

# ies on the Line

Introducing our Fall 2020 special section, “Technology and the Crisis of Work.”

Katrina Forrester and Moira Weigel • Fall 2020



Illustration by Molly Crabapple of Shantonica Jackson, a certified nursing assistant at City View Multicare Center in Cicero, Illinois

In the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the crisis of work and of care—of production and social reproduction—to new extremes. This summer, unemployment reached record levels. Essential workers were called on not only to tend to the sick, but to deliver groceries, collect trash, and drive buses—to perform tasks that have always been hard and undervalued, but now entail a health risk every time you clock on. Capitalist society depends on this essential work—carried out by nursing assistants, transportation workers, and caretakers—and its dangers are distributed unevenly, across divisions of race, class, and gender. For decades, socialist feminists have brought these realities to our attention; the pandemic has made their insights undeniable. For many, whether they are nurses in hospitals or parents trying to work full time while also educating children or caring for dependents, the labor of maintaining and sustaining life—paid and unpaid, public and private—is becoming too much to bear.

The pandemic has also confirmed and deepened the powers of digital technology companies. Google, Apple, and Salesforce are building contact-tracing software. Palantir is pivoting to the pandemic, winning contracts with the Department of Health and Human Services in the United States and national health services across Europe. Zoom enables the professional classes to work from home, and to see friends and family. Netflix and Hulu and Twitch provide entertainment. Care.com helps parents and children look for babysitters and home health aides. Google for Education lets (some) school age children keep learning (sort of). Uber and Lyft are available for those who want or need to avoid public transit; Instacart allows them to avoid stores. Amazon has hired hundreds of thousands of additional workers to deliver everything from textbooks to toilet paper, while continuing to sell much of the computing power that makes the system run. (Nearly half of the world's public cloud runs on Amazon Web Services; Jeff Bezos has added \$85 billion to his personal wealth since January.) The most powerful entities of our era are these platforms: more than just monopolistic corporations, they provide key social infrastructure and have become involved in vast rearrangements of our everyday lives.

The crisis has exacerbated existing divisions—between people who own stocks and those who don't, between those who own and rent their homes, between those who do and do not have safe homes into which they can retreat, between those who do the bulk of domestic labor and those who don't. It is also accelerating ongoing transformations of work and leisure. COVID-19 has created new opportunities for algorithmic management and domination. The technical mediation of work continues. So does the encroachment of tech firms into formerly public spaces, and with it the privatization of both public and personal realms.

These new conditions have inspired sustained political actions that are not novel in form but are striking in their longevity. The uprisings that mark the latest stage of the Black freedom struggle combine protests against the police and the carceral state, with its relentless exploitation, subordination, and murder of Black people and other people of color, with battles for community services. If we defund the police, we can better fund our struggling cities, protesters argue. This dissent takes place on the terrain created by work stoppages and massive unemployment, which is hitting Black communities especially hard. The rent strikes and the organization of mutual aid during the lockdowns join ongoing

revolts in education and healthcare. At many levels of social and political life, there are new sites of contestation: unemployment benefits and furloughs, evictions, school and university openings. So far these have not prompted any major reform. Dreams of a bipartisan universal basic income collapsed with the pittance of the stimulus check, which sets a measly precedent for future basic income projects, relegating them to the policy toolbox of reaction. Far-right movements, including armed militias in the United States, are seizing the shutdowns and the ongoing movements for racial justice as occasions to foment violence. The New Cold War with China is escalating—with competition between U.S. and Chinese tech firms as a critical focus. At the time of writing, it is unclear how the epidemic will affect the Census, or the election in November.

Do these political conditions and conflicts confirm what we have long known, or are they a sign of tectonic shifts that we can't yet understand? It's still unclear whether the chaos of spring and summer of 2020 will give way to a more manageable public health and jobs crisis, a period of major depression and long-term unemployment, or something unprecedented. One thing we do know is that, for now, old frameworks are straining under new pressures.

The foundational divides of modern life—between work and home, public and private, production and reproduction—have been unsettled. Offices have been emptied, and many homes have been transformed into makeshift workplaces. The costs of social reproduction have been transferred from the public to the private realm faster than ever before. Meals once paid for by schools and air conditioning once paid for by companies have been offloaded onto households; like gig workers, all remote workers must now front capital costs for our employers. We upgrade our own internet, plan for endless video calls; the screen is never off. In the absence of regulation, the FAANG companies (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google), alongside others like Zoom, extend their subterranean power. Under a new tech feudalism, users live their lives on platforms and are tithed their data.

In this context, distance has become a new mark of privilege. At the start of the crisis, Jedediah Britton-Purdy described “the power to withdraw” as a sign of status in the class system under COVID-19. That privilege has only become more deeply entrenched as the months have worn on. The incipient trend of remote work is now a reality for many sectors (how long this will last is

impossible to say). The question of withdrawal has been politicized in conflicts over masks and reopenings. But it remains mostly hidden and depoliticized in the realm of work, where getting back on the job for the sake of the economy continues to justify jeopardizing the health and safety of workers. The politics of withdrawal is a public politics about workplace rights and privileges, but it is a deeply personal kind of politics too—about who we are, what risks we can physically and psychically bear, and how our identities and capacities for risk are shaped by our homes, our workplaces, and the structures of power we inhabit within and outside them.

While both techno-pessimists and techno-optimists have long claimed that automation will end work as we know it, COVID-19 has also taught the inverse lesson: much work cannot be automated. The labors of the health and care sectors in particular show the limits of technology. The bodies that we bring to work—their identities and histories and desires—run up against these limits. This generates a novel political cleavage: between the embodied and the remote worker.

The difference tracks longstanding class distinctions—but not exactly. The work of doctors, janitors, and nurses is embodied, as is that of many journalists and university professors; that of medical coders, corporate lawyers, content moderators, and, for now, some teachers, is not. Both embodied and remote workers are likely to suffer new forms of insecurity. Remote workers currently have many privileges, as well as some novel freedoms and joys, but these are unlikely to become tangible benefits; instead, more and more programmers and professors will likely see their jobs broken up so that they can be deskilled or outsourced. While the most privileged workers may gain from remote working by increasing control over their time, the technologies they benefit from now will create new forms of domination later: surveillance that tracks familiar axes of oppression, and mechanisms sold by tech companies for better controlling workers on and off the job.

Digital technologies will continue to transform embodied labor too. Machines, after all, do not eliminate work, but rearrange it. These technologies will also alter our geographies. In the nineteenth century, the steam engine moved power away from rivers; trains brought cities closer to each other. Contemporary landscapes will be reshaped in ways we can't yet see. Suburbanization

entrenched the nuclear family, while the rise of the care sector allowed for private caring labor to be marketized for profit. For decades, re-urbanization and gentrification have produced rising real-estate costs, as financialization turned city centers into valuable, if vacant, assets. The businesses there that rely on proximity, like coffee shops and dry cleaners, are struggling; those that facilitate the right kind of distance—car rentals, delivery services, online retailers—are profiting. Now that those who can are fleeing cities for the country, the maps that divide many economies on class, electoral, and regional lines may be redrawn again.

The essays in this issue interrogate the complex relations between care, work, and technology, and put pressure on received wisdom about our categories and our likely futures. They show how our new systems recapitulate older ones. They deal with the uncanny, the new, the constant, and the old: the racialization of labor under capitalism, the use of technologies to dominate workers by controlling their relation to time and place, and how the most exploited and marginalized workers are still those who put their bodies on the line in the trenches of health and care work.

Tressie McMillan Cottom and Julia Ticona show how the platformization of labor can both reinforce and reinvent older forms of identity, through new distributions of capital and risk. Cottom challenges the “future of work” paradigm and dominant narratives of economic opportunity. She shows how new technologies use ideologies of investment to provide structurally vulnerable entrepreneurs with access to financing platforms—access that, in the context of rising unemployment and the racialized extraction of work, should be understood as a form of predatory inclusion. Ticona reports on care work platforms to show how these online spaces shape discriminatory conceptions of risk and intensify the surveillance of the Black women and women of color who still make up the majority of domestic workers and child-care providers. With school and day-care closures, the use of companies like Care.com has increased dramatically. But as Gabriel Winant shows in his interview with certified nursing assistant Shantonia Jackson, who is active in SEIU Healthcare Illinois, the true front lines of the COVID-19 crisis are in the realm beyond technology. The capitalist crisis of care, Jackson and Winant’s discussion illuminates, is at its most acute and deadly in the institutions of for-profit healthcare.

Aaron Benanav and Veena Dubal also put pressure on the techno-optimist narratives that see automation processes as heralding dramatic novelty. In her essay on workers at Amazon Mechanical Turk, Uber, and other platforms, Dubal shows how new modes of work discipline echo the old. Digital pieceworking today mirrors the homeworking practices of garment workers. The algorithms eliminate the possibility of the steady job with a reliable income. Benanav also resists too-easy utopianism, arguing that those who see automation making possible a world without work are mistaken. COVID-19 will accelerate long-term trajectories of underemployment and low productivity. With the usually absorbent service sector in free fall and the unemployment crisis set to worsen underemployment globally, technology will not solve the crisis of work that COVID-19 has exacerbated.

All these essays suggest that the problems and the solutions that digital technologies present are not always as they seem. In the past few years, much of the Obama-era enthusiasm for Silicon Valley and tech solutionism has given way to criticism. But critics must take care not to restate tech's sales pitches in a different key. We must pay close attention to how digital platforms *actually* work. It is there that we can find opportunities for political resistance. What is new today is not the presence of digital technologies in our work and care relations, but how these relations intersect and the spaces they create. The spread of risk and death across the terrain of life-making has led to its politicization in new, uneven ways, whether it is in homeworking, for-profit healthcare, or community maintenance. Digital tools—secure messaging and encryption for protesters, or payment platforms redeployed for mutual aid—play a role here. What will it mean to rethink labor through the lens of distance and embodiment, and how much will digital technologies transform the world of the time-after, the world of the recovery we all hope for? The coronavirus crash has produced a strange new political terrain. Whatever happens next, for now, we are dwelling within it.

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