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Re-thinking the future of work: beyond binary hierarchies

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Re-thinking the future of work: Beyond binary hierarchies

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Abstract

How will work be organised in the future? This paper reveals that although there are multiple stories about the future of work, a similar storyline is adopted across many of the competing visions. Most visions firstly squeeze all forms of work into one side or the other or some dichotomy and then proceed to temporally and/or normatively sequence the two sides of the dualism and finally label the resultant one-dimensional and linear trajectory as some -ism, -ation or post-something-or-other. This paper evaluates critically such hierarchical binary narratives (e.g., the shift from informal to formal work, non-commodified to commodified work, localisation to globalisation, Fordism to post-Fordism, bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy) and displays how these dominant narratives, as well as the counter narratives that simply invert the temporal and/or hierarchical sequencing of these dichotomies, over-simplify lived practice. The paper concludes by offering a way forward that transcends these one-dimensional linear tales and recognises the heterogeneous and multiple directions of work in order to provide a more kaleidoscope-like understanding of the direction of work and open up the future of work to new possibilities.

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1. Introduction

There are many diverse visions of the future of work. Indeed, there seem to be as many visions as there are commentators. For some, the future of work is rosy, for others it is bleak. For some, radical changes are about to take place, for others, the future will be much like the present apart from a few changes at the margins. Some visions of the future are written as scientifically rigorous descriptions, others as prescriptions of what ought to be.

With such a cacophony of competing voices and styles of writing, one might think that somebody would have attempted to review the multitude of claims about the future of work. Until now, however, most reviews have confined themselves to a narrow range of viewpoints [1–4]. The intention here, therefore, is to provide those interested in the future of work with a more comprehensive tour of the multiple perspectives than so far attempted and in doing so to make some significant advances in how the future of work is thought about. In order to do this, Section 2 will argue that although there are many different stories about the future of work, the vast majority employ a similar storyline grounded in what Derrida [5] terms hierarchical binary thought. To reveal this, Sections 3 and 4 will then review an array of mainstream and alternative depictions of the future of work so as to unravel how they are grounded in this narrative structure. Section 5 will then display...
how this way of thinking about the future has resulted in one-dimensional linear tales that over-simplify what is occurring in lived practice and Section 6 will discuss how this conventional storyline might be transcended in order to achieve a more representative understanding of the trajectories of work.

2. Futures for work: different stories but similar storylines

Although there are many different visions of the future of work, commentators often employ a very similar narrative structure when constructing their stories. To understand the commonalities in their storylines, consider, for example, the following visions of the future of work:

- Products and services are increasingly being produced and delivered by people in formal jobs meaning that informal work (e.g., subsistence production, unpaid exchange) is disappearing almost entirely from the economic landscape (henceforth referred to as the ‘formalisation’ of work thesis);
- Capitalism is spreading its tentacles ever wider and deeper to colonise the few remaining vestiges of the world that remain untouched by its grip (i.e., variously called the ‘commodification’, ‘marketisation’ or ‘commercialisation’ thesis);
- There is a rapid movement towards an open world economy with businesses increasingly operating in a de-regulated seamless global market-place (i.e., the ‘globalisation’ thesis) as regulated national-level economies disappear;
- Industrial society is being replaced by post-industrial societies (i.e., the ‘post-industrialism’ thesis);
- Post-Fordist flexible work practices are increasingly replacing Fordist mass production (i.e., the ‘post-Fordism’ thesis); and
- Post-bureaucratic work organisation is steadily replacing bureaucratic work organisation (i.e., the ‘post-bureaucracy’ thesis).

What, therefore, is the common argument or storyline being adopted across all these perspectives? The first step in constructing these stories is that they marshal the diverse forms of work organisation into one side or the other of some dichotomy which is deemed crucial for understanding the future of work (e.g., informal and formal work, non-commodified and commodified work, bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy, Fordism and post-Fordism). Second, and having squeezed all of economic life into one side or the other of this dualism, the two sides are then ordered into a temporal and normative sequence in which one side is seen as universally replacing and/or more progressive than the other. Third and finally, and to represent this one-dimensional linear trajectory, some label is created to depict their vision of the future of work, which usually involves using some ‘-ation’ (e.g., formalisation, globalisation, commodification), ‘-ism’ (e.g., post-industrialism, informationalism) or ‘post-something-or-other’ (e.g., post-capitalism, post-Fordism, post-bureaucracy).

This common narrative structure employs what Derrida [5] terms ‘binary hierarchical’ thought in that firstly, economic life is marshalled into a binary structure composed of two sides which are stable, bounded and constituted via negation and secondly, these opposites are read in a hierarchical manner in which there is a superordinate (e.g., the formal economy or post-bureaucracy) seen to be in the ascendancy and/or endowed with positive attributes and a subordinate or subservient ‘other’ (e.g., the informal economy or bureaucracy) in decline and/or attributed with negativity. Using this hierarchical binary narrative structure to conceptualise the future of work is not only a popular device, employed in most of the best-selling ‘pop-futurism’ written by seer-like management gurus as well as serious academic writing, but also a very powerful semantic tool. Indeed, to see the persuasiveness of such a story-telling technique, a range of visions grounded in such a mode of thought will be now presented that are often assumed to be facts or descriptions about the future of work with few doubting the yarns that they spin.

3. Dominant narratives about the direction of work

Reviewing the vast body of literature on the future of work, three grand narratives concerning the trajectory of work can be identified that hold considerable sway over how the future is envisaged at the present juncture in history. To understand these narratives, it is here necessary to conceptualise the economy as composed of
three modes of delivering goods and services, namely, the market (private sector), the state (public sector) and the informal sphere (the social economy). Viewed in these terms, the current widespread consensus is that most nations are witnessing a common trajectory of work (where the future is seen as a linear extrapolation of a perceived past trajectory rather than in cyclical or dialectical terms).

Firstly, the future of work is popularly seen to involve an on-going ‘formalisation’ of work in the sense that goods and services are being increasingly produced and delivered through the formal (market and state) sphere under the social relations of formal employment rather than through the informal sphere (termed the ‘formalisation’ thesis). Reviewing the literature, this narrative of ‘progress’ and view of the trajectory of economic development has exerted a firm grip on how the future of work is envisaged [6], so much so that the degree of formalisation has even been taken as a measuring rod used to define third world countries as ‘developing’ and the first world as ‘advanced’. In this vision, formal work is assumed to be expanding and to represent ‘progress’, ‘development’, ‘modernity’ and ‘advancement’, while informal work is the receding mode of work organisation and negatively portrayed as representing ‘under-development’, ‘traditionalism’ and ‘backwardness’. As such, the future of work is cast in stone; there is a one-dimensional linear trajectory and it is one in which there is a natural and inevitable process of formalisation. This shift towards formalisation, moreover, is seen as a positive phenomenon, reflected in the range of terms used to label work that is not formal employment. As Latouche [7] recognises, ‘most of them simply qualify—either directly or indirectly—whatever is meant, in a negative way’ (p. 129). Variously referred to as ‘non-structured’, ‘unpaid’, ‘non-official’, ‘non-organised’, ‘a-normal’, ‘hidden’, ‘a-legal’, ‘submerged’, ‘non-visible’, ‘shadow’, ‘a-typical’ or ‘irregular’, this sphere is thus denoted as ‘bereft of its own logic or identity other than can be indicated by this displacement away from, or even effacement of, the ‘normal’ (p. 129). It is described by what it is not—what is absent from, or insufficient about, such work—relative to formal employment and this absence or insufficiency is always viewed as a negative feature of such work.

The second widely held narrative that has similarly curtailed the scope of what is deemed realistic and feasible so far as the future of work is concerned is the discourse that there is no alternative to capitalism. Here, therefore, this formal production and delivery of goods and services is depicted as increasingly occurring through the market sector (rather than by the state or social economy) by capitalist firms for the purpose of profit; in other words, there is what is variously called a ‘commodification’, ‘commercialisation’ or ‘marketisation’ of economic activity. A universal process is seen to be taking place, whereby capitalism becomes ever more powerful, expansive and totalising as it penetrates deeper into each and every corner of the economic landscape and stretches its tentacles wider across the globe to colonise those remaining areas previously left untouched by its powerful force. Indeed, this vision of the future of work is seldom questioned. For many, in consequence, this vision of the future has taken on the semblance of an indisputable and irrefutable fact. This is the case not only among neo-liberals who extol the virtues of, and celebrate, such a future, such as De Soto [8] who asserts that ‘all plausible alternatives to capitalism have now evaporated’ (p. 13), but also among the swelling ranks of those heavily opposed to its encroachment into every crevice of life where a certain fatalistic despondence prevails about its inevitability. As Amin et al. [9] pronounce, ‘the pervasive reach of exchange-value society makes it ever more difficult to imagine and legitimate non-market forms of organisation and provision’ (p. 60), while for Castree et al. [10], ‘that this is a predominantly capitalist world seems to us indisputable …’. Indeed, this unstoppable transition towards a commodified world is so widely held and felt that it is perhaps difficult today to consider any other future. There really does seem to be ‘no alternative to capitalism’ [11].

Third and finally, this formalisation and commodification of work is seen to be increasingly taking place with an open (de-regulated) world economy (i.e., the globalisation thesis). For adherents to this vision, the outcome is firstly, a process of ‘economic globalisation’ in which free trade occurs in an unrestrained manner and secondly, a process of ‘financial globalisation’ in which a seamless world of hyper-mobile and homeless capital emerges resulting in the end of geography [12] and a ‘borderless world’ [13]. This, moreover, is accompanied by a third process of ‘political globalisation’ in which nation-states witness a diminution in their ability to regulate either national or international capital as an unregulated global capitalism takes hold resulting in the ‘end of sovereignty’ [14] and the end of the ‘nation-state’ [13]. Fourth and finally, and running alongside is seen to be a process of ‘cultural globalisation’ in which an homogenous global culture emerges founded upon what might be called ‘westernised’ or ‘Americanised’ cultural values (e.g., [15–17]). Among
many commentators, these four facets of globalisation are not only depicted as inevitable but among optimistic globalisers, celebrated as positive trends.

It is not just these three grand narratives about the future of work, however, that concoct their visions of the future of work in binary hierarchical terms. The same narrative structure is also employed by many commentators who, accepting the formalisation thesis as an evident fact, limit themselves to depicting the future of work in terms of the changes taking place in formal employment. As Table 1 displays, all of the dominant visions regarding the future of employment adopt the same hierarchical binary way of thinking when depicting what the future holds.

First of all, there are those that represent the future of work organisation in terms of the shift from industrial to post-industrial society. Originating in the late 1960s in the USA, an optimistic belief emerged in the inevitability of, and opportunities provided by, rising levels of affluence linked to the emergence of new more efficient information and communication technologies [18–22]. Many of the major themes that emerged as part and parcel of this thesis, and in particular, the post-industrial occupation with the centrality of knowledge, its production and dissemination, are today still apparent but reproduced in visions that discuss the advent of what is now labelled a ‘knowledge’ or ‘information’ economy [23–28]. Here again, therefore, the same hierarchical binary way of thinking is adopted in which two opposites are being temporally and normatively sequenced. Indeed, most write as if this dichotomy is the only one that can be used to depict the future. As Thompson and Warhurst [29] assert, ‘there is a considerable amount of common ground among popular business and academic commentators about what the trends in work and workplace are. That commonality starts from a re-labelling of the big picture. We are now living in a post-industrial, information or knowledge economy’ (p. 1). Such a myopic disregard for other perspectives towards the future is by no means confined to these commentators.

A second common dichotomy used to depict the future of employment is the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of work organisation [30–33]. In this vision, there is a shift away from Fordism, a period stretching from the end of World War II until the mid-1970s, when there was the widespread mass production of standardised goods using inflexible, dedicated machinery, exploitation of internal scale economies, a Taylorist fragmentation and deskilling of work, and relatively narrow and rigidly defined job descriptions, along with mass consumption. In its place is a new post-Fordist era characterised by the application of production methods considered to be more flexible than those of the Fordist era. These include more versatile programmable machines, labour that is more flexibly deployed (both in terms of the quantity used and tasks performed), the vertical disintegration of large corporations, greater use of inter-firm alliances (e.g., subcontracting, strategic alliances, just-in-time production) and a closer integration of product development, marketing and production, resulting in a small batch production tailored to specific niche markets. Again, therefore, a binary story in which one side is in the ascendancy and the other in demise is propounded.

The third popular dichotomy used to depict how employment is being reconfigured is that which focuses upon the bureaucracy/post-bureaucracy binary and how there is/should be a shift from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic workplaces, or what is sometimes alternatively labelled the shift from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ human resource management (HRM) [34], industrial relations to HRM [35], a ‘low-road’ to a ‘high-road’ strategy [36].
or ‘modern’ to ‘post-modern’ management [37]. Addressing issues such as the dismantling of bureaucratic control methods, engendering a commitment to quality, and the cultural climate of, or within, the organisation, the necessity for, and desirability of, a transition from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic management has been widely discussed [38–41]. For many commentators, moreover, this is normatively depicted as a positive trend. Indeed, a whole raft of prescriptive ‘how to’ textbooks and pop-management best-sellers that provide celebratory odes to post-bureaucracy have saturated the book market in recent decades [42–45]. For adherents to post-bureaucracy, therefore, and whether they are seeking to nurture organisational culture, learning organisations, commitment, heart, soul or spirit, post-bureaucracy is ultimately seen as potentially humanising the workplace. Bureaucracy, meanwhile, is depicted as possessing negative attributes such as inefficiency, dehumanisation and ritualism [46].

In all these perspectives towards the future of work and employment, in consequence, the narrative structure is based on a binary hierarchical mode of thought in which some dichotomy is focused upon which is then temporally and normatively sequenced with one side characterised as the ‘old’ and composed of negative attributes and the other side configured as ‘new’ and a signal of advancement.

4. Alternative visions of the future of work

These dominant visions have not gone uncontested. Indeed, a host of counter visions of the future of work have emerged that directly oppose these descriptions and prescriptions of the future. Until now, however, these alternative visions have sought to challenge them simply by inverting the temporal or normative sequencing of the dominant narratives. Rather than assert that there is a universal trajectory towards formalisation, commodification and globalisation and/or that this represents the path to progress and advancement, these counter-narratives simply propound the opposite (see Table 2). They propose that there is a process of informalisation, de-commodification or localisation, or suggest prescriptively that progress or advancement lies not in formalisation, commodification or globalisation but rather, in a process of informalisation, de-commodification or localisation.

Starting with those visions that directly contest the grand narrative of formalisation, these are of two broad varieties. First of all, there is the ‘third way’ vision. While ‘first way’ (neo-liberal) and ‘second way’ (socialist) thought was ultimately about whether private or public sector provision is the best way of achieving formalisation and commodification, ‘third way’ thought brings the third prong of civil society into the equation as another mode of delivering goods and services. However, in doing so a key, albeit artificial, distinction is made between its relevance to ‘economic’ and ‘welfare’ policy. It is in the sphere of welfare provision and this realm alone, that third way exponents believe that not only private and public sector provision but also a third prong of the ‘third sector’ or ‘civil society’ needs to be harnessed [47]. In the realm of ‘economic’ policy, however, its vision of the future of work remains entrenched in an employment-centred ideology grounded in a prescription of formalisation, commodification and globalisation. This starkly contrasts with the second set of visions that contest on descriptive and/or normative grounds the meta-narrative of formalisation. These envisage either a trend towards the informalisation of work [6] or normatively depict ‘progress’ and ‘advancement’ to lie in developing informal work and reducing engagement in the formal economy [48–51].

Similarly, there are various visions that contest the depiction of a trajectory towards an ever more commodified world and/or the view that this is the path to progress. Again, these are of two broad varieties. On the one hand, there are those accepting that there is/should be a process of formalisation but rejecting the

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<th>Dominant visions</th>
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<td>Formalisation</td>
<td>Informalisation of welfare: third way visions of work: post-employment visions</td>
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<td>Commodification</td>
<td>De-commodification of employment: non-capitalist visions of work: post-capitalist visions of work</td>
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<td>Globalisation</td>
<td>Localisation of work and welfare: green visions</td>
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notion that formal employment is becoming/should be commodified. In these commentaries, a future of work is therefore envisaged in which not-for-profit employment is, or should be, becoming more prominent. These either detail the relative growth of forms of not-for-profit employment [52] or prescribe this as a way forward beyond a commodified world. On the other hand, there are a host of visions that contest not only the commodification thesis but also the notion that the alternatives should be confined to not-for-profit employment. These analysts discuss on either descriptive and/or prescriptive grounds the growth of an array of non-commodified forms of work, including subsistence production, mutual aid and not-for-profit monetised exchange. Pervading such discourses is often a view that there is a need to cease mapping an ever more commodified world because of the performative effects of such a narrative. Such a mapping is viewed as creating what is then seen and for these analysts, there is a need to recognise, value and create non-capitalist economic practices that are already here and emerging so as to shine a light on the demonstrable construction of alternative possibilities and futures [11,53–56]. In these commentaries, in consequence, a discursive analysis of the commodification thesis is pursued coupled with the articulation of alternative regimes of representation and practice in order to imagine and enact alternative futures for work.

Finally, there are alternative visions of the future of work that contest the globalisation vision again on either descriptive and/or normative grounds. On the one hand, numerous attempts have been made to challenge the degree of economic, financial, political or cultural globalisation [57] and the notion that this is a natural and inevitable force [58,59]. On the other hand, multiple commentaries have contested the prescription of globalisation by highlighting the negative economic, social and environmental impacts of globalisation [60–62]. One outcome has been that globalisation is less a real objective process and more a form of storytelling driven by powerful interests which helps create the realities it purports merely to describe [63]. The outcome is that alternative narratives have started to be told in order to counter these celebratory odes to globalisation. One such prominent story is that there is/should be a process of localisation, especially if a form of work organisation is to be achieved that is environmentally sustainable [64–67]. Here again, therefore, the temporal and/or normative sequencing of the globalisation thesis is simply inverted.

It is similarly the case with those contesting the visions of the future of employment that celebrate the advent of the post-industrial/knowledge economy, post-Fordism or post-bureaucracy. Question marks are again raised about the temporal and/or normative sequencing identified in these visions. Take, for example, the post-bureaucratic vision. On the one hand, numerous commentaries depict the shallow and uneven penetration of post-bureaucracy and even rebirth of bureaucratic forms of work organisation [68–70]. On the other hand, a whole host negatively depict post-bureaucracy as a sinister attempt by organisations to control workers by co-opting their ‘hearts and minds’ for the purpose of profit [50,58,71] by creating ‘willing slaves’ [72]. As McKinlay and Taylor [73] (1997: p. 3) assert, critics ‘have inverted the euphoric rhetoric of HRM [human resource management] to produce gloomy analyses of emerging factory regimes in which workers lose even the awareness of their own exploitation’. Some even highlight the fairness and justice inherent in bureaucracy [69]. The outcome has been an inversion of the temporal and normative sequencing of the post-bureaucracy thesis.

What is so valuable about these alternative visions of the future of work and employment is that they open up possible futures for work beyond not only formalisation, commodification and globalisation but also the knowledge economy, post-Fordism and post-bureaucracy. Perhaps less convincing, however, is that they often simply invert either the trajectories propounded to be underway and/or the normative judgements of the dominant narratives regarding the future of work and employment. For example, rather than attach positive attributes to formalisation, commodification and globalisation, and negative attributes to informalisation, de-commodification and localisation, they do the reverse. The result is that just as the dominant narratives over-romanticise formalisation, post-bureaucracy and so forth, these visionaries do the same with informalisation, de-commodification, localisation, bureaucracy and so forth. Ultimately, therefore, such commentaries simply continue with the same mode of hierarchical binary thought as the dominant narratives by constructing a dichotomy which envisages or prescribes an either/or choice and then concoct this in a temporal manner as a one-dimensional linear transformation from some ‘old’ to ‘new’ form of work organisation and normatively privilege one side over the other.
5. Beyond binary hierarchical visions

The problem with all of these binary hierarchical visions, whether of the dominant or alternative variety, is the simplistic manner in which they believe that all work can be snugly fit into some dichotomy and the way in which the two sides are temporally and/or normatively sequenced in order to portray some one-dimensional linear trajectory of what is/should be the future of work. In recent years, such problems with these binary hierarchical visions have started to be recognised.

On the one hand, there has started to emerge with regard to some, albeit not all, of these visions understanding that these opposites are not so stable, bounded and constituted via negation as purported. This has resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between the two sides and even an argument that new ‘hybrid’ forms of work organisation are emerging that combine elements of both sides of the dichotomy. A prominent example is the post-bureaucracy literature. Rather than temporally and normatively sequence post-bureaucracy (or even bureaucracy) as in the ascendancy or a positive trend, some commentators have begun to transcend the linear story of the evolution of work organisation that treats bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy as discrete and separate organisational forms and to recognise how these are inter-penetrating each other and resulting in hybrids. Indeed, these ‘hybrid’ organisations are captured in the emergence of new vocabularies such as ‘customer-oriented bureaucracies’ [74], ‘social Taylorism’ [75] and ‘soft bureaucracy’ in which decentralised responsibilities are combined with centralised decision-making [76]. For such commentators, therefore, the direction of organisational change is/should be towards not ‘post-bureaucratic’ or even bureaucratic forms of work organisation but rather, ‘hybridisation’ [46,77].

The problem, however, is whether this depiction of the emergence of new hybrids is valid since it might well be the case that the ideal-types of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy were never descriptive of organisations in lived practice. What are now being identified as ‘hybrids’ of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy may well have been there all the time but not captured by this over-simplistic dichotomy. Similar arguments apply to all other visions of the future of work that are/might identify that the direction of change is/should be in the direction of hybridisation. Any hybrids identified could well have always existed but not been identified due to the desire to cram all activity into one side or the other of some dualism. For this reason, caution is urged regarding visions of the future that delineate hybridisation.

On the other hand, these binary hierarchical visions of the future of work have been transcended by recognising that these one-dimensional linear tales over-simplify what is occurring in lived practice and showing how there are heterogeneous trends in different places, sectors and populations. Take, for example, those visions which assert that there is/should be a universal process of formalisation or informalisation. Once one begins to analyse the evidence, heterogeneous trends are identified in different places [78]. As Table 3 reveals, in so-called ‘advanced’ western economies, although some nations have witnessed formalisation, others have witnessed an informalisation of working life over the past four decades. Once one begins to

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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>54.2</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>Informalisation</td>
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<td>55.4</td>
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<td>UK</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<td>Informalisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
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<td>51.8</td>
<td>54.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 countries</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>Informalisation</td>
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Sources: Other countries derived from Ref. [83].

*Ref. [79–81].

Ref. [82].
analyse the direction of change, therefore, strong doubts begin to be cast over not only the meta-narrative of formalisation but also the counter-narrative of informalisation.

It is similarly the case when analysing commodification. Although there exist a range of places, forms of work and populations in which a process of commodification can be identified, other places, types of work and populations exist which are undergoing a process of de-commodification. For example, and as Table 4 depicts, while women are spending a greater proportion of their total working time engaged in paid work (some of which will be commodified work), a greater proportion of men’s working time is being spent on unpaid (non-commodified) work. To depict commodification, or even de-commodification, as a universal process, therefore, fails to recognise the heterogeneous trends across different places, activities and populations.

When charting the advent of post-bureaucracy, it is similarly the case that within some particular nations, sectors and occupations, it is possible to identify a shift towards post-bureaucratic management practices, such as in some western nations, the advertising industry and the higher echelons of management. Within other nations, sectors and occupations, however, such a trend is notable by its absence [84–86]. Nor is it the case that bureaucracy is everywhere a negative phenomenon and post-bureaucracy always a positive phenomenon [3,46]. This is replicated across the other visions for employment. In some nations, sectors, occupations and places, post-Fordist practices can be identified as taking hold. In others, however, there is the continuing dominance, even resurgence, of Fordist and Taylorist practices, as witnessed in the McDonaldisation thesis [70]. Therefore, once one evaluates critically each of the one-dimensional linear visions of the future of work that commentators assert are occurring (e.g., from Fordism to post-Fordism, informal to formal work, non-commodified to commodified practices, bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy), it becomes apparent that divergent trajectories are being pursued in different populations and that it is difficult to construe one side as always a positive trend and the other side as always negative.

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued that although there are many stories regarding the future of work, the storyline often remains remarkably similar. Adopting a narrative structure grounded in binary hierarchical thought, most visions of the future of work marshal all work into one side or another of some dichotomy which is deemed central to understanding the future of work and then temporally or normatively sequence the two sides of the dualism, viewing one as in the ascendancy and/or the path to progress and the other as declining and/or a sign of backwardness. This is the case across all of the dominant visions of the future of work that depict formalisation, commodification, globalisation, the knowledge economy, post-Fordism and post-bureaucracy as the direction of change and/or path to progress. Until now, those who have sought to contest these dominant narratives have largely done so simply by inverting the temporal and/or normative sequencing, as

Table 4
Distribution of working time in 20 countries: by gender

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Men and women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paid work</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic work</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of time spent on domestic work</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
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<td>Women</td>
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<td>Paid work</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of time spent on domestic work</td>
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<td>64.6</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid work</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic work</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of time spent on domestic work</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ref. [83]: Table 7.1.
displayed in those perspectives that have sought to propound how informalisation, de-commodification, localisation, bureaucracy and so forth is/should be the direction of change.

To transcend such binary hierarchical narratives about the future of work, recent years have witnessed the advent of a range of commentaries that challenge the notion that all work can be squeezed into one side or another of such dualisms and have pinpointed the emergence of ‘hybrid’ forms of work organisation. The problem, however, is that these hybrids might well have always existed but gone unnoticed due to the way in which all forms of work organisation were crammed into one side or other of these dichotomies.

Perhaps a more promising development in the literature on the future of work will be the recognition that these one-dimensional linear tales fail to capture and reflect the divergent and heterogeneous directions in which work organisation is moving in the contemporary world. In some places, activities and populations, there might be a process of formalisation, commodification globalisation and so forth, but in others a process of informalisation, de-commodification and localisation and although in some places, activities and populations these might be normatively read as positive trends, in others they might well represent a negative phenomenon. This will also require a move beyond relying on one binary to capture the trajectories of work. Until now, as shown, it has too often been the case that commentators simply employ one dichotomy to depict the trends in work. None of these individual perspectives towards the future of work considered above, however, wholly capture and reflect these heterogeneous directions in which work organisation is moving in the contemporary world.

If this kaleidoscope-like view of the future of work is adopted, it might be assumed that this will result in the argument that there is far greater continuity with the past than normally intimated \[1–4,87,88\]. After all, the above arguments that informal and non-commodified work persist, and that formalisation and commodification is far from hegemonic, as well as that post-Fordist and post-bureaucratic practices are far from all-pervasive, seem to support a recognition of the continuity between the present-day and the past. However, although this argument suggests that there is relatively more continuity with the past than many futurologists explicate in their binary hierarchical visions, it does not deny the possibility for change. Indeed, quite the opposite is the case. Similar to many others, it recognises that there is both continuity and change occurring \[34,89–91\]. The changes asserted to be taking place, however, are not configured in some one-dimensional linear manner as being towards some singular -ism, -ation or post-something-or-other. Instead, multiple changes are viewed as occurring that vary across space, sectors, occupations and populations. The outcome is that rather than a process of convergence, a divergence of trajectories is unravelled and a picture painted of the future that is much more variable, diverse and open than usually considered in the above one-dimensional portraits.

In consequence, rather than reproduce what Thompson and McHugh \[88\] call ‘The basic pattern ... of stereotypical polarisation, limited evidence and neglect of diversity, [which] tends to be produced in each new generation of macro arguments’ (p. 169), in this more kaleidoscopic view, there are no universal linear logics but instead, many fragments moving in different directions in various parts of the picture.

Yet even if this paper envisages that the future of work is not so closed as usually intimated in binary hierarchical visions, and therefore the future organisation of work more in our hands than frequently assumed, it would be a misnomer to assume that the future is what we wish to make it. Not only are some narratives of the future, such as formalisation, commodification and globalisation, supported by some very powerful vested interests, whose interests are helping mould the world of work into the image they desire, but for most individuals today, the future is anything but in their hands. For most people, the range of alternative possibilities open to them is very limited. Although affluent households and individuals in western economies, for example, might be able to sometimes choose the type of work that they engage in and use to get tasks completed, for the vast majority, this is not the case. Similarly, although there are some able to downshift to simpler lives, for others this is not a possibility. Although divergent trajectories and a mass of possibilities for the direction of change thus exist on a global level, this is not the case for all individuals and populations in their everyday lives. Some are confined to Fordist employment practices or formal employment; others largely confined to informal economic practices. The task ahead, therefore, is surely to work towards ensuring that people have greater choice about the type of work in which they want to engage. If this paper in displaying that the future is not cast in stone, and that it is wholly possible to imagine all manner of alternative futures for
work, helps to stimulate greater discussion of how to open up the future more for those who currently have little choice, then it will have fulfilled its objective.

References
