

Cyborg Workers: The Past, Present and Future of Automated Labour

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With keynote lectures by

Phoebe V Moore (University of Essex) & Marcel van der Linden (University of Amsterdam)

The automation of work is receiving considerable attention in academia and among the wider public alike. From lecture halls to editorial offices and headquarters of tech companies in Silicon Valley, participants in the debate argue that thanks to unprecedented advances in digitalization and AI technology we are headed to a future in which less and less human labour is required to produce the goods and services that will sustain an increasingly workless society. This future is depicted either as a carefree utopia in which human creativity is finally liberated from the burden of wage labour or as a dystopian nightmare in which a growing number of workers compete for a constantly decreasing number of jobs. Either way, both interpretations conclude that work is going to be increasingly scarce. The claim is that in contrast to the past two centuries, during which machines have taken over some tasks but have also created new ones, in the future, automation will abolish many jobs without generating new employment opportunities for those whose jobs become redundant.

Our interdisciplinary conference aims to scrutinize this verdict by exploring the past, present and future of mechanized and automated work. From the start of the Industrial Revolution to the beginning of the computer age, the introduction of new machinery has triggered great expectations but also great anxieties. In the past, collective responses have ranged from breaking the machines that seemed to threaten the livelihoods of entire communities to adaptation and training that promised to give the initiative back to workers and employees. By putting the debate in a historical context, we will be able to investigate the alleged novelty of contemporary automation debates. This will help us analyse how automation was discussed, implemented and received in the past, and whether or how past experiences differed from contemporary rhetoric and practice.

This rhetoric and practice of automation has already been addressed by feminist and Marxist scholars and by scholars employing perspectives of science and technology studies, critical race theory and decolonial theory. Their contributions scrutinize values and ideologies embedded in the utopian and dystopian scenarios of 'societies without work'. They also analyse in detail how technologies aimed at automating labour are implemented. Such analyses show that automation of a workplace often does not lead to the disappearance of work but is accompanied by an increase of precarious labour. In addition, the implementation of automation technology often means increased surveillance and subordination of workers. As practices of disciplining and controlling labour force have a long history that can be traced back to the origins of modernity and capitalism, there is a lot of potential for bringing together

interdisciplinary contributions that study these practices, that focus on the responses of workers to mechanization and automation, and that analyse expert discourses about impact of automation on labour.

Against this backdrop, we invite historians, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, economists and scholars from neighbouring fields to contribute to an interdisciplinary debate on the automation of work.

Scope

Our conference will focus on discourses, practices and responses in a long-term historical perspective, from the impact of mechanization on work in the nineteenth century to contemporary debates about the present and the future of work. We seek contributions that largely fall into one of the four main lines of inquiry:

1. The gaze of the expert

The first section will investigate how experts such as managers, engineers, academics or journalists have discussed the impact of mechanization and automation through time. We are particularly interested in transnational or cross-sector contributions or contributions that study changes over longer periods of time.

2. Work environment

The second section will look at the impact of mechanization and automation on work in factories, offices, warehouses and construction sites at different moments in time. In this section, we also seek contributions that focus on historical transitions and that critically explore the distinction between mechanization and automation.

3. Machines

The third section will focus on the perception of machines as objects of change. We invite participants to discuss in particular the often human-like traits and features that machines were given in order to normalize or criticize their use. We seek contributions exploring a broad range of material, from fiction to poetry and from political rhetoric to economic thought.

4. Responses

The fourth section will study how workers, employees, social activists and civil society more broadly received and continue to respond to mechanization and automation. Here, we are particularly interested in contributions that critically engage with the widespread assumption that labour has always opposed mechanization and automation as a menace to job security and the quality of work.