issue: Julie's materials were in Chinese—a language I do not speak. This means I could not get integral access to her interview transcripts, which would have allowed for a more comprehensive crossreading/coding of our data. Instead, Julie had to translate parts of the interviews that were potentially relevant to our analysis and emerging argument, so that I could read them and we could discuss their meaning/significance (i.e., compare our interpretations of this data in light of other collected data as well as previous research output). Ultimately, these were two practical challenges to our objectives of systematically analyzing and "mapping" the different ways in which food delivery was organized by the different platform companies we had studied and examining how these modes of organization were negotiated by the riders we interviewed. To compensate, we had a lot of discussions about our respective findings, and Julie had to do quite some work explaining to me the different models of platform-mediated food delivery that coexist in China, as well as the different labor processes and forms of remuneration (especially related to bonus pay). What helped to commensurate across these sociotechnical and cultural differences (which, we found, were related to differences in the political economies and labor market histories of both countries) was the use of Philip Agre's capture model and his notion of data-driven "activity systems," which model and then reorganize a particular work process so that it can be tracked and optimized. This conceptual framework illuminated a lot of quite intricate and idiosyncratic processes that we initially struggled to make sense of and bring together. It also enabled us to formulate two distinct models of platform-based food delivery: Deal Or No Deal in NYC and Grab-and-Stack in Beijing. In conclusion, while this may have been a compromised and unconventional endeavor, we believe it eventually produced some original insights, albeit based on two separately collected datasets.

G. M.: What is on the horizon? Would you tell us about your future research plans?

N. v. D.: Right now, we've entered the final year of the Platform Labor research project, which will end next summer. We are planning to close off the project with a large international conference, tentatively scheduled for June 2023, which should bring together a wonderful collection of academics, policymakers and other interested parties to discuss our project's overall findings and offer their own inputs. Besides my own project, focusing on gig platforms, Platform Labor features three other projects: Jelke Bosma is finishing his PhD project on the impacts of Airbnb on households and housing in Amsterdam and Berlin; Eva Mos is finishing her PhD project on how volunteering and care platforms are transforming the third sector and the provision of social services in these cities; and Aleksandra Piletić is advancing her postdoctoral research on the relationships between platformization and neoliberalization. So the conference we're planning will feature sessions on all these topics, while highlighting the changing role of labor that we're seeing across the different projects. Moreover, Jelke and Eva are organizing a workshop on "platform ambivalence," which promises to be very interesting, while Aleksandra is hosting an exciting workshop on platform labor in the post-Covid era. As for myself, besides supervising these projects, I am still sitting on/with so much data! It's kind of exasperating how much interesting material I have lying around, with so little time to actually use it for future publications. I am excited to be working on a new paper that pushes back against the notion of "algorithmic management," which tends to obfuscate more than it illuminates. It asks what about the subordination and insecurity that workers experience on gig platforms is truly due to what algorithms do, and do these technologies indeed do what we think they are "guilty" of? Like platforms, algorithms thrive under conditions of opacity, yet these conditions also make them the perfect bogeyman for critical researchers and labor advocates in a time of enhanced public scrutiny regarding AI and machine learning systems. However, based on my fieldwork I argue this focus on algorithms detracts from our attention to other aspects of gig work and of gig workers' everyday lives, which may have a more substantial impact on the conditions under which they try to earn a living. Aside from this paper, I'm also putting together a proposal for a book based on the Platform Labor project, although I think I will only really be able to get to work on this manuscript next summer. Moreover, if our proposal gets approved at Polity, Jelke and I will be coauthoring a book on Airbnb—the first book-length scholarly treatment of the impacts that this platform company has had since it started more than a decade ago. So yeah, there's a lot on the horizon and people should keep an eye on our project website for news about events and new publications (they can also sign up for our newsletter). Finally, I am happy to still be in the race for a new ERC grant, which would allow me to start another five-year research project, this time on the platformization of FinTech (i.e., digital technologies facilitating payments and financial services such as lending, credit scoring, and investment). But more about that another time (hopefully)! ■

ON WORKPLACE CONFLICT IN HOSPITALS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PABLO GASTON

Pablo Gastón is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at University of Michigan. He received a Ph.D. degree in sociology from UC Berkeley and was a postdoc in the Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations at Rutgers University. He is interested in economic sociology, work and occupations, health and health care, social movements, and comparative historical analysis. His work examines changing patterns of workplace conflict in the American labor movement with a particular focus on collective bargaining in hospitals.

Ya-Ching Huang, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Pablo Gastón about his latest article published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, "Moralizing the Strike: Nurse Associations and The Justification of Workplace Conflict in California Hospitals."

Ya-Ching Huang: Thank you for joining us in this issue. Let's start with the backstory of your latest article published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. How did you get started in studying workplace contestation of nurses' strikes in the San Francisco Bay Area?

Pablo Gastón: I first became interested in workplace conflict in hospitals because this sector has been something of an anomaly in recent decades. I was trying to understand why the rate of union membership in the healthcare industry had been slowly increasing in the 1990s and early 2000s, a period in which union density had been collapsing almost everywhere else. I started by examining what unions and professional associations in the field were doing in the 1980s and 1990s: how their organizing tactics were changing during this period, and how they were responding to the healthcare industry's growing turn toward market logics.

While I had originally come into the project with a more structural perspective—I thought that this anomalous union growth was a product of some combination of changes in union tactics, the law, and industrial context—as I went into the archives, it quickly became clear to me that the cultural meanings of care work and workplace conflict in hospitals played a very important role. The tensions between the moral obligation to care for the sick and more-selfish economic motivations were right on the surface of every organizing campaign I looked at: both on the part of disruptive hospital workers seeking better working conditions and hospitals with increasingly market-driven orientations. People on all sides of organizing conflicts were talking about these moral tensions constantly, using them against each other. Moral debates, in other words, were having material consequences. It also became clear to me that these debates were longstanding, dating back to the earliest days of collective bargaining in the industry. So, my archival research started to reach further back.

The article that was just published is an examination of this early history, and these early debates on the morality of striking in a hospital from the 1930s–1970s. These debates were not unique to nursing, but they were particularly acute among Registered Nurses. I focus on the Bay Area because that's where this kind of hospital organizing first occurred at scale.

Y. H.: You draw on scholarship on the "moral economy" and "moralized market" to make a convincing case for understanding changes in the moral evaluation of workplace contention—from a moral rejection to a moral acceptance of the nurse strikes. Could you elaborate more on how your case goes beyond these two approaches? And how would the conceptualization of workplace contention as an economic action offer insights to economic sociologists?

P. G.: The ideas behind the "moral economy" and "moralized market" have a lot of common ground, beyond just the almost synonymous concept labels. Both sets of ideas concern the interaction of moral claims and economic actions. Both center the actions of judgment and justification and see these as central to how we act and engage with each other economically. But as I argue in the paper, there is a very important difference between these frameworks when it comes to the consideration of economic conflict and force. When E.P. Thompson was outlining his conception of the moral economy, he was working to understand the moral justification of violence during food riots. Here, the moral economy was a set of traditional rules about economic distribution; when the rules came into conflict with market outcomes, the moral economy could justify the violent redistribution of goods. Conflict was central, both in terms of the social acts he worked to explain and the class antagonisms that undergirded them. Conflict was economic action. More recent scholarship in the moralized markets school, on the other hand, tends to focus on the justification of transactions. The object to be explained, therefore, tends not to be conflict, but settlement. I think this is reflective of a broader underemphasis on conflict and class in economic sociology.

In the article, I work to bring these frameworks together because they both have so much to offer. But I do think attention to class and contention is critical. Workplace conflict is moralized economic action. It also often produces significant economic consequences. Indeed, during the period this article examines, nurses and administrators alike used the term "economic action" to refer to the variety of disruptive activities hospital workers would engage in, from strikes to sick-outs to mass resignations. And, as I hope those who read the article will learn, these actions had economic consequences, altering distribution patterns, shaping the allocation of staff and care provision, as well as affecting what care and care work meant to those who worked in hospitals. I think examining these patterns is consistent with the broader project of developing a firmly sociological view of economic activity, and that we can miss a lot if we leave it out.

Y. H.: You argue that organizational reconciliation as a response to past workplace conflicts accounts for the changing moralization of nurse strikes in subsequent events. Could you tell us more about the mechanism organizational reconciliation? Are there any implications beyond this case?

P. G.: "Organizational reconciliation" is the process through which different groups' conflicting demands get resolved within organizations, on the basis of a preexisting normative logic. In this article I make the case that when staff nurses took disruptive action in the workplace, the nurses professional associations made bureaucratic and tactical changes that reconciled these demands with the normative injunction to prioritize patient care over pecuniary gain. Over time, these organizational reforms came to offer nurses tools to justify workplace contention, and shaped how they engaged in workplace contention. They were able to position workplace contention as a defense against the incursion of market logics in healthcare.

I identified this mechanism to describe a historical process that I saw in the data. I found it useful as a concept because it allowed me to examine and explain changing patterns of class-based contention, while taking seriously the roles of organizations, institutions, and culture. I made a point of grounding this idea in institutional theory in the paper, in part to highlight this usefulness. In the conclusion of the article, I offer some examples of where we might see similar processes at work, including in more recent labor conflicts among teachers and among hospital workers under COVID. But more generically, I think the concept can be useful for scholars examining other conflicts between groups with distinct interests, evaluating potential instrumental actions against a backdrop of moral constraint.

Y. H.: Methodologically, this article relies on various archival data, including nurse associations' journals, correspondence, meeting summaries, diaries, memoranda, and other internal organizational documents, which you call an omnivorous approach. What are some advantages or challenges of using archival data to theorize the case? Any advice for scholars and graduate students interested in a historical study?

P. G.: There are as many ways of doing archival re-

search as there are archival researchers. But ultimately, I think there are two main ways of using archival data, which people combine to different degrees. One is to systematically analyze a set of texts that are delimited in some way—for instance, you might select a set of magazine articles, and look for patterns there. There are important benefits to this approach: The text units are comparable by design, and you can implement a transparent method that disciplines the author's interpretive process. But there are always accessible archival sources that you've necessarily cut out of the analysis, including some that may lead to a meaningfully different interpretation of a given text. On the other hand, a researcher can seek to collect many kinds of archival data about their case, which I think can help them get closer to the truth of what any given piece of text meant to those who produced it. This approach, however, necessarily involves the author's interpretation, in a way that can be challenging to replicate. So there are consequential trade-offs here.

I use a combination of these approaches: I use a systematic coding of articles in nurse association journals alongside a more omnivorous analysis of different kinds of texts in order to build a narrative of what was going on in these organizations. I hope the coding will convince readers that my analysis reflects real things that were happening, rather than my interpretation of a selection of texts. But ultimately, without turning to a broader set of texts, I would not have been able to understand what the journal data was actually showing me. I would not have had enough of a grasp of the social context behind those texts.

For graduate students wanting to think a bit more about these trade-offs in archival research, I would point them to Damon Mayrl and Nicholas Hoover Wilson's excellent 2020 article in *AJS*, which gets at precisely these issues.

Y. H.: What are you currently working on, and what is next for you?

P. G.: I am currently in the process of turning the broader project I discussed above into a book, looking at changing contentious practices among various occupational groups in hospitals, and following them up through the period of union growth in the 1990s–2000s. The book focuses on how persistent cultural and moral frameworks surrounding care work helped hospital workers and unions understand and articulate workers' interests, and ultimately, to develop new strategies of labor mobilization that transformed the industry. Once that is wrapped up, I'll be turning to data collection for my next project on the interaction of disease and the political economy of healthcare work, with particular attention to the AIDS and COVID epidemics. ■

SECTION OFFICE-HOLDERS

Office-Holders and Committee Members

Chair: Ashley Mears, Boston University
Chair-Elect: Ken-Hou Lin, University of Texas at Austin
Past Chair: Emily Anne Erikson, Yale University
Section Secretary/Treasurer: Victoria Reyes, University of California, Riverside
Barbara Kiviat, Stanford University
Carly Knight, New York University
Roi Livne, University of Michigan
Gökhan Mülayim, Boston University (Student Representative)
Beth Redbird, Northwestern University
John Robinson, Princeton University
Katherine Sobering, University of North Texas

SPOTLIGHT: INTERVIEW WITH MELIKE ARSLAN

Melike Arslan received her Ph.D. from the Sociology Department at Northwestern University in July 2021. Following her Ph.D., she was a Raphael Morrison Dorman Memorial Postdoctoral Fellow at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. She is an incoming postdoctoral fellow at Max Planck Institute. She broadly investigates how decisions over economic regulations, such as corporate bankruptcy and antimonopoly and environmental protection laws and policies, are made and how these regulations in turn affect corporate organizations and economic behaviors with a transnational perspective.

Elif Birced, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Melike about her current book project and suggestions for junior scholars.

Elif Birced: What sparked your interest in studying antitrust laws with a transnational perspective?

Melike Arslan: I was primarily motivated by the rising public awareness and debate on the powers of digital monopolies, like Google, Facebook (now Meta), and Amazon. The competitive process is at the core of the political and economic arguments for free, deregulated, and open markets. Without this process, markets cannot generate the economic innovation, efficiency, and reasonable prices that the advocates of free markets seek to achieve. In recent years, state regulators, not just in the United States but around the world, started investigating how digital companies have garnered so much market power. Many concluded that they achieved this not just with economic innovation and efficiency but also by exclusionary and exploitative business strategies in the purview of antitrust (also called "competition") laws. For example, they bought smaller but more innovative competitors, then killed off their innovative projects, or they sold their lower quality products below cost to push their competitors out of the market, then raised the prices, etc. Antitrust laws were originally designed to prevent such business abuses and expansion strategies to protect consumers and other competitors. Yet, since the mid-1980s, especially in the United States, antitrust laws have been interpreted and implemented very narrowly. It has been commonly assumed that most such business strategies generate economic benefits rather than harms, and even when there is clear monopolization, it is transitory. In other words, as long as the regulators allow the entry of new competitors, the markets can fix themselves. But the digital markets have failed to meet these expectations, creating persistent monopolization. Therefore, the growing debate over digital monopolies has catalyzed a broader reevaluation and reinterpretation of antitrust laws around the world.

E. B.: Could you please describe your research and the main implications of your book project, ***The Varieties of Antitrust: How the Fight Against Monopolies Derailed Globally*****?**

M. A.: My book aims to analyze the variations in antitrust laws and policies around the world by combining three layers of research and empirical insights on antitrust laws and policies. This work contributes to some of the core questions and debates in the international political economy of laws and regulations: What national political, economic, and social factors shape antitrust laws and policies? How do these laws and policies diffuse worldwide and get adopted by new countries? How do the differences in domestic institutional legacies and varieties of capitalism affect their enforcement in practice?

In the first layer of this project, I looked at why U.S. antitrust laws and policies changed fundamentally in the 1970s and 80s. Departing from the previous studies on this topic, I did not focus on the political ideologies or goals of presidents; most studies have already found that presidents' political party or ideological affiliation had a mild effect on antitrust policy in the United States. Nor did I focus on the academic training (e.g., Chicago School vs. Harvard School of Antitrust) or professional background (e.g., economists vs lawyers) of policy-

makers. While these factors are important, they focus on a narrow set of actors and tell us a story of gradual change that discounts the role of broader competing economic interests. Instead, I focused on the Congressional debates and decisions on antitrust policy, which reflect more closely the competing economic and political interests. With this shift in focus, I revealed the high inflation rate and the growing consumerist movement of the early 1970s significantly undermined the then-dominant antitrust policies. They created a widespread belief that antitrust policies did not sufficiently prevent monopolization, ironically facilitating the further reduction of antimonopoly restrictions by large businesses' intellectual and bureaucratic allies.

In the second layer, I investigated why antitrust laws and policies diffused worldwide in the 1990s. This diffusion defies the expectations of the existing literature on the international diffusion of laws and policies. The competition for business investments could not explain antitrust policy diffusion because different businesses have different interests in antitrust laws. Crossnational learning between intellectuals and policymakers also could not explain it because the intellectual support for antitrust policies was at its lowest in the 1980s. Lastly, it was unclear what powerful states and international organizations could achieve by coercing weaker nations to adopt antitrust laws. Focusing mainly on the American government's advocacy for this diffusion, I found that domestic protectionist interests were the primary factor. Internationally uncompetitive American businesses pressured the government to issue protections against the industrial policies in developing economies, which tipped the global competition to their disadvantage. Instead, the American government, which had already settled on open trade policies in the 1990s, responded by pressuring these countries to adopt antitrust laws, which it hoped would counteract or limit their industrial policies.

In the third and last layer, I focused on the adoption and implementation of competition laws in Turkey and Mexico— two high-middle-income countries with strong ties to the European Union and the U.S. This research involved six months of fieldwork and 95 interviews and yielded several important findings on antitrust laws in emerging markets. First, I found that the location of developing countries in the global economic system determined whether they adopted U.S. or E.U.-style competition laws. Second, the settlements of power between states and large businesses during the transition to neoliberal policies shaped national competition laws' design by limiting the power of states or businesses. Third and lastly, the enforcement of competition laws varied substantially based on two main factors: the organizational design of antitrust authorities and the complementarity between these new authorities and the domestic administrative law systems. The established hiring and expertise creation practices in national state bureaucracies determined the organizational design of antitrust authorities, shaping their investigation and decision-making process. In addition, any friction between the newly created antitrust authorities and more established systems of administrative law prevented case-law development and forced antitrust laws to adapt to their institutional environment.

E. B.: As a junior scholar in the field of economic sociology, could you share some lesson that may be valuable for those who are doctoral students, on the job market, or at earlier stages of their careers?

M. A.: At the beginning of an academic career, it is hard to distinguish helpful feedback from unhelpful feedback. Especially as a graduate student, you are eager to grow and learn; therefore, you are willing to ask for any advice and listen to any feedback on your research. Later you learn to be conscientious about the limits of external feedback. I advise young scholars at the beginning of their careers to still put their ideas, words, and findings out there and be willing to receive feedback and critique, but also be cautious about the advice they listen to. First of all, it is important to remember that it is never too soon or too late to seek feedback, but in each stage of research, there are different types of feedback that you should be focusing on. For example, at the beginning of a project, the most crucial feedback is about the significance of the question or the puzzle. Later, the feedback on methods and data gains more importance, followed by the feedback on analysis and argument. So, if you are at the beginning of a project, you should not get hung up on the feedback on your data or argument—those things will naturally improve over time. Secondly, you must seek feedback from the real audience of your work, i.e., the community of scholars whose research you refer to and are in conversation with. If you receive feedback from someone outside your audience, you should receive it cautiously: The wrong audience can inadvertently provide unfitting, discouraging, or distracting feedback. Finding the right audience is tricky, but the good part is that it's also a matter of choice. Often sociological work can speak to different groups of audiences and subdisciplines within sociology, and as the author of your work, you get to decide who your audience is. So, my main advice to young scholars is to seek and receive feedback but be aware of their limitations. The right kind of feedback should help you build up your confidence at different stages of your project and not bring it down. ■

BOOKSHELF: WHEN WORK BECOMES RELIGION

Carolyn Chen is an associate professor of ethnic studies at UC Berkeley and co-director of the Berkeley Center for the Study of Religion. She is the author of *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton 2008) and co-editor of *Sustaining Faith Traditions: Race, Religion, and Ethnicity among the Latino and Asian American Second Generation* (NYU 2012).

Meghann Lucy, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Dr. Carolyn Chen about her book *Work, Pray, Code: When Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley* (Princeton University Press, 2022) and possibilities for the future of work.

Meghann Lucy: Firstly, I would like to thank you for being a part of *Accounts* and congratulate you on your book. Could you describe a bit about how you came to study work culture in Silicon Valley?

Carolyn Chen: As a sociologist of religion, I came to study Silicon Valley work culture through the lens of religion. In the last thirty years, the number of Americans who religiously identify has dropped dramatically. I'd increasingly felt that the conventional focus of religion scholars on formal religious tradition wasn't capturing what is sacred or spiritual to many Americans today. I wanted to explore how religion manifests in secular institutions and spaces, and among people who don't claim a religious identity. I started by studying yoga—a practice with Hindu origins but that is popularly regarded as secular. But when I interviewed people, who were mostly professionals, about their yoga and spirituality, work was the central theme. They'd say things like, "I practice yoga after a long day of work to stretch, destress, to calm myself…" and "Practicing yoga helps me return to my work renewed so that I can be a better attorney [or nurse or teacher, etc.]." I realized that what was sacred to them wasn't yoga, but work. Durkheim defines the sacred as those things that we set aside, and that we submit, sacrifice, and surrender to. Yoga practitioners told me about how they endured headaches, insomnia, anxiety, broken marriages, and so much more because of work. They organized their lives around the institution of work. Identifying work as the source of sacredness in professionals' lives led me to studying work and asking how social systems create and sustain work worship. Through the lens of religion, I started to see how tech workplaces had become the new "faith communities" for tech workers, fulfilling their needs for identity, belonging, meaning, and purpose that Americans once looked to religion to fulfill.

M. L.: In *Work Pray Code*, you describe a shift towards "corporate maternalism" in Silicon Valley. How is this different than the regulatory corporate paternalism of decades before? And did you find that corporate maternalism was applied evenly across employees of different genders?

C. C.: "Corporate maternalism" refers to the personal care tech companies provide for their employees so that they are happy, healthy, and therefore productive. It includes the whole constellation of perks that people associate with tech workplaces—free meals, smoothies, ping-pong tables, nap pods, meditation, Zumba classes, dental care, laundry service, social clubs, inspirational talks by spiritual leaders, and so on. I call it corporate *maternalism* because it is carried out by women in female-dominated HR departments that describe their work as "caring for" and "nurturing" the physical, social, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of the young, male tech workforce.

In both corporate maternalism and corporate paternalism, companies are trying to manage and control workers' personal lives in order to increase company productivity and profit. But corporate paternalism, which applied to mostly blue-collar workers in an industrial economy, and corporate maternalism, which applies to high-skilled workers in a postindustrial economy, start from very different assumptions about human capital, and are responding to different challenges in labor management. In corporate paternalism, company perks and benefits were a strategy to compete against employee loyalty and identification with unions. But in Silicon Valley and most knowledge industries, unions hardly exist, and are not a threat.

In tech, human resource professionals identify employee burnout as the biggest challenge in labor management. Burnout is a problem in a knowledge economy because a company's most valuable asset is the knowledge and skills embodied in their high-skilled workers—their human capital. HR professionals explained burnout as the literal depreciation of company assets. It is therefore in tech companies' interests to invest in the "wholeness" of their human capital by caring for, nurturing, and nourishing employees so that they do not burn out. Companies may even go so far as intervening in employees' romantic lives to make them "whole." This was true in one start-up where the CEO/founder hired a coach to improve the dating life of a rising employee. Corporate maternalism is Silicon Valley's attempt to solve the perennial work–life balance problem by providing for all of life, so that workers can give their all to work without exacting a personal toll. Corporate slogans that celebrate the "holistic workplace" and "bringing your whole self to work" obscure the extensiveness of the company's intervention in managing the bodies, minds, and spirits of their employees for optimal performance.

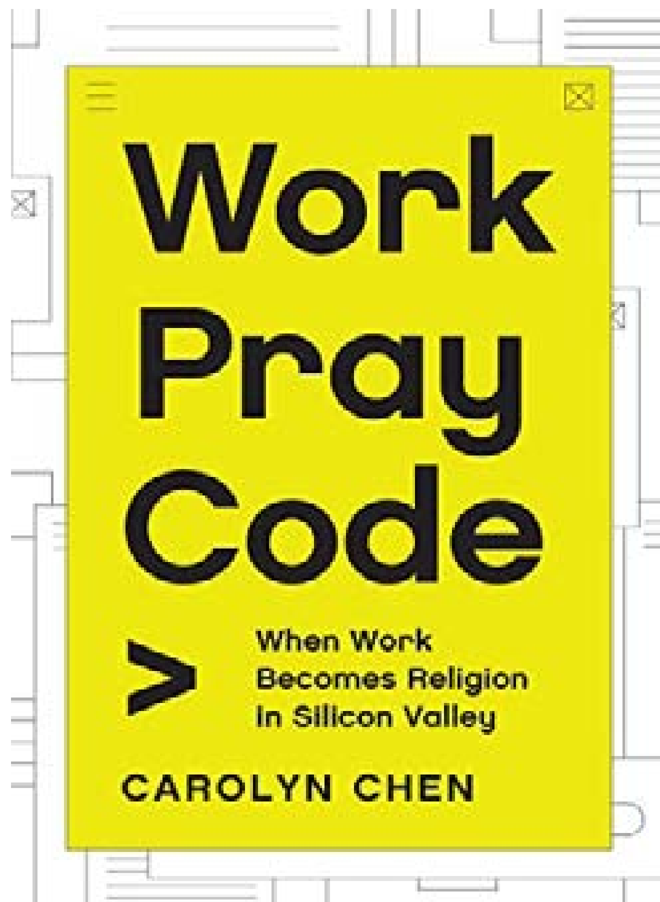
Corporate maternalism is not applied evenly across the company or across genders. The corporate care of the company privileges salaried employees and especially those of senior rank. These tend to be men. Women, who are concentrated in departments like human resources, talent and development, and wellness, have the job of anticipating the needs of male engineers and delivering the care rather than receiving the care. And then there is a whole invisible army of lower-skilled contingent labor like the janitors, cafeteria workers, childcare workers, bus drivers, and more, whose "wholeness" is not worth investing in. They don't have the privilege of receiving the company's maternal care.

M. L.: How does the theocracy of work affect employees' lives outside of the workplace?

C. C.: In a theocracy of work like Silicon Valley, the devotion of an entire society is directed to work. It's a society that is organized to worship work because all the social, material, and spiritual benefits of a community are concentrated in the institution of work. It's my attempt to understand the work worship that we witness among American professionals as a social system, rather than as an individual idiosyncrasy, or a result of one company's work culture. Work institutions are like giant magnets that attract the time, energy, and devotion of a community away from other organizations, like families, faith communities, and neighborhood associations. As a result, people have less time, energy, and devotion for other people, organizations, and commitments. This dynamic was most evident in how tech workers' religious lives change after moving to Silicon Valley. Many tech workers left their religions after they moved to Silicon Valley and joined tech companies. Their workplaces provided the social and spiritual benefits of belonging and meaning that they'd once found in their faith communities. Moreover, their work hours were so demanding that they had no time to develop friendships, interests, and commitments outside of work. As a result, they redirected their worship towards work and away from their religion.

M. L.: An interesting finding from your book describes how the growth of Techtopia affects public institutions and the urban spaces surrounding the workplace. Could you share a bit about this?

C. C.: Silicon Valley is what I call "Techtopia," an engineered society where work is the highest form of fulfilment. So, the same dynamic I described of tech workers directing their devotion away from their faith communities and into their work also applies to their disinvestment and disengagement in other civic institutions and the public at large. Public officials and community leaders all complained that tech workers, who are so devoted to their work, have become publicly disengaged. Companies provide for so much of tech workers' material, social, and spiritual needs with their cafeterias, social clubs, and meditations and more, that tech workers don't need to depend on, or engage with, other people and organizations outside of work. An example of this is the Google bus. Tech workers are shielded from the Bay Area's broken public transportation system because their companies provide private bus services for their employees. As a result, tech workers aren't invested in improving a public good. And because tech companies monopolize the time, resources, and devotion of the community, all other organizations—families, small businesses, faith communities—must cater to the needs of the tech workplace in order to survive in Silicon Val-



ley. This ends up directing Silicon Valley's financial and social capital away from the public and into tech companies.

M. L.: To what extent do you think you might find similar patterns happening beyond Silicon Valley or the tech world more generally?

C. C.: The media often portrays Silicon Valley as a strange outlier. But I think it is only a more extreme example of how broad social and economic shifts of the last fifty years have transformed and elevated the meaning of work for the highly skilled in America. As a result of large-scale shifts, such as global competition and the rise of a knowledge economy, companies are investing in the personal development of their elite employees and curating fulfilling work experiences for them. Words that we once associated with life outside of work—"authenticity," "purpose," and "passion"—are now corporate buzzwords. For a certain sector of elite workers in America, there is no social institution that is more invested in their fulfilment than their workplaces. At the same time, we've experienced a precipitous decline in civic organizations that were once the source of belonging, meaning, and fulfilment for many Americans—our faith communities, neighborhood associations, and unions. This is not just a Silicon Valley story. This is what is happening all over the United States, but especially in knowledge-industry hubs like Seattle, Cambridge, and Washington D.C. The "strangeness" of Silicon Valley allows us to see these broad trends in clearer relief.

M. L.: Do you think the Covid-19 pandemic may have created some cultural shifts at tech firms?

C. C.: Most tech firms have now transitioned to hybrid work and some to full-time remote work, at least for the time being. People don't expect to go into the office as regularly anymore. As work became remote, so presumably did the social and spiritual benefits of work that once motivated and attracted workers to bring their "whole selves" to work. I think this shift has created an opening for many people to question the meaning of work in their lives. But even if the attraction of work has waned, the hours and demands haven't. For most tech workers, work continues to be the alpha institution that organizes their lives and directs their devotion. I don't see work worship changing in tech unless Silicon Valley develops robust nonwork institutions that can offer competing sources of belonging, meaning, and fulfilment apart from work.

M. L.: What is next for you?

C. C.: My interview respondents all told me that finding community outside of work is a challenge. This has really lingered with me. I'm interested in exploring how religious, cultural, and ethnic traditions can offer radical and innovative solutions to cultivating community in hyper-stratified cities. ■

BOOKSHELF: MISCONCEIVING MERIT

Mary Blair-Loy is a professor of sociology at the University of California San Diego. She uses multiple methods to study gender, the economy, work, and family. She coauthored a book, with Erin Cech, *Misconceiving Merit: Paradoxes of Excellence and Devotion in Academic Science and Engineering*, which was published by University of Chicago Press in 2022. Her Twitter profile is @MaryBlairLoy.

Erin Cech is an associate professor of sociology at University of Michigan. Her research examines cultural mechanisms of inequality reproduction—specifically, how inequality is reproduced through processes that are not overtly discriminatory or coercive, but rather those that are built into seemingly innocuous cultural beliefs and practices. Her Twitter profile is @CechErin.

Elif Birced, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, interviewed both Mary Blair Loy and Erin Cech about their recent book, *Misconceiving Merit*.

Elif Birced: What sparked your interest in studying how cultural ideas of merit in academic science, engineering and math produce unequal outcomes?

M. B.-L. and E. C.: It has been a wonderful adventure to write Misconceiving Merit. Mary Blair-Loy has long studied how cultural beliefs about who is worthy create and legitimize inequalities. Her earlier work examined how the "work devotion schema," a cultural understanding that professional work is a vocation requiring single-minded allegiance, marginalized and devalued women in finance and business. Yet finance professionals are not necessarily professionally invested in their own powers of analytic judgements about the merit of colleagues. So, we turned to cultural beliefs about worthiness in the exemplar case of academic science, a profession largely buffered from profit and politics and with an elaborate process for measuring scientific contributions.

Erin Cech's work examines cultural mechanisms of workforce inequality, often using STEM as a case site. Her work has documented patterns of gender, race, and LGBTQ inequality in STEM, and attends to how practices and assumptions within professional cultures reproduce disadvantages for marginalized and minoritized groups. We believed that the cultural basis of inequality goes deeper than biases toward devalued group members, to the core of cultural understandings of professional merit and excellence itself.

Our book investigates this paradox: How can academic science, which so highly values merit and believes it can

objectively recognize it, reproduce consistently unequal outcomes for women, Black, Latinx and Native men, mothers, and/or LGBTQ faculty?

Our investigation uses multiple sources of evidence from the R1 (research intensive) university we study. This university is something of a best-case scenario, as it strives to fairly and transparently assess faculty merit. Our bounded, medium-sized sample allowed us to collect comprehensive data on the entire population of STEM faculty at the university while gaining detailed insight into the lives of individual professors. Our multimethod datasets include administrative data, our Scholarly Production Indices (SPI) database with information we gathered through bibliometric websites and funding databases, our own survey, and in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 85 professors. To assess the resonance of the schemas we identified among STEM faculty in the United States more broadly, we reassessed our top-level findings using Erin Cech's STEM Inclusion Study, with data on over 7500 STEM faculty; there, we found that the patterns we discovered in our case university appear across academic STEM more broadly.

E. B.: In *Misconceiving Merit*, you highlight two hegemonic cultural yardsticks of scientific merit: work devotion schema and scientific excellence schema. Could you please briefly describe what you mean by these schemas? How are they engendering unequal outcomes particularly for women faculty with kids, faculty of color and/or LGBTQ faculty?

M. B.-L. and E. C.: We theorize two key cultural schemas at the heart of the STEM professions' cultural definitions of merit. The term cultural schema underscores that these elements of merit are historically rooted, widely shared, taken-for-granted, and moralized understandings that shape what their adherents know as reality.

The *work devotion schema* portrays academic science as a demanding vocation and frames mothers as lacking sufficient devotion to the STEM work necessary for success. Yet we find that faculty mothers in our study have the same publishing and grant success on average as men and women without children. Mothers in the same departments and advancement levels are devalued and are paid significantly less, net of their scholarly productivity. In response to this stigma, women with children often downplay their status as mothers or pass as nonmothers so that they will be taken seriously as academic scientists and engineers.

The schema of scientific excellence is the set of characteristics that form a yardstick of sorts that STEM faculty use to measure up one another's competence and excellence. The schema of scientific excellence valorizes scientists who are viewed by others as brilliant, assertive, and self-promoting. White and Asian heterosexual men are often viewed as having these qualities by default, while underrepresented and minoritized faculty do not benefit from this automatic assumption of excellence, despite their similar average productivity. Alignment with the schema of scientific excellence has consequences: Academic scientists and engineers who regard themselves as more assertive and self-promoting earn more than others, on average, although they don't actually produce more scientific work. Black and Latinx men and women, white women, and LGBTQ faculty fare worse than white and Asian heterosexual men on average in terms of respect and professional integration, even holding constant their productivity, job level, and department.

Women faculty, especially Black and Latinx women, also face *respect penalties*. Men get credit for relational skills, but women don't. Assertive "cowboys" are assumed to produce better science, but only white and Asian men get full credit for their assertiveness. Black and Latinx women, in contrast, are *devalued* for assertiveness, while Asian women are marginalized because they are stereotyped as too timid. And, despite the myth of their independence, majority-race men actually receive more informal mentoring than other junior scientists.

Scientists who care about and are engaged in diversity and inclusion efforts also face respect penalties. Faculty who care about diversity are sometimes seen as too political, and at risk for producing distorted science. Additionally, sexual minority faculty often feel pressure to downplay their sexual identity and family lives because their identity could be viewed as distorting "objective" science.

E. B.: Could you please describe the main implications of your co-authored book, ***Misconceiving Merit: Paradoxes of Excellence and Devotion in Academic Science and Engineering*****?**

M. B.-L. and E. C.: We identify a paradox of academic science—that a profession with seemingly universalistic and objective standards of evaluation systematically devalues equally productive and committed professionals who are not white or Asian heterosexual men. We resolve this paradox by analyzing the two taken-for-granted and moralized cultural schemas—work devotion and scientific excellence–which lie at the heart of STEM professionals' understandings of

merit. These standards are internalized and deployed by well-meaning scientists of all demographic and disciplinary backgrounds. Yet they *mismeasure* merit. They valorize culturally masculine traits, which are often disconnected from actual scientific productivity. Further, they pick up on the characteristics believed to signal excellence and devotion when embodied by white heterosexual men and often miss them when embodied in other scientists.

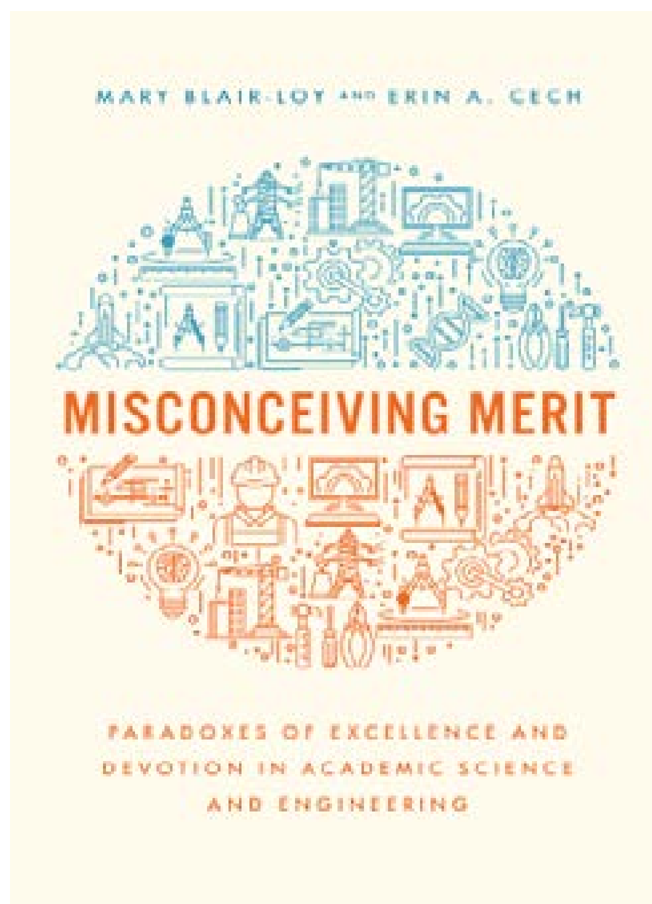
The schemas of work devotion and scientific excellence are bad for scientists and bad for science. They denigrate caregiving, other creative pursuits, rest, and regeneration. They valorize individualistic, self-promoting "cowboys" and "rock stars," but innovation often requires deeply collaborative work across departments, disciplines, generations, and diverse identities.

More broadly, we study STEM *professional culture* as a set of intersubjective meaning systems bounded by the historical understandings and emergent relationships within STEM. We employ STEM professional culture as a floodlight into the black box of merit in STEM to understand the ways that such definitions of merit can perpetuate inequality. We encourage other scholars to similarly investigate other professional and occupational cultures and the ways in which they may be creating and reinforcing intraprofession social inequalities.

E. B.: How can these cultural patterns be reversed—or can they be changed? Could you share some of your insights?

M. B.-L. and E. C.: First, we must recognize that the problem is rooted not only in status biases and bad apples but in a hegemonic belief system as well. Our research shows that the characteristics revered in the schemas of scientific excellence and devotion are gendered and racialized, and they aren't even necessarily tied to scholarly productivity.

Second, we should align departmental assessments of merit with factors that are actually connected to creative scholarly contributions. Departments need to be explicit about hiring criteria before review of faculty materials begins. What does success entail in this department? Research shows that systematically assessing candidates on hiring rubrics should be done strategically to mitigate bias smuggled into these ratings. Anonymized rubric ratings should be discussed in departmental meetings, noting the variability and fairness of each candidate's evaluations.



Third, the work devotion schema unfairly penalizes involved caregivers, particularly mothers. Evaluate your institution's family accommodation policies and who uses them. Are these policies fair, clear, and widely used without stigma?

Fourth, faculty peer-to-peer education can help overcome resistance to openly discussing diversity and inequality in advancement practices. For example, when data on inequality in STEM are presented by departmental members who are seen as star scientists, their colleagues are more likely to embrace more equitable practices. Unwarping the cultural yardstick of merit also means changing how we mentor the next generation of scientists, emphasizing the importance of equity, collaboration, and communication not as tangential to good science, but as central to it. ■

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

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.

Dr. Ladin Bayurgil is a postdoctoral researcher at KU Leuven's Center for Sociological Research working on a European Research Council supported project that focuses on platform work across three sectors, gig, care, and creative, and across eight European countries, with a focus on precarity at the continuum between paid and unpaid work. Ladin's work spans urban and economic sociology, sociology of work and occupations, and particularly asks questions around urban precarious labor. Before her position at the KU Leuven, Ladin has received her PhD in Sociology from Boston University.

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.